AESTHETIC MARX

Edited by SAMIR GANDESHA & JOHAN HARTLE
Aesthetic Marx
Also available from Bloomsbury

*The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière

*Contemporary Marxist Theory*, edited by Andrew Pendakis, Jeff Diamanti, Nicholas Brown, Josh Robinson and Imre Szeman

*Marx*, Michel Henry

*The Cultural Promise of the Aesthetic*, Monique Roelofs

*Red Kant: Aesthetics, Marxism and the Third Critique*, Michael Wayne
Aesthetic Marx

Edited by
Samir Gandesha and Johan F. Hartle
Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Notes on Contributors viii
Introduction x

Section I Aesthetics/Emancipations

1 Three Logics of the Aesthetic in Marx
   Samir Gandesha 3

2 Poiēsis, Praxis, Aisthesis: Remarks on Aristotle and Marx
   Henry W. Pickford 23

3 “Sensuous Supra-Sensuous”: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction
   Sami Khatib 49

4 Free Associations: On Marx and Freud
   Johan F. Hartle 73

Section II Style and Performativity in Marx

5 On Beauty and its Challenges: Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Karl Marx
   Anna-Katharina Gisbertz 97

6 Marx: The Philosophical Defense of History in the Metonymical Mode
   Hayden White 111

7 Imagery as Weaponry: ars gratia belli
   Terrell Carver 151

8 Radical Schiller and the Young Marx
   Daniel Hartley 163

Section III Modes of Artistic Production

9 Installing Communism
   Boris Groys 185

10 Marx’s Aesthetics in Mexico: Conceptual Art After 1968
    Robin Greeley 203
Contents

11 Filming Capital: On Cinemarxism in the Twenty-first Century 229
   Sven Lütticken

12 Marx as Art as Politics: Representations of Marx in Contemporary Art 251
   Johan F. Hartle

Index 275
Illustrations

9.1 Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915) 189
9.2 0.10, Exhibition view (1915) 192
9.3 El Lissitzky, *Pressa Pavillon* (1928) 194
9.4 Alexei Fedorov-Davydov, *Art of the Industrial Bourgeoisie*, Exhibition view (1931) 195
9.6 Ilya Kabakov, *Man who Flew into the Cosmic Space* (1985), courtesy of the artist. 200

10.2 Grupo Proceso Pentágono, *Kidnapping* (1973), Fondo Grupo Proceso Pentágono, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico 213
10.3 Grupo Germinal, *Desaparecidos* (1978), Fondo Grupo Germinal, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico 214
10.5 Melquiades Herrera/No-Grupo, *Coca-cola* (1979), Fondo No Grupo, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico 216
10.6 FMGTC, Exposición Arte Luchas Populares (1979), Fondo Hist.rico MUCA, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico 217
10.7 Maris Bustamante/No-Grupo, ¡Mujeres del mundo, uníos! (1982), Fondo No Grupo, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico 223
11.1 Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, *The Forgotten Space* (2010), still 231
11.3 Screening of Sekula and Burch’s *The Forgotten Space* at SMBA, Amsterdam (2011) 236
11.4 Hito Steyerl, *In Free Fall* (2010), still 236
11.5 Zachary Formwalt, *Unsupported Transit* (2011), still 238
11.6 Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity* and other Kluge DVD sets (2010) 240
Illustrations


12.2 Alexander Matveev, *Marx Monument*, Petrograd (1918), © Tate images, 2016 255


12.4 Pedro Reyes, *The Corpse of Marx is Still Breathing* (2012), © Moritz Bernouilly 259

12.5 Milena Bonilla, *Stone Deaf* (2009), still, courtesy of the artist 260

12.6 Rainer Ganahl, *Sketch for a Head of Glass* (2011), courtesy of the artist 261

12.7 Phil Collins, *use! value! exchange!* (2010), still, courtesy of the artist 263


Contributors

**Terrell Carver** is Professor of Political Theory at the University of Bristol, UK. He has published extensively on Marx and Engels over many years, including textual analysis, new translations and reception studies, as well as visual artefacts.

**Samir Gandesha** is Associate Professor in the Department of Humanities and Director of the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University and was Liu Boming Visiting Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Nanjing in Spring 2017. He is editor, with Lars Rensmann, of *Arendt and Adorno: Political and Philosophical Investigations* (Stanford University Press, 2012) and, with Johan Hartle, *The Spell of Capital: Reification and Spectacle* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017).

**Anna-Katharina Gisbertz** is Professor of German Philology at the University of Mannheim. Her most recent publication is *Stimmung-Leib-Sprache. Eine Konfiguration in der Wiener Moderne* (Fink, 2009).

**Robin Greeley** teaches at the University of Connecticut, and has published widely on Latin American modern and contemporary art. She is also a founding member of the Symbolic Reparations Research Project, which offers best practice recommendations on the use of art in symbolic reparations for victims-survivors of mass human rights violations.

**Boris Groys** is Professor of Russian and Slavic Studies at New York University. Recent publications include *On the New* (Verso, 2014) and *In the Flow* (Verso, 2016).

**Johan F. Hartle** teaches Philosophy of Art at the University of Amsterdam, Aesthetics of the Political at the Karlsruhe University of Arts and Design, and Art Theory at the China Academy of Arts Hangzhou. His publications include *Der geöffnete Raum. Zur Politik der ästhetischen Form* (Wilhelm Fink, 2006), *DADALENIN* (Edition Tube, 2013, edited with Rainer Ganahl) and *The Spell of Capital, Reification and Spectacle* (Amsterdam University Press, 2017, edited with Samir Gandesha).

**Daniel Hartley** is a Leverhulme Postdoctoral Fellow in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. He is the author of *The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics* (Brill, 2017), has published widely on Marxist theory and contemporary literature, and is currently working on a book project on postcolonial impersonality.
Sami Khatib is a Visiting Professor based in Berlin and Beirut. His research is in the fields of critical theory, aesthetics and modern continental philosophy.

Sven Lütticken teaches Art History at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Theory at the Dutch Art Institute Arnhem. He is the author of several books, most recently Cultural Revolution: Aesthetic Practice after Autonomy (Sternberg Press, 2017).

Henry W. Pickford is Associate Professor of German and Philosophy at Duke University. His books include The Sense of Semblance: Philosophical Analyses of Holocaust Art (Fordham University Press, 2013), Thinking with Tolstoy and Wittgenstein: Expression, Emotion and Art (Northwestern University Press, 2015), and the co-authored In Defense of Intuitions: A New Rationalist Manifesto (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015). He is also the editor and translator of Theodor W. Adorno, Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords (Columbia University Press, 2005) and Lev Loseff, Selected Early Poems (Spuyten Duyvil, 2015).

I. Marx and the aesthetic

Capitalism has turned aesthetic. Or so it would seem. This is not, of course, to suggest that life under capitalism has necessarily become fulfilled, that it entails human flourishing, that labor has finally been organized according to the laws of beauty. Far from it! Rather, it has become “aesthetic” insofar as the production of value now draws heavily upon “creative industries,” on the labor of the “creative classes,” on aesthetic strategies of distinction and the modulation of affects. As Jean Baudrillard had put it many years ago, we now witness the movement from the political economy of the commodity to the political economy of the sign.  

Surplus value now springs from speculation in the realm of the “Spectacle,” itself, and many contemporary marketing strategies widely appropriate classical aesthetic discourses. Or, as Fredric Jameson has suggested:

[T]he very sphere of culture itself has expanded, becoming coterminous with market society in such a way that the cultural is no longer limited to its earlier, traditional or experimental forms [the sphere of the arts], but it is consumed throughout daily life itself, in shopping, in professional activities, in the various often televisual forms of leisure, in production for the market and in the consumption of those market products, indeed in the most secret folds and corners of the quotidian.

Must this logic not also profoundly affect and alter our reception of the nature of the classical sources for the analysis of capitalism as well? If there is a direct line between capitalism and the aesthetic, does it not put into play in a new way the often alluded-to but never sufficiently understood relationship between Marx and the aesthetic? How is the aesthetic, the senses and their objects, conceived of in the classical writings of Marx? How does Marx, himself, who always insisted that he was no “Marxist,” figure in contemporary artistic strategies and practices?

These questions, today, gain renewed urgency at the very moment that we see renewed lines of conflict opening up specifically around cultural difference as a direct result of the global penetration of capitalist social relations in a manner that Marx and Engels presciently suggested in the Communist Manifesto in 1848. It is within such
conditions that the responses to cultural difference take the form of either an empty liberal *multiculturalism* or various versions of a racist *clash of civilizations*, become fixed and reified without, at the same time, being understood as two sides of the very same coin. In contrast, from the tradition established by Marx, the articulation of *cultural difference* must be grounded in *social difference*, that is, in class and the hierarchies entailed by the division of labor. An *aesthetic Marx*, so this volume argues, thus politicizes the aesthetic in at least two ways: by referring the aesthetic back to a fundamentally unequal social order, on the one hand, and by inscribing its powerfully destabilizing force into the political, on the other.¹

This link between Marx and the aesthetic, however, is less obvious than one might expect, given more recent understandings of the aesthetic nature of capitalism. The link still encounters resistance from bourgeois and radical alike. From the perspective of both the connection is simply absurd. For a number of the most influential understandings of Marxism the aesthetic dimension will be treated as, at best, a curiosity and, at worst, a marginal dimension that detracts from more pressing, critical questions having to do with, for example, the “fundamental contradiction” of capitalism, the nature of the state, revolutionary agency, the ever-elusive unity of “theory and praxis” and so forth, if it is not denounced as pure “ideology,” as an intellectually “criminal” ornamentation of the true nature of class conflict.

The economistic Marx, however, has long been supplemented and replaced as well. He has gone through various political and ideological transformations (already the previous century’s Marx was characterized by various “cultural turns”) and survived a number of philosophical rivalries not to mention, of course, trenchantly polemical attacks. For the great number of highly cultivated cultural Marxists of the twentieth century the intricate relation between Marx and the aesthetic might even seem self-evident. So often has he been used as a source of inspiration for Marxist conceptualizations of art and the aesthetic that Karl Marx himself appears, miraculously, to be an aesthetician avant la lettre: from Georg Lukács, Galvano della Volpe, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, to Valentin Voloshinov, Max Raphael, Meyer Schapiro, Manfredo Tafuri, to name but a few. Clearly, the list of Marxist or Marxist-inspired aesthetic theorists—throughout the disciplines of philosophy, literary theory, musicology, art history, etc.—is too long for us to even begin to adumbrate, and innumerable publications and events are devoted to addressing the implication of these traditions on a regular basis. Indeed, this tradition might suggest that Marx’s theory has always been aesthetic.

Yet this direct identification of Marx with the aesthetic would be premature and shortsighted. More often than not Marx had to be complemented, generously interpreted, or translated into the field of aesthetics. In other words, more often than not Marx had to be rewritten to appear as a source of aesthetic reasoning. Marx’s own categories (such as the dual character of the “commodity,” “use value” and “exchange value,” “fetishism,” “totality,” and so on) were translated into aesthetic terms (as “cultural capital,” “dual character of the work of art,” “exhibition value” and “cult value,” “aura,” the “integrated work of art,” and so on) or in other cases (“means of production,” “forces of production”)² applied to the field of art. Normally these acts of translation and adaptation went far beyond the letter (and sometimes maybe even the spirit) of Marx’s own writings. Unlike
this book, such powerful and creative attempts were contributions to *Marxism* rather than to the concrete interpretation of Marx’s own texts, although the latter obviously owes much to the former, in ways that will be evident throughout this volume.\(^6\)

This book, however, isn’t purely *Marxological* either. It is neither just another exegetical exercise in recapitulating Marx’s references to the literary canon—Ovid, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, *et al.*—nor does it add to the numerous *Marxological* reconstructions of Marx’s explicit statements on art and literature, nor even an attempt to come to terms with the young Marx’s own poetic production in the spirit of Schiller and Goethe.\(^7\) Following the precise letter of his own writings to clarify Marx’s relationship to the field of study and the theoretical discipline identified as “aesthetics,” of course, had its merits. Thorough research has been done on these questions throughout the decades of committed Marx studies, ranging from the influential works of Lukács, Lifshitz, and Sánchez Vázquez to the work of Margaret Rose, including insightful comments and remarks of theorists as different as Herbert Marcuse and Galvano Della Volpe and many others. Needless to say, much can still be learned from this tradition of aesthetic Marxology, especially an era in which the excellent traditions of rigorous Marx scholarship have been weakened and replaced by more fashionable yet superficial forms of academic discourse. Much of this scholarship is, in one way or another, addressed and referenced throughout this book.\(^9\)

There is one main problem with the Marxological approach to the aesthetic dimensions of Marx’s writings: The classical understanding of the discipline of aesthetics that is presupposed by such exegetical approaches must also be interrogated. “Aesthetics” is normally understood as a philosophical discipline that concerns the conditions for the possibility of judgments of taste, as a specific rationality that maintains its own autonomy, its own *purposeless* purposiveness, against contending and competing the spheres of value (the epistemic, the moral), and that deals with normative criteria in order to evaluate forms of experience and artistic developments on their own terms. Marx cannot be said to unproblematically contribute to the discipline of “aesthetics” because aesthetics, as an independent discipline, does not go without saying for historical materialism. And a key reason for this is that while the dominant current within philosophical aesthetics, namely the Kantian, as suggested above, insists on the autonomy of the aesthetic (in Kant’s case, obviously, built upon transcendental grounds) rooted in certain normative understandings of the human subject, historical materialism relates the aesthetic and all other cultural phenomena, at least in the final instance, to the human metabolism with nature, historically mediated as it is, and all that this implies for the totality of social life. In this sense the discipline of aesthetics might just as well be proverbial “face drawn in sand,”\(^10\) eroded by the further development of historically situated social relations.

Indeed, for this very reason, this book, too, does not only (and not even so much) want to confirm the historically-generated understanding of aesthetics as it is. In fact this Marxological tendency has been attributed to the attempts of second generation—and, indeed, Second International\(^11\)—Marxists who were trying to integrate Marx into the bourgeois canon.\(^12\) Its focus is—please note the *difference!*—on the aesthetic, the historical organization of the senses, of objectivity (*Gegenständlichkeit*), of the bodily dimensions of the organization of living labor, and of the history of subjectivity.
The “aesthetic” in this specific sense must be understood, as well, in relation to the formative or form-giving capacity of subjectivity, or what Marx called sensuous labor (“sinnliche Arbeit”) in a line that can be traced via Fichte, Kant, and Leibniz all the way back to Machiavelli and the Florentine tradition of aesthetic thought. For Marx, it was through the dynamic relation between subject and object, the human “metabolism with nature,” that the senses, themselves, could be said to be shaped by “natural-historical” processes. By understanding Marx’s thinking as comprised of determinate critiques of three diverse, overlapping, and contradictory fields, namely: philosophy, political economy, and politics, we claim that Marx unearths the mutually destabilizing relation between the discipline of aesthetics, in which he had a profound and abiding early interest, on the one hand, and the aesthetic, as a historically determinate organization of the senses, on the other.

This approach, therefore, is meta-aesthetic in at least two respects: First, it goes beyond the fixation on aesthetics as it appears under the conditions of a given socio-economic formation and hence challenges any fixed understanding of the order of the senses and their relation to rationality; second, it restores the importance of the senses and introduces aesthetic strategies (literature, rhetoric, allegory, metaphor, the performativity of theory) as irreducible elements of theory. Marx’s own work is as much a guideline as it is the object of analysis for this specific inquiry.

Addressing Marx from such a position means to focus on a Marxian way of addressing the aesthetic, so we hope, rather than addressing it in a classically Marxist or a narrowly philological, that is, Marxological fashion. This book aims to reconstruct a Marxian spirit (inseparable as it is from the letter of Marx’s writings) and the constitution of aesthetic objects and the specific field of art from within this broader materialist horizon. And it seeks to do so in light of contemporary systematic debates on the nature of the aesthetic. It thus hopes to make Marx our contemporary again, a contemporary (if, indeed, he ever ceased to be one) in, as we could say, a post-Nietzschean epoch.

We situate Marx initially on what we call the post-Nietzschean landscape of contemporary thought. We call it post-Nietzschean and not post-Heideggerian or even post-modern precisely because, with Nietzsche, the troubled relation between philosophical aesthetics centering on the nature of “beauty,” on the one hand, and the “aesthetic” understood as embodied, sensuous perception, on the other, is transvalued or deliberately put into a crisis.

Our book’s claims about the fundamentally aesthetic nature of Marx’s program of social critique and societal emancipation comprise a defense of the Marxian version of the aesthetic. Marx’s own version of the aesthetic, a historicizing vision of the organization of the senses and of the relation between sense and intellect, has come alive once again in contemporary debates, particularly with Jacques Rancière’s theses about the historical regimes of art and the material history of subjectivity. Our claims about the Marxian aesthetic are therefore in close dialogue with Rancière’s contributions to the nature of the aesthetic, emphasizing the historical organization of human subjectivity (with respect to both its formative and receptive capacities, poiesis and aisthesis, respectively).

The tension between these two poles—normative philosophical aesthetics and the historicizing interest in the aesthetic—is the leitmotif of the entire volume and its
attempt to present Marx as a contemporary in our post-Nietzschean epoch (II, below). We subsequently suggest ways in which Marx’s thought is profoundly marked by both sides of this opposition and, indeed, that his work embodies the tension produced by it. Marx’s thought, in other words, inherits a number of aesthetic legacies (III). In particular, this tension surfaces in his thoughts on language and in his own writing style (IV). However, despite this evidence of the way in which aesthetics and the aesthetic structures Marx’s writing, we nonetheless feel compelled to address the critics of so-called “aesthetic ideology” who are mostly skeptical of the idea that the aesthetic/aesthetics could play a key role in social critique and transformative politics (V). Despite these critiques there are obvious parallels between the question of the aesthetic/aesthetics in Marx and that of politics (VI). More specifically, the formative capacity of human labor-power in transforming “inorganic nature” is already anticipated in aesthetico-political categories in the Machiavellian account of the relation between virtù, on the one hand, and fortuna, on the other (VII). Marx understands this in terms of the dynamic, dialectical interaction of spontaneous activity, “production according to the laws of beauty,” as he famously writes, and sensuous receptivity or the idea of the human being as a “sensuous,” “passionate,” and suffering being (VIII).

If we are largely concerned with the role of the aesthetic/aesthetics within Marx, we also suggest to shift perspective and show the increasing presence of Marx (both as figure and inscription) in contemporary artistic practices—an essential field of analysis of this volume (IX) Finally, this introduction provides a short overview of each of the chapters comprising this volume (X).

II. Deadly serious aesthetics—a twenty-first century Marx

The reference to Nietzsche might not go without saying in the context of a book on Marx. But such a historicizing approach to the history of academic disciplines—one which orients itself by the historically determinate organization of the senses—is inspired, clearly, as much by Nietzschean traditions as by a strictly Marxist lineage. Along with Freud, both Marx and Nietzsche belong, in Ricoeur’s celebrated formulation, to the “hermeneutics of suspicion” or a mode of interpretation and critique oriented towards the tensions and conflicts between a certain sensuous materiality, on the one hand, and cultural forms that sublimate and repress it, on the other. Both of them, furthermore, characteristically represent a materialist turn in nineteenth century philosophy, historicizing the great bourgeois values that informed the legacy of German idealism. Aesthetics gains particular relevance in both accounts. Thus Nietzsche writes in his Preface to The Birth of Tragedy on Richard Wagner, while an orderly during the Franco–Prussian War (a time, of course, that Marx spent writing observations on and speculating on the Paris Commune):

[P]erhaps readers will find it offensive that an aesthetic problem should be taken so seriously—assuming they are unable to consider art more than a pleasant sideline, a readily dispensable tinkling of the bells that accompanies the ‘seriousness of life,’ just as if nobody knew what was involved in such a contrast with the seriousness of life.
Nietzsche takes the aesthetic dimension with profound seriousness and indeed, along with Schopenhauer and Wagner, sees in it the culmination of a metaphysics that he comes, shortly thereafter, to distance himself from.

Nietzsche’s gesture should in no way surprise us in so far as what he is, in part, doing is tracing the line of descent of the “aesthetic” all the way back to the origins of Western philosophy in Platonism, if not to the poetic philosophizing of the pre-Socratics and indeed the epic poetry of the Homeric world. For Platonism, justice (in both the individual and in the city) was to be understood as a *harmonic* ordering of the parts within the whole; an order in which each person does the work that is assigned to him. Within Platonism, the aesthetic dimension, music in particular, is key to the domination of reason over the appetites (or affects). Indeed, it is because of the tendency of the poetry of Sophocles and Aeschylus to lead reason astray by depicting the sensible world, and therefore remaining caught within the destabilizing, deterritorializing flux and flow of becoming, the realm of simulacra, that tragedy must be exiled from the city. After all, the role of the philosopher is to make the fraught and tortuous journey, by means of dialectic, upwards out of the cave and the images cast upon its walls toward the sunlight. The world of illusion or semblance must be left behind.

Of course, with his *Poetics*, Plato’s student, Aristotle, presents in the context of his larger break with the master’s dualism, an account of the excessive discharge of powerful emotions within tragic drama that makes it possible to justify its inclusion within the just city. Tragedy here can be seen in terms of a purging of “pity” and “fear” that the audience experiences in the amphitheater, which will leave citizens cleansed and ready to participate calmly and virtuously, according to the golden mean, in the political activity of ruling and being ruled in turn.

In Nietzsche’s time, of course, art was in the process of becoming loosened from its ethical and representational moorings. Nietzsche anticipates the avant-garde, particularly the Futurists, with their hatred of the overwhelming power of the antiquarian past, whom he did so much to inspire. As Marinetti writes in his 1909 “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism”:

> We intend to destroy museums, libraries, academies of every sort, and to fight against moralism, feminism, every utilitarian or opportunistic cowardice . . . It is from Italy that we are flinging this to the world, our manifesto or burning and overwhelming violence, with which we today establish “Futurism,” for we intend to free this nation from its fetid cancer of professors, archaeologists, tour guides and antiquarians.

Nietzsche argues that, while the *antiquarian and monumental forms* of history writing have their place, it is *critical* history, “history in the service of life,” that should take precedence. The Birth of Tragedy was critical history in this sense and sought, therefore, to liberate the Dionysian forces as they expressed themselves in musical terms, in direct—and polemical—opposition to Winckelmann’s vision of Greece as characterized by “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur.” Far from avoiding excessive, ecstatic experiences, the Dionysian impulse manifested exactly these extreme states, it “excited awe and terror.” At the very climax of joy there sounds a cry of horror or a
yearning lamentation for an irretrievable loss.” What at first seems, according to Nietzsche’s juxtaposition of the “seriousness of life,” with the “tinkling of bells,” is, on closer inspection, presented as an inextricable aesthetic dimension lying at the origins not just of the tradition of Western metaphysics but also its political thinking.

Such a thinking was oriented, of course, toward the “good,” but also, therefore, toward the “true” and the “beautiful.” In other words, for Nietzsche, the aesthetic could be said to underlie the basic relation to the world that he came to call “will to power” or the capacity to form matter. Nietzsche’s own rehabilitation of semblance, of affects and, in consequence, of philosophical rhetoric, demolishes the harmonious Platonic order of the good, the true and the beautiful. Nietzsche’s philosophy turns openly rhetorical in its affirmation of powerful affects, pitting itself against the ideologies of truth; cutting across, and against, the classical divide of the philosophical disciplines, through which the mobilization of affects gains tremendous ethico-political significance.

Since the time of Nietzsche, philosophy has focused more explicitly on the material histories of normative regimes, rooted in vital struggles for self-expression. His philosophical project shed new light on the project of materialism itself and, importantly, on the way in which such materialism is in need of a history of subjectivity, too, to make sense of its own claims. Such thinking of course has experienced a powerful revival in the post-Second World War period in France as the “affirmative” counter-point to the negativity of the dialectical thinking of Hegel and a certain “Marx.” This is evinced by the writings of Bataille, Foucault, Derrida and, especially, in the work of Deleuze and Guattari who replace an understanding of the human being as characterized by “lack” with an affirmative notion of “desiring-production; castrated by militant subjectivity.” For this book, such traditions allow for a different approach to Marx as well. By way of a Freudian (or Lacanian) nachträglichkeit this particular conjuncture of a materialist re-interpretation of aesthetics has also transformed our Marx. Marx, after Nietzscheanism, comes to the fore not only as the excellent stylist that he was—for whom theory was interventionist and disruptive rather than merely reflective—but also as a thinker for whom the historical organization of human subjectivity (of the senses, affects, style) has been a matter of tremendous, if often overlooked, importance.

This book is written, then, in a post-Nietzschean spirit for post-Nietzschean times. It is this specific historical constellation that allows us to revisit Marx himself in light of such deadly serious aesthetics.

III. Marx’s aesthetic legacies

If the attempt to draw Marx into the orbit of bourgeois thought in the early part of the twentieth century has been questioned passionately (see the remarks on Bennett below), such skepticism is purchased at the expense of a recognition that Marx’s thought, in large measure, results from a series of determinate rather than abstract negations of the thought produced by the bourgeoisie in its heroic, revolutionary phase. That is to say, the point is not to, as many of his later followers will do with immense zeal, simply dismiss bourgeois thought in toto as false but rather, as Marx
himself put it, to “discover the rational kernel within the mystified shell.”26 As a figure of no less revolutionary and iconic significance than Lenin, himself, noted in his 1913 contribution to Prosveshcheniye, dedicated to the 30th anniversary of Marx's death: “Marx's thought is the legitimate successor to the best that man produced in the nineteenth century, as represented by German philosophy, English political economy and French socialism.”27 Indeed, as Marx celebrated, in an 1844 article in Vorwärts that referred to Heinrich Heine's poem “The Poor Weavers,” the “brilliant literary debut of the German Workers,” he noted the way in which “the German was 'the theoretician of the European proletariat,' as the English was its 'economist,' and the French its 'politician.'”28 Each of these three “moments” of Marx's thinking can be understood, each in their own way, to be deeply marked by the aesthetic as we seek to show below.

This revolutionary bourgeois legacy, in a variety of ways, has always implied myriad aesthetic impulses and valences. These are, in Paul Thomas's words, reflective of Marx's own "haunts," namely the cities of Brussels, London and Paris—the habituses in which the revolutionary exile lived, thought, wrote, and struggled. These three moments form a constellation within which the proletariat was described as the “realization of philosophy.” As Kevin B. Anderson has recently elaborated on Lenin's characterization thus:

To Marx, Britain was the country where the industrial revolution had gone furthest in wiping away feudal remnants; France was where the democratic and, after 1848, the working-class uprisings had been the deepest; Germany was where the modern form of revolutionary philosophy had been born out of a critical appropriation of Hegelian idealism.29

A condition for engaging with these three traditions, especially the tradition of classical German philosophy, was, of course, Marx's early formation as a typical Bildungsbürger. Typical for leftist intellectuals—or at least so Bourdieu suggests—he was equipped with disproportionately more cultural than economic capital and was actively engaged with the major aesthetic discourses of his time. He was liberally educated in Greek and Latin literature and, indeed, completed a dissertation on the Democritean and Epicurian philosophies of nature. Like Plato before he turned to philosophy, as a young man Marx had originally intended to pursue a literary career. Indeed, as anyone who has even casually read his writings will know, Marx's writings and letters are peppered with references to Ovid, Horace, Dante, Virgil, and of course, his particular favorites Goethe and Shakespeare, as well as the Book of Revelation. As one commentator writes:

Marx, so the facts hold, was a man of the Muses. At the university he attended art lectures and wrote plays, poetry, and essays all of which occupy a sturdy volume in the Marxian corpus. The mature writings abound in literary allusions: Marx knows his Homer, Shakespeare, Balzac. Capital itself, at least the one volume Marx published, was intended to be a Kunstwerk of sorts; and the dramatic nature of the Marxian narrative of the conflict between man and capital has not been missed by commentators.30
Not only was he a “man of the Muses,” Marx was also friends with poets Georg Herwegh and the great poet of exile Heinrich Heine—whose best known piece the *Song of the Silesian Weavers* was one of the first works identifying the proletariat as a class.\(^3\) Marx commented—in the so-called Sickingen debate, to which Georg Lukács was most attentive—critically on a drama manuscript by Lassalle.\(^3\) Here Marx held a strictly Hegelian understanding\(^3\) of tragedy as the necessary collision of major forces of history against Lassalle and defended a Shakespearean version of realism, accentuating class positions in characteristic *types*, opposed to naïve forms of individualized spokespersons of a general *Weltgeist*, which he attributed to the aesthetic legacy of Schiller.\(^3\)

Moreover, as Margaret Rose has discussed, Marx actually attempted to write a book on aesthetics, two years prior to the drafting of his *Paris Manuscripts* in 1842, around the time of his critiques of Hegel and his fellow Young Hegelians (see Chapter 5 by Anna-Katharina Gisbertz in this volume). Marx held critical views on idealist aesthetics, while temporarily sympathizing with the Saint-Simonian view concerning the extraordinary historical role of artists\(^5\) and, apparently, had wanted to write a book on Balzac, too.\(^5\) In many ways Marx could rightfully claim to inherit major parts of the bourgeois aesthetic tradition, and he kept commenting on it.

More specifically, though, to return to Lenin’s famous characterization of Marx’s project, how are we to understand the aesthetic content of his thinking? The aesthetic dimension of Marx’s early critique of German idealism in a sense carries on the post-Kantian understanding of the aesthetic. Already announced with the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant’s project was unification of the first and second critiques; the first established the limits of reason in the context of a lawfulness of nature not authored by it, the second established the primacy of practical reason understood as self-determining freedom. Schiller formulated the profoundly influential attempt to reunify reason and sensuousness in the idea of “play.” This was followed and, in its emphasis, occasionally exceeded by Schelling, the Romantics, and figures such as Schopenhauer, who developed their own full-blown metaphysics of art. For Hegel, while art—the sensuous appearance of the Idea—is no longer the repository of Absolute Spirit, as it had been for the Greeks, it is nonetheless a necessary precondition, and thus model, for religion and, finally, philosophy.

Key to all of these post-Kantian philosophies is the idea that the culture of diremption, division and contradiction could somehow be overcome through a harmonious totalization for which the aesthetic served as the model. Marx was well informed and highly influenced by this tradition. For Marx, however, such a notion of totalization moves beyond idealism insofar as it now incorporates sensuousness into the idea drawn from Feuerbach of “Species-being” (*Gattungswesen*). The idea, then, of formative activity, itself indebted to conception of “spontaneity” of Leibnizian provenance, so key to the differentiation of modern from pre-modern accounts of the *Vita Activa*, is sharpened through Marx’s engagement with British political economy, and philosophy becomes transformed into the critical analysis of the material conditions of social life.

This second “moment” of Marx’s thought, is his critique of Hegel’s notion from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* of the pain, suffering, and labour, of the concept. For example, in the crucially important section on Lordship (*Herrschaft*) in the *Phenomenology*,
Hegel writes that, in contrast to the merely "fleeting" satisfaction of recognition enjoyed by the master, the bondman's satisfaction is objective because it consists of formative activity:

Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms and shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its form and something permanent, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence. This negative middle term of the formative activity is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence. It is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, qua worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its own independence. 37

However, at the bottom, in Marx's view, such pain was simply metaphorical insofar as it was the pain of "pure being-for-self of consciousness" and did not ultimately entail the sufferings of actual, which is to say, embodied, sensuous men and women. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx repeatedly refers to the human being as a "sensuous" and "suffering" being, stating that:

To be sensuous is to suffer. Man as an objective, sensuous being is therefore a suffering being—and because he feels that he suffers, a passionate being. Passion is the essential power of man energetically bent on its object. 38

Here Marx, one could say, invokes human finitude and as such places him alongside other so-called existentialist critics of Idealism such as Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. Through British political economy, Marx understands labor as the material transformation of the external, which is to say, sensuous world as does Locke in his famous conception of property as the result of the mixing of land and labour. 39 In other words, insofar as Marx dialectically inverts the "labour of the concept" into the "concept of labour," his thinking is aesthetic in a very literal sense as it relates to the human being as an embodied, sensuous, and, therefore, mortal being.

The third moment of Marx's thinking, his engagement with French socialism, arises through a determinate negation of the work of utopian socialism of Charles Fourier in particular. Marx and Engels, particularly in section 4 of The Communist Manifesto, are extremely critical of utopian socialism for being undialectical and unhistorical in its failure to ground socialism in actual class struggles that were sharpening in the mid-1840s and in its failure to understand capitalism as an inherently contradictory social formation. The influence of Fourier, nonetheless, is clear. Through Fourier, Marx was able to grasp the possibility of a transformation of the labor process from one entailing pain, misery, and strife, in a word, alienation, under capitalism, on the one hand, into a form of labor that came to resemble not drudgery and toil but play under communism, on the other. Humanity would be transformed, as a result, from homo laborans into homo ludens, from man the laborer into man the player. In other words, Marx envisioned with the advent of a post-capitalist form of society, a society in which the category of art would, itself, be abolished insofar as all work would entail, in its
dealienated form, a kind of cooperative self-relation in which the workers could finally recognize themselves in the product of their "freely associated" labor.  

The mechanical materialism of Owen and Fourier also allowed for a vision of social organization in which inclinations—"laws of passionate attraction," as Fourier would have it—would play a decisive role. This utopian vision with its mechanical account of bodily expressions attracted the various generations of surrealists (and post-surrealists), including André Breton, Roland Barthes, and Guy Debord. Fourier's vision of a machinic organization of the collective body also profoundly fascinated one of the foremost contributors to Marxian aesthetics, Walter Benjamin. In his famous exposé to the Arcades Project he noted with some sense of admiration:

The meshing of the passions, the intricate collaboration of passions mécanistes with the passion cabaliste, is a primitist contrivance formed—on analogy with the machine—from materials of psychology. This mechanism made of men produces the land of milk and honey, the primeval wish symbol that Fourier's utopia has filled with new life.

In his Arcades Project Benjamin, too, very carefully notes the ways in which Marx, in Capital, refers to collective organization as to a "collective working machine," an "articulated system composed of various kinds of machines," becoming "all the more perfect." For Marx, as later for Benjamin, the machine-like organization of the collective body, held its own sublime fascination.

IV. Literature, style, and the materiality of language

This fascination not only had theoretical predecessors in mechanical materialism but also, counterintuitively, in German idealism, as well. Its literary expressions were clearly important to Marx where cited or, at least, echoed in his writings. Many of Marx's references to literature echo the Romantic reaction to the Revolution of 1789 and its aftermath that first found expression in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, or a Modern Prometheus, presenting another hybrid between man and machine. This text, written coincidentally in the same year as Marx's birth also uncannily evokes Marx's own favorite cultural hero, the Titan who steals fire from the gods for humanity, a figure symbolizing productive capacity and techne. And as Franco Moretti has indicated, the creature constructed by Dr. Frankenstein signifies the growing, spectral industrial working class. Shelley's story registers directly the fear of the Revolution that Burke had expressed in terms of an aesthetics of the sublime in his Reflections on the Revolution in France. For the Godwinian Shelley, according to David McNally, it took the form of an "anxious radical liberalism."

Perhaps Shelley’s novel was the source of Marx's claim in The Communist Manifesto that the bourgeoisie would inevitably produce its own gravediggers. Frankenstein, the good bourgeois who resembles Faust, literally digs up the dead from their graves and uses their body parts in his project to bestow form on lifeless matter (as an exemplary instance of Machiavellian virtù), so as to create a new form of life—a collective worker
as it were that is the source of surplus value, which in the end only deepens his oppression and indignity. As McNally explains, “A being without kin, friends, property or wealth, the monster represents the negation of bourgeois distinction. He is the inhuman human, a violation of the social order who is nonetheless its product.” Ultimately, because the creature’s negativity is not and, ultimately, cannot be “recognized” within the confines of the existing order, 46 it turns monstrous and pursues its own creator across the globe hinting, as Mary Shelley does, at the reverberations of the French Revolution in Haiti47 and the coming liberation struggles in the colonial world (see Chapter 10, Robin Greeley’s chapter on Marx’s reception in Mexico in this volume). In short, the narrative figures that can be found in Marx’s account of history remain dependent on the tropes of their time. Philosophy, according to the Hegelian conviction, is its “own time apprehended in thoughts.” 48 But history confronts its own tasks not only in terms of addressing its contents, it also requires its own narrative forms, as Hayden White points out in his landmark “tropological” reading of Marx updated and reprinted in our volume. This, then again, is not just a question of the narrative sources of theory but also of the political struggles concerning the possibility of a subject matter to, itself, become the content of history writing at all—a question that Marx was highly concerned with.

Not only the narrative style of his theory, but also the ways in which literary texts are brought into, for example, Marx’s early discussion of money in the 1844 Manuscripts, is, for the truth content that the texts manifest, therefore key to understanding the aesthetic valence of Marx’s project.49 Literature can be understood to manifest what Benjamin calls in his reading of Goethe its “truth content”50 precisely because of the manner in which art has congealed in a complex way the practical consciousness of its epoch. This is not to say that it simply reflects in a straightforward way the interests of the dominant classes of society, although Marx does of course assert this, too, in his 1859 preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy. In fact, specifically because literature reflects the practical consciousness of society in a refracted, oblique, and alienated way, its truth content must be actively excavated.51 So, in the section on money in the Manuscripts, Marx seeks to show through passages from Faust and Timon of Athens the manner in which money becomes what he calls the “alienated ability of mankind.”

The distinctively literary nature of Marx’s texts, its style, its relation to the particularity of time and place, specifically its polemical use of the chiasmus, taken over from Feuerbach’s transformative method, is related internally to the arguments contained within them. The form of thought is, differently put, inextricable from the form of its presentation. Indeed, for that reason, Marx recognizes the central importance of art, literature in particular, in disclosing its truth content. As Marx states in 1842:

Since every true philosophy is the intellectual quintessence of its time, the time must come when philosophy not only internally by its content, but also externally through its form, comes into contact and interaction with the real world of its day.54

Such a recognition is indeed grounded in Marx’s early reflections on the nature of language as, itself, a form of material practice. As he states in his polemical tract on the “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction” (1842):
But then the modesty of genius does not consist in what educated speech consists in, the absence of accent and dialect, but rather in speaking with the accent of the matter and in the dialect of its essence. It consists in forgetting modesty and immodesty and getting to the heart of the matter. The universal modesty of the mind is reason, that universal liberality of thought which reacts to each thing according to the latter's essential nature.\textsuperscript{54}

What Marx appears to be saying here is that the modesty of genius doesn't consist of abstract universality, or universality unmediated by its immersion in particularity, but rather precisely in such an immersion in the concrete particulars of real history which inexorably finds its way into language as the “heart of the matter.”

It is in the so-called German Ideology,\textsuperscript{55} however, that Marx makes good on his attempt to break with the Hegelian and post-Hegelian humanist framework of the philosophical thinking of his epoch. Rather than focusing on what he calls “the imaginary battles of imagined subjects,” he seeks to go beyond Hegelian philosophy and its mere “criticism.” Therefore Marx begins from “real premises from which abstraction can only be made in the imagination. They are the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.”\textsuperscript{56} What he means by real here, as he explains elsewhere, is an active, transformative, and above all sensuous relation to the world.

Within this context, language is, for Marx, practical consciousness. Language constitutes the specifically social, inter-subjective and therefore human capacity for naming, making sense of and practically transforming the determinate, sensuous conditions of life. Language is practical consciousness as it exists for other human beings, as is required by social intercourse, which is itself necessitated by the imperative of satisfying existing human needs and is the means by which new ones are brought into being.\textsuperscript{57}

Marx's own position here very much differs from Hegelian philosophy of consciousness, in and through which language is understood to embody the “negation of the negation,” that is, considered only a means by which Spirit realizes itself as Absolute insofar as it passes through partial, incomplete, and contradictory “shapes.”\textsuperscript{58} Hegel's position is clearly expressed in the last section of his introduction to the Phenomenology, where he explicates his idea of Absolute Spirit:

In pressing forward to its true existence, consciousness will arrive at a point at which it gets rid of its semblance of being burdened with something alien, with what is only for it, and some sort of ‘other,’ at a point where appearance becomes identical with essence, that its exposition will coincide at just this point with the authentic Science of Spirit. And finally when consciousness itself grasps this its own essence, it will signify the nature of absolute knowledge itself.\textsuperscript{59}

In opposition to such an idealist account of language, for Marx language is itself to be understood in its very materiality—as a form of “negativity” that could never be properly negated insofar as it emerges initially from the necessity of a sensuous
productivity that is infinite. It therefore bears within it the traces of such necessity that it is constitutionally unable to divest itself of. Singling out this very passage of Hegel’s *Phenomenology* on the achievement of Absolute Spirit for critical scrutiny in *The German Ideology*, Marx argues that:

> From the start the “spirit” is afflicted with the burden of matter, which makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sound, in short of language (*in der Form von bewegten Luftschichten, Tönen, kurz der Sprache auftritt*). 60

Insofar as language is coextensive with consciousness, it is not possible to speak of consciousness independent of language—Spirit is unable, ultimately, to “unburden” itself of language and the trace of otherness (that is, as materiality) it ineluctably contains. Marx emphasizes this even more in the *Grundrisse*:

> Ideas do not exist separately from language. Ideas which have first to be translated out of their mother tongue into a foreign language in order to circulate, in order to become exchangeable, offer a somewhat better analogy; but the analogy then lies not in language, but in the foreignness of language. 61

For Marx there is no language-independent form of thinking and our knowledge of the sensuous world is not simply a reflection of sense impressions but, rather, a kind of translation of them. This, of course, gives added meaning to the overstretched and oversimplified idea that being (*Sein*) determines consciousness (*Bewusstsein*) or, as Marx and Engels put it, conscious being (*das bewusste Sein*). 62 Language is grounded in practice, that is, in the production and reproduction of the material conditions of life, a necessary rather than contingent mediation between being and consciousness. In other words, in demolishing the Crusonade starting point of classical political economy, Marx makes an argument that seems to anticipate the later Wittgenstein’s strictures against the possibility of a “private language”: “Production by an isolated individual outside society . . . is just as preposterous as the development of language without individuals who live together and speak to one another.” 63

Already with these remarks on language Marx emphasizes the materiality and sensuousness that subtends all communication, anticipating the semiotic version of the linguistic turn in structuralism and post-structuralism, which has been so important for twentieth-century aesthetic debates on modernism with all its emphases on the materiality of the signifier, or, if you will, the medium of communication. For Marx the very materiality of the voice, itself, its reliance on the “compressed air and sound” that arises out of the necessity of meeting and transcending “needs” (social intercourse), lies at the very heart of spirit (*Geist*), which also means a kind of living “breath” (*Spiritus*). 64

It is precisely this reflection on language as practical consciousness that serves as the basis for social intercourse in the “natural history of the species.” In “Fragment on the Machine” in the *Grundrisse*, in which Marx introduces the now much-discussed idea of the “General Intellect,” the laborer, as machinery or dead labor, soaked with sensuous human affects, knowledge, and skills, stands opposed to the subjective regime of capital. In an allusion to Shakespeare, Marx suggests that:
Introduction

[w]hat was the living worker’s activity becomes the activity of the machine. Thus the appropriation of labour by capital confronts the worker in a coarsely sensuous form; capital absorbs labour into itself—as though its body were by love possessed.65

Where the machine incorporates the modes of human production, the struggle enters the sphere of subjectivity. This has been taken to anticipate, especially in post-Fordist capitalism, the so-called knowledge economy in which immaterial production plays a proportionately greater role than material production.66 As Paolo Virno writes famously, representative of a larger discussion, “The ‘general intellect’ includes formal and informal knowledge, imagination, ethical tendencies, mentalities and ‘language games.’”67

Such a discussion, with its emphasis on the inherently creative role of labor in producing digital code, affect, and language itself, picks up on the same links between the codes of communication and the concrete practical regimes through which they are structured that Marx had already developed in *The German Ideology*: the idea of practical consciousness. Moreover it clearly historicizes the idea of aesthetics as a fixed normative regime: For Marx, and this cannot be repeated often enough, the mediations between subject and object are historical, mediated by power relations and therefore are political through and through, as is language and the codes of communication.

V. External and immanent critiques of aesthetic ideology

Whenever the potentials of the aesthetic are thus addressed affirmatively from within Marxism, it immediately and fittingly generates a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” as it were. Among others, Tony Bennett has doggedly pointed out the tensions between historical materialism and the construction of aesthetics as a discipline. As a discipline with universal claims rooted in epistemology and moral philosophy, aesthetics is under suspicion of falling back into mere idealism as when Marx, himself, in *The German Ideology* criticizes idealism, as alluded to above, for speculating on the “imagined activity of imagined subjects.”68 In his *Outside Literature* Bennett has explicitly argued that normative aesthetics with universal claims “has an undeniable political use-value . . . only for the right”69—as it presupposes and helps establish a type of normative subjectivity that Bennett takes to be anti-emancipatory by definition.

Bennett’s claims have to be read against the backdrop of 1980s minority politics and the critique of all attempts of ideological closure. For Bennett the generalizing gesture of universalized aesthetics would be a way of veiling the particular perspective of the dominant social groups. And the leftist task would therefore be to engage in *Ideologiekritik*, which is to say to unmask the false claims to universality. Bennett, however, identifies these tensions in Marx’s works themselves. Turning Marx against Marx, Bennett states that the idealism in many Marxists’ approaches to aesthetics:

[r]eflects the ambiguity of Marx’s own writings on literary and artistic matters. Although he did not attempt to develop a systematic theory of art and literature,
Marx did comment frequently and often at length on these matters. Unfortunately, it is not always easy to reconcile what he has to say in these passages with the concerns and procedures embodied in the approach he took to the questions of economic and political analysis with which he was more centrally concerned. Bennett’s relativism is an extreme case that can be differentiated in light of a number of other Marxist perspectives on aesthetics, which aim to criticize aesthetics from without. According to Bennett’s relativist position, the crucial theoretical break lies in the recognition that, instead of “Marxism and aesthetics,” the real concern should be with “Marxism versus aesthetics.” So he says:

Where the concerns and procedures of aesthetics prevail, artistic practices are differentiated in terms of their formal properties as theorised in relation to some conception of the aesthetic as a distinct mode of the subject’s mental relation to reality. The disposition of Marxism, by contrast, is to establish a social, historical and, above all, political basis for theorizing the internal economy of the sphere of artistic practices and their ideological articulations.

His position might be the most extreme concerning the possibility of a Marxian version of the aesthetic. Strictly speaking, however, Bennett is neither the original nor the most influential source of the Marxist critique of aesthetic ideology. In a number of meta-aesthetic texts inspired by Marxism, aesthetic discourse comes to the fore as an imaginary displacement effected by collapse between the promise of emancipation and equality and the repression of real emancipation and real equality in the further development of capitalist society. As such a displacement, however, it comprises a critical potential: it harbors various desires and imaginary potentials. The history of Marxological debate, and of meta-aesthetic readings and interpretations of Marx represents an attempt to come to terms with this meta-aesthetic claim. It embeds aesthetics in social history while attempting to see more in it than just a second layer of political strategy and to approach it from the perspective of immanent critique. In the history of leftist meta-aesthetics there are four decisive texts that further develop that argument. The first one is Herbert Marcuse’s “The Affirmative Character of Culture” (originally published in 1936). In this influential article, Marcuse argued that the inherent promise of bourgeois culture functions as a mere idealist promise (detached from the organization of real life practices) of happiness and beauty. “Culture is supposed to assume concern for the individual’s claim to happiness,” he says, and goes on: “But the real gratification of individuals cannot be contained by an idealist dynamic which either continually postpones gratification or transmutes it into striving for the unattained.”

Marcuse underlines the inherent promises of bourgeois high art, the political potentials of the aesthetic. But according to Marcuse these potentials find their proper place only in a materialist project: “materialist philosophy takes seriously the concern for happiness and fights for its realization in history.” The utopian surplus of culture needs to be realized in political practice and it is a matter of social struggles. If bourgeois culture and the very ideal of beauty—the main examples in Marcuse are indeed the
protagonists of German classicism—is a displacement of happiness, then materialist philosophy (and the emancipatory politics of the left) would be the proper place of the otherwise displaced.

The second decisive text in this context is Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger underlines the immanent contradiction of bourgeois aesthetics between its critical and utopian function on the one hand and its compensatory (thus: ideological) function on the other. He writes: “Art is institutionalized as autonomous to act as a guardian of human emancipation in a society whose actual life processes do not allow its realization.”

To Bürger (following Adorno) it is in the specific organization of aesthetic semblance that we find an emancipatory surplus. The bourgeois conception of the autonomous artwork, Bürger claims, has two utopian dimensions: It reconciles the material and the rational and the general and the particular. But this emancipatory potential is only symbolically present. Bourgeois aesthetics reduces the anticipation of emancipation to mere semblance.

Bürger will make sense of the history of the avant-garde against this backdrop. Avant-gardist cultural politics, Bürger claims, is the attempt to bring the emancipatory potentials of autonomous form back into real life. His thesis has become influential and canonical as a definition of the avant-garde and emphasizes a necessary moment of leftism inherent in the history of aesthetics: the aesthetico-political tension between the merely compensatory and the re-organization of social life praxis—a struggle and a practice of active interventions.

In his early 1980s masterpiece *The Political Unconscious*, the third central text in this tradition, Fredric Jameson has claimed that historical materialism provides the most powerful analytical tools for a proper analysis of narratives, that Marxism—and Marx’s theory of ideology—is unavoidable for deciphering aesthetic practices and revealing the hidden priority of politics. Though Jameson provides strong arguments for a materialist hermeneutics, *The Political Unconscious* is highly skeptical about the possibility of philosophical aesthetics. Form (and the universalizing claims of aesthetics) is quite generally drawn under suspicion of ideology, covering the political tensions that underlie the politics of the respective works. The “aesthetic act,” Jameson writes:

> is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic of narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.\(^75\)

Rather than arguing for aesthetics (as a universalizing discourse on form and experience) or the aesthetic (the historical constellation of the sensuous and the rational) *The Political Unconscious* locates politics “in the last instance” and emphasizes the priority of history. As Jameson exhorts: “Always historicize.”\(^76\) Regardless of its having inspired a deepened discussion of aesthetics or the aesthetic Jameson’s gesture is, paradoxically, critical of the possibility of such discourse.

In his *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, the fourth important text in this line of thought, Terry Eagleton has set forth arguments not unlike those of Jameson’s. When he analyzes the main figures of aesthetic discourse from Baumgarten to post-modernism, he
emphasizes the deeply ambivalent political use-value of the aesthetic. In Eagleton's view aesthetics appears as a sublimation and displacement of politics. Although aesthetics, on the one hand, appears as a manifestation and, thus, perpetuation of bourgeois subjectivity, on the other, it also has a certain revolutionary dimension. Main elements of the aesthetic tradition are, thus, also main elements of leftist emancipatory struggles: the struggle for solidarity, community, and the mediations between the particular and the general, between (egalitarian) form and content, between materiality and rationality, between manual and intellectual labor. The aesthetic, Eagleton writes:

[r]epresents on the one hand a liberatory concern with concrete particularity and on the other hand a specious form of universality. If it offers a generous utopian image of reconciliation between men and women at present divided from one another, it also blocks and mystifies the historical movement towards such historical community.

Eagleton's book is not just fundamentally Marxist in its critical method and aim but also contains a critical reconstruction of the inherent aesthetic theory of Marx himself. The ideas of a sensuous community, of the restoration of the bodies’ “plundered powers” and of the unity of society’s form and content (substantially living up to its normative standards), are therefore, so Eagleton argues, fundamentally aesthetic principles in Marx.

VI. The aesthetic turn in political theory

Textual or philological evidence for Marx's own aesthetic reflections that reach beyond historical or social relativism can readily be given in a Marxological way. Although every philosophy and art, as Marx admits, is the quintessence of its time, his interest in Greek culture seems to contradict his key claims. This was a difficulty that Marx was well aware of—explicitly so in the Grundrisse, in which he writes:

The difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as norm and as unattainable model.

How, then, is it possible that the art of the Greeks—who existed at a much less developed stage of human sociality—hold any charm for us today? And Marx's attempt to answer the question runs as follows:

A man cannot become a child again, or he becomes childish. But does he not find joy in the child's naivete, and must he not strive to reproduce its truth at a higher stage? . . . The Greeks were normal children. The charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the undeveloped stage of society on which it grew. [It] is its result, rather, and is inextricably bound up, rather, with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return.
Marx's reference to the Greeks obviously echoes Nietzsche's *bête noire* Winckelmann, whom he read as early as in 1837 at the age of 19. It also recalls the general German fascination for the unity of cultural manifestation and commonly agreed upon collective beliefs that had been attributed to the ideal Greek culture not only by Winckelmann but also by Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel. In his earliest writings, Marx, too, recognized a potential of collective unity in Greek culture that was replaced by pure atomism and abstract individuality in Roman civilization.\(^{82}\) Greek culture and the idea of historical adequacy represent much of what Hegel grasped in his own terms as the sensuous manifestation of the Idea, as expressing a determinate potential in a materially concrete shape.

But Marx's argument seems to go further. The key word here, for Marx, is “naïvete.” Marx is referencing Schiller's distinction between naïve and sentimental poetry, the former a direct description of nature, the latter a reflective depiction of it. The dialectical idea here is that there could be no possible return to the immediacy and unity of Greek beauty (*schönheit*).\(^{83}\) What was possible, however, was its determinate negation, a simultaneous cancelling and preserving at the higher level, that is at the level of *communism* which would rescue such beauty but in such a way that would reconcile it with genuine post-revolutionary universal freedom and radical egalitarianism.\(^{84}\) In other words, as previously mentioned, labor would be generalized through the abolition of the private ownership of the means of production and class division but it would also be the site of a certain “free play of the faculties” and therefore rendered “aesthetic” understood as the free yet sensuous fashioning of external nature and, through this, of subjectivity itself.

Such a determinate negation of the Greek ideal is what Joseph Chytry has called the “Aesthetic State.” This Chytry understands as “a social and political community that accords primacy, although not exclusiveness, to the aesthetic dimension in human consciousness and activity.”\(^{85}\) Chytry refers to the manner in which the attempt, centered in Weimar, to bring the abiding German fascination with the Hellenistic world, as manifested in the work of Winckelmann, together with the problem of the aesthetic as the ultimately unsuccessful\(^{86}\) unifying dimension of Kant’s Critical Idealist project. In such a determinate negation, the aesthetic state was principally associated with the writings of Schiller, in particular his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, as well as those of Herder and Goethe. Along with a whole host of other German classicist and Romantic thinkers as diverse as Winckelmann, Goethe, Hegel, Wagner, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Marcuse, among others, Marx was driven by the quest for the “aesthetic state.”\(^{87}\) Marx’s vision of the aesthetic state, in particular:

culminates the ideals of German classicism and idealism by anticipating humanity’s ultimate vocation as an aesthetic universality, a creativeness playing with all forms and unifying humans and nature in a free ‘*Gemeinwesen*.’

He goes on to suggest that Marx’s idea of the ‘social individual’ embodies the *homo aestheticus* of German idealism. Of course, Marx approaches this universal being not through formal aesthetic means but
through radical socio-political change that transforms the condition of the human species. Yet a change of this order, representing the qualitative leap from alienated to creative labour, presupposes a more radical introduction of the aesthetic dimension into human society than Schiller and the Swabian idealists had envisaged. The romantic chasm between the artistic genius and the masses gives way to the universal homo ludens succeeding homo faber.

Although not necessarily in harmonistic understandings of the state, political theory has undeniably encountered aesthetic challenges, challenges that make visible the dimensions of affects and performativity, of the abysmal nature of representation, of the historical organization of subjectivity (the senses and their relation to the intellect), and the formal dimensions of the organization of public order.

According to Nikolas Kompridis, what is often referred to as the “aesthetic turn” in political theory can, therefore, be correctly described as a “return” insofar as the aesthetic dimension does not arrive from outside of political theory but was, always already, present within it at its origin. And yet, given the trajectory of political theory, its seemingly inordinate emphasis on formalism and deontological normative preoccupations and commitments as can be discerned in the contributions of the early Rawls and later Habermas, the aesthetic turn as a re-turn becomes also something like an over-turning. The aesthetic becomes the figure for everything that does not properly fit into political theory and therefore causes its (normative) foundations to tremble. Therefore, as Christoph Menke has argued, for this reason art can be understood as “sovereign,” and therefore has a particular force (Kraft as in Urteilskraft) to provoke the crisis of other, contending discourses such as those of science and morality. And it is worth indicating here that Menke draws attention to the manner in which, in Baumgarten’s original formulation, “aesthetics” was closely tied to a materialist understanding of sensuousness. But the aesthetic is also an attempt to ground politics in a more fundamental understanding of political form and of the historical constitution of subjectivity and of the subject’s relations to the world.

Derrida, of course, with his aforementioned intervention contributed to debates concerning the aesthetico-political with explicit references to Marx. The ground for Derrida’s discussion of Marx was already laid early in Positions, where Derrida aligns his development of the problematic of difference as a way of breaking with the Hegelian concept. In other words, Derrida poses it within the framework of materialism, in particular the materiality of the (legible) sign. A key contribution of Derrida’s is to take up Nietzsche’s early deconstruction of the strict opposition between metaphor and concept and to suggest the “transformative” or “transfigurative” nature of the act of reading itself. Reading, in this account, isn’t a passive apprehension of a meaning that embedded in the text than an actual production of meaning as such. Meaning is, as it were, made rather than found. Two decades later, Derrida elaborates a reading of Marx as offering a “hauntology.” He suggests, against those such as Fukuyama, who assert the triumph of liberal democracy at the end of history, that the specter of Marx continues to haunt its institutions. Such a haunting reveals “actually-existing democracy” as non-identical with itself, which is to say, it is always pushing ahead of its instantiation at any given period of time.
Without explicitly addressing it as “aesthetic” as such, Derrida very powerfully emphasizes the political dimension of a Marxian aesthetic as well, developed here in terms of the possibility of proper and transparent representation. According to Derrida, Marx’s world is, happily, a ghostly world that is not identical with itself and is irreducible to teleological determination and to the ultimate closure of the realm of the political. Such a world is overdetermined by semblance, conflicting temporalities, a “time out of joint,” with a subtle machinery of ambiguous meaning. For Derrida, of course, this aesthetic ambivalence is directly linked to the project of a “democracy to come” and to the mise en abyme of the substance of the political: any positive ontology of the people, of the social, of the state, indeed the proletariat as a “revolutionary class,” or totalizing “revolution,” is held at some distance with the help of specters—including the ones of Marx that Derrida holds against him. The possibility of a stable re-presentation of any substance of politics is therefore projected (and structurally postponed) onto the horizon of a democracy to come, built on the insight that democracy (as the self-preservation of the demos) as such is an impossibility. 93

As suggested above, Chytry’s book on the Aesthetic State introduces Marx as an aesthete of a different kind, suggesting that the order of society itself could be organized along the lines of aesthetic principles. And undoubtedly, Marx’s communist vision is one deeply and profoundly suffused by a vision of humanity producing the conditions of its social life through an aesthetic view of labor and of community. An aesthetic understanding of the commonly shared world does not, however, necessarily imply the instantiation of a harmonious, utopian consensus, but can also imply an agonistic idea of dissensus. 94 Indeed, the particular figures of romantic biopolitics—the figure of the creation of a collective body in aesthetic shape—become less and less important in the later writings of Marx. The aesthetic makes a particularly uncanny return in Western Marxism at the very moment the contradictions within the sphere of production (including the wider sphere of “reproduction”) are resolved, at least for a period of time, by what Friederich Pollock calls “State Capitalism” or the stage of capitalism characterized by state direction of the economy so as to stave off, perhaps indefinitely, capitalism’s inherent and potentially fatal crisis tendencies. 95

But Chytry’s point about Marx’s sense of the aesthetic state is not so much about the determination of collective harmony but rather about the self-regulation of agonistic forces, thus, again, much more in line with Nietzsche than with the organicist fantasy of the collective body that characterized romantic discourse. In fact Marx’s materialism doesn’t allow for any model of formal organization other than one that is rooted in the self-regulation of social, material, and bodily forces with all their conflicting and contradictory implications, antagonisms, and forms of dissensus. 96

“Dissensus,” of course, in contemporary aesthetic discourse, alludes to the aesthetic-political theory of Rancière. 97 The term, of course, not only alludes to rational disagreement but conflicting orders of the senses, inherent in the idea of a historical configuration of subjectivity under conditions of class division, which precedes, in Rancière’s view, the possibility of intellectual agreement. Rancière, on his own account, is obviously quite strongly influenced by the Marxian discussion of the division of labor and the way it constitutes the subjective conditions of a divided collective body. 98 Rancière’s influential account of the “aesthetic” is fundamentally concerned with what
he refers to as the “distribution of the sensible” (partage du sensible): what in any given society is perceptible and un-perceptible, and by whom. The question of the attribution of social positions and capacities is, thus, key to his aesthetic discussion of the political.99 Rancière provides us with a profound framework by which the history of political thought can be understood in terms of distinct “regimes” of art, which, in their own specific ways, also relate to the historical organization of subjectivity, understood as organizing principles for given orders of the sensible. So, our foregoing description of the role of the theater in Plato, Aristotle, and Nietzsche can be understood in terms of what Rancière calls the “ethical,” “representational,” and the “aesthetic” regimes of art.

In the ethical regime of art, as we saw, art is subordinated to an overarching conception of the Good, and thus restricted to limited possibilities of expression; limited to legitimate subjects that are clearly subordinated to the larger order of the polis. For Plato, the Good was to be understood in terms of an account of to on or true being that, like Parmenides’s account of being, remains eternal and changeless. As mentioned earlier, to access Being as such, the philosopher needed to turn away from the realm of appearance, the Heraclitean world of unending flux, flow, and contingency. Only art that bolstered (rather than undermined or hindered) the philosopher’s capacity to undertake the journey upwards out of the cave was permitted within the city. In this way, art, like the inhabitant of the just city, does the work that is assigned to it.

In Plato’s successor, Aristotle, we find, according to Rancière, evidence for a second type of aesthetic discourse, the representational regime of art. For Aristotle, in contrast to his teacher, there was no Manichean divide—arrestingly and definitively represented by the spatial analogy of the cave itself—between eternal Being and transitory Becoming. Rather, via his fourfold notion of causality (material, formal, efficient, and final) Aristotle offered a more differentiated, sensuous understanding of Being and placed the latter, the final cause or purpose (telos), at its heart. Objects were not considered as better or worse copies (appearances) of real—that is Ideal—Being, but rather as better or worse sensuous adequations of the forms or Ideals that they themselves strove to actualize. Hence, art could be understood in terms of its capacity of representing the world, through a drawing out of the beautiful form in and through the matter itself in the way, for example, that the “sculptor” can be said to liberate the figure from the stone. In the representational regime, art was thus restricted not to selected subject matters but to pregiven hierarchies of representing these subjects, due to pregiven onto-teleological orders.

With Nietzsche, on the very precipice of modernity, and in the aftermath of a revolutionary century—revolutionary, also, with Kant, Schiller, and then again, Flaubert, Courbet, and so on, in aesthetic discourse—we see something at work which represents a break with both “ethical” and “representational” regimes: an aesthetic regime of art which opens up, through art’s autonomy, the entire sensorium to the production and experience of art, allowing for its disruptive effects on any well-ordered type of discourse whose determinations cannot be mapped in advance but are subject to the experimental logics of art as a potentially autonomous practice.

We can see this concretely through Nietzsche’s Schopenhauerian metaphysical account of the destruction of Apollonian impulse (the form-giving and form-maintaining impulse par excellence) via the explosive, de-differentiating Dionysian
impulse. Nietzsche’s politics were prima facie conservative, save for his middle period with its explicit identification with Voltaire and French Enlightenment, liberalism and indeed certain versions of socialism. After the break with Schopenhauerian and Wagnerian pessimism, the radicality not just of Birth of Tragedy but also the Second Untimely Meditation becomes clearest in terms precisely of opening up the aesthetic as a site at which all of the previous ethical and representational hierarchies could be contested.100

The aesthetic regime of art is understood as a regime of aesthetic autonomy that challenges and restructures all given ontological hierarchies of the active and the passive, the meaningful and the meaningless. Facing the already established structures of discourse, it is through this aesthetic rationality that dissensus emerges, a dissensus that concerns nothing less than the conditions of what can be seen and what can be said. As a critique of any political rationality based on a pre-given division of labor (between those who can and those who cannot speak adequately), Rancière’s recapitulation of the history of aesthetics is also a contribution to the politics of class, informed by the Marxist legacy and in many ways anticipated by it.

VII. Re-presentations of the political: Machiavellian Marx

Skepticism of the aesthetic dimension of Marx parallels critiques of a relative absence of a proper theorization of politics in the architectonic structure of Marx’s thought as a whole—both are understood as epiphenomena, matters of mere Überbau.101 Such critiques are situated both outside of and within the Marxist tradition. One of the most influential versions of the latter is that presented by Hannah Arendt in the Human Condition in which she accuses Marx of reducing the political to the social, zoon politikon to animal laborans, the genuine possibility of the new, to the endlessly cyclical repetition of the labor process associated with the idea of “metabolism with nature.”102

Within the Marxist tradition, it is argued most forcefully and dramatically by Antonio Gramsci who famously claimed that the Russian Revolution was a “revolution against Capital,” performed by a virtuosic political will rather than the socio-historical forces identified in Marx’s opus magnum.103 In other words, the properly political moment—what he terms via an Aristotelian vocabulary (appropriately for our purposes) the “cathartic moment”—is able to escape determination, in the last instance, by the economic. Like Arendt, Gramsci understands politics as, at a decisive moment, breaking free of determinism and inaugurating something new. The connection here with the aesthetic avant-garde is unmistakable.

This problematic nature of Marx’s relation to the political has been addressed in most acute fashion by Miguel Abensour’s book Democracy Against the State: Marx’s Machiavellian Moment. Abensour argues that rather than advocating a “withering away of the state” in a post-capitalist society, drawing upon his longer, somewhat overlooked Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right Marx emphasizes, in a way that parallels Machiavelli’s civic republican treatise Discourses on Livy, the way in which sovereignty lies in the self-actualizing demos itself; the political is comprised by the ongoing formative, self-regulating activity of the people itself.104 Thus, as Antonio Negri
Introduction

has argued, “another tradition of modern metaphysics, from Machiavelli and Spinoza to Marx, sees the development of the dynamic of constituent power as absolute.”

This specific continuity between Machiavelli and Marx also expressed itself in its own literary genre: in the manifesto form, a genre of political writing in which, as Althusser emphasized, the imposition of form and the idea of textual intervention into the realm of material practice maintain a central position. It was, in fact, through the act of writing *The Communist Manifesto* that Marx and Engels sought to contribute to, as they, themselves, put it in the text, “forming the proletariat into a class.” By organizing textual practices into a material force, with the manifesto as its specific genre, style begins to be reflected in its politically formative dimensions.

This Republican idea of the self-constitution or self-regulation of a political subject closely links to other anti-Platonic key arguments in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. As we have seen, the aesthetic has deeply (albeit implicitly) shaped the nature of Socratic political thinking already. The form (*eidos*) becomes then transformed by Aristotle into essence or end (*telos*). So, in Plato, the philosopher’s journey beyond the cave, the difficult and painful *striving away* from sensuous objects toward the forms which sensuous objects resemble (as semblance) imperfectly becomes, for Aristotle, a striving toward (*energeia/entelechia*) the actualization of their essences.

What is key for an understanding of the early modern emergence of the “*aesthetico-political*,” is the vital role played by Machiavelli in the political actualization of the Aristotelian idea of formative capacity. Modernity has been defined, in part, by the disenchantment and rationalization of the world. As nature, in particular, is progressively disenchanted, understood as the process by which it is stripped of any kind of inherent teleology or purposiveness as in Aristotle’s account, it comes to be conceived simply in terms of mechanical-causal and therefore calculable relations. The meaningfulness or intelligibility accorded to nature comes from the outside, and the order of the aesthetic gains its own integrity separate and distinct from the orders of the true and the good. For Kant, the aesthetic is the means by which pure and practical reason are unified. While these two other spheres of value come to be dominated by formal rationality, the aesthetic retains a certain charismatic authority.

In *The Prince*, Machiavelli anticipates the active, formative, rather than simply passive, role played by subjective activity in relation to the contingencies afforded by historical circumstance (*Fortuna*). While Plato indicated the ontological gap between the Ideal and the sensible worlds, and Aristotle showed the manner in which essence was constitutive of the objective world (both nature and artifice) that objects sought to actualize, Machiavelli is one of the first to show the active, human role constituting essence. With this gesture, he began in a serious way to differentiate politics from both metaphysics and morality.

Plato and Aristotle each in their own way seek to make the (political) world safe for philosophy; after all, the highest good, as Aristotle shows, is the *vita contemplativa* or quiet contemplation. In contrast, Machiavelli transforms *virtue*—defined as moderation and “quiet contemplation” of the logos (order) inherent in the cosmos as the highest good—into an active, impetuous, and essentially *innovative virtù*. Skeptical of the Platonic claim that the just man is the happy man, Machiavelli argues that “the gulf between how one *should* live and how one *does* live is so wide that a man who neglects
what is actually done for what should be done fosters self-destruction rather than self-preservation.”

At the same time, it is important not to forget the continuity between the central Aristotelian concept of *phronēsis*, or practical reason, and Machiavellian *virtù*.

*Virtù*, in Machiavelli’s sense, is the capacity to *form* matter; it is, above all, a *formative capacity*. While Kant viewed the formative capacity of the understanding as transcendental, which is to say, necessary and ineluctable, Machiavelli considered the formative powers of *virtù* specifically as determined by a concatenation of contingent, open-ended historical, material forces and affects, which he called *fortuna*. The formative capacity of *virtù* is, thus, a self-organization of material and bodily expressions. Referring to those who achieve power not by relying on favorable historical circumstance but on their own exemplary *virtù*, Machiavelli states:

> Fortune, as it were, provided the matter but they gave it its form; without opportunity their prowess would have been extinguished, and without such prowess the opportunity would have some in vain.

Here prowess is the translation of *virtù* but the word is also used in connection with the arts and is therefore related to “*virtuosity*” with its unmistakable aesthetic, indeed musical, almost improvisory, resonance. Of course, with the subsequent history of German idealism from Leibniz onward, the historical embeddedness of such formative capacity will remain an open question, up to and including Marx. Again, here the specifically *aesthetic* (as relating not just to the senses or *aisthesis* but also to *poiesis*, a bringing forth, that is at the same time a form of *praxis* or action) dimension is key. This specific line of descent from Machiavelli’s aesthetic-political can be seen in the following in Marx’s further reflections on the historical contingencies and struggles post-1848:

> Has one ever heard of *great improvisators being also great poets*? They are the same in politics as in poetry. Revolutions are never made to order. After the terrible experience of ’48 and ’49, it needs something more than paper summonses from distant leaders to evoke national revolutions.

This can be understood, then, in terms of political action being conceived first and foremost as the problem of formative and therefore *aesthetic* activity within particular, determinate circumstances. To what extent is it possible for a given social class to impose an exemplary conception of the world on society as a whole? To what extent in a given and specific balance of forces or “conjunction” is it able to attune itself to and in the process master, rather than being mastered and therefore defeated by, historical contingencies rather than simply subsuming them under a general concept of political action?

However, this specifically Machiavellian understanding of politics as the *formative* and *transformative* response to a set of pre-existing historical circumstances is, of course, present in Marx’s most brilliant piece of historical writing: the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Marx’s *concept of labor* understood in terms of the capacity to form matter (sensuous objectivity), as the Feuerbachian transformative critique of Hegel’s *labor of the concept*, is specifically oriented toward what might be called an “ontology of labour.” Moreover, his reflections in the *Brumaire* could be said to
anticipate specifically the idea of the “aesthetico-political” or the idea that the political (la politique) has to do with the establishment of the forms through which politics (le politique) or certain historically determinate power struggles can be said to play themselves out (see Chapter 1 by Gandesha and Chapter 7 by Carver in this volume). It is thus that we must, in part, understand Marx’s call for a “poetry of the future” as the basis for the social revolution of the nineteenth century, a poetry in which the new social-revolutionary “content” will exceed, indeed possibly explode, its “phrase.”

In other words, the released dynamics of capitalist production relations will definitively break with the historical drive to imagine the “new” as but a re-iteration of the old; the future reiterated always already as the past. Indeed, it is the Machiavellian understanding of history as constituted by something like fortuna or historical circumstances that opens up both possibilities. As Marx states in the opening of his famous historical reflection of Louis Bonaparte’s coup d’état: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.” The very possibility of freedom, of free action, therefore is a recognition of necessity, that is, of inheritance and the recognition of the requirement to undo the power wielded by such an inheritance by “letting the dead bury the dead.” But not only that: it requires, in a specifically political manner, the imposition of new form, a new language, hence a “poetry,” (a new poiesis that is also a new form of praxis) of the future in which, as previously mentioned, the correct relation between the “content” and “phrase” would somehow be struck.

This implies another way of understanding the oft-quoted passage from the 1857 Introduction published in the Grundrisse, where Marx writes: “The Object of art—like every other product—creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus not only creates an object for the subject but a subject for the object.” Production (poiesis) creates forms of subjectivity that then have a profoundly political valence in the specific sense that it creates the basis of what Kant called a sensus communis or common sense that could orient that most political of all faculties: judgment. That the experience of laboring and struggling together within the nineteenth century factories brought workers—what Marx termed “new-fangled men”—together in hitherto unprecedented ways and—unlike the peasantry, which experienced the world under conditions of radical separation and isolation—enabled them to experience modern urban space collectively and productively. Is this not what Marx is speaking of when he refers to the “fundamental contradiction” of capitalism, the contradiction between the explosive forces of production (mass, industrial, technologically-mediated production), on the one hand, and private ownership of the means of production, growing immiseration, and so on, on the other, that would constitute the crucible in which a nascent communist society would be forged?

VIII. Materialist histories of subjectivity

The two sides of the coin of the aesthetic, as it were, deal with the organization of formal processes in general, in both formative or spontaneous and receptive aspects.
The aesthetic thus transgresses the realm of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline that deals with questions of taste or of art. Next to the formative capacities of the aesthetic in the realm of the political (as in the Machiavellian line of tradition), the organization of the receptive apparatus is of no lesser importance for Marx.

Throughout his whole work, passages can be found in which Marx deals with the material specification of the historical organization of subjectivity—the senses, spatiality, temporality. This interest in the historical organization of the human perceptive capacities, and in the mediation between the sensuous, receptive, and contingent, on the one hand, and the intellectual, form-giving, and planned, on the other, is historico-political but also sometimes normative.

In his *chef d’oeuvre* and the preceding economico-critical texts Marx develops a strong meta-aesthetic claim, which will later be picked up particularly by Georg Lukács, Walter Benjamin, and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. History, to Marx, is also the history of human subjectivity and the formation of both the subject and object of experience. The *1844 Manuscripts* includes a particular focus on the historical constitution of human perception, in other words: the *history of the aesthetic*. So Marx writes: “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world.”

Marx’s Communism also interprets itself as the culmination of such a history.

The particular interest in the historicity of the senses, and of object relations in more general terms, however, remains throughout the whole work of Marx, who, as Georg Lukács emphasized with great sympathy, took the economic analysis back to the historically specific relations between human beings and, eventually, to nature and, who, therefore, Lukács claims, “allowed for deeper insights into the nature of the aesthetic than the writings of the romantic anticapitalists, who had spent their whole lives on question of aesthetics.”

In *Capital*, Marx is particularly interested in two forms of the organization of sensuous-practical objectivity, which are both addressed mainly negatively or critically: The suprasensuous reality of the commodity and, through what he calls a transformation in the *dramatis personae*, the event-like emergence of the figure of the worker.

Also, of course, the analysis of the mature Marx implies an analysis of the specific historical organization of the relation between subject and object. The analysis of *Capital*, with its methodological starting point, the commodity form, deals with a specific formal aspect of human intercourse mediated by things. It is this form, which, as Kojin Karatani stated, allows us to “reread *Capital* from a formalist standpoint” for it is not just alien to the things but inscribed into their social existence. According to Marx, the commodity relation is not just the dominant form of social organization, but also constitutes a specific form of a sensuous-suprasensuous objectivity. Commodities are concrete objects characterized by an enigmatic phantomlike or spectral objectivity (see Chapter 3 by Sami Khatib in this volume). This idea is as simple as it is complicated. Within the relationality of commodities (as it is objectified in the value form) the relations between producers are hidden. As far as the social relations are, however, covered and hidden by the concrete objectivity of the commodity, the commodity also turns into a fetish, which surreptitiously contributes to the reproduction and legitimation of the social order. In this way the social relations between people appear as what they really are, thing-like, *reified*. This thing-like relation is, at the same time,
also semblance: although practically effective, this thing-like relation contains a misrecognition of the truly social nature of the relation between producers.

To the producers, therefore, the social relations between their private labours appear as what they are, i.e. they do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [dinglich] relations between persons and social relations between things. \(^{130}\)

*Capital* emphasizes the historical production of the disposition of the worker (a specifically disciplined type of subjectivity) as one of the necessary conditions of capital. The “incessant reproduction,” the “perpetuation of the worker” himself, so Marx writes, is the “absolutely necessary condition for capitalist production.” \(^{131}\) In this analysis of the historical genesis of the specific subjectivity which is required for free labor-power, subjectivity is part of the dialectic of capital, its condition as much as its result, and thus element of historical struggle. “Centuries,” Marx emphasizes,

are required before the ‘free’ worker, owing to the greater development of the capitalist mode of production, makes a voluntary agreement, i.e. is compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, in return for the price of his customary means of subsistence. \(^{132}\)

One of the key fields of struggle in this historical organization of subjectivity (and obviously, Marx anticipates much of what Foucault subsequently was to confirm with *Discipline and Punish*) is the organization of a disciplinary regime of time. \(^{133}\) It is here that capital transgresses all previous boundaries and “celebrates its orgies.” \(^{134}\) Further Marx says:

It has been seen that these highly detailed specifications, which regulate, with military uniformity, the times, the limits and the pauses of work by the stroke of the clock, were by no means a product of the fantasy of Members of Parliament. They developed gradually out of circumstances as natural laws of the modern mode of production. \(^{135}\)

This subjective transformation of the worker and of the organization of social life also deeply affects the experience of time. \(^{136}\) Undoubtedly capital is fundamentally a temporal regime that also reorganizes space. It requires control not only over the coordination of the working day (and, potentially, its endless extension), but also the break down of time into temporal units that can be quantified and made commensurable. The pre-history of capital is, thus, also the history of the installation of a specific temporal regime. Lukács has emphasized this dimension of capital (against the historical background of Taylorism). \(^{137}\) Capital, he emphasizes in a memorable passage:

[M]ust likewise transform the basic categories of man’s immediate attitude to the world: it reduces space and time to a common denominator and degrades time to the dimension of space. \(^{138}\)
Such a spatialization of time is equivalent to the installation of an abstract regime of time, a time that is bereft of events, reduced to pure measurability. The fundamental transformation of the basic categories of human experience is a key development in the advent of modern capitalism. Such a transformation has been described by Moishe Postone thus:

The conception of abstract time, which became increasingly dominant in Western Europe between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, was expressed most emphatically in Newton's formulation of absolute, true and mathematical time [which] flows equably without relation to anything external. Abstract time is an independent variable; it constitutes an independent framework within which motion, events, and action occur. Such time is divisible into equal, constant, nonqualitative units.\(^{139}\)

To the general intellect, of course, the earlier quoted passage introduces yet another dimension of the historical formation of subjectivity through labor, or, in Marx's own terms "the appropriation of living labour by capital." It can be seen to anticipate the influential Italian Autonomist discussions of the key role of "immaterial labor" in post-Fordist capitalism. General intellect is Marx's concept for the increasing role played in the production process by fixed as opposed to variable capital, machinery, and technics as opposed to labor-power. Labor-power appears to become part of the extended field of capital, part of the process of the real subsumption of subjectivity under capital. This, of course, suggests another aesthetic dimension in Marx's account of social relations as it emphasizes the ways in which the mediation between subject and object (through the senses, linguistic codes, and so on) is a matter of historical transformation and, ideally, of political intervention.\(^{140}\)

Such Marxian (and Marxist) accounts of the effects that capitalist transformation has on the human sensorium are, to a large extent, descriptive. The aesthetic is thus, in Marx's own account, often an analytical means to merely understand capitalism.\(^{141}\) Not only in analytical, historico-political terms, but also in normative terms, Marx remains in some key ways faithful to the classical horizon of the aesthetic: The history of the senses and their relationship to the intellect bear their own promise of mediation and fulfillment. In the *Manuscripts* this reflection upon the historicity of the human senses is closely linked to an aesthetico-political program: "The abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, *human*."\(^{142}\) Communism, according to the young Marx, creates "social organs" through which human sensuousness will be capable of freely relating to itself. This normative aesthetic perspective of the young Marx finds its highest expression in the cultivation of the senses, which are "becoming theorists themselves" and starting to address objects for their own cause. Such a cultivation of the senses realizes itself in material practice, through which the senses create a form of collective sensorium, through which, in turn, the species-being of mankind is becoming concrete (Chapter 2 by Henry W. Pickford in this book works out this claim in more detail).

In some sense, however, Marx's politics of the senses is simply the subjective side of the strife over the social appropriation of labor processes. Aesthetic mediation here
becomes a question of utter political importance. The question of mediation, of course, characterized the German aesthetic tradition ever since Baumgarten. In this sense Baumgarten's belief that aesthetic representations would be able to restore the plenitude of impressions for cognitive insights was inspirational for the whole foundational discourse of aesthetics. Baumgarten, in classically rationalist fashion, opposed the higher faculties of cognition to the lower ones and was clearly convinced that proper cognition would have to be conceptual. Yet he claimed that purely rational cognition—abstraction—had its price, the price of simplicity and reduction (“What is abstraction if not a loss?”), whereas the inferior capacities could express knowledge in a clear (yet confused) way, integrating synthetically the complexity of the empirical world. Baumgarten's reconciliation of the senses with the intellect (if only in the realm of art) thus also suggested an example for the possibility of a different type of organization of genuine subjectivity within which receptivity or openness to the sensuous manifold could play a different role.

Much of the German aesthetic discourse that followed can be reconstructed in the light of this mediation between the sensuous and the cognitive, sensibility and intelligibility. Kant, of course, took this path (after some doubts), indirectly responding to the revolutionary events in France, when he reflected on the possibility of beauty in terms of a free play of imagination and understanding (lower and higher faculties of cognition). The systematic importance of this step (bringing the realm of duty into dialogue with the empirical world of nature and inclination) has been widely debated and certainly fully grasped by Schiller, which turned the transcendental considerations of Kant into anthropological principles (the “Spieltrieb” all of a sudden signified an instinct or a drift of play) and, more importantly, an educational program for human emancipation. As problematic as one might find it, Schiller's attempt to also identify the distortions of this normative aesthetic principle of play with specific cultures (barbarians, obviously alluding to Roman civilization and their inheritors in revolutionary France, and savages in the pre-enlightened parts of the world) also opened the path for the political, the Marxian interest in the question of the historical organization of subjectivity.

This historicization and politicization of the question of subjectivity and the internal organization of its capacities made possible Marx's own project. The reflections on the history of the senses in the Paris Manuscripts (as noted above: “The cultivation of the five senses is the work of all previous history”) are therefore indeed effects of the classical aesthetic tradition, although with a social-theoretical twist. For historical materialism, of course (and, without being particularly committed to this legacy, Jacques Rancière has been the clearest about this), the question of the historical organization of subjectivity, more specifically, the question of the separation (and, respectively, reconciliation) between sensuousness and intellect, had always been related to the question of inequality and therefore of class.  

Rancière's aesthetico-political position emphasizes the aesthetics of politics (and the politics of aesthetics) as a sensuous order that relates to the forms of symbolic dispossession that are effected by the social division of labor, that “converts the worker into a crippled monstrosity” and thus deprives him of the means to legitimate participation in the realm of cultural and intellectual representation. Many of Rancière's
recurring references and figures of thought echo Capital's chapter on the “Division of Labor and Manufacture.” Here and there Plato's distribution of the sensible appears as the ideology of an authoritarian division of labor and here and there the parable of Menenius Agrippa serves as the key example for the ruling ideologies of the division of labor and symbolic dispossession.  

Clearly, the division of head and hand, of intellectual and manual labor, marks one of the key themes in Marxist analysis all the way through to the attempts of Gramsci, to conceive of an “organic intellectual,” capable of overcoming the damage that these effects would have on political rationality. In another vein of Western Marxism, in some ways even summarizing the aesthetic leanings of the whole first generation of the Frankfurt School, Alfred Sohn-Rethel wrote that “Communism is the overcoming of the separation between intellectual and manual labor.” This can precisely be read as an answer to the subjective divide of the discussion which had been anticipated by the classical aesthetic tradition. As suggested above, Jacques Rancière emphasized, most emphatically, the central importance of the effects that the division of labor has on the organization of human subjectivity and the role it plays in the politics of aesthetics.  

Let us, against this background, have a close look at a passage from Marx's 1864 Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association: “The First International.” Discussing the social experiments of the cooperative movement, Marx emphasizes:

[T]here was in store a still greater victory [than the Ten Hours bill, SG/JH] of the political economy of labor over the political economy of property. We speak of the co-operative movement, especially the co-operative factories raised by the unassisted efforts of a few bold “hands.” The value of these great social experiments cannot be overrated. By deed, instead of by argument, they have shown that production on a large scale, and in accord with the behests of modern science, may be carried on without the existence of a class of masters employing a class of hands; that to bear fruit, the means of labor need not be monopolized as a means of dominion over, and of extortion against, the laboring man himself; and that, like slave labor, like serf labor, hired labor is but a transitory and inferior form, destined to disappear before associated labor plying its toil with a willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart.  

The strong rhetoric of this passage of course has to be taken with a grain of salt. The specific choice of words, however, still expresses the subtle presence of an aesthetic legacy within which the mediation of sense and intellect, head and hands, are central. Interestingly enough “hands,” the human being's single most defining feature, with its opposable thumb, form their own “class” in Marx's wording, apparently to regulate their own practice. Furthermore Marx presents such an aesthetic politics as the performative power of concrete “deeds” that are mobilized against the empty force of the better “argument.” Performativity and rhetoric challenge the rationalist politics of the citoyen, and also, so it seems, give voice to “bold hands” that are merely hands and not yet legitimate voices in the formalized game of the politics of the rational citoyen.  

In the end, however, it is the interplay between the “willing hand, a ready mind, and a joyous heart” that leads to Marx's version of a politics of economic self-organization,
a politics of “associated labor” (see Chapter 4 by Hartle on “Free Association,” this volume). Such politics therefore also seems to deal, quite literally, with the major tasks of classical aesthetics: bridging the Kantian divide between the merely rational and the merely sensuous, developing a new language for those “bold hands” who hold more productive power than official public visibility. In fact, without such aesthetic power of presentation, Marx argues, it is destined to disappear. If these lines contain Marx’s understanding of socialist politics, socialist politics again needs to draw upon the poetry of the future, on the powers of the aesthetic.

Marx’s appreciation of the social experiments and the heroic imagination of the early socialist movement (and, implicitly, its theoretical mentors too) may be surprising. Such an appreciation centered, in particular, on the relation between hands and head, between “bold hands that form their own class, which opposes the logics of the class of masters.” Marx leaves no doubt about the fact that this form of aesthetico-political insurgency comprised in cooperation and the working class’s self-organization is a passionate endeavor, as it combines the “willing hand, a ready mind, and joyous heart.” If an aesthetic dimension, a structural re-organization of the predominant forms of rationality mobilizes the hands, minds, and hearts in the most imaginative and powerful forms, then Marx’s political theory crosses the boundary of purely strategic political reasoning: With this particular interest in a re-organization of classical hierarchies between hand and head, Marx steps into the realm of the aesthetic.

In even more strongly optimistic—if you will: normative—terms, Rancière emphasizes the emergence of a radically subversive aesthetic regime that facilitates the undermining of the established orders of legitimate and illegitimate rationalities by producing heterogeneous sensibilities. Such forms of the aesthetic are, according to Rancière, politically powerful and not merely secondary to projects of [political] emancipation. What Rancière reconstructs as the “aesthetic regime of art” is a regime that promises fundamental equality and installs practices that undermine all kinds of symbolic and representational hierarchies. Rancière develops these arguments to justify aesthetic autonomy in its ambiguous relation to political heteronomy, of art in its constitutive tension with life. Rancière thus interprets aesthetic play—one of the core principles of German aesthetic discourse ever since its beginnings in the eighteenth century—as the principle of an egalitarian articulation where the passive and the active can change roles and that the pre-stabilized harmonies of the division of labor are disrupted. According to Rancière’s somewhat overly sanguine account, the very possibility of equality is constantly brought into play by this aesthetic configuration.

These parallels, however, and Rancière’s obvious dependency on key figures of Marxist thought, are only half the story concerning Rancière’s interpretation of the aesthetic in Marx. According to Rancière, Marx’s own version of the aesthetic (“the heterogeneous sensible”) characterizes Marx’s whole method.

The whole affair of the ‘fetishism of the commodity’ must, I think, be reconsidered from this point of view [from the point of view of the heterogeneous sensible]: Marx needs to prove that the commodity has a secret, that it ciphers a point of heterogeneity in the commerce of everyday life and complicates his earlier exposition of the becoming-transparent-to-itself of modern life in the Communist
Revolution is possible because the commodity, like the Juno Ludovisi [of Schiller's Letters, SG/JH], has a double nature—it is a work of art that escapes when we try to seize hold of it. The reason is that the plot of the ‘end of art’ determines a configuration of modernity as a new partition of the perceptible, with no point of heterogeneity. In this partition, rationalization of the different spheres of activity becomes a response both to the old hierarchical orders and to the ‘aesthetic revolution.’ The whole motto of the politics of the aesthetic regime, then, can be spelled out as follows: let us save the ‘heterogeneous sensible.’

And as the aesthetic regime of art allows for the merging of the active and the passive, the sensuous and the rational, the purely material and the significant, so Marx’s work is seen as yet another example of the modern aesthetics of politics. Rancière writes:

This draft [oldest System Programme of German Idealism] ... laid the basis for a new idea of revolution. Even though Marx never read the draft, we can discern the same plot in his well-known texts of the 1840s. The coming Revolution will be at once the consummation and abolition of philosophy; no longer merely ‘formal’ and ‘political,’ it will be a ‘human’ revolution. The human revolution is an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm.

According to Rancière, however, there is a tension between the emancipatory claim of aesthetics and the conceptual framework of Marx’s philosophy. In Rancière’s view, Marx also precludes the full emancipatory potential of the aesthetic regime of art by clinging to dialectical method (with its inherent distinction between the manifest and the latent) and thus represents an authoritarian tradition of “master hermeneutics.” Instead of fully allowing the playful subversion of any hierarchy of voices to take over, Marx too, so Rancière holds, replaces the multiplicity of the voices of reason with one major method of deciphering history and society. Marx’s aesthetic, in other words, goes far, but not far enough for thinkers like Rancière.

This book’s claims about the fundamentally aesthetic nature of Marx’s program of social critique and societal emancipation are also, at the same time, a defense of the Marxian version of the aesthetic. They are, however, in close dialogue with Rancière’s important suggestions concerning the nature of the aesthetic. The many layers to such a discussion between Marx and Rancière cannot be fully addressed in this book.

The question as to what extent Rancière’s methodological position can be consistent with itself (given its strong claims concerning overarching historical regimes of the aesthetic) and the question as to what extent Rancière’s anti-sociologism can also be turned against the idea of emancipation go beyond the scope of this book. From a Marxian perspective it seems overstated to repudiate in advance, as Rancière appears to do, social scientific analyzes of social inequality as structural reproductions of discursive inequalities; that is, it appears to denounce the critique of ideology, on account of its knowledge claims, beforehand as ideological. The Marxian legacy suggests that social criticism cannot do without the idea of a critical sociology, identifying the histories and structures of social inequality in “objective” terms. Such critical sociological perspective, however, will imply a confrontation with what could
be called Rancière’s methodological anarchism, as Alberto Toscano has convincingly done, with its limitations.\textsuperscript{156}

What follows from such a socio-historically informed view is Marxist skepticism towards the historical formation of aesthetics in the course of bourgeois ascendency (against the ideology of the aesthetic) and against the institutional deficits of actually existing aesthetic practices. Much of what has, in a Marxian fashion, been argued against the ideology of the aesthetic in the positions of Marcuse, Bürger, Bennett, Jameson, and Eagleton as discussed above, could also be legitimately leveled against the Rancièrean claim concerning the emancipatory content of the modern “aesthetic” regime of art. That autonomous art or, more concretely, the social sphere of high end luxury goods and the symbolic reproduction of social inequality, eventually unambiguously stands out as the site for social emancipation is, to say the least, unlikely, at least not without mediation. Oliver Marchart’s verdict that Rancière’s aesthetic optimism holds as “the spontaneous ideology of the art field”\textsuperscript{157} can at least be read as a reminder that this discussion has not yet come to an end and that the tensions between art and emancipation need to be kept alive rather than to be settled one-sidedly.

**IX. Eternal returns: Marx in the arts**

It might be for this reason specifically that Marx keeps appearing as a most prominent denizen of the art world. For if there is a profound aesthetic dimension in Marx’s thinking, then Marx has also, at the same time, been an exemplary figure for contemporary artistic practices. In other words, the relevance of Marx for the aesthetic cannot be reduced to intellectual discourse alone. Marx (and not just Marxism) had his various returns on the level of material art objects and their respective practices. Critical artistic reflections on the power relations and economic constraints that historically determine the modern aesthetic paradigm (the “art world,” the “aesthetic ideology,” the “aesthetic regime of art”) oftentimes refer to Marx. Furthermore all the aesthetic dimensions that one can discern in Marx’s work culminate in the factual artistic reference to Marx.

Marx and his work have therefore effusively been represented—depicted and illustrated—at least since the last third of the nineteenth century. Throughout the history of the labor movement, Marx has been a preferred subject of caricature and printed on mundane, vernacular objects in ways reminiscent of the Christian icons as have been the official monuments in state socialist reality.\textsuperscript{158} The letter of his writings came back literally in musical compositions (the slightly ironic *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* by Sergei Prokofiev) and formed the source of monumental works of poetry (as with Brecht’s 1945 attempt to rewrite *The Communist Manifesto* in hexameters).\textsuperscript{159}

Some attempts to illustrate his written work (most famously the woodcuts on *The Communist Manifesto* by Frans Masereel and the lithographs to *Capital* by Hugo Gellert but also the pedagogic cartoon version of Marx’s and Engels’s *The Communist Manifesto* by Mexican cartoonist Rius) have gained art historical relevance of their own.
kind. Not only were they trying to illustrate and didactically prepare their complex matters, they were also, in all cases, attempts to give a cultural expression to a politically relevant matter, organizing cultural consent around the “labor of the concept,” as it were.

Beyond these political conjunctures, the current anniversaries (150 years of *Capital*, volume 1 in 2017 and 200 years of Karl Marx in 2018) led to their own high tides of Marx-representation in cultural production: In March 2017 Raul Peck’s historical *bromance* drama *Der junge Karl Marx* arrived in theaters and the Argentinean composer Oscar Strasnoy is preparing an opera on Marx as we compose these lines.

Curiously enough, Marx’s influence has gone far enough not only to inspire artists in all kinds of fields, including popular music contexts (with references and mentions in song texts of all kinds), but even to serve as a patronymic for hip-hop bands like the 1990s Birmingham act *Marxman* (not to mention the various echoes of his works in song titles and lyrics, again, all the way through to contemporary popular culture, to mention only *The Poverty of Philosophy* by the East Coast rapper Immortal Technique). As a metonymy of revolutionary practices, such references might allow for a radical, somewhat avant-gardist stance and serves as a distinct strategy in gaining street credibility (Marx’s own scribbles from the manuscript of the *German Ideology* and the graffiti-like font on the cover of this book allude to this) or at least popular attention both within the spheres of high- and low-brow cultural production, those “torn halves of an integral freedom to which however they do not add up.”

Within avant-garde production Marx had been a source of inspiration in a variety of ways and keeps coming back in contemporary revisions of the original spirit of the avant-garde. Few project ideas have gained a similar amount of attention as Sergei Eisenstein’s 1929 diary notes which expressed the plan to turn *Capital* into a film, which, 80 years later, eventually inspired the monumental nine-hour film essay of Alexander Kluge as his own attempt to (albeit indirectly) film Marx’s *Capital*. The history of works in twentieth and twenty-first century art directly inspired by Marx is yet to be written, but the importance of these works, however, can hardly be denied.

Particularly since Okwui Enwezor’s 2015 Venice Biennale, it is an obvious fact that Karl Marx is, once again, the man of the hour in contemporary arts. The Biennale revived a certain spirit of adapting Marx to the arts that has characterized much of the historical avant-gardes (clearly this is the case for the Russian avant-garde—see Chapter 9 by Groys in this volume—and the politicized scene of Berlin DADA), of revolutionary traditions in colonial and post-colonial political constellations (the Mexican muralists, for instance), political and conceptual art practices in various parts of the world ever since the 1960s (see, for instance, Chapter 10 by Robin Greeley in this book), and the official visual culture in the state-socialist tradition all the way through to the present (China, for instance, had its own opera version of Marx’s *Capital* just a few years ago).

With a key segment of the whole 2015 Biennale in the Arsenale and the Central Pavilion dedicated to Marx and to *Reading Capital*, along with its (in any sense of the word) spectacular core event—the Oratorio of *Capital* staged by Isaac Julien, reading out aloud the whole three volumes of *Capital* to the international Art public—Marx’s oeuvre was presented as being fundamentally relevant to the arts. And the 2015
Biennale was just one point of culmination of a broader history of the returns of Marx in contemporary art. The massive presence of the concrete letter of Marx's writings, on the one hand, and of representations of his image, on the other, in works as various as those of Phil Collins, Dan Mihaltianu, Claire Fontaine, Zachary Formwalt, Rainer Ganahl, Dimitri Gutov, Alfredo Jaar, Rimini Protokoll, and innumerable others (for some of them, see Chapter 11 by Sven Lütticken and Chapter 12 by Johan Hartle in this volume) indeed suggest a necessary link between Marx and artistic practices rather than a contingent disposition of a small number of artists. The number of artistic projects and exhibitions that circle around the concept of capital emphasize this timely dynamic of Marxian figures of thought in artistic practice. Something deeply Marxian belongs in the very core of the formation of contemporary art.

This observation, too, counters the predominance of Rancièrean types of aesthetics. Not only does it reintroduce the dimension of critical (methodological) social analysis into the aesthetic (generally challenged by Rancière's anti-sociological stance), it also re-introduces such a position as a fundamentally artistic principle (whereas Rancière suggests an understanding of the aesthetic within which any predominant method would be undermined). There are, of course, various interpretations of such relevance. They can range from the emphasis on the concrete organization of society as the general subject matter of artistic representations—a perspective that has increased its relevance in public debate since the advent of the current economic crisis—all the way through to radically aesthetic interpretations, which see Marx's work as an unavoidable source of understanding the historical constitution of the aesthetic and of the immanent potentials and contradictions of art (some arguments for which this book is presenting). Marx can, in other words, either be regarded as a thinker who clarifies the structure of society (under conditions of pervasive commodification, financialization, abstraction, and so on) and thus allowing the various revenants of social realism to know what they are actually dealing with. Or Marx can be seen as a theorist whose work clarifies specificities of a commodified art world, on the one hand, and of the constitution of aesthetic sensitivity under capitalist conditions, on the other. Especially in the latter case Marx's work is not only about possible contents of artistic practice but aesthetic (and therefore of relevance for artistic self-reflexivity) in its very nature. In most interpretations, the obvious fact of Marx's contemporary artistic relevance and the existence of artistic strategies directly leaning on Marx, however, deals with the mediation between the general course of capitalist development and the specific constitution of artistic institution, discourse, and practice.

As suggested above, and in defense of Marx against the harsh criticism of Rancière, the critical (economic and sociological) analysis of capitalist class societies infiltrates and also questions the legitimacy of the aesthetic and its ideologies. If this, however, does not lead to "activist escapism" (which is, obviously, not an oxymoron in the artistic realm), it certainly constitutes an immanent contradiction that has to be dealt with in some kind of Marx-inspired artistic practice: art's attempt to come to terms with its own social situation—a situation of the sumptuous celebration of class power, a symbolic ornamentation of financial supremacy—while not being reduced to it. If one, in other words, accepts this critique of the aesthetic ideology as an immanent
contradiction, this understanding could be key to explaining how Marx keeps coming back in art. The structural interpretation of such artistic Marxism has not been pursued in much detail yet. This book therefore partly wants to lead a discussion on the important and abiding presence Marx has in modern and contemporary art. By doing so, as the course of its argument and the sequence of chapters will show, it embeds the historical development of such artistic practices in the broader history of discourse. It thus unfolds the conjunction *Marx and the Aesthetic* in the figure of a chiasmus, in two dialectically related ways: as the *Aesthetic in Marx* and as *Marx in the Aesthetic*.

X. The book: sections and chapters

This book is structured in three parts, addressing the structurally aesthetic nature of Marx's key arguments, Marx's specific considerations on style and his own use of style, and the various returns of Marx in artistic practices, respectively. The first part deals with the ways in which general figures of aesthetic discourse inform the Marxian ontology as well.

The first part, *Aesthetics/Emancipations*, starts with Samir Gandesha's presentation of “Three Logics of the Aesthetic in Marx,” where Gandesha suggests that there are three distinct logics of the aesthetic in Marx's writings: the sensualism of his early writings; the analysis of capitalism in the *Communist Manifesto*, in which “all that is solid melts into thin air” augurs a fundamental emancipatory transformation of sensuous perception; and the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in which Marx expresses his profound worry that the aesthetic shock effects of modern life were rapidly turning into what Susan Buck-Morss in another context calls “anaesthetic,” that is to say, profoundly undermining the possibility of genuine, revolutionary experience.

Gandesha's chapter is followed by Henry W. Pickford's analysis of the aesthetic relevance of Aristotle's writings for Marx's own conceptions. His “*Poiēsis, Praxis, Aisthesis: Remarks on Aristotle and Marx*” initially reviews Aristotle's famous distinctions between *poïēsis* (production) and *praxis* (practice) and between *kinēsis* (change/movement) and *energeia* (activity), and briefly charts the orthodox model of production's reappearance in the modern tradition of political thought. After demonstrating that Aristotle in fact has a second model of “practical production” based on *energeia*, Pickford then shows how early Marx invokes that model of production in his implicitly normative account of social production as a form of *energeia*, in which products are not independent of their production and mutual use, but rather are constitutive elements of social production understood as human species-being. Finally, after considering Aristotle's account of *phronēsis* as practical, non-sensory *aisthēsis* (perception), the chapter outlines two prospects for a Marx-inspired aesthetics: social aesthetic production, and the inculcation of phronectic perception in aesthetic experience.

Sami Khatib's “‘Sensuous Supra-Sensuous’: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction,” explores the aesthetic and semiotic structure of Marx's concept of value in more detail. Although value is foremost an expression of a social relation, Khatib argues that the site of language and thought bears a structural homology to value production.
Much like for Pickford, for Khatib the proper aesthetic content of Marx’s writings also appears in a Benjaminian reading: Referring to Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, Khatib conceives of the Marxian commodity-form as an allegorical form of perception, in which contingent and meaningless fragments (things), signifiers without significant content (specific use value), can actually form—perform—a meaning (value) labeled with a price tag. If allegory here is not a mere personification but an aesthetico-social mode of signification (value), we enter the “sensuous-supra-sensuous” sphere of “commodity language” (Marx). Taking its cue from Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s theory of “real abstraction,” the chapter concludes by showing that in capitalism conceptual abstraction is not only not thought-induced but real: it has a non-metaphorical reality in the money form.

Johan F. Hartle’s chapter “Free Associations: On Marx and Freud” interprets Marx’s ontology as a critique of representation (the representation of human cooperation through state and capital) from the practical position of labor, organized in “associations.” Although of a radically different content, yet somewhat isomorphically, this idea of association echoes the history of associationism in aesthetics and psychology, particularly Freudian psychoanalysis. The method of Marx and Freud, critical of abstract representation, emphasizes spontaneously and intrinsically linked elements and describes them as “associations.” Hartle argues that these methods of association are, in both cases, structurally aesthetic: as methods of descent to potentials of the material and alternative forms of expression.

The second part of the book, on *Style and Performativity in Marx*, begins with Anna-Katharina Gisbertz’s text “On Beauty and its Conflicts: Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Karl Marx,” in which Gisbertz analyzes how Marx shaped his own ideas of aesthetics, particularly of the sublime and the comical, through Friedrich Theodor Vischer’s popular study *Aesthetics*. Vischer’s concept of the beautiful provided the last idealistic system that integrated even the sublime and the comical into a complete idea of beauty. Marx was fascinated by this concept and recalled the idea of wholeness throughout his works. However, if Vischer wanted to reconcile reality in beauty, Marx aimed, overall, at reconciling beauty in reality, something that Gisbertz traces through diametrical oppositions between the two thinkers, with a focus on the notions of the comical and farce.

Gisbertz’s text is followed by a revisited publication of Hayden White’s already classical text “Marx: The Philosophical Defence of History in the Metonymical Mode,” including a new introduction by the author from a contemporary perspective. White analyzes the importance of literary tropes (Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, Irony) to the historical and socio-theoretical narratives of Marx. Synecdochic relationships—the union of parts as a whole—characterize, as White points out, not only the analysis of the commodity form (where A = B), but also his theory of history with its analysis of class struggles, and its sequence of historical formations (from primitive communism to capitalism). In this sense historical materialism as such appears to be of a narrative structure, of a specific style essential to its method.

Marx’s probably most brilliant text, at least in stylistic terms, is the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. With his “Imagery as Weaponry: *ars gratia belli*,” Terrell Carver reads Marx’s *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as his première work
of political activism, a text within which the performativity of language plays a major role. Carver analyzes the politically strategic impact and importance of Marx's literary tropes, which constitute this text as the most powerful textual intervention of Marx. With its rich political imagination and its powerful rhetoric _The Eighteenth Brumaire_ thus presents a form of political aesthetic in which writing constitutes a form of partisanship that generally characterizes Marx's understanding of culture.

Daniel Hartley's "Radical Schiller and the Young Marx" reads Marx's early writings through the lens of Schiller's _On the Aesthetic Education of Man_ and vice versa. Hartley deploys Schiller's letters to delineate a powerful strand of aesthetic logic within Marx's developing theory of revolution and the state. At the same time, seen retrospectively from the viewpoint of the early Marx, he reconstructs a radical 'red thread' that runs throughout Schiller's theory of the aesthetic. Unlike those 'aesthetic' readings of the young Marx that focus on the importance of the senses and alienation, however, Hartley understands the 'aesthetic' in an expanded sense as an immanent modality of hegemony; art, beauty and "aesthetic culture" are thus conceived as moments within a more expansive aesthetic process. By placing Marx's reflections on journalistic style in the context of emerging individualist theories of style and eighteenth-century copyright debates, and by connecting Marx's articles on wood-theft to a Schillerian theory of hegemony, Hartley shows that Marx's aesthetic reflections were an ongoing and constitutive feature of his political and economic thought.

The last part, _Modes of Artistic Production_, discusses the returns of Marx in the field of visual arts. It begins with Boris Groys's "Installing Communism" and interprets various streams of Russian avant-gardist practices in light of the differences between Marx and Stirner. Based on a close reading of Marx's critique of Stirner in the _The German Ideology_, Groys presents an interpretation of the fundamentally communist nature of installation art. As installation art dismantles the "sovereignist" mythology of authorship by unveiling the materialist context, the art installation takes control of the institutional context itself. Installation art presents the material context as the truly productive moment on art. This strategy of self-empowerment through the self-nullification of the individual artist, particularly developed by El Lissitzky, remains as an inherently communist dilemma of art. It can, Groys claims, neither be avoided nor realized.

With her chapter "Marx's Aesthetics in Mexico: Conceptual Art After 1968," Robin Greeley analyzes the aesthetic-political revolts in post-1968 Mexico in light of various strands of the artistic reception of Marx. Three main positions, in particular, come to the fore: the Marx-interpretations of Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, of Alberto Híjar, and of Juan Acha, themselves inspiring a number of artistic positions particularly represented by the various Grupos, by political art collectives that defined the range of artistic activism in the Mexican context. By mapping these various forms of artistic activism and their contemporary relevance, Greeley discusses the relevance of a Marx-inspired version of the aesthetic-political for contemporary Mexican activism in a situation of drug wars and forced disappearances.

With Sven Lütticken's "Filming Capital: On Cinemarxism in the Early Twenty-first Century," the book turns explicitly towards contemporary artistic practices. Lütticken analyzes a number of recent films and video pieces. The historical background is formed by Eisenstein's aborted plan to film _Capital_, which Alexander Kluge revisited in
his *News from Ideological Antiquity*. Lütticken argues that these works (like others of Noël Burch and Allan Sekula, Zachary Formwalt and Hito Steyerl) command our attention by reframing the problem of the representation of capital(ism) in terms of their own functioning within it. How do these films foreground and problematize their own participation in contemporary society, in which artistic labor has come to play a role that was only partially foreseen by Marx, but one that is central to various forms of contemporary Marxian theory?

In “Marx as Art as Politics: Representations of Marx in Contemporary Arts,” Johan F. Hartle reconstructs the passage of Marx-inspired visual art from classical political art—as part of the communist world movement—to contemporary self-reflexive art. The Marx-related works of Phil Collins, Rainer Ganahl, Alfredo Jaar, Pedro Reyes, and others are interpreted as radically contemporary forms of art for which reflection on the political and economic conditions are indirect means to reflect upon the very nature of autonomous art itself. Along these lines Hartle reconstructs strategies of political, pedagogic, and social interventions of melancholy, re-enactment, and parody as attempts to come to terms with the emancipatory legacy of Marx.

**Notes**

3. We try to outline these lines of conflict in our book *The Spell of Capital: Reification and Spectacle* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), 10.
5. See Adorno’s important notion of the “forces of aesthetic production” in *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Continuum, 2002), 5: “The aesthetic force of production is the same as that of productive labor and has the same teleology; and what may be called aesthetic relations of production—all that in which the productive force is embedded and in which it is active—are sedimentations or imprints of social relations of production.”
6. In his excellent biography, Gareth Stedman Jones tries to distinguish Marx’s original work and context from the Marxist version of Marx erected particularly by Engels and Mehring. See Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 2.
9. It should be added here that not all of these authors would be particularly pleased at being so designated.
11. This was also arguably true of the “popular front” period 1934–1939, championed by Lukács.

14 Marx, of course, stands with Nietzsche and Kierkegaard as offering three of the most powerful critiques of the classical German tradition of philosophy that reaches its apotheosis in the philosophy of Hegel.


18 Of course, Brechtian Epic Theater is oriented specifically against this pacifying, apologetic role for drama. Indeed, as Vidal-Naquet has argued, in Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece (New York: Zone Books, 1990), fifth-century tragedy played a key role in challenging and literally putting on trial through elenchus, or cross-examination, the heroes of the naïve Homeric world, figures who, by definition, lived, like gods or beasts (perhaps as Gods and beasts) outside of the polis. But now, particularly through an understanding of hamartia and hubris, they were shown to be all-too-human; the demands of the “good man” would have to be reconciled with the larger social (and political) whole. Man was, after all, not a radically individual hero existing in splendid isolation, forever journeying as did Odysseus, home to himself, but rather zoon politikon, the political animal.


21 J. Winckelmann, History of the Art of Antiquity (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2006).


23 Nietzsche, Birth of Tragedy, 40.


26 Karl Marx, Capital, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 103. This was a characteristic Young Hegelian trope and not exclusive to Marx himself. We thank Terrell Carver for this insight.

Introduction

28 Stedman Jones, Karl Marx, 164.
29 Kevin B. Anderson, Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 42–43.
31 See Paul Thomas, Karl Marx (London: Reaktion Books, 2012), 64.
33 See Hegel's reading of Sophocles's Antigone in the Phenomenology of Spirit that forms part of the section on “Spirit” entitled “The Ethical Order” in which Hegel holds that both Antigone and Creon were in the right. The collision between the right of the polis and that of the family was therefore a properly tragic one. G.W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 266–94.
35 See Stedman Jones, Karl Marx, 57 and 155 f.
37 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, 118.
40 This, of course, becomes key for Herbert Marcuse’s understanding of non-repressive desublimation in Eros and Civilization (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1955), 197–221.
42 Marx, Capital, 502.
43 See also books by David McNally, Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2012); and Mark Neocleous, The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005).
45 McNally, Monsters of the Market, 103.
46 Hegel had already recognized the way in which capitalist society produced its own forms of “rabble” (Pöbel) or form of negativity that could not be “negated” and therefore accommodated within its sittlich institutional structures and practices. See Frank Ruda, Hegel’s Rabble: An Investigation in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right (New York: Continuum, 2013).
49 See Francis Wheen, Das Kapital: A Biography (New York: Grove Press, 2008). It is also interesting to see how, conversely, Thomas Piketty in Capital in the Twenty-first Century (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014) uses literary texts of Balzac, Austen, and F. Scott Fitzgerald as evidence for his central idea that the return on capital tendentially outstrips that of wages and, therefore, the thesis that, over-time, capitalism will become more egalitarian is false and that major forms of intervention such as “punitive taxes” on the wealthy are required to reverse growing inequality. However, it must be said that these references are made *en passant* and are as a result rather superficial.
50 In other words, there’s no history “in-itself”: all history-writing includes a literary or tropic structure without which it would be an assemblage of isolated, atomistic, and therefore “fetishized” facts. Cf. Hayden White’s classic essay included in this text.
52 Marx’s references to Shakespeare are especially worthy of our attention insofar as it is in the early modern period that banking began to gain particular power in northern Europe after its early emergence in the Italian city states, Florence in particular, under the aegis of the Medici family.
53 Cited in Wheen, Das Kapital: A Biography, 11.
55 It is vitally important to bear in mind the way in which Marx’s “books” are fabrications insofar as they are productions of subsequent editors who sought to establish the coherence of manuscripts that, as Marx and Engles said in respect to what has come to be known as the The German Ideology, they had left to the “gnawing criticism of the mice.” See Terrell Carver and Daniel Blank, Marx and Engels’s “German Ideology” Manuscripts (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
57 Such an approach to Hegel would be contested by interpreters such as Robert Pippin, Robert Brandom, Terry Pinkard, Douglas Moggach, and others.
58 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, 56–57.
59 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “German Ideology” in Marx and Engels Reader, 158.
60 Karl Marx, Grundrisse. Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft). (London: Penguin, 1993), 163. In this Marx anticipates the so-called “linguistic turn in philosophy,” which holds that language, practical consciousness as a dimension of (social) Being, is an irreducible constituting element of thought, if not, more strongly, that the materiality of the signifier is irreducibly inscribed into the production of meaning.
61 Derrida argues that the notion of *differance* is oriented specifically at the destruction of the Hegelian *releve* (*Aufhebung*) and, when asked specifically about his relationship to Marx and Marxism, he states that “[i]t follows that if, and in extent to which, the “matter” in this general economy designates . . . radical alterity . . . then what I write can be considered ‘materialist.’” (Positions, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of
Chicago Press, 1982), 64). See also Walter Benjamin’s “On Language as Such and the Language of Man,” which consists, in part, of a reflection on the idea that the divine word of God bears the traces of a divine “breath.” Hence: “In the beginning was the Word.” John 1:1.

65 Marx, Grundrisse, 704.


69 Tony Bennett, Outside Literature (London: Blackwell, 1990), 146.


71 Bennett, Outside Literature, 141.


74 Peter Bürger, “The Institution of Art as a Category of the Sociology of Literature,” in Institutions of Art, ed. Peter Bürger and Christa Bürger (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 11.


76 Jameson, Political Unconscious, 9.


78 Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, 9.

79 Eagleton, The Ideology of the Aesthetic, 201.


81 Marx, “Introduction,” Grundrisse, 111. See also Alain Badiou’s remarks on this formulation in his Second Manifesto for Philosophy (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 23.


85 Chytry, The Aesthetic State, xii.


87 See also Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, Heidegger, Art, Politics (London: Blackwell, 1990), 66–70.


Paul Thomas suggests that Marx and Engels’s references to the “spectre” “haunting” Europe has more to do with space and place than a time that is “out-of-joint,” that haunting (um gehen) refers more to a visitation of various places or locations rather than a spectral “life after death.” However, this cannot be said to “refute” Derrida’s reading but rather to re-affirm that other interpretations are possible.

Indeed, in Fourier’s utopian vision, he includes in his understanding of work transformed into play the idea of good-natured rivalries between different groups of workers organized according to lines of friendship.


See especially Chapter 14 of *Capital*, in which Marx also discusses manufacture and its effects on the organization of the collective body with reference to Rancière’s preferred fable: the fable of Menius Agrippa, see Marx, *Capital*, 481.


No wonder that Nietzsche would be most productively appropriated by the left, particularly in France, rather than by the right—despite the damage done to his reputation by his sister and brother-in-law.

This is especially the case with Marx’s reduction of rights to bourgeois property relations. See Moggach, “German Idealism and Marx.”

And this criticism becomes central to Habermas’s argument about the apparent “obsolescence of the production paradigm.” See *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. F. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 75–82.


107 For a discussion of two different accounts of poiesis or production in Marx, see Chapter 2 by Henry Pickford in the current volume.

108 Machiavelli, of course, plays the leading role in Leo Strauss’s account of the “three waves of modernity” and its break with the ancient tradition of “natural law.” Strauss argues that Machiavelli’s two key moves are to suggest a shift of emphasis in political theory from the “ideal” to the “real” and the notion that “Fortuna” can be tamed by force. In Strauss’s view, through these two moves, Machiavelli makes a larger claim that, in contrast to ancients such as Aristotle, who thought that a “desirable political order” could not be fashioned from bad matter, that is, an inherently corrupt people, such a “difficulty can be overcome by an outstanding man who uses extraordinary means in order to transform a corrupt matter into a good matter; that obstacle to the establishment of the best regime which is man as matter, the human material, can be overcome, because matter can be transformed.” Leo Strauss, *Political Philosophy: Six Essays*, ed. Hillel Gildenh (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), 85. It is also central to J.G.A. Pocock’s account of early modern civic republicanism. See J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003).


111 In the ancient sense of the word, *theoria* is understood as a more or less passive “looking on.”


117 It is worth noting that, as a young man, Marx kept detailed notes from his early study of Machiavelli’s *Discorsi*.

118 Karl Marx, *New York Daily Tribune*, 1853, in *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (New York: Telos Press, 1973). This text is being cited in this edition because, strangely, it has not been included in the *MECW*.

119 These are the questions that Antonio Gramsci will, of course, take up under the sign of the “Modern Prince” (code word for the Communist Party) via his engagement with the Idealist theorist of the aesthetic, Bendetto Croce, on the one hand, and the Third International, on the other, in the early decades of the twentieth century in Italy.

As Jameson has recently commented, Marx “applied himself to demonstrate that socialism was more modern than capitalism and more productive. To recover that futurism and that excitement is surely the fundamental task of any left ‘discursive struggle today.’” Representing Capital (London: Verso, 2011), 90.

Marx, Grundrisse, 92.

Hannah Arendt, Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

The older Lukács, in his Aesthetics, was very well aware of this aesthetic dimension of Marx's writings, when he focused on the dimensions of historical habit formation and the ways in which this was informed by the respective forms of labor (particularly in the Eigenart des Ästhetischen). Special thanks to Erik Bachman for bringing this to our attention.


Lukács, Einführung in die ästhetischen Schriften von Marx und Engels, 212 (our translation, SG/JFH).

Alain Badiou, The Communist Hypothesis (London: Verso, 2010), 168–260, Badiou, of course, locates the “evental” emergence of the figure of the worker in the Paris Commune, whereas Marx, however, has already disclosed it dialectically in the hidden mediations of capital.


Marx, Capital, 166.

Marx, Capital, 716.

Marx, Capital, 382.


Marx, Capital, 390.

Marx, Capital, 394.

See Stavros Tombazos, Time in Marx (Chicago, IL: Haymarket, 2014).

See Georg Lukács, History and Class Consciousness; for the historical signature of the theory of reification see our book The Spell of Capital: Reification and Spectacle (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017).


See Hardt and Negri's Empire and Communities of Sense, ed. Beth Hinderliter, Vered Maimon, Jaleh Mansoor and Seth McCormick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); and Terrell Carver, The Postmodern Marx (University Park, PA: Penn State Press, 1998), especially Chapters 2–4, in which he addresses what kind of subjectivity
is required in order to make “value in exchange” an intelligible practice between individuals.

141 The shift of these analyses on the general intellect towards aesthetic paradigms is crucially made by Félix Guattari in *Chaosmosis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).

142 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 300.


144 In *Disagreement* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 18, Jacques Rancière for instance identifies “the setting-up of politics”—as a dissensus on the level of conflicting subjectivities—as “identical to the institution of the class struggle.”

145 Marx, *Capital*, 481.

146 Marx, *Capital*, 481.


150 As for the aesthetic dimensions of the idea of association see the text of Hartle, Chapter 4 in this volume.

151 As a problem of political organization—and thus, not only as a question of a utopian idea but its real manifestation in historical struggles—this question is elaborated in Georg Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness. Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). Therein Lukács strongly emphasizes the dialectical relation between the spontaneity of proletarian action and the discipline (of the revolutionary organization) as one condition of the leftist project (see again our *The Spell of Capital*). “What is essential,” he writes, “is the interaction of spontaneity and conscious control.” (317) Lukács does not explicitly call this relation aesthetic. But the “freedom in solidarity” (316) clearly alludes to classical figures of the aesthetic, of integrated totality or the mediation between the general and the particular in the organic work of art—such a mediation which was already suggested in his assessment of the re-birth of epic totality in Russian literature in his pre-Marxist, Romantic, anti-capitalist phase, culminating in the publication of the extremely influential *Theory of the Novel* (1914). The aesthetic unity of the general and the particular was the normative standpoint from which Lukács undertook a critique of the “age of absolute sinfulness” characterized by the opposition of the individual and society amid the baleful perservativeness of second nature.


154 Rancière is perhaps not mindful enough of Hegel’s own honest admission that the rabble could never be fully incorporated within ethical life and hence left the
Introduction


Rancière literally says that Marx’s formulation, that “ideas are material forces” that “take over the minds of the multitude,” is only “half-materialistic,” as it denies the direct effects (!) of discourse on practice. See Jacques Rancière, “A Few Remarks on the Method of Jacques Rancière,” *Parallax,* 2009, 15 (3), 114–23, 114.


See Anette Michelson, “Reading Eisenstein Reading Capital,” in *October,* vol. 2 (Summer, 1976), 26–38; and “Reading Eisenstein Reading Capital (Part 2),” in *October,* vol. 3 (Spring, 1977), 82–89.


One might think of Eugen Blume’s and Catherine Nichols’s huge exhibition, *Das Kapital. Schuld, Territorium, Utopie,* that took place in the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin in the summer and fall of 2016. Another exhibition worthy of mention Henrik Plenge Jakobsen’s exhibition *Kapital,* in the Museet for Samtidskunst in Roskilde, which took place in the fall and winter 2013.

Section I

Aesthetics / Emancipations
Three Logics of the Aesthetic in Marx*

Samir Gandesha

An animal forms objects only in accordance with the standard and the need of the species to which it belongs, whilst man knows how to produce in accordance with the standard of every species, and knows how to apply everywhere the inherent standard to the object. Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.

Karl Marx, 1844 Manuscripts

Any reading of the aesthetic in Marx is faced with the imperative of overcoming the one-sidedness of three reductionist types of discourse in which the link between (post) Marxist politics and aesthetics was sketched. Previous attempts to make sense of Marx and Engels in terms of aesthetics have either been: (1) Marxist in a very broad sense as an external projection of Marxist categories on aesthetic discourse; or, (2) Marxological in a naïve sense, that is, merely assembling in one volume the stray comments on art and literature that pepper Marx’s and Engels’s writings.

The problem with the first attempt is that it assumes that Marx simply bypasses or overlooks the aesthetic and, therefore, that Marxian discourse stood in need of radical reworking. The failure of the second approach was that it restricted the understanding of “aesthetics” to statements dealing explicitly with art and literature as opposed to a more inclusive conception of the aesthetic. Yet, the word “aesthetic” does not merely pertain to art and questions of the “beautiful,” but derives from the Greek aisthetikos, meaning “of or relating to sensuous perception,” and leads Immanuel Kant, for example, to define the “transcendental aesthetic” as “the science of the perception of the senses.”

In a third discursive strand (3) authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jacques Rancière, among others, have pointed to the way in which all radical attempts to theorize the political are profoundly dependent on figures of the aesthetic. The “aesthetico-political,” therefore, has become the name for all aesthetic dynamics that cross (and confound) the hegemonic orders of reason and the established channels of perception. It is closely linked to versions of post-Marxist politics but

* I thank John Abromeit, Ian Angus, Andrew Feenberg, Johan F. Hartle, Iain McDonald, Rodolphe Gasché, Charles Reeve, and Eva Ziarek for their helpful comments on previous iterations. Any errors are my responsibility alone.
hardly ever directly linked to and brought to play within a critical re-reading and re-assessment of the aesthetic potentials of Marx’s work itself. It is against this backdrop that I want to suggest that there are three identifiable logics of the aesthetic running through Marx’s texts.

In Marx’s own texts, the first logic of the aesthetic as such is to be located mainly, though not exclusively, in the early critiques of Hegel and the Young Hegelians. For example, in the fifth Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx states that “Feuerbach, not satisfied with abstract thinking, wants [sensual] contemplation; but he does not conceive sensuousness as practical, human-sensuous activity.” It is here that Marx engages in a “transformative critique” of Hegel’s understanding of the labour of the concept and develops a sensuous-practical concept of labor. While it is true that the language of alienation and estrangement becomes rather muted in the development of Marx’s categories, with the partial exception of the famous discussion of the commodity in the first chapter of the first volume of Capital, Marx seeks to show throughout his writings the manner in which this sensuous moment is simultaneously present and absent in capital for reasons that are, in fact, spelled out in the discussion of commodity fetishism—that relations between human beings take on the appearance of the relation between things just as relations between things appear to be strangely humanized. Or, as Marx writes in the Grundrisse, “The person objectifies himself in production, the thing subjectifies itself in the person.”

A second logic may be discerned in particularly pronounced form in The Communist Manifesto, in which Marx shows how the transformations in capitalism, in particular the objective development of the productive forces, transform the conditions of all aspects of life. The creative-destructive logic of capitalist society will undermine the institutional bastions of the old order, including the family, and from this one can extrapolate the institution of art, and, as a consequence, the radical transformation of the senses, empowering them to perceive the “real conditions” of social life no longer with selfish but truly cooperative eyes and ears, thus laying the groundwork for the genuine realization of the totality of human powers, or species-being (Gattungswesen) in communism.

Finally, a third logic can be located in the Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, in which Marx engages in a fundamental rethinking of the conception of history that he sketches out in the Manifesto. In place of the linear logic through the various modes of production—from slavery through feudalism, to capitalism and the unleashing in the latter of the productive forces and, with them, the production of new modes of sensuous perception—Marx now takes up specifically the problem of the repetition of previous forms of representation that inhibit precisely such a production. In place of the comedic completion of history with the victory of the proletariat, taking up the mantle of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, we see the farcical triumph of Louis Bonaparte underwritten by an alliance of petite bourgeoisie and peasantry under the aegis of the “party of order.” The rhetorical charge of the Brumaire has to do precisely with the gap between Marx’s conception of the logic of historical transformation and the actual unfolding of events in France. The key point, I argue, is that Marx looks to the aesthetic as the model through which the compulsion to repeat could be broken. In other words, the revolutionary project of the proletariat is specifically aesthetic. Let’s look at each logic in turn.
The first logic of the aesthetic that can be identified in Marx is “aesthetic” in the broadest possible sense, which was already suggested as relating to sensuous perception, which itself is derived from *aisthanomai*, “to perceive, feel or sense.” By the time it is received by Marx, the term has already been given its modern definition through the writings of Baumgarten, Kant, Schelling, and Hegel, in which it comes to form the modern discipline of aesthetics. Yet, while Hegel famously defines art, as the locus of Absolute Spirit, as the “sensuous manifestation of the Idea,” his understanding of the “aesthetic,” as Marx makes clear in his own critique in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, has more to do with the problems of presentation (*Darstellung*) than with sensuous receptivity per se. It is the latter that becomes a central concern for Marx. For Hegel, it is through the problem of the presentation of Objective Spirit (*Objektiver Geist*) that art nevertheless gives way to religion and, finally, philosophy. It is in the latter, through the “suffering, patience and labor of the negative” that the passage from sense certainty to Absolute Spirit comes about. This is Hegel’s famous “labour of the Notion.” In the long process of developing his mature concept of labor, Marx initially takes a detour through the earlier, more expansive sensuous understanding of the aesthetic in the development of a materialist critique of Hegel.

This “aesthetic” aspect of Marx’s thinking cannot be underestimated insofar as it corresponds with his elaboration of a form of materialism that would, on the one hand, represent a determinate negation of the Left Hegelian position of Feuerbach, Strauss, Bauer, Stirner, *et al.*, and, on the other, an alternative to the mechanical materialism of figures like d’Holbach. So, what becomes key for Marx’s thinking at this stage is the concept of sensuousness (*Sinnlichkeit*) and what he calls “sensuous human activity” (*sinnliche menschliche Tätigkeit*). While in Feuerbach’s transformative critique of religion, which entailed a switching of subject and predicate, that is, “Man makes God, God doesn’t make Man,” human sensuousness is simply thought abstractly. In the case of mechanical materialists such as d’Holbach, materialism is understood as “matter in motion,” as the totality of inexorable relations of cause and effect without significant differentiation via consciousness and activity. An exploration of *Sinnlichkeit* would be central to Marx’s early program, as expressed in his letter to Arnold Ruge, co-editor of the *Deutsche-Französische Jahrbuch*, clarifying for “critical philosophy” the “meaning of its struggles and its own desires.”

For Marx, central to understanding these “struggles and desires” was human activity, which, itself, had to be understood in all of its material sensuousness. This emphasis on sensuousness emerges with Marx’s shift of orientation from the so-called “critical criticism” of Bruno Bauer to the anthropology of Feuerbach. Yet the latter is taken to task for understanding such sensuousness in terms of passivity rather than activity. For example, in the first *Thesis on Feuerbach*, he states that, “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach’s included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, practice, not subjectively.” This starting point, what Marx also describes as “reality” (*wirklichkeit*), “nature” (*natur*), “historical life-process” (*historischer Lebensprozeß*), and so forth, in which the various phenomena of
"consciousness" are to be grounded and, therefore, understood. In a key passage that emphasizes, in direct opposition to the post-Kantian thesis that consciousness ultimately determines being, Marx states that, "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious being, and the being of men is their actual life-process." (Das Bewußtsein kann nie etwas Anders sein als das bewußte Sein, und das Sein der Menschen ist ihr wirklicher Lebensprozeß.)

However, Marx's object of criticism is not Hegel's Philosophy of Right, on which most attention is typically focused given the fact that Marx devoted important texts to it in 1842 and 1843. Marx's critique of Hegel's political philosophy centers on establishing the correct relationship between bürgerliche gesellschaft and the state, the system of needs and Objective Spirit. Hegel held that the truth of the former lies in the latter, which means that qua "zone of mediation par excellence," a civil society based preeminently on property requires forms of "right" or "law" that transcend the particularism of that sphere and enter into the mediations of Sittlichkeit as a whole. Marx inverts this relation, which leads to Marx's famous statement in his 1859 A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, in which the "economic base" (basis) is said to determine the superstructure (überbau).

Rather, the key location of Marx's development of a concept of sensuousness, indeed, sensuous activity, labor, lies in his critique of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit one year later in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, written in Parisian exile in 1844 but not discovered until 1932. It is in this text, that Marx, as it were, subjects Hegel, himself, to a transformative critique by switching subject and predicate. Where Hegel famously in the Phenomenology articulates an account of "the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative," that is "the labour of the Notion," Marx, ever seeking to turn Hegel on his head, develops "the concept of labour" that entails Sinnlichkeit. Such a concept of labor will not, however, be fully worked out, of course, until Marx's systematic reading of classical political economy. But already present in the Lockean account of labor is an account of sensuous activity. In this, he was, in a sense, raising himself up to (and beyond) Hegel, whose account of the bürgerliche gesellschaft in the Philosophy of Right was based on a reading of Smith and Ricardo, a reading which led Hegel to understand how this sphere produced its own insurmountable negativity in the form of the "rabble" (Pöbel).

What is so important about the Manuscripts is Marx's linking sinnliche Arbeit and alienation in the form of private property. This notion of sensuous, that is to say, properly aesthetic, activity furnished Marx early on with a normative account of non-alienated labor that would finally be realized in communist society. This form of non-alienated labor would be the means by which the human being—as a "natural being," a "suffering, conditioned and limited creature"—is able to produce universally as a member of the species and, therefore, to produce not according to heteronomous imperatives flowing from any particular interest, that is, self-preservation, but rather would produce in accordance with the "laws of beauty." If what has been called the "perfectionist" strain of German Idealism can be traced all the way back to the influential work of Leibniz as "form-giving activity," then with Marx, such activity is to be understood in sensuous-material terms through which the senses, themselves, would be transformed.
Marx’s basic critique of Hegel is that the latter can understand the Absolute as Spirit’s being itself in its other being precisely because such being is understood as self-consciousness. The object, negativity, is negated and therefore yields positivity, which is to say, the identity of self-consciousness with itself. As Marx states:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as a loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of labour and comprehends objective man—true, because real man—as the outcome of man’s own labour.\(^{18}\)

But Marx’s point is that the supposed “transcendence of alienation” is the return back to an alienated condition because labor, for Hegel, is abstract, mental labor. That is, Hegel fails to grasp the return from alienation as the realization of human species-being (*Gattungswesen*), which is premised upon the historical emergence of “the cooperative action of all of mankind.”\(^{19}\) In contrast, Hegel posits mankind in an abstract and one-sided way when he posits ‘self-consciousness,’ and this has specific implications for how the senses, themselves, are understood: “The self, however, is only the abstractly conceived man—man created by abstraction. Man is selfish. His eye, his ear, etc., are selfish. In him, every one of his essential powers has the quality of selfhood.”\(^{20}\) However, Marx makes the crucial distinction, in *The German Ideology*, that what he calls “human nature” (or social being) is not determined by self-consciousness, but rather self-consciousness is determined by human nature (social being). This means, of course, that Marx’s critique of Hegel is not simply a matter of inversion, as is typically understood, a mere turning Hegel on his head, but rather a fundamental transformation of our very understanding of the senses from capacities that are, within bourgeois society, selfish to ones that are now cooperative: senses that take their bearing from other human beings as well as what Marx calls “inorganic nature” outside of the subject, towards which, in both cases, they are oriented. For Marx, subjectivity is oriented towards and dependent upon the object. Hence, while the passions play a certain role in Hegel’s notion of the cunning of reason, in the form of a negativity that is ultimately negated, for Marx, “man’s feelings, passions, etc., are not merely anthropological phenomena in the [narrower] sense, but truly ontological affirmations of being (of nature).”\(^{21}\) Adorno will later give this a negative turn and call it the primacy of the object (*Vorrang des Objekts*).

“Production thus not only creates an object for the subject,” Marx argues in the *Grundrisse*, “but also a subject for an object.”\(^{22}\) Hence, it is for this reason that Jacques Taminiaux argues that Marx, like Plato at the origins of Western metaphysics, negates art in the interest of beauty.\(^{23}\) That is to say, for Marx, the existence of art per se is symptomatic of the alienated conditions of life within class society. For Marx, with the transcendence of class society through the communal ownership of the means of production, art would itself be negated, not insofar as it would no longer exclusively be produced by “artists,” but rather because the very institution of art would be abolished. Just as we subjects of the new society would “hunt” and “fish” and “criticize after dinner,”\(^{24}\) all human beings would in their now universal rather than
particular, in their integrated rather than fragmented activity also, in a sense, be artists. Actually, it would be more correct to say that the activity, itself, would be aestheticized. In a sense, this aesthetic dimension of Marx’s critique of alienated labor forms the crucial backdrop to understanding the debates over the politics of art in the twentieth century, in particular, the debate between advocates of art’s dialectical autonomy such as Adorno, on the one hand, and figures such as Walter Benjamin, the Surrealists, Dadaists, the Situationist International, and figures such as Peter Bürger, who was the theorist of the European avant-garde, on the other. The latter argue for a negation of the institution of art that would make possible an annulment of the separation of art from life. Indeed, more than this somewhat restricted set of the debates within the avant-garde, broadly speaking, is the question of the relation between aesthetic and political revolution that was literally posed on the barricades of 1848. On the one hand, there was Wagner and Bakunin agitating in Dresden for the ill-fated Republic, on the other was the aesthetic vision of Marx in the Manifesto, in which Marx and Engels, as I will show in the next section, saw the social transformations of society, itself, leading to revolutionizing not just the relations of production but also, as a preliminary step, the senses themselves. With the collapse of revolutionary fervor and the rise of reaction, there is an exact split. Wagner is actually brought to Paris by Louis Bonaparte as his patron, while Marx, of course, writes a devastating critique, mocking Napoleon Bonaparte’s nephew, in which he calls for a “poetry of the future” to break the stranglehold of the past over the very future itself. This fissure over the Revolution of 1848 remained in place until the momentous year of 1871 and the conflict between the Communards and their enemies. The first line can be said to give rise to a form of “reactionary modernism,” while the other anticipates the revolutionary modernism of the twentieth century avant-garde and continues to inspire avant-gardist gestures well into the twenty-first century.

II.

The authority of the new is that of the historically inevitable.

T.W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory

If we keep the experiences of the twentieth century avant-garde in mind, then we can see in Marx a similar tension that takes the form of what I call the second logic of the aesthetic in his writings. And the exploration of this tension is what will occupy this section and, indeed, the remainder of this chapter. On the one hand, we have The Communist Manifesto which suggests that capitalism’s “fundamental contradiction,” that between forces and relations of production, will, in transforming human beings’ relation to the world, in stripping the illusions from their perceptions of that world, give rise on its own to a dramatic shift in direct aesthetic perception (aisthetikos). This is, at least in part, why the Manifesto is viewed as such a powerful modernist text both in form (as a manifesto) and as a substantive argument about how the objective conditions of modern industrial production create not only new forms of transportation, communications technologies, but also new aesthetic forms such as “world literature.”
But the key “zone of mediation” is the human sensorium as such. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, Marx suggests that the transformation of the senses is the work of history itself. It can, in other words, be argued that in the Manifesto, Marx wants to show the concentration and intensification of such historical development. If the past 200 years since the invention of the steam engine have accelerated human history and have indeed altered the very conditions of “natural history” (now understood via the concept of “anthropocene”), then Marx has his finger on exactly how the fundamental contradiction of capitalism works both ways: objectivity transforms the conditions under which subjects are formed, and a new form of subjectivity, in turn, transforms that existing form of objectivity into the form of revolutionary activity. According to Marx, “Bourgeois industry and commerce create [the] material conditions of a new world in the same way as geological revolutions have created the surface of the earth.”

The logic of capitalist society that Marx outlines in the Manifesto captures with a gripping perspicacity, then, the globalizing tendencies of capitalism a century before “globalization,” which are characterized by a truly planetary intensification of exchange relationships: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe,” Marx writes in those most familiar of sentences, “It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.” According to Marx, the domination of exchange over use value leads the bourgeoisie to play an explosively revolutionary historical role. It is driven to perpetually revolutionize the means of production as a way of valorizing capital (relative surplus value), thus creating a historically unprecedented productive capacity. Its innovations, not just in the sphere of production but also in transportation and communications, surpassed the Egyptian pyramids, the Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals. The importance of such accomplishments far exceeded that of the objective economic forces, but they had a profound impact upon every subjective dimension of social life. Hence, what is perhaps the crucial passage of the Manifesto, whose translation echoes, in extraordinary detail, Shakespeare’s The Tempest:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterruptedly disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with the train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions are swept away, all new ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses (mit nüchternen Augen) his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The specific logic of “creative destruction” that Marx and Engels identify in the Manifesto forms the basis of an important discussion of the politics and aesthetics of contemporary capitalism framed, by the concept of what has recently been called “accelerationism.” The key idea of accelerationism is that the only way beyond capitalism is through it and refers, in particular, to the uniquely deterritorializing logic of capital as presented in the Manifesto. This logic is a specifically aesthetic one, insofar as intensified capitalist development—what we might refer to as the shift from
the *formal* to *real* subsumption of labor, the elaboration of a new form of labor rather than a capture of pre-capitalist forms of labor—is fully driven by the imperative of capital accumulation. And it is such real subsumption of labor that, for Marx, represents the emancipatory potential of capitalism itself. If we can speak of “accelerationism” here, it is in terms of the intensified development and re-organization of the senses that enables the proletariat to grasp its own condition unencumbered by the mediations of custom, tradition, superstition, and above all, religion and cultural forms that had always served to legitimize oppressive social and political relations. It is at this point that what Marx describes in his critique of Hegel as the selfish ear and eye are transformed, under conditions of industrial production, into genuinely cooperative senses.

Marshall Berman argues—in his now classic study of the *Manifesto*, that takes its title from the most arresting passage of the *Manifesto*—that it is possible to discern a particular relation between the objective processes of modernization, at the heart of which is the imperative of constant movement, of unrelenting innovation, on the one hand, and the production of new forms of subjectivity, new modes of sensuous perception to which they give rise, on the other.

Development construed in this sense offers a promise of human self-development which the *Manifesto* understands in Rousseauian terms as a free association of the direct producers, such that the free development of the individual is finally reconciled with the free development of all. Indeed, it is this very expanded productive capacity resulting from the constant revolutionizing of the means of production that makes this an objective possibility, as opposed to simply the “socialization of poverty.” Yet, between the concepts of “modernization” and this conception of “modernity” as the idea of free self-development lies a third, mediating term, namely: modernism.

In Berman’s view, modernism comprises precisely the experience that Marx describes in the passage cited above. Modernism enables men and women to become subjects of rather than being merely objects that are subjected to the logic of modernization. Berman’s argument is that the *Manifesto* can help us better prepare for the possibilities and limits of the future by glancing back to the modernist culture of which the *Manifesto*, itself, constitutes an exemplary moment. Berman’s retrieval of modernism through this alignment of unrelenting innovation in the realm of production, on the one hand, and the production of “new” aesthetic forms and representations, on the other, has also been recently emphasized by T.J. Clark in his eulogy to modernism. 32 Or, as Jameson has recently argued, Marx “applied himself to demonstrate that socialism was more modern than capitalism and more productive. To recover that futurism and that excitement is surely the fundamental task of any left ‘discursive struggle today.’” 33 Such would be the project of Marx’s text *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, to which I shall return below. In Berman’s reading, the *Manifesto* enables us to renew our critical energies and commitments in the face of a seemingly overwhelming process of modernization. He states:

Th[e] act of remembering can help bring modernism back to its roots, so that it can nourish and renew itself, to confront the adventures and dangers that lie ahead. To appropriate the modernities of yesterday can be at once a critique of the
modernities of today and an act of faith in the modernities—and in the modern men and women—of tomorrow and the day after tomorrow.³⁴

In a characteristically trenchant critique, Perry Anderson identifies a number of problems with Berman’s reading of the Manifesto,³⁵ not least of which is Berman’s interpretation of the text’s conception of time. According to Anderson, the concept of modernization presupposes a unified, homogenous and empty conception of linear time described by Berman’s three main adjectives: “constant, uninterrupted, everlasting,” that “denote a homogenous historical time, in which each moment is perpetually different from every other by virtue of being next, but—by the same token—is eternally the same as an interchangeable unit in the process of infinite recurrence.”³⁶ Read in isolation from Marx’s other writings on capitalist development, such a view of development, then, stands much closer to the anti-Marxist modernization theory because it presents a (repeatable) logic that seemingly escapes a specific historical determination.

In contrast, Anderson argues, if one situates Marx’s argument within the larger field of social forces, then one can see that the “time” of capital is, in fact, not infinite and linear, but rather takes the shape of a parabola: this “time” is marked by a logic of emergence, rise, and decline. In other words, Marx’s conception of time is always already marked by the inscription of social and economic crisis that opens onto a very different temporality.³⁷ Accordingly, Anderson calls for a more temporally and spatially differentiated account of the rise of modernity which would bring into play what he calls a “conjunctural” analysis of both the emergence and decline of the culture of modernism as such.³⁸

Indeed, here, Anderson unearths the central problem in Berman’s argument: on the one hand, Berman understands the time of modernization as homogenous and linear, yet, on the other, the mode of experience to which it directly correlates has not kept pace with it but, rather, has fallen prey to a pronounced decline—a decline Berman seeks explicitly to reverse. Yet, if the experience of modernity is so inextricable from an unrelenting modernization logic, the question arises as to how such a decline is possible in the first place?³⁹

Peter Osborne takes up and deepens Anderson’s critique of Berman in a way that dispenses with the somewhat deterministic premises that underpin it, while at the same time seeking to rescue from Berman the key idea of modernism, which is dismissed by Anderson as an empty concept, arguing that, symptomatic of the absence of a structural opposition to capital, Berman’s “melting vision” of the Manifesto “extends beyond the specific futurities of qualitative historical novelty in the name of which such manifestoes are written (be they communist, futurist, or surrealist), to a generalized existential modernism that dissolves political subjectivity into the movement of time itself.”⁴⁰ The crucial question that Osborne poses is the following: “Is there really no time left in the Manifesto, for us, today, other than the time of capital, culturally generalized into that of an abstract, badly infinite modernity?”⁴¹ That is, an experience of the ever-the-same masquerading as the new? Or, does the text offer a glimpse of a qualitatively different time: a “historical futurity” closer to the text’s original intent?
The basic argument that both Anderson and Osborne are making, then, is that Berman universalizes a particular form of social time: the time of the expanded reproduction of capital, and the revolutionary temporality of a particular class project, namely, that of the bourgeoisie. In contrast to Berman and Anderson, Osborne seeks to unearth in the text not simply the endless production of quantitative novelty, but the place where quantity turns into quality; novelty that takes qualitative form as an encounter with a radically different form of temporality. For Osborne, such a "qualitative temporality" is manifested not in the phenomenological experience of modernity that, in Berman’s interpretation, is ultimately anchored in the relentless drive to capital accumulation, but rather in the very syncretic style of *The Communist Manifesto* itself.

Drawing apposite connections between the text and the European avant-garde, which, of course, itself would become known for the production of manifestos of various kinds, Osborne argues that the montage-like quality of the first two sections of the *Manifesto*, incorporating a genuinely dialectical "revolutionary catechism" in a highly compressed formulation of massive sweep of world-historical breadth, means that the "temporal locus of the text is no longer the eternal present of secret society or schoolroom, but the contradictory historical present of capitalist societies, packed tight with the productive energies of human history and the accumulated memories of struggles between classes, bursting with the anticipation of a specific future (communism)."

There is a direct correlation, then, between the extremely dense compression of the entire panoramic history of class society from antiquity to Marx’s present in just a few highly charged paragraphs and its capacity to force not an ongoing, merely quantitative rupture constituted by successive class struggles, but rather to initiate a "tiger’s leap" into the "open air of history." The extreme concision with which the entirety of human history is presented constitutes a mass that is so dense that it has the power to blast open the historical continuum and, therefore, constitutes what Walter Benjamin called "Jetztzeit" or "now time" in the fourteenth thesis on the philosophy of history.

Osborne’s is an insightful reading of the *Manifesto*, not least in the way it draws attention to its form that for successive avant-garde movements, becomes precisely the vehicle by which, through an act of will, they mark out their spatial and temporal distance from the entire previous history of art practices, indeed from the "institution of art" as such. Yet, at the same time, it is difficult not to be skeptical of such a reading. While it would be, I think, unfair to attribute a technological determinism to the *Manifesto*, it is beyond question that Marx was clearly intoxicated with the heightened productive capacity of capital as, indeed, are his contemporary "accelerationist" votaries. In fact, it is the development of the productive forces, as that which gives history its directionality, centering on the growing contradiction between such forces and relations of production. As Anderson makes clear, it is this contradiction that forms the basis upon which Marx elaborates his theory of crisis, which shows how capitalism ultimately produces the conditions for its own destruction. Thus, if one takes Marx’s own advice of emphasizing that the “content goes beyond the phrase,” then it would seem that far from being an exemplary Benjaminian text, the *Manifesto* is more appropriately read as articulating the view of history that Benjamin calls historicism and subjects to a sustained critique in Thesis XI. As the great historian Eric Hobsbawm argues in the Preface of the 1998 Verso edition, at this stage in the
development of Marx's thought, "The aim of communism . . . was derived not from the analysis of the nature and development of capitalism but from a philosophical—indeed, an eschatological—argument about human nature and destiny." At the same time, what is especially interesting about Osborne's reading is the way in which it points to a certain kind of accelerated development of the senses that Walter Benjamin suggests in his famous encomium to the history of film and photography and its exposure of the "optical unconscious." Technology, in this way, comes to mediate and could be said to speed up or accelerate the historical formation and development of the senses that, as we have already seen, Marx suggests in the 1844 Manuscripts. This is especially true insofar as Marx emphasizes the development of the sense of vision ("nüchternen Augen") in particular.

What seems to escape Berman's, and by extension Anderson's and Osborne's, attention is the necessity of reading the Manifesto in relation to other key texts of Marx's. Read in light of Capital, for example, Marx's understanding of the possibility that through immediate experience (Erlernis) of the maelstrom of modern experience itself, men and women would finally, with "sober senses," come to face the "real" conditions of their existence, seems questionable, even when we leave aside Marx's epistemological and ontological claims. For, just at the moment that exchange relations dissolve all fixed, stable forms of culture within the "icy water of cold calculation," the commodity form generates its own forms of socially necessary illusion, its own inverted world. As an intermediate step between, on the one side, the Manifesto, and on the other, Capital, lies of course, Marx's Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonapatre. Indeed, like in the Brumaire, in Capital, with its revising of "religion" via the problem of "theological niceties" and "metaphysical subtleties" of the commodity-form-as-fetish, Marx demonstrates the central problem of the Brumaire: the burden of a nightmarish past as it weighs down the present. The fundamental nature of capitalist society remains concealed behind its appearance as an immense collection of "commodities." How the senses could be liberated of their own accord becomes a crucial question, which for the Manifesto it simply is not.

Given that Berman, Anderson, and Osborne frame their readings of the Manifesto in terms of the problem of the meaning of historical time, it is particularly surprising that little or no mention is made of the Brumaire in their respective readings of the Manifesto. This is of especial interest when we consider the fact that, taken together, these two texts frame what is perhaps a, if not the, central historical event of the nineteenth century: the failed Revolutions of 1848, the ghost of which would haunt the subsequent history of Europe, including our own present.

III.

I stood on a hill and I saw the Old approaching, but it came as the New.
Bertolt Brecht, "Parade of the Old New"

If, as many critics have noted, the Brumaire has a rhetorical power that rivals the "Biblical" language of the Manifesto, then such power arises precisely out of the force
field that constitutes its relation to this text. The Brumaire’s presentation of the events of 1848–51 as farce is only fully intelligible against the theory of history compressed into the first two sections of the Manifesto. For this reason, the Brumaire enables us to see aspects that would otherwise not be visible in the Manifesto. The Manifesto locates a structure of subjective experience—rooted in the restless, explosive revolutionizing of production and the dizzying disenchanting effects of the exchange relationships (or abstract labor) through which every aspect of life is increasingly mediated—that ultimately constitutes something like Hegel’s “cunning of reason”; that beneath the apparent constant revolutionizing there can be discerned something like a stable and directional logic, a logic pointing to a future realization of the Communist Idea. This culminates in a new found “sobriety” regarding the nature of the history that objectively makes it possible. This constitutes the return of the subject to itself out of the intoxicating diremptions that constitute the basis of modern experience. As Marx puts it in the section entitled “Private Property and Communism” of the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, “Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution.”

In The Brumaire, in contrast, as I have already intimated, Marx expresses a deep worry that actual historical events might not conform to such a historical narrative. Indeed, Jeffrey Mehlman argues in Revolution and Repetition that Marx’s reading operates on the basis of a linear construction of time constituted by the theatrical oppositions of tragedy (bourgeois revolution) and comedy (proletarian revolution). While he fails to refer to the Manifesto, it seems clear that the relation between the two is clearly delineated in that text between the rise of the bourgeoisie and the forces it manages to liberate, on the one hand, and the proletariat, on the other, which would increasingly contest its power. Mehlman argues that Marx’s recourse to the figure of farce in the text, accompanied by an outburst of laughter and hilarity, is symptomatic of the death drive and, ultimately, the implosion of Marx’s materialist conception of history—its failure to provide a convincing account of the ascension of Louis Bonaparte. Paradoxically, however, Mehlman has been criticized for premising his reading on a mechanical account of the articulation between the economic relations, legal and political institutions, and structures and culture more generally. Yet the key thing that Mehlman fails to emphasize is the manner in which the Brumaire might be read as the failure not of Marx’s materialist conception of history—its failure to provide a convincing account of the ascension of Louis Bonaparte. Indeed, this is an assumption that Berman seems to make in his attempt to re-appropriate the experience of modernism for the political struggles of the present.

So, if the Manifesto is ambivalent about the place of politics or human activity more generally, if it shifts constantly between constative and performative speech acts (Derrida), or between narrative and discourse (Osborne), or third person accounts and first person perspectives, then the Brumaire is ultimately written in the imperative mode in which Marx emphasizes the need for the elaboration of a new form—a form that does not lag behind explosive new historical content, one that would not
overwhelm it as was the case in the bourgeois revolutions he is criticizing, a form which would be capable of superseding the compulsion to repeat the past and, in the process, would free up the future.56

The *Brumaire* seems to be deeply marked by a basic and fundamental ambivalence regarding its apparent protagonist: Louis Bonaparte. *On the one hand*, Marx delights in derisively characterizing him as a “grotesque mediocrity,” a mere “caricature,”57 “the serious buffoon,” and so on. “Never has a pretender,” Marx suggests, “speculated more stupidly on the stupidity of the masses.”58 “Only when he has eliminated his solemn opponent, when he himself now takes his imperial role seriously and, under the Napoleonic mask, imagines that he is the real Napoleon, does he become the victim of his own conception of the world, the serious buffoon who no longer takes world history as comedy, but his comedy for world history.”59 *On the other hand*, Marx shows in deliberate, painstaking detail the not inconsiderable guile with which Bonaparte is able to manipulate the various factions in the National Assembly, how he is able to bring the army over to his side, and ultimately to orchestrate the coup.

Is this ambivalence simply another contradiction in what most critics suggest is an already deeply convoluted and contradictory text? On the contrary, Marx’s ambivalence towards Louis Bonaparte is what could be called a structural ambivalence, that is, one that results from the two levels at which the text itself operates. On the first level, Marx sets forth a historical narrative that outlines the three stages of the ill-fated February Revolution leading up to the *coup d’état* of December 2, 1851. On another level, as already suggested, Marx is engaging a reflection on what Koselleck calls the “semantics of historical time.”60 In other words, Marx is referring not simply to the actual historical events, themselves, but also to how the meaning of historical time is refracted through the interpretation of those events. In particular, in *Capital* he identifies the persistence of “theological niceties” and “metaphysical subtleties” in the very vehicle of disenchantment, namely: the commodity form. Marx suggests that on the very brink of realizing a new conception of revolutionary time, or *neuzeit* as rupture or break, there is an abrupt reversion to a pre-modern conception of revolutionary time, one that suggests an endless, cyclical and finite sequence of the rise and fall of a finite set of political regimes.61 In this very movement, in the shirking of the burdens of the present, enlightenment effectively reverses itself into myth.62

If this is true, then it is possible to suggest that Marx’s ambivalence towards Louis Bonaparte results from the fact that he fails to live up to the world-historical destiny of his uncle. Indeed, it is not necessarily the fact that he, himself, is a caricature of his uncle, as much as the fact that any kind of presence of a Bonaparte in a historical role in the middle of the nineteenth century cannot be anything other than caricature.63 Not only does the *coup d’état* in France fail to conform to Marx’s philosophy of history, it constitutes a particular kind of failure: it presents the logic of history in inverted form, a philosophy of history turned on its head. In the French Revolution of 1789, each of the dominant factions relies for its power on the support of other, more progressive parties. Hence, according to Marx, “as soon as it has brought the revolution far enough to be unable to follow it further, still less to go ahead of it, it is thrust aside by the bolder ally that stands behind it and is sent to the guillotine. The revolution thus moves in an ascending line.”64
The situation in 1848 is the exact reverse. As the wheel of history shakes and sputters, its gears grinding as it begins to turn slowly in retrograde motion: “Each party kicks from behind at that driving forward and in front leans over towards the party which presses backwards. No wonder,” Marx continues, “that in this ridiculous posture it loses its balance and, having made the inevitable grimaces, collapses with curious capers.”

This period reveals forms of historical complexity that refuse to resolve into the dialectic of two classes confronting one another on the stage of world history. It is the profound disappointment that arises out of the failure, not just of the Revolution of 1848 but also of its imputed role within Marx’s philosophy of history, that gives the text its particular rhetorical valence, unearthing myriad contradictions beyond the world historical confrontation between “bourgeois and proletarian”:

Alliances whose first proviso is separation; struggles whose first law is indecision; wild, inane agitation in the name of tranquility; most solemn preaching of tranquility in the name of revolution; passions without truth, truths without passion; heroes without heroic deeds, history without events (Geschichte ohne Ereignisse); development whose sole striving force appears to be the calendar, made wearisome through constant repetition of the same tensions and relaxations . . .

The key to this passage is Marx’s characterization of this period of French history as a “history without events,” and indeed, an understanding of development as marked only quantitatively, that is, by the passage of empty, homogenous “calendar time.” In the space of a mere three years, Marx has gone from celebrating, as Berman emphasizes in his reading, the experiences of the perpetual flux and flow of a fundamentally destabilizing temporality, a perpetual “shock of the new,” in the Manifesto, to a profound worry about the very possibility of the “new,” let alone its ability to shock.

This is nowhere more clearly expressed than in Marx’s suggestion of the role of the imagination in “awakening society from its dream about itself.” Again, while the suggestion in the Manifesto is that this would be accomplished, of its own accord, as a result of the intensified logic of capitalist development entailing the passage from the formal to real subsumption of labor in a condition in which men and women would finally face reality with sober senses, awake to their shared fate and prospect of political solidarity, now Marx expresses this as an imperative, something that must be actively accomplished. In a way that seems to respond directly to the Manifesto, Marx states:

And just when they seem engaged in revolutionizing themselves and things, in creating something that has never yet existed, precisely in such periods of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service and borrow from them names, battle cries and costumes in order to present the new scene of world history in this time honoured disguise and this borrowed language.

Hence in Germany, “Luther donned the mask of the Apostle Paul,” in France, “the Revolution of 1789 to 1814 draped itself alternatively as the Roman Republic and the
Roman Empire,” in an earlier age, Cromwell and the English people had borrowed speech, passions, and illusions “from the Old Testament for their bourgeois revolution.”

Yet, the Revolution of 1848 “knew nothing better to do than parody, now 1789, now the revolutionary tradition of 1793 to 1795.”

The project of freeing the future from the past is understood as a hermeneutic act, through the analogy with translation, yet one that would break through the inherently circular nature of interpretation. One can be said to have properly learned a new language, according to Marx, only when one has ceased translating it back into the mother tongue and has “assimilated the spirit of the new language and can freely express himself in it only when he finds his way in it without recalling the old and forgets his native tongue in the use of the new.” While Marx sketches the limitations of bourgeois revolutions, locked as they are in the compulsion to translate the “new language” always back into the “old,” he suggests the only way beyond such a repetition lies in the construction of a new language that has decisively broken the stranglehold of the mother tongue. In one of his better known passages, Marx claims:

The social revolution of the nineteenth century cannot draw its poetry (Poesie) from the past, but only from the future. It cannot begin with itself before it has stripped off all superstition (Abergaluben) in regard to the past.

Such a new language must be inherently innovative in order to be able to disclose aspects of the social order that have hitherto been rendered invisible. But in what does such innovation consist?

IV. Conclusion

The question of innovation in Marx is tied to the underlying unity of his understanding of the aesthetic. It is possible to understand the unity of the three logics of the aesthetic in Marx in terms of Jacques Rancière’s notion of the “distribution of the sensible.” Rancière states that the “distribution of the sensible [is] the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and position within it.” By “distribution of the sensible” Rancière means the ways in which roles and modes of participation in the social order are shaped by pre-established orders of sensuous perception. It, therefore, refers to “what is visible or invisible, sayable or unsayable, audible or inaudible.” Politics, in Rancière’s sense, refers to the attempt to contest the dominant distribution of the sensible constituted by the existing social order.

The three logics of the aesthetic in Marx, I would suggest, can be understood to be unified along the lines of Rancière’s idea of the distribution or indeed re-distribution of the sensible. Marx’s early critique of Hegel aims at a liberation and reconfiguration of the senses as the basis of a transformed conception of labor. As Marx argues in the Grundrisse, “An art object, and likewise all other products, creates a public interested in art and sensitive to beauty. Production creates not only an object but likewise a
subject for the object.” Transformed production relations, therefore, would allow the subject—as a species-being or *gattungswesen*—and, in particular, the finite, sensuous, suffering human body to finally come into its own through its relation to other bodies and to “inorganic nature.” In a second logic, as set forth in the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx seeks to show that the explosive unleashing of the productive forces would, *of themselves*, fundamentally transform the existing “distribution of the sensible,” bringing men and women, finally, to face with “sober senses” the “real conditions of their existence and relations with their kind.” This is what explains Berman’s attempt to reclaim the *Manifesto’s* modernism for contemporary struggles. However, what Berman (and his critics) fail to address is the manner in which a third logic complicates the picture, for, as Marx points out, “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living,” that “men make their own history but they do not make it just as they please.” What Marx has in mind here are less the economic and social conditions as the persistence of cultural forms from the past, or what Lukács called in his influential *Theory of the Novel* “charnel houses of long-dead interiorities.” It is in this context that Marx invokes the “poetry of the future” as the counter-point to the farcical mimicry of bourgeois revolutions, locked as they are into a compulsion to repeat antiquated forms of political struggle. Such a “poetry of the future” is oriented, I would suggest, toward a radical new distribution of the sensible rather than leaving this task to the supposed “objective laws of historical development.” Does this mean that such a “poetry of the future” is able to break with a logic of repetition? I would suggest that rather than breaking with repetition, per se, such a “poetry” constitutes a *repetition with the difference* through which it renders visible what had previously been invisible. By closing the gap between the “content and the phrase,” the “poetry of the future” discloses the social world in such a way that lays bare its blood-soaked history and, in so doing, simultaneously shows its contingency and, therefore, futurity.

It is possible to see such a form of repetition precisely at work in the “Critique of Political Economy,” specifically in the crucial sixth chapter on “The Sale and Purchase of Labour Power,” of *Capital Volume I*. This chapter marks the crucial transition from the analysis of the commodity form within the sphere of simple circulation or exchange to the sphere of production proper. Such a transition occurs less as a linear progression than a kind of repetition with a difference, *repetition as re-presentation*. This is the re-presentation of the sphere of exchange, what Marx calls the “exclusive realm of freedom, equality, property and Bentham,” in which individuals meet and enter freely into relations with one another for their mutual advantage as the sphere of production—such a repetition, rather than maintaining the existing “distribution of the sensible” challenges it by generating a shock-like transformation in the appearance of the what Marx calls the “physiognomy of the dramatis personae.”

He, who before was the money-owner, now strides in front as the capitalist, the possessor of labour-power follows as his labourer. The one with an air of importance, smirking, intent on business, the other timid, and holding back, like one who is bringing his own hide to the market and has nothing to expect but—a hiding.
In the middle of the nineteenth century, Marx could still identify the inner contradictions of political economy in such a way as to make capital “dance to its own tune.” That is to say, bringing into visibility by, as it were, altering the distribution of the sensible through the activity of “criticism.” It is through such criticism that he shows the manner in which the “free and equal exchange” between “money-owner,” on the one hand, and the “possessor of labour-power,” on the other, was anything but. However, with the generalization of fetishization of the “real abstraction,” namely the commodity form, beyond the sphere of simple circulation to every sphere of society at the end of the Second World War, the aesthetic, in its autonomy, and therefore negativity, becomes central to fashioning a form of truth that could enable men and women to grasp, in their very mediations, the “real conditions of their existence.”

Notes


Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 322.


Marx and Engels, *German Ideology*, 160.


Karl Marx, “Karl Marx on India,” *New International*, vol. VIII (6), July 1942, p. 192.


Compare:

Prospero: You do look, my son, in a moved sort,
As if you were dismayed: be cheerful, sir.
Our revels are now ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped tow’rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with sleep.


As Srnicek and Williams write in *ACCELERATE: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics*, far from being an opponent of modernity, Marx “sought to analyze and intervene within it, understanding that for all its exploitation and corruption, capitalism remained the most advanced economic system to date. Its gains were not to be reversed, but accelerated beyond the constraints of the capitalist value form.” Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, “#ACCELERATEMANIFESTO for an Accelerationist Politics,” *Critical Legal Thinking – Law and the Political*, http://criticallegalthinking.com/2013/05/14/accelerate-manifesto-for-an-accelerationist-politics/ (last accessed on March 15, 2015).


Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” 101. See also Gopal Balakrishnan’s argument that brings back the periodization between an early and later Marx, though not in the same way as Althusser’s attempt to distinguish between “ideology” and “science,” but rather between a general sense of capitalism’s self-negating tendencies up to and including *The Eighteenth Brumaire* in 1852, and a specific understanding of the logic of crisis as developed in, for example, *Capital*. Of course, this reading doesn’t pay specific enough attention to the manner in which there is a nascent discussion in the *Manifesto* of what Marx calls the “fundamental contradiction” of capitalism, that between forces and relations of production. And the transformation of the senses is key to this.


Osborne, “Remember,” 194.

Contemporary “Accelerationism” inherits this tradition explicitly. See above-cited the Accelerationist Manifesto as well as the more recent Xenofeminist Manifesto which follows in its wake.

Osborne, “Remember,” 196.


“Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological developments as the fall of the stream with which it was moving,” “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” 258.


To quote Jameson again, socialism could be shown to be more modern and more productive than capitalism, according to Marx, by the combination of “a politics of revolt with the ‘poetry of the future.’” Jameson, *Representing Capital*, 90.
In other words, The Eighteenth Brumaire is a summation of the failure of real history to conform to the philosophy of history embedded in the Manifesto. This can be seen specifically in Marx's extremely negative assessment of the peasantry mentioned above, which represents an inversion of the development of political consciousness in the proletariat as Marx outlines in the Manifesto. The peasantry, in this sense, is the exact opposite of the proletariat as he describes it in the Manifesto.

According to the sub-altern studies with their notion of “dominance without hegemony,” such a transition fails to happen in countries such as India therefore limiting the explanatory and mobilizing capacity of Marxism in that country, if not the global south as a whole. For a critique of this account see Vivek Chibber, Postcolonialism and the Spectre of Capital (London, New York: Verso, 2013).

In the same way, it would seem, Marx does in his reference to Jesus's admonition in Luke 9:59–62 to “let the dead bury the dead.” The obvious paradox here is that Marx draws upon the very tradition in order to advocate its destruction.


See Terrell Carver's contribution to the current volume.
While scholars have long recognized the presence of Aristotle in Marx’s writings, there are riches yet to be uncovered here, just as Marx himself wrote of Aristotle when he was translating *De Anima* in Berlin in 1840: “Aristotle’s profundity tosses up in the most surprising manner the most speculative questions. He is a kind of treasure seeker. Wherever under bushes or rocks a living spring bubbles, his dousing rod infallibly finds it.” In this chapter I explore some of the reticulations of Aristotle’s thought in early Marx and consider their actuality and prospects for thinking about social practice and aesthetics. In section I, I trace out the distinction between *poiêsis* and *praxis* in Aristotle, which I then relate to a further distinction between change/movement (*kinêsis*) and activity (*energeia*). While I identify the classical model of production in Aristotle and briefly indicate how it reappears under the guise of labor (*Arbeit*) in the modern tradition of political thought (Arendt and Habermas), I also argue that Aristotle has a second, alternative model of production that the modern tradition overlooks. With these distinctions and models in place, in section II, I show how early Marx invokes the alternative model of production by presenting an implicit normative picture of social production as a form of Aristotelian *energeia*, one in which products (that is, what is produced by social production) are not independent of their production and mutual use, but rather are constitutive elements of social production understood as the species-being (*Gattungswesen*) of human beings. In section III, I consider Aristotle’s remarks on practical wisdom (*phronêsis*) as a kind of perception that is other than sensory perception, and suggest that such a kind of *practical perception*, together with an avowedly *social aesthetic production*, offers new prospects for a Marxist-inspired *practical aesthetics*.

### I. *Poiêsis* and *praxis* in Aristotle

As a *terminus a quo*, we can state that in Aristotle production (*poiêsis*) has a goal or end (*telos*) outside or beyond itself and belongs to technical or artisanal expertise (*tekhnê*), while action (*praxis*) has goals or ends internal to itself, and belongs to practical wisdom (*phronêsis*). In *Magna Moralia* Aristotle writes:
When things are made and done \[\text{poioumenôn kai prattomenôn}\], that which makes and that which does them \[\text{to poiêtikon kai praktikon}\] are not the same. For the arts of making have some other end beyond the making \[\text{para tên poiêsin}\]; for instance, beyond housebuilding, since that is the art of making a house, there is a house as its end beyond the making, and similarly in the case of carpentry and the other arts of making \[\text{tôn poiêtikôn}\]; but in the processes of doing \[\text{tôn praktikôn}\] there is no other end beyond the doing \[\text{outhen telos autên tên praxin}\]; for instance, beyond playing the harp there is no other end, just this is the end, the activity and the doing \[\text{hê energeia kai hé praxis}\]. Practical wisdom \[\text{phronêsis}\], then, is concerned with doing and things done, but technical expertise \[\text{tekhnê}\] with making and things made; for it is in things made rather than in things done that artistic contrivance is displayed.

1197a3–13

Aristotle's privileged examples of \text{poiêsis}, a housebuilder producing a house, a teacher instructing a student, and a doctor producing health, make clear that the product of \text{poiêsis} can be an individual substance (an object), or a state or condition. This initial distinction between \text{poiêsis} as a making with an external end and \text{praxis} as a doing with an internal end already raises fundamental puzzles for aesthetics, since the making of an independent artwork would be an example of \text{poiêsis}, whereas the playing of the harp, as above, is an example of a \text{praxis}. And it is possible to think of cases where an artist's actions can be considered an end-internal \text{praxis}, although the final result (which might merely be whatever remains once the doing is halted, rather than when the doing comes to some teleological completion) would be independent of that \text{praxis}, and so at least suggest (retrospectively) that the actions were also a \text{poiêsis}. One example might be a writer's (say, like Gertrude Stein's) habit of automatic writing on the one hand, and the resulting literary text on the other. Another example might be an artist (say, like Jackson Pollock) experimenting with color, texture, size and shape on the one hand, and the resulting canvas on the other. A second puzzle would be the role envisioned for practical wisdom (\text{phronêsis}) in harp-playing, which would seem, like production in general, to require rather technical expertise (\text{tekhnê}). (I shall elaborate and develop some of these possibilities in section III.)

Aristotle returns to the \text{poiêsis–praxis} distinction in \text{Nicomachean Ethics VI.4–5}, where he further develops the distinction to include considerations of the habit or disposition (\text{hexis}), its connection with reason or rational prescription (\text{logos}), and the origin or principle (\text{arkhê}) of the doing:

Within the sphere of what can be otherwise, there are both things that belong within the realm of production and things that belong within that of action: but production is a different thing from action (and on this subject we can rely on our published discussions too), so that rational disposition \[\text{meta logou hexis praktikê}\] in the sphere of action will also be different from rational productive disposition \[\text{meta logou poiêtikês}\]. By the same token, nor is either of them a species of the other: it is not the case either that action is production, or that production is action … technical expertise \[\text{tekhnê}\] will be the same as productive disposition.
accompanied by true rational prescription. Every technical expertise is concerned with coming into being, that is, with the practice and theory of how to bring into being some one of the things that are capable either of being or of not being, and the origin [arkhê] of whose coming into being lies in the producer and not in the thing being produced; for technical expertise is not concerned with things that either are or come to be by necessity, nor with things that are or come to be by nature, since these have their origin in themselves. And because production is a different thing from action, necessarily technical expertise has to do with production, not with action.

So, on a first approximation, poiêsis is a making or a production whose arkhê is in the producer, and whose telos is in the product, whereas praxis is a doing or an action whose arkhê and telos are in the action itself. Now both technical expertise (tekhnê) and practical wisdom (phronësis) are “states [hexeis] by which the soul truths [alethuein] through affirmation and denial” of which there are five such states in total: technical expertise (tekhnê), systematic knowledge (epistêmê), practical wisdom (phronësis), intellectual accomplishment (sophia), and intelligence (nous) (NE VI.3). Unlike the other kinds of “soul-truthing,” practical thought and productive thought is done well when its truth is in agreement with correct desire (VI.2), that is, when the direction of fit goes from mind to world, rather than from world to mind: praxis and production as it were make true an end—either an internal, constitutive end or an external, independent end. So, whereas “technical expertise [tekhnê] . . . is a productive disposition [poiêtikê hexis] accompanied by true rational prescription [meta logou alêthous]” (1140a21–22), “[phronësis] is a true disposition accompanied by rational prescription, relating to action in the sphere of human goods, relating to action . . . So it is clear that practical wisdom is a kind of excellence [aretê] and not a technical expertise [tekhnê]” (1140b20–25). Aristotle appears to be saying that because praxis is an action “in the sphere of human goods,” phronësis is an excellence or virtue, whereas tekhnê is merely a skill or expertise, and not a virtue, presumably because poiêsis needs not be a making-true in the sphere of human goods. We shall see in section II that Marx exploits this distinction to suggest that there is a kind of poiêsis that can be considered a making-true in the sphere of human goods, and hence a kind of human excellence.

The classical model of technical or artistic production is illustrated in Aristotle’s famous example of the housebuilder, which also serves as his privileged example for the contrast between capacity (dunamis) and activity (energeia) that he draws in Metaphysics θ. The housebuilder possesses the idea, image or plan (eidos) of a house (or the definition of what a house is), which is the origin or principle (arkhê) for the making, and the housebuilder is “in capacity” (dunaton) to build houses. He also needs the requisite materials (bricks, stone, wood, and so on) that have the capacity to become
a house. That is, to speak with the distinction Aristotle draws in *Metaphysics* \(\theta\) between “being-in-capacity” and “being-in-activity,”\(^{14}\) the housebuilder, even when sleeping or otherwise not building, is a housebuilder-in-capacity, and the building materials, prior to the act(s) of production, constitute a house-in-capacity. These capacities are actualized when the housebuilder works upon the materials to produce a house.\(^5\) The produced house is in effect a house ‘made true’ by the housebuilder’s technical expertise. The German Idealist tradition takes up this classical model of production as one of “externalization” (Entäußerung) and “objectification” (Vergegenständlichung): the housebuilder in producing a house “externalizes” or “objectifies” the form (eidos) of the house that in some sense is the intention or goal with which he engages in the activity of housebuilding.\(^6\) In this model of production, the *eidos* or intention vanishes with the completion of the activity, resulting in the being-in-activity of the house itself (in more common parlance, the transition of the being-in-capacity of the house materials into the being-in-activity of the house, the actualization of the potentiality of the materials): the activity of housebuilding comes to its natural end (in the sense of telos and in the sense of fulfillment or completion, entelekheia) in the creation of the house, which then exists independently of the process that produced it. Aristotle speaks of this kind of activity as a movement or change (*kinêsis*) in *Physics* III.1–3. A *kinêsis* is an activity that is oriented to a specific or finite end, such that when that end is reached the activity is completed. In the case of this model of production, the overarching *kinêsis* is oriented towards the end of a completed house, and the completion of the house just is the completion of the *kinêsis*, for the movement or change takes place for the sake of the independent end of the house. Similarly, if the overall movement of housebuilding itself is divisible into phases (for example, pouring concrete, setting the foundation, raising the roofbeams, and so on) then each of these phases is itself a *kinêsis* with a finite end done for the sake of that end and for the sake of the finite end of the overall movement. Thus a housebuilder who is asked why he is doing what he is doing can answer truthfully “because I’m pouring the foundation,” or “because I’m building a house.” I shall expand upon these initial considerations of *kinêsis* and finite end shortly.

This classical model of production also underlies the conception of labor or work (*Arbeit*) in the tradition of German Idealism (perhaps most famously in Hegel) and subsequently the conception of “purposive-rational action,” “instrumental action” or “strategic action” in Max Weber and in Critical Theory. The end (*telos*) of housebuilding is the independent, produced house, and the materials and activity (*energeia*) of housebuilding are the means to producing that end, and hence technical expertise can be appraised according to whether, and how well, the housebuilder produces houses or the doctor produces health. One must have the independent desire for, or the extrinsic end of, a house, or health; instrumental reason is modernity’s understanding of Aristotle’s *tekhnikê hexis meta logou* (as above). Moreover, the standard of goodness attaches to the product as such, not to its provenance in production. Thus if houses spontaneously generated without the labor of a housebuilder, that would not affect the standard of goodness of the house (say, whether it shields is inhabitants from inclement weather and fulfills the other functions of a house); and likewise if a housebuilder made an irrational mistake that fortuitously resulted in a better house, that would not affect the judgment that he is a not a good housebuilder. Thus the standard of the
making is independent of the standard of the product, and the former will be subject to the norms of instrumental reasoning and instrumental action.

The modern tradition of labor and instrumental action overlooks the fact that at times Aristotle suggests a second, alternative model of production. In *Nicomachean Ethics* VI.2 he acknowledges that thought can be used in the classical, convention sphere of production:

Thought [dianoia] by itself sets nothing in motion; thought that sets in motion is for the sake of something and practical. For this also controls productive thought [autê gar kai tês poiëtikês arkhei], since everyone who produces something produces it for the sake of something, and what is an end without qualification is not the end of production [to poiēton] (being relative to something else, and the end of a given expertise), but the end of action [to prakton]; for doing well is an end, and desire is for the end.

1139a36–b4; my emphasis

The implication of course is that thought is used in another sphere beyond that of technical production, whose ends are without qualification, such as action, whose end is doing well. In VI.12 he explicitly develops the idea that this sphere is one of a different kind of production:

First, let us state that wisdom [phronēsis] and intellectual accomplishment [sophia] must necessarily be desirable in themselves, if excellences they are, each of one of the two soul-parts in question, even if neither of them produces anything at all. The next point is that they are in fact productive [poiousi]: not in the way medical expertise produces health, but in the way health does—this is how intellectual accomplishment produces happiness; for since it is a part of excellence as a whole, it is the possession of it, and its exercise, that make a person happy. Again, the product [ergon] is brought to completion by virtue of a person’s having wisdom and excellence of character; for excellence makes the goal correct, while wisdom makes what leads to it correct.

1144a1–a8; my emphasis

So there are in fact two kinds of “productive thought,” two kinds of “product,” and two kinds of ends. In the first model of production, the end is relative to something else: the product serves an extrinsic or independent use, say, for the sake of which it is produced. This is the productive thought of the craftsman with technical expertise, and the end of his activity is the end of production (to poiēton). This is the classical model of production (poiēsis) that enters the German Idealist tradition and reappears in the political thought of Arendt and Habermas, as we will see. The second model, however, which the tradition calls praxis (action), is—Aristotle is claiming—also a model of production, one in which the product [ergon] is intrinsic, not for the sake of something else, an end without qualification, not a to poiēton but rather a to prakton. The excellences (aretai) at work here are productive in a way different from that of technical expertise: they produce not the way a doctor produces health, but the way health produces health, says Aristotle, in the way that the “exercise” [energein] of the excellences produces happiness.
This idea in fact reaches back to Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, in which Aristotle draws a homologous contrast between an end independent and external to a doing, and an end internal and constitutive of a doing. But the contrast here serves to distinguish *poiēsis* not from *praxis*, but from *energeia* (activity): 7

But there appears to be a certain difference among ends: some are activities [*energeias*], while others are products of some kind, over and above the activities themselves. Where there are ends over and above the activities, in these cases the products are by their nature better than the activities.

Activities that result in independent products are subordinated to the products that are the external ends of those activities of production; this is the classical model of production in Aristotle and subsequently in instrumental action, as we’ve seen. But implicit in the distinction above is that there are also activities (*energeias*) that have no ends external to them, that is, that are *praxeis*, and whose good lies not in the external product but in the activity itself, understood as the activity or activation, the setting into activity, of the species-specific human excellences or virtues (*aretai*). 8 This model of production is one of *manifestation*: the activation of human excellences, as being-in-capacity of the human species, manifests the *ergon* of the species, whereby *ergon* can be translated as work, product, or *function*, as in the famous “Function Argument” of NE I.7: “... a human being’s function [*ergon*] we posit as being a kind of life, and this life as being activity [*energeia*] of soul and actions [*praxeis*] accompanied by reason [*meta logou*], and it belongs to the good of man perform these well and finely, and each thing is completed well [*tên aristên kai teleiotatên*] when it possesses its proper excellence” (1098a13–17). Thus, when human beings are exercising the excellences (*aretai*) that constitute the proper function of the species, they do not produce the product of health (which would be the first model, misapplied), but rather they manifest the state of health, or happiness. The second model of production—manifestation—is not such that the end vanishes with the completion of the activity: the end is present, manifest, *in* the activity. This is how, to speak with Aristotle, “health produces health” (second model) in contrast to doctors producing health in patients or themselves (first model). The end in this second model is not a finite end, but rather an *infinite* or *general* end. Anscombe describes this well as human “generalities”:

The reckoning what to do or abstain from in particular circumstances will constantly include reference, implicit or explicit, to generalities... Because of it human conduct is not left to be distinguished from the behavior of other animals by the fact that in it calculation is used by which to ascertain the means to perfectly particular ends. The human wants things like health and happiness and science and fair repute and virtue and prosperity, he does not simply want, e.g., that such-and-such a thing should be in such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time. 9

Being healthy, living well, are not finite ends that are exhausted by the person performing certain actions: say, eating well and exercising as actions conducive to
attaining good health. Rather such actions are *manifestations* of the infinite end: I eat well and exercise not in order to achieve health once and for all at a certain time (and then make health my specific, finite end again next week, say), but rather I do those actions habitually because I think that one who does them is healthy, that one who does them manifests health.

In *Metaphysics* Θ.6 Aristotle defines *energeia* by distinguishing it from *kinēsis* as two species of the genus of action understood as a process with an internal end:

...that in which the end is present is an action [praxis]. E.g. at the same time we are seeing and have seen, are understanding and have understood, are thinking and have thought: but it is not true that at the same time we are learning and have learnt, or are being cured and have been cured. At the same time we are living well and have lived well, and are happy and have been happy. If not, the process would have had at some time to cease, as the process of making thin ceases: but, as it is, it does not cease; we are living and have lived. Of these processes, then, we must call the one set movements (*kinēseis*), and the other activities (*energeias*).

1048b22–28

*Kinēsis* (change, movement) is an action or process which, as it were, vanishes in its *specific* or *finite* end, in its completion. The subject is joined to the action word *progressively*: in the present tense, for example, “The tree is falling.” The past tense allows two forms of expression, one (perfective aspect) in which the movement has reached completion (“the tree fell”), and one (imperfective aspect) in which the completion is left in doubt (“the tree was falling”). By contrast, *energeia* (activity) is such that its end does not vanish in its completion, but abides, or is habitual; its end is *general* or *infinite*, as Anscombe defines such ends above. The subject and action are joined in a way that already as it were contains the whole temporally extended process; the predication is *time-general* and is expressed paradigmatically as, for example, “the eye sees.” The past tense here has only one form: “the eye used to see,” that is, it lost that *hexis*, that capacity.11 Time-specific episodes of vision are *manifestations* of the habitual activity, the *energeia*. In this second model, therefore, a being-in-capacity becomes active (or “actualized”), and its “producing” (*poiēin*) is a manifesting of the general end appropriate to the *entelekhēia* of that capacity, including the specific capacities Aristotle calls human (intellectual, moral) “excellences” or “virtues.”12

Before turning to my interpretation of Marx, I want to canvas briefly some positions in the modern German tradition that develop the fundamental distinction between *poiēsis* and *praxis*, or attempt to undercut the distinction in ways other than how I will interpret Marx. Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* is instructive here, for she both revives the distinction between *poiēsis* and *praxis* and enriches the classical model of *poiēsis*. She upholds the basis of the distinction, the difference between an external, independent end that as *eidos* or intention antedates the process of *poiēsis* on the one hand, and an internal end that is manifested by the *praxis* on the other, and she accentuates the difference in *arkhē*. The *arkhē* of a *poiēsis* is the producer’s *eidos*, which as end-to-be-produced requires the use of instrumental reason, technical expertise and technical dispositions by the producer. On the other hand, under the concept of
action Arendt stresses the open-ended initiative of an action: “to act, in its most general sense, means to take an initiative, to begin (as the Greek word archein, ‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ and eventually ‘to rule,’ indicates), to set something in motion (which is the original meaning of the Latin agere).” Unlike production, which at least in principle can be pursued and completed by a solitary artisan, human plurality is the “the basic condition of both action and speech,” and hence also politics. Action and speech are the means by which people become apparent to each other: “In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities will appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice.” As preconditions for political life understood as argument, discourse, and participatory democracy, action and speech for Arendt are defined by their constitutive function—that is, an internal, general social end—in creating a public realm, and—an anticipation of Habermas—any instrumental or strategic distortion of that constitutive function imperils the political life of the polis: any act that displays pure self-expression, and hence serves no instrumental purpose, or inaugurates something new in the social world is an action in Arendt’s sense: “The public realm, the space within the world which men need in order to appear at all, is therefore more specifically ‘the work of man’ than is the work of his hands or the labor of his body,” whereby in “work” here we should hear the species-specific ergon of the human being.

Arendt sharpens the contours of the poiēsis–praxis distinction by differentiating the classical model of poiēsis into two species: “labor” and “work.” Labor is defined as “the biological processes of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor.” Work, on the other hand, is an activity severed from natural life processes and closely parallels Aristotle’s notion of tekhnē; its arkhē is an eidos:

The actual work of fabrication is performed under the guidance of a model in accordance with which the object is constructed. This model can be an image beheld by the eye of the mind or a blueprint in which the image has already found a tentative materialization through work. In either case, what guides the work of fabrication is outside the fabricator and precedes the actual work process in much the same way as the urgencies of the life process within the laborer precede the actual labor process.

Whereas work and labor are similar in that their arkhē and telos exist independently and antedate the poiēsis, and hence both types of poiēsis are characterized by forms of instrumental reasoning, they differ precisely in their concepts of completion or fulfillment:

The process of making is itself determined by the categories of means and end. The fabricated thing is an end product in the twofold sense that the production process comes to an end in it (“the process disappears in the product,” as Marx said) and that it is only a means to produce an end. Labor, to be sure, also produces for the end of consumption, but since this end, the thing to be consumed, lacks the worldly
presence of a piece of work, the end of the process is not determined by the end product but rather by the exhaustion of labor power, while the products themselves, on the other hand, immediately become means again, means of subsistence and reproduction of labor power. In the process of making, on the contrary, the end is beyond doubt: it has come when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world as an independent entity has been added to the human artifice. As far as the thing, the end product of fabrication, is concerned, the process need not be repeated . . .

To have a definite beginning and a definite, predictable end is the mark of fabrication, which through this characteristic alone distinguishes itself from all other human activities. Labor, caught in the cyclical movement of the body’s life process, has neither a beginning nor an end. Action, though it may have a definite beginning, never . . . has a predictable end.²⁰

Arendt follows Marx, who is following *De Anima*, in distinguishing lower life-activities (energeias) and functions (erga) like nutrition and reproduction (that is, maintenance of one’s body, and of the species), that are common to plants and animals and humans, from higher life-activities and functions such as self-locomotion and ratiocination.²¹ Marx claims in the 1844 Manuscripts that under capitalism the worker is reduced to these lower functions of nutrition and reproduction,²² and Arendt seems to echo that judgment when above she holds that the labor process “is not determined by the end product but rather by the exhaustion of labor power.” However, because she is working only with a concept of finite ends and kinêsis, she can only conceive of the labor activities as perpetual repetitions rather than manifestations of infinite or general ends like health and self-maintenance. The problem is not that labor is a perpetual repetition of “lower-life” finite ends, for those are life-activities that manifest general ends proper to all organisms, and indeed the lower level organisms (plants, animals incapable of self-locomotion) are in fact “living well” (eupraxia) when they are engaging in these species-specific energeias (species-specific, because how an organism acquires nutrients, or reproduces, will vary with the form of that species). Marx’s critique of capitalism includes the claim that the worker is reduced to solely these lower-level life activities, but we’ll see below that his critique is more encompassing than that.

Lastly, Arendt is instructive because she follows her early mentor Heidegger in his critique that Aristotle tacitly privileges poïēsis over praxis even in his ethical writings, and it is important to distinguish this Heideggerian renegotiation of the divide from my own interpretation of Marx below. Heidegger uncovers a tacit privileging of being (on) as what exists (to ontos), as a thing, or a capacity-to-become-a-thing that reaches from Plato forward to modernity’s understanding of nature as “standing reserve” (Bestand) for exploitation.²³ Arendt apparently follows Heidegger in this general criticism, but localizes it in *The Human Condition* as the occlusion by Plato and Aristotle of genuine action by likening it to a kind of poïēsis, by identifying politics with the production of laws and education with the production of citizens:

To [the Greeks], legislation and the execution of decisions by vote are the most legitimate political activities because in them men ‘act like craftsmen’: the result of
their action is a tangible product, and its process has a clearly recognizable end. This is no longer or, rather, not yet action (praxis), properly speaking, but making (poiēsis), which they prefer because of its greater reliability. It is as though they had said that if men only renounce their capacity for action, with its futility, boundlessness, and uncertainty of outcome, there could be a remedy for the frailty of human affairs.

... [Aristotle] thinks of acting in terms of making, and of its result, the relationship between men, in terms of an accomplished ‘work’ (his emphatic attempts to distinguish between action and fabrication, praxis and poiēsis, notwithstanding). 24

Arendt’s criticism attaches most readily to Book I of the Nicomachean Ethics, where Aristotle concludes the book with a brief discussion of the legislator in the manner she identifies, but one could argue that there he is specifically concerned with political wisdom (or even political science) as the tekhnē of ruling, rather than with practical wisdom (phronēsis) and praxis, as he is in the rest of the treatise. 25 More importantly for our present purposes, however, is that if Arendt and Heidegger fault Aristotle for his appearing to recast praxis as a kind of poiēsis, and thereby in a sense to instrumentalize politics, as a means to an independent telos and whose arkhē lies in a pre-existing eidos, I shall endeavor to show that Marx attempts just the opposite: to embed a proper understanding of poiēsis as social production within the Aristotelian conception of life-activity (energeia) as praxis.

Habermas, of course, relies on the classical model of poiēsis as labor in his distinction between instrumental (later strategic) action, on the one hand, and praxis as communicative action, on the other. In this he follows Arendt, down to attributing instrumental action to a monological consciousness and communicative action to an essential plurality of participants. 26 Therefore, for Habermas, as for Arendt, because Marx relies on the standard model of poiēsis and instrumental reasoning, Marx’s materialism cannot in fact enable genuine ideology critique and emancipation. Habermas locates the shortcoming of Marx’s theory.

... in the reduction of the self-generative act of the human species to labor. Alongside the forces of production in which instrumental action is sedimented, Marx’s social theory also incorporates into its approach the institutional framework, the relations of production. It does not eliminate from practice the structure of symbolic interaction and the role of cultural tradition, which are the only basis on which power (Herrschaft) and ideology can be comprehended. But this aspect of practice is not made part of the philosophical frame of references. In is in this very dimension, however, which does not coincide with that of instrumental action, that phenomenological experience moves... In his empirical analyses Marx comprehends the history of the species under categories of material activity and the critical abolition of ideologies, of instrumental action and revolutionary practice, of labor and reflection at once. But Marx interprets what he does in the more restricted conception of the species’ self-reflection through work alone. 27
Thus like Arendt, Habermas, too, defines labor according to the classical model of poïēsis as production via instrumental reasoning, and relegates it to the material-economic sphere as opposed to the political sphere of social communication and interaction on the model of praxis. But this modern tradition of political philosophy overlooks the second model of production in Aristotle, a model that, however, I believe Marx recognized and incorporated into his normative theory of social production.

II. The sublation of poïēsis and praxis in early Marx

We have seen how Aristotle presented his conceptions of poïēsis and praxis, and how these kinds of production related to capacity (dunamis) and activity (energeia) and truth (aletheia). In this section, I will trace out how the early Marx, who was steeped in Aristotle’s philosophy, takes up and modifies these Aristotelian conceptions in his account of the social species-being (Gattungswesen) of man as the normative standpoint for his critique of capitalism. Elsewhere, I have argued that the distinctive logical form of generic judgment used by Aristotle in De Anima to describe the characteristic life-activities (what Marx calls Lebenstätigkeiten, his translation of Aristotle’s energeia) of a kind of organism, tacitly provides the natural normative standard by which Marx criticizes capitalism in the 1844 Manuscripts, which he wrote after translating De Anima in 1840. Here I want to focus on one way in which Marx conceptualizes social production (gesellschaftliche Produktion). Marx’s most elaborate description of the what and the how of social production as the normative life-activity of man—the normative ideal of our species character—occurs in the comments on James Mill that he recorded in notebooks while he was writing what are now known as the 1844 Manuscripts. In his comments on Mill, Marx writes: “Exchange, both of human activity within production itself and also of human products with each other, is equivalent to species-activity and species-enjoyment whose real, conscious, and true being is social activity and social enjoyment.” Here I want to focus on one way in which Marx conceptualizes social production. Marx describes social production as follows:

Supposing that we had produced in a human manner; each of us would in his production have doubly affirmed himself and his fellow men. I would have: (1) objectified in my production my individuality and its peculiarity and thus both in my activity enjoyed an individual expression of my life and also in looking at the object have had the individual pleasure of realizing that my personality was objective, visible to the senses and thus a power raised beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have had the direct enjoyment of realizing that I had both satisfied a human need by my work and also objectified the human essence [Wesen] and therefore fashioned for another human being the object that met his need. (3) I would have been for you the mediator between you and the species and thus been acknowledged and felt by you as a completion of your own essence and a necessary part of yourself and have thus realized that I am confirmed both in your thought and in your love. (4) In my expression of my life I would have fashioned your expression of your life, and thus in my own activity have realized my own essence, my human, my communal essence.
Social production for Marx is thus a mode of “productive activity” that finds the end internal to its action in the fulfillment of another’s need, and is mirrored by one’s finding one’s own need fulfilled by the product produced by another. The end is not the production of an independent product per se, which would make it a poiēsis, but rather a general unity of reciprocal material exchange, hence a praxis, in Aristotle’s framework. In this way the producing activity constitutes an expression or manifestation of each human being’s species-form. For Marx this time-general description of social production describes the specific actuality (entelekheia) of the human life-form as a general or infinite end, in the guise of its generic or habitual life-activity (energeia). That is, “social production” (gesellschaftliche Produktion) is not a production in the sense of a poiēsis, because the product (ergon), while indeed independent of the process of production, is not independent of the larger praxis of exchange for the sake of human social needs (use-values) that manifests the social energeia of the species-being. Whether this exchange takes place by barter or through the intermediary of money is immaterial: what is important is that ends (products) are internal to the social and political organization of society in which the production occurs. The producers are producing for the sake of the social needs of the society’s members, and hence there is a “natural limit” (to speak with Aristotle of the Politics) of production and exchange. Society is reproducing itself via the production and exchange of goods, and this social reproduction can be considered a praxis with an internal end, an energeia of the human species-being (Gattungswesen).

Conversely, under capitalist production for exchange the essential unity of this life-activity, involving both producer and consumer quasi-metabolically, is destroyed:

I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me. You are as little concerned by the result of my production in itself as I am directly concerned by the result of your production. That is, our production is not production by a human being for a human being as a human being, that is, not social [gesellschaftliche] production. Neither of us, therefore, as a human being stands in a relation of enjoyment to the other’s product.  

That is, the end internal to the life-activity has been removed in at least two respects. First, in an exchange economy one produces for oneself (for the accumulation of exchange-value) so that the product and its use are merely an instrumental means to this new end, subject to an instrumental syllogism: I want to own exchange-value, so I should produce product p. For the wage-laborer, the instrumental syllogism is: I want to continue existing, so I should produce product p for a wage: production as an intrinsic end (a “life-activity”) has become a mere means of continued existence: “to the worker the purpose of his activity seems to be the maintenance of his individual life and what he actually does is regarded as a means; his life’s activity is in order to gain the means to live.” Second, unlike another’s need, the accumulation of exchange-value has no natural limit: “as soon as exchange exists, production goes beyond the immediate limits of possession,” and this destroys the unity and entelechy of the process. It is a movement that can be repeated with each new resurgence of the desire for self-aggrandizement. Since producer and consumer were united in the life process of social
production, its destruction alienates both parties from their species character; they are, to speak with Marx, alienated from their species-being. As Marx says of the worker under capitalism: “in degrading spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labor makes man’s species life a means to his physical existence;” “labor does not appear as an end in itself, but as the servant of the wage,” and such labor has no internal end other than the duration of labor sufficient to reproduce himself: the “working day.”

Within Aristotle’s framework then, Marx’s claim is that social production as energeia is not repetitive or recurrent movements (kinêseis), those of setting a finite end of producing a certain product for my neighbor’s specific need, and then doing another movement, aimed to realize another finite end, the next day. Rather social production is habitual and time-general in the sense that as a life-activity human beings manifest it as part of what it means for our species to live well. When that life-activity or process is de-actualized (entwirklicht) under capitalism, it disintegrates into two forms of kinêsis: the capitalist setting a recurring finite end of realizing a daily profit, and the worker setting a recurring finite end of earning a daily wage. In Kapital Marx will draw the further conclusion: while social production according to the species-being of man can be understood as the species-specific mode of production for the sake of the reproduction of man’s social being—society—capitalism in turn can be understood as the evolved system of commodity production for the sake of the reproduction of capital, for “every social process of production is at the same time a process of reproduction.”

III. Towards a Marxist aesthetic

In this final section I will trace out the presence of Aristotle’s theory of perception (aisthêsis) in early Marx, and then present a second notion of perception Aristotle associates with the phronimos and ask, speculatively, whether this second notion of perception might suggest a role for a specifically Marxist notion of aesthetic experience.

The first, or orthodox theory of perception, as found in De Anima for instance, follows the model of being-in-capacity and being-in-activity that we saw above in section I. So for instance, seeing is the activity (the activating of a capacity) of the eye, and takes place in the eye, but is brought about (or “affected”) by the sensible object’s activity in the sense of conveying a perceptible form (eidos) to the eye. Aristotle holds:

In general, with regard to all sense-perception [peri pasês aisthêseôs], we must say that the sense [aisthêsis] is that which can receive perceptible forms [aisthêtôn eidôn] without their matter, as wax receives the imprint of the ring without the iron or gold, and it takes the imprint which is of gold or bronze, but not qua gold or bronze. Similarly too in each case the sense is affected by that which has color or flavor or sound, but by these not in so far as they are what each of them is spoken of as being, but in so far as they are things of a certain kind and in accordance with their principle [logos]. The primary sense-organ is that in which such a capacity [dunamis] resides.
Because for Aristotle the activation or actualization of any capacity requires an active or actual agent, the sense-organ's capacity to perceive the perceptible form in its specific mode of sense (for example, vision, touch, and so on) must be activated by the sensible itself. There is a parallel here with the reciprocal process of teaching and learning: the teacher's actuality activates the capacity in the learner to receive the teaching. We recognize the same classical model of poiēsis as labor outlined above: the learner is in a sense the "matter" that is worked upon, and "informed" by the activity of the teacher, just as the perceiving organ is "informed" by the perceived sensible.39

Marx invokes this reciprocal relationship between man's senses and the sensibles of the world when he argues that man's species-character possess "social organs"—organs for perceiving fellow species-members—that will become active (verwirklicht) when private property is transcended:

The transcendence of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and attributes; but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object—an object emanating from man for man. The senses have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man [Marx's footnote: "I can relate myself practically [praktisch] to a thing humanly only if the thing relates itself to the human being humanly"] and vice versa. Need or enjoyment have consequently lost their egotistical nature, and nature has lost its mere utility by use becoming human use.

In the same way, the senses and enjoyments of other men have become my own appropriation. Besides these direct organs, therefore, social organs [gesellschaftliche Organe] develop in the form of society; thus, for instance, activity [Tätigkeit] in direct association with others, etc., has become an organ for expressing life,40 and a mode of appropriating human life.

To recapitulate; man is not lost in his object only when the object becomes for him a human object or objective man. This is possible only when the object becomes for him a social object, he himself for himself a social being, just as society becomes a being to him in this object.

On the one hand, therefore, it is only when the objective world becomes everywhere for man in society the world of man's essential powers [Wesenskräfte]—human reality, and for that reason the reality of his own essential powers—that all objects becomes for him the objectification [Vergegendständlichkeit] of himself, become objects which confirm and activate [bestätigenden und verwirklichenden Gegenstände] his individuality, become his objects: that is, man himself becomes the object. The manner in which they become his depends on the nature of the objects and on the nature of the essential power corresponding to it; for it is precisely the determinateness of this relationship which shapes the particular, real mode of affirmation [recall that Aristotle likens desire in perception to affirmation] . . . The peculiarity of each essential power is precisely its peculiar essence, and therefore
also the peculiar mode of its objectification, of its objectively actual living being [ihres gegenständlich-wirklichen, lebendigen Seins]. Thus man is affirmed in the objective world not only in the act of thinking, but with all his senses.

On the other hand, looking at this in its subjective aspect: just as music alone awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear—is no object for it, because my object can only be the confirmation [Bestätigung] of one of my essential powers and can therefore only be so for me as my essential power is present for itself as a subjective capacity [Fähigkeit], because the sense of an object for me goes only so far as my senses go (has only sense for a sense corresponding to that object) for this reason the senses of the social man are other senses than those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being [des menschlichen Wesens] is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, senses capable of human gratifications, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being [teils erst ausgebildet, teils erst erzeugt]. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses—the practical senses (will, love, etc.)—in a word, human sense—the humanness of the senses—comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of humanized nature [durch die vermenschlichte Natur]. The forming [Bildung] of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to present.

Thus, the objectification of the human essence both in its theoretical and practical aspects is required to make man’s sense human, as well as to create the human sense corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.41

Just as the non-social human being’s five senses correspond to kinds of natural-kind sensibles in the world, social or practical senses—whether cultivated or brought into being—will correspond to social sensibles. To take one example Marx mentions in passing, love as a social sense would perhaps embrace such natural social virtues as friendship, fellow-feeling, solidarity, and so forth. It is to this social or practical sense of love that the fragment on Mill quoted in section II refers. As a social species-beings, man would fully develop these virtues under socialism, for they have been stunted, denatured, de-actualized (entwirklicht) in societies organized around private property and private labor.

Furthermore, Marx’s analogy to music awakening the sense of music suggests the first way in which a Marxist aesthetics might look. Productions that “awaken” or “cultivate” or “bring into being” man’s species-character social and practical senses and “organs” might find a faint resonance in Schiller’s concept of “play drive” (Spieltrieb), understood anthropologically as the innate human instinct for reconciling form and content. But Schiller’s theory operates via the “as if” of aesthetic semblance: in reconciling antagonisms between formal and content-based elements, the aesthetic spectator experiences such reconciliation in aesthetic experience only. The successful reconciliation of antagonistic elements in an artwork represents or prefigures in the
mode of “as if” the utopian possibility of such reconciliation transposed to the social-political arena, but this very mode consigns the possibility to that of representation, not practical activity. By contrast, a Marxist aesthetics would incorporate practical social activity into the artwork itself and its production. So collective coordination, cooperation, and labor would constitute (at least in part) aesthetic production. What might such “artworks” look like? In one register such an artwork could be a music collective’s composing, or commissioning, an orchestral piece, preparing and performing it collectively, with collectively determined roles, or perhaps without a conductor at all. Or collective participatory “performance artworks” could be designed such that members of the performance collaboratively and cooperatively produce the artwork that—unlike poiēsis but like praxis—have no end beyond their own performance. The artwork would not be consumed in the mode of contemplation or reflection, but rather would be performed in the mode of social interaction and solidarity, and in this way would cultivate or bring forth the social practical senses Marx advocates. This suggestion, as it were, concretizes Jacques Rancière’s definition of aesthetics as a “redistribution of the sensible” and a “new partition of the perceptible,” by grounding it in a theory of perception as reciprocal but asymmetric relationships between capacities and activities, between the human being and the natural world, and applying that theory to the natural world that is augmented with the social world, as a relationship between human beings.

This suggestion also deepens and extends the line of thought pursued by Walter Benjamin in his famous essay, “Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility,” in which he is still operating with—while trying to dislodge—the distinction between individual and collective spectator in his championing of film, whereas my suggestion tends to eliminate the role of spectator altogether. Nevertheless, when he writes that “the function of film is to train human beings in the apperceptions and reactions needed to deal with a vast apparatus whose role in their lives is expanding almost daily;” that cinema provides “an object of simultaneous collective reception;” that “the most important social function of film is to establish equilibrium between human beings and the apparatus;” and that the tasks required for such equilibrium “are mastered gradually—taking their cue from tactile reception—through habit,” he is attributing to the technology of new artforms a unique (and admittedly perhaps overly romanticized) role in what could be called “the education of the social senses.” Moreover, we can discern the Aristotelian-Marxian model of asymmetric reciprocity of sense perception when Benjamin writes that the new cinematic technology and techniques (such as the close-up shot, slow motion, and so on) “bring to light entirely new structures of matter” and “discloses quite unknown aspects” of movements and “the optical unconscious,” such that: “Clearly, it is another nature which speaks to the camera as compared to the eye.” For these reasons as well, Benjamin concludes that film “proves to be the most important subject matter, at present, for the theory of perception which the Greeks called aesthetics.”

In a different register, Benjamin’s volume One-Way Street [Einbahnstrasse] offers a suggestion for what a literature would look like aimed to cultivate social practical senses. The opening section of the work states the programmatic goals of a tacit manifesto:
Filling Station

The construction of life is at present in the power far more of facts than of convictions [Überzeugungen], and of such facts as have scarcely ever become the basis of convictions. Under these circumstances, true literary activity cannot aspire to take place within a literary framework; this is, rather, the habitual expression of its sterility. Significant literary effectiveness [Wirksamkeit] can come into being only in a strict alternation between action and writing; it must nurture the inconspicuous forms that fit its influence in active communities better than does the pretentious, universal gesture of the book—in leaflets, brochures, articles, and placards. Only this prompt language [prompte Sprache] shows itself actively equal to the moment. Opinions are to the vast apparatus of social existence what oil is to machines: one does not go up to a turbine and pour machine oil over it; one applies a little to hidden spindles and joints that one has to know.  

Ephemeral but timely, kairotic “practical” literary forms—leaflets, brochures, articles, placards—will replace universal and eternal masterpieces like the novel, as the best means afforded “engineers of the human soul” (the new appellation of writers under NEP after the Bolshevik revolution). These new, practical literary forms will also be characterized by their “prompt language,” but what is a “prompt language”? It is a language that is adept at reacting to the specific situation in its specificity, of intervening in a particular situation without reflection and appeal to universal prescriptions. It is the aesthetic inflection of practical phronësis. Similarly, in the “Artwork” essay Benjamin distinguishes the performance of the film actor from that of the stage actor by the fact that the former is subject to “interventions” by specialists (producers, director, cinematographer, sound and lighting engineers, and so on) at any time. “This aspect of filmmaking is highly significant in social terms. For the intervention in a performance by a body of experts is also characteristic of sporting performances and, in a wider sense, of all test performances.” A film actor confronts the technologically mediated labor process of which she is a part, and her performance is halted, criticized by experts, and immediately modified, redone: she adopts a practical attitude toward “equipment” and is trained up to immediately adapt, improvise, and overcome any obstacles in her interaction with the “apparatus.” This too is an aesthetic inflection of practical phronësis, and constitutes a break with the Idealist aesthetics that holds even Rancière still captive in his admiration for Schiller, for of these test performances enabled by cinematic technology Benjamin writes: “nothing shows more graphically that art has escaped the realm of ‘beautiful semblance’ which for so long was regarded as the only sphere in which it could thrive.”

And this brings us to the second way in which a Marxist aesthetics might be developed, one that is more in line with the second, alternative model of production outlined in section I. The object of phronësis (practical wisdom) is necessarily transient, contingent, and particular (which is why this kind of wisdom differs from nous and epistêmé, whose objects are eternal, necessary and universal) and concerns what comes last (that is, both the particular situation as it is perceived and captured in the minor premise of a practical syllogism, and either the proposition or the action that is the
conclusion of a practical syllogism), and it is—for Aristotle—an object of perception (aisthēsis):

So wisdom [phronēsis] is antithetical to intelligence [nous], for intelligence has as its objects the definitions for which there is no account [logos], whereas wisdom has as its object what comes last, and this is not an object of systematic knowledge [epistêmē], but of perception [aisthēsis]—not perception of the sensibles special to each sense, but like that by which we grasp that the last element in mathematical analysis is the triangle: for things will come to a halt in that case too. (However, this is more a case of perception than of wisdom, but a different kind of perception from the one of the special sensibles).

Phronetic perception is unlike the sense perception of simple qualities such as sweet and sour, because the latter kind of perception is immediate and complete; rather phronetic perception is like the perception of a geometer who sees a hexagon as ultimately composed of triangles. This kind of perception is not immediate and complete, but rather is a process of (visual, say) analysis culminating in the awareness of the ultimate elements of the object being considered. As the commentator Sarah Broadie puts it: “...we cannot see the triangles as the last two-dimensional elements of the hexagon, or see such-and-such a particular action as the right decision, without first considering the unanalyzed hexagon or the unanalyzed project.” And Aristotle explicitly connects this phronetic perception—what he calls “the eye of the soul”—with the exercise (energein) of excellences (aretai):

The eye of the soul does not come to in its proper condition without excellence, as has been said and as is clear in any case; for chains of practical reasoning have a starting point—since the end, i.e. what is best, is such-and-such’ (whatever it may be: for the sake of argument let it be anything one happens to choose), and this is not evident except to the person who possesses excellence, since badness distorts a person and causes him to be deceived about the starting points of action. So it is evident that it is impossible to be practically wise without possessing excellence.

Now Benjamin might be understood to be suggesting this type of perception when he talks about how the photographic camera can reveal the “optical unconscious” or how the film camera operator can function “like a surgeon” or how the communist (NEP) writer is like an “engineer” (in Einbahnstrasse). So the model of a Marxist aesthetics here is no longer that of the creation of collective collaborative performance art, but rather the artistic cultivation of phronetic perception. Martha Nussbaum’s work in this area is one—bourgeois, perhaps—variant of this line of reasoning. Benjamin’s work would be a second—socialist—variant. If virtuous action presupposes phronetic perception of the moral salience of a particular situation in its particularity, then virtuous practical-political action too requires such phronetic perception, and this
second model of Marxist *aisthēsis* is intended to cultivate the exercise and improvement of such perceptual capacities.

Therefore, on the basis of my earlier explication of the implicit presence of Aristotle's thought in Marx's philosophy, I suggest two models of what a Marxist aesthetics could look like: collaborative and cooperative aesthetic production as an activating of the *energeia* of social production, and artworks that attempt to activate the recipient's capacity for situational, kairotic perception and reaction (**phronêsis** as a distinct kind of *aisthēsis*). Both these models are decidedly practical and social, in keeping with Marx's assertions in his “Theses on Feuerbach”: that "the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as human sensuous activity, praxis [*sinnlich menschliche Tätigkeit, Praxis*]" (first thesis); that "the human essence [*das menschliche Wesen*] is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its activity [*Wirklichkeit*] it is the ensemble of social relations" (sixth thesis); and that what is required is "practical-critical' activity [*’praktisch-kritischen’ Tätigkeit*]" (first thesis). The models of Marxist aesthetics advocated here seek to realize that requirement by overcoming what Marx in the 1844 Manuscripts called the “de-actualizing” (*Entwirklichung*) of the social *energeiai* of the human species-being, in that such an aesthetics would set-into-work (*energein*) those capacities. Throughout his writings Marx advocates precisely such an activation of those human social capacities:

Only when the actual, individual man has taken back into himself the abstract citizen and in his everyday life, his individual work, and his individual relationships has become a *species-being* [*Gattungswesen*], only when he has recognized and organized his *forces propres* as social powers so that social power is no longer separated from him as political power, only then is human emancipation complete.61 . . . the special productive power of the combined working day is, under all circumstances, the social productive power of labor, or the productive power of social labor. This power arises from co-operation itself. When the worker co-operates in a planned way with others, he strips off the fetters of his individuality, and develops the capabilities of his species [*Gattungsvermögen*].62

Notes


3 Broadie/Rowe translation modified. The verb here is conjugated to agree with the subject soul (psyché). Heidegger captures aspects of this verb with his concept of truth as “disclosure” (entbergen), as does Anscombe with her notion of “practical truth,” whereby the agent “makes true” her intention by fulfilling it.

4 These English phrases are introduced by Jonathan Beere to indicate the distinction Aristotle draws between ways a thing can be, in several passages of Metaphysics θ, for example, 1045b34–5, 1048a30–35, and so on. See Jonathan Beere, Doing and Being: An Interpretation of Aristotle’s Metaphysics Theta (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

5 “When that which is buildable is in actuality, in the respect in which we call it such, it is being built, and this is the process of building; and similarly with learning and healing and rolling and jumping and maturing and growing old” (Physics III.1 201a16–19; cf. 201b5–15).


7 See Beere, Doing and Being, on the controversy regarding whether energeia should be translated “activity” or “actuality.” I accept his conclusion that the dominant meaning is “activity.”

8 Cf. Beere, Doing and Being, 13, who notes that energeia is Aristotle’s neologism, although connected to the commonplace Greek word ergon (work, job, function): “Energeia is a doing that is not a change. So living, thinking are energeias (activities) that are not changes. There are capacities for change (producing change or undergoing change), but there are also capacities for energeia like living, thinking, etc. that are not changes.” He also writes that poiêsis can be understood simply as “one thing’s bringing about a change in another” (25, 41).


10 Recent scholarship has questioned the authenticity of this passage: cf. Myles Burnyeat, “Kinêsis vs. Energeia: a much-read passage in (but not of) Aristotle’s Metaphysics,” Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy 24, 2008), 219–92. Historically, however, the passage has been part of the canonical text of the Metaphysics, and so Marx presumably was familiar with it. Moreover, below I show that logically it elucidates distinctions Marx draws in his critique of capitalism. Thus for both historical and logical reasons the use made of the passage here is justified.

11 For a related discussion of the difference between kinêsis and energeia in terms of tense-inferences, see David Charles, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Action (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), 35–37. Note also that, on the interpretation I am offering, species-specific energeias are praxeis, but not all praxeis are species-specific energeias in the sense of activities of human aretai. Hence harp-playing, or thumb-twiddling, is a praxis but likely not a species-specific human aretê.

12 Note that this distinction between finite and infinite ends refutes the dilemma posed by Sarah Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 206–207, in her interpretation of the analogy between phronêsis and tekhnê: “… if practical wisdom is a craft, then either it is defined in terms of a product to be used in
some higher activity, or its definition is self-referential. The second alternative is repugnant, and so, it would seem, is the first, given that agents of lower activities follow the prescriptions of agents of higher.” Her second alternative is the idea that “there could be a productive activity which, though productive, is highest because it aims at producing the conditions of its own continuing and continually productive exercise, whether by the agent himself or by others of his kind later” (206); because she views the conditions produced as finite ends, to be repeatedly produced and repeatedly enabling their own production, she finds the account “logically repugnant” (as in holding that the eye seeing perpetuates the conditions enabling the eye to see). But viewing the state produced (health, happiness, enjoyment, and so on) as an infinite end that is not finitely produced but rather manifested, avoids the dilemma entirely.


14 Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 160–161, in fact claims that work cannot serve as a model of action because the former is essentially a solitary activity, but this is too strong: there is no reason in principle why work as poiēsis cannot be accomplished by a group, or even under Taylorized division of labor. As we’ll see in the next section, it is far more perspicuous to distinguish poiēsis and praxis/energeia by means of the distinction between finite and infinite ends.


21 “But life is spoken of in many ways, and we say that a thing lives if but one of the following is present—intellect, perception, movement, and rest in respect to place, and furthermore the movement involved in nutrition, and both decay and growth” (*De Anima* 413a21–24); “… the soul is the principle of the things above mentioned and is determined by them—by the faculties of nutrition, perception, thought, and by movement” (413b12–13).

22 “As a result, therefore, man (the worker) no longer feels himself to be freely active in any but his animal functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc.; and in his human functions he no longer feels himself to be anything but an animal. With is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal. Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But in the abstraction which separates them from the sphere of all other human activity and turns them into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal.” Karl Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, in *Marx–Engels Reader*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1978), 74; cf. also 94–95.

23 For instance, in “Phenomenological Interpretations in Connection with Aristotle” (1922) Heidegger writes that “Being means being-produced” and elaborates: “But in Aristotle and also after him, ousia still retains its original meaning of the household, property, what is at one’s disposal for use in one’s environing world. Ousia means possessions, what one has [die Habe]. What it is in being which, as their being, comes into true safekeeping that deals with them, i.e., what allows them to be characterized as possessions, is their being-produced. It is in production that the objects of dealings first appear and come to look the way they do.” Martin, Heidegger, “Phenomenological


25 Cf. Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, 202: “the statesman in NE 1 is indeed presented as a sort of supreme craftsman of the good . . . Whatever we might now have to take of the statesman as a philosophically enlightened builder of human virtue, what such a one purports to build is not to be defined as a capability for even the noblest species of building. That much is made clear in NE VI.4 and 5, where Aristotle draws his famous contrast between making and acting.”

26 Habermas works out this distinction in late 1960s, while acknowledging that early Hegel offered a model of labor and social interaction: see Jürgen Habermas. “Labor and Interaction. Remarks on Hegel’s Jena Philosophy of Mind,” in Knowledge and Human Interests, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1971). And in his “Postscript” to Knowledge and Human Interest he admits that “normally instrumental action is embedded in communicative action (productive activity is socially organized general)” but he sees “no reason why we should not adequately analyze a complex, i.e., dissect it into parts.” Jürgen Habermas, “A Postscript to Knowledge and Human Interests,” translated by Christian Lenhardt, Philosophy and Social Sciences 3 (1973), 186, endnote 27. But this “dissection” reproduces at the level of theory the dissolution of social production qua praxis into its constituent processes (kinéseis) that—we shall see below—Marx attributes to commodity production under capitalism. Nonetheless by the time Habermas comes to write The Theory of Communicative Action, he has firmly settled on the poëisis–praxis distinction outlined above, and it becomes one of his central criticisms of earlier critical theorists: “Instrumental reason is set out in concepts of subject–object relations. The interpersonal relation between subject and subject, which is decisive for the model of exchange, has no constitutive significance for instrumental reason.” Jürgen Habermas, The Theory of Communicative Action, vol. 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, translated by Thomas McCarthy (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1984), 379. Honneth makes the connection to Arendt explicit, when he writes that Habermas “accepts the distinction between praxis and poëisis, which Arendt has revived, in order to allow intersubjective understanding as a type of action to achieve the status in the theory of emancipation which social labor had in Marxian theory,” but Honneth understands Marx’s social labor as inherently monological, an “anthropologically radicalized externalization model of work as socio-economic formation which makes the identification of the working subject in his own product structurally difficult or impossible.” Axel Honneth, “Work and Instrumental Action,” translated by Mitchell G. Ash, New German Critique 26 (1982), 45 and 34. My thanks to Johan F. Hartle for much of this note.

27 Jürgen Habermas, “Marx’s Metacritique of Hegel,” in Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, 42.


30 Marx, “On James Mill,” 132. Marx characterizes communism in similar terms in the *1844 Manuscripts*: “. . . the object, being the direct embodiment of his individuality, is simultaneously his own existence for the other man, the existence of the other man, and that existence for him. . . . Thus the social character is the general character of the whole movement; just as society itself produces man as man, so is society produced by him. Activity and consumption, both in their content and in their mode of existence, are social: social activity and social consumption . . . ” etc. Marx–Engels Reader, 85.


32 Marx, “On James Mill,” 128; cf. 132. Marx notes that the usefulness of a product is secondary to its saleability: for example, if I instill a false need in you for product p, so much the better. In his comments on Mill he writes: “The social relationship in which I stand to you [under capitalism], my work for your need, is also a mere appearance [Schein] and similarly our mutual completion is a mere appearance for which mutual plundering serves as a basis. An intention to plunder and deceive is necessarily in the background, for since our exchange is a selfish one both on your side and on mine, and since each selfishness tries to overcome the other person’s, of necessity we try to deceive each other” (“On James Mill,” 130). In the *Manuscripts* he writes: “under private property . . . every person speculates on creating a new need in another, so as to drive him to a fresh sacrifice, to place him in a new dependence and to seduce him into a new mode of gratification and therefore economic ruin. Each tries to establish over the other an alien power, so as thereby to find satisfaction of his own selfish need. The increase in the quantity of objects is accompanied by an extension of the realm of the alien powers to which man is subjected, and every new product represents a new potency of mutual swindling and mutual plundering” (Marx, Marx–Engels Reader, 93).


34 “The extent to which money, which appears as a mean, constitutes true power and the sole end—the extent to which in general that means which gives me substance, which gives me possession of the objective substance of others, is an end in itself . . . ” (Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, in Marx–Engels Reader, 100). Marx’s touchstone here may be Aristotle’s *Politics* I.8–10, where he argues that there are two types of “wealth-getting,” a natural one that is subordinated to the ends of household management and hence has a natural limit, and an unnatural one, “and there is no bound to the riches which spring from this art of wealth-getting” (1257b24–25). Compare *Capital*: “The simple circulation of commodities—selling in order to buy—is a means to a final goal which lies outside circulation, namely the appropriation of use-values, the satisfaction of needs. As against this, the circulation of money as capital is an end in itself, for the valorization of value takes place only within this constantly renewed movement. The movement of capital is therefore limitless.” Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, translated by Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 253.


36 Marx’s neologisms “entwirklichen” and “Entwirklichung” like Hegel’s use of “wirklich” (“actual,” an ergon) should be heard with Aristotelian ears, and not translated as “loses reality,” as his English translators render it: “Labor’s realization [Verwirklichung] is its objectification [Vergegenständlichung]. In the conditions dealt with by political economy this realization of labor appears as de-actualization [Entwirklichung] for the workers . . . ” (Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, in Marx–Engels Reader, 71–72, trans. modified); “Just as he begets [erzeugt] his own production into his de-actualization [Entwirklichung] . . . (Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, in Marx–Engels Reader, 78, trans. modified). Likewise Marx’s “werktätig” (translated as “active” in “active species life” at Marx, 1844
Manuscripts, in Marx–Engels Reader, 76) should be heard as “ergon-active,” a literal rendition of Aristotle’s *energeia* (“being-in-the-work”).

37 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1: 711. Readers have long called attention to organicist metaphors in Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, its “metamorphoses,” the division of labor as an “organism of production” (*Capital*, vol. 1: 201, trans. corrected). If a life-form is that which can be the subject of a certain logical form of judgment sometimes called “Aristotelian categoricals” or “generics,” then it remains to be seen whether the capitalist form of commodity production is susceptible to accurate description by such judgments.

38 I am skirting several complications and ensuing difficulties here. For instance, in *De Anima* Aristotle holds that one’s capacity for perception is in fact a *hexis*, which the corresponding underlying *dunamis* becomes at conception. Such subtleties, and the puzzles they entail, extend beyond the restrictions of this chapter. For a helpful explication of Aristotle’s theory of perception, see Richards Sorabji, “Intentionality and Physiological Processes: Aristotle’s Theory of Sense-Perception,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s De Anima*, edited by Martha Nussbaum and Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 195–226.

39 “It is not absurd that the activity [energeian] of one thing should be in another. Teaching is the activity of a person who can teach, yet the operation is performed on something, and is not cut adrift from a subject, but is of one thing in another. There is nothing to prevent the activity of two things being one and the same (not the same in being, but in the way that what potentially is [to dunamei on] is related to what is in activity [pros to energoun]). Nor is it necessary that the teacher should learn, even if to act upon and to be acted upon are the same thing, provided that are not the same in respect of the account which states their essence (as with ‘raiment’ and ‘clothing’), but are the same in the sense in which the road from Thebes to Athens and the road from Athens to Thebes are the same” (*Physics* III.3 202b5–13, translation modified).

40 “An organ for expressing my own life” (*Marx–Engels Reader*, 88) is erroneous: it is the expression of the species-life of the human being, not an individual’s life.

41 Marx, 1844 *Manuscripts*, *Marx–Engels Reader*, 87–89.

42 And we pause to note that in US middle and high schools, music and drama programs have been slashed out of budgets, but that team sports seem to have survived the budgetary blood-letting. With respect to fostering social and practical senses, what separates team sports like football from student orchestras and theatrical productions? Precisely that in the former case the collective performance is subsumed more directly under the will to compete with and defeat a rival, a collective *poiēsis* (disregarding complications of social virtues like good sportsmanship) that best serves capitalism.

43 Jacques Rancière, “The Aesthetic Revolution and Its Outcomes,” in Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, edited and translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), 115–33, emphasizes the moment of disruption or inauguration of a new “sensorium” or a “heterogeneous sensible,” that enables an expanded, or more differentiated, recognition of political subjects, as his English editor Steven Corcoran helpfully elucidates: “Politics, for Rancière, effects a break with the sensory self-evidence of the ‘natural’ order that destines specific groups and individuals to rule, to public or private life, and that delineates between friend and enemy, by pinning bodies down to a certain time and place, that is, by pinning individuals to specific bodies. It invents ways of being, seeing and saying, engenders new subjects, new forms of collective enunciation” (Rancière, *Dissensus*, 7). As Johan F. Hartle rightly observes,
However: “Yet ontology here means nothing more (and nothing less) than a theory of materiality, of potentiality and an expressive logic of the political that is structurally conceived as a critique of sovereignty.” Johan F. Hartle, “Die Trägheit der Juno Ludovisi. Schillers politische Ontologie in der zeitgenössischen Debatte,” in Ästhetische Regime um 1800 vol. 21. Mediologie, hg. von F. Balke und H. Maye (München: Fink, 2009), 256; translation mine. Rancière’s aesthetics therefore can be seen as the ever-present possibility of a newly forming plurality in Arendt’s sense of praxis and its constituent public realm.


45 “... nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another” (Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 116).


49 Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” 120.


51 Broadie, Ethics with Aristotle, 198, for instance, likens phronêsis to the ability to balance, to maintain equipoise, as well as to the geometer’s analysis of a geometrical construction.


54 It is an open question in the scholarship whether the conclusion of a practical syllogism for Aristotle is a proposition (for example, “so I ought to φ”) or an action (my φ-ing). See Charles, Aristotle’s Philosophy of Action, 84–96.

55 “There are two distinguishing characteristics by which people mainly define the soul: motion in respect of place; and thinking [noein], understanding [phronein], and perceiving [aistheanesthai]. Thinking and understanding are thought to be like a form of perceiving (for in both of these the soul judges and recognizes any existing thing). Indeed the ancients say that understanding and perceiving are the same” (De Anima 427a17–22).

56 Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, translated with commentary by Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, 375. Notice that this distinction between immediate and complete sense perception on the one hand, and processual phronetic perception on the other, leaves room for a further conception of perception that while complete and immediate appears to be cognitively more like phronetic perception than sense perception: Wittgenstein’s “aspect-seeing.” Important here would be Heidegger’s explication of “practical phronêsis” and “practical nous” in §23 of his lecture course Platon: Sophistes (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1992), 157–65. Exploring these various forms of perception would take us beyond the purview of this essay, however.


58 Martha Nussbaum, Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), especially the following essays: “Flawed Crystals:

For an excellent exposition of virtue ethics along these lines, see John McDowell’s “Virtue and Reason,” in McDowell, *Mind, Value and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).


Marx, *Capital, vol. 1*, 447. My thanks to Samir Gandesha, Johan F. Hartle, Mitzi Lee, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments and suggestions.
Language and labor are expressions in which the individual in himself no longer retains and possesses himself; rather, he lets the inner move wholly outside of him and he thus abandons it to the other. For that reason, we can just as well say that these expressions express the inner too much as we can say that they express it too little. Too much –because the inner itself breaks out in these expressions, no opposition remains between them and the inner; they do not merely provide an expression of the inner, they immediately provide the inner itself. Too little—because in speech and action the inner makes itself into an other and thereby abandons itself to the mercy of the element of transformation, which twists the spoken word and the accomplished deed and makes something else out of them than what they, as the actions of this determinate individual, are in and for themselves.

Hegel, 1807

I. Real Abstraction

Explaining the peculiarities of the value form, in the original 1867 edition of Das Kapital, vol. I, Marx deploys a compelling image:

It is as if alongside and external to lions, tigers, rabbits, and all other actual animals, which form when grouped together the various kinds, species, subspecies, families etc. of the animal kingdom, there existed also in addition the animal, the individual incarnation of the entire animal kingdom.

MEGA II.5.1, 37

Marx’s project of the critique of political economy could be summed up as the science of this animal and its spectral mode of existence. In “societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails” (C I, 125) it is as if the abstract dimension of value acquires a life of its own. The dual character of the commodity, pertaining to both

* I would like to thank Maya Andrea Gonzalez for her comments and edits; all misreadings, however, are mine.
use-value and exchange-value, creates a seemingly autonomous sphere of value relations which have cut themselves loose from the sensual world of concrete commodities and the dimension of their use-value. This autonomy, however, is not merely intellectual or ideal as in the sphere of religion where “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own” (C I, 165). Rather, it is as if the mode of abstraction, namely value, has a real material existence of its own independent of the human mind. As one real existing animal encounters another existing animal within the animal kingdom, in capitalism it is as if concrete sensuous objects encounter their mode of abstraction in real life. Following the logic of this image, the incarnation of such abstraction is in fact real; it is not the result of a subjective intellectual operation but rather the effect of an objective and actually existing relation.

With the paradoxical nature of real abstraction, the limits of intellectual Darstellung or presentation are reached. What, then, is the nature of the as-if-existence of the animal as such? Is Marx deploying it as a mere metaphor, personification (“animalization”), or allegory? Can we simply distinguish between the meaning of this image (on the level of the signified) and its mode of signification (on the plane of the signifier)? Or, rather, is it not the cause that the linguistic structure of this image expresses the very paradox of the capitalist mode of valorization and signification? In fact, already on the categorical level of the commodity form, we encounter the limits of a mode of presentation that separates itself from the content it presents. If we follow this reading of Marx, the question arises whether and to what extent the value form of the commodity is structured in a metonymical or metaphorical way. These various forms, by which value and meaning are produced, are precisely what I will call the aesthetics of real abstraction, that is to say that the value form of the commodity is homologously structured in accordance with certain aesthetic forms of signification—like symbol and allegory.

Language and money, hence, have more in common than a positivist or empiricist reading of political economy would wish have it. Against all forms of descriptive political economy and their attempts to separate the object of inquiry from its mode of presentation, the “Copernican turn” of the Marxian text is already articulated in the first sentence of Capital I: “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” (C I, 125). Beginning with the form of appearance, the problem of presentation and the intertwinement of method and its object is introduced. Language is not external to this problem but its site.

Following Marx’s Capital, the commodity has a dual nature: use-value and exchange-value. However, whereas the former category, use-value, seems unproblematic—as long as it refers to sensuous intuition as an empirical thing, satisfying a determinate human need—the latter 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.” Moreover, from the total perspective of capital accumulation, a commodity is nothing else but the materialization or crystallization of a certain social substance: “What is the common social substance of all commodities?” Labour, says Marx, and “not only Labour, but Social Labour” (MEGA II, 4.1, 405f.). In Capital I, Marx will later define precisely that social labour as “abstract” or “abstract human labour” stands in opposition to “concrete labour” (C I, 137). Later, it was Walter Benjamin’s and
Theodor W. Adorno’s friend Alfred Sohn-Rethel who examined the non-empirical materiality of the abstraction performed by abstract human labour. Sohn-Rethel’s speculative hypothesis contends that within commodity abstraction, there already resides the Kantian transcendental subject—and with it the origin of abstract thinking dating back to Greek philosophy and the introduction of the first printed coins around 700 BC. Without discussing this hypothesis, I begin from his notion of “real abstraction.”

At first glance, commodity abstraction simply designates the act to equating two empirically different things as commodities by abstracting from their particular attributes. Things as commodities can be posited as equivalents if they are reduced to a common “substance” (C I, 128). This reductive abstraction turns “things,” whatever their specific use, into bearers of a substance, homogenous units of abstract human labour, which enters into a quantifiable relation, i.e. exchange-value. Here, substance is not an essential predicate; rather, it expresses an unstable social relation—the value relation. The value relation does not exist in itself, only for itself, which is to say, value relations are purely differential; each value attains to its quantifiable position by differing from all other values. These differential value relations are expressed by exchange-values: x commodity A = y commodity B. The values of the commodities A, B, C etc. thus are not preceding the exchange relation through which they are expressed. Although expressive, the exchange-value appears before that which is expressed by it, i.e. value. Against linear atemporal logics, the exchange relation pertains to a temporal-logical looping constitutive of the value form: quality is produced through abstraction whilst quantity is so only through difference. Quality (the “expressed”) logically precedes quantity (the “expressing”), yet “in real time” quantity seems to come first.

Following Marx, we have to thus distinguish between two distinct 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 as abstract labour. This quality of being value is expressed in the exchange relation as exchange-value. Thereby, the initial abstraction from use-values, implied by each commodity’s dual-character, redoubles itself on the level exchange-value. Each exchange-value acquires its quantitative value in a differential manner with respect to any other exchange-value. As we shall see, the redoubling of the dual-character of the commodity has far-reaching consequences.

Yet, for the moment, let us concentrate on the initial act of commodity abstraction as an abstraction from use-value. In his reading of Capital, Sohn-Rethel insists that commodity abstraction is real and therefore not subjective or thought-induced; thus, it is not reducible to the intellectual faculties of the Kantian transcendental subject. The temporal-logical loop I identify here as pertaining to the value form, relates to a real process of exchange—an actually performed equation of things as commodities, which acquires at the same time, the form of thought, that is, an abstraction. “Wherever commodity exchange takes place, it does so in effective ‘abstraction’ from use. This is an abstraction not in mind but in fact.” It is in this sense that Sohn-Rethel’s term “real abstraction” takes Marx’s Capital to its epistemo-materialist conclusion. Already Marx discovered a fundamental link between the form of commodity abstraction and the form of thought articulated by the categories of bourgeois science: these “are forms of
thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production” (C I, 169).

The site of these forms of thought is language as a medium not limited to its instrumental communicative function. This language, of course, is also the language of the Marxian text itself, which does not acquire the position of a neutral meta-language, uncontaminated from its object of critique and socially valid forms of thought. In this way, Marx’s mode of presentation reveals the structure of its object of inquiry.

To return to Marx’s image, we can now specify the paradoxical as-if-existence of the “animal.” Real abstraction is a mode of existence that points to the structural homology of the linguistic form of thought and the economic form of value. That is not to say that both are the same. Quite the contrary: Sohn Rethel’s point was precisely that real abstraction, as implied by the value form of the commodity, has not only the form of thought but also owes its existence to a real process of exchange as an actually performed equation of commodities. However, real abstraction reveals more about the form of thought or, more precisely, the linguistic mode of presentation, than Sohn-Rethel was able to grasp. The scientific discovery of real abstraction is written in a language that relies on certain aesthetic modes of signification, tropes, figurative speech—the “animal”—which share the logic of their signified object of inquiry, value. If we take the homology of the mode of presentation and its object seriously, we can expand our question to the question of an assumed homology of value relations in language and in political economy. The aesthetics of real abstraction is economically and linguistically constituted—it relates to the sensuous and the supra-sensuous world.

II. Economic and Linguistic Value

Commodity abstraction, that is, the abstraction implied by real exchange relations, is the historical as well as logical origin of the category of value. Value, wert, is derived from the Old French past participle of valoir, “to be worth,” that relates back to the Latin verb valere. Invoking the words of Henry the Fourth, Marx exclaims, “Paris vaut bien une messe!” (C I, 144). This reference provides us with a clue of the homology between the communicative use-value of language, that is to say meaning, and the use-value of the commodity itself. Conversely, we can detect a homology of linguistic value, as distinct from meaning, and economic value, as that which is abstracted from use-value. The homology at stake comes into full relief once we read Marx’s critique of political economy in light of the discoveries of structural linguistics. Both fields of knowledge can be described as sciences of value.

In his Course in General Linguistics, published posthumously in 1916, Saussure stated: “Here [in linguistics, S.K.] as in political economy we are confronted with the notion of value; both sciences are concerned with a system for equating things of different orders—labour and wages in one and a signified and signifier in the other.” Whereas economic value comes into being by virtue of a totalizing equation of all different kinds of concrete labour in their transmogrification as abstract labour,
linguistic value emerges through a differential relation of signifiers whose operators of meaning are metaphor and metonymy. According to Saussure, the linguistic sign has a dual character, concept and sound-image, which can be formalized as the unity of signifier and signified. Against more naturalizing accounts on the origin of linguistic signs, Saussure’s famous thesis is that the “bond between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary.”8 If the linguistic sign is arbitrary and can be isolated without further reference to an extra-lingual referent, the value of each linguistic sign is not grounded in any natural bond or meaningful substance. And, if the existence of a meta-language—a standpoint from which all linguistic signs could be overlooked and totalized—can be ruled out, the value of each linguistic sign can only be derived differentially, via negationis. Value emerges as the difference of each sign vis-à-vis another sign. Only this metonymic system of differential reference allows for Saussure to draw his comparison to economic value. As we shall see, this comparison, however instructive, occludes a certain asymmetry contained in the production of economic value. For the moment, let us rephrase the consequences of Saussure’s theory of the linguistic sign: “Linguistic structuralism begins with the recognition of the autonomy of the signifier and with the minimalism of structure.”9 Therefore, arbitrariness of signification is another term for the autonomy of the signifier: the linguistic sign attains to its value only within a differential chain of signifiers. Without a natural foundation, meaning is produced metonymically.

The autonomy of the signifier is also at stake in the process of economic valorization. A commodity as use-value has no inherent value, it is only the material bearer of a common social substance. This social substance, abstract labour, is expressed by quantifiable exchange-values. “As use-values, commodities differ above all in quality, while as exchange-values they can only differ in quantity, and therefore do not contain an atom of use-value.” (C I, 128) This emancipation from the empirical (or, at least, symbolic) matter of the use-value dimension of the commodity could give rise to a theory of the autonomy of exchange-value. Exchange-values signify all commodities as use-values in quantitative terms and every exchange-value presents itself to another exchange-value in a purely denaturalized, differential manner in order to gain its unstable, transitory identity as a quantitatively distinct value. However, the homology of linguistic and economic value, cannot be fully grounded in Saussure’s structural linguistics. If we take Saussure’s own reference to political economy and economic value seriously, we need to supplement Saussure’s value theory with Marx’s labour theory of the value. As Samo Tomšič succinctly puts it:

The first lesson of Marx’s science of value is thus already doubled: the difference between use-value and exchange-value uncovers the autonomy of value and defines value as difference to another value. At this point, Marx’s critique of political economy seems to overlap with Saussure. Although this lesson implies an immediate corollary: exchange-value is not without a subject, but this subject is not the same as the subject of use-value (need). Exchange-value is not merely a vertical relation between value-signifier and commodity-signified but also a representation of the subject of exchange, which can be presupposed in all commodities and which Marx associates with labour-power.10
The "commodity-sign," the split entity of use- and exchange-value, leads to an autonomy of exchange-value as a denaturalized difference without natural substratum. However, exchange-value is defined by Marx as the "necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance, of value" (C I, 128). What is expressed here and finds its quantifiable form of appearance is value—and as we know, value is a social relation the substance of which is abstract labour. The latter (and with it the entire dimension of the value) can only be produced by the commodity of "labour-power" (C I, 128f.). Once labour-power is bought by capital and employed in the labour process, it can produce more value than that which is necessary to reproduce it (including, worker's means of subsistence, social reproduction, etc.). The conversion of concrete labour into abstract labour, the substance of value, is only possible by virtue of a differential relation that posits all expenditures of concrete labour into a relation with all others. This is the social relation of abstract labour. Particular concrete labour is rendered as abstract labour, expressing a relation of qualitative equivalence and quantitative difference. Abstract human labour "is only the expression of equivalence between different sorts of commodities which brings to view the specific character of value-creating labour, by actually reducing the different kinds of labour embedded in the different kinds of commodity to their common quality of being human labour in general." (C I, 142)

Whereas at first sight economic value as exchange value seemed to entertain an autonomy that can be grasped homologous to the autonomy of the signifier, as in the linguistic sign, we can now specify that this autonomy is underpinned by another relation, expressing an asymmetry: the asymmetry of economic exploitation and surplus-value extraction, structurally implied by the act of selling and buying labour-power. The subject of exchange is the proletariat, that is, "masses of men who have nothing to sell but their labour-power." (C I, 899) In fully developed capitalism, people who have "nothing to sell except their own skins" (C I, 873) become a mere embodiment of labour-power, the only source of the surplus-value. As such, embodiment does not, however, form a trans-historical, self-identical, and self-conscious subject of history as traditional Marxism depicts the proletariat. If the proletariat is represented in exchange-value, as the subject of exchange, this position remains ultimately unconscious and repressed. It is in this sense that the proletariat as "the privileged social embodiment of the structural contradictions of capitalism" is the cut in the otherwise fetishistic image of the self-generative sphere of the exchange-value as autonomous. As a cut, the embodiment of irreconcilable contradiction, the proletariat "disturbs the established fetishist appearance [of capitalism, S.K.] and opens up the minimal space for political organization and revolutionary politics." In other words, through labour-power an antagonistic social relation enters the sphere of the exchange of equivalences. Now we can fully grasp the consequences of the redoubling of the dual-character of the commodity. The abstraction from use-value is mirrored by the abstraction of concrete labour as abstract labour. If the latter is the substance of value and in turn value finds its necessary expression, that is, its form of appearance in exchange-value, the autonomy of the value—as metonymical chain of self-differential exchange-values—contains a systemic cut or asymmetric social relation, going by the name of a social antagonism between labour-power and capital, and embodied in the proletariat.
If we follow the argumentative trajectory of an assumed homology between economic and linguistic value, the autonomy of the signifier, as independent from naturalized substrata or external relations, is therefore not homogeneous or symmetric; rather, it contains this cut. What structures the sphere of economic value relations, is the very redoubling split within the commodity-form as use-value and exchange-value. Here in fact, "the structure is a cut." If capitalism is structured by the value form of commodity relations, this structure is unstable, contradictory, and driven by negativity as class antagonism. On the flipside, we can detect a homologous structure in language through this reading. The autonomy of the signifier, as structure, expresses a cut contained in the split within the linguistic sign as signifier and signified. Moreover, this cut emancipates language as an organon of communication from its secondary instrumental role. From Saussure's structural linguistics and its further expansion to the field of psychoanalysis we learn through Jacques Lacan, that linguistic value has “cut” itself loose from the intentions of empirical subjects of communication.

When humans communicate among themselves they unknowingly speak the language of values, a language that does not communicate meaning, and the question is whether it communicates at all. The autonomy of the signifier stands for a noncommunicative kernel of linguistic communication. Given the autonomy of the signifier, language does not serve the instrumental transmission of meaning. Communication is only the intentional byproduct of an unintentional relation of signifiers that “speak” themselves in a differential way without stable external referents. Moreover, the production of linguistic value, the speaking of language, turns every meaning into a communicative bearer of its own non-communicative self-proliferation. Here, the homology of linguistic and economic value cannot be understated. Use-value and meaning become the material (communicative) envelope of value. From this vantage point, real abstraction is another expression for the autonomy of the signifier: The structure of the value necessitates the abstraction from use-values (meanings) in order to arrive at the “horizontal” plane of differential exchange values (signifiers). The “vertical” abstraction, nevertheless, is at work in the initial isolation of values, which redoubles itself in the sphere of “horizontal” differential relations. Yet, this abstraction is real, insofar as it articulates the material consequences of the non-empirical materiality of value. Value relations—be they economically or symbolically structured—have material effects precisely because they have “cut” themselves loose from the binary distinction of both the sensuous and super-sensuous, empirical and intellectual. They designate a reality of a difference that functions with materialities, without matter.

This value-generating structure, however, is uneven and asymmetric. It contains a dimension of negativity and antagonism. With Marx we can add that in capitalism the autonomy of the signifier finds its proper form in the money-form. Money, as we shall see, is not merely a sign external to what is signified by it. Rather, in capitalism, money as form already contains the antagonism of value and its substance, abstract labour. Likewise, one has to insist that the speaking of language is not governed by a self-transparent autonomy of the signifier. The subject of linguistic value remains
unconscious. In line with Lacan’s famous dictum “the unconscious is structured like a language,” Tomšič convincingly argues that the non-communicative kernel of linguistic communication refers to an unstable, decentralized, that is to say, “unconscious subject” who speaks, ça parle. This unconscious dimension is already addressed in Marx’s own science of the value:

Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men’s social product as is their language.

C I, 167

Put differently, the autonomy of the signifier, which structures the domain of both economic and linguistic value, necessitates the agency of an unconscious subject; hence value production contains a structural misperception, reducible neither to the sphere of the use-value (the domain of “wrong” meanings, “false” consciousness) nor to the differential circulation of exchange-values (the plane of the signifier, “inappropriate” words or “incorrect” language).

III. The Spectral Materiality of Wertgegenständlichkeit

To grasp this unconscious dimension, let us consider Marx’s famous opening lines from the chapter on commodity fetishism from Capital, Vol. I:

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

C I, 163

The dual character of the commodity is not the result of an intellectual abstraction but the articulation of a material, yet non-empirical reality of redoubling abstractions. Therefore, commodity fetishism is not an illusion of the subject of cognition but the result of the split nature of objective reality itself—it belongs to what Sohn-Rethel called “socially necessary forms of cognition.” We can add now with Tomšič’s parallel reading of Saussure, Lacan, and Marx, that these forms remain unconscious.
Nevertheless, they have real effects. Commodities as empirical material or immaterial objects are a necessary form of appearance of non-empirical material forms, which structure social relations in capitalism. In contrast to a traditional Marxist understanding of false consciousness, it is not that ideologically produced illusions veil material relations but rather that things produced by capitalist society—commodities in their very graphicness—veil social relations. That is why Marx’s definition of the commodity as a “sensuous supra-sensuous thing” has to be taken most literally. Unlike in religions of spiritual beliefs, in capitalism—as an unconscious religion of practice—the sensuous world veils a non-sensuous reality: the dimension of value. Here, we find the materialist kernel of Marx’s otherwise merely rhetorical formulation, according to which commodities are “abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (C I, 163). Capitalism’s physis produces its own “naturally grown” metaphysics. In other words, with generalized commodity production sensuous first nature becomes sensuous-supra-sensuous “second nature.”

Therefore, value and its substance (abstract labour) can neither be grasped in concretely spatial terms of sensuous materiality (a quantum of simple or average labour) nor in temporal terms of chronometric time (measured by weeks, days, and hours) but only as a purely social relation devoid of all material-empirical traces. It is this social relation that structures the totality of all expended social labour and thereby provides, in the first place, the homogenous social basic-unit, which allows for the qualitative commensurability of commodities, that is, differentiability as such, however without yet any differences. Differentiability as quality logically precedes quantifiable differences, although in chronometrical time quantities (exchange relations) appear “earlier.” By virtue of this temporal-logical loop, which is constitutive of value production, the form of social relations posits its own historical result, which is to say the commodity form of labour-power, as its logical precondition. It is in this sense that the specifically capitalist social relation, which we addressed earlier in terms of the autonomy of the signifier, is not stable, self-sufficient, or self-identical. It does not rest “in itself” but only proceeds “for itself” as the metamorphoses of the commodity as commodity and money as capital. In this way, commodities as material or symbolic objects, become the “sachliche Hülle” (MEW 23, 105), “objective shell” of social relations through the expenditure of abstract labour.

If, in the realm of commodities, objects become the concrete screen of abstract social relations, how are we to conceive of the peculiar fusion of sensuousness and supra-sensuousness? How can such a socially produced fusion be fetishized as natural? Marx’s way to account for this almost alchemical amalgamation is the oxymoronic German compound “wertgegenständlichkeit” (MEW 23, 66), a term that can only be imperfectly translated as the “value-objectivity.”

In contrast to the coarsely sensuous Gegenständlichkeit [“objectivity”, the feature of standing over against] of the body of the commodity, not one atom of matter enters into its Wertgegenständlichkeit [“value-objectivity”]. We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value. However, let us remember that commodities possess a Wertgegenständlichkeit only in so far as they are all expressions of an identical
social unit, human labour, that their Wertgegenständlichkeit is therefore purely social. From this it follows self-evidently that it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity.

C I, 138f.22

“Gegenständlichkeit” is a substantive of the adjective “gegenständlich,” derived from the noun “Gegenstand.” Although its grammatical structure is similar, the English substantive “objectivity” covers a slightly different meaning.23 “Gegenständlichkeit” designates the feature of standing (“ständlichkeit”) over against (“gegen”). The compound “Wertgegenständlichkeit” thus presents a paradoxical venture: the purely social category of the value stands over against (op-post to) the subject as if it were an objective entity with a sensuously material body.

The spectral materiality of wertgegenständlichkeit always implies a transformation of social relations into a relation of things as their necessary form of appearance. In capitalist everyday-life, the only way to measure, mediate, and move this wertgegenständlichkeit is money, however, money in its threefold function: as measurement, means of circulation, and capital. In order to determine the value of a commodity by referring to its value, money as the universal measurement has always already to be presupposed to allow for quantifiable social basic-units in terms of abstract labour. For money is a quasi-transcendental—a necessary condition for the possibility of quantifiable relations of value and its “substance,” abstract labour. As soon as money as the general equivalent comes into being, the socio-temporal transformation of concrete labour-time (measured by chronometric time) converted into abstract labour-time (implying the totality of all social relations in capitalism) becomes possible. Money is the register that transcendentally allows for this conversion—this literal transubstantiation—and, at the same time, the very result of the exchange of commodities. What we addressed earlier as a temporal-logical loop, constitutive for any value relation, finds its only proper form in the money form. Here historical genesis (the historical emergence of money) and logical validity (quasi-transcendental form) cannot be mapped onto each other: they are torn apart. Therefore, the history of money cannot be told historically in a linear way. Any instrumental rationalization of money as an external, seemingly neutral organon of the exchange of superfluous products misses the quasi-transcendental feature of the money form and the retroactive validity of concepts that only came into being with capitalism.24

Once money is introduced and has acquired a universal form, we enter a sensuous supra-sensuous sphere where sensuous commodities co-exist with their supra-sensuous abstraction—the value—that is to say, the commodity abstraction expressed by the value acquires, as in Marx’s image of the animal kingdom, a spectral materiality indicated by its “as if”-existence. To be clear, this “as-if” does not designate an illusion but articulates the ontological status of real abstraction. The animal is the real incarnation of the whole of social (abstract human) labour; it is the really existing abstraction without which all other animals could not be signified as animals. Put differently: only this real-abstract animal lends the “Warenpöbel” (MEW 23, 72), common commodities, the feature of particular distinctiveness, that is, economic-linguistic value. Marx’s image of the animal is the figurative expression of real
abstraction as the form of social relation. As we will later see, it is this mode of figurative incarnation that the commodity form shares with aesthetic modes of the production of meaning.

IV. Commodity-Language and its Secret

It is not by chance that in Capital I, 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.

The comparison of language and commodity relations is not external. Marx's prosopopoeia articulates the homology of linguistic and economic systems of value. Considering the figurative status of prosopopoeia, Werner Hamacher rightly points to the intersection of the figurative speech of Marx's text of Capital I and the signified relations of commodity production in capitalism. The compound word “commodity-language” sews these two planes inextricably together.

Marx thus does not use a metaphor or a prosopopoeia, but the commodity of which he speaks is itself structured as a prosopopoeia. The cloth does not speak figuratively but, because it is a commodity and hence a figure, it actually speaks. A language devolves to it—and indeed the only language dominant in the commodity-world—because language is both abstract and material, i.e., the incarnated form of man's expression and the form of organization of his labor. That commodities—and moreover everything affected by them—speak a language, and perhaps the language, is what Marx calls their fetish character. Commodity fetish—that means commodity-language.

The transcendental medium of this language can only be money. Only money provides the manifold of commodities with a universal language. Every commodity can speak to another commodity in the language of money. Money, hence, is not external to commodity-language but inherent to it in the precise sense of a structural condition of the possibility of each commodity's speech act.

Money is the transcendental of commodity-language, that form which vouchsafes all other forms their commensurability, appearing as a copula in all the statements and postulates of commodity-language. This copula, which only apparently has a
completely formal character, does indeed refer to a historical referent and is itself both historical and historicizing: it refers, namely, to the “common substance” at work in all elements of commodity-language, refers to what is common and—by virtue of its formalization—equal to all: it refers to human labor. 27

It is in this sense that money is not an external sign for something else that is signified by it. Marx’s argument is more radical since money is the historical, yet quasi-transcendental condition that allows for any act of signification within commodity-language. That is why Marx constantly insists on his insight that, in contrast to classic political economy, money is never a mere sign.

The fact that money can, in certain functions, be replaced by mere sign [bloße Zeichen] of itself, gave rise to another mistaken notion, that it is itself a mere sign [bloßes Zeichen]. Nevertheless, this error did contain the suspicion that the money-form of the thing is external to the thing itself, being simply the form of appearance of human relations hidden behind it. In this sense every commodity is a sign [Zeichen], since, as value, it is only the objective shell [sachliche Hülle] of the human labour expended on it. But if it is declared that the social characteristics assumed by things [Sachen], or the objective [sachlichen] characteristics assumed by the social determinations of labour on the basis of a definite mode of production, are mere signs [bloße Zeichen], then it is also declared, at the same time, that these characteristics are the deliberate [willkürliche] product of human reflection.

C I, 185f. 28

Referring to our earlier discussion of the autonomy of the signifier, economic value as exchange-value in fact entertains an arbitrary or, rather, contingent relation to what is signified by it, that is, use-value. Money as the quasi-transcendental form of commodified value-relations could invite the misperception that money is merely an external sign, an instrumental means of the exchange of commodities and their arbitrary values. However, the opposite is also wrong, money is not the inherent derivative of the value, expressed by exchange-value. Marx’s discussion of money as a special commodity, that is, money as “Geldware” (MEW 23, 109), money-commodity, historically gold, could lead to the assumption that money finds its historical origin in a pre-existing economic value, which it serves as a means of expression. Marx’s theory of money, however, neither suggests money as external organon nor internal expression of value. To be sure, money as the quasi-transcendental medium of commodity-language serves the communicational purposes of commodities (money as a means of circulation); its other two functions (money as measure and money as money, that is, capital) point to the non-communicative or non-expressive kernel of money. Marx rightly argues that money is not the product of human reflection; there is no subject of cognition that could declare money as a deliberately chosen conventional sign signifying certain relations of commodities and their values. Quite on the contrary, the subject of the arbitrary mode of signification performed by money remains unconscious: Labour-power and the dispersed subject of class antagonism, the negativity of the proletariat as
mere bearer of labour-power, is the unconscious subject implied by the seemingly autonomous sphere of money-signifiers.

Nevertheless, the commodity speaks, it speaks commodity-language through the mouths of the agents of the market. The agents act as character-masks, “Charaktermasken” (MEW 23, 100), of the economic-linguistic commerce of commodities.

If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value. Our own intercourse as commodities proves it. We relate to each other merely as exchange-values.

C I, 176

In the speech act of commodities two relations are inverted. A relation of things, that is, commodities in their mutual relation as objects of use-value, acquires the attributes of a social relation between abstract human labour (value), expressed by exchange-values. As a result, commodities speak to (commerce with) each other not as objects of use-value but as objects of exchange-value endowed with the social quality of having value. Social relations of value appear as a relation of things, thing-ish relations appear as social relations of value. In this way, the purely social “soul” of the commodity, its “Wareenseele” (MEW 23, 97), speaks objectively through the minds of the theorists of classic political economy.29 The exchange of commodities speaks itself through an inversion that only the prosopopoeic commodity-language and its formal abstraction allows for.

The cloth, then, the commodity, speaks. It speaks a historical language which claims to be universal and transhistorical. It speaks an abstract language limited to a single statement, value, and a single grammatical structure, equation, yet claims nonetheless to be valid for an unrestricted variety of singularities. It is a language of exchange [Verkehr], but only as a process of turning [Verkehrung].30

The nexus of exchange (commerce) and turning (inversion) is implied by the seemingly universal sign of equivalence contained in every simple speech act of commodity-language: x commodity A = y commodity B. Commodity A can speak commodity B and vice versa. As equated, their exchange-values relate to each other in a purely differential way. Thereby the concrete labour materialized in a particular commodity is replaceable and exchangeable as abstract labour. Conversely, every commodity as exchange-value can express (signify) another. If all other commodities can determine the distinct exchange-value (the exact position within a metonymical chain of signification) of one commodity, the inverse relation is also possible: one commodity, gold or money, can express the value of all other commodities. Within the logic of the equal sign (“=”), commerce (communication) implies inversion (exchangeability of position).

This inextricable nexus of commerce and inversion, Verkehr and Verkehrung, lends the physical body of the commodity what Marx calls its “metaphysical subtleties.” It is only by way of inverting social and thing-ish attributes, abstract and concrete qualities,
that the concrete objectivity of a commodity can assume a sensuous-supra-sensuous body, that is, value-objectivity ("Wertgegenständlichkeit"). This nexus of exchange and inversion is not accidental, a result of mere illusion, but structural—it relates to the form of commodity itself: "Whence, then, arises the enigmatic character of the product of labour, as soon as it assumes the form of a commodity? Clearly, it arises from this form itself" (CI, 164). It is precisely this form of the commodity, its exchangeability and commerce (verkehr) that leads to an inversion (verkehrung). Behind this inversion there is no deeper secret, no enigma.

V. Capitalism as Religion

In the course of unfolding his theory of commodity fetishism, the nexus of verkehr and verkehrung forces Marx to take flight to an intricate analogy—to the misty realm of religion. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in Specters of Marx:

The necessity of turning toward this analogy is presented by Marx as a consequence of the “phantasmagoric form” whose genesis he has just analyzed. If the objective relation between things (which we have called commerce between commodities) is indeed a phantasmagoric form of the social relation between men, then we must have recourse to the only analogy possible, that of religion [. . .].  

As in religion the creations of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with an independent, autonomous life, so it is in the world of commodities with the material products of men’s hands. The only possible analogy “at hand” is religion and its practice; for good reasons Marx never mentions the word “ideology” in this context. Derrida rightly noticed that the “religious is thus not just one ideological phenomenon or phantomatic production among others.” However, the religious sphere that Marx invokes here alludes to a very special kind of religion. Whereas already the young Marx regarded the task of the critique of religion as more or less accomplished by Ludwig Feuerbach and the Young Hegelians, the mature Marx made a decisive shift from the critique of spiritual religion as “verhimmelte” (MEW 3, 217), “heavenized” representations of empirical conditions to the critique of the practical religion of the capitalist everyday. In doing so, he displaced key terms of the otherwise obsolete language of the critique of religion to the political-economic domain of capitalism. In this way, the polemical thrust of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism is produced by a symptomatic mismatch of the displaced language of the critique of religion and its profane, yet sensuous-supra-sensuous subject matter.

In one of his early pre-Marxist fragments, Walter Benjamin compared capitalism to religion. As “an essentially religious phenomenon”, capitalism is “a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme there ever was. Within it everything only has immediately a meaning in direct relation to the cult: it knows no special dogma, no theology” (SW 1, 288). That is to say, capitalism-as-religion compares to a very special form of religion—a religion of practice, a neo-pagan cult religion, which has to be differentiated from monotheist religions with theology and dogma.
It contributes to the knowledge of capitalism as a religion to imagine that the original paganism certainly and most proximately grasped religion not as a “higher” “moral” interest, but as the most immediately practical—that it had with other words not been aware of its “ideal” or “transcendent” nature, just as today’s capitalism is, but saw in the irreligious or individual of different faith an infallible member of its community, in precisely the same sense the modern bourgeoisie [sees] its non-working members [nicht erwerbende Angehörigen].

SW 1, 290

Capitalism-as-religion, hence, designates a mode of production that fully relies on a material practice without a specific spiritual belief or a certain knowledge. In an almost tautological manner, its cult consists in “doing words with things” while, conversely, the social relations of its cult members are unconsciously “being done by” or “being operated through” things.

Already Marx conceived of this feature as key to commodity fetishism. Referring to the capitalist producer’s practice of equating different products in exchange for value and thereby equating different concrete labour as abstract human labour, Marx recites the words of the New Testament: they are doing it but “they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34, cf. MEW 23, 88). With Benjamin we can add: The neo-pagan members of capitalism-as-religion do not know what they are doing—they simply do not need to know or to be aware of capitalism’s ideal or transcendent nature.  

Paradoxically, only the speculative positivist can be an authentic member of capitalism-as-religion, for the capitalist “religion of everyday life” (MECW 37, 817) is transcendentally meaningless. It is only its cultic practice that produces immediate meaning. Commenting on Benjamin, Hamacher consequently argues that in capitalism “[e]verything that has meaning is immediately identical with what it means; the sign is immediately the signified and its referent.” What Hamacher presents as the mode of production of capitalist meaning is not only of political-theological relevance. The structurally pagan cult practice of capitalism aims to produce meaning (use-value) by short-circuiting the plane of signification (exchange-value) and the world of empirical-sensuous referents. Of course, such a system of signification would be tautological. Commodity-language, however, is a language that can create value and meaning in a non-tautological manner by way of staging its own material figuration without external reference.

VI. Symbol, Allegory, and Capitalist Dingwelt

As Jochen Hörisch has shown, the commodity form is structured symbolically, that is to say, as a symbol (and not as mere sign) money intervenes in what is signified by it. The commerce, Verkehr, of commodities is symbolically structured insofar as the commodity can stand in both the position of the signified and the signifier of use-value (meaning).

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.
Owing to its dual character (being 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 signified and the signifier, essence and appearance, or, more generally, form and content. As Benjamin argued in his book on the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, “Mourning Play,” the vulgar understanding of symbol leads to *falscher Schein*, “the false appearance of totality” (O, 176). Whereas fragmentary, scattered brittleness is the domain of allegory, the symbol is inextricably connected to illusionary beauty. The symbol, however, is not necessarily of illusionary nature. When it is limited to its original domain, that is theology, the *theological symbol* renders the paradoxical “unity of the sensuous and supra-sensuous object.” Therefore, the symbolic illusion of a false totality as put forward by late-romanticist aesthetics has to be distinguished from an authentically theological, yet irretrievably lost unity of the sensuous and supra-sensuous object. In fact, when Marx describes the spectral materiality of the dimension of value inherent to the commodity form, he uses a strikingly similar formulation: things as commodities become sensuous supra-sensuous things.

Reading Marx with Benjamin, in modern capitalism the aesthetic and theological meaning of the symbol intersect. The quasi-transcendental medium of commodity-language, 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 authentic (and therefore impossible, inaccessible) 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, commodity-language is structured by an infinite chain of differential signification, which we called the autonomy of the signifier. Every commodity speaks itself and thereby signifies another commodity. Every commodity “speaks” a differential value attached to a different object. In other words, within commodity-language, there is not only a “beautiful appearance” at work, in which, as Benjamin writes in the *Arcades Project*, “signifier and signified flow into each other” (I 83a,3) but a short-circuit of self-signification: the commodity as exchange-value is capable of signifying its own mode of signification. This self-signification is arbitrary, contingent and lacks a self-conscious subject. Speaking the false universal language of money, commodities as exchange-value can signify any use-value (meaning) without external referent and thereby determine the mode in which the signified is tied to the signifier. This mode of self-signification 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 to a fetish. As a fetish a commodity acts as a socially animated thing endowed with seemingly mystical powers of self-motion and self-signification.

However, if one shifts the perspective from the standpoint of value to the empirical materiality, the “thing-ishness” of the commodity, the dialectics of the commodity form reveals its polar opposite. Whereas commodities as exchange-values allude to symbolic signification in a “natural” way without any cracks or gaps, commodities as use-values appear as the fragmentary and ultimately contingent bearer of value. In other words,
things as commodities perform their use-value dimension (meaning) 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 interpretation of the Marxian commodity form:

Allegorical emblems return as commodities.  
Allegory is the armature of modernity.  

SW 4, 183

The commodity has taken the place of the allegorical mode of apprehension.  

SW 4, 188

Broken down matter: the elevation of the commodity to the status of allegory. Allegory and the fetish character of the commodity …  

Arcades H 2,6

Allegories stand for that which the commodity makes of the experiences people have in this century.  

Arcades J 55,13

An inferno rages in the soul of the commodity, for all the seeming tranquility lent it by the price.  

J 80,2/80a,1

At first glance, it might be surprising to define allegory as the modern armature—a term that designates both a scientific device of measurement and a military tool of armor, armament. Already in his book on the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, written in 1924/25, Benjamin explored the nature of allegory in difference to the religious and aesthetic symbol. Summing up his earlier book, in the *Arcades Project* Benjamin states:

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.  

Arcades, J 83a,3

In short, allegory is the aesthetic signature of the age of secularization in early modern times starting in the late 16th century. With the implosion of the medieval universe of transcendentally guaranteed meaning and sense, allegory and the emblems of death and decay arise: “Allegories are, in the realm of thought, what ruins are in the realm of things” (O, 178). In the *Arcades Project*, however, allegory assumes a different status providing a theoretical lens to conceive of the shape of things as commodities. Implicitly echoing Georg Lukács’s volume *History and Class Consciousness* from 1923, Benjamin does not primarily side with the perspective of reified social relations but with those res, things themselves. As is well known, Benjamin was profoundly influenced by Lukács’s volume, which also marked his theoretical turning point towards communism and Marxism.41
In retrospect it was Lukács's essay on reification that sparked the neo-Marxian discourse strongly influencing not only Benjamin but also early Frankfurt School. Lukács's reading of Marx firstly discovered the structural relevance of the fetishistic inversion of the planes of the thing-lish and the social.

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” [gespenstige Gegenständlichkeit], an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its grounding essence [Grundwesen]: the relation between people.\(^{42}\)

The mode of commodity production reifies social relations, subordinates them under the exchange of things. Although Lukács grasped the sensuous supra-sensuous (gespenstige, ghostly, phantom like) nature of the commodity, his reading still bears traces of an anti-capitalist essentialism. In capitalism there is no Grundwesen, no foundational grounding essence that could be concealed (“reified”) but, on the contrary, the objective thing-lish mode of concealment itself has become the essential feature, the Grundwesen of society.

Principally, Benjamin follows Lukács’s reification theorem; however, he decisively modifies, one might even say inverts, it: On the flipside of the enthronement of things as commodities over human social relations, a radical deobjectivation of the realm of things, Entdinglichung der Dingwelt, takes place. Things as the mere embodiment of social relations become the bearer of a value. Thereby, things as sensuous Gegenstände acquire a senuous-supra-sensuous Wertgegenständlichkeit. In an allegorical way, contingent things—whatever their specific materiality and use-value may be—are treated indifferently as the material incarnation of value as capital. That is to say, commodities really speak differently, allos agoreuein—that is, they speak other than on the public marketplace. This otherness, however, is only the other side of the marketplace and the logic of arbitrary and differential signification (the sphere of exchange-values). From the perspective of commodities as use-values, things acquire their proper meaning only indirectly in a contingent, denaturalized way. Things do not simply mean by themselves. Acquiring meaning implies being attached to the horizontal plane of differential relations, expressed by exchange-values (or, in the terms of structural linguistics as linguistic values). Since both the commodity and the linguistic sign always exist in the same space as a unity (despite the fact that they are divided by logical time, split between anticipation and retroaction, and their historical genesis and logical validity), their mode of signification can be perceived in two ways: either from the perspective of use-values—commodities as things are structured allegorically; or, from the perspective of exchange-values—whereby things seem immediately fused with their value in a symbolical (if not fetishistic) way.

That is to say, it is only the allegorical way of seeing that is able to perceive the brokenness of things that otherwise (used to) function as use-values. Things as ruins only come into view when use-values—whatever their specific use—have become obsolete or dysfunctional. Ruinedness is a mode of being deprived of wholeness: a thing deprived of its proper use or meaning. Following this optics, capitalist use-values
appear as ruins, for their use (meaning) is derived from an arbitrary mode of signification. In this vein, Benjamin famously stated: “With the destabilizing of the market economy, we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled” (Arcades, 13).

Moving on from here, I rely on Benjamin, who deliberately chooses the perspective of an allegorical mode of the production of meaning. In the Arcades Project, he proposes his original reading of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism:

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 between the two. But this is just how the 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 goods 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 it is written in the stars that the allegorist’s profundity will lead it to one meaning rather then another. And though it once may have acquired such a meaning, this can always be withdrawn in favor of a different meaning. The modes of meaning of the commodity is its price; it has, as commodity, no other meaning.

Arcades, J 80,2/80a,1

Indeed, if we assume a homology of meaning and use-value, we can detect an allegorical way of seeing in the relation that use-values entertain with their exchange-values. Ultimately, the allegorically assembled meaning, materialized in a use-value, is superseded, annulled by its exchange-value, or eventually its price. No meaning is fixed, attached to a stable configuration of material things. And conversely, no value empirically precedes its mode of appearance, its contingent embodiment in a thing as commodity. In temporal terms, the commodity is a split, or cut as it were; its use-value and exchange-value exist as unity only in space. This split can never be unified in a linear-temporal way, since the commodity as a value-bearing entity already implies the logical time of anticipation and retroaction. As we said before, this temporal-logical loop is constitutive of the value form of the commodity. Therefore, exchange-values can only retroactively be validated by the market within the quasi-transcendental form of money. There is no objective “price” of a commodity other than the redeemed 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, and still “naturally grown”, naturwüchsige way. Similarly, in the case of Benjamin and his allegorical reading of the commodity form, we can now understand that the fundamental ambiguity of the allegory—the inner dialectical tension between its enigmatic fragment character and its expressive character as the expression of a conventional meaning—is deflated in capitalism and rendered useless by an equivocal, arbitrary, radically contingent mode of value signification. The
commodity’s final price tag, then, eliminates all stained traces of its historical genesis. Against all odds, Benjamin 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. Things as useless ruins of matter—the material residues of deactivated use-values so to speak—only unfold their critical dimension when seen from the perspective of what they are not: conventional meaning.

* * *

However, we must not favor either perspective over the other; neither economic use-value nor exchange-value, nor linguistic meaning or that of linguistic value. For, the commodity and the linguistic sign have more in common than a positivist account on political economy and language could ever illuminate. The otherwise incompatible discourses of both Marx and Benjamin intersect in precisely this way: both understand that conventional meaning in language and the category of use-value are superseded by a denaturalized, decentralized, differential and arbitrary mode of signification and valorization—aptly addressed by Marx’s term Warensprache, or commodity-language.

Instead of fetishizing the ruins of a seemingly lost immediate access to meaning and usage, or in searching for a meta-commodity-linguistic standpoint, both Marx and Benjamin analyze the cut in a fetishistic semblance of self-referential differentiation, implied by the value form of the commodity. This cut can be addressed from the perspective of the social relation: as the dimension of an unconscious subject of exchange (the proletariat), as well as the negativity of class antagonism, resulting from the exploitation of labour-power; or from the perspective of relations of things—as fragmentary constellations of allegorical meaning. Both perspectives share the critical insight in the mutual intertwining of the linguistic medium of presentation and its presented object of political economy. This intertwining does not imply identity, however, but is the symptom of a structural homology between different systems of value, both of which operate through an equation of difference and thus differences. From the perspective of exchange-value, this homology becomes most apparent through a parallel reading of Saussure and Marx.

The emergence of linguistic value by way of differential relations, which give rise to the autonomy of the signifier, reveals the logic of the economic exchange-value. However, from the vantage point of use-value, our parallel reading of Benjamin and Marx illuminates the allegorical and symbolic modes of the production of meaning, which in turn share the logic of the use-value as attached to, and, ultimately superseded by, an arbitrary mode of abstraction and thus signification. What in the world of commodities appears as a mode of the production of meaning, as allegory and symbol, bears the imprint of the form of value, that is to say, a system of differential relations that represses an unconscious subject. It is in this sense that real abstraction, as a really existing form of qualitative equation (abstraction) and differential quantification (signification), posits a concept of capitalist aesthetics.

Aesthetics, here, does not refer to a philosophy of fine arts, aesthetic judgment of the beautiful, or transcendental forms of sensuous intuition; rather, aesthetics, as an aesthetics of real abstraction, designates a sphere of what Marx terms the “sensuous-
supra-sensuousness” of the commodity. This sphere is characterized by a homology of horizontal, differential relations of value, that arbitrarily signify a vertical positioning of use-value and meaning. Put differently, aesthetics is not limited to aesthetic modes of meaning production—such as allegory and symbol—but refers to the entirety of vertical and horizontal relations of abstraction and signification. This entire sphere of meaning and value is addressed by the aesthetics of real abstraction, as the domain in which sensuous supra-sensuous “things” acquire a life of their own.

The as-if-existence of Marx’s “animal” is therefore not limited to a certain place, a properly defined realm of capitalist everyday life, but rather, it turns all other “animals”—whether material or immaterial—into sensuous supra-sensuous things themselves, or in other words as the bearers of value. However, the language of these “animals” cannot be spoken by “animals” themselves. Commodity-language speaks itself through human social relations. This, nonetheless “is as much men’s social product as is their language” (C I, 167). Language, however, needs translation in order to persist. Marx was such a translator.

Notes


2 All English translations are taken from the online resource www.marxists.org, URL: https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm (last accessed October 18, 2016).

Sigla used for Benjamin's and Marx's writings:


3 Emphasis mine.


8 Saussure: Course in General Linguistics, 67.


10 Tomšič, The Capitalist Unconscious, 29f.

11 See Tomšič The Capitalist Unconscious, 113f.


15 Tomšič, The Capitalist Unconscious, 32.

16 Again, here I rely on Tomšič, The Capitalist Unconscious, 27f.

17 See Jacques Lacan: Ecrits, trans. by Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton), 737.


22 Translation modified, cf. Marx: “Im graden Gegenteil zur sinnlich groben Gegenständlichkeit der Warenkörper geht kein Atom Naturstoff in ihre Wertgegenständlichkeit ein. Man mag daher eine einzelne Ware drehen und wenden, wie man will, sie bleibt unfaßbar als Wertding. Erinnern wir uns jedoch, daß die Waren nur Wertgegenständlichkeit besitzen, sofern sie Ausdrücke derselben gesellschaftlichen Einheit, menschlicher Arbeit, sind, daß ihre Wertgegenständlichkeit also rein gesellschaftlich ist, so versteht sich auch von selbst, daß sie nur im gesellschaftlichen Verhältnis von Ware zu Ware erscheinen kann” (MEW 23, 62).

23 Although the German word “Gegenstand” is correctly translated as object, it connotes a slightly different meaning. Object originates from the Latin verb “obicere” (compound of “ob,” in the way of, and “iacere,” to throw, to lie); its perfect participle passive form is “obiectum” (“thrown in the way of”). Whereas an object designates that which is thrown or placed in the way of somebody (or something), the German “Gegenstand” (that which “steht,” stands, “gegen,” over against, somebody) connotes a more inert objectivity, something that op-poses me. The state of “standing over and against” is less movable and indicates a certain degree of spatio-temporal resistance vis-à-vis the activity of the (cognizing) subject who encounters it. A possible translation of “Gegenstand” is “that which stands over and against.” Understood in this way, “Gegenstand” here oscillates between the “Ding” (thing), which has an independent existence of our cognitive faculties, and the conceptually grasped object.

24 Again, here we could draw a comparison to the realm of language and scientific tales of the supposed origin of language as tool, organon of human communication. For a critique of this Aristotelian understanding of language see Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 18.


27 Werner Hamacher: “Lingua Amissa,” 174f.

28 Trans. modified, cf. Marx’s earlier formulation in *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1859): “Das Geld ist nicht Symbol, so wenig wie das Dasein eines Gebrauchswerts als Ware Symbol ist. Daß ein gesellschaftliches Produktionsverhältnis sich als ein außer den Individuen vorhandener Gegenstand und die bestimmten Beziehungen, die sie im Produktionsprozeß ihres gesellschaftlichen Lebens eingehen, sich als spezifische Eigenschaften eines Dings darstellen, diese Verkehrung und nicht eingebildete, sondern prosaisch reelle Mystifikation charakterisiert alle gesellschaftlichen Formen der Tauschwert setzenden Arbeit. Im Geld erscheint sie nur frappanter als in der Ware.” (MEW 13, 35). Concerning the English mistranslation of sign as symbol in *Capital I* and the conceptual relevance of this terminological shift in Marx’s later text, I rely on Phillip Homburg’s doctoral dissertation “Walter Benjamin and ‘materialism,’” submitted at the University of Sussex, August 2015. All misinterpretations, however, are mine.

29 Marx invokes here the words of Samuel Bailey: “Riches (use-value) are the attribute of man, value is the attribute of commodities. A man or a community is rich, a pearl or a diamond is valuable . . . A pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or diamond.” (cited in C I, 177).


33 Trans. modified, cf. GS V I, 100.

34 Trans. modified, cf. GS V I, 102.

35 Hamacher rightly reminds us that Benjamin’s polar opposition of monotheism and paganism is not identical with conventional definitions of Christianity and Greek polytheism. “What he [Benjamin] understands by the word ‘pagan’ (also according to [Hermann] Cohen’s sense of it) is not only Greek polytheism, but also—and not a bit less—the Christianity that raised the doctrine of original sin to the status of a dogma and extended this logic into the furthest reaches of its systems of faith, thought, and behavior” (Werner Hamacher: “Guilt History. Benjamin’s Sketch ‘Capitalism as Religion,’” trans. Kirk Wetters, *Diacritics* (Fall-Winter 2002), 85). The Christian doctrine of original sin is pagan insofar as it follow an nexus of guilt and retribution. As already Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Morals* pointed out, moral guilt, *Schuld*, relates...
back to the very material sense of economic debt, *Schulden*, that is also structured along equation and retribution.


38 Cf. Benjamin: “Die Einheit von *sinnlichem* und *übersinnlichem* Gegenstand, die Paradoxie des theologischen Symbols wird zu einer Beziehung von Erscheinung und Wesen verzerrt” (GS I, 338, emphasis mine). Osborne's translation occludes the terminology that Benjamin applies here: “The unity of the material and the transcendental object, which constitutes the paradox of the theological symbol, is distorted into a relationship between appearance and essence” (O, 160).

39 See my discussion in section III. I owe the insight into the parallel of Marx and Benjamin to Phillip Homburg, University of Sussex.


41 Cf. Benjamin's letter to Gershom Scholem from Sept. 16., 1924; see Corr, 247f.

42 Lukács: “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” 83, translation modified.
Free Associations: On Marx and Freud*

Johan F. Hartle

The liberation of form . . .
holds enciphered within it
above all the liberation of society

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

In the written thoughts of Marx and Freud there is prominent reference to the term “association” in connection with the attribute “free.” It seems as if there were no specific connection between these two uses of the term. They can indeed easily be traced back to two quite different lines of tradition that can be properly distinguished. Marx takes the term “association” from the history of early socialism and in the tradition of political “associationism.”

Freud finds his predecessors in the history of British empiricism and in association psychology.

The term “association” does, however, serve similar functions and has a similar structure in both of these contexts—in each case it points to central theoretical ideas and critical impulses. The topos of the association of free and intrinsically connected elements facilitates the critique of “abstract,” distortive and static instances of representation, which hamper the articulation of the repressed but fundamental forces of the societal or mental order.

Freud is interested in free association as a form of expression that allows one partly to circumvent repressive forms of articulation under the control of the superego. And while the regular speech conceals that by which it is secretly driven, free association provides access to the elementary forces of subconscious desire in all its pathological reality.

Marx discusses the association of free and equal producers as a form of self-governed societal order, operating independently from repressive state apparatuses and the predominance of commodity fetishism (the latter a regime of representation that represses the self-organization—and even perceptibility—of labor). For Marx, the apparent universality of state and capital conceal the driving forces of basic bourgeois class structure and the cognition of the relations of production.

* The author thanks Nathaniel Boyd, Robin Celikates, Sudeep Dasgupta, Samir Gandesha, Dan Hartley, Henry Pickford, Markus Stauff, and Peter D. Thomas for valuable comments on previous drafts of this chapter.
In what follows, I will try to briefly trace the two histories of the concept of association with their hidden resonances (1) and to outline structural similarities between the two concepts denoted by the term (2). In both Freud and Marx, figures of a latent reality and of critical relations between the repressed elements of such a reality are brought into play as a critique of certain forms of representation, of being represented (vertreten). In my reading, they correspond to each other regardless of the fact that these forms of representation are as different as representation in conscious articulation on the one hand and representation by state and capital on the other. Both Marx and Freud assume that association is an intrinsic connection that on the one hand comes forward spontaneously while, on the other hand, has to be guided, as well. And for both of them these forms of association stand in some relation to the distorted whole for which they somehow are the cure.

With regard to these figures of thought I will eventually (3) discuss the theoretical consequences of such structural analogies between Marx and Freud’s discussion of association and discern overarching elements of the aesthetic in both Marx and Freud and discuss consequences of this relationship, elements that have everything to do with mobilizing meaningful relations at the edges of what can easily be expressed within the given structure (of the complex or the societal order).

The theoretical relation between Marx and Freud is, of course, no innocent terrain. Freudomarxists (like Reich and Marcuse) have tried to argue for a continuity of sexual and political liberation. But the identification of the aims of psychoanalysis with the aims of Marxism was reductive in both directions. They tend to reduce social struggles to subjective emancipation and to identify mental health with sensuous liberation.

In the writings of Louis Althusser, the focus is on the epistemological break that allowed for distinctions between ideology as a “practice producing subjects” constituted through the “imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence” or a form of misrecognition and the foundation of science as a “practice producing knowledge.” Especially Michel Tort developed these ideas further. But the focus on scientific knowledge blocked the insight in convergences between the practical methods of psychoanalysis and Marxism, convergences that bear the signature of the aesthetic.

More recent interpretations of the relation between Marx and Freud—for example by Laclau and Žižek—have, in spite of all their differences, focused on questions of symbolic representation as a form of repression in more broadly ontological terms, ranging from individual psychological observations all the way through to patterns of collective action and its forms of institutionalization. That, of course, has opened up new interpretations of the political dimensions of psychoanalysis and a better understanding of the Marxist method as well. Lately, Fredric Jameson has emphasized these similarities in method and claimed that the relationship between “representation and representability,” as Freud develops it, “will be more comprehensible when we shift from the arcane of the psyche and its drives to the question of capitalism as a totality.” In another context, Jameson even speculated about “a Marxian version of Freudian free association”—without even taking Marx’s use of this very term into account.

My reading differs from all their approaches by reflecting upon a methodological dimension of the traditions of Marxism and psychoanalysis, focusing on a specifically aesthetic moment that is implied in the conception of association as a form of self-
regulation that is, isomorphically, presented by these two theoretical traditions. The structure of the concept “association” suggests a convergence between Marxism and psychoanalysis, one which goes beyond the problematic hermeneutics of the latent and also suggests a way of—somewhat therapeutically—organizing and expressing it. This convergence poses questions concerning the relation not only between Marxism and psychoanalysis but also, more generally: between mind and society, without reducing the relation between Marxism and psychoanalysis to mere continuity by misinterpreting one as the meta-discourse of the other.

I. Twofold associationism

There are, of course, all kinds of associations—workers’ associations as well as insurance associations and sports associations. From the standpoint of linguistic practice there is good reason to be skeptical when a “deeper meaning” or essence is attributed to words, regardless of the factual contexts of usage. When Marx reflects on language as practical consciousness he points in this direction. Whenever language is detached from its practical context, and hence reified, it turns into ideology, congealed in the very words themselves. Words begin to appear meaningful—and to haunt the present—while their reference has become unclear. Such specters of the past maintain social meanings that have no justification in a vital practice whatsoever. The same goes for the history of the concept of association; after all association is just a word, too. But there is a tension between semantics and pragmatics, a tension between what a word apparently means by itself and what a word actually does.

a) Socialist associationism

When Marx addresses the specter behind the term “association” in the writings of Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, he questions precisely the absoluteness of semantics. Marx presents himself as a critic of language, who tries to exorcise the ghostly existence of the term “association.” Already at his time, obviously, “association” had become a spectral catchword among political “associationists” shot-through with a multiplicity of connotations. Sometimes, as in the case of Proudhon, these connotations might have replaced political programs and proper arguments. In his critique of Proudhon, Marx points out the indeterminate number of connotations associated with the term, which conceal the vagueness of Proudhon’s political argument. Proudhon tries, according to Marx, “to defend competition against socialism by describing competition by the single word association.” Proudhon short-circuits potentials for genuine critique by way of a reification or abstraction of language. Taking a term for granted and insinuating the many connotations it contains, allows him to arbitrarily combine contradictory attributes. Proudhon says, as Marx points out, “association,” which suggests “socialism,” and then he derives forms of “competition” from the term alone. Thus, he can speak about socialism, pretending to clarify its meaning while he argues for market competition. Marx writes:
In actual fact, *society, association* are denominations which can be given to every society, to feudal society as well as to bourgeois society, which is association founded on competition. How then can there be Socialists, who, by the single word *association*, think they can refute competition? And how can M. Proudhon himself wish to defend competition against socialism by describing competition by the single word *association?*

“Association,” obviously, has become an empty word, useful for mobilizing an ideology but not sharp enough to carry a specific and irreducible meaning. But this is only half the story. Despite his polemic, Marx himself inherits a tradition with its own terminology, too.

* * *

It was Rousseau who introduced the term “association” to social philosophy; he uses the term to positively describe the linking between free and equal citizens. In the *Second Discourse* Rousseau speaks of “free association, which obliged none of its members,” as a form of societal organization. In the *Contrat Social* it will be the contract itself that constitutes the association of a free society. In both cases association appears as self-determined connectivity of the members of a free and equal society. With this tradition, the term association slowly gains specific connotations. They are linked to the idea of an emancipated society.

After Rousseau, Claude Saint-Simon, and Charles Fourier specified egalitarian forms of organization as “associations.” Saint-Simon reflected on association as the form of organization of the *classe productive*, a professional organization for scientists, artists, and workers that should, in the end, reorganize society. Beyond social atomism, and beyond the market and the state, associations were considered as extrinsic systems of social organization that would not adequately represent the productive classes of society. The idea of an association of producers who would “work together and market their goods in common” was the central idea to Fourier’s utopianism. “Association,” for Fourier, Saint-Simon, and their aftermath, stood for an alternative form of organization.

Partly independently of the theoretical efforts of early socialists, so-called associations became the central element in the working class’s actual self-organization on the ground. Strikes during the French Revolution of 1830, for example, engendered a movement committed to the ideals of associationism. As Bernard H. Moss writes, associations were “originally designed with expanding funds of collective capital to ensure the continual admission of new members without capital and emancipate the entire trade.” In 1848, Paris alone hosted around 300 of such associations with approximately 50,000 members collectively.

The idea of common labor in self-organized associations, an idea that Charles Fourier had originally conceived for agricultural contexts, will become the leading slogan for urban craftsmen and the organization of the industrial working-class. Marx refers to these historical connotations in his use of the term “association,” too; famously so in the *Communist Manifesto*: “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms,” Marx and Engels write, “we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”
Time and again “association” describes a form of social organization that functions as means and end for the egalitarian organization of society. What Marx finds in it is a description of the workers’ potential to communally manage the production and distribution of material wealth on a small and large scale. From *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto* to the third volume of *Capital*, just as much as in Engels’s later writings, this use of the term association can be found as a description of socialist politics and the working class’s self-organization, which transgresses the repressive and alienated organizational forms of state and capital. That which is normally concealed by the socially necessary illusion generated by the commodity form, which is to say, labor, itself, gains visibility and autonomy in and through associations.

b) The association of ideas

Freud’s use of the concept of association stems from a second, one could say parallel history of associationism, which begins with Locke rather than with Rousseau. It is quite evident what these two stories of the concept of association do not have in common. In the history of epistemological and psychological associationism concerns of societal organization and of political resistance do not play a central role. There is, however, a social dimension to this history of associationism, too, regulating legitimate and illegitimate forms of subjectivity, sometimes more rigidly, sometimes more sympathetic to the productivity of imagination and its aesthetic potentials.

With Locke the story begins as an analysis of proper and improper forms of thought. Locke adds, in 1700, a chapter on “The Association of Ideas” to the fourth edition of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Here, associations appear as the “wrong connections of ideas,” typical for madmen and children, opposed to proper rationality. Locke paradigmatically pathologizes associations (which will remain one of the three main lines of dealing with their challenge): Associations are symptomatic of madness. They have their own necessity, although they are free from rational determination. And already Locke had to admit that such a “degree of madness” can be “found in most men;” they are, if you wish, common, quotidian pathologies.

It is in the British (and particularly Scottish) Enlightenment that the concept of association will temporarily lose this stigma and begin its extraordinary career. For associationists such as David Hartley and David Hume the self itself appears to be “the product of association which, though fundamentally random in origin, emerge, like language itself, towards a level of relative stability.”

Notwithstanding their tendency towards relative stability, associations are an outcome of the imagination and will therefore become particularly relevant as an explanatory source for the aesthetic. Francis Hutcheson will find an aesthetic principle in “association” that allows him to explain the enjoyment of aesthetic contents in an indeterminate openness. “Associations of Ideas make Objects pleasant, and delightful, which are not naturally apt to give any such Pleasures.” Associations are now considered a productive and playful relation between mental events that are potentially enjoyable.

In the further development of Scottish aesthetics, Alexander Gerard and Archibald Alison will develop an aesthetic theory of association, in which the imaginary
reconstruction of a lost world and is connected to the aesthetic genius. As Alexander Gerard writes in his *Essay on Genius*:

> [T]he bye-roads of association, as we may term them, lead to rich and unexpected regions, give occasion to noble sallies of imagination, and proclaim an uncommon force of genius, able to penetrate through unfrequented ways to lofty or beautiful conceptions.²⁴

Associative connections allow for unforeseen dimensions of meaning, newness is their aesthetic effect.²⁵ This neither deductive nor arbitrary connectivity of ideas, a connectivity that is intrinsic to the form of the representation of objects, introduces an open meaning-structure. This field of enriched imagination, introduced by associations, defines the associationist paradigm of the aesthetic.

David Hume, more influentially though in quite a different way, tries to take the phenomenon of association seriously in an epistemological sense and classifies different types of association (by resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect). But it is Hume, who, to a large extent, anticipates the questions and problems of psychoanalysis, when he detects in his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* that:

> even in our wildest and most wandering reveries, nay in our very dreams, we shall find, if we reflect, that the imagination ran not altogether at adventures, but that there was still a connexion upheld among the different ideas, which succeeded each other. Were the loosest and freest conversation to be transcribed, there would immediately be observed something which connected it in all its transitions.²⁶

Thought connections, associations, Hume suggests, are not arbitrary. They can be reconstructed, theorized. If transcribed and reflected upon, the overload of stimuli can still be comprehended as a rational structure. Hume’s cognitive response describes a third way of dealing with the challenge of associations.

With Locke, Hutcheson, Allison, Gerard, and, most importantly, Hume, the origin of the concept of association is British. And with the thought of Coleridge and Mill the continuity and influence of British associationism remains strong. It is, however, particularly its German interpretation that becomes influential in the nineteenth-century prehistory of modern psychology, including Freud’s own.

The expansion of associationism in Germany was affected by the nineteenth-century’s scientism and materialism, and by the exploration of psychophysical laws, which might explain the emergence and connections of ideas. In the foundational discourse on the discipline of psychology, Johann Friedrich Herbart will turn association into a subject of the special sciences. Pursuing the idea of an “experimental psychology,” Gustav Theodor Fechner and Wilhelm Wundt try to discover “elementary laws concerning the relation between the world of bodies and the world of mind.”²⁷ Association is no longer only regarded as a mental phenomenon, but seen in close relation to bodily states and neurological impulses, which tend to be unpredictable.

The discipline of psychology emerges, for the most part, in nineteenth-century Leipzig. In fact, association is one of the problems that the emerging discipline attempted
Free Associations

79
to solve. The social problem of overstimulation in the context of modernity’s bombarding of the senses was their starting point. The relationship between sensation and attention became an issue for the new field of psychology precisely because of concern for the effect on the stability and unity of the human subject’s psychic and physical integrity.²⁸

Against the backdrop of these traditions Sigmund Freud eventually developed free association as a method.²⁹ And much of the materialist spirit of nineteenth-century scientism remained in Freud’s interest in laws of association and the hidden bodily logic by which it is driven. Spontaneous, free association provides Freud with non-restricted expressions that allow him to decode the structure of the unconscious, its libidinal drives, and the history that has crystallized within it.

Free association is, in structure an egalitarian and anti-representational method, as Pontalis and Laplanche define, “according to which voice must be given to all thoughts without exception which enter the mind, whether such thoughts are based upon a specific element (word, number, dream-image or any kind of idea at all) or produced spontaneously.”³¹

The so-called “fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis promises to disclose the secrets of the human psyche. It reveals the madness, as it is to be “found in most men,” as John Locke had said, and clarifies the hidden laws, which connect our ideas even “in our very dreams,” just as David Hume had assumed. Next to the somewhat pathological and epistemic dimensions it will, however, keep its aesthetic dimension, too, dealing interpretively, and, following the lead of Scottish aesthetics: aesthetically, with the polyvalence of meaning that, in its openness, is neither arbitrary nor deductive.³² With the emphasis on the productive imagination of the associating mind a great amount of trust is invested into the self-regulation of the mind. It is attributed with a sense of aesthetic pleasure.

II. Ontologies and methods

In the context of the history of ideas it is easy to tell how the two conceptions of “association” differ. Yet there remains an interesting connection between the two. The analogous use of the term in Marx and Freud is functionally related, rather than mere coincidence: Marx and Freud emphasize the possibility of a self-regulation of the social body on the one hand and of mental capacities on the other, articulating new forms of representation that are grounded in spontaneous relations between associated elements.

The point, however, is not to simply add social theory to psychoanalysis or some psychology to Marxism or to read one in view of the other. The failure of the Freudomarxist attempts to identify the project of psychoanalysis and Marxism and the pitfalls of the Althusserian debates on ideology (trying to incorporate a psychoanalytical conception of the imaginary into the Marxist concept of ideology) are telling in this respect. In his 1987 text “Psychoanalysis and Marxism” Ernesto Laclau claimed that adding the theoretical benefits of either of these theories to the other cannot be “of the slightest use.”³³ The problem,” he argues, “is rather that of finding an index of comparison between two different theoretical fields, but that, in turn, implies the construction of a new field, within which the comparison would make sense.”³⁵
Laclau sees “the coincidence of the two, around the logic of the signifier as a logic of unevenness and dislocation;” he conceives of their analogy in terms of a structural logic of repression and denial in the order of representation that both theories, Marx’s and Freud’s, diagnose. The structural denial of the latent content, which conditions (as it is conditioned by) the orders of representation—that is the structure of thought in both Marx and Freud. In line with Laclau we can call this structural similarity an ontological similarity. Slavoj Žižek’s attempts to reconstruct Marxism in light of a psychoanalytically informed theory of the symbolic have given this idea plausibility.

Insofar as the ontologies of Marx and Freud are concerned, the point of Laclau and a long tradition of structuralist readings of Marx and Freud are both convincing. But the “index of comparison” goes one step further than the structural affinities of ontology. It encloses a particular method, a specific structural approach that unites Marx and Freud and is, in a number of ways, of aesthetic relevance.

a) The hidden ground

The “logic of the signifier as a logic of unevenness and dislocation,” as Laclau has called it, alludes to a specifically ontological construction that Marx and Freud share. Both of them are dealing with a specific form of manifest being that conceals its latent and dynamic ground, of which it is, at the same time, a product. In other words, both are dealing with “the gap between representation and production.”

As Freud confronts the symbolic sphere of articulated speech with the hidden ground of the unconscious, Marx confronts the institutionalized spheres of state and capital with the capacity of material production to self-organize. In both of their theories, the symbolic sphere is confronted with some hidden dynamic of production that is structurally excluded from an apparent logic of representation (while being inherently dependent on it, too).

Both ontologies center around four elements: Both describe, first, the order of representation (speech, value, and political representation) as dialectically linked to a productive and dynamic ground (which might, however, be both its cause and effect at the same time). The latent, libidinal unconscious energies and material practices are the denied core of the symbolic and historical practices. The dynamic core out of which representation emerges is materially concrete.

Second, Freud and Marx conceive of this productive and dynamic ground of the symbolic as being structurally hidden. The forces of repression drive both ideology in the case of Marx and repression and censorship in the case of Freud. Capital and the state deny the reality of class, by which they are secretly determined, as they establish universal orders of representation. Conscious speech represses the articulation of the complex as it structures the unconscious.

Third, both conceive of this dynamic core of representation as being mediated through human practices and history. Marx’s materialism is interested in human labor. Therefore it never explicitly deals with crude matter as such but rather with forms of interaction between human agents and historical material, emphasizing the historicity of human needs and of nature. Freud describes the unconscious as a sub-symbolic
material remnant, into which the history of the individual is inscribed. *The ontological foundation of Marx and Freud therefore appears to be a limit concept of symbolic representation.*

Fourth, the productive ground of symbolic representation is therefore not merely an object, an entity, or a thing. Instead it is a relation between human practice, on the one hand, and corporeal and natural materiality, on the other. This relation is an all-embracing structure. Marx’s “socio-economic foundation” and Freud’s “complex” converge here: They both describe a dynamic relation at the core of the social (for example, psychological dynamics): *The ontological foundation is a materially and practically concrete structure, connecting a variety of elements.*

All the readings of Marx and Freud inspired by structuralism have (for better or worse) pointed out these analogies in their various ontologies. As far as I know they have, however, neglected the methodological hint that hides in the term “association.” For in both theories association serves as a means to articulate and to organize this ontological ground for therapeutic ends. My claim is, thus, that for a proper understanding of the relations between Marx and Freud the analogies in ontology have to be seen in context with association, which I will reconstruct as a specific form of aesthetic rationality.

b) **Intrinsic connectivity**

The potentialities of living labor and of libidinal impulses are to be organized in free association. Whether in the history of Marxism or psychoanalysis, association is a free form of coordination—it helps organize an intrinsic link that might otherwise be repressed. Such freedom is based on the self-regulation of social or psychological forces, now freed to form their own associations.

This idea can be called aesthetic in several respects. First, it aims to mediate materiality and symbolic practice. In Marxist terminology, the association of workers avoids the flaws of the bourgeois state by bringing economic production and political organization (indeed a form of symbolic practice and, for better or worse, representation) directly together. Free association in Freudian psychoanalysis tries to reconstruct the structure and logic of the complex as it is connected with bodily impulses. And it is this connection that is, according to Freud, normally repressed by articulated speech.

Association is, furthermore, driven by the assumption that the structural potentialities—inherent in the material producers or spontaneous utterances—are connected and can establish an aesthetic order based on the affinities of repressed material elements. Secretly, latently these potentialities are already connected—it is the method of free association that lays bare the yet unorganized energies.

Some tendencies towards the formation of such patterns can, as both Marx and Freud point out, already be found in the present order. Marx and Engels emphasize in *The Communist Manifesto* that with the bourgeois order a relation between the laborers emerges as its immanent product, something that is already present in a latent form. “The advance of industry,” they write, somewhat teleologically, “whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by the revolutionary combination, due to association.”

Association is a form of rationality that follows a different logic of expression and organization. It maintains its own presence in the given order, underneath and in struggle with the dominant rationality. And, as the early Freud argues in his “Psychotherapy of Hysteria,” it even presents its own “correct and proper order.” He stresses “that the pathogenic psychical material which has ostensibly been forgotten, which is not at the ego’s disposal and which plays no part in association and memory, nevertheless in some fashion lies ready to hand and in correct and proper order. It is only a question of removing the resistances that bar the way to the material.”

One does not have to deny the disanalogy between historico-philosophical and hermeneutic types of explanation to also see the analogy: In both perspectives conditions of possibility for association are historically specific. They are pre-structured by the complex or the relations of production, respectively.

Here the concept of association becomes aesthetically interesting. For it is not only that association had been, ever since its further development in the Scottish Enlightenment, an aesthetic concept. Clearly, in its original context, the concept was part of a foundational discourse for the justification of judgments of a specific kind: judgments of taste. But even outside this historically specific discourse, association retains a peculiarly aesthetic dimension: Association is a pattern that connects expressive impulses and is uniquely resistant to the conventional systems of representation. With this structure of open referentiality and of a potentially infinite chain of associations, Marx and Freud employ structures of aesthetic rationality, emphasizing the potentialities of material forces to self-regulate, without leading to any finalized or totalized whole. Sometimes the awareness of this aesthetic potential comes to the fore: No wonder that in The Interpretation of Dreams Freud also calls free association, reminiscent of Kantian-Schillerian terminology, at least three times a “free play.”

This is not to say that either Marx or Freud would truly develop an aesthetic theory. Rather, both find in association an aesthetically inspired method that therapeutically supplements their ontology by freely organizing the repressed elements of symbolic practice following the lead of their (non-deductive yet non-arbitrary) affinities.

c) Repression and re-presentation

According to both Marx and Freud, association is resistant to repressive forms of representation. Censorship and the functions of the superego take the place in Freud’s theory that institutionalized ideology occupies in Marx. In association a reality is liberated that was structurally denied. It thus replaces the fixed order of meaning, in which certain connections are made impossible, with an open structure, in which that which is normally repressed comes to the fore.

Freedom of association was, consequently, one of the key demands of the early working class movement. And this model of politics articulates what state and capital institutionally deny: As Marx had outlined, the fetishism of the commodity precisely represses the acknowledgment of living labor, the crystallization of living labor in value veils the invested labor-power, which is to be organized by and in associations. The bourgeois state, similarly, grounded on the idea of universal citoyenneté and
constitutional law, abstracts from its concrete origin in historically specific relations of production.

Marx quite regularly uses the term association when he emphasizes the anti-statist aim of the socialist movement. Association articulates a form of politics that cannot be alienated. In *The Poverty of Philosophy* Marx writes: “The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association which will exclude classes and their antagonism, and there will be no more political power properly so-called…” 45

Freud, of course, did not have to hold such utopian claims: for him, association might simply replace the given orders of articulated speech and of symbolic representation. He stresses, however, that free association is in constant struggle with the tendencies of censorship implicit in the conventional discourse. The analyst’s task is, as Freud writes in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, to find “a legitimate and deeper link between” associations, “which is subjected to the resistance of the censorship.” 46 Association follows an emancipatory impulse and counters repression.

d) Spontaneity and guidance

Speaking of method obviously calls on a terminology that makes a lot more sense in the context of psychoanalysis than in the context of Marxism. 47 Freud has, of course, reflected extensively on the “fundamental rule” of psychoanalysis and its implicit ethos. Or, as Cornelius Castoriadis has observed: “The question of practical philosophy appears in psychoanalysis as the question of the end and the finality of the psychoanalytic treatment, but also that of its ‘means.’” 48 Free association is a principal one of these means.

Again, the divergences are obvious and in the case of Marxism it might be doubtful whether association can be described as a method at all, even more doubtful whether it would have a therapeutic function. However, both Marxism and psychoanalysis are confronted with structural problems in the employment and facilitation of free association. And against such a backdrop, association does in fact appear to be a *therapeutical method* in Marxism as well: It uncovers and helps to resolve structural flaws; it helps to organize a different society in which the detachment of the producers from the fetishized social forms, under which they are condemned to live, is to be overcome.

Freud invests a lot of effort on such questions. The analyst is fully dependent on the associations of the patient, 49 and so to trigger associations is often necessary to break potential resistance. Especially in the case of hysteria such resistance is pronounced. The analyst does, to a certain extent, have to act on behalf of the associations. But that also places the psychoanalyst in a dilemma where associations threaten to become personal projections (by means of transference and countertransference).

In this tension between the autonomy of associations and the discourse of the analyst, of spontaneity and directedness, Freud is confident in the technique of association. As he writes in the *Studies on Hysteria*: “Every single reminiscence which emerges during an analysis of this kind has significance. An intrusion of *irrelevant* mnemonic images … in fact never occurs.” 50 As every association is in some way or
another related to the dominant complex, every form of association is legitimate; its articulation is grounded in the structure of the complex.\textsuperscript{51}

Wherever such politics of association within the theoreti-co-political context of psychoanalysis might lead, in the history of Marxism these methodological or, more precisely, strategic decisions are openly political. What appears as the relation between association and the analyst in psychoanalysis is strongly reminiscent of the relation between the spontaneity of working class politics and the role of the party. In the \textit{Manifesto} Marx and Engels are very explicit about the attempt to minimize tension: “The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to the other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole.”\textsuperscript{52}

It is, of course, not so much in Marx’s own thought but in the history of the socialist tradition that this tension will become central. In the history of Marxism, however, precisely this question will be of vital importance. Classically Rosa Luxemburg’s accentuation of the spontaneity of the masses and their capacity to self-organize prominently opposes Lenin’s conception of the vanguard party.\textsuperscript{53} The heritage of political associationism remains vital in the left-wing communist strands of council communism, where free association, free from party domination is the central idea.\textsuperscript{54}

\textbf{e) The whole}

I have mentioned before that the ontological construction that Marx and Freud share is not grounded on any kind of crudely material or thing-like foundation. Rather it refers to a structurally complex, relational system—that is, in a mediated way, materially concrete. Association is, in this respect, an expression of a structural connectivity, too. As such, on the one hand, it has a therapeutic and practical dimension and an epistemic and interpretive dimension, on the other.\textsuperscript{55} The measure of the validity of associations and the measure of their success is their relation to the whole.

The more developed the chain of association, Freud accentuates, the more correct it is as well. The “associative threads,” he writes, “interweave with one another and finally lead to a tissue of thoughts which are not only perfectly rational but can also be easily fitted into the known context of our mental processes.”\textsuperscript{56} The degree of rationality that Freud is aiming at consists in the connectivity of associations and the degree to which they indicate elements of a further-reaching structure. Association has an epistemic (and in his specific setting, therapeutic) value. As this is a therapeutic means, it is meant to replace the old order. Freud’s method, particularly in his early work, is mainly cathartic. Hence, the epistemic and the therapeutic aspects of association overlap to a large degree.

Obviously, this is different in the social philosophy of Marx, where association is an organizational and strictly practical means with internal ends. While in the case of Freud the therapeutic function of association seems to be largely absorbed in the epistemic, it is the therapeutic \textit{practice} of association that predominates in the considerations of Marx. But not only does the whole therapeutic situation constitute a liberating practice that is not reducible (certainly not in late Freud) to the cathartic reconstruction of any real story. Both Marx and Freud also find the normative measure
in the construction of an alternative connectivity, a network of associations that approximates the totality of the complex or of the social order to be replaced.

Marx writes: “The working class, in the course of its development, will substitute for the old civil society an association.” And it will do so by spreading the idea and political form of association as broadly as possible. Association will, as Marx claims, have to “make the revolution permanent, until all the more or less propertied classes have been forced out of their position of dominance, the proletariat has conquered state power, and the association of proletarians, not only in one country but in all the dominant countries of the world, has advanced so far . . . that at least the decisive productive forces are concentrated in the hands of the proletarians.” And although the political, organizational aspect of association preponderates, association has an epistemic dimension for Marx, too. Association as a form of political organization and an end of political struggle results from transformations of ways in which human practices are linked through commodified labor-power. But as this form of organization merely exists secretly under the repressive rule of capital, association makes this social secret explicit. The reorganization of the division of labor through association is practical and epistemic, means and end, and, at the same time, meant to break with the repressive order of institutionalized ideology.

III. Aesthetics and the politics of self-regulation

This reconstruction does not suggest that the theories of Marx and Freud operate on the same ground or analyze the same phenomena. The analogies are, instead, structural. Such structural analogies between Marxism and psychoanalysis are not to be reduced to ontology but also consist in a specific method that echoes a specific dimension of aesthetic rationality.

a) Isomorphism without ontological priorities

This leaves many meta-theoretical questions open. How can these two different theoretical practices be related to each other at all? What consequences could be drawn from this analogy? Four possible consequences stand out.

First, one could think of ways of mutual denunciation from the standpoint of either orthodox psychoanalysis or Marxism, with totalizing claims about the predominance of either the psychological or the social. From the Marxist versions of such a standpoint, Freud would appear as a bourgeois thinker, who takes up the historical experiences of fin de siècle capitalism and transforms them ideologically by projecting them on the constitution of the individual alone: The social experience of social repression and political associationism were projected onto the individual mind. And as Freud is, of course, writing against precisely this morbid historical background without explicitly bringing this forward, there might even be some plausibility to that claim. Voloshinov has suggested such a critique, in which Freudianism is seen as a denial of the primacy of the social, as he literally writes in his Freidianism: “Freudian psychical dynamics and its mechanism are only a projection into the individual psyche of social relationships.”
From the psychoanalytic versions of such a position Marx would appear as a neurotic, who projects mental energies onto society. The denial of the inner psychological dynamics would have led to their displacement to other fields of research. The various versions of psychohistory from Erik Erikson and Lloyd deMause all the way through to Peter Gay’s interpretation of the importance of psychoanalysis for historiography (and the major examples that he has in mind) might be an example for this kind of reading: Historical personalities and forms of theory in the light of neuroses and sublimation.61 This argument, too, has certain plausibility: Experiences of repression and of emancipation might indeed primarily be experienced on an individual, psychological level.

Both readings are, obviously, of the same structure, and in both cases the similarity would merely be the effect of the denial of their totalizing claim to truth. In this sense, both of these interpretations would claim that either of the two theories would basically be wrong, a misinterpretation of the other’s achievements.

If in this first interpretation of the connection between Marx and Freud passionate identification predominates, cool historical distance would be central for the second. This second position would read Freud and Marx as two examples for the same theoretical paradigm or epistêmê. From the distanced position of the historian of systems of thought one could describe their analogies as typical for the historical framework that they represent, trying to prove this in comparison with systems of thought from other disciplines, too. Such an archaeological position would abstain from the question whether or not there is any contemporary relevance of these theories for today. They would simply be examples for a different historical paradigm, for a shape of life that has grown old, to use Hegel’s words. In my eyes, however, that would be too passive an approach to the history of thought, leaving aside the timeliness of both of these theory’s claims to emancipation and to comprehend the obstacles of symbolic practices.62

Third, this affinity between the theories could be seen as mere coincidence. Any overarching connection between different fields of theory and its implicit totalizing claim would be rejected. This would be the dominant strand in Neo-Kantian modernist and hypermodernist theories of rationality. In this light, rationalities appear as region-specific and any overlaps that go further than logical consistency are coincidental, if not distressing.63 The departmentalization of scientific reason would widely have abandoned any such interference of theoretical construction, since the respective problems that have to be solved are far too diverse. One would be led to assume that the constitution of the historical individual and the constitution of the body politic would not allow for any structural comparison. Hence, the theoretical affinities between Marx and Freud would appear as remnants of an already obsolete romanticism. And this position is, doubtlessly, a strong position, as it emphasizes the different requirements of different social tasks in diversified social and discursive systems.

There is, however, a fourth interpretation to consider, according to which, the affinities between Marx and Freud are neither merely coincidental or flawed, nor would either of them simply be wrong from the perspective of the other. This interpretation (which is in fact mine) has two dimensions: First, it implies the strong assumptions of an irreducible, isomorphic and equiprimordial relation64 between the individual body
and the body politic.\textsuperscript{65} This interpretation differs from classical Freudomarxist theories, according to which we can assume an immediate continuity between mental and economic forms of repression. Thus, the emphasis on a structural analogy between the ontologies of Marx and Freud does not suggest any kind of immediate continuity of their two projects: “The psyche and the social-historical are mutually irreducible,”\textsuperscript{66} as Castoriadis has emphasized.\textsuperscript{67} The emancipation of libido and individual, on the one hand, and of labor and society, on the other, do not necessarily have to converge. Neither can one be said to be prior to the other.

There is a strong strand of such isomorphic thought in the history of philosophy that leads from Plato to Spinoza and Nietzsche and some of its exemplars in twentieth-century thought: in Michel Foucault’s idea of micropolitics and in Oskar Negt’s and Alexander Kluge’s multilayered discussion of self-regulation in \textit{History and Obstinacy}.\textsuperscript{68} The history of associationism (particularly David Hartley and David Hume) provides a number of arguments for such a line of thought as well. Such an interpretation suggests an intrinsic connection between the individual body and the body politic in the constitution of subjectivity. It eventually suggests that the reproduction of forms of social domination equally takes place on both levels.\textsuperscript{69}

\textbf{b) Disrupting the orders of representation}

This emphasis on the mutually irreducible function of (psychological, political) association contains yet a second dimension. This dimension is, as I have argued, aesthetic: interpretive, productive of meaning (which, again, has to be understood in its openness without being arbitrary or deductive), and rooted in the grey zones of symbolic representation. Friedrich Schiller was one of the most explicit theorists of an equiprimordial and isomorphic relation between the constitution of the individual body and the body politic, finding a therapeutic potential in aesthetic rationality.\textsuperscript{70} This reference to Schiller might not be obvious. But in his \textit{Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man}, he addresses the aesthetic configuration of cultural practices (from individual mindsets to public institutions) quite explicitly: Aesthetics, for Schiller, famously appears as the mediation between both mind and body and individual and the state. Schiller takes the Kantian idea of an aesthetic rationality as an emancipatory potential for both state and individual, as it re-embeds abstract and implicitly violent dimensions of rationality in the material and impulsive sensuous being. And in the 27th letter on the \textit{Aesthetic Education of Man} he even explicitly refers to the idea of “free association” as just another word for playful figures of the aesthetic.\textsuperscript{71}

In this sense, Schiller is not only a major example for the twofold politics of the aesthetic (an ideological displacement of emancipatory energies and the anticipation of their fulfillment), as Terry Eagleton has argued.\textsuperscript{72} Schiller also allows conceiving the aesthetic as a political potential that disruptively operates on two political fronts: the organization of the historical individual as much as the order of the state.\textsuperscript{73}

Jacques Rancière has made this aesthetic Schiller our contemporary again, when he emphasizes the potential of aesthetic rationality to subvert the dominant orders of representation. The redistribution of the field of the sensible—of impulse and rational representation—is the political lesson learned from the aesthetic paradigm.
From this Schillerian point of departure Rancière goes one step further. Although he does not mention association, he finds the methodology of both the theories of Marx and Freud to be triggered by an era of aesthetic experience, by a specific form of thought that he interprets in the sequence of Schiller. The “major hermeneutics” of Marx and Freud are, according to Rancière, deeply inspired by the “new social imagery” as it tries to “apply the procedure of surprise and decoding initiated by the new literary forms to the new flood of social and commercial images.”

“It is the moment,” Rancière writes:

When Marx teaches us to decipher the hieroglyphics written on the seemingly a-historical body of the commodity and to penetrate into the productive hell concealed by the words of economics, just as Balzac taught us to decipher a history on a wall or an outfit and enter the underground circles that contain the secret of social appearances. Thereafter, summarizing a century’s literature, Freud will teach us how to find in the most insignificant details the key to a history and the formula of meaning, even if it originates in some irreducible non-sense.

According to Rancière, Marx and Freud were readers of the codes of society and of the psyche, readers inspired by new forms of aesthetic imagery and theory, revaluing hidden meanings transferring the aesthetic potential of a reconfiguration of the sensible into theory. Their specific aesthetic sensitivity lies, then, in their analysis of a specific sensorium, of specific configurations of subjectivity. Self-regulation, association appears as a source of pleasure and goes beyond the merely hermeneutic principle of unfolding hidden meaning. Disrupting hierarchical systems of representation, it operates as a source of emancipatory politics.

With the idea of association, then, the politics of the aesthetic appears as a concrete logic of (dis-)organization that also allows us to rethink the historical function of the aesthetic and its relation to the political in more concrete terms. The theoretical analogy between Marx’s and Freud’s associationism consists in this specifically aesthetic logic of organizing the latent in opposition to the dominant forms of representation. Such association is about a widened horizon of possible connections that rearranges the logics of representation. It is “aesthetic” as it mediates between the realms of the material and the symbolic, between libido and representation, between the economic and the political, as it interferes with (as Rancière would have it) the distribution of the sensible. In this sense the idea of association opposes the specific orders of repression (within the individual body and the body politic).

By referencing their respective tradition of associationism Marx and Freud employ a subversive rationality which can obviously be brought into play on several grounds—as sovereign aesthetics. Wherever it comes into play, the logic of the aesthetic produces connections and transitions and opens up possibilities of reference that are otherwise foreclosed by fixed and hierarchical systems of representation. This links the aesthetic to various types of emancipatory practice. If we may therefore claim that emancipation is an aesthetico-political project, then association is one of its many names.
Notes

7 The “Marxian version of free association” was identified in cinematographic techniques of Sergej Eisenstein. See: Fredric Jameson, “Marx and Montage,” in New Left Review 5 (2009), 109–17, 113.
8 See Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, The German Ideology. Critique of Modern German Philosophy, in MECW: vol. 5 1845–1847 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976), 105–212, 44; with the emphasis on the real life practical dimension of language in opposition to an abstract mentalist understanding, according to which concepts would have objective meaning. See also V.N. Voloshinov, Freudianism. A Marxist Critique (London: Verso 2012), 127: “Language and its forms are the products of prolonged social intercourse among members of a given speech community.”
14 In some sense, Fourier can be seen as a predecessor not only of Marxism but also of psychoanalysis. Passionate affection is the theory of the spontaneous connectivity of otherwise repressed desires, a theory that encompasses both individual and social emancipation. See Charles Fourier, The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier. Selected Texts on Work, Love and Passionate Attraction, 329 ff.
15 See George Lichtheim, The Origins of Socialism, 66 for the relevance of this term for Blanqui.
Aesthetic Marx


23 Francis Hutcheson, An Inquiry into the Ideas of Beauty and Virtue in Two Treatises (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2003), 63.


25 Cf. Cairns Craig, Association and the Literary Imagination, 23.


29 For Freud’s dependency on Scottish associationism see Cairns Craig, Association and the Literary Imagination, 30.

30 Anti-representational is meant to signify a form of expression in which what is expressed cannot be re-presented (vertreten werden) by the established and distortive forms of speech.


32 This emphasis on interpretation is, of course, inspired by Paul Ricoeur’s approach—regarding the projects of Marx and Freud (and Nietzsche) as hermeneutic projects. Both, “far from being detractors of ‘consciousness’ [or: the symbolic, JFH], aim at extending it.” Paul Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy. An Essay on Interpretation (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 34.
34 Ernesto Laclau, “Psychoanalysis and Marxism,” 333.
37 As Laclau states in another context: A “pure relation of representation is obtainable because it is of the essence of the process of representation that the representative has to contribute to the identity of what is represented.” See Ernesto Laclau, Emancipation(s) (London: Verso, 1996), 87. Tomšič, The Capitalist Unconscious (47–62, 99–116, and 130–47) strongly emphasizes this parallel in the focus on production, which identifies both psychoanalytical and Marxist ontologies.
38 This is not to say that the representational practices (the superstructure/the symbolic order) were not material. Symbolic practices are, as the line of tradition from Gramsci and Raymond Williams has emphasized, material practices.
39 See David Pavón-Cuéllar, Marxism and Psychoanalysis. In or Against Psychology (London: Routledge, 2017), 38. Pavón-Cuéllar also points out that for both Marx and Freud this is the core argument of their critique of idealism and idealization, respectively.
40 See Tomšič, The Capitalist Unconscious, 139.
41 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Manifesto of the Communist Party, 496.
44 David Harvey, Paris. Capital of Modernity, 291.
45 Karl Marx, The Poverty of Philosophy, 212. See Abensour’s discussion of “true democracy” in which the “constitution’ will rest upon the ongoing self-constitution of the people themselves. Democracy Against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment (Cambridge: Polity, 2011).
46 Sigmund Freud: The Interpretation of Dreams II, 530.
50 Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, Studies on Hysteria, 295.
51 If these methodological decisions are, as I suggest, taken as elements of an emancipatory political ontology, then the comparison with C.G. Jung would be particularly interesting. For it is C.G. Jung who, in his Studies in Word-association, from the very beginning began to distinguish pathological forms of associations from the apparently healthy ones. Social distinctions (such as education, and so on) were of major importance, too. Here you can see the right-wing dimension of his method,


54 Convincingly, although, typically, without any reference to the idea of association, David Pavón-Cuéllar formulates this analogy (referencing Lukács and Luxemburg rather than Marx) in the following terms: “In Lukács as in Freud and Luxemburg, it is the subject itself that must make the unconscious conscious, through spontaneous action that becomes conscious through its effects” (Italics in the original). We can add: This happens through and because of association.

55 I leave open the question in how far these dimensions can be separated. Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* argues most strongly for their unity. “Therapeutic” practice, according to Lukács, is precisely the condition of cognizing the structure (“totality”). This is the core of his “standpoint epistemology.” Cf. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 149–209.


57 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, 212.


62 This is, presumably, Foucault’s position on the repressive hypothesis as presented in his *History of Sexuality, vol. 1, The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1990).

63 Habermas’s emphasis on the differentiation of validity claims would be a perfect example. Particularly so in his *Theory of Communicative Action, 2 vols* (Cambridge: Polity, 1986). Luhmann’s system theory, here in agreement with Habermas, would be

64 Equiprimordiality is meant to emphasize the simultaneity, “Gleichursprünglichkeit,” of individual body and body politic. The German “gleich” is probably more explicit about this temporal dimension than the Latin/English “equi.”

65 See for instance Étienne Balibar’s interpretation of Marx as a transindividual thinker. Étienne Balibar, The Philosophy of Karl Marx (London: Verso, 1995), 31 f. In Friedrich Balke’s Figuren der Souveränität—particularly his chapter on Spinoza (“Enkrateia,” in his: Figuren der Souveränität [München: Wilhelm Fink, 2009], 169–237), the idea of the equiprimordiality of individual body and body politic is powerfully developed.

66 Cornelius Castoriadis, “Done and to be Done,” in The Castoriadis Reader, 361–417, 376.

67 Helmut Dahmer, Libido und Gesellschaft (243) suggests a similar understanding, speaking of the coexistence of two different systems, mutually correcting each other without any one of the two becoming dominant. They meet, so Dahmer argues, in the theorization of what might become subject (or just as well remain unconscious).


69 The critique of hierarchical representation implicit to such interpretations, furthermore, describes two basic aspects of the concept of political ontology. It determines political ontology as a general structure of symbolic representation and reflects its meta-theoretical implications. And it lays bare the theoretico-political consequences of the question of how such a ground could be obtained. In this sense, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have, in Milles Plateaux (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 368–445, briefly mentioned philosophical associationism in line with political associationism and suggest this as an anti-statist form of politics and of subjectivity. Cf. also John O’Neil, Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society (Ithaca, NY: Cornell, 1985).


71 Friedrich Schiller, Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2004), 67. See also Chapter 8 by Daniel Hartley in this volume.


73 This idea of an isomorphic relation between aesthetic experience and the structure of an emancipated society—especially if read in context with the twofold aesthetic-political idea of association—is also one way of interpreting Adorno’s idea that “the process enacted internally by each and every artwork works back on society as the model of a possible praxis in which something on the order of a collective subject is constituted.” See Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (London/New York: Continuum, 2002), 231. Cf. Jens Becker and Heinz Brakemeier (eds), Vereinigung freier Individuen. Kritik der Tauschgesellschaft und gesellschaftliches Gesamtsubjekt bei Theodor W. Adorno (Hamburg: VSA, 2004).


Section II

Style and Performativity in Marx
The years 1857 and 1858 proved to be rather productive for Karl Marx: he began to write the *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, which later turned into the first chapter of his masterpiece *Capital*; he developed his own central ideas on labor, surplus value, and profit; and he refined his own philosophy, particularly the concepts of alienation and automation. Moreover, Marx intended to publish an article on aesthetics for the newly founded *New American Cyclopedia*; yet his ideas differed from the publisher’s intentions and Marx therefore dropped this plan. While writing a fully elaborated *Aesthetics* in general was obviously not Marx’s primary goal, the philosopher and critic of political economy was nevertheless keenly interested in questions on aesthetic issues in his first outlines of *The Capital*. Marx’s notebook from the years 1857 and 1858 contains excerpts from the 1840 *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexicon*, and from articles and encyclopedias written in English and in French on the topic of aesthetics. Marx also displayed a particular interest in the popular study *Aesthetics, or The Science of the Beautiful*, published in several volumes from 1846 to 1857 by Friedrich Theodor Vischer (1807–1887).  

As Marx’s notes suggest, he engaged with post-Hegelian philosophy despite his critical analyses of it which he articulated in, for example, *The German Ideology* or *Theses on Feuerbach*. Marx even developed his own aesthetic endeavors in relation to Vischer’s understanding. What remains published of Marx’s early interest in aesthetics at the time are, after all, some principal reflections on aesthetics in his first version of the aforementioned *Capital*. In this chapter, I aim to re-encounter Marx’s engagement with idealism and his breaking of new grounds in political theory on the discursive intersection with the aesthetics of his time.

I. Vischer’s concept of beauty

Marx carefully recorded certain aspects of Vischer’s theory, four of which I outline here. First, he transcribed every title and subtitle, thus planning explicitly to construct his great economical project in casual booklets just like Vischer’s *Aesthetics*. Second, Marx noted from all parts of Vischer’s six volumes key sentences on the active role of
the subject in the appearance of the beautiful. The role of imagination ("Phantasie") captured a great part in this context. Lukács commented on this aspect that Marx had to fight on two fronts, not only against idealism, but also against mechanical materialism. Consequently, Marx's *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy* stressed the active dimension of the subject. The third aspect with which Marx was interested, concerned the role of myth and its relation to poetry old and new. Finally, Marx noted many of Vischer's comments on the limits of aesthetics, which are, in Vischer's work, the sublime and the comical.

Already in 1837 Vischer published his treatise *On the Sublime and the Comical* as an attempt to develop a systematic account of aesthetics in the tradition of objective idealism. This treatise was later included as the first part in Vischer's six volume key work *Aesthetics* (1846–1857), bearing the title "The Metaphysics of the Beautiful." In his *Aesthetics*, Vischer adapted Hegel's dialectical method to the field of aesthetics, thereby giving him the reputation of completing Hegel's *Aesthetics* and of being the most important scholar of aesthetics, after Hegel. Vischer regarded beauty as a dialectical process that eventually unites the idea with the form in the artwork. Metaphysical beauty was, for Vischer, the perfect unity of the idea and the form, resulting only from the beauty's dialectical self-expression in the artwork. First, beauty exposed itself to "the conflict of its elements" which consisted of the sublime and the comical; Vischer related to the English critics of the eighteenth century who had perceived the sublime and the comical as opposing moments of beauty as such. Yet, in Vischer's view, philosophers like Edmund Burke and his countrymen failed to perceive the opposition within the unity. Only Hegel's dialectical method was able to grasp this constellation. If Hegel restricted the aesthetic to the terms of the beautiful in his respective *Aesthetics*, however, he thought of the topic with regard to a philosophy of art, or rather, fine art. Hegel regarded the role of the sublime and the comical as specific concerns, not as general accounts of the role of aesthetics. Vischer, on the other hand, wanted to include the sublime and the comical into his notion of aesthetics. He aimed for an all-encompassing modern philosophical view in which beauty could provide a synthesis—certainly quite Hegelian—as a "subjective–objective reality." For Vischer, art expressed "the principle of the unity of subjectivity and objectivity" as well as the realization of this unity in the realm of philosophy. So if Hegel failed to use the means of his dialectics with respect to the role of the sublime and the comical, and if he dissolved the conflicting moments into other parts of the system, Vischer attempted to fill this gap.

After all, Vischer aimed at preserving the unity of the objective idea and its subjective revelation in the artwork at a time when the post-Hegelians were confronted with this question of unity in general. Aesthetic scholars like Arnold Ruge or Hermann Weiße thus interpreted the beautiful as a sensual revelation of the absolute idea in the artwork, perceivable through imagination. Vischer criticized their subjective perception of the objective idea and wondered how objective truth could then be perceived. He trusted in art's capacity to reveal this truth through beauty. However, this trust in art remains ambiguous throughout Vischer's *Aesthetics*, as Berthold Emrich argued about Vischer's key conflict: "... since Vischer dissolves Hegel's mystical unity of the Absolute Spirit and reality, he received on the one hand an endless process of the absolute idea, on the other the living reality in its independence. The central question is now how at least
one certain idea can be realized in life.” Vischer’s attempt to realize one certain idea also recalls Kant’s *Third Critique*. In Vischer’s view, Kant remained within subjective idealism since he, being a philosopher, made an untenable distinction between free beauty and dependent beauty. This fact eventually caused a distorted view of an inner concept of the end. If the subject saw beauty in (or even into) the world in Kant’s philosophy, Vischer claimed that the world had to exist with its inner concept prior to the emergence of art, and not vice versa. The purpose of art was, for Vischer, directed at an indeterminate concept of reason rather than one of understanding, as Kant had claimed. Therefore, according to Vischer, Kant’s aim to unite theoretical and practical philosophy through beauty in Kant’s *Third Critique* failed. With his move towards a proper notion of the inner concept of the end, Vischer grounded his ideas, ultimately, in Schelling’s philosophy of nature, stating that Schelling’s objective idealism was the only system capable of providing a proper metaphysical basis for beauty. Only Schelling’s Romantic Idealism could present the true unity of the idea and the form in his philosophy.

Schelling enabled Vischer to bridge the gap between the subjective form and the objective idea. Schelling’s inner concept of the end provided the decisive solution to the central question as to whether the beauty of nature contained Spirit, or only the subject added this spirit from the outside. Schelling had pointed to a procession of the absolute idea from an undifferentiated state to an antithesis of the subject and the object and, finally, to a stage of synthesis; this final stage provided a return of the beautiful to its original unity. With the notion of an inner concept of the end, the real-theologian aestheticist Vischer was satisfied, for the moment, with uniting organic beauty’s origins and their metaphysical grounds.

II. Vischer’s sublime and the comical

Vischer and Marx were both scholars of the same generation, both born Protestants and greatly influenced by Hegel. They tried to put Hegel’s dialectical method on a new foundation. Subsequently, they were politically active in the Revolution of 1848, and they were creative writers in different fields: as poets, philosophers, and critics of the bourgeois society. Literature always played a key role in their lives. Marx was well acquainted with the canon of literature—from Greek and Roman poets to Shakespeare, Goethe, and his favorite writer Balzac. Like Vischer and the others, Marx was confronted with similar philosophical, political, and aesthetical questions. He often referred to great writers in his own studies and showed analogies or envisaged the future. And, finally, Marx was as interested as Vischer in producing artistic totalities.

Vischer’s concept of the sublime offered a first contrast of the beautiful which brings forth the idea of measurelessness as compared to measured form. The sublime negates the form and confronts form with its own narrowness, initiating an opposition between the form and the formless, the limit and limitlessness, the measure and measurelessness, and serves as a proportional term which essentially hides the thing in itself. If Burke had claimed that darkness is a proper feature of the sublime, Vischer agreed and determined it further as a sudden eruption, which could either be beautiful or ugly.
The sublime appeared beautiful when the idea itself became recognizable during this eruption, and it appeared ugly when the idea outgrew the form drastically. Vischer distinguishes three forms of sublimity: (1) an objective sublime (nature, substance, an overflow of space and time); (2) a subjective sublime (self-recognition of the self’s unity between finitude and infinity); and (3) the subject–object as their dialectical unity. This third form was, for Vischer, the highest form of the sublime. He defined this form to be the proper expression of the tragic.

This figure of thought, the sublime as a tragic dialectic, resembles Hegel’s understanding of the tragic, as Szondi summarized: “From the perspective of the absolute, the tragic process is the battle that the ethical life wages against itself in the form of its opposing particulars. To this extent, the tragic process is also a dialectical process, in which, unlike Schopenhauer’s will and like Solger’s divine idea and Nietzsche’s Dionysus, the absolute reveals itself precisely in its indestructibility.” Vischer’s understanding of the tragic process refers clearly to Hegel’s interpretation of Sophocles’s drama *Antigone.* Hegel saw two moral instances collide in this drama, the law of the family and the law of the state. They clashed because both Creon and Antigone acted according to their own inherent law. While the law of the family demanded burial rites for Antigone’s brother, Polynices, the law of the state demanded the exclusion of its traitors. Because these moral laws were legitimate on both sides, they clashed irreconcilably and hence, in Hegel’s understanding, tragically. The next step of the historical process could then be reached, the reconciliation of the opposing principles through their dialectical annihilation.

Vischer defined the tragic, however, by “taking Hegel’s interpretation of tragedy from the process of Absolute Spirit and transferring it to the system of the beautiful.” Vischer also adapted Hegel’s reading of the tragic from classical to modern drama. For Vischer, modern drama was then also marked by a confrontation between the hero and his opponent. Both central figures were forced to resolve their conflict by way of giving up their one-sided perspectives and realizing their inherent unity. In the end, the dramas reconfirmed, ideally, the divine order. Vischer closed his explanations with a quote from the *Xenien* of Goethe and Schiller, emphasizing, once again, the sublime’s dialectical structure: the sublime is “the great, gigantic fate that elevates the human when it crushes the human.”

The decisive further step in the dialectical process of the beautiful was the comical, which Vischer defined as necessary to compensating the negation of form through a new negation of the idea. Vischer understood the comical consequently as a double negation; if the sublime criticized the form and broke free from it, the form revolted against the sublime. In an earlier study, Vischer had clarified the relation between the sublime and the comical by comparing them to the image of a scale, placing the idea of beauty on one tray and form on the other. These trays were equilibrated in beauty, while the idea weighed heavier whenever the sublime was added to it, and it shot up when the comical was added. Vischer imagined this move as a sudden breakdown, a stunning moment for human consciousness, a contradiction of self-consciousness. During this moment, the comical tripped up the sublime and overthrew it, coming across like a bolt of lightning. Thus the comical presented the weaknesses of the dark sublime.

Since it is possible to overthrow something in different ways, the forms of the comical expanded to farce, jokes, word plays, humor, caprice, or irony. The proper
definition of the comical was, in sum, always related to the sublime. It formed a perfect contrast to the sublime since it provided the negation of a negation.\textsuperscript{27} The relation of the comical and the sublime can be summarized through the following formula: \textit{If the sublime was an attack of the idea on the form, then the comical was an attack of the form on the idea.}

Comedy became, consequently, an operative part of a dialectical process. It was part of an open-ended process in which comedy did not annul the sublime but kept it within itself. Thus comedy could not appear apart from its connection to the sublime to which it responded, and it always remained a recurring step in the development of the abstract beautiful. As Modiano summarized Vischer's notion of the comical: “In comedy the sublime is brought down to earth with a sudden blow, although this is not meant to destroy the status of the sublime or elevate the ordinary at its expense. The comic needs the sublime for its survival, for otherwise it would lose the very contrast between ideality and mundane existence which defines its special dialectical character.”\textsuperscript{28} Metaphysical beauty had to overcome the sublime and the comical as its conflicting challenges before it could repossess itself as a saturated, experienced beauty. Above all, beauty was founded on a dialectical process, progressing according to the solid formula that a \textit{double negation is affirmative}.\textsuperscript{29}

\section*{III. Marx's and Vischer's aesthetic wholes}

Marx's early writings resemble, at a first sight, an utterly idealistic self-understanding, similar to Vischer's. Moreover, Marx also transfers Hegelian metaphysics to the realm of beauty. This becomes most visible in his famous letter to his father of November 10–11, 1837, when Marx recalls a crushing experience of the sublime. He writes: “And yet these last poems are the only ones in which suddenly, as if by a magic touch—oh, the touch was at first a shattering blow—I caught sight of the glittering realm of true poetry like a distant fairy palace, and all my creations crumbled into nothing.”\textsuperscript{30} The “magic touch,” the “shattering blow,” and the “fairy palace” relate to a realm of idealistic poetry, to which Marx's poetry was able to allude, but was unable to represent at all. Just like Vischer's sublime attack on beauty, the idea exceeds the form here and leaves behind a disturbing experience. In fact, Marx explains to his father why he stopped writing poetry. He further reports how he suffered physically from this experience and was sent to the countryside by his doctor, trying to recover there from anemic weakening. As his body worked through his devastating experience as a poet, Marx, as Plato had also done, left the vocation of poetry, stating that a “curtain had fallen, my holy of holies was rent asunder, and new gods had to be installed.”\textsuperscript{31}

In fact, Marx continued to write in a poetic way. He described himself as a “writer of literature who continuously works,”\textsuperscript{32} and he obviously stuck to the idea of unity in beauty. Like Vischer, the obsession with the question of unity had the effect to reveal a higher, undetermined truth, a notion of freedom through art.

However, Marx switched register. Despite this decisive break with poetry, Marx's works tell a different story about his self-understanding as a writer in general. As his career continued, he contributed articles to the \textit{Rheinische Zeitung} in 1842 and soon
became its editor. Marx’s first articles commented on the debates of the Landtag on the freedom of the press, when the Landtag discussed a new law of censorship.33 Interestingly enough, Marx connected this debate to the aesthetic question of how beauty could best be expressed. He writes:

Goethe once said that the painter succeeds only with a type of feminine beauty which he has loved in at least one living being. Freedom of the press, too, has its beauty—if not exactly a feminine one—which one must have loved to be able to defend it. If I truly love something, I feel that its existence is essential, that it is something which I need, without which my nature can have no full, satisfied, complete existence.34

In this passage, Marx recalls the idea of a fully saturated beauty of artwork through love. However, he shifts Goethe’s idea of the beauty of art in paintings to his idea of the beauty of the press. Accordingly, the notion of the sublime changes towards the powerful reality of the Prussian government. As a writer of journalism, censorship to him amounted, in fact, to a “sublime” restriction quite equal to physical submission, as Marx continues:

You think it wrong to put birds in cages. Is not the cage a preventive measure against birds of prey, bullets and storms? You think it barbaric to blind nightingales, but it does not seem at all barbaric to put out the eyes of the press with the sharp pens of the censorship. You regard it as despotic to cut a free person’s hair against his will, but the censorship daily cuts into the flesh of thinking people and allows only bodies without hearts, submissive bodies which show no reaction, to pass as healthy!35

The cage, the blinding, and the cutting demonstrate how closely freedom is connected to the idea of beauty or wholeness in Marx’s argument. Since the truth is turned upside down, only the deformed body passes as healthy under the new Prussian law. Marx realizes further that “the starting point is a completely perverted and abstract view of truth itself.”36 And he asks: “Is truth to be understood as being simply what the government decrees, so that investigation is added as a superfluous, intrusive element, but which for etiquette’s sake is not to be entirely rejected? It almost seems so. For investigation is understood in advance as in contradiction to truth. . . .”37 Despite this criticism of the abuse of truth through Prussian power, Marx continues to be fascinated with the idea of wholeness and its expression through writing. Certainly, he was forced into exile as a consequence of the censorship laws. When he later finished writing the first volume of Capital, he wanted to finish the other parts as well, in order for them to be published together. The reason for this was his understanding that the power of his writings depended upon the fact, as he explained, “that they [formed] an artistic whole, and this can only be achieved through my practice of never having things printed until I have them in front of me in their entirety.”38 Marx would only give up this plan due to his illnesses, yet he still maintained his commitment to the idea of artistic totality.
IV. The impact of Vischer’s *Aesthetics* during the years of the restoration

Vischer certainly belonged to the domain of abstract idealism at first. However, he distanced himself as well from his *Aesthetics* in the course of his life. His voluminous study proceeded from Hegel’s *Aesthetics* and discussed the challenges of beauty, the sublime and the comical. Vischer showed, further, how the sublime and the comical resisted beauty by superseding the form and disclosing the shock-like experience of the idea. In the process of beauty’s self-revelation in art, however, the idea stumbled through the comical; it was confronted with the comical and negated. Finally, this process turned into a unified whole.

If Vischer still tried to provide an understanding of beauty as a totality, he criticized his own idealism later and even gave up his attempt to reconcile the idea and the form through art. His *Aesthetics* is already marked by a constant unrest between a striving for synthesis and its criticism. Vischer himself was never content with the results, and his skepticism grew over the years. He doubted the correspondence between his desired synthesis of beauty and the gruesome reality of his time. And he realized that his work could not be the last word on beauty and its conflicts. Consequently, Vischer presented his own criticism a few years later, offering a perception of beauty as a radical subjective result rather than a representation of world’s harmony. Vischer was therefore subsequently received as a transitional figure between Hegel and Nietzsche as well as between romanticism and naturalism.

Vischer’s idealist solution to the question of the gap between the idea and the form finds adequate treatment—on a smaller scale—in post-Hegelian aesthetics such as Arnold Ruge’s treatise *New Preschool of Aesthetics* (1837), or Karl Rosenkranz’s *Aesthetics of the Ugly* (1853). Ludolf Wienbarg’s *Aesthetical Crusades* (1834) and Theodor Mundt’s *Aesthetics* (1845), which were evenly concerned with the unity of subject and object, focused also on the sublime and the comical as responses to political repression. Generally, in the years of the Restoration, the field of aesthetics dealt broadly with the comical as a contemporary expression of art in the German-speaking world.

To search for an all-inclusive notion of beauty points eventually back to Kant, who himself had already aimed at unifying his critical philosophy through the beautiful. Kant brought forth the essential question whether an absolute idea could be realized in beauty. As the philosopher Lucien Goldman comments about Kant’s new philosophical worldview, Kant was able to integrate both the immanence of ancient philosophy with the human imperfection of the Christian ideal in order to grasp totality as a human task, as the essence of human self-understanding, and the product of human action. This was also the initial constellation from which the subsequent history of philosophy developed in Goldman’s view. Kant’s philosophy displayed a new thinking process based on the important question whether the tragic of the human being was truly insurmountable. Was there no way for the empirical human being to reach towards the absolute, the highest good? Kant did not reach at a positive answer, yet the representatives of German idealism, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, as well as Marx tried to provide one a few years later. Vischer also contributed to this philosophical endeavor, since his concept of beauty was directed at representing absolute truth.
V. From comedy to the farce

When Marx burnt his poems and decided to search for “the idea in reality itself,” he presented this step as the beginning of his new philosophy and his political agitation. He began his confrontation with the Prussian regime, a “sublime” power, nevertheless, which he sought to fight through comedy. Marx addressed consequently the “comedy of despotism that is being played out with us…” He also revealed the ugliness of the Prussian state, yet he soon realized the insufficiency of comedy as a linguistic weapon:

The glorious robes of liberalism have fallen away and the most repulsive despotism stands revealed for all the world to see. This, too, is a revelation, albeit a negative one. It is a truth which at the very least teaches us to see the hollowness of our patriotism, the perverted nature of our state and to hide our faces in shame.

While he still refers to the goal of a revelation, Marx points to the abuse of truth instead of a revelation. Comedy is insufficient, as he makes clear, to fight the “sublime” in reality. He writes about the Prussian government: “even if for a long time this comedy were not to be looked upon as the thing it actually is, it would still amount to a revolution. The state is too serious a thing to be turned into a kind of harlequinade.” Marx realizes in this passage the limits of Vischer’s aesthetic progress for his context of real life and turns away from its semantic parallels. In Marx’s early philosophical writings the gradual process of dialectics was already disrupted, as Karl Löwith commented: “Marx’s dialectics is not dialectical in Hegel’s sense any longer, because its moving principle is only the negation of the negation without the moment of perpetuation of that which is negated through abolition (‘Aufhebung’).” The loss of the synthesis is connected to the aesthetical structure of Vischer’s theory, because it is a loss in the belief of the power of comedy. Marx faces rather the complete destruction of the perverted state, requiring “ruthless criticism of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be.” It becomes increasingly impossible for Marx “to write under Prussian censorship or to live in the Prussian atmosphere.”

Marx’s wife Jenny still demands that Marx should not write “with too much rancour and irritation,” but rather in a “matter-of-fact and subtle way,” and Marx’s friend Bruno Bauer commented on the effects of one of Marx’s texts: “What berserk rage came upon you again?” Yet this rage dominates Marx’s future writings; he complains that the Germans don’t see their bad fate, stating: “these miserable people are still patriots.” Being too serious to laugh about it, comedy does not redeem the bad “sublime” of reality. Rather, as Shapiro commented, “comic self-awareness is connected, as in Schiller, with the sense of previous history as a powerful and irrational force.”

While focusing on Marx’s Vischer-excerpts, the Marxist scholars Lifshitz and Lukács pointed out Vischer’s appeasing mode of the comical in which the spectator realizes his own little failures and everything dissolves in harmony. In Lukács’s view, Vischer celebrated humor as the means to give in to the infinite imperfections of the self and the world without revolting against it. Marx, on the other hand, represented an aggressive mode of the comical, according to Lukács. The worker played his role
unconsciously here. Marx’s humor appeared in reception as a means to communicate the perverted conditions under capitalism without any reconciliation. Similarly, Grimm comments on Marx’s use of humor: “A scornful, harsh, and bitter laughter, perhaps accompanied by a grinding of one’s teeth: such is the socialist satirist’s ultimate, absolutely secular, response.” While Vischer still expressed metaphysical ambitions, Marx was aware, as these scholars proved, that such metaphysical beauty could not be applied to the rough reality of the industrial age. While Vischer defined the tragic and the comic further as two successive, yet antithetical principles on different sides of the same scale, Marx reflects on these peripheries of beauty obviously as a non-dialectical succession, barely to be united in beauty. Instead of the comic he turns to the farce as an unredeemed aesthetic form. Vischer embraced both comedy and tragedy as inherent elements of beauty’s self-exposure that offered a happy ending. Marx, on the other hand, shows how history should not be.

In his poignant beginning of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1851–52), Marx made a clear statement about the roles of the tragic and the comical, claiming that “Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add, the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.” Marx’s popular comment is a quite cynical understanding of the historical process. Unimpressed by any notion of progress, Marx describes historical change as a rhythmical change of tragedy and farce. History serves eventually, as he demonstrates, a theatrical model of entertainment, evidently acted out through the *coup d'état* of Napoleon III. Tragedy and farce form most extreme opposites of this historical arrangement. They form the dramatic poles for a movement which progresses through repetitions, no longer capable of being grasped in terms of the beautiful. The farce emerges as a third genre in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, as a different mode of laughter. Unlike comedy, farce “inaugurates a local collapse of history, a repetitive span which opens up a veritable caesura in time.” Farce forms a new genre which “excites a different kind of laughter than (petit bourgeois) comedy, and which, in its absurdity, elicits tears unknown to (proletarian) tragedy, free of every promise of redemption.” According to Jeffrey Mehlmann, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* thus provides a specific structure of a grotesque repetition, or, in other words, an inverted world. This world suggests itself to respond to Vischer’s concept of the comical, which Marx revolutionized in order to fight the “sublime” Prussian power.

VI. The microscopical view

Both Marx and Vischer eventually serve as thinkers on opposite ends of the same intellectual development in the mid-nineteenth century. This development is concerned with a crisis of idealism, the demands of materialism and the search for a new orientation. For Vischer, idealism can still be recognized, yet through a distant view, bound to the surface in art. He writes, “fortunately our eye is not a microscope, the base vision already idealizes, or else the plant louse on the tree, the dirt and the amoeba in the purest water, the impurities of the most tender human skin would destroy every stimulus.” Quite contrary to Vischer, Marx refers precisely to the microscope as a
useful artistic tool. As such, in his Preface to the First German Edition of Capital, Marx announces to observe social relations in the same manner as the natural sciences, which use a microscope or chemical reagents, but with different instruments:

In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both. But in bourgeois society, the commodity-form of the product of labour—or value-form of the commodity—is the economic cell-form. To the superficial observer, the analysis of these forms seems to turn upon minutiae. It does in fact deal with minutiae, but they are of the same order as those dealt with in microscopic anatomy.60

Marx refers in this passage to the “force of abstraction” as a means to reveal the economical “body” precisely in analogy to the use of a microscope in anatomy. If Vischer avoids the close view in order to keep the stimulus of the whole, Marx abandons the distant view. He looks at the world like a painter, just like he did as a young journalist, arguing that “I must abandon the point of view which shows me the world and human relations only in their most external appearance, and recognize that this point of view is unsuitable for judging the value of things.”61 To judge the value of things, Marx borrows from “categories and forms bordering on the aesthetic because of their analogy to the contradictory vicissitudes of the categories of capitalist economy.”62 His notion of beauty turns over the years into the exact opposite, as something which cannot be redeemed through a higher unity. The terms “beautiful labour,” “beautiful science,” or the “beauty of the system” appear therefore always ironically in his masterpiece Capital. If Capital was received as a “tragic drama,” a “Victorian melodrama,” a “comedy,” and Marx's method was regarded as “one of the classic methods of comedy,” while Marx was seen best as a polemicist, his artistic view of the world requires certainly a close view, unafraid of ugliness.63 In the field of aesthetics, Vischer and Marx were, as Marx might have argued, “concerned with the same science but—how inconsistent!—they stand diametrically opposed in all that concerns truth, certainty, application of this science, and all that refers to the relationship between thought and reality in general.”64 Overall, while Vischer tried to save the idea of idealistic beauty as a unified whole on the surface, Marx aimed at an aesthetic view of the world which is not determined by an idealistic understanding of beauty, but, astonishingly enough, still open to it. Marx's writings provide evidence then of the discursive power of Vischer's concept of beauty in the nineteenth century as much as they also push its abolition.

Notes


3 Lukács, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Ästhetik, 229f.
6 See the corresponding chapters on the “Comical” and the “Sublime” in Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Ästhetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen, vol. 1, 226–356; quote 226.
9 Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, 42.
10 Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, 42.
11 See Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, §82, 227.
12 See Arnold Ruge, Neue Vorschule der Ästhetik. Das Komische mit einem komischen Anhange (Halle: Verlag der Buchhandlung Waisenhauses, 1837); Christian Hermann Weisse, System der Ästhetik als Wissenschaft von der Idee der Schönheit (Leipzig: Hartmann, 1830); and Vischer’s comments in Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, §83, 231.
15 See Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, 127, §82.
16 Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, 132, §44.
17 This affinity to Schelling has only recently been researched in detail by Philip Ajouri, Erzählen nach Darwin. Die Krise der Teleologie im literarischen Realismus: Friedrich Theodor Vischer und Gottfried Keller (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), 156f. The author makes a strong claim for Vischer’s teleological conception of the beauty of nature in Schelling’s tradition—much more than Hegel’s. Ajouri shows how Vischer became later unsure about this idea through reading Darwin’s explanation of the natural concept of the end. The idea of the beauty of nature thus turns from Romantic idealism to Darwin’s evolutionary theory in Vischer’s writings, as Ajouri argues. Modiano pointed to Schelling’s influence earlier, but without determining it further. See Modiano “Humanism and the Comic Sublime,” 239.
19 On the sublime see the expansive entry in Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, 233–358. I will stress only some elements of this central concept.
20 On the sublime’s darkness see Edmund Burke, Esq., The sublime and beautiful. With an introductory discourse concerning taste, and other additions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1796), 155 ff. Burke argues against Locke’s opinion that darkness is neither troublesome nor a cause of terror.
23 Hegel, Ästhetik, see vol. 2, 564–68.
24 Szondi, An Essay on the Tragic, 32.
29 Vischer, Ästhetik, vol. 1, 527. This process of the beautiful is, as Günther Oesterle commented, a process of self-excitation. See “An den Grenzen des Ästhetischen,” in Friedrich Theodor Vischer: Leben–Werk–Wirkung, 231–48; see 239.
33 See Chapter 8 by Daniel Hartley in this volume for an extended analysis of Marx’s discussion of the question of style and its relationship to censorship laws.
37 Marx, “Comments on the latest Prussian Censorship Instruction.”
39 On this see Vischer’s vast attempt to revise his earlier concepts in his late works, Friedrich Theodor Vischer, Kritische Gänge. 6 vols (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1860–1873).
40 On Vischer’s transitional status, see diverse articles in: Friedrich Theodor Vischer: Leben—Werk—Wirkung.
44 Karl Marx, “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction.”
54 Grimm, “Comic Reversal,” 156.


Marx: The Philosophical Defense of History in the Metonymical Mode

Hayden White

Prefatory Remarks (2015)

One of the characteristic attributes of nineteenth-century Left radicalism was belief in the possibility of a science of history on which to project recommendations for realistic social and political reforms and critique merely “ideological”—class, group, or individually “subjective”—versions of social reality. Marx cannot be said to have done the kind of “original” historical research into history that he and Engels did in their efforts to create a scientific study of economics. Since Marx there have of course been many historians who have used his “dialectical materialism” as organon and method for a scientific study of history. But the Marxian version of history differs from the established academic idea of the kind of science one can have of history as radically as the Marxian version of a scientific economics differs from that of the bourgeois political economists that Marx had hoped to displace and transcend.

Bourgeois social science, which typically purports to be empirical, objective, and realistic, rather than theoretically motivated and ideologically “distorted,” as Marx’s idea of history is purported to be, eschews any search for “laws” of historical development and any possibility of predicting the end, purpose, or telos for the historical process as a whole. Marx, by contrast, believed that a science of history ought to be able to account for the structure and form of “the present” and divine at least the general direction of emergent or possible future developments of any given society once it had been subjected to dialectical materialistic analysis.

However, for Marx as for his bourgeois enemies, certain aspects of culture remained a problem. This was especially the case with art. The loose determinism that Marx allowed for art, to which he granted a certain unpredictable and ultimately unaccountable freedom of choice and transhistorical value, did permit a historical analysis that could account for the work of art’s historical specificity. But the value accorded ancient and even archaic works of art across a panoply of historical formations remained a mystery, which not even the theory of “commodity fetishism” could clear up. In many respects,

for Marx, the work of art was a simulacrum of the commodity itself. Just as for Aristotle, a slave was a “tool” which could speak, so too for Marx the work of art could be thought of as a commodity which literally rather than only figuratively spoke its own name as a product of human labor rather than as only a token of the wealth of its owner. The work of art was a commodity that resisted the expropriative alienation of its market existence. As thus envisaged, art was a manifestation of free labor and the artists an avatar of the free worker in an ideal future society.

I was recently privileged to hear a lecture on my treatment of Marx in *Metahistory* by Hans Kellner, who argued and pretty well demonstrated to my satisfaction, that what I had done with Marx was to make him into a Formalist, the very demon of postmarxist criticism, which held that science was a matter of content alone, rather than some combination of content and form in which the one was just as important as the other for the comprehension of the value ascribed to different kinds of commodities. But, as Fredric Jameson has taught us, modernist Marxian criticism purports to find in form itself the solution to the appeal of different ideologies. Thus Althusser held that an ideology was an “imaginary” relation to the real conditions of a given society. This means that every exercise of historiological demystification or de-ideologization must conjure with the fact that effective ideologies are structures of thought and sensibility in which form and content are indistinguishable one from the other—and which, as in the work of art, you cannot change one without changing the other. And this is because in the work of art, the form is not only the container of a content but is also that aspect of content which distinguishes the work of art from all the other kinds of commodities produced by the labor of a given society’s work force.

Thus, I accept Hans Kellner’s characterization of my chapter on Marx in *Metahistory* as an effort at formalization of Marx’s writing, but with the proviso that this effort was undertaken—I now think or wish—in the hope of showing how Marx’s historiographical writing might be better understood as a work of art rather than as the kind of science he himself hoped to create for a better understanding of history.

### I. The Problem of Marxian Scholarship

Marx apprehended the historical field in the Metonymical mode. His categories of prefiguration were the categories of schism, division, and alienation. The historical process, therefore, appeared to him as that “panorama of sin and suffering” which Tocqueville and Burckhardt asserted to be history’s true meaning *once their analyses of it were complete.* Marx began where they ended. Their irony was his point of departure. His purpose was to determine the extent to which one can realistically hope for the ultimate integration of the forces and objects that occupy the historical field. Marx regarded the kinds of integrative trends which Michelet and Ranke purportedly found in the historical process as illusory, false integrations or only partial ones, the benefits of which were shared by only a fragment of the whole human species. And he was interested in determining whether this fragmentation of humanity must be considered the ineluctable condition of the human animal.
Hegel’s Comic conception of history was based ultimately on his belief in the right of life over death; “life” guaranteed to Hegel the possibility of an ever more adequate form of social life throughout the historical future. Marx carried this Comic conception even further; he envisioned nothing less than the dissolution of that “society” in which the contradiction between consciousness and being had to be entertained as a fatality for all men in all times. It would not, then, be unjust to characterize the final vision of history, which inspired Marx in his historical and social theorizing, as a Romantic one. But his conception did not envisage humanity’s redemption as a deliverance from time itself. Rather, his redemption took the form of a reconciliation of man with a nature denuded of its fantastic and terrifying powers, submitted to the rule of technics, and turned to the creation of a genuine community, to the end of creating individuals who are free because they no longer have to struggle with one another for their own selfhood, but only with themselves. As thus conceived, Marx’s idea of history represented a perfect Synecdoche: the parts merged into a whole, which is qualitatively superior to any of the entities that comprise it.

In Marx’s thought the problem which had been raised by Vico, worried by Rousseau, skirted by Burke, and formulated as a major philosophical problem by Hegel—that is, the “problem of society,” or the “problematical nature of social existence”—was moved to the center of historical investigation. For Marx, society was no longer either the sole protective barrier between a beleaguered humanity and a chaotic nature (as it was for Burke) or the obstructive barrier between individual men and their true “inner natures” (as it was for Rousseau and the Romantics). For Marx, as for Hegel, society was both these things—that is, the instrument of man’s liberation from nature and the cause of men’s estrangement from one another. Society both unified and divided, liberated and oppressed, at one and the same time. The purpose of historical investigation, as Marx conceived it, was, first to show how society functions in this twofold manner in the life of man and, then, to demonstrate how the paradox represented by this condition must be resolved in time.

My aim is to specify the dominant style of Marx’s thought about the structures and processes of history-in-general, I am interested in Marx primarily as a representative of a specific modality of historical consciousness, a representative who must be regarded as neither more nor less “true” than the best representatives of other modalities with which it contended for hegemony in the consciousness of nineteenth-century European man. In my view, “history,” as a plenum of documents that attest to the occurrence of events, can be put together in a number of different and equally plausible narrative accounts of “what happened in the past,” accounts from which the reader, or the historian himself, may draw different conclusions about “what must be done” in the present. With the Marxist philosophy of history, one can do neither more nor less than what one can do with other philosophies of history, such as those of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Croce, even though one may be inclined to do different kinds of things on the basis of a belief in one philosophy’s truth.

That is to say, one can either adopt Marx’s philosophy of history as providing the perspective from which one wills to view one’s own place in the stream of historical becoming or one can reject it on similarly voluntaristic grounds. We apprehend the past and the whole spectacle of history-in-general in terms of felt needs and
aspirations that are ultimately personal, having to do with the ways we view our own positions in the ongoing social establishment, our hopes and fears for the future, and the image of the kind of humanity we would like to believe we represent. As these felt needs and aspirations change, we adjust our conception of history-in-general accordingly. It is not with history as it is with nature. We have no choice with respect to the principles of knowledge we must adopt for effecting transformations in, or for exercising control over, the physical world. We either employ scientific principles of analysis and understanding of the operations of nature or we fail in our efforts to control nature.

It is different with history. There are different possible ways of comprehending historical phenomena because there are different, and equally plausible, ways of organizing the social world, which we create and which provides one of the bases of our experience of history itself. As Lucien Goldmann pointed out, it is in the interest of every modern class, and indeed of every individual, to promote the growth of objective physical sciences, for it is in the interest of all classes of contemporary society to extend man's control over the “nature” that lies before him as the resources out of which a “society” is to be constructed. But, as social beings, we have different stakes in the different kinds of society we can imagine to be potentially realizable as a result of our scientific exploitation of nature. This means that the kind of social science we will be inclined to promote will be characterized by certain crucial limitations on what we can envisage as that science's capacities for promoting or frustrating the growth of a particular kind of society.

Thus, there are bound to be alternative and even radically incompatible ways of conceiving the form that an adequate social science must take. Among these ways we recognize the legitimacy of a specifically Radical conception of social analysis, of which Marx was undoubtedly the outstanding nineteenth-century exponent, but alongside this we must set Anarchist, Liberal, and Conservative varieties. Each of these notions of social analysis is attended by, or generates, a specific conception of the historical process and of its most significant structures, to which a given individual may be drawn by epistemological, aesthetic, or ethical considerations. It is fruitless, then, in my view at least, to try to arbitrate among contending conceptions of the nature of the historical process on cognitive grounds, which purport to be value-neutral in essence, as both Marxist and non-Marxist social theorists attempt to do. The best reasons for being a Marxist are moral ones, just as the best reasons for being a Liberal, Conservative, or Anarchist are moral ones. The Marxist view of history is neither confirmable nor disconfirmable by appeal to “historical evidence;” for what is at issue between a Marxist and a non-Marxist view of history is the question of precisely what counts as evidence and what does not, how data are to be constituted as evidence, and what implications for the comprehension of the present social reality are to be drawn from the evidence thus constituted.

Marx wrote history neither for purposes of social mediation (à la Tocqueville) nor for purposes of social accommodation (à la Ranke). He was a prophet of social innovation, and he conceived historical consciousness as an instrument of human liberation in a way that no other nineteenth-century thinker of similar stature ever tried to do. When he wrote in his “Theses on Feuerbach” that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world in different ways; the point, however, is to change it,” he
meant to imply not that men should not try to understand the world but that the sole test of their understanding of it was their capacity to change it. Thus he laid siege to every plan for creating a merely contemplative historiography such as that which, under Ranke’s name, had been established as orthodoxy in the academies all over Europe. Science for Marx was transforming knowledge, the transforming of nature in the physical sphere, the transforming of human consciousness and praxis in the social sphere. And he envisaged his theory of history as a means of liberating men from the infinite series of infinitesimal approximations to a genuine humanity, conceived to extend indefinitely into the future by thinkers like Hegel and Tocqueville, so that they might finally realize their humanity fully. For Marx, history properly comprehended not only provided an image of man come into his kingdom on earth; it was also one of the instruments by which that kingdom was finally to be won.

Within the context of considerations such as these I will consider the problem of the continuity between Marx’s early and late works. It is my contention that, as far as Marx’s general theory of history is concerned, this is a pseudo problem. It may be interesting to speculate on the effects that contemporary events and Marx’s encounter with specific thinkers during the 1840s had on the constitution of his system as represented by The Eighteenth Brumaire or Capital. But these are hagiographical, not theoretical, concerns. It is my contention that, considered as a representative of a distinctive style of historical philosophizing, Marx’s thought displays a consistent recourse to a set of tropological structures that give his thought its unique attributes, from The German Ideology (1845) through Capital (1867).

II. The essence of Marx’s thought about history

The essence of Marx’s thought about history, its structures and processes, consists less in an attempt to combine what he thought was valid in the thought of Hegel, Feuerbach, the British Political Economists, and the Utopian Socialists than in his effort to synthesize the tropological strategies of Metonomy and Synecdoche in a comprehensive image of the historical world. It permits me to distinguish between the tactics Marx used for criticizing opponents and those he used for setting forth the truths of history which he purported to find in the historical record.

Marx’s thought moved between Metonymical apprehensions of the severed condition of mankind in its social state and Synecdochic intimations of the unity he spied at the end of the whole historical process. How can man be both immediately determined and potentially free; how can he be both severed and fragmented in his becoming, yet whole and one in his being? These are the questions that concerned Marx. He needed two kinds of language to characterize these different states or conditions. And he effectively divided the historical record into two orders of phenomena, horizontally, as it were, one order of which was related integrally by Metonymical, the other of which was related by Synecdochic, strategies of characterization. Marx’s problem, then, was to relate the two orders thus distinguished.

He related them, in fact, Metonymically, in a cause–effect relationship; and this is the mark as well as the measure of Marx’s ultimately Materialistic conception of
history. When Marx said that his conception of history was “dialectical-materialistic,” what he meant was that he conceived the processes of the Base of society mechanistically and the processes of the Superstructure Organicistically. This combination alone permitted him to believe that, over the long run, a structure of human relationships that is essentially extrinsic and mechanical in nature can eventuate in a qualitatively different structure, intrinsic and organismic in the way it relates parts to wholes.

Thus, as Marx conceived it, the history of mankind in general represents a twofold evolution: an ascent, insofar as man gains ever greater control over nature and its resources through the development of science and technology; and a descent, insofar as man grows ever more alienated from himself and from his fellow man. This twofold movement permitted Marx to believe that the whole of history was heading toward a decisive crisis, a conflict in which man would either come into his kingdom on earth or destroy himself—and the nature that he both arose from and opposed in the struggle for his own humanity.

This means that Marx’s philosophy of history comprises both a synchronic analysis of a basic structure of relationships which remains constant throughout history and a diachronic analysis of the significant movement by which this structure is transcended and a new modality of relating man to man is constituted. And this implies that, for Marx, history had to be emplotted in two ways simultaneously: in the mode of Tragedy and in the mode of Comedy. For, although man lives Tragically, inasmuch as his attempts to construct a viable human community are continually frustrated by the laws that govern history while he remains in the social state, he also lives Comically, insofar as this interaction between man and society progressively moves man toward a condition in which society itself will be dissolved and a genuine community, a communistic mode of existence, will be constituted as his true historic destiny.

III. The basic model of analysis

The model of analytical strategy that Marx used for comprehending all historical phenomena received one of its clearest formulations in Chapter I of Capital where he set forth the labor theory of value in order to earn a distinction between the “content” and the “form” of value of all commodities produced by man. This chapter, entitled “Commodities,” is divided into four parts, the first two of which have to do with the content of the value of commodities, and the second two of which have to do with the forms that value assumes in different systems of exchange.

Commodities, Marx said, are the “elementary units” of the “wealth of societies in which the capitalist method of production prevails.” And he went on to distinguish, on the basis of the labor theory of value, between the use value of a commodity and its exchange value, in terms of the distinction between the content and the phenomenal form of any commodity offered for exchange in any economic system, whether primitive or advanced. The use value of a commodity, Marx argued, is provided by the “abstract human labor that has been embodied or materialized in it.” Man can measure
this value, Marx asserted, in terms of “the quantity of the value-creating’ substance it contains—the quantity of labor.” This means that, “as values, commodities are nothing but particular masses of congealed labor time.”

What interests me here is Marx’s analysis of the different forms that the phenomenal aspect of the value of a commodity assumes and the relationship between these forms and the actual, or real, value of any commodity which, by his lights, remains constant throughout whatever changes the phenomenal form undergoes. For these two kinds of relationships, between the forms of value on the one hand and between the forms and the constant content of value on the other, are precisely analogous to the relationships he took to exist between the phenomenal forms of historical (social) being on the one hand and its constant (human) content on the other.

In Marx’s view, the Money form represents the point of departure from which all analyses of the actual value of commodities must set forth. The Money form of value is the “mystery” to be solved in economic analysis, a mystery which consists of the fact that men, who by their labor create the value that inheres in commodities as use value, insist on interpreting the value of commodities in terms of their exchange value, and specifically in terms of their exchange value in gold.

It should be noted that Marx characterized the Money form of value as “absurd.” It is absurd because men, in the bourgeois world at least, insist upon characterizing the value of the commodities they produce and exchange in terms of their exchange value for gold, the least useful of all the metals in Marx’s view. The whole burden of Marx’s analysis of both the content and the form of value of commodities was to reveal the absurdity of this impulse to equate the value of a commodity with its gold equivalent. This is what Marx meant when he characterized bourgeois society as having been founded upon the “mystery” of the fetishism of commodities. In bourgeois society, men insist upon obscuring the extent to which the value of commodities resides in the amount of socially necessary labor expended in their production, and in equating that value with its exchange value for gold. The constitution of a socially useless commodity, such as gold, as the criterion for determining the value of commodities produced by human labor is, according to Marx, evidence of the madness of the kind of society that is organized along bourgeois lines, in response to the imperatives of the capitalist mode of production.

In Marx’s view, commodities exist in reality as a set of individual entities, the actual value of which is determinable by the specific amounts of socially necessary labor expended in their production. But they exist in the consciousness of men only insofar as they have an exchange value for other commodities, and specifically for the commodity of gold. How can this strange fact be accounted for?

In Chapter I, Part 3, of Capital, Marx dilated on the form of value—that is to say, the exchange value of commodities—in order to explain the development of the Money form of value on the one hand and to prepare his readers for his solution of the “mystery of the fetishistic character of commodities,” on the other. As he put it in the introduction to this section of his work:

We have to discover the origin of the money form; to trace the development of the expression of value contained in the value ratio of commodities to follow up from
its simplest and most inconspicuous configuration to the glaringly obvious money form. Then the enigma of money will cease to be an enigma.\textsuperscript{5}

He then proceeded to distinguish among the four forms of value: the Elementary (or Accidental) form, the Total (or Extended) form, the Generalized form, and the Money form.

What interests me in Marx's analysis is the strategy he used to derive the alleged fact of the fetishism of gold from the fact of an ordinary, and natural, \textit{equation} of relative use values in the original form of exchange. For this strategy can serve as a model of Marx's method of analyzing the transformations that occur on the phenomenal level of all processes of development which are specifically social and historical (rather than natural).

The strategy may be thought of as dialectical in essence, in the Hegelian sense of that term; and the four forms of value may be thought of, if one wishes, as value in itself, value for itself, value in and for itself, and value by, in, and for itself. But it is obvious—as Michel Foucault has observed—that Marx's dialectical analysis of the phenomenal form of value represents little more than an extended exegesis of the word “value,”\textsuperscript{6} and that what Marx carried out was a tropological analysis of the way the concept “value” is apprehended by men in different stages of their social evolution.

For example, Marx's model of the Elementary (or Accidental) form of value is that of an equation construed as a metaphorical relationship between any two commodities. He said:

We write $x$ commodity $A = y$ commodity $B$; or we say that $x$ commodity $A$ “are worth” $y$ commodity $B$. In the concrete, we write, 20 yards of linen = 1 coat; or we say that 20 yards of linen “are worth” one coat.\textsuperscript{7}

But this kind of equation is not the simple statement of an arithmetical equivalence. A deeper, more profound relationship lies hidden within its \textit{apparently} arithmetical form. Marx argued that “the whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this elementary form.”\textsuperscript{8} For, as he said, in the statement of the equivalency of $A$ and $B$:

$A$ and $B$, two different kinds of commodity (linen and coat in our concrete instance), obviously play different parts. The linen \textit{expresses} the value of the coat; the coat \textit{serves as the means} for the expression of this value. The former commodity plays an \textit{active} role; the latter, a \textit{passive} one. The value of the former commodity is presented as \textit{relative} or comparative, or appears in a relative form. The latter commodity \textit{functions as an equivalent} or appears in an equivalent form.\textsuperscript{9}

In short, the copula that links $A$ and $B$ in a relationship of \textit{apparent} equivalency is \textit{transitive}, active, and more specifically, anacastically appropriative.

In the expression “$A = B$,” the value of the commodity signified by $A$ is “presented as relative or comparative,” while that of the commodity signified by $B$ is “equivalent.” The copula establishes a \textit{Metaphorical} relationship between the things compared. It expresses at one and the same time a difference and a similarity, or a “relative value
form” and an “equivalent form,” which, in Marx’s words, “are reciprocally dependent factors, mutually determining one another, and inseparable: but at the same time they are mutually exclusive or contrasted extremes, polar opposites of the same expression of value.” As Marx concluded:

Whether a commodity is in the relative value form, or in the opposed equivalent form, depends solely upon what happens to be its position in the expression of value—upon whether it is the commodity whose value is expressed, or the commodity in terms of which the value of some other commodity is expressed.

In short, in the language of valuation, whether a commodity is endowed with relative or equivalent value depends upon its placement on one or the other side of a Metaphorical expression. The Metaphor that resides at the heart of any expression assigns a value to a commodity in terms of some other commodity, which is the key to the “whole mystery of the form of value” itself. The Metaphor provides the key to the understanding of how purely material or quantitative entities come to be endowed with spiritual or qualitative attributes. And the understanding of Metaphor provided Marx with the method by which the false spirituality of all commodities, and especially of gold, is disclosed.

That the different forms of value (as against the true content of the value of any given commodity, the amount of socially necessary labor expended in its production) are products of modes of consciousness is evident from what Marx said in his analysis of the Relative value form. If we wish to discover how the elementary expression of the value of a commodity “lies hidden in the value ratio between the two commodities,” Marx said, we must “begin by contemplating the ratio independently of its quantitative aspect.” He criticized those who “take the opposite course, seeing in a value ratio nothing more than the proportion in which specified quantities of two different kinds of commodities can be equated.” In Marx’s view, such an analysis obscures the fact that “magnitudes of different things cannot be qualitatively compared until they have been expressed in terms of the same unit.” In Metaphorical expressions this presupposed same unit is hidden, and attention is directed solely to the external attributes of the objects compared in the equation. But what is this hidden same unit?

We may put the matter thus. As values, commodities are mere jellies [Gallerten] of human labor, and for this reason our analysis reduces them to value in the abstract, but does not give them any value form differing from their bodily form. It is otherwise when we are concerned with the value relation between one commodity and another. Then the character of the value of the former commodity is disclosed in virtue of its relation to the latter.

Commodity A and commodity B are, in reality, Marx argued, “concreted” forms of a “jelly of human labor,” which is the hidden content of every human product. When a coat is equated with a commodity of linen, in an expression of a value form, “the tailoring is in actual fact reduced to that which is identical in the two kinds of labor” required for the production of both commodities—that is to say, “is reduced to their
common quality as human labor.” In this “roundabout way,” Marx was, in fact, “saying that weaving, insofar as it weaves value, cannot be differentiated from tailoring, for it is abstract human labor.” This abstract human labor is expressed in the assertion of an equivalency between any two given commodities. And this assertion reduces “the different kinds of labor embodied in the different commodities to that which is common to them all, to human labor in the abstract.”

By linguistic means, then, men obliquely pay tribute to their own labors as that which gives value to all commodities. Hence, to grasp the nature of linguistic reduction is to grasp the nature of what Marx called “the language of commodities (die Warensprache),” and therewith to understand the phenomenal forms that value assumes in different systems of exchange. This language of commodities is a language of extrinsic relationships, masking what is in reality an intrinsic relationship (the common element of labor inherent in all commodities) between any two commodities that might be compared with each other as a basis for any act of exchange. Thus, Marx wrote:

In the production of the coat, human labor has been expended in the form of tailoring. Human labor has, therefore, been stored up in it. In this aspect the coat is a “depository of value,” although its quality as such a depository remains hidden even though it be worn threadbare. Tightly buttoned up though the coat may be, the linen looks within and recognizes in the coat the beautiful soul of value akin to linen’s own. But the coat cannot express value in relation to the linen, unless, from the outlook of the linen, this value assumes the form of a coat. In like manner, A cannot assume the aspect of a king’s majesty for B unless, in B’s eyes, the idea of “majesty” becomes associated with the bodily form of A—this meaning that “majesty” will have to change features, hair, and other bodily characteristics, when a new king ascends the throne. . . . As a use-value, the linen is something which to our senses is obviously different from the coat; as a value it is the equivalent of the coat, and therefore looks like a coat. In this way it acquires a value form different from its bodily form. The essence of its value is manifest in its likeness to the coat, just as the sheep nature of the Christian is manifest in his resemblance to the Lamb of God.

The fancifulness of Marx’s language in these passages should not be dismissed as irrelevant to the aim of his analysis of the forms of value. This fancifulness is necessary for conveying his conception of the way consciousness functions to endow things, processes, and events with (false) meaning. The world of things, in Marx’s view, is a world of isolated individualities, particulars which appear to bear no essential relationship to one another. The value actually ascribed to a given commodity as a basis for an act of exchange is a product of consciousness. Marx suggested that men give meanings to things, just as, by their labor, they create commodities and endow them with value.

The relationships between things interested Marx, those relationships by which things are capable of taking on a phenomenal aspect different from what they are “in themselves.” Men enjoy no specific “humanity” except in their relationships to one another. So, too, a clue to the understanding of the value of commodities is found in the
placement of any given commodity in a Metaphorical relationship to some other commodity in the minds of men. As Marx said:

We see that everything which our analysis of the value of commodities has told us, is disclosed by the linen itself as soon as it comes into relation with another commodity. It conveys its thoughts in the only language it knows—the language of commodities. In order to tell us that its own value is created by labor in the abstract form of human labor, it says that the coat, so far as equivalent to itself, is likewise value, consisting of the same labor as linen.\(^{17}\)

By means, then, of the ‘Value ratio’ expressed in the Metaphorical expression ‘A = B’, the ‘bodily form of commodity B thus becomes the value form of commodity A, or the body of commodity B acts as a mirror to the value of commodity A.’ And, inasmuch as ‘commodity A becomes related to commodity B as the embodiment of value, as materialized human labor, it makes the use-value B serve as material for the expression of its own value. The value of commodity A, as thus expressed in the use-value of commodity B, has taken the form of relative value.’\(^{18}\)

I have stressed Marx’s distinction between the ‘form’ and the ‘content’ of the value contained in any given commodity because it is precisely analogous to the distinction he wanted to establish in his philosophy of history between the ‘phenomena’ of the historical process and their inner, or hidden, ‘meaning.’ The phenomenal form of history is the succession of different kinds of society testified to by the historical record in its unanalyzed form. The forms of society change in the same way that the forms of value do, but their meaning, the significance of these changes, remains as constant as does the ‘jelly’ of labor, which endows all commodities with their true, or essential, value. This means that the forms of society produced by the historical process are to the forms of value as the modes of production which determine those forms of society are to the value content of commodities. The forms of historical existence are given in the Superstructure; the content of historical existence is given in the Base (the modes of production). And the forms of historical existence, the fundamental forms of society, are the same in number as the forms of value.

There are four basic forms, both of value and of society. The forms of value are Elementary, Total, Generalized, and Money. The forms of Society are Primitive Communist, Slave, Feudal, and Capitalist. And the question which arises is this: Are the forms of society and the modes of transition from one form of society to another analogous to the forms of value and the modes of transition from one form of value to another (offered in Capital as the solution to the “enigma” of the fetishism of gold)? If they are, in fact, analogous, we have discovered a clue to the proper understanding of Marx’s theory of history and, at the same time, have established the conceptual continuity between his earlier and later works.

Let me be more specific. For Marx, writing in Capital, the forms of value were conceived to be generated out of the primitive, original, or Metaphorical expression of equivalence in such a way as to explain the fetishism of gold, which characterizes advanced systems of exchange. But the true value content of all commodities remains essentially the same: the labor expended in the production of the commodities. So it is
with the history of societies. Their forms change, but the content that underlies these changes in form remains constant. This content is comprised of the modes of production by which man relates himself to nature. The components of these systems may change, thereby dictating transformations in the social relations created on their basis. But the true meaning of these changes is not to be found in the contemplation of the phenomenal form of the society under study; it lies in the hidden transformations that occur in the modes of production.

It should be stressed that, once Marx analyzed the elementary form of value and disclosed its essentially Metaphorical nature, he proceeded to explicate the natures of the other three forms of value, culminating in the fetishism of gold, in purely *tropological* terms. The Total, or Extended, form of value is nothing but the conceptualization of the value of commodities in the modality of Metonymy. Here the relationships among commodities are conceived on the basis of the apprehension of their placement in a *series* that is infinitely extendable, such that commodities are related to all other commodities in the form of the set: \[A = B, \quad B = C, \quad C = D, \quad D = E, \ldots \]
the value of any given commodity being apprehended as equivalent to a specific *quantity* of *any other commodity* in the system of exchange. But this apprehension of the existence of commodities within an extended series suggests, by the very extensiveness of the set, the possibility of a value that is shared commonly by all of them. In short, the possibility of the Generalized form of value is suggested by the very fact that commodities can be arranged in such a way as to be parts of a *total system* of purely extrinsic relationships. Thus, by Synecdoche, the Metonymically provided series of commodities can be endowed with the attributes of parts of a whole. In Marx’s view, this value of the whole set is really nothing but the “congealed” labor expended in the production of the individual commodities. But, because of the inclination of men involved in specific systems of exchange to obscure from themselves the true content of the value they perceive to inhere in all commodities, the shared value that inheres in the whole set of commodities is Synecdochically unified as the quantity in gold which commodities can command in the exchange system. And this “absurd” ascription to gold of the power to *represent* the value of all commodities in any system of exchange accounts for the “fetishism of gold,” which characterizes advanced systems of exchange.

Thus, the course or evolution of the forms of value, leading from the original (Metaphorical) characterization of the value of a commodity in terms of its equivalence to some other commodity to the (Ironic) characterization of the value of a commodity in terms of the quantity of gold (or money) which it brings in the system of exchange, proceeds by way of the two tropological strategies of reduction and integration that we would expect: by Metonymy on the one hand and by Synecdoche on the other. The last form of value analyzed by Marx in this section of *Capital*, that of the Money form, is Ironic precisely inasmuch as, in his account of it, the necessary labor expended in its production, is hidden from view by the ascription to it of a value conceived in the form of a money (or gold) equivalent. It is Ironic also inasmuch as the characterization of the value of a commodity in terms of its money equivalent contains both a truth and an error. The truth contained in it is reflected in the impulse to view all commodities in terms of a universal standard of valuation; the error consists in the identification of this standard as the money equivalent a commodity might command within a given system
of exchange. The fetishistic nature of the identification of the value of all commodities with their gold equivalent is at once the condition of self-delusionment of the most advanced systems of exchange and the precondition for the liberation of consciousness to the apprehension of the true basis for ascribing value to any commodity, the labor theory of value which Marx used as the basis of his analysis of both the strengths and the weaknesses of the system of exchange known as Capitalism.

The second half of the first chapter of Capital, then, is an exercise in Irony, consisting as it does of the exposure of the purely fictional nature of all conceptions of the value of commodities, which do not begin from the apprehension of the truth of the labor theory of value. In short, the labor theory of value serves as the baseline from which all erroneous conceptions of value can be transcended.

It should be stressed, however, that Marx did not insist that the various forms of value provided by the tropological reductions are totally erroneous. Each contains an important insight into the nature of value in general. These insights derive from a legitimate impulse to discover the true nature of the value that commodities have in any system of exchange. But the true basis of all value is obscured and remains hidden to perception in any analysis that begins from a consideration of form rather than content. Thus, the history of thought about the forms of value describes a sustained descent of consciousness into the depths of its own capacities for self-deception and alienation. The nadir of this descent is the situation in which men deny to themselves the worth of their own labor, which is concealed as the true content of the values of all commodities, in order to endow a worthless metal, gold, with the virtues of their own unique power to create value itself.

But what is the nature of the relationship between the labor theory of value, on the basis of which Marx criticized all other conceptions of the value of commodities, and those other false, or illusory, forms of value that he analyzed? It would appear to be a Metonymical relationship and inevitably, therefore, a reductive one. For Marx insisted that the phenomena of commodity exchange be divided into two orders of being: their form, on the one hand, and their true content, on the other—in short, into phenomenal and noumenal orders of being. Once this distinction is admitted, it is necessary to inquire into the grounds on which they are conceived to be related in practice. Why is the true content of the value of all commodities suppressed by consciousness in favor of the various phenomenal forms analyzed by Marx? This problem is at once psychological, sociological, and historical; and, in order to comprehend Marx’s solution to it, we must turn to an analysis of his theory of consciousness on the one hand and his philosophy of history on the other.

IV. The “grammar” of historical existence

Marx laid out the broad lines of his theory of history in the late 1840s, while he was trying to come to terms with the main schools of social thought of the previous generation: German Idealism, French Socialism, and English Political Economy. Basic to his position at this time—a position which he and Engels would regard as scientifically confirmed by Darwin later on—was the conviction that consciousness in
man is merely a more efficient, rather than a qualitatively different, capacity for
regulating relations between the human animal and its environment for the satisfaction
of primary (physical) and secondary (emotional) needs. Thus, he wrote: “Men can be
distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion, or by anything one likes.
They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to
produce their means of subsistence.” The nature of this production, Marx argued, is
“determined” by men’s physical constitution. In producing their means of subsistence,
men indirectly produce “their actual material life.” As thus envisaged, human
consciousness is merely the peculiar means which man has at his disposal, as part of
his natural endowment, to exploit his environment and live off it.

And thus it followed, as Marx had already noted in *The German Ideology*, that

the way in which men produce their means of subsistence depends in the first
place on the nature of the existing means which they have to reproduce. This mode
of production should not be regarded simply as the reproduction of the physical
existence of individuals. It is already a definite form of activity of these individuals,
a definite mode of life. As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are,
therefore, coincides with their production, with what they produce and with how
they produce it. What individuals are, therefore, depends on the material conditions
of their production.  

This reduction permitted Marx to deduce the three presuppositions (or, as he called
them in an ironic reference to the practice of German philosophers of the time,
the “moments”) of human consciousness. They are: first, the impulse to satisfy needs
(primary and secondary); next, the capacity to reproduce other men and maintain the
life of the species, from which derives the first social group, the family; and, finally,
the constitution of the modes of production adequate to the maintenance of human
life in different environments. Thus, he concluded, in order for us even to conceive the
existence of human consciousness, we must postulate a natural connection between
the human animal and his environment and a social connection by which men enter
into cooperative activity with other men, within and between families. This postulate
allowed Marx to combine in his theory of history his materialistic metaphysics on the
one hand with his dialectical theory of social development on the other.

Marx looked for the intimate relation that exists in every society among human
consciousness, the material world, and the current modes of production. Thus, he wrote:

it follows from this, that a determinate mode of production, or industrial stage, is
always bound up with a determinate mode of cooperation, or social stage, and this
mode of cooperation is itself a “productive force.” It also follows, that the mass of
productive forces accessible to men determines the condition of society, and that
the “history of humanity” must therefore always be studied and treated in relation
to the history of industry and exchange. 

Marx stressed that the “moments” he had analytically shown to underlie any
conception of a distinctively human consciousness are to be regarded as only logically
prior to that consciousness, not existentially differentiated from it; they have existed contemporaneously with consciousness "since the dawn of history and since the first men," and they "still assert themselves in history today."²²

Even so, he continued, man's consciousness is not "an original, 'pure' consciousness." From the very beginning "'spirit' is cursed with the 'burden' of matter." At first, consciousness is "merely an awareness of the immediate sensible environment and of the limited connection with other persons and things outside the individual who is becoming self-conscious. At the same time, it is a consciousness of Nature, which first appears to men as a completely alien, all-powerful and unassailable force, with which men's relations are purely animal and by which they are overawed like beasts; it is thus a purely animal consciousness of Nature (natural religion)."²³

Just as the Elementary (or Accidental) form of Value contains "the whole mystery of the form of value" in general, so too the elementary form of society and its attendant form of consciousness contain the mystery of the form of society in general. In The Communist Manifesto, to be sure, Marx spoke of three principal forms of social organization (Slave, Feudal, and Capitalist); and it was only in a note added by Engels that a fourth form, that of Primitive Communism, was alluded to. But, already in The German Ideology, Marx had characterized the mode of consciousness of this primitive form of social organization as Metaphorical. Thus, he wrote:

Here, as everywhere, the identity of nature and man appears in such a way that the restricted relation to one another determines men's restricted relation to nature, just because nature is as yet hardly modified historically; and, on the other hand, man's consciousness of the necessity of associating with the individuals around him is the beginning of the consciousness that he is living in society at all. This beginning is as animal as social life itself at this stage. It is mere herd-consciousness, and at this point man is only distinguished from sheep by the fact that with him consciousness takes the place of instinct or that his instinct is a conscious one.²⁴

Marx thus postulated as the precondition of all genuinely historical development an original stage in human development in which men live in a condition of consciousness, which is strictly Metaphorical in its modality. Men exist in the simultaneous apprehension of their similarity to, and difference from, nature. And the consciousness of humanity at this stage resembles an "animal" consciousness, a "sheep-like" or "herd" consciousness, which serves to consolidate human existence in the first form of society, which is tribal, and in which a kind of Primitive Communism must be supposed, by Marx's light, to have existed as the dominant form of economic organization. During this stage, men live parasitically off nature, as hunters and food-gatherers, which is to say that they participate in a form of production and consumption which is the same as that of other animals endowed with similar instincts and physical capacities.

But Marx appeared to believe that a factor in human life works to transform this metaphorical modality of relationship between human consciousness and nature, and between men and other men, an economic factor which originally was nothing but a function of sexual differentiation; and this factor is the division of labor. The division
of labor, working Mechanistically, as we would say, upon the forms of social relationship, brings about a change in the way men relate to nature and, as a result, to other men.

In short, the division of humanity is brought about by purely physical factors, differences of sex on the one hand and of power on the other. These kinds of division within the species dissolve the original identification of man with nature and with his own kind, which produced the original tribal union. This original division of the species on the basis of physical, or genetically provided, attributes then gives place, Marx suggested, to another and much more fundamental schism within the species, that which is expressed in the distinction between “material and mental labor.”

“Division of labor,” Marx said, “becomes truly such” only when this distinction appears in society. “From this moment onward consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it is really conceiving something without conceiving something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world and to proceed to the formation of a ‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc. 25 In other words, as a result of a division of labor, caused by purely mechanical factors in the distribution of physical attributes and powers, mankind is set upon the path of its own alienation from itself and from its own creative powers, and is impelled toward the attribution of these powers to imaginary “spirits” of the sort postulated by “‘pure’ theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc.”

Men now begin to exist contiguously with one another, as separate and as separated beings, as members of different classes, and in such a way as to preclude belief in the possibility of an ultimate reconciliation of the parts within the whole that is a single species.

With the division of labor, the Metaphorical relationship between man and man on the one hand and between man and nature on the other is dissolved, a Metonymical relationship is established, and, instead of existing with one another in the modality of identity, as was the case in primitive society, men come to exist in the modality of contiguity. Or, as Marx put it:

With the division of labor . . . and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal distribution (both quantitative and qualitative), of labor and its products, hence property; the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wife and children are the slaves of the husband. 26

This means, in Marx’s view, that the social expression of this condition of severance within the species is slavery.

This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property, but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing the labor power of others. Division of labor and private property are, moreover, identical expressions: in the one the same thing is affirmed with reference to activity as is affirmed in the other with reference to the product of the activity. 27
Thus, the primal unity, expressed in the social modality of primitive communism, gives place to a severed condition. What had before been unified, in both consciousness and praxis, is now divided; and mankind, formerly unified within itself against nature, is now severed within itself into two kinds of producers, and therefore into two kinds of consumers, and, as a result, into two kinds of humanity, two classes. Therewith begins the history of human society, which in its various phases exists in the modality of opposition of part to part, in conflict, struggle, and exploitation of man by man. Men now exist in a mode of relationship with one another as master and slave, in consciousness as well as in fact, a condition in which the differences between one segment of humanity and another are apprehended as being much more basic and important than any similarities which their possession of common species attributes might suggest.

But this transformation of both consciousness and the modes of social relationship is not seen as having been caused by a dialectical transformation of consciousness itself. The shift from the Primitive tribal stage to the ancient Slave stage of social organization is caused by purely material factors, a genetic factor on the one hand (sexual differentiation) and a functional differentiation on the other (a division of labor). And the division of labor, the cause of social differentiation among men, serves as the basis for the “ennoblement” of the consciousness of man himself, the “elevation” of man in his own consciousness above nature.

Following upon the division of function in the sexual act is the division of labor in primitive society between those who do manual labor and those whose work is primarily mental, between workers and priests. From this moment on, Marx said, “consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice . . .; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world,”28 because it can turn its attention on itself, hypostatize its fancies about itself in its uniquely human—that is, mental—aspects, and treat those fancies as if they were real, and even deify and worship images of them. But, by this very process of hypostatization, thought prepares itself for the discovery and the reintegration of that which makes man a potentially unifiable species. Thought is prepared for the Synecdochic unification of the fragments of humanity as elements of a whole, which is greater than the sum of the parts.

Thus is born all of that “pure” theology, philosophy, and theory on which man has prided himself since the dawn of civilization, and to which he has looked for the determination of his own properly human ends and purposes in life ever since.

V. The “syntax” of historical process

It may be noted that, as early as The German Ideology, Marx had prefigured the grammar and syntax of the theory of history that would serve him to the end of his days as a thinker. He could from that point on divide all historical phenomena coming under his gaze into the categories of Base and Superstructure.

Once this grammatical classification of historical phenomena has been carried out, it becomes possible to apply syntactical principles to “explain” why changes occur in
the areas of human praxis which these categories conceptually represent. These syntactical principles are nothing less than the laws of mechanical causation which govern relations between the Base and the Superstructure raised upon it. The central syntactical principle in Marx’s system of historical analysis, by which the “meaning” or “significance” of the whole historical process is to be provided, simply states that, although changes in the Base determine changes in the Superstructure, the reverse is not the case—that is, changes in social and cultural dimensions of historical existence do not cause changes in the Base.

To be sure, human ingenuity or action may cause changes in the means of production. Wars deplete the labor force, as do famine and pestilence; inventions change the nature of the technological endowment; natural resources become exhausted by use, and so on. But the changes caused in the means of production are not functions of alterations of the social order or the officially credited cultural endowment (the philosophy, religion, art, and so on) of a given society. The relationship between the Base and the Superstructure is therefore not only unidirectional but also strictly Mechanistic. There is nothing dialectical about this relationship at all.

The fundamental forms of the Superstructure, however, display the same categorical characteristics as the forms of value in Marx’s analysis of commodities in Capital. They are four in number, they are similarly tropological in his characterizations of them, and they succeed one another in the same way that the forms of value are conceived to do in Capital. These four forms of society (Primitive Communist, Slave, Feudal, and Capitalist) thus comprise the basic categories into which the phenomena of history considered as a diachronic process are to be grouped; and their succession constitutes the acts of the drama of significant historical occurrence for which Marx purported to provide the underlying plot structure (in which the meaning of the whole process can be disclosed) in his historical works.

More important, changes in publicly authenticated forms of human consciousness follow only upon changes in the fundament of every form of human society, the modes of production. These cause changes in the dependent social and cultural Superstructure. When the necessity for changes in the social order becomes apparent, individual products of “pure” consciousness become possible candidates for admission to the publicly authenticating group consciousness. This was the basis of Marx’s fundamental law of historical change in all its dimensions, the law he set forth in the preface to his Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy in 1859, the approximate midpoint between his earliest philosophizing in the 1840s and his death in 1883.

In the social production which men carry on they enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will; these relations of production correspond to a definite stage of development of their material powers of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society—the real foundation, on which legal and political superstructures arise and to which definite forms of social consciousness correspond. The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness. 29
As can be seen from this passage, for Marx, significant causal efficacy proceeds from the Base to the Superstructure by a direct, not a dialectical, path. There is a lag between the causal forces that promote social transformations and between social transformations and cultural changes; but this lag is inertial, caused by the incapacity of human consciousness in situations of fundamental transformations in the Base to relinquish the modes of conceiving reality inherited from, because they are based upon, earlier modes of productivity. Only after a new mode of production has been established as the dominant one in a given society can the publicly sanctioned forms of both consciousness and praxis themselves be established, in new laws, a new form of state organization, a new religion, a new art, and so on.

What is dialectical in all this—and here is the measure of Marx’s debt to German Idealism—is the mode of transition from one form of publicly sanctioned consciousness to another. The adjustment in human consciousness and in the Superstructure to the transformations caused by changes in the Base is a dialectical process and is precisely analogous to the kind of tropological change that occurs when primitive consciousness falls out of a Metaphorical relation to nature and to mankind in general and into a Metonymical apprehension of those relationships. From Metaphorical, to Metonymical, to Synecdochic consciousness—these are the phases through which humanity passes by dialectical transformation of the ways it relates itself to its contexts (natural and social) in its passage from savage to advanced civilized consciousness.

But precisely because these transformations of consciousness are dialectically engendered, by principles governing the operations of consciousness itself, we cannot, as Marx put it, judge a period of transformation by its own consciousness of itself—as conventional historians, seeking to reconstruct the consciousness of an age in its own terms, are inclined to do. The consciousness of an age is always more or less than what pure perception, were it not clouded by inherited preconceptions about what reality must be, would reveal to be the actual social reality of that age.

As a theory of consciousness’s transformations in history, Hegel’s Phenomenology of Mind had value for Marx as a model of analytical method. States of consciousness (publicly sanctioned forms of consciousness) are related to one another dialectically, by affirmation, negation, and negation of the negation, and so on; but these states of consciousness represent only the phenomenal forms of historical being. The true content of historical being, that which makes it subject to scientific analysis—that is, nomological causal analysis—is to be found in the modes of production of which the phenomenal forms are mere reflections.

Men relate themselves in their own minds to nature and to other men dialectically, but they are really related to nature, Marx insisted, in the modality of mechanical causality. Their apprehension of the world is mediated by consciousness, but their existence in the world is determined by the actual relationships they sustain to the natural and social worlds; and these actual relationships, in turn, are strictly causal and deterministic in nature. This is the meaning of Marx’s oft-quoted aphorism “Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”

Changes that occur in the Base are not, then, products of a dialectical interaction of the modes of production and the natural world; on the contrary, changes in the modes of production are occasioned by strict mechanical laws. Soil exhaustion, population
depletion, inventions of new techniques for exploiting nature—all of these changes in
the means of production result from changes that are explainable by natural scientific
concepts of causal relationships. The invention of a new machine such as the steam
engine, which might transform the relationship between the technological endowment
and the labor force, is conceived as a function of intelligence dedicated to the solution
of practical problems; and it represents not a dialectical process but rather the
application of a mode of thought, Mechanism, to the solution of a specific problem
suggested by the need to increase productivity for consumption or exchange.

Moreover, the transformation of the Base is strictly mechanical and incremental, not
dialectical. Its effect on the Superstructure is such as to set up a dialectical interaction
between inherited social forms and their attendant modes of consciousness and new
ones called for by the transformations occurring in the Base. But even this effect on the
Superstructure is mechanical in nature, not dialectical. For, as Marx pointed out in his
Contribution, the forms of consciousness that will gain public accreditation, in response
to the changes called for in society by the changes in the Base, are predetermined by
those changes. “Therefore,” he said,

mankind always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since, on closer
examination, it will always be found that the problem itself arises only when the
material conditions necessary for its solution already exist or are at least in the
process of formation. 31

In short, all publicly significant social “problems” are not problems at all but
“puzzles,” inasmuch as, in Marx’s view, such “problems” can always be presumed to be
soluble and to make available to those trying to solve them the means for their solution
in the time and place in which they arise. There is nothing “dialectical” about the
process that generates the crucial problems with which mankind must deal at different
stages of the historical process. And there is nothing “dialectical” about the means to be
employed by men in different historical situations in their efforts to solve those
problems. What is “dialectical” is the succession of the “forms” of society and culture
which consciousness constructs in the wake of its solutions to the social problems
caused by transformations in the Base. And Marx used the “dialectical” method for
analyzing the true content of the forms of social and cultural existence which appear
in history, in the same way that he used this method to disclose the true content of the
forms of value in the opening chapter of Capital.

The concept of the division of labor served as the organizing idea of Marx’s social
theory in the same way that the labor theory of value served as the organizing idea of
his economic theories. It is the division of labor which hurls mankind into that
condition of schism and self-alienation to which the historical record testifies as man’s
seemingly natural condition of existence. 32

In the division of labor, too, Marx found the origins of that schism in social life
between private and public, individual and general, interests. To be sure, he admitted
that the very nature of human life generates the distinction. The communal interest, he
said, exists “first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals
among whom the labor is divided.” But as soon as labor is divided, he insisted, “each
man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his livelihood.”  

Thus, men become slaves to their own creation, instruments of the very power which has given the species in general control over nature. Mankind becomes fragmented and atomized; and individuals become torn between their desire to be whole men and the necessity of functioning as specialized instruments of production. “This crystallization of social activity” into functionally differentiated spheres had been, Marx believed, “one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.”  

And in the conflict within individual men between their human aspirations and their socially provided roles, and in society in general between individual and communal interests, Marx found the driving force behind the creation of the state.

This is why, in the end, every putative “general interest” is always experienced by both dominant and subordinant classes as something outside, beyond, or alien to men—alien but benign in the case of dominant classes (since it establishes the “natural” quality of their power and privileges), alien but maleficent in the case of subordinate classes (since it frustrates their impulse to realize their individual and class interests fully). “Just because individuals seek only their particular interest, i.e., that not coinciding with their communal interest . . ., the latter will be imposed on them, as in its turn a particular, peculiar ‘general interest.’”  

On the other hand, “the practical struggle of these particular interests, which constantly really run counter to the communal and illusory communal interests, makes practical intervention and control necessary through the illusory ‘general-interest’ in the form of the State.”  

Thus, “social power, i.e., the multiplied productive force, which arises through the cooperation of different individuals as it is determined within the division of labor, appears to these individuals, since their cooperation is not voluntary but natural, not as their own united power but as an alien force existing outside them” as an abstract force which “lives” them, rather than as what it truly is, their own force, objectified and reified and turned to communal ends.

VI. The “semantics” of history

Marx claimed to have found in the Mechanistic relationship obtaining between the Base and the Superstructure the conceptual basis of a dynamic science of history and the instrument for predicting the outcome of history in its transient social phase. “Dialectical Materialism,” the combination of Hegel’s logic with the Feuerbachian conviction that all knowledge must begin with sense experience, Marx’s “New Science,” provides scientific justification for the conviction that “social” life, as known to every phase of history since primitive times, must disappear. More, it finds in bourgeois society the superstructural form of the Capitalist mode of organizing the means of production, both the last phase and the agency of destruction of this social life. If all previous history is the history of class struggle, as the Communist Manifesto proclaims, “bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production . . . At the same time the productive forces developing in the womb of bourgeois society create the material
Aesthetic Marx

conditions for the solution of that antagonism. With this social formation, therefore, the
prehistory of human society comes to an end.”38

The dynamics of this process of transformation, in which society itself is transcended,
is set forth most clearly in The Manifesto of the Communist Party (1848). In A Grammar
of Motives, Kenneth Burke has analyzed the Manifesto in “dramatistic” terms, stressing
the extent to which, in Marx’s presentation of history in this work, the element of
“scene” determines and provides understanding of the “agents, acts, and agencies” that
appear to make up the gross matter of the historical process. In Burke’s view, this
elevation of “scene” over “agent” reveals Marx’s essentially materialistic conception of
history, reveals him as a deterministic philosopher in the tradition of Hobbes, and sets
him apart from genuinely dialectical thinkers such as Hegel, for whom “agency” and
“purpose” play greater roles in the comprehension of history’s true significance.

Burke’s analysis is true enough as far as it goes, but it obscures the extent to which,
in the Manifesto as elsewhere, Marx’s thought moved simultaneously on two levels, by
appeal to both Mechanistic and Organicist conceptions of reality, and utilized two
fundamentally different linguistic protocols, Metonymical on the one hand and
Synecdochic on the other. So, too, Marx emplotted the historical process in two modes,
Tragic and Comic, simultaneously, but in such a way as to make the former emplotment
a phase within the latter, and so as to permit himself to claim the title of a “realist” while
sustaining his dream of a utopian reconciliation of man with man beyond the social
state. The sublation of the Tragic condition, which has prevailed in history since the fall
of man into society through the division of labor, constituted, in Marx’s thought, the
scientific justification of the Radical political position he purported to derive from his
study of history.

A brief analysis of the theory of history set forth in the first part of the Manifesto
will illustrate what I had in mind when I characterized Marx’s idea of history in the
foregoing terms.

The Manifesto opens with a characterization of the specific nature of the structure
of all previous periods of history: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the
history of class struggles.” The various classes of all previous societies “stood in constant
opposition to one another” and “carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open
fight.”39 This uninterrupted fight, Marx argued, resulted in the eruption, from time to
time, of crucial revolutionary reconstitutions of the whole social order. But no peace
resulted from any of these reconstitutions; each simply substituted “new classes, new
conditions of oppression, new forms of struggle in place of the old ones.”40 Nonetheless,
the process resulted in the “simplification” of “the class antagonisms.” Society was
progressively split into two camps, with two great classes facing each other: bourgeoisie
and proletariat.

The essential structural relationship in history is opposition, but the relationship
between the phases of the developmental process is dialectical. Thus, Marx said of the
succession of the classes:

From the serfs of the Middle Ages sprang [hervorspringen] the chartered burghers
of the earliest towns. From these burgesses the first elements of the bourgeoisie
developed [entwickelten].41
The images of development are Organicist; the mode of relationship is Synecdochic. The modality of the relationships among the different phases in the evolution of the Base, however, is characterized in different terms.

The feudal system of industry . . . now no longer sufficed for the growing wants of new markets. The manufacturing system took its place [antreten]. The guild masters were pushed to one side [verdrangt]; division of labor between the corporate guilds vanished in the face of division of labor in each single workshop.\(^42\)

Here the imagery is Mechanistic, the mode of the relationship of the parts is Metonymical, and the conditions for the further transformation of the social order are described in what is essentially the language of mechanical causality:

Meantime the markets kept ever growing [immer wuchsen]; the demand ever rising [immer steigt]. Even manufacture no longer sufficed. The place of manufacture was taken [antreten] by the giant, modern industry, the place of the industrial middle class by industrial millionaires, the leaders of whole industrial armies, the modern bourgeoisie.\(^43\)

And Marx concluded this overture to his essay, his delineation of the elements of the historical field and his classification of them into types in terms of their historical functions, in the following way:

We see, therefore, how the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange.\(^44\)

He then went on to characterize the development of the modern bourgeoisie, and in such a way as to depict it as a form of social organization, which bears the seeds of its own dissolution and autotransformation within it. Ironically he depicted the ways in which the modern middle class, in its pursuit of profits, effectively succeeds in overturning, dementing, and depleting its own ideological resources, its own most highly cherished conscious beliefs and allegiances. This development, he argued, not only puts “an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations” and “drown[s] the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of Philistine sentimentalism in the icy water of egotistical calculation,” but also “resolve[s] personal worth into exchange value,” and, “for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, . . . substitute[s] naked, shameless, direct, brutal exploitation.”\(^45\) In short, the bourgeoisie produces the conditions in which man must at last face the depraved condition of his millennial existence in “society” with a clear and unclouded eye. It thereby constitutes the mode of consciousness in which a “realism” with respect to the true nature of the social order can take shape, a realism as powerful in its capacity to transform “reality” itself as that which permitted the constitution of modern science for the exploitation of the material world.

The irony of bourgeois society, Marx suggested, is that it cannot exist “without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of
production, and with them the whole relations of society."46 This revolutionary impulse is inspired by the “need of a constantly expanding market.”47 The achievement of the bourgeoisie is truly heroic, truly Promethean, in Marx's account of its rise and development, but its present situation is one of internal contradiction: the need for ever-expanding markets causes the bourgeoisie to revolt against “the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and of its rule.”48 From this paradoxical state arise the “crises” that periodically break out in the most highly developed capitalist economic systems.

The internal contradictions of bourgeois life generate “epidemics,” and especially one kind of epidemic, which “would have seemed an absurdity in all earlier epochs—the epidemic of overproduction.”49 And, ironically, the cures provided by the bourgeoisie for these epidemics promote even more virulent outbreaks of them in the future:

And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand, by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.50

The result of all this is that the very weapons with which the bourgeoisie “felled” the older feudal order are “turned against the bourgeoisie itself”:51 But the agency forged by the bourgeoisie, the agency by which its own destruction is to be brought about, does not arise ex nihilo, as an effect of some cause operating mechanically in its environment, in the way that new systems of production are created. The agency which will bring about the destruction of the bourgeoisie is to be made up of all the alienated of all the classes which have been reduced to the status of mere “commodities”—that is, to a purely nonhuman or natural status, by the exploitative operations of the most efficient members of the bourgeois class itself. This new class of radically alienated “refuse” of the capitalist system is the proletariat, “recruited from all classes of the population.”

The origins of the proletariat, then, are the most diverse imaginable. It exists originally in the condition of total dispersion, without even any consciousness of its status as “refuse.” In the process of its development, however, this refuse is transformed into gold; from the wretched of the earth is fashioned the instrument of human liberation.

Thus, while Marx emplotted the history of the bourgeoisie as a Tragedy, that of the proletariat is set within the larger framework of a Comedy, the resolution of which consists of the dissolution of all classes and the transformation of humanity into an organic whole. It is not surprising that Marx emplotted this Comedy as a drama in four acts that correspond to the stages of the Classical drama: pathos, agon, sparagmos, and anagnorisis successively.

The action of the drama is carried forward by the struggle with the bourgeoisie, but in the opening act the “contest is carried on by individual laborers” who “form an incoherent mass” and who do not even know their real enemy, the bourgeoisie, but fight instead against “the enemies of their enemies, the remnants of absolute monarchy.”52 At this stage, the consciousness of the proletariat is only a mood (pathos). The proletariat simply exists in itself, neither for itself nor in the consciousness of
others. With the advent of industry, however, “the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels its strength more.” Workers begin to form “combinations (trade unions) against the bourgeoisie” and to engage their exploiters in open contests with their own interests in mind. 53 These contests consolidate the workers into political parties, groups organized for struggle in the political arena. This is the agonic stage; here the proletariat exists in conscious opposition to the bourgeoisie. It exists for itself, therefore, inhabits a world that it knows to be severed and in which raw power is recognized as the means to the only end that the masses can envisage, betterment of their own material condition against the threat of others. 54

This “organization of the proletarians into a class, and consequently into a political party,” is, however, constantly upset “by competition between the workers themselves.” The agonic stage is thus followed by sparagmos, the falling apart of the proletariat into its several elements. This falling apart, however, is necessary (in Hegelian terms) for the proletariat’s coming to consciousness of its own potential unification. The proletariat, Marx said, “ever rises up again, stronger, firmer, mightier.” 55 This recurrent rise of the proletariat from the condition of dispersion into which it falls as a result of its agon is aided by divisions which occur within the bourgeoisie itself. The bourgeoisie, put upon by the remnants of the older aristocratic order and by elements of itself which have become antagonistic to it, is forced to call upon the proletariat from time to time to aid it in its struggle against its enemies. The political education of the proletariat follows as a matter of course. Those elements of the aristocracy and bourgeoisie which are the victims of the stronger elements within the bourgeois order sink into the condition of the proletariat, unite with it, make its cause their own, and “supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.” 56 Thus, the proletariat is gradually transformed, not only into the repository of the refuse of all other classes, but into the class which knows itself to be this repository, and hence is rendered cosmopolitan and classless in its own aspirations. It becomes a class which is not only in itself and for itself but in and for itself simultaneously, and hence is a genuinely revolutionary class, the class that solves the “riddle of history.”

And the result of this growth and transformation of consciousness is that the proletariat becomes the only “really revolutionary class,” a superclass, the class of all classes, so that, while the “other classes decay and finally disappear in the face of modern industry,” the proletariat becomes the “special and essential product” of this industry. 57 The “special and essential” nature of this revolutionary class will be manifested, Marx wrote, in the fact that the proletariat will occupy a position in society and history in which it will be unable to “fortify [its] already acquired status by subjecting society at large to [its] powers of appropriation.” 58

The proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation, and thereby also every other previous mode of appropriation. 59

This is because the proletariat, ironically, “[has] nothing of [its] own to secure and to fortify; [its] mission is to destroy all previous securities for, and insurances of, individual
property." And, when the proletariat comes into its own, the result will be Communism, that condition of society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”

It is obvious that this fourfold movement of the proletariat is a historical description not of the actual stages through which the proletariat had already passed but of the stages through which Marx conceived that it must pass if the kind of society that he envisioned as the end of all historical development is to come to pass. What were the grounds, apart from the manifestly polemical purposes of the essay, for Marx’s characterization of these four stages in the way he has in fact characterized them?

What I have laid out in the above passages is the plot structure, in embryo, of all significant processes in history, cast in terms that would allow Marx to postulate the final stage of proletarian development as a Synecdochic union of parts in the whole. The analysis is cast in the Metonymical mode—that is, in manifestly mechanical, or causal, terms. But what is being described is the transformation of a condition characterized originally in the Metaphorical mode, through a description of it in its Metonymically reduced state, to that of a Synecdochic union of parts into a whole. Marx wrote history from the standpoint of a thinker who was consciously committed to the Metonymical strategies of reducing a field of occurrences to the matrix of Mechanistic causal agencies which effect its transformations in strictly deterministic terms. But he exempted the social order from complete determination by causal forces as a way of comprehending the dynamics of its internal structural attributes. Although the whole social order follows, and is determined in its gross configuration by, the causes operating mechanically in the Base (the modes of production), the internal dynamics of the Superstructure are to be comprehended in the mode of Synecdochic relationships. And communism, in Marx’s mind, was nothing but the social order conceived in the mode of a perfect Synecdochic integration.

The structural similarities between Marx’s method of analyzing history and his method of analyzing commodities (in Chapter I of Capital) should be obvious. The historical record is divided into a manifest and a hidden level of meaning, which are related to each other as phenomenal form to true content. The content of history changes incrementally—that is, quantitatively—through changes in the means of production, which require transformation in the modes of production. But the primacy of the modes of production as a causal agency, determining the forms that appear in the Superstructure, remains constant throughout all changes. The different ways in which men relate to the natural world, in their efforts to provide for species needs, determine the forms that their social relationships must take. Fundamental alterations in the modes of production, such as the shift from Primitive Communism to an agrarian system exploiting Slave labor, or from the latter to a Feudal organization of the labor force, or from this to modern commercial Capitalism, provide the criteria for delineating the various “acts” of the historical drama as viewed from a macrocosmic level of conceptualization. The path which consciousness follows in response to these fundamental alterations in the modes of production is that from Metaphorical consciousness, through Metonymical and Synecdochic consciousness, to an Ironic apprehension of the essentially paradoxical nature of a social organization which breeds poverty in the midst of plenty, war in a situation in which peace is possible, scarcity (both material and psychic) in the midst of
affluence. And this Ironic awareness of the condition of modern man prepares the ground for a transition of human consciousness to a new and higher (because it is a more self-conscious) form of Metaphorical union of man with nature, with other men, and with himself—the condition of consciousness in which Communism becomes a realistic possibility for men in the next stage of their development.

In short, the Ironic condition in which modern men find themselves is precisely similar to that which becomes possible, in Marx's view, once the fetishism of gold is recognized for what it truly is after one has followed the analysis carried out in the opening chapter of Capital. A dialectical analysis of the forms of value is possible because Marx distinguished between form and content on the basis of a belief in the labor theory of value. So, too, a dialectical analysis of the forms of the historical process is possible because Marx distinguished between history's form and content on the basis of his belief in the primacy of the Base as the agency of significant historical change. This dialectical analysis constitutes the formal argument in defense of his unique explanation of the true meaning of history, and it justifies the emplotment of the historical process given in the Manifesto as an image of the form of history-in-general.

But in the drama of history, as Marx actually conceived it, different actors dominate the various acts: first master and slave, then nobleman and serf, then bourgeoisie and proletariat. But the proletariat is endowed with a role and a being such as to make it the true protagonist of the whole drama, as that which the whole historical process from its beginning has been straining to become. As Marx characterized the proletariat, it is obvious that for him it is the whole of humanity that the different parts of humanity in the historical process have been (unsuccessfully) striving to become in their various incarnations. And because of the special place given to the proletariat, Marx was forced to endow the bourgeoisie itself with a special role in the historical drama.

The bourgeoisie becomes, in Marx's emplotment of history, the Tragic hero through whose fall the proletariat is raised to consciousness of its uniquely Comic destiny in world history. That is to say, by virtue of the fact that the proletariat is not only the victim, but also the spectator, of the bourgeoisie's rise and fall, the whole historical process can be provided with a Comic resolution as its preordained end. Just as, in Capital, the explication of the forms of value was carried out in the interest of justifying the labor theory of value, so, too, in the Manifesto, the explication of the forms of society was carried out in the interest of justifying the imminent triumph of the proletariat over both society and history itself. This is what lay behind Marx's relegation of what was conventionally called "history" to the status of "prehistory." Man's true history, he predicted, will begin only with the triumph of the proletariat over its bourgeois oppressors, the dissolution of class differences, the withering away of the state, and the establishment of socialism as the system of exchange based upon the acceptance of the labor theory of value.

VII. Marx's method applied to concrete historical events

Thus far, I have analyzed parts of The German Ideology, the Manifesto, and Capital with a view toward identifying the fundamental structures of Marx's analytical method. In the course of my analysis of his thought, I have stressed the tropological nature of what
is commonly thought of as his “dialectical” method. No matter what Marx undertook to analyze, I have suggested, whether it was stages in the evolution of society, forms of value, or forms of socialism itself he was inclined to break down the phenomenon under study into four categories or classes, corresponding to the tropes of Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony. Thus, to give yet another example, at the end of the Manifesto, when he classified the different forms of socialist consciousness, he spoke of four major types: Reactionary, Conservative (or Bourgeois), Utopian, and (his own “Scientific”) Communist. The evolution of Socialist consciousness proceeds by way of an original Metaphorical (Reactionary) type, through Metonymical (Bourgeois) and Synecdochic (Utopian) varieties, to the crystallization of that scientific brand of Socialist consciousness (his own) by which all previous forms can be identified as fragmentary, incomplete, or flawed. Thus, Marx said, while Utopian Socialists still “endeavor . . . to deaden the class struggle and to reconcile class antagonisms . . .,” Communists “fight for the attainment of the momentary interests of the working class . . . [and] everywhere support every revolutionary movement against the existing social and political order of thing.” This passage suggests that, even in the enthusiasm of 1848, Marx was under no illusion that the revolution of the proletariat could possibly be realized at that time.

Communists “Ironically” join every revolutionary movement in the interest of promoting the ultimate victory of the proletariat. This Ironic stance, not only with respect to the bourgeoisie, but also with respect to revolutionary movements directed against it, protected Marx from any optimistic illusion that the time had come for the ultimate victory. The Manifesto, with its call to arms to the proletariat, is itself an Ironic document, inasmuch as Marx himself at the time of its composition entertained few hopes for the consummation of the revolution that it enthusiastically proclaimed, Marx knew that the revolution could not be consummated, because he knew that the Synecdochic stage of consciousness, presupposed by the aims it envisioned, had not yet been attained by the proletariat of Europe. In fact, in The Holy Family (1845), Marx had defined Communism as “the positive abolition of private property, of human self-alienation, and thus, the real appropriation of human nature, through and for man. It is therefore the return of man himself as a social, that is, really human, being; a complete and conscious return which assimilates all the wealth of previous development.” The whole assimilates to itself and transforms into a unity the totality of the parts. That such an assimilation and transformation were hardly in the offing in the eruptions of 1848 was signaled by Marx’s own characterization of Communist consciousness in that year as encompassing only limited aims. It was further signaled in his analysis of The Class Struggles in France, 1849 to 1850, written in the latter year as a series of articles commenting on the events as they evolved before him.

In his 1891 introduction to Marx’s The Civil War in France (1871), Engels remarked on Marx’s ability to grasp “clearly the character, the import, and the necessary consequences of great historical events, at a time when these events are still in progress before our eyes or have only just taken place.” In The Class Struggles in France, Marx had characterized the revolutionary movement of 1848 as a “tragicomedy,” which served the interests of the proletariat only insofar as it brought into being a “powerful
united counterrevolution” and created thereby “an opponent in combat with whom, only, the party of revolt ripened into a really revolutionary party.”65 In short, here the revolution was depicted as serving primarily as a means of developing the consciousness of the proletariat itself, by way of negation, opposition, or antithesis. The creation of a counterrevolutionary party alone permitted the revolutionary party to define itself, in both its similarity to, and difference from, the counterrevolutionary party.

Marx argued, in fact, that the nature of the proletariat’s consciousness and its actual historical condition required its defeat. For since the proletarians rightly regarded themselves as the victors of February, . . . They had to be vanquished in the streets, they had to be shown that they were worsted as soon as they did not fight with the bourgeoisie, but against the bourgeoisie. . . . Arms in hand, the bourgeoisie had to refute the demands of the proletariat. And the real birthplace of the bourgeois republic is not the February victory; it is the June defeat.66

This uncovering of the events of June as the true birthplace of the bourgeois republic, as the defeat of its “true” enemy, the proletariat, which had fought with it in February to depose Louis Philippe, is rather like that dialectical analysis of the Money form of value given in Capital. That is to say, it is at once a reduction and a clarification through a reduction. The false equivalence stated in the explicit form of the Metaphor “the revolution = the February uprising” is corrected by the Ironic negation “the revolution = the triumph of the bourgeoisie.” Thus, Marx said,

The February revolution was the beautiful revolution, the revolution of universal sympathy, because the antagonisms which had flared up in it against the monarchy slumbered peacefully side by side, still undeveloped, because the social struggle which formed its background had won only an airy existence, an existence of phrases, or words.67

By contrast,

The June revolution is the ugly revolution, the repulsive revolution, because deeds have taken the place of phrases, because the republic uncovered the head of the monster itself by striking off the crown that shielded and concealed it.68

The true beneficiary, then, of the June uprising was the bourgeoisie, which, because it had triumphed in Paris, now had its “self-assurance” raised all over Europe. Accordingly, Marx argued, the triumph of the bourgeoisie in June 1848 laid the groundwork for the overthrow of the bourgeoisie itself precisely because it revealed it for what it was, a monster. Its monstrous character was displayed in the contradictions contained in the new constitution, which the Constituent National Assembly had put together.

The “most comprehensive contradiction of this constitution” consisted, according to Marx, in the way it disposed political power among the various classes of France.
In such a contradictory situation, only a nonentity such as Louis Bonaparte could possibly have appealed to the broad sectors of the French electorate. Thus, ironically, it happened

that the most simple-minded man in France acquired the most multifarious significance. Just because he was nothing he could signify everything save himself.  

Thus, the condition of France under the rule of Louis Bonaparte was precisely the same as that of modern capitalist society under the sway of the “fetishism of gold.” A totally worthless entity was identified with the interests of all groups precisely because the specific interest of every group had been negated by constitutional maneuvering. French society was relegated to that “farical” condition which would become the subject of a more comprehensive analysis in Marx’s classic, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

VIII. History as farce

*The Eighteenth Brumaire* opens with a famous apothegm:

Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.  

The coup of Louis Bonaparte is thus prefigured in the first paragraph of Marx’s work as an ironic anaclasis to the genuinely Tragic events that had brought Napoleon I to power in the great bourgeois revolution in 1789. Although French society in 1848 thought that it was carrying out the revolutionary program of 1789, in reality, in Marx’s view, it was regressing to a point “behind its point of departure.” The whole set of events which occurred from February 24, 1848, to December 1851, Marx characterized, as he had in *The Class Struggles in France*, as a “tragicomedy,” a charade of revolution, which left the French nation in a state of bondage more oppressive than that from which it had been liberated in 1789.

Moreover, Marx denied that one can legitimately say, “as the French do, that their nation was taken unawares. . . . The riddle is not solved by such turns of speech, but merely formulated differently.” The real problem, he maintained, is to explain “how a nation of thirty-six million can be surprised and delivered into unresisting captivity by three swindlers.”

Of course, this was not really a problem for Marx. At least, it was not an analytical problem, for he already knew the answer to that problem. Marx’s problem was a literary one; he had to present “what really happened” in a convincing narrative.

Marx’s formal answer to the question “what really happened” must be distinguished from the analytical method he used to arrive at an answer to that question. Formally, Marx simply argued that Louis Bonaparte’s victory was a result of bourgeois fear of the proletariat, combined with peasant resentment of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The causes of this fear on the one hand and of the resentment on the
other, are referred to as the “material conditions” which underlay and informed relationships among the bourgeoisie, proletariat, peasantry, and the Bonapartist form of government in 1850. Here, as in the analysis of value in Capital, it was a matter of distinguishing between the form and the content of the phenomenon to be analyzed.

But the question of how these various factors coalesced to provide the specific form of their relationship under the Second Empire required that Marx reveal the “true story” behind the events that made up the chronicle of significant historical occurrences in France between 1848 and 1851. And, in turn, the disclosure of this true story required the emplotment of the events as a story of a particular kind. This story had already been characterized as a “farce” in Marx’s opening remarks, which means that he had cast the story in the mode of Satire. There was, in short, nothing Tragic about the events of 1848–51, in which France delivered itself into the care of “three swindlers.” The events that Marx depicted as leading from the February revolution to the establishment of the Second Empire describe a sustained fall into a condition of bondage unrelieved by any evidence of the kind of noble aspiration that would have permitted their characterization as a genuine Tragedy.

This differs from Marx’s characterization of the events of 1789, the activities of the bourgeoisie during the course of the French Revolution. Referring to the revolution of 1789, Marx wrote:

But unheroic as bourgeois society is, it nevertheless took heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war, and battles of peoples to bring it into being. And in the classically austere traditions of the Roman Republic its gladiators found the ideals and the art forms, the self-deceptions that they needed in order to conceal from themselves the bourgeois limitations of the content of their struggles and to keep their enthusiasm on the high plane of the great historical tragedy.  

The bourgeois revolution of 1789 was Tragic because the disparity between ideals and realities was obscured. The revolution of 1848–51 was another matter. It was “farical” precisely because the ideals were subordinated to realities. As a result,

Instead of society having conquered a new content for itself, it seems that the state only returned to its oldest form, to the shamelessly simple domination of the saber and cowl. This is the answer to the coup de main of February 1848, given by the coup d’état of December 1851. Easy come, easy go.

The establishment of the Second Empire, then, represented the final phase of a course of events which had begun in the uprising of February 1848. It was the datum to be explained, and Marx explained it by dividing its “history” into four phases of development: the February period; the period of the Constituent National Assembly, May 4, 1848–May 28, 1849; the period of the Legislative National Assembly, May 28, 1849–December 2, 1851; and, finally, the Second Empire itself, which lasted from December 2, 1851, to its overthrow in the days of the Paris Commune in 1871.

Marx’s characterization of these phases corresponds to that offered in the analysis of the four forms of value in Capital. Thus, he described the February period as a
“prologue to the revolution” since, during this time, everyone involved in the uprising was inspired only by “general,” not by specific, revolutionary aims.

The appearances and the realities of the revolutionary situation existed in the strongest contrast to one another, but were not perceived to be such—in the same way that, in the Elementary form of value, the disparity between content and form is obscured, to the detriment of the former. Thus, all of the “elements that had prepared or determined the revolution ... provisionally found their place in the February government.” Every party construed [the revolution] in its own way. The proletariat, having secured arms at last, “impressed its stamp upon it and proclaimed it to be a social republic,” thereby indicating the “general content of the modern revolution,” but one which, in the circumstances, “was in most singular contradiction to everything that ... could be immediately realized in practice.” Meanwhile, the old powers of society regrouped themselves, “assembled, reflected, and found unexpected support in the mass of the nation, the peasants and the petty bourgeois, who all at once stormed onto the political stage.”

This contrast between the ideal of the revolution and what “could be immediately realized in practice” corresponds to the “form” of value and its true “content” as set forth in Capital. The true content of the situation in February 1848 is masked by a general condition of consciousness, which might be called Metaphorical in a strict sense. What is hidden is also present, but present in a distorted form. The true content of the revolution is to be found in the material conditions that made the February uprising possible, but this content exists in contradiction to the forms of social action present on the scene in 1848. That this was implicitly recognized by the parties of the revolution is shown by the fact that the February regime was designated as “provisional.” “Nothing and nobody,” Marx said, “ventured to lay claim to the right of existence and of real action.” The condition of stasis into which the nation fell after the success of the coup against Louis Philippe was evidence enough for Marx of the existence of a practical contradiction which could be resolved only by force.

And it was resolved, according to Marx, during the second phase, the period of the Constituent National Assembly, which lasted from May 4, 1848, to May 28, 1849, the period of the “bourgeois republic ... a living protest against the pretensions of the February days.” The function of the National Assembly, Marx said, was “to reduce the result of the revolution to the bourgeois scale.” In short, the purpose of the second phase was to resolve the contradictions contained in the first phase by reducing the general content of the revolution to a particular content, the general rule to that of the bourgeoisie,

The demands of the Paris proletariat are Utopian nonsense, to which an end must be put. To this declaration of the Constituent National Assembly the Paris proletariat replied with the June insurrection, the most colossal event in the history of European civil wars.

But, ironically, this most “colossal event in the history of European civil wars” was historically significant, in Marx’s estimation, primarily because of its failure. Only by the defeat of the proletariat would the proletariat prevail.
The defeat of the June insurgents was thus characterized as a lamentable, but hardly Tragic, event, inasmuch as their resistance to the bourgeoisie was not informed by a clear notion of their aims or by any realistic assessment of their prospects for victory. Little wonder, in Marx's view, that attempts to revive the proletarian cause were consistently frustrated. The proletariat "seems unable either to rediscover revolutionary greatness in itself or to win—new energy from the connections [with other groups] newly entered into, until all classes with which it contended in June themselves lie prostrate beside it"—until, in short, all classes have become one with it. The fact that the proletariat "at least . . . succumbs with the honors of the great world-historical struggle" cannot obscure the more important fact that its defeat "leveled the ground on which the bourgeois republic could be founded and built up." The reductive nature of the bourgeois order is revealed in the fact that, for it, "Society is saved just as often as the circle of its rulers contracts, as a more exclusive interest is maintained against a wider one."

The evolution of bourgeois society was marked by the systematic betrayal of the ideals on behalf of which it had prosecuted the revolution of 1789. These very ideals, when appealed to by spokesmen for the proletariat, seeking to gain for their constituency the same "liberties" and "organs of progress" that had brought the bourgeoisie to power, were now branded as "socialistic." Its own ideals were rejected as a threat to the "class rule" which the bourgeoisie sought to establish. But, ironically, Marx pointed out, the bourgeoisie did not realize that its own parliamentary regime, that its political rule in general, "would be regarded as "socialistic" by those elements in its own ranks which now desired "tranquility" above all. The bourgeoisie, once the champion of competition, discussion, debate, rule by majority, and so on, could no longer countenance these processes insofar as they were demanded by others. It therefore necessarily rejected these along with its commitment to the ideals of "liberty, equality, and fraternity" and to the principle of parliamentary democracy.

This series of ironic inversions provided the dramatic principle by which Marx "dialectically" explicated the self-destructive operations of both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat which serve the "cunning of history." The transition from the first to the second phase of the revolution is a transition from a Metaphorical to a Metonymical mode of existence. In the second, or bourgeois, phase, "society" is Metonymically identified with the "bourgeoisie;" the part has taken the place of the whole. "The parliamentary republic, together with the bourgeoisie, takes possession of the entire stage; it enjoys its existence to the full." But on December 2, 1851, this republic was buried, "to the accompaniment of the anguished cry of the royalists in coalition: 'Long live the republic!'" And it was buried by Louis Bonaparte, who provided the transition from the Metonymical to the Synechdochic (Generalized) phase of the revolution. Marx described the transition thus:

In Parliament the nation made its general will the law, that is, it made the law of the ruling classes its general will. Before the executive power it renounces all will of its own and submits to the superior command of an alien will, to authority. The executive power, in contrast to the legislative power, expresses the heteronomy of the nation, in contrast to its autonomy.
This “executive power” (Bonaparte) stood with respect to the French nation, with its various classes, as linen did to all other commodities in Marx’s analysis of the Generalized form of value in *Capital*. Thus, Marx wrote:

France, therefore, seems to have escaped the *despotism of a class* only to fall back beneath the *despotism of an individual*.91

But, ironically, it had fallen back beneath the authority of “an individual without authority. The struggle seems to be settled in such a way that all classes, equally impotent and equally mute, fall on their knees before a rifle butt.”92 Thus, the “total,” or “extended,” condition of class conflict, characteristic of the bourgeois republic, now gave place to the “generalized” condition of the bourgeois dictatorship, and in such a way that, while coming to the fore as the dominant class of society, the bourgeoisie was stripped of that very political power to which it had aspired in 1789. All political power was vested in a single individual, Bonaparte: “As against civil society, the state machine has consolidated itself so thoroughly that [Bonaparte] suffices for its head.”93

Marx argued that Bonaparte’s success depended upon support of the smallholding peasants of France, but he noted that this success was not attended by the ascent of this class to political power. In much the same way that, in the analysis of the forms of value, the fetishism of gold succeeded the Generalized form of value, in the succession of political forms, the fetishism of Bonaparte succeeded the generalized form of political power represented by the presidential office occupied by Bonaparte. Bonaparte, “an adventurer blown in from abroad, raised on the shield of a drunken soldiery, which he has bought with liquor and sausages,”94 not only betrayed the peasantry but all other orders as well. Looking upon himself “as the representative of the middle class, . . . he is somebody solely due to the fact that he has broken the political power of the middle class and daily breaks it anew.”95 Looking upon himself as “the representative of the peasants” and of the “lumpen-proletariat,” he betrayed them also, insisting that they must learn to be happy “within the frame of bourgeois society.”96

Bonaparte’s program was a masterpiece of duplicity and contradiction. The French bourgeoisie were right, then, when they proclaimed (as Marx has them say): “Only the chief of the Society of December 10 can still save bourgeois society! Only theft can still save property; only perjury, religion; only bastardy, the family; disorder, order!”97 The same “absurdity” which Marx subsequently ascribed to the “fetishism of gold” was here ascribed to a whole society.

The contradictions of Bonaparte’s regime are precisely analogous to the contradictions which inform, and render congenitally unstable, the Money form of value. And this is what permitted Marx to predict, with perfect self-confidence, the regime’s ultimate dissolution. Marx ended *The Eighteenth Brumaire* with a characterization of the regime which presaged the judgment he would render on it retrospectively in his *Civil Wars in France* in 1871. *The Eighteenth Brumaire* ends thus:

Driven by the contradictory demands of his situation and being at the same time, like a conjurer, under the necessity of keeping the public gaze fixed on himself, . . . by springing constant surprises, that is to say, under the necessity of executing a
coup d’état en miniature every day, Bonaparte throws the entire bourgeois economy into confusion, violates everything that seemed inviolable to the Revolution of 1848, makes some tolerant of revolution, others desirous of revolution, and produces actual anarchy in the name of order, while at the same time stripping its halo from the entire state mechanism, profanes it and makes it at once loathsome and ridiculous. 98

In 1871, then, all that was needed to lay bare the “rotteness” both of the regime and of the society which it pretended to serve was the prick of the Prussian bayonet. 99 The disintegration of this “farcical” form of government was inevitably followed by its “direct antithesis”—that is to say, the Paris Commune—which launched French society on a new cycle of development.

The Commune also launched the proletariat on a new cycle of consciousness. Thus, Marx wrote in The Civil Wars in France:

The cry of “social republic,” with which the revolution of February was ushered in by the Paris proletariat, did not express a vague aspiration after a republic that was not only to supersede the monarchical form of class rule, but class rule itself. The Commune was [thus] the positive form of that republic. 100

The positiveness of the called-for “social republic” was reflected, Marx argued, in its attempts to construct a social order greater than the sum of the parts which made it up. Thus, for example, the Commune was “emphatically international,” 101 admitting “all foreigners to the honor of dying for its immortal cause.” 102 Marx even went so far as to assert that crime was virtually unknown in Paris during its heyday: “No more corpses in the morgue, no nocturnal burglaries, scarcely any robberies.” 103 In contrast to the decadent remnants of the former regime, now gathered at Versailles and endeavoring to subvert the Commune, Paris was a virtual paradise; “Opposed to the new world at Paris behold the old world at Versailles . . . Paris all truth, Versailles all lie; and that lie vented through the mouth of Thiers.” 104 In Paris during the Commune, a group of men succeeded for a moment in creating, according to Marx, a model of what the Communist society of the future would look like. As Engels wrote in 1891: “Well and good, gentlemen: do you want to know what [the dictatorship of the proletariat] looks like? Look at the Paris Commune. That was the dictatorship of the proletariat.” 105

Yet, here, as in 1848, the revolution was predestined to defeat, not only because the material conditions were not yet right for the establishment of a Communist society, but also because “the majority of the Commune was in no wise socialist, ‘nor could it be.” 106 The cry for a “social republic” was only a Metaphor, containing within it an unspecified content, which was “socialism,” but which appeared under the vague designation of “class rule.” The idea of the Commune would have to undergo the agon of Metonymical reduction before it could emerge purified and self-consciously socialist in its next incarnation. The Third Republic, established by the force of Prussian arms, was the social form that this reduction took. Its contradictions were not less glaring than those of the Second Empire, which it supplanted. And it was not more stable. If anything, it was even more morbid, existing as it did as an uneasy compromise
between a frightened bourgeoisie and a proletariat grown more self-conscious of itself as a revolutionary class, for having the historical experience of the Commune to draw upon for inspiration. That it would become more “absurd” in the course of time, Marx did not doubt at all. It was as fated to absurdity as that economic system which confused value with gold.

IX. Conclusion

I can now summarize Marx’s idea of history, conceived as both a method of analysis and a strategy of representation. I have indicated that, in my view, Marx’s view of history has two dimensions, or two axes of conceptualization: one Synchronic, having to do with the timeless relationships presumed to exist between the Base and the Superstructure; the other Diachronic, having to do with the transformations that occur over time in both of these. Marx broke with Hegel in his insistence that the fundamental ground of historical being is nature, rather than consciousness, and in his conviction that the publicly sanctioned forms of consciousness are determined in a Mechanistic way by the modes of production of which they are reflections. This causal relationship is unilinear and is conceived to be irremissible throughout history. He remained one with Hegel, however, in his use of the “dialectical” method to analyze the succession of forms appearing in the Superstructure. Here his categories are the same as Hegel’s, and his conception of the relationships among the entities classified under their rubrics is identical. Hegelian “logic” is thus remanded to the task of analyzing the fundamental forms of human self-conceptualization and the social matrices within which these forms of self-conceptualization gain public accreditation. Moreover, both the categories used to characterize the forms and matrices and those used to characterize relations among them were derived from Marx’s perception of the essentially tropological nature of the categories of Hegel’s Logic. The types of human self-conceptualization and the social projections of such conceptualizations are given in, and are ultimately limited to, the modes of characterizing reality provided by language in general, as are the modalities of transformation of these types and projections. Metaphor, Metonymy, Synecdoche, and Irony offer not only the means of human self-conceptualization but also the categories of analysis by which such self-conceptualizations are to be comprehended as stages in the history of any aspect of the Superstructure. Whether Marx was analyzing a micro-event, such as the revolution of 1848–51 in France, or a macro-event, such as the whole evolution of humanity, he always fell back upon tropology as the basis for his categorization of classes of events and the stages through which they pass in their evolution from an inaugural to a terminal condition.

So, too, as in Hegel, the tropes provided the basis for Marx’s fourfold analysis, in dramatistic terms, of sets of historically significant phenomena. The plot structure of every historically significant sequence of events—from pathos, through agon and sparagmos, to anagnorisis—represents a movement either toward liberation or toward bondage, toward a “Romantic” transcendence of the world of experience or toward an “Ironic” condition of bondage. But Marx denied both extremes; mankind is indentured
neither to total bondage nor to perfect transcendence. His historical vision, like that of Hegel, oscillated between apprehensions of the Tragic outcome of every act of the historical drama and comprehensions of the Comic outcome of the process as a whole. For Marx, as for Hegel, humanity achieves the condition of a Comic reconciliation, with itself and with nature, by means of Tragic conflicts which, in themselves, appear to offer nothing more than the consolations of a philosophical comprehension of their nobility. Thus, just as in his “explanations” of history Marx moved between a Mechanistic and an Organicist mode of argument, so, in his “representations” of it, he moved between a Tragic and a Comic conception of its fundamental form.

What Marx sought to do was to provide an analytical method and a strategy of representation which would permit him to write about history in the active, rather than the passive, voice. The active voice is the voice of Radicalism. But Marx’s Radicalism was that of the Left, and was distinguishable from its rightwing counterpart by its insistence that history is no more a mystery in principle than is nature itself, that the study of history yields laws by which one can comprehend both its meaning and its general direction of development. It thereby positions the reader in a situation of choice between possible alternatives without specifying what his decision in a given situation has to be. More important, it places the reader in a position in which, whatever choice he makes, he is forced to make it in a condition of self-consciousness more profound than if he had made his decision in the Rankean apprehension of things working out for the best no matter what one does or the Burckhardtian belief that, whatever one does, it does not matter.

Notes

3 Marx, Capital, 7.
4 Marx, Capital, 8.
5 Marx, Capital, 17[62].
7 Marx, Capital, 18.
8 Marx, Capital, 18.
9 Marx, Capital, 18 (italics added).
10 Marx, Capital, 18.
11 Marx, Capital, 18 (italics added).
12 Marx, Capital, 19 (italics added).
13 Marx, Capital, 20 [65].
14 Marx, Capital, 20–21.
15 Marx, Capital, 22[66].
16 Marx, Capital, 22[66].
17 Marx, Capital, 22–23.
18 Marx, Capital, 25.
19 Marx, Capital, 53.
21 Marx, Selected Writings, 62.
22 Marx, Selected Writings, 62.
23 Marx, Selected Writings, 70–71.
24 Marx, Selected Writings, 71.
26 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 252–53.
27 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 253–54.
28 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 252–53.
31 Marx, Selected Writings, 52 (italics added).
33 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 254.
34 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 254.
35 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 254.
36 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 254.
37 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 254.
40 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 8.
41 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 8 (italics added).
42 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 8 (italics added).
43 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 8 (italics added).
44 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 9.
45 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 9–10.
46 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 10.
47 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 10.
48 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 13.
49 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 13.
50 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 13.
51 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 13. Ibid.
52 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 15.
53 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 16.
54 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 16.
55 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 17.
56 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 17.
57 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 17.
58 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 18.
59 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 18.
60 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 18.
61 Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 29.


67 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 305.

68 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 305.

69 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 315.


71 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 323.

72 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 325.


75 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 323.

76 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 326.

77 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 326.

78 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 326.

79 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 327.

80 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 326.

81 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 327.

82 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 327 (italics added).

83 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 327.

84 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 328.

85 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 328.


87 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 332.

88 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 332.


93 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 337.

94 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 337.

95 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 345.


97 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 345.


100 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 365.


103 Marx and Engels, *Basic Writings*, 376.
Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 377.
Marx and Engels, Basic Writings, 362.
Imagery as Weaponry: *ars gratia belli*

Terrell Carver

Marx has a formidable reputation as a political theorist, and indeed one with a profound thesis concerning the relationship between a superstructure of “ideological” production (such as law, politics, religion, and presumably art) and a base of “material” production, the latter being of much more significance in all of human history.  

While he had some views on art (mainly literary production), these are obviously marginal to his main efforts and require some digging into manuscripts, correspondence, and notes for planned (but unwritten) works to discover. He would seem to be a poor candidate for views on aesthetics, and in particular for the use of aesthetics as a way to understand “man” as a “political animal.”

However, and rather surprisingly, an examination of the textual surface of a well-known work—*The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852)—will lead us to rather different views about Marx, and rather different conclusions about the relationship between aesthetics and politics. This chapter will consider Marx’s puzzling pamphlet in a new light, namely focusing on it as a precisely timed political intervention (the “*gratia belli*” of my title) and deriving from it some quite novel views on how aesthetic practices are crucial to political action. This latter will include Marx’s observations on the contrasting historical trajectories of the 1789 and 1848 French revolutions—one progressing authentically through a politics of “dressing up,” and the other regressing parodically through a politics of kitschy imitation. To get this argument underway, though, I need to discuss my understanding of aesthetics as practice, and outline my approach to Marx as we have him.

First, I am taking aesthetics in a very broad sense to cover a wide range of discursive practices, and am not limiting “the aesthetic” to an appreciation (or otherwise) of art as generally conceived or academically defined. Rather my understanding here opens out the aesthetic in relation to Marx in order to broaden our understanding of his characteristic modes of political intervention (for example, printed pamphlets constructed in such a way that they would function as communicative objects within chosen channels of circulation) as well as our appreciation of the rhetorical construction of his interventions within those textual modes (for example, genre, tropes, imagery, allusion, classical rhetoric and similar “lenses” for analyzing the “textual surface” of his published productions). This approach takes us beyond the semantic content of his thought as normally construed but recoups our critical evaluation of it in a fuller sense.
In this particular study of Marx as artful I am connecting his imagery in language with an imputed visual imagery that is of his time, though not reproduced or referenced exactly within the text. The object of this interpretive exercise is to appeal to the reader’s aesthetic imagination as a resource that can be brought to bear on the content and significance of Marx’s work in his time and ours.

Second, I am also taking Marx as an author and his texts as an *oeuvre* to be historically constructed phenomena, both being artifacts of reception. Indeed, Marx and his works have been constructed, and then re-constructed, in a number of successive and quite contrasting ways since 1859, when he was 41 and first introduced as a thinker to the wider world (in a book review by his friend, political colleague and sometime co-author Frederick Engels). Most scholarly work does not make this process of construction and reception explicit (even when recounting biographical facts), and in contradiction to my approach, most accounts simply project present-day understandings of Marx and of the works currently in the scholarly canon—where they are arranged in hierarchies of importance—back on to supposedly contextual accounts that purport to show “how it was at the time.” In other words the Marx of the biographies and biographical accounts is a kind of specter or simulacrum, a copy without an original, because—in point of fact—his writings were not his “works” in the canonical sense at the time that he was writing them.

Of course there is no way of getting ourselves “back there” with Marx as he was, and even if we could time-travel, we would still know a lot more about him than even he knew about himself at any given time, not least because he did not know then that he was a “famous thinker” writing for the readers of posterity. In fact he was really quite obscure in his own time, even in German socialist circles, until the 1870s, from which point his health and intellectual and political activities went into a noticeable decline. No doubt he would have been amazed at achieving such worldwide fame and notoriety as he later and mostly posthumously acquired, and indeed would have marveled at the different versions of how and why he did or did not deserve this notice. Nonetheless I propose to shake-up the reception of Marx yet again, not by further pretending to get at a supposed truth in his works, or to recover his context more exactly, but rather by boldly stating a somewhat different set of presumptions about how we might read him today. In other words, I am advocating a reading strategy founded on a notion of what he was doing, and which of his works—as we have them, and indeed we have more than ever—we want to read, and what we want to make out of them when we recount our readings to others.

This reading strategy proceeds by means of two stipulations: First, Marx was a political activist from 1842, when he was 23–24, and onwards for the rest of his life. Overwhelmingly this proceeded through *writings* loosely described as journalism but always engaged—at least to some degree—with determinate political interventions, starting with his first articles for liberal papers of the time on disadvantaged workers in his local Rhineland area, continuing through more intellectual engagements on political issues of wider interest (for example, free trade in economic policy and free expression in the press) and of course topical works and pamphlets criticizing notable political theorists of the day (for example, Proudhon) and notorious politicians on the world stage (for example, Louis Bonaparte). These interventions were published in
articles and pamphlets directed to certain reading communities, mostly German-speakers within and outside the Deutschland collection of peoples and states. A unified Germany did not of course exist until 1871, and throughout Marx’s life he dealt with the politics not simply of Prussia and Austria (the major German-speaking states) but also with that of numerous other smaller kingdoms, principalities, state-lets and free cities, not to mention other areas of Europe and further afield to a large diaspora in North America.

The effect of my first stipulation is to upgrade what people have taken unambiguously to be journalism (for example, the *New-York Daily Tribune* articles (1852–61), as well as earlier and later occasional pieces and communications), and to highlight the extent to which a large number of pamphlet-style publications—such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848)—have been promoted to book-like status and thus major works. These in turn are taken to be suitable repositories for “thought” that is of doctrinal significance. Obviously the last consideration presumes that Marx was writing doctrine of philosophical interest for the ages, rather than lightning-bolt interventions into the contemporary political world as he saw it, and as he had access to specific communities of readers within it.

While there has been interest in Marx’s journalism for many years (starting with Engels’s efforts on *The Class Struggles in France*, and Eleanor Marx’s editorial compilation on *The Eastern Question*) the articles are generally treated as adjuncts to what are presumed already to be works of more importance and lasting value. While from an academic and “theoretical” point of view this may seem obvious, my argument here is that the pamphlets and tomes treated as substantial and of theoretical interest lose their perlocutionary force as political interventions through this framing. If we upgrade the journalism, as it were, and look for theory there, then perforce we upgrade the business of topical interventions into contemporary politics. The upshot of this is to frame Marx’s pamphlet works as communicative objects—which were important to him in exactly that way—at the expense of finding theory (or “the theory”) in them, expressed in more or less satisfactory ways, and more or less in agreement with that which we “already know.”

Another effect of my reading strategy here is to downgrade manuscripts somewhat, and certainly to downgrade factitious “works” extracted from unpublished manuscripts, for example, “the economic and philosophical manuscripts of 1844” and “the German ideology.” These are jewels in the current canon, and doubtless contain passages worth reading. But as “works” they are editorial fabrications and as such are remote from their original context and significance. Their current canonical status resonates with a “fetishism of the archive.”

My conclusion from this line of thinking is that—for me—Marx’s première work is the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, in the sense that it is the one work to choose through which to read Marx as a political activist, and through which to receive him as a political theorist with things to say about the politics of his time and ours. By contrast the favorite work through which to read Marx—for many commentators from Engels to G.A. Cohen and current “analytical Marxists”—is the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, a published work but obscure throughout Marx’s lifetime, ideas from which were circulated by Engels and denominated by him as the
“materialist conception of history.” This of course is the foundation of a doctrinal reading of Marx, and it sets up a hierarchy of importance within his writings and ideas that is very seldom questioned. Rather nicely for my purposes the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is often taken to contradict the received doctrine forming the core of Marxism (a term not used by Marx or Engels). Yet it also, intriguingly, contains an earlier version of these ideas embedded in what I think is a more exciting and rather more characteristic context for Marx, that of a full-on polemical intervention into contemporary politics.

My second stipulation is a philosophical and methodological one: in writing there is no line between the literal and the metaphorical, and in commentary there is no line between the textual and the visual. The former is derived from post-Saussurean and post-structuralist views of language. My approach here will demonstrate that Marx’s argument derives just as much from his “colorful” language as it does from his (academically extracted) claims, whether theoretical or empirical or historical. In other words my commentary focuses on tropes, imagery, figures of speech, rhetoric, and how all these devices work together to make meaning and stimulate action, or in other words to have perlocutionary effects.

Marx intended the text of the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to be a political intervention, to be published at a specific and very interesting political moment, namely the period during which the President of the [Second] Republic had become Prince-President by plebiscite but had not yet openly declared his intention to revive (or rather reinvent) an empire styled after his late uncle. Although about French politics, the pamphlet was written in German, and published—after some earlier deals fell through—in New York in May 1852, about six months after the *coup d’état* of December 2, 1851. As a political intervention it somewhat backfired, and Marx was furious: the typesetters had altered his title to read “Louis-Napoleon” rather than “Louis Bonaparte,” thus giving totally unwanted credence to presidential pretensions to an imperial mantle—the very thing that Marx was mocking in the pamphlet. Writing in 1869 he commented that a “few hundred copies found their way into Germany at that time,” but did not seem to have an opinion as to what had happened to the main print run, or indeed what was supposed to have happened as a result of any of this political effort. The works to which he compared it were not science of any kind but rather contemporary polemics in French by Victor Hugo and Pierre-Joseph Proudhon.

My commentary will then be of a visual character in that it will illustrate representations—not by Marx, and not in general textual—that further make the points that he was trying to make. Note that these are rhetorical points, which politically speaking, was the whole purpose of the exercise. Framing the *Eighteenth Brumaire* as a so-called historical piece within the Marx canon—as is the usual practice—makes it appear to us as some kind of not very good or even failed factual exercise by a not very good historian (and indeed there are critiques that proceed in just this way). It also allows us to grasp a rather different take on a so-called materialist approach to politics, one in which emotion, performativity and multimedia productions play a role that depends on, articulates with, and in revolutionary terms is trumps over—“the economy.” It also allows us to see that some aesthetic conceptualizations of politics make it easy to miss the political power of bad taste, and the political potency of cheap sarcasm, by
opting for an elitist “arty” perspective which discounts popular taste and popular circulation as important for contextualizing political interventions.\(^{17}\)

The *Eighteenth Brumaire* has been the victim of the worst translation into English of any of Marx's works; the "classic" English text dates from 1897–98, and was done by Daniel de Leon, published in New York. This is a shame, and clearly detracts from any perlocutionary force that present-day readers might experience, subject to appropriate historical and contextual transference, that is, from the possibility that they might otherwise make judgments and undertake actions about and within contemporary politics as a result of reading Marx's text. Much of the language in that translation is neither English nor German, and Marx's brilliance as a writer, in this text above all, has been sleeping for about 100 years in the English-speaking world. Translating this work anew, and from the first hot-off-the-press edition (rather than from later editions introduced and "authorized" by Engels), was for me a labor of considerable excitement.\(^{18}\)

Of all Marx's writings, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* has the most extravagant imagery, withering scorn, and scathing satire. These textual and rhetorical devices were intended, presumably, to have illocutionary force in international politics, that is, writing that Louis Bonaparte was rubbish would actually rubbish him. In other words, the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is proto-docu-drama, and Marx was perhaps the Michael Moore of his day in his relentless pursuit of the *exposé* (though not, so far as we know, a master of any interviewing style, *faux-naïve* or otherwise). Or perhaps more soberly, I note that the *Eighteenth Brumaire* was in fact based on Marx's newspaper articles of 1850 which were written even closer to the time of the relevant events,\(^{19}\) and thus it unfolds as a kind of blog, or rather a blogger's take on his own newsy blogs to date.

Marx advanced his arguments through writing that deploys metaphor on a sliding scale from the literal to the burlesque. There are also ideas in the images and tropes, rather than the other way round, and remarkable levels of irony, even for Marx. He wrote about politics in France for a German audience, and employed terms for French institutions in French as well as Germanized loan words from French. Making this intelligible in translation for contemporary readers of English is something of a challenge, particularly as there are no exact political equivalents in Anglophone history for the institutions Marx was writing about. Getting his highly coordinated choice of terms to work together in a different language, in a different time, and still make him Marx (and not some honorary Victorian Englishman), is tricky.\(^{20}\)

There are a number of controlling, analytical ideas in Marx's text, to which he adapted his metaphors, some of which are extraordinarily visual and dramatic. Within the register of the visual and dramatic, he was equally at ease with images from Greek and Roman literature, the Bible and Church doctrine, and a huge range of other ideas from magic to masquerade. The introductory section set a very tight framework, which the succeeding six sections filled out. No doubt there are other ways of analyzing what Marx was doing when he selected and manipulated his imagery, but in terms of controlling ideas I would choose the following strong binaries as a mode of analysis: hero/fool, original/caricature, masquerade/parody, downward/upward, progress/reversion, construction/destuction.

At the outset the overall trope is repetition, captured in the opening line: “Hegel observes somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur
twice, so to speak” (19). The corresponding footnotes in Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, and in MEGA2, trace the origins of this to Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, where the idea is that the same thing simply happens twice, or more specifically, that a transformation in state power must occur twice before it is sanctioned by the opinion of the people. Hegel wrote that those wanting to undo a *coup d’état* (such as that of the conspirators against Julius Caesar) needed to do more to restore the Roman Republic than merely kill him. That repetition creates realities seems to be Hegel’s message: “Thus, Napoleon was defeated twice and twice the Bourbons were driven out.” Marx was possibly recalling a letter from Engels (of December 3, 1851) in which historical events are described as being “the first time high tragedy and the second time low farce.” Engels was possibly recalling earlier works by Marx in which world historical events fail to achieve a happy ending by culminating in the rule of comedians or other nonsensical outcomes. Both were recalling the intellectual fireworks of their youthful days as Young Hegelians. Marx thus developed the notion of repetition, making the first and second occurrences different, and eventually substituting a much more dynamic idea as to what is required to produce a revolutionary overthrow of state and society.

Marx’s notion of repetition with difference was thus enriched by the notion of a decline from heroism to foolishness: “... the London constable [Louis Bonaparte] ... after the little corporal [Napoleon Bonaparte] ... the eighteenth Brumaire of the fool after the eighteenth Brumaire of the genius!” (19). Not content with denigration Marx moved on to the cartoon send-up, and the notion of the second imprint or bad copy. This is a realm of living satire and *reductio ad absurdum*: “The first time France was on the verge of bankruptcy, this time [Louis] Bonaparte is on the brink of debtors’ prison” (19). Portraits of the new emperor done just after Marx’s minatory prediction relate very directly to the kitschy bad taste he had in mind; Louis Bonaparte’s small stature may have been a reproduction of Napoleon’s, and his costume evocative of his uncle’s grandeur, but the pretentious and self-serving comparison of the nephew—whose martial skills were nothing like his uncle’s, and whose bourgeois milieu was far from heroic—shows up very clearly in a visual comparison of portraiture.

The most famous passage in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* also occurs in the introductory section: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please in circumstances they choose for themselves; rather they make it in present circumstances, given and inherited” (19). The most astonishingly original and egregiously underestimated of Marx’s devices in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* is not the idea that people make history albeit under constraints. The novelty is rather the identification of “circumstances, given and inherited”—not with economic conditions or relations of production or any such “material” feature of experience—but with something quite different: “tradition from all the dead generations’ weighing ‘like a nightmare on the brain of the living’” (19).

The next shock for the contemporary reader is finding out that this nightmare world of tradition is, in Marx’s view, *politically productive*. From “things happening twice,” to “the second time as low farce,” Marx moved on to a notion of doing something once and once only, but in the guise of a previous event, thus making masquerade the
opposite of farce. Farce as cartoon *reductio* is embarrassing; performing revolution in the costumes of a prior age is enabling. The repetition here is *in the clothes and set dressing*, rather than in the events. Indeed the revolutionary events that Marx was interested in—namely the first-time ones in Britain in the 1640s and in France from 1789—were described by him as “creating something unprecedented” (19). Louis Bonaparte’s personal reproduction of “Napoleonic” clothes and set-dressing—a central feature of his “regime-change” after he was declared emperor in December 1852—was in Marx’s terms pathetic rather than authentic repetition, since it merely imitated the trappings through which the prior revolution had achieved success, indeed world-historical greatness, while doing nothing of the sort itself. As Marx assessed the politics of the time, it was not even attempting the unprecedented journey into democratization that the earlier French revolutions had accomplished, albeit with setbacks along the way (that is, the monarchical restorations).

Substantively Marx declared that there have been “epochs of revolutionary crises,” in which “spirits of the past” are “nervously” summoned up, not just in the minds and language of those participating but in uniforms, guise and art forms (19–20). The fusion here of the nightmare in the individual brain with collective recollection enacted in ritual is intellectually forward-looking, to say the least.

... the [French] revolution of 1789–1814 draped itself alternately as Roman republic and Roman empire, and the revolution of 1848 could come up with nothing better than to parody 1789 at one point, the revolutionary inheritance of 1793–5 at another. (20)

The genuine and faux Napoleonic coins, medals and seals of the period show this parodic quality exactly, or rather the later self-serving and ludicrously flattering images of Napoleon III as a Roman emperor are already there in Marx’s imagery (and his imagination) as farcical self-parody, rather than the intended self-advertisement. Just to reinforce his point Marx added that at an even earlier stage (pre-1789) in this historical development, “Cromwell and the English had borrowed Old Testament language, passions and delusions for their bourgeois revolution.” This extends Marx’s revolutionary sequence back to the 1640s and 1650s, and his line of productive, parodic counterparts further back to pre-Roman Old Testament political dramaturgy (21), again easily viewed in the pamphlets of the period, though more by explicit and epigraphical Biblical quotation than by visual imagery.

Strikingly Marx conceptualized the performative side of revolution-making in *emotional* terms. Referring to the pre-history of the 1848 revolution—the heroic events of 1789–1814—Marx noted that the unheroic outcome had required an evocation of antique heroism, a world of “antediluvian colossi, and ... resurrected Romans—the Brutuses, the Gracchuses, the Publicolas, the tribunes, the senators and Caesar himself.” His view was that on the one hand a revolutionary transformation from feudal to bourgeois society required “heroism, sacrifice, terror, civil war and national conflict to bring it into the world” in the great events of the French revolution. But—and here Marx offers us an emotional analysis of politics relying on a concept of displacement—French revolutionaries conducted themselves heroically through grandiose (but not
kitschy) self-deceptions “to keep themselves emotionally at the level of high historical tragedy.” Hence they imagined themselves gladiators in the “ideals and art forms” of the Roman republic, and would not have triumphed otherwise (20–21).

The complication here is that by Marx’s time the latter stage of bourgeois revolution (1848–50) evoked, so he argued, only the “antiquity” (and not the substantial goals and achievements) of the revolution of 1789–1814. Bourgeois revolutions, Marx seems to say, require this historical evocation in the first instance for emotional reasons, as otherwise the revolution will not be satisfactorily performed. Nonetheless the sequence of revolutionary crises (1789–1814, 1830, 1848) evidently required to bring this kind of revolution to completion, and the substantive goal of bourgeois society itself (a “dreary realism” antithetical to the “classical traditions of the Roman republic”) meant that productive masquerade attenuated into evasive parody and immaterial spectrality: “Thus the resurrection of the dead in those revolutions [1789–1814] served to glorify new struggles, not to parody the old [1848–51].” Marx summarizes his thesis here, which is that authentic revolutions use repetition and “dressing up” to magnify fantastically “the given task,” whereas inauthentic ones are only evading a real resolution by relaunching a specter (21).

The performative aspect of this conceptualization of what it takes to get progressive political change (towards this particular goal, bourgeois society) was explained by Marx in psychological terms (rather than the economic/material terms of traditional Marxisms) as a theory of language-learning, or rather second language-learning. This parallels current theories of naturalization and identity-formation, in that fluency in a new language means—so Marx says—that one ceases to refer back to a former native language and instead enters “into the spirit of the new language” unselfconsciously (20).

Thus the new must come into being through a process of imaginative anachronism that gives a comforting illusion of familiarity, an emotional high of heroism and a collective act of performative inter-communication that actually enacts the requisite changes. The heroes of the original French revolution, “as well as the political parties and massed crowds alike,” unleashed modern bourgeois society by displacing their emotions through revolutionary actions in “Roman costumes and with Roman phrases,” psychologically fixed into unselfconsciousness through repetitions of ceremony and architectures of republic and empire (20).

What, then, is the connection between antedeluvian colossi, whether of the Old Testament or of classical Rome, and the making of bourgeois society? Marx seems to say that the work of political parties, massed crowds, and heroes—that is, the dramatis personae of the sequential revolutionary crises, working in masquerade and thus resurrecting the dead—were destroying feudalism as a system of authority and property relationships. In that way they were creating the conditions for free competition and so unfettering “the industrial productive power of the nation” (20). Whether this was an unfettering of pre-existing “forces of production” or an unfettering of the ability to create such forces is rather a moot point. It is worth considering that in Marx’s scheme of things—a certain kind of jerky linearity in historical development—it really doesn’t matter. Change happens. The added value here is Marx’s emotionally, psychologically, and performatively perceptive account of how progressive politics takes place.
Given Marx’s self-proclaimed goal (in the 1848 Manifesto of the Communist Party, jointly written with Engels) of moving history on to the next phase, proletarian revolution and communist society, it is perhaps surprising, yet again, that his sequential view of this historical process is remarkably different from his etiology of bourgeois revolution. Proletarian revolutions, he says, do the reverse of displacement—they create “poetry” not from the past “but only from the future” (22).

The overall trajectory here has more jerkiness than linearity. The trajectory from feudalism through to bourgeois society is both upward sloping, towards eventual proletarian revolution, and downward sloping, towards the immediate “content” of bourgeois society. This content seems to be the “revolutionary starting point, the situation, the relationships, the exclusive conditions for the development of a real modern revolution” (22). Politically this is described as a “situation . . . which makes impossible any reversion, and circumstances themselves cry out in these often quoted poetic lines:

Hic Rhodus, hic salta!
Hier ist die Rose, hier tanze!
[There’s no time like the present!] (22–23) 23

Marx’s depiction of these circumstances was again highly imaginative, including allusions to death, dementia, dejection, and demolition. The bourgeois republic must be destroyed, he said, before the conditions for successful proletarian revolution are in place, but the agent of destruction is not the proletariat. The imagery here is Wagnerian; Marx was not at all a fan, but the dramaturgy is very much of the period. Marx writes of “thunder from the grandstand, the sheet-lightning of the daily press,” mentions magic, spells and sorcery, and quotes Goethe’s grandiloquent rendering of the Faust myth (“What’s worth building is worth demolishing”) (23–24).

Moreover (ultimately) successful proletarian revolutions progress in an almost backwards way, according to Marx, so he did not conceive of proletarian victory until, paradoxically, the revolutionary class had reached a dead-end in a sequence of defeats. This continues Marx’s rhetorical trope that proletarian revolutions will be the inverse of bourgeois ones in various respects, this time drawing on imagery from Greek mythology: the more they are stopped “in their own tracks,” returning repetitiously to begin anew “what is apparently” complete, the more they “strike down their adversary” the bourgeoisie, the more they have to contend with the way this “giant” draws “new powers from the earth” (22). These passages echo the paean to the powers of the bourgeoisie famously recounted in the opening section of the Manifesto. 24

Marx seems to see the proletariat victorious only when stripped of illusions and superstition, unlike the bourgeoisie, who, through productive masquerade, were actually rather used to these things. 25 What buoyed them up (in getting rid of feudalism) then dragged them down, not as victims of the proletariat, but as victims of authoritarian militarism of a very low sort. Marx identified Louis Bonaparte and his thuggish associates and hangers-on with cheats, crooks, conmen, and so on. As the story unfolds towards the coup d’État Marx painted the supposed saviors of the republic (from working-class insurrection) as more and more nakedly criminal and as enemies, in
fact, of the bourgeoisie and their ideas of “order.” He correctly predicted Bonapartist repressions that withdrew the rights of the citizen, eviscerated the rule of law, victimized respectable members of the middle class and delivered the opposite of “religion, property, family, order,” seizing instead on criminal elements to enforce the emperor’s self-proclaimed (but deeply hypocritical) role as “saviour of society” (27–28; emphasis in original) and god-like regal presence.

Marx was scathing about the elements of bourgeois society which fooled themselves that this campaign against working-class interests was being run for the benefit of the republican bourgeoisie; self-deception through dressing up as Roman heroes hadn’t saved them from the “bolt from the blue,” the Bonapartist military coup on December 2, 1851 that spelled the end of the (Second) Republic. Marx described such bourgeois dupes as “loudmouths” (23).

The drama here is the dissolution of the bourgeois republic, supposedly the vehicle for the development of industrial wealth within a competitive economy, as it collapses into an authoritarian and decidedly unbourgeois regime of banditry. He writes that “Even the simplest demand for bourgeois financial reform, for the most ordinary liberalism, for the most formal republicanism, for the most basic democracy, is simultaneously castigated as an ‘outrage to society’ and stigmatized as ‘socialism’” (27). Then, as now, the “red scare” was a powerful way to drive out democracy and institute authoritarian rule.

What brings this on is a temporary collusion between forces uniting themselves against the massed working class, that is, bourgeois republicans and armed criminals. Marx memorialized the working class in its “June days” insurrection of 1848, in which it was quite brutally defeated, and after which it went down to further defeats. But at least, he concludes, it was defeated with the honors of a great world historical struggle; not only France but all Europe trembles at the June earthquake (26).

The truth of these circumstances, for Marx, was that “bourgeois republic means the unlimited despotism of one class over another” (26–27). This seems to be excellent Hegelianism—progressive development arising, phoenix-like, from the ashes of irreconcilable contradictions—but rather poor sociology and politics, not to mention strategy and tactics for armed revolutionary conflict.

There is a prediction in the work, but not one that follows deductively from laws of science, or one that is falsifiable and easy to understand. In 1869 Marx wrote that the concluding words of his work—which he says he has not robbed of its “peculiar colouring”—have already been fulfilled: “but when this imperial mantle [of Napoleon] falls at last onto the shoulders of Louis Bonaparte, the bronze of Napoleon, high on the column in the Place Vendôme, will plunge to the ground” (109). The statue, however, was not literally taken down until the spring of 1871 during the Commune. In 1869 Marx was presumably referring to the part of his prediction fulfilled by Louis Bonaparte’s assumption of the title Emperor in December 1852, which occurred shortly after he had finished writing his text in March.

Marx was right to refer to the Vendôme column, which had by his time seen the removal of the first Napoleon (in Roman dress) by the restored Bourbon monarchy of France, and the eventual restoration of a citizen-soldier image of the great general by Louis-Philippe, King of the French, after the revolution of 1830. Presciently, though not in terms of timescale, Marx foresaw the toppling of Napoleon III’s kitschy and
faux-Roman evocation of his uncle when the communards toppled it—and were photographed standing over it—in 1871, just at the start of the civil war (recounted in another contemporary political intervention by Marx, *The Civil War in France*) that ultimately led to the institution of the Third Republic.

Moreover, Marx’s portrayal of bourgeois democrats as weak and therefore vulnerable to authoritarians, who can manipulate the politics of class, was also prescient. Further, his short treatise on the performative power of anachronistic allusions and invocations is startling, precisely because of its aesthetic dimensions as detailed above. The *Eighteenth Brumaire* represents a politics of imagination done through writing with extraordinary imagery. It isn’t everything, but it’s a tremendous start.

**Notes**


MEGA²=Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1975—ongoing).


5 See, for example, Kevin B. Anderson, *Marx at the Margins: On Nationalism, Ethnicity, and Non-Western Societies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2010).


8 There are of course other touchstone texts in Marx-reception, notably the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,” widely circulated in French and English from the later 1950s onwards (and the focus for a “humanist” reading of Marx), and also the *Grundrisse* economic, historical, and methodological manuscript collection, which circulated about the same time and provoked interest in a more exploratory and less dogmatic Marx in relation to class politics, economic structures, and historical development.


For a discussion of this approach, including the relation of the visual images to meaning-making, see Terrell Carver and Jernej Pikalo, eds., Political Language and Metaphor: Interpreting and Changing the World (Milton Park: Routledge, 2008).

For another demonstration of this method and analysis of results, see Terrell Carver, “Spectres and Vampires: Marx’s Metaphors,” in The Postmodern Marx (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 7–23.

Karl Marx, MECW: vol. 16, 642, footnote 64.


A word that Marx used very infrequently; in Marxist usage it often slips ambiguously between an ontological materialism and a focus on social production or “economics.”

Apologies to Noël Coward: “… how potent cheap music is” (Private Lives, 1930).


These were serialized articles published throughout 1850, much later collected as “The Class Struggles in France, 1848–1850” and reproduced in translation in MECW: vol. 10 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1978), 47–145.

I have aired some of these particular issues in Terrell Carver, “Translating Marx,” in Alternatives 22 (1997), 191–204.


My use of the notions of masquerade and performativity is derived from Judith Butler, Gender Trouble (London: Routledge, 1990); for an explication of these terms, see Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver, Judith Butler and Political Theory: Troubling Politics (Milton Park: Routledge, 2008), Chapters 1–2 and passim.

This quotation derives from Hegel’s “Preface” to his Philosophy of Right, and consists of a Greek passage from Aesop, followed by a Latin translation. The quotation comes from a story in which a braggart boasts that he once made a stupendous jump in Rhodes, and then a bystander says, in effect, “if so, you can do it here.” Hegel constructs a German version, punning first on the Greek (Rhodos=Rhodes, rhodon=rose) and then on the Latin (saltus=jump, saltā=dance!), alluding obscurely to Rosicrucianism, which finds the rose in the cross, and joy in tragedy—or at least that is what Hegel seems to think. See G.W.F. Hegel, Philosophy of Right, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 303, footnotes 31, 33, 34. Given that the Latin line from Aesop was something of an adage, I have given an English “drift” of this in square brackets. Warm thanks and grateful acknowledgment to Henry Hardy, Wolfson College, Oxford, for his scholarly work on this widely misinterpreted conundrum.

Karl Marx, Manifesto, Part One.

Whereas the Manifesto dwells on various bourgeois hypocrisies, the Eighteenth Brumaire ventures into much more ambitious theories of self-deception, delusion and displacement.
Radical Schiller and the Young Marx

Daniel Hartley

In Machiavelli and Us Althusser sought to solve the following “mystery”: To whom is The Prince addressed? Empirically, of course, The Prince was dedicated to Lorenzo de’ Medici, but does he remain its only addressee? Althusser demonstrates in a quite startling manner just how central to the book’s continued—and literal—appeal this question remains. Having spoken to Hegel in the present tense and Gramsci in the future, The Prince’s sustained interpellative power arises, suggests Althusser, from its inscription of a “dual place or space”: the place of the subject of political practice and the place of the text which politically deploys or stages this political practice. The former is the place produced by a conjunctural analysis that transforms situational elements into relations of force, calling upon an agent (the Prince) to intervene to resolve the “problem” of the conjuncture; the latter is the place of the text itself: the text (The Prince) which performs the conjunctural analysis becomes one of the active elements within the conjuncture. This double inscription is further complicated by the discrepancy between the place of the political viewpoint from which The Prince is written (that of the people) and the place of the political force it calls upon to act (the Prince). This redoubled duality transforms traditional theoretical discourse into a singular conjunctural interpellation whose hail echoes across the centuries.

Perhaps one might say the same of Schiller’s On the Aesthetic Education of Man. Ostensibly a series of real letters, Schiller included the following note in the original Die Horen publication of 1795: “These letters have really been written; but to whom is here of no relevance, and will perhaps in time be made known to the reader.” Empirically, we know that Schiller wrote at least seven letters to his patron, the Danish Prince von Augustenburg, but in February 1794 these were destroyed in a fire at the Copenhagen palace. The letters which ultimately appeared in Die Horen were based on Augustenburg’s requested replacements, which were reformulated and expanded versions of the originals. Of those that survived the flames, two remarks concerning the mode and recipients of Schiller’s address stand out. First, Schiller overtly requested that he be allowed to develop his:

[1]deas on the philosophy of the beautiful … in a series of individual letters addressed to you [Augustenburg], and which I could then lay before the public. This freer form would lend their presentation more individuality and life; and the
idea that I addressed you, and was judged by you, would give me a greater interest in my material.\(^7\)

The epistolary form is thus an integral component of Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic. Like the aesthetic, the letter form mediates between life and form (the objects of the material and formal impulses respectively); it is receptive to the empirical vitality, variability and individuality of life, yet the (literal) nobility of judgment and reason provide it with an internal rational restraint.\(^8\) The letter form performs the aesthetic.

Equally significant is Schiller’s awareness of his two addressees: the individual letters to Prince von Augustenburg will be “[laid] before the public.” Just as the letter form mediates between life and form, so each line is written, at one and the same time, for the particular eyes of a Danish Prince and the abstract gaze of a universal mankind. In a formulation uncannily similar to Machiavelli’s dedicatory note to Lorenzo de’ Medici written three hundred years earlier,\(^9\) Schiller writes in a letter of July 13, 1793:

> A conversation about such matters would have all the greater attraction for me the more that the position from which I, a private person [der Privatmann], regard the political world differs from that from which you, a prince and a ruling statesman, look down into the flow of events. What could be more delightful than to meet each other in the way of thinking just where external relationships bring about the greatest distance, converging on the same midpoint in the world of ideas from such an immeasurable distance in the actual world?\(^10\)

Superficially, the sycophantic tone of address would support the now familiar argument that the aesthetic is precisely a substitute for radical social transformation—that is, one in which the social distinction of prince and private person is overcome in thought or beauty but not in practice. Yet this would be to underestimate the radical potential of Schiller’s theory, that which in Schiller goes beyond Schiller. Just as for Machiavelli there can be no knowledge of rulers except from the viewpoint of the people, so for Schiller there can be no theory or practice of the aesthetic that does not seek out the “midpoint” between ruler and ruled, state and private person.

The precise political configuration of this “midpoint” is, however, ambiguous. Schiller’s letters are philosophically and politically overdetermined, giving rise to a range of interpretations. Seen by Heidegger as “the first great retaliation against the French Revolution”\(^11\) and more recently by Terry Eagleton (1990) as setting forth an ideological case for rule by consensus, one line of inheritance reads Schiller’s text as a proponent of reformist anti-Jacobinism. Alternatively, at the high point of the German workers’ movement, Schiller was read by figures such as Franz Mehring as a thinker of the Left.\(^12\) More recently, Jacques Rancière has done much to make Schiller our renewed contemporary by locating in the paradoxes of the aesthetic a new artistic regime which initiates a democratic logic of the sensible.\(^13\) Alongside Rancière’s theoretical intervention, Schiller has also been read as an inheritor and expander of the modern republican tradition of Machiavelli, Rousseau, Montesquieu, and Ferguson.\(^14\) The sheer range of political interpretations to which Schiller’s letters seem to lend themselves would suggest that the text is not only politically and historically overdetermined, but structurally ambiguous.
This ambiguity consists of two principal moments. First, philosophical concepts constantly function in Schiller’s letters as allegorical figurations of social classes, such that the opposition of form and matter is always implicitly mediated by the opposition between rulers and workers. The effect is to produce constant subtle but confusing shifts in scale between psychology and statecraft. Second, and more importantly, the letters seem to employ four closely related yet ultimately distinct and occasionally mutually contradictory understandings of beauty and the aesthetic:

- The “idea of beauty,” which entails the “completely pure union” of the two contrary (material and formal) impulses, as set forth in Schiller’s overarching transcendental argument.
- “Aesthetic culture,” which is a collective task empirically (and hence imperfectly) to apply the principles of the transcendental idea of beauty to the composition of artworks and critical judgement in the “arena of actuality.”
- “Spontaneous” “beauty” or “aesthetic disposition of the soul” that arises from a chance combination of socio-ecological, proto-evolutionary circumstances.
- The “aesthetic” (comprising variations such as “aesthetic disposition” [ästhetische Stimmung], “aesthetic state” [ästhetischer Zustand] and “aesthetic state” [ästhetischer Staat]), which is a more diffuse and expanded set of arguments mediating between the first three strands, and informed by the republican ideals of equality, liberty and collective self-formation.

Any reading of the letters is thus forced to plot a course through these ambiguities and destined to emphasize one line of argument over another. My own reading, while attempting to remain cognizant of the text’s ambiguities, is no different.

The aim of this chapter is to pursue the implications of the aesthetic, not only within Schiller’s On the Aesthetic Education of Man, but also in the writings of the ‘young’ Marx. I aim to read Marx’s earliest writings through the lens of Schiller’s letters and vice versa. In doing so, I hope to show that Schiller’s philosophy enables the recognition of a powerful strand of aesthetic logic within Marx’s developing theory of revolution and the state, while at the same time, seen retrospectively from the viewpoint of the early Marx, Schiller’s letters begin to reveal a hidden “red thread.” Unlike those “aesthetic” readings of the young Marx that focus on the importance of the senses and alienation, however, I ultimately understand the aesthetic in an expanded sense as an immanent modality of hegemony; art, beauty and “aesthetic culture” are thus conceived as moments within a more expansive aesthetic process. The point here is not to trace lines of direct “influence” from Schiller to Marx, however valid such an approach might be, but rather to enable the writings of each to shed light on those of the other.

I. Schiller’s letters

There exists within Schiller’s letters a radical line of argument which, if pursued to its conclusion, points beyond Schiller’s own inherent political limitations. I shall attempt to reconstruct this subversive logic in four stages: his historical criticism of modernity,
the theory of the state, an implicit theory of hegemony, and—finally—Schiller’s ideal of the “aesthetic state.” It should be noted, however, that this operation entails a certain risk. As has been noted, Schiller was acutely aware of the importance of the letter form for his theory of the aesthetic, contrasting it explicitly to “the majority of our scholars [who] are so fearfully buckled into their systems that a somewhat unfamiliar form of presentation cannot penetrate their triply armoured chests.”

By abstracting theoretical propositions from the aesthetic form of the letter, I am consciously running the risk of “dissolving the necessary bond” between the “elements” of the “secret” of beauty, against which Schiller explicitly warns in his first letter. Nonetheless, the reconstruction of Schiller’s argument will ultimately arrive back at its point of departure—the “freer form” of the letter—at which point the theoretical will be “sublated” within an expanded comprehension of the aesthetic.

In what would become a long line of intellectuals mobilizing the image of the organic totality of ancient Greece against the fragmentation of modernity, Schiller bemoans several aspects of modern life. First, “utility” [der Nutzen] has become the “great idol of the age, to which all powers are in thrall and all talent must pay homage.” Utility signals the predominance of the “material impulse” [sinnlichen Trieb] over the “formal impulse” [Formtrieb], the two contradictory drives that pull humanity between time, matter, contingency and sensation on the one hand, and eternity, ideas, necessity and freedom on the other. It will be the task of the aesthetic, through the “playful impulse” [Spielttrieb], to conjoin the two. The reign of utility is reinforced by egoism: “Egoism has established its system at the heart of the most elaborated sociability, and in the absence of its very own sociable heart we experience all the contagion and affliction of society.”

Egoism is savagery to the second degree; having torn itself from the animalistic state of nature, humanity now freely submits to the tyranny of matter at the level of principle. Yet here one encounters a crucial and constitutive ambiguity in Schiller’s writing: the aesthetic education of “man” (Mensch) concerns at one and the same time individuals and social classes. As noted above, the material and formal impulses are at once internal to individual “minds” or “souls” and allegorical of entire social classes: “We observe rough and licentious instincts among the lower and more numerous classes” just as “the civilized classes represent the even more repugnant spectacle of lethargy and a depraved character which is all the more disgusting because culture itself [the form-giving force par excellence, DH] is its source.” Schiller is thus developing a theory of the politicized mutual determination of the senses and reason, which itself is an allegorical figuration of the division between ruler and ruled, intellectual and worker, yet a figuration which is active within the latter oppositions.

This lack of harmony between rulers and ruled is further aggravated by the processes of differentiation, fragmentation and specialization that occur under the modern division of labor:

The image of the human species in each of us has been enlarged, shattered and scattered as shards, not in proportioned admixtures; so that one has to go from one individual to another to reconstitute the totality of the species . . . [1]n practice our faculties express themselves as fragments corresponding to the analytical distinctions of the psychologist; not only individual subjects but entire classes of
Like Marx, Schiller understands the division of labor as historically necessary but profoundly mutilating. His impassioned critiques of utility, egoism and fragmentation converge in a passage that would not be out of place in Marx’s early writings:

The more numerous part of mankind is too tired and exhausted from its struggle with need to gird itself up for a new and more intense struggle against error. Happy to avoid the troublesome effort of thinking, they gladly leave the control of their concepts to others; and if it so happens that they rouse themselves to higher needs, they seize with greedy credulity upon the formulations that state and priesthood have prepared for them in anticipation. If these unhappy souls deserve our sympathy, we are justified in despising those whom fortune has freed from the yoke of need, but who nonetheless choose to bend themselves to it.\footnote{32}

The radical potential of this passage lies, as will become clear, in its interconnection of labor, philosophy, class and the state. Schiller’s aesthetic ideal, which “will combine the most abundant existence with the greatest autonomy and liberty,”\footnote{33} would seem to presuppose an alleviation of economic exploitation combined with the development of—to risk an anachronism—organic intellectuals capable of leading the workers from error to truth, a task the state and priesthood are too corrupt to fulfill.

Yet the true radicalism of Schiller’s position, glimpsed here \textit{in nuce}, only fully emerges in his comments on the state. It is well known that Schiller’s letters condemn the authoritarian excesses of the state, whereby form is violently imposed upon a recalcitrant nature; he notes that “the constitution of a state will be very incomplete if it can bring about unity only by suppressing diversity.”\footnote{34} It was this that led Terry Eagleton to argue that Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic is, effectively, a theory of Gramscian hegemony, whereby ‘hegemony’ is understood as rule by consensus rather than coercion. Yet a different reading is also possible, based on a closer engagement with the minutiae of Schiller’s argument and an alternative understanding of hegemony.\footnote{35} Schiller writes that “every individual carries within himself … a purely ideal man”\footnote{36} and that this “pure man … is represented by [or through, \textit{durch}—DH] the state.”\footnote{37} He continues:

But since the state should be an organization that creates [or forms/ educates—\textit{bildet}] itself through itself for itself, it can only become actual to the extent that the parts have been attuned [or have attuned themselves] to the idea of the whole. Because the state represents the pure and objective humanity in the hearts of its citizens, it will have to observe with respect to its citizens the same relationship as each has to himself, and will be able to honour their subjective humanity only to the extent that it is refined into objective humanity.\footnote{38}

That the state should \textit{form} and \textit{educate} itself through itself for itself, immediately throws into doubt the traditional enlightenment hierarchy of (laboring) masses led to truth by
(thinking) intellectuals. It is thus plausible to interpret the aesthetic as an immanent modality of ‘hegemony’, but only if one understands the latter not as ‘class rule through consensus’ but as a process of mass self-education and collective intellectuality that Gramsci would come to identify with the figures of the organic intellectual and the “democratic philosopher.” This mass self-formation is not only intellectual but also pertains to aesthetic form, an insight whose political stakes become clear in Marx’s early writings on Prussian press censorship. Ultimately, the state for Schiller can only become actual to the extent that its citizens have formed and educated themselves in the Idea of the whole; to the extent that this is not so, the state will impose itself from above as a violent abstraction.

It is here that Schiller can be seen as an inheritor of Machiavelli’s modern republicanism and a forerunner of the young Marx’s critique of Hegel’s doctrine of the state. By reversing the classical priority of form over event, Machiavelli emphasized the active, formative role of subjectivity in relation to the contingencies afforded by historical circumstance. In doing so, he transformed virtù into an impetuous, innovative, formative activity; it now named a self-organization of material and bodily expressions that became the ontological basis of his republicanism. Schiller, along with German republicanism in general, inherited this emphasis on collective self-organization, particularly as it relates to aesthetic form. The beautiful form, “a symbol of republican freedom,” is “flexible and spontaneous, describing the movements of the particulars who generate it . . . sustained by their own cooperation.” It is precisely this line of aesthetic republicanism that Marx himself will employ to criticize Hegel’s doctrine of the state:

In monarchy, the whole, the people, is subsumed under one of its forms of existence, the political constitution; in democracy the constitution itself appears only as one determining characteristic of the people, and indeed as its self-determination . . . The constitution is in appearance what it is in reality: the free creation of man.

This same logic of aesthetic self-organization informs both Marx’s earlier writings on press censorship (as we shall see) and Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic state. As a process of intellectual and practical self-formation it is integral to the struggle for hegemony.

To return now to Schiller, the second sentence in the previously quoted passage instigates a crucial and recurring line of thought throughout the letters. If the state is “to observe with respect to its citizens the same relationship as each has to himself” then the ideal state would be one in which representation has become so attenuated as to coincide with the minimal representational mediation necessary for one to relate to oneself. Indeed, representation in general gives rise to a constant risk of political abstraction:

Forced to deal with the diversity of its citizens through their classification, experiencing humanity only through representation, hence at second hand, the governor entirely loses contact with humanity [verliert der regierende Theil sie zuletzt ganz und gar aus den Augen], taking it for a mere construct of the intellect,
while the governed are in turn indifferent [mit Kaltsinn] to laws that barely relate to them.\textsuperscript{45}

Yet if the state is to become coextensive with citizens' self-relation, what form does this relation assume? Since for Schiller each citizen consists of both an absolute “I” or “person” and an empirical “I” or “individual” (a precursor of Marx’s “On the Jewish Question”), the (noumenal) person, to become actual, must determinately realize itself through time in a specific (phenomenal) situation.\textsuperscript{46} “It is only in the sequence of his ideas that the persisting I itself becomes manifested to itself [Nur durch die Folge seiner Vorstellungen wird das beharrliche Ich sich selbst zur Erscheinung].”\textsuperscript{47} Consequently, either the state must relate to its citizens in analogy to the way in which citizens relate to themselves through the sequence of ideas or—pushing Schiller's logic further—the state as “representative” of the pure I in each citizen could be understood as providing the ideas through which each citizen mediates her relationship to herself—with Schiller becoming an incipient theorist of ideology.

The ideal state would be one in which the aesthetic process of mass self-education and self-formation renders unnecessary the abstraction of representation beyond what is necessary for citizens' self-relation. Yet, as we have seen, because of utility, egoism, and the division of labor, “[t]he more numerous part of mankind is too tired and exhausted from its struggle with need to gird itself up for a new and more intense struggle against error.”\textsuperscript{48} Consequently, the “sequence of ideas” through which each citizen relates to herself is too erroneous to enable full self-manifestation; error arises from the lack of physical, moral, and theoretical vitality of the ruling class which exploits workers' exhaustion to maintain its hegemony (hegemony being always a relation of pedagogy). In a sentence reminiscent of E.IV.p1 of Spinoza’s Ethics (“Nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true,”)\textsuperscript{49} Schiller bemoans the fact that the existence of Enlightenment reason has done nothing to dispel the deathly pall of error: “If truth is to prevail in battle it must itself first become a force, establishing an impelling force as its champion in the realm of appearances.”\textsuperscript{50} This “force” will combine elements of both drives: the material impulse and the formal impulse. “Graced” by form but in touch with life, such a persona “enlivens all acquaintances, in his worldly affairs steers all towards his own intentions”:\textsuperscript{51} the aesthetic can thus be read as an immanent modality of hegemony.

If the driving force of the aesthetic is the “playful impulse,” its principal faculty is imagination. The imagination is the human equivalent of an energetic surplus in nature itself;\textsuperscript{52} its “whole charm” consists “in an unforced association of images [ungezwungene Folge von Bildern]” and the “play of freely associated ideas [Spiel der freyen Ideenfolge].”\textsuperscript{53} If it is “only in the sequence of his ideas that the persisting I itself becomes manifested to itself,”\textsuperscript{54} and if the ideal state is one which coincides with this self-relation, then human liberation is only possible when the state itself embodies free association. Given Schiller’s tendency to allegorical figuration, free association must be understood as at once the individual capacity for joyful, unrestrained concatenation of images and thoughts, as well as collective assemblies of bodies and minds freely exchanging ideas, forms and images with no censorious intervention from an abstract state. Yet “freely associated ideas” are still, within Schiller's schema, residually connected to the material
impulse; true aesthetic freedom must “[attempt] to find a free form.” It is at this point that we return to the beginning: the epistolary form.

Schiller sets out an array of sometimes puzzling preconditions for the advent of the aesthetic state. It requires: a socio-historical situation, arising out of contingency, which fuses sedentary, introspective individuality with nomadic, centrifugal collectivity; an alleviation of immediate physical need; and the developed physiological receptivity of an aesthetically disposed eye and ear. These preconditions combine in the primal scene of the aesthetic: “[Man’s] tender beauty will bud only when he speaks silently to himself in his hut and, as soon as he comes out, speaks with all of his kind [da allein, wo er in eigener Hütte still mit sich selbst, und sobald er heraustritt, mit dem ganzen Geschlechte spricht, wird sich ihre liebliche Knospe entfalten].” A dialectic is thus produced between the “sequence of ideas” through which each person becomes individually manifested to herself, and the public and universal “free association” of ideas through collective debate and encounters (of which, from Marx’s perspective, a free press and the right to free assembly are historical pre-conditions). “[O]nly aesthetic communication unites society, “ writes Schiller, “because it is based upon what is shared in common.” The letter form was the “freer form” through which Schiller could speak to himself and to the public simultaneously. For the young Marx, the newspaper would assume a similar function; and by the time of “The Civil War in France” (1871) it would be the Paris commune that signaled “the political form at last discovered under which to work out the economical emancipation of labour.” “It is only beauty,” writes Schiller, “that we enjoy as individual and genus, as representatives of the genus.” The aesthetic can thus be seen as a modality of hegemony, inscribed in a free, generic form in which individuals actualize themselves only through the full actualization of the genus itself.

II. State censorship, style and copyright in the young Marx

Marx’s early writings share this concern with the actualization of the genus. What Marx seems to call for in these early texts is for human beings to become what they properly are. What we are in the young Marx’s eyes is productive, rational, social animals. These four attributes (“animality,” taken from the subject “animal,” being the fourth) form the basis of human labor. This differs from mere animal activity in that it is universal (as opposed to unilateral), consciously undertaken (as opposed to instinctively performed), free (in that it can become an end-in-itself) and world-fashioning (in the sense that man’s natural history is a dialectical pole of human history as such). For Marx, labor is the constitutive life-activity of man, life-activity being what is determinate of a given genus. This means that man is a Gattungswesen, a species-being, not only in the sense that all humans belong naturalistically to the same genus, but also in the sense that what is universal to all human beings is precisely universality itself. Human labor is both internally and externally universal: it can be applied to any object at all (such that man “makes the whole of nature his inorganic body”) and it is oriented to the human species as a whole, for it produces goods that in principle any human being could use.
As it stands, however, man is currently unable to realize his own *Gattungswesen*: theoretically, he *is* a species-being, but is unable to activate this theory in practice. According to Marx, what prevents this realization is alienation, a situation in which some (implicitly undesirable) third party intervenes between man and his essence as human. Joseph Margolis summarizes this well: “man is alienated [for Marx] insofar as he fails to grasp that his own nature and the world’s (the world in which his labor—his praxis—is effective) are the *products of his praxis*, through history.”73 The archetypal form of alienation is religion (since God is the ultimate mediator between man and his essence),74 but economic alienation is fundamental (especially in the form of the commodity, which masks the social relations of its production).75 For our purposes, however, the most significant form of alienation discussed in the early writings is political.76 The very existence of a political state, Marx claims, is already a sign of a cleavage between civil and political society: “the sphere in which man behaves as a communal being (*Gemeinwesen*) is degraded to a level below the sphere in which he behaves as a partial being . . . it is man as *bourgeois*, i.e. as a member of civil society, and not man as citizen who is taken as the *real* and *authentic* man.”77 The consequence of this is a disjunction, as in Schiller, between sensuous content and abstract political form, between “man in his sensuous, individual and *immediate* existence” and “man as an *allegorical*, *moral* person.”78 The form of the state hangs loosely on the body politic like a badly fitting toga. True human emancipation, which Marx will come to know as “socialism,” would entail the return of man’s essence unto himself, the destruction of the mediator, and the reharmonizing of form and content. In a passage reminiscent of Schiller’s aesthetic state, Marx writes: “Only when real, individual man resumes the abstract citizen into himself and as an individual man has become a *species-being* in his empirical life, his individual work and his relationships . . . only then will human emancipation be completed.”79 In this light, one might say that if Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach called for the realization of philosophy in praxis, then “On the Jewish Question” offers a vision of Schillerian actualization.

Central to Marx’s analyses here—especially in his *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* (1843), which prepared the theoretical ground for “On the Jewish Question”—is a theory of the modern state: “The abstraction of the *state as such* was not born until the modern world because the abstraction of private life was not created until modern times. The abstraction of the *political state* is a modern product.”80 He contrasts the modern situation with that of the Middle Ages, in which “the life of the people was identical with the life of the state [i.e., political life].”81 As Lucio Colletti observes, “[p]olitics [in the Middle Ages] adhered so closely to the economic structure that socio-economic distinctions (serf and lord) were also political distinctions (subject and sovereign).”82 Likewise, Marx also contrasts the modern state with the Greek *polis* in which “the political state as such was the only true content of their [the citizens’] lives and their aspirations.”83 According to the young Marx, then, it is only in modernity that the political realm becomes abstracted from the life of the people as a particular reality over and above their daily existence.

It is against this dual backdrop—that of Marx’s early writings on the state and Schiller’s theory of the aesthetic—that we should read the first newspaper article Marx ever wrote, “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction” (1842). At the
time, Friedrich Wilhelm IV had begun his reign by ostensibly relaxing censorship laws, only to find himself subsequently incapable of controlling the liberal dissent he thereby unleashed.\textsuperscript{84} To counteract this wave of agitation, he promulgated new censorship instructions, effectively clamping down on his own liberalizations. One of the decrees of the new censorship instructions was that “censorship should not prevent serious and modest investigation of truth.”\textsuperscript{85} Marx responded to this restriction on the very style of journalistic writing with an argument which goes to the heart of his simultaneously aesthetic and political opposition to censorship:

\begin{quote}
[T]ruth is general, it does not belong to me alone, it belongs to all, it owns me, I do not own it. My property is the form, which is my spiritual individuality. Le style c'est l'homme. Yes, indeed! The law permits me to write, only I must write in a style that is not mine! I may show my spiritual countenance, but I must first set it in the prescribed folds! What man of honour will not blush at this presumption and not prefer to hide his head under the toga? Under the toga at least one has an inkling of a Jupiter's head. The prescribed folds mean nothing but bonne mine à mauvais jeu.\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

At first glance, it would be easy to read this passage as indicative of Marx's early Romanticism: the outrage of the poet-radical at an attempt to curb the individual creative genius, to set it in prescribed folds—the fury of a Prometheus bound. There is certainly something in that reading, but a closer analysis reveals a coherent theory of style that links, not only to the central aspects of Marx's early writings outlined above, but also to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century theories of authorship and copyright.

First, he claims that truth is universal; it is only the form which is my individual property, my spiritual individuality. Next follows a series of conceptual and idiomatic puns on style as an individual's spiritual face, countenance or visage—in other words, style as the physiognomy of an individual writer, indicative of his inner being (Schiller’s “person”). What the state is trying to do, Marx suggests, is to force the writer to screw his face into an alien pose. The German here is vorgeschriebene Falten, which literally means “prescribed folds,” but which, in the idiomatic phrase mein Gesicht in Falten legen, has another primary sense of “frowning pensively,” drawing as it does on the meaning of Falte as “wrinkle.”\textsuperscript{88} At this point, Marx claims that it would be better to hide one's head beneath a toga than contort one's spiritual countenance into a state-decreed rictus. The issue of style and censorship reproduces on a smaller scale the larger problem of the political state as such: the state enforces the merely abstract
universality of the legal person onto the authentic, sensuous individual. A “freer form” of association (to quote Schiller)—one in keeping with the inherent sociality of man’s species-being—would enable a type of individual stylistic expression whose limits were self-willed rather than externally imposed. That is to say, Marx does not seem to be calling for some spontaneous Romantic formlessness, but rather for a form of collective aesthetic self-regulation: a stylistic concrete universal in which the styles through which humans articulate what Schiller called the “sequence of ideas” through which they manifest themselves arise organically through common and free association.

This argument takes on new light in the context of nascent eighteenth-century theories of copyright law. In the passage cited above, Marx (mis)quotes Buffon’s well-known phrase, *Le style est l’homme même* [(the) style is (the) man himself]. This dictum is usually taken to mean that style reflects personality, but in fact its meaning is somewhat different. It occurred in the context of Buffon’s inaugural 1753 address to the French Academy. Buffon informed his fellow *immortels* that facts, knowledge and discoveries were external to man, the common property of all. They were, he said, appropriable, liable to transportation and alteration:

Only those works which are well written will pass into posterity . . . if they are written without taste, without nobility and without genius, they will perish, because knowledge, facts and discoveries are easily appropriable; they travel and even gain from being put to work by more skilful hands. These things are outside of man; style is man himself. Thus, style cannot be appropriated, nor transported, nor altered: if it is elevated, noble, sublime, the author will be equally admired in all ages; because truth alone is durable, even eternal.

Style, then, as opposed to knowledge, facts and discoveries, is immutable, immovable and immortal. Style is the man himself; it is, one might say, his property, the proper of man: like Schiller’s notion of the “person,” it cannot be expropriated, it never changes and it never differs.

In 1753, however, these philosophical pronouncements on style had not yet been codified into law. It was only Fichte’s intervention into late eighteenth-century German copyright disputes that enabled this to happen. At the time, piracy was rife, and there was still no unified pan-Germanic legal system or rationale to deal with it. The very notion of the author as legal proprietor was still in the process of being born. It was in the context of these simultaneously economic and aesthetic debates that in 1793 Fichte wrote his essay, “Proof of the Illegality of Reprinting.” He begins by distinguishing between the physical [*körperlich*] and intellectual [*geistig*] aspects of a book.
physical refers to the printed paper. The intellectual can be further subdivided into its material \[materielle\] aspect—the ideas communicated, or the ideational content—and its formal aspect—the \textit{style} in which these ideas are presented. By defining rightful ownership as when the expropriation of a thing by others is physically impossible, Fichte declares that when a book is sold ownership of the physical object and its ideal content passes to the buyer.\textsuperscript{94} The \textit{form} of this ideational content, however, remains eternally the author's own:

\[T\]hat which can simply never be appropriated by anyone, since it is physically impossible, is the \textit{form} of the thoughts, the connections between ideas, and the signs by means of which ideas are presented. Each person has his own manner of thinking, and his own unique way of forming concepts and connecting them.\textsuperscript{95}

While Fichte does briefly attempt to distinguish form from “manner” \[Manier\],\textsuperscript{96} it is quite clear that his own understanding of “form” is very similar to Buffon’s notion of “style”: that which is proper to each individual. Fichte thus provided the rational grounds for literary ownership and authorship and, at the same time, for the illegality of piracy; he did so by \textit{privatizing} that which in Schiller remains the very point of intersection between the person and the commons: “the sequence of ideas” or “freely associated ideas.” In doing so, he helped fundamentally to alter the understanding of what a writer was: no longer the patronized, neo-classical imitator of nature, but an \textit{Urheber}, an originator and creator.\textsuperscript{97}

If we now return to Marx’s article on censorship, we see it in a whole new light. This is not—or not \textit{only}—Marx the Romantic, resisting mundane restrictions on individual creation. On the contrary, when Marx states that a man’s style is his property he means it quite literally. State censorship is a form of expropriation: the expropriation of form, of individual property. As Margaret Rose has observed,\textsuperscript{98} in attempting to confer its identity upon its citizens, the state has succeeded only in expropriating them of their own identity—of that which is \textit{proper} to them. So we are left in somewhat of a quandary: the very Romantic theory of the author as unique, individual originator developed partly because of the very system of private property that Marx used it to criticize. Just as Marx attacked Proudhon for declaring that “Property is theft!” since the concept of theft presupposes private property,\textsuperscript{99} so Marx’s attack on the censors for forcibly expropriating the formal property of man presupposes an individual with property rights. In attempting to stress the inner contradictions of the bourgeois state, Marx in a sense falls short of the implicit radicalism of Schiller’s aesthetic commons, since the latter would entail the rejection, not only of the state’s violent abstractions, but also of the privatization of the stylistic commons effected by copyright law.

\section*{III. Wood-theft and the commons}

In his article on “Debates on the Law on Thefts of Wood” (1842), however, Marx was very much aware of the privatization of the commons, and developed a profoundly Schillerian critique of the criminalization of wood-gathering. Once a customary
right of peasants, the gathering of dead wood on residual common land was increas-
ingly being penalized as theft. Traditionally, such gathering had been unrestricted but
the scarcities caused by the agrarian crises of the 1820s and the increase in
industrialization, beginning in earnest in the following decade, led to severe legal
controls: during this period five-sixths of all prosecutions in Prussia dealt with wood.\footnote{100}
The gathering of dead wood was now treated as harshly as the cutting down and theft
of living timber. In some cases, “thieves” were compelled to carry out forced labor for
forest owners.

What is significant about Marx’s biting articles on this topic is that his disgust at the
profound injustice of these laws is inextricable from a critique of private interest and
the state that is articulated in surprisingly Schillerian terms. Broadly speaking, Marx
attacks private interest on three levels: ontology, character, and logic. When subordinated
to private interest the state becomes incapable of subtle differentiations of being:

The gathering of fallen wood and the theft of wood are therefore essentially
different things. The objects concerned are different, the actions in regard to them
are no less different; hence the frame of mind must also be different, for what
objective standard can be applied to the frame of mind other than the content of
the action and its form? But, in spite of this essential difference, you call both of
them theft and punish both of them as theft.\footnote{101}

Just as Schiller had warned that “the constitution of a state will be very incomplete if it
can bring about unity only by suppressing diversity,”\footnote{102} so the power of private interest
has led the Prussian state intentionally to suppress ontological distinctions. Private
interest has the capacity to violently simplify the world:

[Interest] makes the one point where the passer-by comes into contact with him
into the only point where the very nature of this man comes into contact with the
world. But a man may very well happen to tread on my corns without on that
account ceasing to be an honest, indeed an excellent, man. Just as you must not
judge people by your corns, you must not see them through the eyes of your private
interest.\footnote{103}

Existential variety and multiplicity of being is violently suppressed. Consequently, in
subordinating itself to interest, the state becomes incapable of “observ[ing] with respect
to its citizens the same relationship as each has to himself;”\footnote{104} on the contrary, Marx
explicitly notes that interest “do[es] not look at a thing in relation to itself.”\footnote{105} In
Schillerian terms, interest thus prevents the true actualization of the state.

Marx’s second line of attack concerns character, a recurring theme throughout
Schiller’s letters.\footnote{106} Private interest, writes Marx, has a “petty, wooden, mean and selfish
soul.”\footnote{107} If the state subordinates itself to private interest, it limits its own moral,
practical, and affective scope:

This claim on the part of private interest, the paltry soul of which was never
illuminated and thrilled by thought of the state, is a serious and sound lesson for
the latter. If the state, even in a single respect, stoops so low as to act in the manner of private property instead of in its own way, the immediate consequence is that it has to adapt itself in the form of its means to the narrow limits of private property.108

This concern with character and soul is integral to the young Marx’s developing theory of revolution.109 Just as Schiller had claimed that he who successfully combines matter and form “enlivens all acquaintances, in his worldly affairs steers all towards his own intentions,”110 so Marx suggests that magnanimity is a precondition of hegemony. Likewise, just as Schiller had bemoaned the paltry soul of the “civilized classes,” those who failed to follow Kant and Horace’s dictum (sapere aude!) and dared to use their understanding, so the young Marx gradually came to understand that no “particular class” in Germany—especially the bourgeoisie—was capable of becoming a revolutionary force by uniting the whole of society behind it through “a moment of enthusiasm in itself and in the masses”:

[I]n Germany every particular class lacks not only the consistency, acuteness, courage and ruthlessness which would stamp it as the negative representative of society; equally, all classes lack that breadth of spirit which identifies itself, if only for a moment, with the spirit of the people, that genius which can raise material force to the level of political power, that revolutionary boldness which flings into the face of its adversary the defiant words: I am nothing and should be everything.

The main feature of German morality and honour, not only in individuals but in classes, is that modest egoism which asserts its narrowness and allows that narrowness to be used against it.111

Thus, for both Schiller and Marx, magnanimity and an expansive vitality are integral to winning hegemony. If for Schiller it was only the aesthetic that was capable of combining philosophical rigor, moral audacity, and affective vivacity, for the young Marx it became the proletariat: “Philosophy cannot realize itself without the transcendence [Aufhebung] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realization [Verwirklichung] of philosophy.”112

Marx’s final line of attack on private interest was its total disregard for logic: “it is not concerned about contradictions, for it never comes into contradiction with itself. It is a constant improviser, for it has no system, only expedients.”113 Expediency is what happens to logic under the gravitational pull of money. Where a philosophical system presupposes internal logical coherence, according to laws of non-contradiction, interest is a bricoleur of reason, cobbling together ad hoc positions on the basis of whatever happens to be necessary to make a profit. Seen in light of the previous criticisms, it can be concluded that Marx’s contempt for private interest is total: interest subordinates the universal state, the supposed embodiment of man’s species-being, to petty materialist egoism; it violently suppresses ontological multiplicity; it prevents the magnanimity of character necessary for revolutionary hegemony; and it negates conceptual rigor. It does all of this to the end of dispossessing German peasants of one of their sole means of survival.
IV. Conclusion: for an aesthetic commons

What emerges from this reading of Schiller’s letters in light of Marx’s early writings (and vice versa) is a radical Schiller and a young Schillerian radical. Their respective, often vituperative, critiques of the abstract, authoritarian state and the petty egoism of private interest are remarkably similar in certain key respects. Likewise, their visions of collective self-realization have much in common. Schiller’s aesthetic ideal combines “the most abundant existence with the greatest autonomy and liberty” in a state which is nothing other than the everyday practice of free association inscribed in “free forms” whose law is “to give freedom by means of freedom.” Marx envisaged an association of free and equal producers in a society that “produces man in all the richness of his being” who “has become a species-being in his empirical life.” Both Schiller and Marx saw aesthetic forms as integral to the realization of these visions. Schiller’s claim that it is “only in the sequence of his ideas that the persisting I itself becomes manifested to itself,” seen in light of Marx’s writings on censorship, as well as eighteenth-century copyright law, points to the political necessity of defending or constructing an aesthetic commons: a press free from state censorship and subordination to capital, the freedom of association to enable joyful bodily and intellectual encounters (a precondition of hegemony), and a commonwealth of forms that are the collective product of writers and artists speaking to themselves in the language of the whole.

Notes

1 I am grateful to Hammam Aldouri, Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle for their comments on an earlier version of this chapter. All remaining errors are my own.
7 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 117.
8 In the published version, Schiller refines this point: “What I had intended to ask of you as a favour you have generously made a duty, leaving me the appearance of merit when I am merely following my inclination” (Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 3). The fusion of duty and inclination is integral to the aesthetic.
9 “For those who draw maps place themselves on low ground, in order to understand the character of the mountains and other high points, and climb higher in order to understand the character of the plains. Likewise, one needs to be a ruler to understand properly the character of the people, and to be a man of the people to understand properly the character of rulers” (Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, trans. Russell Price (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 4).
10 Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, 122; emphasis in original.
Hartle, “Trägheit der Juno Ludovisi,” 250, n. 35.
14 Beiser, Schiller as Philosopher; Douglas Moggach, “Schiller’s Aesthetic Republicanism,” History of Political Thought, 28(3) (2007), 520–41.
15 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 58.
16 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 61.
17 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 99.
19 It is, of course, Rancière who has done most to unpack the various configurations of “art,” “life” and “politics” arising from what he takes to be the foundational conjunction of aesthetics: “Schiller says that aesthetic experience will bear the edifice of the art of the beautiful and of the art of living. The entire question of the ‘politics of aesthetics’ . . . turns on this short conjunction” (2010, 116; emphasis in original). It would take another article entirely to negotiate the strengths and shortcomings of Rancière’s approach, but suffice it to say that this is a quite severely selective reading of Schiller and that its principal category, “aesthetic experience,” is problematic given the precise philosophical status of the concept of “experience” within German idealism, not to mention the total absence of the phrase “aesthetic experience” from Schiller’s letters, which tend to speak instead of “aesthetic disposition” [ästhetische Stimmung] (often as “aesthetic disposition of the soul [Gemüth]”), “aesthetic state” [ästhetischer Zustand] or “aesthetic state” [ästhetischer Staat].
20 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 118.
21 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 4.
22 I write “sublated” with caution since there is a sense in Letter Eighteen that Aufhebung for Schiller denotes a formal logical notion that remains too bound to the formal impulse. He seems to oppose to it the notion of a “completely pure union” (65). I am grateful to Hammam Aldouri for drawing my attention to this distinction.
23 For a historical and philosophical reconstruction of this intellectual tradition, see Josef Chytry, The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).
24 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 5.
25 The Kantian architectonic is clearly visible here.
26 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 15.
27 Savagery for Schiller denotes a predominance of feelings or the “material impulse” over the “formal impulse;” barbarism denotes the inverse (Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 12).
28 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 14.
29 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 15.
30 Terry Eagleton (The Ideology of the Aesthetic, 113) makes a similar point: “Indeed the whole text is a kind of political allegory, in which the troubled relations between sense drive and formal drive, or Nature and reason, are never far from a reflection on the ideal relations between populace and ruling class, or civil society and absolutist state.”
31 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 18.
32 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 27.
33 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 47.
34 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 11. In an article on aesthetics in German republicanism, Douglas Moggach has argued that “[t]he central political question for
Schiller is the attainment of a unity that is compatible with difference, and that is brought about by spontaneous self-determination rather than by forcible imposition” (Douglas Moggach, “Unity in Multiplicity: Agency and Aesthetics in German Republicanism,” in On Civic Republicanism: Ancient Lessons for Global Politics, eds. Geoffrey C. Kellow and Neven Leddy (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 314).

The latter is afforded by a major work of recent Gramsci scholarship: Peter D. Thomas, The Gramscian Moment: Philosophy, Hegemony and Marxism (Leiden: Brill, 2009).

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 10.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 11.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 13; translation modified. “Aber eben deswegen, weil der Staat eine Organisation seyn soll, die sich durch sich selbst und für sich selbst bildet, so kann er auch nur in so ferne wirklich werden, als sich die Theile zur Idee des Ganzen hinauf gestimmt haben. Weil der Staat der reinen und objektiven Menschheit in der Brust seiner Bürger zum Repräsentanten dient, so wird er gegen seine Bürger dasselbe Verhältniß zu beobachten haben, in welchem sie zu sich selber stehen, und ihre subjektive Menschheit auch nur in dem Grade ehren können, als sie zur objektiven veredelt ist” (Friedrich Schiller, Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), 17).


See the introduction to the present volume and Miguel E. Vatter, Between Form and Event: Machiavelli’s Theory of Political Freedom (Dordrecht: Springer-Science and Business Media, B.V., 2000).

Again, see the introduction to the present volume.

Moggach, On Civic Republicanism, 315.


Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 13.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 20.

As Beiser (Schiller as Philosopher, 138) remarks, “[h]ere Schiller follows Fichte and breaks decisively (if silently) with Kant, he is virtually saying that the Kantian noumenal self exists only in and through its determinate phenomenal manifestations.”

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 39.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 27.


Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 26.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 34.


Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 107; emphasis in original.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 39.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 107; emphasis in original.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 99.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 27, 100, 132–33.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 101.

Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 99; translation modified.

Cf. Gramsci on the historical preconditions of the “democratic philosopher”: “The environment reacts back on the philosopher and imposes on him a continual process of self-criticism, functioning as ‘teacher.’ This is why one of the most important
demands that the modern intelligentsias have made in the political field has been that of the so-called ‘freedom of thought and of the expression of thought’ (‘freedom of the press’, ‘freedom of association’). For the relationship between master and disciple in the general sense referred to above is only realized where this political condition exists, and only then do we get the ‘historical’ realization of a new type of philosopher, whom we could call a ‘democratic philosopher’ in the sense that he is a philosopher convinced that his personality is not limited to himself as a physical individual but is an active social relationship of modification of the cultural environment” (Gramsci, 1971, 350).

61 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 111.
62 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 117.
64 This section is a lightly adapted version of sub-chapters 2.1, 2.3 and 2.4 of Daniel Hartley, The Politics of Style: Towards a Marxist Poetics (Leiden: Brill, 2017). They are reproduced here with the kind permission of Brill.
66 Note the Aristotelian analogues of these terms: poiēsis (production), zōon logon echon (animal ‘having’ language/discourse) and zōon politikon (political animal). Nonetheless, it is also quite possible to see Marx’s conception of praxis and species-being as completely at odds with Aristotle’s understanding of a fixed human essence. See, for example, Joseph Margolis, “Praxis and Meaning: Marx’s Species Being and Aristotle’s Political Animal,” in Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth-Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity, ed. G.E. McCarthy (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1992), 329–55.
68 It goes without saying that Marx’s early, predominantly anthropological theory of human labor is a controversial one. It has given rise to two interconnected debates among its interpreters: the first concerns a so-called “break” which occurs between the early and the mature Marx, from an initial anthropological focus on “human nature” to a purely relational conception in which “human nature” is rearticulated as the structural ensemble of social relations. The main progenitor of this line of thought was, of course, Louis Althusser (Louis Althusser, For Marx, trans. B. Brewster (London; New York: Verso, 2005)). The second issue concerns Marx’s theory of labor itself. Moishe Postone identifies two opposing interpretations which have produced “two fundamentally different modes of critical analysis: a critique of capitalism from the standpoint of labor, on the one hand, and a critique of labour, on the other” (Moishe Postone, Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5). The former assumes that labor is transhistorical, whereas the latter identifies labor under capitalism as historically specific. In the first, labor is the subject of the critique of capitalist society, while in the latter it is the object. More recently, Jason Read has argued that both interpretations miss the point: “The opposition between these two critical strategies generally assumes that labor itself is one-sided, thus forgetting the duality of labor. An examination of the relationship between abstract and living labor makes possible a criticism in which labor is both the object, in the sense that it is a criticism of the apparatuses and structures that constitute abstract labor, and the subject, in the sense that it places the potentiality of labor at the center of this critique” (Jason Read, The
This is one of the aspects of Feuerbach's thought which Marx criticizes in the sixth thesis on Feuerbach: 'Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as 'genus,' as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals’ (Marx, Early Writings, 423).

Chitty, Karl Marx and Contemporary Philosophy, 128.

Marx, Early Writings, 328.


Margolis, Marx and Aristotle, 337. There is, however, a problem with Margolis’s phrasing to the extent that it implies that man is alienated for primarily epistemological reasons; alienation is produced practically within the very process of production under the conditions of capitalistic private property: “grasping” this fact will not practically resolve it, since it is a “socially necessary illusion.”

Cf. Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity, trans. G. Eliot (New York: Prometheus, 1989), 153: “God is the concept of the species as an individual . . . he is the species-concept, the species-essence conceived immediately as an existence, a singular being [Einzels.]

Both religious and economic alienation are structured by the logic of the fetish. The commodity form—and capitalist private property more generally—conceals the four types of economic alienation Marx famously identified in the 1844 manuscripts: man’s alienation from the product of his labor, from his labor itself, from his species, and from his fellow men.

This is obviously not to say that religious and economic alienation are not indirectly political.

Marx, Early Writings, 23.

Marx, Early Writings, 234.

Marx, Early Writings, 234.

Marx, Early Writings, 90.

Marx, Early Writings, 90.

“Introduction” to Marx, Early Writings, 34.

Marx, Early Writings, 91.


This is a quotation from the original censorship instruction, cited in Karl Marx, “Comments on the Latest Prussian Censorship Instruction,” in MECW: vol. 1, Karl Marx: 1835–1843 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 111.


Marx, Mega Abt.I Bd.1. Werke, 100.

It is no coincidence that Schiller’s artistic ideal is the Juno Ludovisi: “[the Greeks] banished from the brow of the blessed gods all the gravity and labour that furrow the cheeks of mortals, together with all those frivolous pleasures that smooth empty faces, freed those who were eternally content from the fetters of any purpose, any obligation, any cares, making idleness and indifference the envied lot of the gods: simply a more humane name for the freest, most sublime being’ (Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 57).

90 My own translation of the French passage cited directly below.


93 Graham Mayeda, “Commentary on Fichte’s ‘the Illegality of the Unauthorised Reprinting of Books’: An Essay in Intellectual Property During the Age of the Enlightenment,” University of Ottawa Law and Technology Journal 5 (1&2) (2008), 141–98, 173–74. Mayeda’s commentary includes a full translation of Fichte’s article, with the German and English in parallel columns: cf. ibid., 171–98. This is the source of my quotations from Fichte.

94 Whereas in terms of the physical object, the author cedes all proprietary rights to the buyer on purchase, in terms of ideas the author remains a co-proprietor (Graham Mayeda, Commentary on Fichte’s “the Illegality of the Unauthorised Reprinting of Books,” 175–76).

95 Mayeda, Commentary on Fichte’s “the Illegality of the Unauthorised Reprinting of Books,” 176.

96 Mayeda, Commentary on Fichte’s “the Illegality of the Unauthorised Reprinting of Books,” 177.

97 Woodmansee (1984) deals with this aspect in great detail.

98 Rose, Reading the Young Marx and Engels, 29.

99 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Selected Correspondence (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1956), 128.

100 David McLellan, Karl Marx: His Life and Thought (London: Paladin, 1976), 56.


102 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 11.


104 Schiller, 2016, 13.


106 See especially letters three and four.


109 The best account of this theory is Michael Löwy, The Theory of Revolution in the Young Marx (Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books, 2005).

110 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 34.


114 Schiller, On the Aesthetic Education of Man, 110; emphasis in original.

115 Marx, Early Writings, 354.

116 Marx, Early Writings, 234. Cf. Hartle’s chapter on Free Association (Chapter 4) in the present volume.
Section III

Modes of Artistic Production
Installing Communism

Boris Groys

The word “Communism” is usually associated with the word “Utopia.” Utopia is a place that is not inscribed in any “real” topography and can be reached only by the way of imagination. However, Utopia is not a pure fantasy. It is a no-place that has a potential to become a place. Not accidentally, one speaks so often about the “Idea of Communism” or “Communist Project”—meaning something non-real but able to be realized. Thus, even remaining an “idea” or a “project” Communism has a certain reality—its own here and now. Formulation of a certain idea or project presupposes namely a certain “real” scene in which this formulation takes shape—certain political, social, medial, technical conditions that allow to produce, manifest, and distribute this idea in a “material” form of a book, film, image, website, and so on. That means that Utopia always already has its place in the world. The Utopian imagination always presupposes a certain “real space”—a working place for a work of Utopian imagination. And this space is not something that this imagination can create anew. The scene of the Utopian imagination is a part of topology of the world as it already is. It is something that Karl Marx permanently stresses in his polemics against the Socialist Utopianism—especially, the French Socialist Utopianism that had a tendency to remain blind to the economic, social, and political conditions of its own possibility. The Marxist materialism is nothing else than the thematization of the real, material conditions of “immaterial” imagination and the demonstration of the unconscious dependency of this imagination on the conditions of its production and distribution.

This dependency becomes even more obvious when one begins not only to imagine but also to build Communism as it was the case in the Socialist countries of the European East. Here the scene of the Communist imagination becomes even more visible. And the contrast between Communist utopia and the scene of its building becomes also obvious. Today, one is confronted time and again with an opinion that the Eastern European Communism (or Socialism) was not Communism (or Socialism) at all. It is, obviously, true. But the Soviet Union and other Eastern European countries understood themselves not as places of Communism but as places where Communism was built. And the building place, of course, always looks different from the final construction. The building scene of the Egyptian pyramids was, probably, also different from the pyramids themselves as we see them today. And the lifestyle of the Western intellectuals that imagine and preach today the “Idea of Communism” also does not look very Utopian. Can this fact discredit the Idea of Communism itself? Probably not.
But then how can the real experience of the building of Communism in Eastern Europe be accused of not being the experience of Communism at all? It is not quite clear.

It becomes even less clear if we ask ourselves what kind of idea we have of the Communist society. Here again Marx was very ironic about any attempts by the French and English Utopian Socialists of his time to describe the Communist society in every detail. If Communism is Utopia it is indescribable because Utopia, being no-place, cannot have a definite form. Every attempt to describe Communism necessarily functions as a projection of the personal prejudices, phobias, and obsessions of the writer or artist who tries to undertake such a description. According to Marx Communism may come when the development of the productive forces change our life in a yet not fully predictable way. Being a Communist means for Marx not to fix one's gaze on the vision of the Communist future but to look attentively at the scene of one's own imagination and to analyze its dependence on the realities of this scene. This requirement to shift the gaze from the Utopian vision to its real context becomes especially explicit when Marx discusses the "idealistic" discourses of art. Indeed, Utopian imagination is a specific kind of artistic imagination. The romantic, "idealistic" understanding of art interprets the artistic imagination as a break with reality, as a possibility to flee the reality and imagine a new world that would be alternative to the world as it is. It is not that Marx denies the possibility of such a free flight of imagination away from reality. Rather, he asks about the real conditions that make such a flight possible—and even necessary.

In the famous paragraphs of the "Critique of German Ideology" by Marx and Engels that are dedicated to the critique of Max Stirner's book *The Ego and His Property* one can find the following passage related to the theory of artistic labor:

Here, as always, Sancho [Sancho is a nickname that Marx and Engels gave to Max Stirner—BG] is again unlucky with his practical examples. He thinks that "no one can compose your music for you, complete the sketches for your paintings. No one can do Raphael's works for him." Sancho could surely have known, however, that it was not Mozart himself, but someone else who composed the greater part of Mozart's *Requiem* and finished it, and that Raphael himself "completed" only an insignificant part of his own frescoes.

He imagines that the so-called organisers of labour wanted to organise the entire activity of each individual, and yet it is precisely they who distinguish between directly productive labour, which has to be organised, and which is not directly productive. [Communists—BG] In regard to the latter, however, it was not their view, as Sancho imagines, that each should do the work of Raphael, but that anyone in "whom there is a potential Raphael should be able to develop without hindrance." Sancho imagines that Raphael produced his pictures independently of the division of labour that existed in Rome at the time. If he were to compare Raphael with Leonardo da Vinci and Titian, he would see how greatly Raphael's works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time, which occurred under Florentine influence, while the works of Leonardo depended on the state of things in Florence, and the works of Titian, at a later period, depended on the totally different development of Venice. Raphael as much as any other artist was
determined by the technical advances in art made before him, by the organisation of society and the division of labour in his locality, and, finally, by the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse. Whether an individual like Raphael succeeds in developing his talent depends wholly on demand, which in turn depends on the division of labour and the conditions of human culture resulting from it.

And they write further:

In proclaiming the uniqueness of work in science and art, Stirner adopts a position far inferior to that of the bourgeoisie. At the present time it has already been found necessary to organise this “unique” activity. Horace Vernet would not have had time to paint even a tenth of his pictures if he regarded them as works which “only this unique person is capable of producing.” In Paris, the great demand for vaudevilles and novels brought about the organisation of work for their production; this organisation at any rate yields something better than its “unique” competitors in Germany.” But Marx and Engels also cautioned: . . . Incidentally, it is self-evident that all these organisations based on modern division of labour still lead to extremely limited results, and they represent a step forward only compared with the previous narrow isolation.¹

I bring here these lengthy quotations from the “Critique of German Ideology” because in these passages Marx and Engels required and predicted a shift from the contemplation of the individual artworks towards a reflection of the context of their production, distribution, success with the public, and so on—the shift that, indeed, took place in the twentieth-century art theory and art itself. Indeed, the fate of art is dependent on a certain stage of technical development (art being originally a techne, after all), economic conditions under which art production takes place and the taste of the public that is formed by its particular lifestyle. Now, inside the art practice itself this new awareness of the context is manifested through a shift from the production of individual artworks towards creation of artistic installations in which the organizational presuppositions of the artistic practice could be thematized. Thus, one can argue that the Marxist art—if such a thing is possible—can only be the art of installation. I speak here of course not about a kind of immersive installations that try to overwhelm the spectator by aesthetically attacking him or her from all the sides. (And we have experienced a lot of such immersive installations in the last decades). Rather, I speak about the installations—artistic or curatorial—that are designed as a means to reflect on the contexts of art production and functioning.

Not accidentally, this shift from the artwork to the installation occurred in the Soviet Union earlier than in many other places. And not accidentally, it occurred originally in the context of the radical Russian avant-garde and, especially, its most radical, Suprematist version. Here it is important to mention that the early artistic practice of Malevich was in many ways inspired by Stirner. In the early texts by Malevich one can easily discover the influence of the author of Ego and His Property. Thus, Malevich insists on achieving “nothing” or, rather, “nothingness” as the true goal
of his art. In one of his programmatic texts he writes: “Kubofuturists have collected all
the things on a square, broken them—but not burned them. It is a pity!” And further:
“But I transformed myself into the zero of forms and came out of 0–1.” These
statements remind very strongly (also by their rhythmical structure) of the famous
formulations by Stirner: “All things are nothing to me” and: “I, this nothing, shall put
forth my creations from myself.” For Malevich, as for Stirner, the discovery of one’s
own uniqueness in the world is a result of radical negation of all the cultural,
economical, political, social traditions, conventions, and restraints. That means: one
discovers oneself as pure nothingness, a point of emptiness inside the fullness of the
world—an active emptiness that devours the world, destroys, consumes, and annihilates
all the things, turns everything into nothing. Stirner’s “unique individual” (der Einzige)
comes to himself through liberation from all the goals, principles, and ideals that
previously connected him to the others. Stirner asserts: This unique individual does
not understand himself anymore as a subject of reason and ethics, as a worker and even
as man, as a human being. Ultimately, Stirner’s hero is an artist realizing his or her
unique presence in the world by “unproductive,” non-, or even anti-economical artistic
work that is equal to pure negation. This understanding of the role of the artist was
shared by Malevich: he called his own art “non-objective” not only because it excluded
any references to the “real objects” but also—and maybe primarily—because his art had
no goal, no objective beyond itself. One should not forget that Malevich stood politically
very close to the Russian anarchist movement—and even after the October revolution
he regularly published his articles in the newspaper Anarkhia (1918). At that time Max
Stirner was the must-be-read writer in the circles of the Russian anarchists. Here the
artistic views of Malevich fully correspond to his political views. One can even
speculate that his famous “Black Square” (see Figure 9.1) refers to the black flag of the
Anarchist movement.

The Suprematism is the best example of the “non-organized” or “not directly
productive” work. It is an art that rejected all the formal criteria of professional art—
and the social demands that were connected to these criteria. That is why the
Suprematism could and still can serve as the best starting point for the Marxist
reflection on the dependence of art on its social, economical, and political context. The
reason for that is the same that dictates to Marx and Engels to use the Ego and His
Property as the focal point for the discussion of the unconscious, unreflected
dependence of the “unique individual” on the material, technical conditions of his
activity, including his artistic practice. Only if an individual completely rejects all the
explicit forms of its dependence on the cultural, ideological, and political values that
dominate the society in which this individual lives can one start a discourse that would
thematis the hidden, unconscious, implicit dependence of this individual on the
technical, material, and political context of his existence—including the context of this
individual’s act of self-liberation itself. Only if an individual becomes “nothingness”
does the context of his existence become transparent, visible. The reduction of the
artwork to nothingness, to emptiness, to point zero opens the gaze of its spectator to
the context of this artwork. As we know the notion of installation was introduced by
Michael Fried in the framework of his analysis of art of American Minimalism,
especially, art of Donald Judd. Fried contends that the extreme reduction of the
artwork that was practiced by the Minimalists reoriented the gaze of the spectator from the artwork itself to its context—understood by Fried as the scene of its display. That could be an exhibition space or natural landscape. To characterize this shift of gaze Fried used the notion of installation. In other words, Fried registered correctly—if also with a critical intention—the reorientation of the gaze from the artwork reduced to nothingness towards the world in which this nothingness emerges. But even if American Minimalism repeats the Suprematist gesture of reduction (and the texts of Judd on Malevich confirm that), Minimalism at the same time objectifies and naturalizes the Suprematist nothingness—by placing, as Fried rightly states, the minimalist object inside the natural landscape. Such a re-naturalization of nothingness does, of course, run against the Suprematist program. For Malevich the Suprematism means an irrevocable break with everything natural. The Black Square is an image of this break. And because of this break a new transparency is created. After and through the emergence of this new transparency something comes to be seen that was never seen before—that remained hidden by the fullness of the world. The emergence of the

Figure 9.1 Kaszimir Malevich, *Black Square* (1915)
Black Square does not mean the reorientation of the gaze to the already existing, naturally given outside of the Black Square—as Fried describes it. Rather, it allows an insight inside and behind the Black Square—toward the hidden stage of its emergence. The self-nullification of the individual, including the artist, always presupposes a certain stage on which it takes place. It is precisely this stage that Marx and Engels try to describe—and contemporary art tries to reveal.

In the following paragraphs I will show that both leading protagonists of Russian installation art, El Lissitzky and Ilya Kabakov, used Black Square as the starting point of their artistic practice. Both artists have, so to say, gone through the Black Square—and made visible a space that was hidden behind it. In fact, during the later period of his life Malevich himself had to accept the existence of the invisible or, rather, necessarily overlooked determinations of his artistic practice—and the artistic practice in general.

In his famous text on the additional element in the painting Malevich speaks about “bacilli” that infect the artistic vision in an unconscious way. The infection by the outside world remains—even if the visibility of this world is reduced to nothingness. Malevich praises this unconscious infection through the outside world because it makes the artistic practice contemporary to the reality in which this practice takes place. Now, Lissitzky and Kabakov go much further in the visualization of the infectious context that is covered and at the same time indicated by the Black Square. But they do that in very different ways. One can argue that these two different ways are not accidental or dictated solely by the individual temperaments of these two artists. These two different ways reflect the ambivalent relationship between life and art under the specific conditions of the Soviet regime—but to an even greater extent they reflect the ambivalence of the installation as an art form.

As already mentioned, the installation can be seen as an attempt to overcome the autonomous, sovereignist attitude of modernist art by revealing its “realistic,” materialist context. Indeed, freedom of the artist to create art according to the artist’s own sovereign will does not guarantee that an artist’s work will also be exhibited in a public space. The inclusion of any artwork in a public exhibition must be—at least potentially—publicly explained and justified. Though artist, curator, and art critic are free to argue for or against the inclusion of some artworks, every such explanation and justification undermines the autonomous, sovereign character of artistic freedom that modernist art aspired to win. This is why the curator—being the most visible representative of the art institutions—is considered to be someone who keeps coming between the artwork and the viewer, disempowering the artist and the viewer alike. Now, the artistic installation can be seen as a space of exploration of the dependence of the artist on the art institution, in general, and curatorial strategies, in particular. But at the same time the emergence of the artistic installation can be also seen as an act of self-empowerment of the artist, as an expansion of his sovereignist attitude from the artwork to the art space itself—in other words, from the artwork to its context.

The artistic installation is often viewed today as a form that allows the artist to democratize his or her art, to take public responsibility, to begin to act in the name of a certain community or even of society as a whole. Thus, the artist’s decision to allow the multitude of visitors to enter the space of the artwork can be interpreted as an opening of the closed space of an artwork to democracy. This enclosed space
seems to be transformed into a platform for public discussion, democratic practice, communication, networking, education, and so forth. But this analysis of installation art practice tends to overlook the symbolic act of privatizing the public space of the exhibition, which precedes the act of opening the installation space to a community of visitors. As I have mentioned, the space of the traditional exhibition is a symbolic public property, and the curator who manages this space acts in the name of public opinion. The visitor of a typical exhibition remains on his or her own territory, as a symbolic owner of the space where the artworks are delivered to his or her gaze and judgment. On the contrary, the space of an artistic installation is the symbolic private property of the artist. By entering this space, the visitor leaves the public territory of democratic legitimacy and enters the space of sovereign, authoritarian control. The visitor is here, so to speak, on foreign ground. The visitor becomes an expatriate who must submit to a foreign law—one given to him or her by the artist. Here the artist acts as legislator, as a sovereign of the installation space—even, and maybe especially so, if the law given by the artist to a community of visitors is a democratic one.

One might then say that installation practice reveals the act of unconditional, sovereign violence that initially installs any political order including a democratic one. We know that democratic order is never brought about in a democratic fashion—democratic order always emerges as a result of a violent revolution. To install a law is to break one. The first legislator can never act in a legitimate manner—he installs the political order, but does not belong to it. He remains external to the order even if he decides later to submit himself to it. The author of an artistic installation is also such a legislator, who gives to the community of visitors the space to constitute itself and defines the rules to which this community must submit, but does so without belonging to this community, remaining outside it. And this remains true even if the artist decides to join the community that he or she has created. This second step never leads us to forget the first one—the sovereign one. In his *Constitutional Theory,* Carl Schmitt thematizes the “state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*)—an event that reveals the sovereign power hidden behind the constitution order. Since then and for many theoreticians, especially for Giorgio Agamben the “state of exception” became an important starting point for investigating the hidden conditions of the modern constitutional and democratic order. In this sense one can say that the artistic installation is a “space of exception.” It isolates a specific space from the topology of the “normal” world to reveal its inner conditions and determinations.

Now the Soviet power never tried to conceal its sovereignist character—and contrasted this “honesty” to the “hypocrisy” of the bourgeois world. Under Soviet conditions the creative freedom of the sovereign, be it Stalin or, later, the Party was always made explicit. Marxism, like installation art, can be interpreted in two different ways. One can read the Marxist requirement to shift the attention from the “subjective” philosophical thinking to its economic and political context as an appeal to critically investigate the powers that shape and control this context. Here Marxism is understood as a critical project—and it is this understanding of Marxism that finds its reflection in so-called critical art. But Marxism can be understood also as an appeal to transform the context of reality instead of critically interpreting it. Soviet communism emerged as a consequence of the second revolutionary, sovereignist reading of Marxism. One can say
that the Soviet Union as a whole was shaped as a kind of artistic installation—an artwork
the boundaries of which coincided with the borders of the Soviet territory. On this
territory the sovereign, creative, artistic freedom of formation and transformation had an
obvious priority vis-à-vis the democratic freedom of discussion: the population of the
Soviet Union was from the beginning inscribed into the artistic space in which it lived
and moved. Thus, the artistic reflection of the Soviet condition could take two different
forms. It could draw a parallel between the sovereign, creative freedom at the core of the
Soviet experiment and the creative freedom of the artist as author of an installation that
reflected this freedom—and at the same time participated in it. Or it could critically
reflect the reification of this creative freedom after it was officially and institutionally
installed by the Soviet Power and took a certain definite form. Now, one can argue that
Lissitzky embraced the first possibility, and Kabakov the second critical one.

Let us begin by the analysis of Lissitzky's work. Lissitzky sees Suprematism as crossing
the point zero of the old world toward a free creation of the new world—in accordance
with the title of the exhibition in which Malevich has shown for the first time his Black
Square and other Suprematist works. This title was “0.10” which indicated that 10
participating artists went through the point zero—through nothingness and death (see
Figure 9.2). Lissitzky sees himself also as one of the artists that went through point zero—
and he believes that on the other side of zero (or, one can say, other side of the mirror) one
can create a new, completely artificial space and world of forms. This belief is an effect of
the October revolution. It seemed to many artists and theoreticians of that time that the
Russian reality itself—including all its explicit and implicit contexts—was completely
nullified by the revolution. Russian reality went the same way that Suprematism went

Figure 9.2 0.10, Exhibition view (1915)
before it. There was no context for life and for art left intact anymore. There was nothing to see through the Black Square, through the gap that was created by the break with nature and historical past. Art had to create its own context—the social and economic presuppositions for its own further functioning. In a language that strongly resembles Stirner’s language as it was criticized by Marx and Engels, Lissitzky contrasts Communism, understood by him as domination of organized, regulated labor with Suprematism understood as domination of creative, non-regulated, non-organized labor—and he expresses his conviction that in the future Communism will be left behind by Suprematism because creativity moves faster and functions more efficient than regular work. However, Lissitzky understands the non-organized labor in a different way than Marx and Engels did. For Lissitzky, as for Russian constructivists in general, non-organized labor is precisely the organizational work. The artist is not organized because he is an organizer. Specifically, the artist creates the space in which the organized, productive labor takes place.

In a certain sense, the Soviet artists had no other choice at the time than to forward such a total claim. The market, including the art market, was eliminated by the Communists. Artists were no longer confronted by private consumers and their aesthetic preferences, but by the state as a whole. Thus, for the artists it was all or nothing. This situation is clearly reflected in the manifestos of Russian Constructivism. For example, in his programmatic text entitled “Constructivism,” Alexei Gan wrote:

Not to reflect, not to represent and not to interpret reality, but to really build and express the systematic tasks of the new class, the proletariat … Especially now, when the proletarian revolution has been victorious, and its destructive, creative movement is progressing along the iron rails into culture, which is organized according to a grand plan of social production, everyone—the master of color and line, the builder of space-volume forms and the organizer of mass productions—must all become constructors in the general work of the arming and moving of the many-millioned human masses.

However, later Nikolai Tarabukin asserted in his then-famous essay “From the Easel to the Machine” that the Constructivist artist could not play a formative role in the process of actual social production. His role was rather that of a propagandist who defends and praises the beauty of industrial production and opens the public’s eyes to this beauty. The artist, as described by Tarabukin, is someone who looks at the entirety of socialist production as a ready-made—a kind of socialist Duchamp who exhibits the whole of the socialist industry as something good and beautiful.

One can argue that such was precisely the strategy of Lissitzky in the late period of his artistic activity. In that period Lissitzky increasingly concentrated his efforts on the production of various kinds of exhibitions. In these exhibitions he tried to visualize the socio-political space in which the organized Soviet production took place. Or, in other words, he tried to make visible the organizational work that otherwise would remain hidden, invisible for the external spectator. To visualize the invisible is traditionally the main goal of art. Obviously, Lissitzky understood his exhibitions as spaces constructed by the curator-author—spaces in which the attention of the spectator was shifted from the exhibited objects to the organization of the exhibition space as such (see Figure 9.3).
In this respect, Lissitzky draws a difference between “passive” and “active” exhibitions—or, as we would say today, between traditional exhibitions and installations. For Lissitzky passive exhibitions only demonstrate what was already done before. On the contrary, active exhibitions create completely new spaces in which the general idea of the exhibition is embodied—and in which individual items function in a subsidiary role. Thus, Lissitzky argues that an exhibition of Soviet architecture must be in itself an embodiment of Sovietness in architecture and all the elements of the exhibition, including its space, light, and so on, should be submitted to this goal. In other words Lissitzky sees himself as a creator of the exhibition space that functions here as extension and realization of his earlier PROUNS (proyekty utverzhdeniya novogo—projects for establishing of the new). Here the exhibition space becomes, when not quite a utopian, but, to use the term introduced by Michel Foucault, heterotopian space. The “active exhibition” has not to merely illustrate and reproduce the development of the socialist reality and the socialist labor that creates a new society but, rather, to offer a project for designing the Soviet reality in its totality. On the one hand, the organizational work by the Communist Party is reconstructed and praised. But, on the other hand, the representation of the organized Communist work is aesthetically subjected by Lissitzky to the Suprematist interpretation of the installational space.

Here Lissitzky finds himself in a competition with the “active exhibitions” that were mounted by Tretyakov Gallery (Moscow) and Russian Museum (Leningrad) in the years 1931–1932 by the Marxist art theoreticians Alexei Fedorov-Davydov and Nikolai Punin under characteristic titles like “Art of the Capitalist Era” or “Art from the Age of Imperialism” (see Figure 9.4). These exhibitions looked like contemporary innovative curatorial installations in which their creators tried to reveal the sociological presuppositions of the avant-garde artistic practices. For example, the works by Malevich, and also by some other artists, were presented under a banner with the text: “Anarchism is a reverse side of bourgeois order.” Here a real attempt was undertaken to socially, economically, and politically contextualize the new, avant-garde art—from a position of the art theoreticians who were sympathetic to this art but interpreting it as being merely a necessary transition step on the way to the incoming Socialist art. These exhibitions
could be seen as applying communist organizational work to the production of the Russian avant-garde—as Lissitzky's exhibitions can be seen as an application of the Suprematist space design to the Communist production. From today's position it is difficult to say who moved faster forward—and who was left behind.

Here one should stress the fact that the sociologically oriented exhibitions of the Russian avant-garde were not denunciatory. They have not lead to destruction or even elimination of these images from view—which shows their essential difference from the (in)famous exhibition “The Degenerate Art.”\(^{15}\) The contextualization of the Russian Avant-Garde in the late Capitalist, or Imperialist (in Lenin's sense of globalized Capitalist order) era corresponds interpretation of Marxism as an analytical, critical method. Here the curators were following the Marxist Sociology of Art as it was developed by Vladimir Friche. Friche contended that the development of capitalism made the notion of beauty and the practice of aesthetic contemplation of beauty obsolete. True art became the design of machines—where the function defines the form. The true artists of the Capitalist times are the technicians that design these machines and make them work. Accordingly, the art of Capitalist society reflects this process of machinization that slowly but inevitably leads to the abolishment of art as a separate activity.\(^ {16}\) This sociological interpretation of the avant-garde denies its ability to change the context of its own emergence: the avant-garde becomes inscribed in politico-economic context that produced the avant-garde art in the first place. But this re-inscription of the avant-garde into the late Capitalist order was understood by the curators of the exhibition not.
only as a critique of the avant-garde but also as its legitimation. The artistic avant-garde is proclaimed here to be a legitimate expression of its epoch, like, for example, Renaissance, Baroque, or Romanticism. That is why the sociological exhibitions were not experienced as being anti-avant-gardist ones. The art of the avant-garde was institutionally disempowered in the middle of the 1930s as Socialist Realism was officially established as a dominating artistic method. Here the work organized by the Communist Party has finally achieved a victory over the Suprematist non-organized work. But the Communist Party practiced the same sovereignist reading of Marxism as the Russian avant-garde. Accordingly, Friche and his school were proclaimed to be an expression of vulgar (in other words, critical) Marxism and removed from the positions of power together with the artists of the Russian avant-garde.

Now, Lissitzky by no means saw himself in the context of the developed or late Capitalism but, rather, as part of the avant-garde of Communist society. His artistic attitude, though, did not quite coincide with the role of the artist in Communist society as it was envisaged by Marx and Engels. In the context of the discussion of Stirner’s non-organized, that is, artistic work, they wrote:

> The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals, and its suppression in the broad mass which is bound up with this, is a consequence of division of labour. Even if in certain social conditions, everyone were an excellent painter, that would by no means exclude the possibility of each of them being also an original painter, so that here too the difference between “human” and “unique” labour amounts to sheer nonsense. In any case, with a communist organisation of society, there disappears the subordination of the artist to local and national narrowness, which arises entirely from division of labour, and also the subordination of the individual to some definite art, making him exclusively a painter, sculptor, etc.; the very name amply expresses the narrowness of his professional development and his dependence on division of labour. In a communist society there are no painters but only people who engage in painting among other activities.17

Thus, Marx and Engels did not assume that in Socialist society the artist could take the role of social designer or political propagandist. Rather, they expected a return of arts to the search for beauty—but more on the side of production of beauty than its consumption and contemplation. In Communist society everybody can become an artist if he or she likes—but, in a non-professional manner, in his or her free time. It is a vision of the future of art that was still shared by Clement Greenberg when at the end of his famous essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” he spoke about a possibility of saving beauty and art in the perspective of “international socialism” (Trotskyism, in fact). Obviously, Marx and Engels have not foreseen the strategy of self-empowerment that lead many artists to undertake a leap from non-organized labor to organizational work. This self-empowerment was a goal of the artistic avant-gardes that emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century. But, after all, the organizational work by the Communist Party demonstrated itself as more efficient than the Suprematist organizational work. The Party took over the artistic labor—and organized it. In a certain way the Soviet state brought to its logical end the process of the organization of professional artistic labor that, according to Marx and
Engels, started already inside the bourgeois society. But at the same time another prediction by Marx and Engels was also realized. During the Soviet time the unofficial, non-professional, lay artistic activity emerged that, indeed, was practiced by members of the Soviet society among their other activities. This non-professional, lay art was non-organized but at the same time non-organizational—and even anti-organizational. In fact, it had no definite place inside the Soviet society—no definite purpose, no identifiable social role. This Soviet unofficial, some say dissident, art was a lay art that was not made for the art market or for the museums—but for a small circle of friends. Under these conditions to choose the role of a lay artist meant to choose no place, social absence (if you want, true Utopia). But precisely because of the absence of any explicit social, political, and economic context of non-official, lay art and its, if I can say so, zero social role and status—Russian unofficial art made the hidden, unconscious, everyday context of Soviet life visible. In a certain (namely, critical and analytical) sense unofficial Russian art was more Marxist than the Russian avant-garde: it turned the artist himself in a zero medium that manifested the “objective” context of his practice.

In his installations Ilya Kabakov manifests precisely this zero-status of the Russian non-official art during the Soviet time—and its social context. Kabakov starts again with the Black Square of Malevich. In the early 1970s Kabakov produced a series of albums under the common title “Ten Characters.” Each of these albums is a book of loose sheets depicting in images and words the counterfeit biography of an artist living on the margins of society, whose work was neither recognized nor entirely preserved. The images in the albums are to be interpreted as the visions of their artist-heroes. All the images are accompanied by texts commenting on them from the perspective of various friends and relatives of each artist. These lonely provincial artist-heroes can, of course, to some degree be seen as pseudonyms or alter egos of Kabakov himself. Nonetheless, the distanced and ironic treatment of these fictitious authors in Kabakov’s albums should by no means be taken as just simulated. Actually, he is constantly practicing a kind of oscillation between identification and non-identification with his heroes.

The artistic execution of the album images refers back to the conventional aesthetics that mark the typical illustrations found in Soviet children’s books—following almost seamlessly in the tradition of nineteenth-century illustrated books. This was a style that Kabakov fluently mastered. These somewhat nostalgic, out-dated aesthetics further emphasized that this was the work of lay artists who were striving to find expression for their modest, personal dreams in tranquil privacy beyond the reach of the official Soviet art and Western modernist and post-modernist art movements. Moreover, the comments made by spectators and added to these pictures offer evidence of the various misunderstandings to which any form of art is necessarily exposed—particularly in the eyes of its contemporaries. Yet at the same time, in the eyes of any well-informed viewer the works by these lay artists betray numerous parallels to the glorious history of the twentieth-century avant-garde. The references range from early surrealism to abstract art, pop art, and conceptual art. It is almost as though Kabakov’s heroes have accidentally stumbled upon modernist art—beyond the reach of its normative history. Their images are modern against their will; they are modern for their very ignorance of modernism. The final image in every album is a sheet of white paper announcing
the death of the hero. And each album concludes with several general résumés of the artist’s oeuvre, voiced by further fictitious commentators who, one presumes, reproduce the views of the art critics entrusted with the final evaluation of the artist’s legacy.

The first image in the first album of this series “In-the-Drawer-Sitting-Primakov” presents a black square that obviously refers to the Black Square of Malevich. This image is interpreted as image of blackness that a small boy sees when he sits in a drawer. On the following pages the drawer opens and the boy begins to see what was concealed from him by the Black Square. Here the role of the Black Square changes in a very radical way. The Black Square—the point zero of art—is not understood here any more as an effect of radical reduction of the whole visual world, as the black background of any vision that becomes visible at its zero point. Rather, the Black Square is interpreted here as a cover up, as an unpenetrable surface that hides a visible world behind it. However, this is not a Utopian world created by the artist but a world of everyday life—a real context that shows itself when the images that are produced by the artist’s imagination are removed. Kabakov’s hero has also gone through the point zero of art but he has found on the other side not the creative freedom but the “real” context of everyday existence. In fact, this interpretation of the Black Square is historically accurate: Malevich painted his first, original Black Square on a figurative painting—and the surface of the black square cracked along the shapes of the covered figures.

Kabakov’s first major installation in the West was also called “Ten Characters” (shown in 1988 in the Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, see Figure 9.5). The installation space of “Ten Characters” was made to look like a typical Soviet communal

Figure 9.5  Ilya Kabakov, Ten Characters (1988)
apartment where the former residents had left behind some nondescript rubbish which should really have been cleared away. Under the impression of this and many other Kabakov installations some critics understood Kabakov's art as depicting the reality of Soviet communal apartments when different families had to live together. However, the space of this and other Kabakov's installations is always an abandoned space. The artists who lived and worked in the communal apartment disappeared. One can see only the traces of their living presence and the context in which they spent their lives.

Kabakov's communal apartment is a metaphor of the museum—and at the same time a critique of the museum. It is a metaphor of the museum because every museum is a post-mortem communal apartment in which the artists are brought together—and doomed to remain together throughout their afterlife. But the traditional museum creates an artificial context for their coexistence. Kabakov tries to keep the memory of the real life context of the artistic practice. And it is precisely the zero point of art and the absence of the artist that makes its context visible and memorable.

The topic of abandoned space and absent artist is central for Kabakov's art. One can see this figure of disappearance already in the first installation that Kabakov made in Moscow, “Man who Flew into the Cosmic Space” (1985) (see Figure 9.6). This installation shows an apartment that was left behind by a hero who flew into the Cosmic space directly from his bed—accumulating Utopian energy that was necessary for such a flight by contemplating the Soviet posters that covered the walls of his apartment. He left behind these posters, his empty bed and the destroyed ceiling. One of the rooms of the installation “Ten Characters” is dedicated to an artist who disappeared in the white surface of the canvas that he was supposed to paint: the unpainted canvas and empty chair are left to see. Another room presents the garbage left by another character—obviously, also an artist—after his death. The garbage is sorted out and classified but there is no image of the former owner of this garbage. Thus, in Kabakov's work the strategy of self-reduction that was practiced by modernist art and found its culmination in Russian Suprematism is brought to its logical end. Not only do the things and their images disappear—the artist himself disappears without leaving any corpse behind. The body of work disappears together with the body of the artist himself. The only thing that remains from the artist is the scene of his disappearance.

It is not only the individual subject of the non-organized artistic work that disappears. The subjects of organized, collective work also disappear—and abandon their working place. Kabakov's enormous installation “We're living here” (Centre Pompidou, Paris, 1995) presented the deserted construction site of some gigantic future palace, of which all that now remains are the building's ruins and the makeshift, shabby huts that once housed the workmen. This palace was evidently intended by its builders to be a work of “high art;” their lives were dedicated to the creation of this sublime artistic edifice. But not much is left of the palace, and what remains holds little fascination for us viewers. However, what Kabakov instead presents as the actual works of art are the temporary, private, and humble lodgings once occupied by the construction workers, dwellings strongly reminiscent of arte povera installations. Besides this, we are also given the chance to behold the provisional clubs where the workmen spent their leisure hours and to appreciate them as modernist works of art.
Figure 9.6 Ilya Kabakov, *Man who Flew into the Cosmic Space* (1985)

So we understand that the builders of the palace are in fact artists—but artists against their will and beyond their intention.

Thus, Kabakov practices a reversal of the relationship between art and its context as it was established by the avant-garde. Avant-garde art could be seen as an attempt to reduce the existing context, reduce all the things and their representations to the point
zero—and, after crossing this point, to begin the creation of the new, artificial contexts. Kabakov repeats this strategy of reduction: his artists-heroes reduce everything, including themselves. However, after this act of self-reduction they do not start to function as active creators of the new world but definitely disappear from the world in which from the beginning they had no place. It is precisely this radicalized disappearance of art and artists that makes their context truly visible—and lets us discover and analyze their dependence on the real economic, political, social, and everyday conditions of their functioning. In fact, the fictional figures of self-reducing, disappearing modernist artists are from the beginning invented by Kabakov with the only goal to demonstrate the context of life and death. Not accidentally Kabakov speaks about his installations as “total installations”: only the self-reduction to zero let the context of abandoned life emerge in its totality. The radical disappearance of the artist in the point zero of art gives a possibility of presenting the context of art as a total context. The self-nullification in and through art is an illusion. But only the pursuit of this illusion makes visible the conditions of art—including the conditions of the possibility of this illusion itself.

Notes

A previous version of this chapter has been published in Charles Esche et al., *Utopia and Reality. El Lissitzky/Ilya and Emilya Kabakov, Textbook* (Eindhoven: van Abbemuseum, 2012), 5–18.


3 Malevich, *Sobranie Sochinenii*, vol. 1, 34.


5 Stirner, *The Ego and His Own*, 309.


Vladimir Friche, “Sotsiologiya iskusstva,” Gos. izdatelstvo (Leningrad, 1926), 204ff.

Marx’s Aesthetics in Mexico: Conceptual Art After 1968

Robin Greeley

In the aftermath of Mexico’s 1968 student movement and its vicious repression by the state, an urgent debate opened regarding the nature of Marx’s philosophy and its relationship to aesthetic production and political action. Deeply involved in wider deliberations throughout Latin America concerning the imbrication of art, social action and Marxism, artists and critics returned to the foundational texts of Marx from the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* to *Capital*, rereading them in light of the increasingly polarized political contexts of the post-1959 Cold War Americas and the related international crisis of Stalinist Marxism. In Mexico, theoretical explications of Marx, through concepts such as aesthetic “praxis,” “dialectic-subversive” art, and “arte no-objetual” proved foundational for an emerging set of artistic practices that sought to undo the pervasive hold that the Mexican state maintained over cultural policy. In turn, Marxist artists and critics sought to open a renewed politics of social collectivity that would resonate throughout Latin America, based neither on the bankrupt hegemonic model of revolutionary nationalism offered by the centralized state nor on the moribund Marxist–Leninist party model offered by the corporatized orthodox left.

This essay examines post-1968 Mexican conceptualism in relation to interpretations of key texts by Marx made by three prominent aesthetic theorists operating in Mexico: the Spanish exile philosopher, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, the activist philosophy professor, Alberto Híjar, and the Peruvian exile critic Juan Acha.¹ Sánchez Vázquez and Híjar undertook a return to Marx’s writings in the wake of Mexico’s 1968 student movement and the larger hemispheric repercussions of the Cuban Revolution and US regional interventionism. Acha, arriving in 1971, brought to the Mexican context a model of cultural activism inspired by dependency theory, by his encounters with French political thought in Paris in the wake of May 1968, and by Peruvian conceptualism’s militant anti-authoritarianism. This geopolitical situation prompted a reassessment of Marx, in all three cases, through the lens of an anti-imperialist, anti-authoritarian ideology critique that sought to re-articulate the relationship between aesthetics and politics outside the Stalinized framework of the official Mexican left. A second commonality was their urge to identify a specific “Latin American” aesthetics, especially against the United States.
Despite their shared objectives, however, Acha, Hija, and Sánchez Vázquez differed substantially in their interpretations of Marx. Acha allied his understanding of Marx to an anti-imperialist critique of the culture industry through what he called “arte no-objetual” (non-object-based art)—a theory of conceptual artistic practice aimed at transforming human consciousness above and beyond “even the most radical transformation of socioeconomic structures” promised by Marx. Hija, by contrast, rejected Acha’s focus on the culture industry in favor of a more purely Althusserian re-reading of Marx. Part of a widespread post-1968 turn throughout Latin America to the classic writings of the French Marxist Hija mounted a forceful critique of the role of the state in relation to civil society, the role of the symbolic in the constitution of systems of domination, and the aesthetic as a principal site of hegemonic ideology production and, therefore, a key site of class struggle. Sánchez Vázquez, in turn, heavily criticized the Althusserian model for its subordination of aesthetics to a structuralist model of ideology critique. Instead, he argued for art as a specific form of creative work with its own ethical and liberatory potential, and insisted on the deeply aesthetic character of Marx’s thinking. Against Hija’s Althusserian rejection of the early humanist Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts, Sánchez Vázquez asserted what he termed the “philosophy of praxis” running throughout Marx’s oeuvre from the early critique of consciousness to the later projects of socio-economic critique and social transformation. In relation to aesthetics, claimed Sánchez Vázquez, this model of praxis emphasized less art’s role as an ideological reflection of historical circumstances than its role as an active producer of new realities—a position that opened possibilities hitherto foreclosed in Mexico and Latin America to valorize vanguard forms of artistic practice through reference to Marx.

These debates played out forcefully in the conceptualist experiments of Mexico’s Grupos movement of the 1970s, as artists constructed a new aesthetic politics of collectivity that grew directly out of the 1968 student movement’s repudiation of Marxist–Leninism in favor of autogestión participatory democracy. Collectives such as the Taller de Arte e Ideología, Grupo Proceso Pentágono, Grupo Suma, Grupo Germinal, and No-Grupo tussled over the various interpretations of Marx put forward by Acha, Hija, and Sánchez Vázquez, even as all endorsed an intense critique of the validity of the autonomous art object. Works such as Hotel Marx (Grupo Proceso Pentágono, 1983), Export–Import (Taller de Arte e Ideología, 1977), and Montajes de Momentos Plásticos (No-Grupo, 1979–83), as well as group participation in the 10th Paris Youth Biennial (1977), the Frente Mexicano de Grupos Trabajadores de la Cultura (1978), and the Primer Coloquio Latinoamericano sobre Arte No-Objetual y Arte Urbano (1981) deconstructed Mexico’s traditional notion of art as object-based, redefining art as a collaborative social praxis grounded in gesture, event, idea, and critique, and the object as the materialization of those social engagements. Responding both to their immediate historical context and to international aesthetic debates, the Grupos linked these conceptual revisions to the rise of new political actors and new forms of citizenship. In so doing, conceptualism in Mexico and throughout Latin America prompted a foundational turn to the “aesthetico-political”—a discursive interaction between aesthetics and politics that transformed conventional definitions of both those categories.
I. A Marxian aesthetics for 1968

In 1983, Grupo Proceso Pentágono was invited to participate in a public commemoration of the centenary of Marx’s death. Held in that premier site of state cultural nationalism, the Palacio de Bellas Artes, the event was meant to be a solemn tribute by Mexico’s most illustrious Marxists. A panoply of speakers, including Sánchez Vázquez, Roger Bartra, and the venerable Luis Cardoza y Aragón, sought to impose an academic tone but were soon overwhelmed by shouts from the packed auditorium for less analysis and more action.\(^5\)

Pentágono, not wanting to contribute to the sacrosanct atmosphere of the event, staged their deliberately quirky *Hotel Marx* for the accompanying exhibition (see Figure 10.1). Inspired by a chance encounter with a hotel of that name, the group mounted an installation mimicking a room, out of the darkened window of which could be seen the glowing neon sign of the Hotel Marx. Cheap metal blinds, a shoddy folding table and chairs, and a multitude of beer and liquor bottles completed the ensemble. At the exhibition opening, Pentágono members seated themselves around the table ostensibly to discuss the grand German philosopher, but instead ended up tipsily praising the quality of a good mezcal.\(^6\) Verging on the iconoclastic, *Hotel Marx* signaled a sharp (if humorous) rupture with the cultural and political status quo that mirrored the divide between orthodox and younger Marxists evident in the catcalls from the auditorium floor during the commemoration. It was a divide rooted in the deep fractures within the Mexican left over how to interpret Marx in the aftermath of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre—the notorious state-ordered mass killing of students at a rally in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco neighborhood—and the state’s subsequent *guerra sucia* (dirty war) against its political opponents.

![Figure 10.1](Grupo%20Proceso%20Pentagono,%20Hotel%20Marx%20(1983).%20Fondo%20Grupo%20Proceso%20Pentagono,%20Centro%20de%20Documentacion%20Arkheia,%20MUAC,%20UNAM,%20Mexico)
Writing about the same 1983 centenary event at which Pentágono presented *Hotel Marx*, historian and literary critic Christopher Domínguez Michael identified 1968 as a turning point in Mexican Marxism, prompting “the birth of a Marxism” openly committed to a “socialist and democratic culture” at the national level “that function[ed] as an autonomous component of Mexican culture” outside the control of the state.7 Like many of the artworks produced by the Grupos, *Hotel Marx* flouted Mexico’s long-standing tradition of figurative political art, to address the repercussions of the Tlatelolco massacre through a conceptual paradigm that dismantled Mexico’s conventional categories of political aesthetics. The installation’s aesthetic confrontation disrupted the veneer of social inclusion proffered by the urbane institutional spaces of the Palacio de Bellas Artes, registering an attack on the symbolic spaces of national identity controlled by the state, and a breach of the nationalist discourse that had long positioned the dirigiste state as the benevolent “caretaker” of Mexico’s citizens.

The events of 1968, which served as a political baptism for many Grupos artists, revealed an intertwined set of political and economic crises that had been brewing for decades. The overwhelming emphasis on industrialization during the so-called “Mexican Miracle” of the 1950s and 1960s had reduced Mexico’s national viability solely to a question of economics at the expense of other forms of national integration and social justice. The Mexican corporatized left, with its high-religious faith in the Marxist–Leninist party system, proved woefully incapable of recognizing the mass rejection of a social structure that allied economic “progress” with a repressive state and a nepotistic, often corrupt political oligarchy. In response to these crises, new political actors emerged—students, guerrilla resistance movements, local grassroots organizations, artists’ collectives—actors inspired by Marx who could not be accounted for within the hierarchical structures of the orthodox Mexican left. For these new political actors, the problem of the state came urgently to the fore, along with contingent questions regarding democracy, citizenship, and forms of political participation. Concerns operated on two levels: a concrete historical analysis of the development of the nation-state was matched with an epistemological concern with the nature of the concepts used in such an analysis.

In artistic terms, 1968 precipitated a new investment in art’s social dimension and in a radical rethinking of the theoretical contours of a Marxian aesthetics. The Grupos movement broke with previous models of art and politics in a critique that intertwined aesthetic rupture with political rupture. The result was a new mode of artistic practice—collectivity—espoused as both an aesthetic praxis and a political principle. This in turn prompted a new understanding of the artwork not as an autonomous object, but as a type of praxis in which the material artistic product became the repository for a set of collective social engagements. “What will endure as [the Grupos movement’s] major proposal,” wrote Pentágono member Felipe Ehrenberg in 1985, is “the collectivization of artistic practice [as] a model for life” itself.8 In part, this meant revising Mexico’s prominent history of collective artistic production, embodied most powerfully in the muralism movement. Although innovative in the 1920s and 1930s, by the post-war period muralism had become thoroughly institutionalized under an increasingly authoritarian state that stripped it of its leftist social ideologies and historicized it in purely formal terms. Yet the Grupos also rejected the model represented by muralism’s
challengers, the “Ruptura” generation of the 1950s and 1960s. Ruptura artists had rebelled against muralism’s “sterile” nationalism and narrative-based social realism in favor of an inventive reappraisal of formal aesthetic procedures.9 Nevertheless, in the eyes of the Grupos, Ruptura efforts to revitalize artistic production could not overcome the movement’s subjective “bourgeois individualist” character.10 Against these models, Grupos artists reassessed Marx to reinvigorate the artwork as site of collective social-aesthetic praxis outside the orthodox Marxism of Mexico’s political parties and often in combative relation with state-sponsored cultural spaces, veering from a “Trojan horse” tactics of subversive infiltration to outright institutional rejection.11

II. Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez: Marx and the concept of art as creative work

The Grupos found a theoretical support for their inventive aesthetic practices in Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, whose reappraisal of aesthetics vis-à-vis Marx’s writings reopened the social dimension as a fundamental aspect of artworks and artistic practices. Conversely, he also postulated the aesthetic—the “sensual” in Marx’s language—as a crucial dimension of human social practice. Sánchez Vázquez arrived in Mexico in 1939, a refugee from the Spanish Civil War, and in 1959 was named professor of aesthetic philosophy at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), where his teaching ran sharply against the grain of mainstream pedagogy. A leading theorist of Marxist aesthetics in Mexico and throughout Latin America, Sánchez Vázquez had widespread influence in post-1968 art practice through his innovative rereading of Marx’s writings.

Sánchez Vázquez’s reassessment of Marx, principally elaborated in two key texts, Las ideas estéticas de Marx (1965) and La filosofía de la praxis (1967), was generated out of his preoccupation with the role of art in light of the widespread sense after the Cuban Revolution of an imminent transition to socialism across Latin America. Sánchez Vázquez’s core thesis asserted that Marx had propounded a concept of a revolutionary “praxis” defined as human activity aimed at radical social change that is simultaneously theoretical-reflexive and utilitarian-pragmatic, subjective and objective, humanist and scientific. This revolutionary praxis, contended Sánchez Vázquez, was best exemplified in art, defined as creative labor reducible neither to ideology nor to sociological “knowledge,” in which is “maintained that creative dimension that is negated in alienated labor.”12 Against capitalism’s relentless destruction of that imaginative drive, artistic production encapsulated the transformative character of human productive labor, the “human material activity that transforms the natural and social world” in order to make of it a human world.13

Returning to Marx’s early writings, Sánchez Vázquez asserted that the 1844 Manuscripts marked a turning point in the German philosopher’s elaboration of a materialist model of revolutionary change based in linking theory to the practical process of transforming reality. In opposition to the Stalinist dogmatism of official Marxism, the “anthropologizing” readings offered by Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, and Althusser’s rejection of the young Marx’s humanism, Sánchez Vázquez

Marx’s Aesthetics in Mexico
claimed that the Manuscripts developed a veritable “science of society and history.” Marx’s big breakthrough, he argued, was to understand the proletarian worker not primarily as a “revolutionary moved to struggle by the universal human character of his suffering,” but rather as “an agent of production” whose labor “transforms nature and creates a world of objects.” From the 1844 Manuscripts onwards, he wrote:

[P]roduction begins to take on a special significance for Marx, resulting not only from its economic [content] but more fundamentally from its philosophical content in the sense that for Marx, production is the self-production or self-creation of man. The role of production set out for the first time in the 1844 Manuscripts in the form of the economic-philosophical concept of alienated labour, was later to be elaborated into the fundamental premises of all human history.

This profound reframing of the human social condition in relation to production, Sánchez Vázquez maintained, allowed Marx to posit a dialectical antagonism between labor as a fundamentally creative act and labor as the locus of man’s alienation under capitalism. Tracing the theme of alienated labor as a “fundamental premise of all human history” from the young Marx of the 1844 Manuscripts through to his mature works, Sánchez Vázquez underscored Marx’s “conception of man as a practical worker-being who deploys his transformative activity within the framework of given social relations, and moves, by means of production, between these two poles: creation and alienation.”

The tension between creation and alienation, he insisted, was not simply an aside in Marx’s writings, but foundational to all of the German philosopher’s revolutionary thought:

From the moment in which Marx exposes man’s exploitation as a producer in capitalist society—first with the key concept of alienated labor and later with that of surplus value—the contradiction between capitalism and creation is displayed in all its depth. . . . For this reason, the problem of artistic creation must necessarily be elaborated as an essential aspect of [Marx’s] thought. Marx could not fail to address aesthetic and artistic questions—and he effectively does address them from his youthful works onward—for two reasons: a) to assert that capitalist production destroys the creative principle of human practical activity . . . b) in order to highlight the fact that the aesthetic relation of man with the world . . . responds to the human need to . . . externalize oneself, to affirm oneself materially as a human being.

Thus in Sánchez Vázquez’s view, Marx’s great break from German Idealism’s “illusory faith in the power of ideas” was not simply to propound a revolutionary praxis aimed at “the actual transformation of reality,” but also to lodge that praxis in the self-reflexive interaction, through production, of man with his surroundings. Quoting the Theses on Feuerbach, Sánchez Vázquez reiterated Marx’s words: “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the object, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not
as human sensuous activity, as practice."\(^{19}\) Production involved not only "what [human beings] produce [but also] how they produce . . . not only the production of material goods . . . but also man’s production of himself and of his social life."\(^{20}\) Marx’s model of praxis, as Sánchez Vázquez understood it, considered material engagement with the world to be that which secured the possibility of self-reflexive, critical thinking. Sánchez Vázquez thus underscored Marx’s observation in the 1844 Manuscripts that “A being which has no object outside itself is not an objective being.” And further: “a being without object is an unreal, non-sensuous thing, a product of mere thought, that is, of mere imagination, an abstraction.”\(^{21}\) Key to critical thinking, therefore, was humanity’s ability to bring the obdurate materiality of things into expressive correspondence with social aspirations: “Praxis requires a conscious activity not only at the outset but throughout the practical process, given that the material to be transformed constantly offers up new resistances.”\(^{22}\) This process, which Sánchez Vázquez labeled “essentially creative,” was directed outward towards the material world, but also aimed inward towards a self-reflexive awareness of man’s own subjectivity.\(^{23}\) In grappling with the recalcitrant materiality of things, human beings recognized themselves as cognizant subjects whose confrontation with the otherness of objects was what opened the potential for critical, conceptual thinking. Sánchez Vázquez underscored the importance of the productive material encounter, without which thought would become merely a reflection of itself, unhitched from the experiential world. Quoting The German Ideology, he argued that “it is a matter of explaining the formation of ideas from material practice,’ and not of ‘explaining practice from the idea.”\(^{24}\)

In Sánchez Vázquez’s view, this self-reflexive interaction with the material world was best exemplified in artistic praxis. Artistic production epitomized the more general transformative process through which human consciousness and human will toward social change are engendered and shaped in response to the concrete material conditions of existence. In theorizing aesthetic production, Sánchez Vázquez was deeply concerned with maintaining the indeterminate, dialectical nature of this process against those models that reduced art either to the pure expression of the artist’s intentions or to an art object divorced from the notion of human creative imagination: “The artistic product does not simply reproduce an experience existing prior to the practical process, when it was still without (artistic) form, but it shapes that experience itself.” In this regard, “the [art] object is not merely an expression of the subject; it is a new reality that transcends him.”\(^{25}\)

* * *

For Sánchez Vázquez, this return to the oeuvre of Marx, especially to the 1844 Manuscripts, opened three prominent avenues of critique. First, it enabled him to reject the Marxist–Leninist model of class struggle led by a revolutionary vanguard party and, in turn, to propagate an alternative to the Soviet orthodoxy that pervaded leftist discourse in 1940s and 1950s. In Mexico, this leftist orthodoxy was most prominently embodied in the Mexican Communist Party, and in Vicente Lombardo Toledano, the highly influential leader of the Marxist–Leninist Partido Popular Socialista, who displayed an “almost religious” belief in nationalist adhesion to the state—a position put irredeemably into crisis by the events of 1968.\(^{26}\) But this orthodoxy also
surreptitiously appeared in the writing of the legendary communist dissident, José Revueltas, who reiterated the necessity of a centralized proletarian vanguard party aimed at class struggle even as he recognized the “degeneration of Communist parties throughout the world” and the urgent challenges to the Leninist model posed by the 1968 student movement. Like Revueltas, Sánchez Vázquez was committed to the young Marx’s Hegelian emphasis on alienation and its transcendence through the reappropriation of man’s human essence. Sánchez Vázquez’s interpretation of the 1844 Manuscripts allowed him to draw from the Hegelian Marx the idea of “praxis” as creative work, by means of which man, as a social being, postulates his universal human essence. Yet whereas Revueltas used the 1844 Manuscripts to develop a theory of the dialectic as an anguished tension between reason and unreason, between consciousness and the unconscious, Sánchez Vázquez’s emphasis on creation elucidated the concept of praxis squarely in relation to socio-economic conditions of production, thereby tracing the idea of “creative labor” through the whole of Marx’s oeuvre from the 1844 Manuscripts to Capital.

Allied with this, Sánchez Vázquez propounded a fierce critique of the Soviet model of economic determinism and its adaption by the Mexican corporatized left. Soviet cultural policy came in for particular scorn: “the Zhdanov conception of socialist realism: art reduced to a political schematic, the search for an easy and direct communicability, a utilitarian-social concept of art, and therefore the subjection of aesthetic criteria to political criteria.” To speak of art as a direct “reflection” of objective reality, then, was to reduce it to a mere “translation or transcription” of economic and social life, leading to the “cruelest sociologism and ideologism.” Sánchez Vázquez, by contrast, argued incisively for a socially engaged aesthetics lodged in the relative autonomy of the superstructure: “When one speaks of... the reflection of reality in art, [that term] must pass from a general philosophical plane to another that is proper aesthetic. Only thus, as it takes on [its own] peculiar signification, can one speak of art as a form of knowledge.” But neither did Sánchez Vázquez advocate a model of art as an autonomous practice that could act a bulwark against the messy ideological conflicts of the social realm. Associated in Mexico first with the Contemporáneos’ anti-muralist turn toward the introspective and the subjective in the 1930s, then with Octavio Paz and his post-war support of a “contemplative” pictorial modernism exemplified by many of the Ruptura artists, this essentially “modernist-formalist” view remained focused on the art object as that which secured a self-reflexive poetics of aesthetic beauty. Speaking at the 1968 Congreso Cultural de La Habana, Sánchez Vázquez argued both against Marxist hardliners who dismissed avant-garde art as “decadent” and against bourgeois appropriation of avant-gardism in the name of aesthetic purity. “With his work,” contended Sánchez Vázquez,

the artist helps ensure and enrich aesthetic appropriation and, ultimately, man as creator. Hence the dual need to be revolutionary—that is, truly creative—in art and to dispel the illusion—fueled by the bourgeois ideologists—that the revolution ends there for the artist, and that his political and social commitment is incompatible with being revolutionary in the field of artistic creation.
Nor did Sánchez Vázquez align himself with the rise in Latin America of Althusserian ideology critique. Thus the third result of Sánchez Vázquez’s return to the early Marx—the Spanish émigré philosopher’s critique of Althusser—was perhaps the most controversial within Mexican conceptual art circles. While Sánchez Vázquez trenchantly opposed the dogmatic dialectical materialism (dia-mat) of orthodox Marxist-Leninism, he was no partisan of the resolutely anti-humanist structuralism of Althusser. Characterizing the French philosopher’s dismissal of Marx’s pre-German Ideology work as “an interpretation [that] burns all the bridges between” the young and the mature Marx, Sánchez Vázquez criticized Althusser for not according sufficient importance to the concept of praxis: “The defense by [Althusser] of the scientific character of Marxism has led [him] to relegate the subjective factor at work in praxis to a minor role, and thus to forget that Marxism . . . remains fundamentally a philosophy of the transformation of the world.” Against Althusser’s structuralist claim that social entities (whether individuals or classes) are produced by, rather than authors of, social formations, Sánchez Vázquez pitted his culturalist model of human creativity lodged in material experience as a fundamentally transformative social act. Yet while this culturalist model would deeply influence the aesthetico-political stance of the Grupos, it also proved in many ways insufficient as a specific address to the Grupos’ conceptual turn.

III. Conceptual aesthetico-politics—from Sánchez Vázquez to Híjar and Acha

Sánchez Vázquez’s rejection of both Marxist-Leninism and the traditional model of autonomous art became a fundamental part of the theoretical arsenal mobilized by the Grupos movement in the aftermath of 1968, even as the art collectives wrestled over what exact structural relationship of aesthetics to politics would best suit the context of Cold War Latin America: 1968 had made it clear not only that prior political theories could not simply be applied uncritically to events, but also that the events themselves had generated the viewpoint (the “intellectual grid” in Bruno Bosteels’s words) from which they could be understood. In this regard, 1968 gave rise to “new subjective forces” that could not be accommodated by extant theoretical mappings. In aesthetic terms, the Grupos operated out of a recognition that 1968 had breached the prevailing order of representation both politically and discursively. Grupos artists linked this epistemological upheaval in the sphere of political praxis to an equivalent upheaval in the realm of art and its institutions, centering their analysis along two principal axes: an anti-hierarchical collectivity as a new model of cultural and political citizenship antagonistic to institutional politics or party structures; and the artwork understood not as a discrete autonomous object, but as a transformative praxis embodying collective social processes.

Against rigid party hierarchies, Grupos artists elaborated new concepts of collectivity and an aesthetic activism based on the autogestión toma de conciencia [“development of consciousness”] experiments in direct democracy deployed by the 1968 students. “The student movement,” writes Bosteels, “propose[d] a series of spontaneous tactics,
such as the *mitines-relámpago* (literally ‘meetings that strike lightning’) or ‘exemplary actions,’ based on the structures of the group, or *grupúsculo*, as the principal detonating mechanism—a concept on which the model of the *foco* of Guevara’s guerrilla warfare left deep imprints, as did the Sartrean theory of the group in fusion.” The student movement also engaged in “various experiments in participatory democracy such as the *brigadas* or *asambleas* of the National Strike Council.” All these tactics had a profound effect on the Grupos movement. Pentágono member Víctor Muñoz recounts, for example, how his experience of the collective political organizing and poster production for the 1968 student brigades prompted in him a mental “catharsis” regarding the value of art as a collective enterprise: “One group would design; another would do the printing; another group would put the posters up in the streets, and another group would collect money to support these activities.” Poster production provided a platform for testing new forms of collectivity in which “transforming certain paradigms of art was tied to transforming society. “Aesthetics [was tied to] ethics,” argues Muñoz. Collectivity, in this model, implied not simply production, but a complete process involving theorizing, discussion, and debate, leading to the production and circulation of the art object, which in turn led to further collective engagement in which the artwork functioned as a “public vehicle for dialogue with people in the street.” Artistic collaboration and the collective social public were, for the first time, conceived as structurally interlinked.

Many collective art actions occurred literally in the street, in open rejection of conventional institutional spaces and systems of patronage. Adapting the tactics of the *mitin relámpago*, for instance, Grupo Proceso Pentágono used street performances such as the 1973 *El secuestro* [*The Kidnapping*] to meld art and activism (Figure 10.2). Like the 1968 student “hit-and-run political rallies,” *El secuestro* involved a small cadre spontaneously performing a rapid unauthorized action outside the Palacio de Bellas Artes in downtown Mexico City that commented overtly on state terrorism.

One Pentágono member, pretending to be a bystander, mingled with the street crowds outside the museum. Without warning, three attackers (the other members of the group) ran up to him, bound and gagged him, and dragged him away in front of a stunned crowd, mimicking the state’s method of forcibly disappearing its political opponents. Passers-by were abruptly confronted with a performance aimed at exposing the relationship between elite cultural institutions and the violence of the regime. Pentágono would then solicit reactions from the crowd, opening an impromptu dialogue directed toward activating urban citizenship through new circuits of information outside conventional media and political systems. Other productions, such as those of Grupo Germinal, included designing posters, banners, and performance works as part of mass popular democracy demonstrations, while Grupo Suma combined new graphic technologies such as Xerox with “found” objects from mass media and the urban environment to deconstruct the “visual codes of the ‘man in the street’” (Figure 10.3).

Art actions such as Grupo Março’s *Topographic Poem* (1980), in which urban inhabitants extemporaneously “wrote” the city, exploited the friction between subjective human imagination, the signifying properties of language, and the objective material facticity of the city to open up a self-reflective process of critical thinking vis-à-vis urban public space, and to reconfigure city spaces as arenas of
transformative civic engagement outside the regulatory structures of the state (Figure 10.4).

All of these actions liberally melded prototypically artistic genres of experience with those of the purportedly separate social arenas of political activism and quotidian urban life. Through constructing hybrid actions that could be understood as art performances, political militancy, or a combination of the two, Grupos artists brought the redefinition of politics prompted by 1968 to bear on a far-reaching redefinition of art. From TAI’s “dialectical-subversive” art actions, to Tepito Arte Acá’s theorizing of niero otherness as a cultural strategy of class and anti-imperialist urban resistance, to Grupo Mira’s comunicados gráficos and No-Grupo’s counter-information collaborations with the Colombian leftist guerrilla movement M-19, artistic production was reformulated as an interpenetration of politics and aesthetics that conceived of the “artwork” as action, social transformation, political dissent, information subversion, militant resistance—in short, as something other than art. What Híjar termed in 1974 the move “from art-object to art-concept” thus responded to the volatile socio-political circumstances of post-1968 Mexico and Latin America. But it also reworked a broad spectrum of international aesthetic encounters in light of the increasingly polarized politics of Cold War Latin America. Felipe Ehrenberg’s sojourn in England as a member of Fluxus allowed him to bring home to Mexico a keen aesthetic articulation of absurdist artistic performance, institutional critique, and leftist politics as a means of negotiating the ever greater national and regional antagonisms induced by the Cold
War. No-Grupo launched an assault on “serious” culture’s investment in the autonomous art object that reformulated the Duchampian and Warholian readymade in light of dependency theory (Figure 10.5). And Víctor Muñoz rethought Julio Cortázar’s unremitting linguistic incongruities to confront the interconnection between political crisis and representational crisis. In the face of “a traditional pictorial language in which we no longer believed,” one of Muñoz’s earliest performative acts was literally to “undo” painting—cutting his own canvases with a knife such that the destroyed strips fell to a heap on the gallery floor—a Fluxus-style act that formed the basis for Pentágono’s aggressive anti-aesthetics.

This critique of the art-politics nexus in turn opened new modes of social organizing and new models of citizenship. At the forefront of these was the Frente Mexicano de Grupos Trabajadores de la Cultura (Mexican Front of Cultural Worker Groups) founded in 1978, which sought to link “cultural workers” to “popular struggles for the revolutionary transformation” of Mexico and Latin America (Figure 10.6). “With the
founding of the Frente in 1978,” wrote Ehrenberg, “was forged the idea that ‘the collective’ effectively contained the key to building links with our society.” This collective aesthetic experience thereby became the basis of articulating new socio-political configurations. In part, this meant challenging the Mexican state’s long history
Figure 10.5 Melquiades Herrera for No-Grupo, *Esta Coca-cola, recién descubierta por el Pop Art* [This Coca-Cola, recently discovered by Pop Art . . .] (1979). Fondo No Grupo, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico
Figure 10.6  FMGTC, Exposición Arte Luchas Populares en México [Exhibition Popular Struggle Art in Mexico] (1979). Fondo Histórico MUCA, Centro de Documentación Arkheia, MUAC, UNAM, Mexico
of equating the cultural concept of “nation” with the political concept of “state” and its implications for models of civil society. Through participation in the Frente, Grupos artists sought to wrest the idea of culture away from the restrictive official models of citizenship embodied in Mexican cultural nationalism in order to propose new forms of citizenship outside the reach of institutional politics. Social transformation was thus “not merely a matter of changing political leaders; it was a much more fundamental problem with the state, with the social contract.” The Frente further extended this model to a reconceptualization of citizenship beyond national borders, encompassing the whole of the Americas, engaging in anti-imperialist acts of solidarity with Nicaragua, Cuba, Colombia, and agricultural unions in Arizona, among others.

Such tactics involved a critique not simply of the art object, but also of the entire cultural and political system. Sánchez Vázquez’s Marxian philosophy of praxis liberated the Grupos to broaden the concept of the aesthetic beyond the material end product of artistic labor (the art object), to propose an aesthetico-political address to the nature of the social order altogether. Yet to many Grupos artists, the Marxian critique opened up by Sánchez Vázquez was only a first step in connecting aesthetic theory to a renovated social praxis—one that itself needed interrogation. One prominent challenge came from the legacy of Althusser in the Americas. Another came from Juan Acha’s anti-imperialist critique of the culture industry and his efforts to define a “Latin American” aesthetic sensibility.

* * *

The Cuban Revolution had revealed the urgent need to rethink Latin American Marxism in light of the dramatic shifts in the region’s historical conditions. Through debates in Cuba and beyond on the value of Althusser’s challenge to orthodox Marxism, as well as the work of theorists such as Alberto Híjar in Mexico, Ernesto Laclau in Argentina, and the Chilean Marta Harnecker, Althusser’s structuralist critique powerfully influenced much of the Latin American left of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, fostering the establishment within Western Marxism of a theoretical discourse specifically attuned to the realities of Latin America. The French philosopher’s theories of ideology and ideological state apparatuses were widely used to analyze authoritarian governments across the Americas, while his hermeneutic method of historical materialism opened alternatives to humanist interpretations of Marx such as Sánchez Vázquez’s and to the strict economic determinism of orthodox Marxist–Leninism.

Híjar, labeled “the first ‘Althusserian’ in Mexico,” was instrumental in bringing the French philosopher to the Mexican left at the same moment as the eruption of the political and economic crises of 1968. Through the 1960s UNAM seminar “Curso Vivo de Arte” devoted to studying Marxist aesthetics, Híjar and his colleagues read Marx in light of French structuralism, delving into everything from Althusser to Macherey, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Barthes. The emergence of the student movement beginning in 1966, Híjar notes, converted the Curso Vivo into a vital workshop for social change beyond the confines of academia, and in 1975 the seminar spawned the collective Taller de Arte e Ideología (TAI), which united students of sociology, architecture, political science, theater, cinema, and the visual arts to reinterpret Marx through the lens of Althusserian ideology critique. This, in turn, was bound up in
the task of redefining the meanings and fields of operations of both “art” and “politics.”

TAI’s first redefinition of the art–politics relationship occurred in the very makeup of the group itself, whose members were primarily philosophers, engineers and political scientists, with only a smattering of visual artists—a configuration that from the start implied a conceptualist reformulation of the notion of art. “TAI was able to perform in the arts arena,” writes Shifra Goldman, “because of the exceedingly flexible territory granted practitioners by pop and conceptual art.”47 The group’s first endeavor, Híjar notes, was an Althusserian “aesthetic reading of the first chapter of Capital” as part of TAI’s aim to transform “the conditions of our own structural dependency in [late] capitalism” through “ideological struggle.”48 The TAI’s reading of Capital “resulted in an aesthetic exercise of discovering the clarity and rigor of that exemplary theoretical discourse” and in revealing art as simultaneously an “ideological crystallization” and as having “a value beyond that of ideologies, as described by Marx in A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.”49 Subsequent TAI efforts to connect aesthetic theory with social praxis included counter-information tactics of mass media critique, support of various workers and peasant unions that mixed agit-prop with direct public participation, and, internationally, protests against the Chilean military coup and the US war in Vietnam, and collaborations with the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) in Argentina, and with the revolutionary governments of Cuba and Nicaragua.

TAI merged this activism with an Althusserian critique of art and its institutions as “ideological state apparatuses” that did not reflect society so much as produce it. TAI understood culture, therefore, as a key site of dominant ideology production and thus as a key site of resistance and critique. Art’s ability to contest ideological formations (that is, to reveal the representational bases of subjects’ imaginary relationship to their real conditions of existence, in Althusser’s famous definition of ideology) depended, according to TAI, on understanding the viewer as a subject constructed by structures of representation, and the artwork as a potential means of revealing the ideological basis of those structures. Yet for Sánchez Vázquez, this Althusserian model proved unable to concretize a militant aesthetico-political praxis.50

This face-off between Sánchez Vázquez’s humanist Marx and Híjar’s Althusserian “scientific” Marx reflected larger debates within Latin American Marxism regarding the character and form of revolutionary praxis. These surfaced, for instance, as antagonisms within the Frente over the relationship of aesthetics to ideology critique and political organizing. Frente artists sought to transform art into a set of heteronomous activities defined outside and against those conventionally associated with art and cultural institutions. Yet this often clashed with a continued need for their work to be legitimated as art, whether by extant cultural institutions such as the Paris Youth Biennial and the National Art Salon or by the leftist political organizations with which the Grupos allied themselves. Tensions also appeared within the logic of particular groups and practices. Híjar, for example, continually framed TAI’s production—which ostensibly rejected not only the orthodox cultural tactics legitimated by the state but also often the attention to formal aesthetic procedures privileged by other Grupos—in relation to Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros. By claiming TAI’s direct lineage from Siqueiros’s concept of “dialectical-subversive” art, Híjar positioned TAI as a
continuation of Mexico’s history of militant aesthetics rather than as a break with it.\(^5\) That the visual tactics of past generations of artists such as Siqueiros had not only proven largely unadaptable to post-1968 conditions, but also that these had been coopted by the Mexican state, generated substantial friction within the Frente.\(^52\)

* * *

While Híjar and Sánchez Vázquez battled over the renewed relevance of Marx in the aftermath of 1968, the Peruvian-Mexican critic Juan Acha turned to the Marx of the _Grundrisse, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy_, and _Capital_ to theorize the tense relationship between avant-garde art and consumer culture. Acha mobilized Marx to argue for the dialectical interweaving of production, distribution, and consumption in determining the transformative effects of artworks. Quoting the _Grundrisse_, Acha noted that “[i]n distribution, society mediates between production and consumption in the form of general, dominant determinants.”\(^53\) Distribution, in Acha’s reading of Marx, “includes circulation and exchange” and thus formed the crucial link that ties production to consumption; distribution and circulation, therefore, were an essential component of capitalism’s continual expansion.\(^54\) Acha again referenced the _Grundrisse_ to make his point: “A precondition of production based on capital is therefore the production of a constantly widening sphere of circulation.”\(^55\) Acha’s structural vision, via Marx, of the production–distribution/circulation–consumption dialectic underwrote his increasingly virulent critique of the fetishization of the material in object-based art and his concomitant turn, in the late 1960s, towards a recognition of Latin America’s disadvantaged position vis-à-vis world capitalism, and toward conceptual art as a critique of that marginalized condition.

Culminating in his theory of “no-objetualismo,” Acha advanced a militant Marxist analysis of art that mounted a critique of Latin America’s neo-colonial peripheral status within a world economy dominated by the US culture industry. Although Acha had begun reading Marx in the 1960s (especially through Eastern bloc texts on Marxist aesthetics), his involvement intensified through his encounters with French structuralist and Situationist thinking during his 1969 sojourn in Paris, his commitment to Latin American conceptualism’s critique of the autonomous art object, and his participation in Mexican debates regarding art and politics from 1972 onward. As Gustavo Buntinx documents, Acha’s extended tour of Europe in 1969 marked his rejection of the developmentalist discourse he had previously favored and his turn towards a Marxist dependency theory model of underdevelopment.\(^56\) The resulting 1970 essay, “Vanguardismo y subdesarrollo” (“Avant-gardism and Underdevelopment”), argued that the gaping divide between advanced capitalist nations and Latin America’s archaic “Third World” socio-economic systems was not simply an accident of history, but was structurally _produced_ by the unequal integration of underdeveloped nations into a global mass consumer society enforced by the West.\(^57\) Acha would later argue even more pointedly that post-war capitalist mass media had “invaded” Latin America, disrupting the region’s search for an independent cultural identity and “tighten[ing] the bonds of our cultural dependency.”\(^58\)

In this context of imposed dependency, asserted Acha, the “presence of the artistic avant-garde in underdevelopment is not only legitimate, but also indispensible.”\(^59\)
Latin America, therefore, the avant-garde’s job was not to “catch up” to metropolitan discourses emanating from New York or Paris, and still less to produce autonomous artworks isolated off from the social realm. Rather, it was to reveal the structures of the region’s underdevelopment as a function of its historical insertion into the structures of the global culture industry, and to “propose certain corrections.” In arguing thus, Acha recuperated for Latin American aesthetic production dependency theory’s socio-economic challenge to Cold War capitalism’s neo-imperialist project.

Fleeing the Alvarado dictatorship in Peru, Acha arrived in Mexico in 1972, where he became deeply involved in debates regarding the definition of a specific “Latin American” culture. Alongside intellectuals such as Néstor García Canclini, Mirko Lauer, Rita Eder, Aracy Amaral, Frederico Morais and others, Acha rejected the model based on what Canclini would call “the fundamentalism of Macondismo” that “freezes the ‘Latin American’ as a sanctuary of premodern character and sublimes this continent as the place where social violence is haunted by desire.” Against the predominance of the poetic, metaphoric criticism of figures like Octavio Paz, Acha and his fellow critics mounted an anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist theory of continental identity that affirmed a Latin American cultural perspective against Euro-US dominance, and promoted strategies for making art socially relevant.

It was within these larger debates regarding the definition of a “Latin American” cultural sensibility that Acha put forward his theory of “no-objetualismo,” resulting in his organizing a major international conference on the topic in Medellín in 1981, where he presented his seminal essay, “Teoría y práctica no-objetualistas en América Latina” (“Non-objectual Theory and Practice in Latin America”). Appropriating Duchamp’s critique of the art object, non-objectualism politicized it as a structural critique of First World imposition of so-called “modern” (that is, contemporary US) values on purportedly “backward” societies through a combination of mass media spectacle, consumerism, and brute force. As the inheritor of the Duchampian ready-made’s critique of object fetishization under capitalism, argued Acha, non-objectualism revealed capitalism’s duplicitous (“doble juego”) promotion of “pure” art while simultaneously subjecting all aesthetic concerns to the culture industry. In addition to its critical stance, non-objectualism polemicized new forms of aesthetic production. “What is important now,” contended Acha,

is process or action, and not the product in a predetermined format. The process consists in inserting artistic experiences in every human effort, work or act. . . . Art ceases to be an end in itself, and becomes instead a medium, whether of political or countercultural preoccupations. This is when non-objectualisms emerge, whose target of attack is the fetishization of the object.  

Non-objectualism recast dependency theory’s economic model, to theorize such politicized, anti-aesthetic practices as those of No-Grupo and Grupo Proceso Pentágono that dismantled conventional categories of both sculpture and political art in Mexico. While Pentágono openly bridged art and politics, No-Grupo envisioned the field of aesthetics itself as politicized, as offering a powerful point of subversive critique of the entire system of representation in both aesthetic and political senses.
Foregrounding irreverent humor and the absurd as a quintessentially Mexican “form of survival,” No-Grupo reconceived artistic production as the integration of aesthetics and politics, and the “artwork” as a set of renegade social and performative actions aimed at exploding from within the myth of the artist-genius and the autonomous artwork. Labeled “Montajes de Momentos Plásticos” (“Montages of Plastic Moments”), these included “kidnapping” artist Gunther Gerzso, using Ruptura artist José Luis Cuevas as a “pretext” for making art, and (in a Duchampian gesture with a Mexican twist) patenting the taco as a weapon of “cultural penetration.”

No-Grupo’s participation in the 1981 First Colloquium of Non-Objectualism, organized by Acha in Medellín, gave the group the opportunity to concretize these practices around the concept of “arte no-objetual” with which they had been experimenting for some time. “Non-objectualism,” argued No-Grupo member Maris Bustamante, “identified a distinct dimension [of cultural practice] that altered the traditional circuit of art constituted by the subject, the object, production, distribution, and consumption.” However, it was in No-Grupo’s collaboration with the Colombian leftist guerrilla movement, M-19, that their explorations of the boundaries between politics and art—and their invocation of Marx—took its most radical form. Impressed by accounts of M-19’s having stolen the sword of Simón Bolívar (an act which No-Grupo considered highly significant in aesthetico-political terms), No-Grupo made contact with M-19 militants who invited the artists to collaborate on the “artistic-political” project, Agenda Colombia 83. The printed agenda—less an autonomous art object than an aesthetic materialization of militant political dissent, counter-information actions, and transformative social practices—brought together the graphic arts contributions of forty artists, as well as texts such as Juan Acha’s “La producción artística antes de la Revolución” (“Artistic Production Before the Revolution”), and was distributed throughout Colombia, Latin America, and Europe. Bustamante contributed a humorous twist on Marx’s famously bearded portrait, reformulating his image and the Communist Manifesto’s famed rallying cry into a clarion call for a militant international women’s movement (Figure 10.7). More subtly, Bustamante positioned the German philosopher to mimic the pose of Duchamp’s wry L.H.O.O.Q. Marx holds his feminized hands folded demurely in the pose of the Mona Lisa; the background sketches out the landscape of Leonardo’s masterwork. But Bustamante has wildly expanded the delicate mustache and goatee of Duchamp’s Mona Lisa into Marx’s extravagantly bushy facial hair. What seems at first an absurd, even inconsequential gesture is nevertheless part of No-Grupo’s relentless upending of conventional appropriations of Marx and Marxism, and a determined rupturing of the extant order of aesthetic representation as itself a political act. Marx thus acts as a fulcrum for a critique of object fetishism, for a revamping of the historical avant-garde in light of Latin America’s economic and political conditions, and for a feminist revision of Marx’s own socio-economic theories. More than this, however, his representation here signals an evasion of the status quo—whether the Mexican state’s claims to have institutionalized the revolution, the tendency of Latin America’s leftist guerrilla movements to relegate gender issues to a secondary plane, or the rampant tendency of capitalism to commodify even Marx—precisely in order to reveal the failures of that status quo to articulate a functional relationship between its structures and the subjective energies of emerging social forces.
IV. Marx and the aesthetico-political today

In his 2012 book, *Marx and Freud in Latin America*, Bosteels remarks that “it is in Mexico that the legacy of 1968 is still open.” To make his point, Bosteels compares Mexico to France: “Unlike what happened in France, where May 1968 almost immediately received a now-canonical series of interpretations […], in Mexico it
seems as if the experience of 1968 had, by force, to pass through more experimental forms of aesthetic representation. Grounded in the very structural unrepresentability of 1968 (the events of which, until recently, were known only through hearsay and rumor), these aesthetic experiments functioned at “the outer edges of representation where language touches upon an impossibility,” where a nascent discursive space, lodged between the political and the aesthetic, was discernible. “Everything that previously would have been excluded from the domain of politics proper for being frivolous, adventurous, trivial, fictitious, or merely anecdotal” came to play a strategic role in prying open the dominant order of representation.

Bosteels principally treats emergent literary forms, but his observations hold true for the conceptualism of los Grupos and their legacy. As I’ve shown, the Grupos project depended in large part on a re-reading of Marx, aided by theoreticians Sánchez Vázquez, Híjar, and Acha, to undergird a discursive interaction between aesthetics and politics that altered the epistemological conditions of both categories. Theirs was not merely a project of praising open institutionalized cultural politics or exposing the false claims to democracy of the repressive state; rather, it was to pressure extant conditions as a means of prompting new configurations of what could be said, seen, and thought; of imagining new, unanticipated horizons of the possible. This deliberate dismantling of the discrete categories of “art” and “politics” conceptualized aesthetics not as ancillary to productive human engagement with the world, but as central to it. That “sensual” (in Marx’s terminology) act of experiencing differently, proposed by re-readings of Marx in the aftermath of 1968, has once again urgently come to the fore today in Mexico. As I write this essay, the country is roiled by the dramatic breakdown of the social compact between the state and its citizenry, emblematized in the massive protests against the forced disappearance and probable murder of forty-three students. The plight of the Ayotzinapa students, who have come to represent the more than 150,000 dead as a result of narco violence, government corruption, and its imbrication in organized crime (and not a little supported by militarized Mexico–US drug, immigration, and trade policies), has sparked a crisis of representation manifestly reminiscent of the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre. In turn, citizen activists have unleashed new aesthetico-political forms aimed at forcing open the schism revealed by this crisis, blurring the lines between “art” and “politics” once again with the intent of effecting structural social change. Just as politics is always involved with the perceptual image of power relations, so too, the Ayotzinapa protests remind us, do aesthetic concerns return us unfailingly to questions of participation, social inclusion, and equality. The aesthetico-political lessons derived from re-reading Marx in the aftermath of 1968 could not be more relevant today.

Notes
José Revueltas, “Acerca de la autogestión, de la Universidad y del Movimiento,” in México 68: Juventud y revolución (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1978), 105–84. The Grupos movement involved over a dozen different artist collectives. For more information, see De los grupos, los individuos: artistas plásticos de los grupos metropolitanos (Mexico City: INBA, 1985).


Hermann Bellinghausen, “Marx para quién?” Nexos (June 1, 1983).

Víctor Muñoz, email to author January 19, 2015; Felipe Ehrenberg, email to author May 8, 2015.


Felipe Ehrenberg, “En busca de un modelo para la vida,” in De los grupos los individuos, n.p.


Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, Las ideas estéticas de Marx (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1965), 44.


Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, El joven Marx: Los Manuscritos de 1844 (Mexico: UNAM, 2003), 284.


Sánchez Vázquez, Las ideas estéticas de Marx, 49.

Sánchez Vázquez, The Philosophy of Praxis, 129.

Sánchez Vázquez, Las ideas estéticas de Marx, 55–56. Italics in original.

Sánchez Vázquez, The Philosophy of Praxis, 261.

Sánchez Vázquez, The Philosophy of Praxis, 201.


Roger Bartra, “¿Lombardo o Revueltas?” *Nexos* no. 54 (June 1982).


See Bruno Bosteels, “Hegel in Mexico: Memory and Alienation in the Posthumous Writings by José Revueltas,” *South Central Review* 21 (3) (Fall 2004): 48–49.

Sánchez Vázquez, “Los problemas de la estética marxista,” 96. Sánchez Vázquez refers to the Zhdanov Doctrine of 1946, adopted as official Soviet cultural policy, which mandated that artists had to conform to the Soviet party policy of socialist realism.

Sánchez Vázquez, “Los problemas de la estética marxista,” 33, 32.

Sánchez Vázquez, *Las ideas estéticas de Marx*, 33. In Sánchez Vázquez’s eyes, the Cuban Revolution’s early years represented the actualization of this emancipatory aesthetic project.


Víctor Muñoz, author interview (Mexico City, September 20, 2013).


Declaración del Frente Mexicano de Grupos Trabajadores de la Cultura (February 5, 1978), in CENIDIAP archives, Mexico City.


Víctor Muñoz, author interview (Mexico City, September 20, 2013).


Goldman, *Dimensions of the Americas*, 133.


Alberto Hiñar, email to author (May 20, 2015).

51 See 30 años 30. *Herederos teóricos y espacios estéticos: David Alfaro Siqueiros y Alberto Híjar* (Mexico City: CENIDIAOP, 2004). Híjar also has posited a militant agency through biographical recourse to his own credentials as a Marxist radical who was imprisoned and tortured by the Mexican state for his role in the 1968 student movement, and who has participated in other Latin American revolutionary struggles.

52 Ehrenberg, “En busca de un modelo para la vida;” Víctor Muñoz interview.


54 Acha, *El arte y su distribución*, 12.


60 Acha, “Vanguardismo y subdesarrollo,” 19.

61 Néstor García Canclini, *Consumidores y ciudadanos* (México: Debolsillo, 2009), 110.


64 Maris Bustamante, personal communication (February 2012).


Filming Capital: On Cinemarxism in the Twenty-first Century*

Sven Lüticken

In memory of Allan Sekula

If there is one element that can be found in all forms of Marxian aesthetics, it is—in Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s words—the promise of “an aesthetic which is not limited to the sphere of ‘the artistic.’”¹ In his mature work Marx reformulated essential questions from idealist aesthetics, revolving around the relation between form and content and between concretion and abstraction, in social and economical terms, or in terms of “real abstraction.” Brecht’s famous remark from the 1931 Dreigroschenprozess, that a photograph of the Krupp or AEG factories does not really say anything about their mode of functioning, picks up on the aesthetic dimension in Marx’s analysis of capital.² A few years earlier, in 1928, Sergei Eisenstein stated that the stock exchange should not be represented by an image of a stock exchange, as in Fritz Lang’s Dr Mabuse, der Spieler, but by a thousand little details, connected through a dialectical montage.³

Capitalism presents us with a constant aesthetic challenge; while the movements of finance capital seem to be beyond representation, labor could theoretically be represented, but often is not. The cinema, in particular, has occluded labor. If, as Harun Farocki has noted, the history of cinema starts with a “sortie de l’usine,” throughout its history film has not been “drawn to the factory and [but] even repelled by it. Films about work or workers have not become one of the main genres, and the space in front of the factory has remained on the sidelines.”⁴ What is true of the space in front of the factory is doubly so of its interior, which has largely remained hidden by Brecht’s inexpressive facades.

In the eternal debate about the exact nature of the relation between “early Marx” (still romantic and aesthetic) and “mature Marx” (hard-boiled, economic), Marcuse’s position is noteworthy: in arguing that “the writings of 1844–45 must be read as if they find their theoretical (and practical) place and function after Capital,” Marcuse emphasizes that “they would be an essential part of the projected transition from capitalism to socialism.”⁵ It is in these early texts that “Marx develops the notion of a non-alienated mode of production, of an ‘aesthetic’ construction of the object world, and of individual property

* A much shorter first version of this chapter appeared as ”The Making of Labour: The Movie” in Fillip 18 (Spring 2013), 122–27, 144–45. Some passages on films and artworks have been adapted from my previous writings on the artists in question.
Marcuse maintains that these notions were in no way obviated by the economic analysis of *Capital*; in fact, the latter was in the service of ultimately realizing the former, which “find their place, structurally, *after Capital*, not merely because they convey the image of socialist man, but also because they presuppose Marx’s full analysis of capitalist society.” There is, however, a very real sense in which *Capital* itself is not just a preparation for a future emancipation of the senses, but is itself an exercise in the aesthetics of political economy.\(^8\)

In 1842, Marx studied Charles de Brosses’s classical treatise on African fetishism, a notion he also encountered in Hegel.\(^9\) Fetishism denoted a state of religion and of culture before the emergence of art properly speaking; a stage lower than idolatry, before humans formed matter, when they worshiped—according to De Brosses—random objects. For Hegel, consequently, fetishism had no place in the history of art, and a place in the *prehistoric* of religion at best.\(^10\) However, the fetish’s place outside the domain of “art proper” points precisely to an aesthetic problem that Hegelian idealism could address only indirectly—the problem of objects that appear to follow an obscure logic, that stand out from the natural world but that do not exhibit the “*sinnliches Scheinen der Idee*” (the sensuous appearance of the Idea): they are not the spiritualized subject-objects or artistic symbols on which idealist aesthetics focused. When the “mature” Marx polemically applied the notion of fetishism to the commodity and its “theological whims” in *Capital*, he addressed an issue that is as aesthetic as it is political: while the value of commodities is determined by the labor invested in them, this labor does not “show up” in the object, whose price appears to be determined by its “social relationships” with other commodities.\(^11\)

It took the extended analysis of *Capital* to make legible the workings of capitalism, and to make them *visible* would obviously require a comparably extensive undertaking. The closest historical cognate to this project in the art of Marx’s own day was the realist novel, with its narrative panoramas of bourgeois society. The 1920s and 1930s would see the great debate between Lukács’s insistence on the continuing validity of realism for any socialist aesthetic, and the avant-garde’s critique of any belief in the representation of a predetermined reality through its development of new forms, media, and modes of production and distribution. In recent decades, Fredric Jameson has placed both realism and modernism in a historical sequence—in which modernism is in turn followed by post-modernism—that mirrors successive stages of capitalism and is marked by a progressive abstraction from the real. If, in the age of bourgeois realism, monetary equivalence had “announced and provoked a new interest in the properties of objects,” by the early twentieth century the rule of exchange value resulted “in a withdrawal from older notions of stable substances and their unifying identifications.”\(^12\)

Finally, post-modernism stands for the triumph of a financialized capitalism and “a play of monetary entities that need neither production (as capital does) nor consumption (as money does)," suggesting:

[A] new cultural realm or dimension that is independent from the former real world, not because as in the modern (or even the romantic) period culture withdrew from the real world into an autonomous space of art, but rather because the real world has already been suffused with culture and colonized by it, so that it has no outside in terms of which it could be found lacking.\(^13\)
However, it would be more in keeping with Jameson’s overall analysis to say not—in somewhat Baudrillardian terms—that the world “has been colonized” but that is subjected to ongoing processes of colonization, extraction, and accumulation, which produce uneven effects and social antinomies. When Jameson analyzes recent films in terms of what he terms “cognitive mapping”—a project recently taken up by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle—he focuses precisely on film’s power to chart aspects of this conflictuous reality of uneven development, whether by “First World” or “Third World” filmmakers.  

My focus, too, is on film. In analyzing a number of more or less recent film and video art projects, I discuss their ways of representing or mapping aspects of a reality that melts into ever thinner air, but I also foreground the status of the films themselves as commodities, and the productive relations and modes of distribution that enable them, and that are in turn enabled by them. To the extent that they qualify as aesthetic practice, such cinematic essays do not trace lines only by showing (for instance) how goods are shipped across the world, but also through their own ways of coming into the world, and of moving through it.

I. The productive logic of montage

One of the most wide-ranging (and certainly the most monumental) of these works is Allan Sekula and Noël Burch’s 2010 feature-length film, The Forgotten Space, which is subtitled “a film essay” (see Figure 11.1). In the 1960s, co-director Noël Burch had helped to (re)introduce and develop the notion of the essay film, pitted against both the feature film (Spielfilm) and the conventional documentary. Burch states:

I set the essay film against ‘documentary’ in the classical sense, that supposedly objective rendering of reality, my bad objects were Flaherty, Grierson and the GPO. An essay film was about getting across ideas.

Figure 11.1 Allan Sekula and Noël Burch, The Forgotten Space, 2010, still
In the case of *The Forgotten Space*, the ideas come largely from Sekula’s work: the film in question is a continuation of *Fish Story* by other means. This also means that discussions of the film are often somewhat skewed when it comes to authorship: Sekula’s contribution seems easier to pin down than Burch’s.

Like Sekula’s photo essay *Fish Story* (1989–1995), *The Forgotten Space* focuses on ocean transport and the labor conditions it entails. As a covert filmic interpretation of *Capital*, it is necessarily an essay on abstraction—on the reality of abstraction as embodied, in this instance, by the shipping container. *The Forgotten Space* is, as Sekula’s voice-over puts it, “the unlikely story of a steel box.” The minimalist boxes are shown in various situations: on deck, on endless trains traversing the countryside, being carted around in a fully automated port. Accompanied by Riccardo Tesi’s accordion on the soundtrack, the latter scene becomes a veritable *ballet mécanique*. Containerization, which had triumphed by the 1970s, mean that the physical labor needed for the loading and unloading of commodities was drastically reduced; harbors became mechanized and the ocean and its ports became a “forgotten space” while capitalism prided itself on its “dematerialized” reinvention in the age of information technology. *The Forgotten Space* takes a long hard look at the container as a physical agent of abstraction, obscuring use value and emphasizing exchange value by turning disparate qualities into measurable qualities—and transforming labor, life, and entire communities in the process.

The film originated after the turn of the century, when Sekula was asked by SKOR—a Dutch foundation for public art—to document the upheavals that accompanied the planning and construction of the Betuwelijn, a new train line connecting the all-important port of Rotterdam with the hinterland. The film’s first part, “Phoenix and Mammoth,” reflects the film’s origins in attempting to home in on the dubious nature of this project, for which alternatives (especially river barges) were readily available, and which never lived up to its alleged potential. As an autonomous reality—a line of flight isolated as much as possible from the surrounding countryside—the Betuwelijn stands for an increasing separation between lines of transport, on the one hand, and their context, on the other; they cut through spaces and communities without connecting to them or offering employment. From Holland, the film embarks on a global itinerary, with long segments focusing on California, Hong Kong, and Shenzhen in the Pearl River Delta, before returning to Europe for an acerbic exposé on Bilbao and its Guggenheim branch—that sublimated container for blue-chip art.

In between these segments, Sekula and Burch portray the Korean/Indonesian crew of a container ship, driving home the importance of another American innovation, the “flag of convenience,” which allows for the bypassing of Western labor law. The film’s prologue and epilogue are odes to the Belgian village of Doel, slated for demolition because of the expansion of the port of Antwerp. While *The Forgotten Space* mourns the destruction of old forms of life and old communities, at times quite rhetorically, it should not be seen as an exercise in nostalgia. Instead, the film opens the effects of containerization on societies open to questioning by suggesting that the transformations we see are not natural processes but the result of political and processes; hence, processes that can be changed. The film is too complex to be brushed aside as a dated attempt to present contemporary society as representable, to naturalize the abstract and immaterial. Far from denying
that contemporary capitalism differs from that of Marx’s day, the film focuses on the container as an abstract concretization of economic flows.

It is not particularly surprising that an unashamedly Marxian film starring metal boxes would have spent a long time in development hell, during which the directors and SKOR tried to find co-producers and secure funding. As a consequence of this, the film on the screen is not quite the one that was envisaged in early treatments and scripts. One element that disappeared was the *Leitmotif* of a Disney Winnie-the-Pooh doll that would appear in various contexts, from its consumption in Holland to its fabrication in China. The disneyfied bear would have given the containers’ content an anthropomorphic face: the abstract box would have opened up and revealed just what kind of commodity it contains. In the finished film, the box remains a hermetic, modernist volume—though this nonhuman protagonist is joined by (and at times eclipsed by) a human supporting cast that ranges from Dutch farmers and technocrats to Indonesian sailors and young female workers in Shenzhen—migrants from the countryside who flocked to the expanding city.

In Peter Osborne’s words, “the productive logic of film is the productive logic of the work of art in the twentieth century.” If, among the great Marxian aestheticians of Brecht’s generation, Lukács always remained imprinted on the novel, both Adorno and Benjamin consequently charted the role of film in capitalist production and its deeply ambivalent emancipatory and revolutionary potential. However, what of the early twenty-first century, when celluloid has gone the way of the dodo and film financing, production, distribution, and consumption are all undergoing critical changes? In its form, *The Forgotten Space* seems to defiantly classicist, a lumbering beast of a feature film—far less adapted to the survival of the fittest than the containers it follows. By contrast, Alexander Kluge’s 2008 project, *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike*, seems almost over-adapted to the productive logic of the present.

Kluge’s *Nachrichten* revisits Eisenstein’s aborted 1927–28 plan for a film version of Marx’s *Capital* in the form of a DVD set containing a seemingly endless series of short segments, most of them conversations between Kluge and various representatives of German *Suhrkamp-kultur*, or comedian Helge Schneider in one historical disguise or other (see Figure 11.2). Its shamelessly sprawling and rambling nature may appear anachronistic, suggesting that for Kluge time is not an issue and in unlimited supply; on the other hand, the project is clearly of its time in its abandonment of Eisensteinian dialectical film montage in favor of a televisual enfilade of talking heads. *Nachrichten* reflects radical changes in medium and in production and distribution in its very structure. In so far as Kluge’s sprawling assemblage of performers is dialectic, it is an open-ended dialectic of intermingling discourses that regularly collapse into virtuoso sophistry.

In his review of Kluge’s opus, Jameson remarks that while Eisenstein had theorized a “discursive film” that would be non-anecdotal, filming *Capital* necessitates a dialectic of the discursive and the anecdotal; when trying to track abstraction in real and concrete situations, one can hardly avoid the telling—and thereby anecdotal—example. However, with Kluge the discourse itself often tends to become an anecdotal kind of virtuoso performance, whereas with Sekula and Burch the filmic “anecdotes” are eventually reintegrated into a whole that is both musical and discursive, an ebbing and flowing, a veritable rhythmic montage.
The Forgotten Space, that “story of a box,” is also much more than that. While the film focuses on the distribution rather than on the production of commodities, the work involved in this production process, and the labor conflicts it entails, plays an important role in the film—and there are also vignettes focusing on young Chinese female factory workers in the Special Economic Zone of Shenzhen, and on Filipino women working as nannies. In addition to shots showing people at work, or at leisure, there is no shortage of talking heads—discussing their work or lack thereof. A particularly poignant episode focuses on a tent camp for homeless in California patrolled by underpaid guards right next to the railway track on which the containers move. An African-American woman with a blonde wig—her own hair is falling out—clutching some dolls makes for a rather different talking head than those in Kluge’s DVD film.

The overarching structure of The Forgotten Space allows its makers to include little vignettes such as one that shows children on a “container port” playground, playfully preparing themselves for life in the containerized world. Helped by its geographic trajectory, which allows the directors to explore different facets and effects of containerization, the film is much more linear than Kluge’s Nachrichten. In fact, the lack of signature “essay film” elements such as a montage that uses “preexisting” footage might lead some to question its very status as an essay. Ultimately, its essayistic character can be identified in the interplay between a narration that refuses to be reduced to humanistic anecdote but instead alternates from socio-economic analysis on the one hand, and images, on the other, that may or may not propel the analysis forward in a linear fashion. Many scenes and sequences make for digressions that feed the analysis and also make for a “rather rambling structure,” as Burch puts it.21 If, towards the end,
there are a few too many false stops and restarts, a few too many rambles, this also prevents the film from becoming an illustrated lecture.

To varying degrees, the works that are under discussion here are indebted to the Soviet montage school and late-1960s “cinemarxism” (to use a Godardian term). However, dialectical montage and the productive logic of film are no longer quite what they used to be. Sekula and Burch come closest to a form of classicism, whereas Kluge embraces a televisual logic, allowing the viewer/listener to make his own zapping edit, to arrive at her own non-linear dialectic—which Jameson interprets as a Marxian form of Freudian free association. Co-produced by television stations, The Forgotten Space is impacted by the productive logic of the post-cinematic era. The Forgotten Space, is a film in search of an audience; it is, perhaps thankfully so, unfinished business. Burch’s grim diagnosis that the kind of essay film he has advocated “is out of fashion, ratings are king, audiences are meant to be too dumb to follow anything the least bit complex” seemed to be borne out by the fact that during its release in Dutch arthouse cinemas, The Forgotten Space was seen by some 130 people; subsequent cinema releases seem to have been more successful than that. Television screenings in Holland and Austria obviously had higher ratings, but Sekula and Burch were forced to make a shorter edit for TV purposes.

If one is to film capital(ism) today, one is obviously participating in the subject of one’s own film, as it is not possible to lay claim to a position that is already (however imperfectly) post-capitalist, as in the case of Eisenstein. How, then, to intervene in and foreground the irrational logic that one is operating within and against? The Forgotten Space traces the lines drawn by boxes shipped across the globe—but what of the distribution of the film itself? Since it will usually be screened in a digital format anyway, screenings for students and other groups in contexts not foreseen by regular film distribution, such as Alfredo Jaar’s Marx Lounge exhibition at SMBA in Amsterdam in 2011, may be a more interesting option—one that, however, inscribes the film in a regime of cultural labor in which the dividing lines between labor and leisure have all but ceased to exist (see Figure 11.3).

II. Representation and accumulation

Hito Steyerl’s film In Free Fall (2010) focuses on the “lives” of Boeing airplanes, leading from the Israeli army to an airplane junkyard in the Mojave desert (see Figure 11.4). Steyerl references Sergei Tretyakov’s 1929 The Biography of the Object, as well as the stock market crash of that same year. Steyerl’s film—which exists as a single-channel 30-minute short but also as a multi-channel installation version—combines shots from the airplane junkyard with shots of herself and a few others as well as appropriated clips including found footage from a documentary about airplanes being reused for aluminum; while the planes are at times used for filmic spectacles such as Speed, their aluminum is also recycled for DVD production. The year 1929 is not only the year of the stock market crash and Tretyakov’s text but also the year of the production of Howard Hughes’s Hell’s Angels (released 1930), during which Hughes crashed and was seriously injured. Later, Hughes bought TWA and the plane blown up for Speed is one.
Figure 11.3  Screening of Sekula and Burch’s *The Forgotten Space* at SMBA, Amsterdam, 2011

Figure 11.4  Hito Steyerl, *In Free Fall*, 2010, still
Filming Capital

of TWA’s old Boeings, which spent the latter part of its life in the Israeli airforce as 4X-JYI. Its sister plane, 4X-JYD, was present at the storming of the hijacked plane at Entebbe, and it now functions as a cinema in an Israeli army museum while 4X-JYI has been destroyed for *Speed*. As the salvage yard guard puts it in Steyerl's film: “Everything that was left was scrap, and that’s when the Chinese were buying scrap.”

Steyerl's entropic airfield dissolves in a post-cinematic montage indebted to the MTV aesthetic; new footage and appropriated footage generate a dizzying, fragmented map unfolding in a non-linear and multifaceted time. The editing—with plenty of catchy music—is seductive to the point of glossing over its own intricacies, making the film look more accessible than it may actually be. While it would indeed appear that, with *In Free Fall*, Steyerl “has turned from the essayistic subject to the essayistic object,” it may be more precise to say that the film focuses on objects as having a certain derivative and secondary *agency* that affects lives. Depending on market fluctuations, planes may be used for movie productions or be sold to China for their scrap metal. Both object and subject act and are acted on in a bewilderingly complex political economy, with Steyerl's cameraman losing his job in Hollywood partly because of the crash in the DVD market due to online streaming and filesharing.

In this respect resembling Steyerl and Kluge, but not Sekula and Burch, Steyerl exploits precisely those characteristics of the essay that Adorno defended in his mid-1950s essay “The Essay as Form”: the essay claims the intellectual freedom to be speculative and to over-interpret. Like Sekula and Burch, however, Steyerl focuses on material—metal—objects as pseudoconcrete symptoms. But what about financial capital itself, which moves around these metal containers? Technology allows for an ever faster and more massive circulation of capital, of capital-as-data. And in a number of video pieces, artist Zachary Formwalt has investigated the increasing resistance of capital(ism) to representation, going well beyond the obstacles encountered by Eisenstein or Brecht.

Formwalt makes conceptual jump cuts in time and between different technologies and economic mechanisms. In his video *Unsupported Transit* (2011), he combines footage of the construction site of the Koolhaas-designed Shenzhen Stock Exchange with a voice-over recounting Eadweard Muybridge's collaboration with the railroad tycoon Leland Stanford that showed there was a moment of “unsupported transit” in a horse's gallop (see Figure 11.5). Formwalt also recapitulates the later development of time-lapse photography by a former stockbroker; this technique can be used to show large buildings being constructed seemingly within minutes and without human agency. Formwalt deploys time-lapse photography to show work on the Shenzhen stock exchange—though the speed is not such that we see the building miraculously reach completion before our eyes. Rather, things glide somewhat aimlessly; we see some workers, but the actual work disappears in the intervals between the recorded moments.

In one of the artist's explicit invocations of Karl Marx, the voice-over discusses Marx's analysis of the abbreviated circuit of capital, with capital seemingly breeding capital without having to go to the commodity stage—in the form of interest-bearing capital deposited in a bank, or indeed as “fictive capital” on the stock market. Capital circles the globe in ways that seem to escape representation. It has concrete effects, but the effects seem to spring from mysterious and overly complex causes. The time-lapse
footage of the Shenzhen stock exchange construction site enters into an ambiguous relationship with this disquisition on Marx and abbreviated capital. It is an essayistic speculation on financial speculation, and on the possibilities and limitations of media to represent that which melts into thin air.

In *Unsupported Transit*, Formwalt notes that as capital spends less time in production, as fixed capital, its moments of concretion become rare; it circulates in the form of money, which is to say: of data. Contemporary capital is marked by the integration of monetary “real abstraction” and by the operative abstractions of technoscience—of science made into a productive force. Marx already noted that the “growth of scientific power” and its transformation into fixed capital was both fuelling and ultimately undermining industrial capitalism. Starting in the late 1960s, theorists such as Hans-Jürgen Krall and the Italian autonomists revived this notion of the General Intellect, arguing that the “wissenschaftliche Intelligenz” was now integrated in the productive forces. A simplistic base/superstructure model could not be maintained; in controlling production, the General Intellect traverses this divide. For the theorists of the General Intellect, post-Fordism and “immaterial labor,” the fact that intellectual labor is as stunted and specialized as manual labor came to be seen as part of the new preconditions for revolutionary action.

In contrast to the engineers who developed the hard- and software that he uses to make his work, an artist is not part of the General Intellect in the narrow—technological—sense used by Marx. However, from the late 1960s onwards theorists implicitly or explicitly widened the definition, as the development of the culture industry meant that previously “unproductive” artists were integrated in productive capitalist relations. In this sense, an artist such as Formwalt is as much of a representative of the General Intellect as the nineteenth-century railway surveyors and engineers who designed the railway line in Ghana, under the aegis of the British colonial regime. This is the subject of Formwalt’s film *A Projective Geometry* (2012).
Filming Capital

The railway line in question allowed for the transport of minerals extracted from the local mines to the port of Sekondi for transport to Britain, and for the import of goods produced in Britain back into the colony. Formwalt’s tool—a camera on a tripod—is eerily close to a surveyor’s equipment; both the surveyor and the filmmaker come to chart the African country and extract materials from it, abstracting the space in the process. Formwalt reflects on this by including conversations with people encountered during the filming on the soundtrack. Is Formwalt not, in fact, a postindustrial (colonial) prospector, extracting visual raw materials from Africa and transforming them into commodities? Formwalt’s film actively invites such a line of questioning, foregrounding its own status as a problematic commodity.

Projective Geometry contains a passage reflecting on Marx’s notion of primitive accumulation in the context of nineteenth-century colonialism. Today Africa is again subject to a renewed wave of primitive accumulation, thanks to no small extent to Chinese capital—just as in China itself, pre-capitalist or non-capitalist social bonds are destroyed as myriads of young workers flock to industrial zones such as Shenzhen (portrayed in a rather heartbreaking fashion in The Forgotten Space).

There is also another contemporary version of primitive accumulation. In 1981, Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge argued that the forceful integration of pre-capitalist subjects into the labor market could also take the form of a psychological and behavioral “retooling” of laborers who are already part of it, who have been born into it. The expropriated workers appropriate new skills and characteristics. New demands are made on workers, demands that come to be interiorized and reshape them as subjects. Kluge and Negt make this analysis in the form of a sprawling tome of more than 1,200 pages, whose montage aesthetic underlines the authors’ claim that this book does not demand to be read in a linear fashion. In this manner, in a prefiguration of the excessive scope of Kluge’s Nachrichten, they create a dialectic of clashing temporalities. Too little time, and too much of it; the subject can no longer compartmentalize and the work of art, or the work of intellect, becomes boundless.

Hardt and Negri have likewise argued that primitive accumulation is ongoing and takes the post-modern form of informational accumulation: “As the new informational economy emerges, a certain accumulation of information is necessary before capitalist production can take place.” In today’s Western societies, the rise in “creative” and “affective” labor has placed new demands on workers who can either be part of a small well-paid elite or, in much greater numbers, of a growing precariat. Hardt and Negri note that as “informational accumulation (like the primitive accumulation Marx analyzed) destroys or at least deconstructs previously existing productive processes, but (differently than Marx’s primitive accumulation) it immediately integrates those productive processes in its own networks.” Temporality becomes immediacy; one may think here of Facebook, where the transformation of previously “private” information into a (semi-)public commodity that produces value (for Facebook, first and foremost) is infra-quick and painless compared to older, violent forms of primitive accumulation. One difference with these older forms is of course that the integrated subjects do not become wage laborers, but a different kind of worker. Or compare the hundreds or probably thousands of intellectuals and artists (and others) that Kluge has interviewed for television over the decades: their work now includes talking about their work, for no
extra fee. The work of art thus foregrounds artistic labor (and immaterial or intellectual labor in general) as being central to the current regime of accumulation.

In *In Free Fall*, Steyerl’s cameraman—who used to be a Hollywood specialist responsible for making television and other screens look “natural” in film scenes—appears onscreen as a performer. Steyerl herself, of course, also appears—at one point doing a kind of airline safety routine ballet with an Israeli military expert. Furthermore, contemporary artists such as Steyerl will often present their work in the form of public talks accompanied by screenings. While their films can easily travel the globe, there is a demand for the filmmaker to be present and *perform* the work. The data needs to be embodied by the artistic worker. The issue of representing capital becomes partly one of performing labor, of enacting capitalism.

For a scattered audience largely consisting of artists and intellectuals of some description, viewing parts of *News from Ideological Antiquity* on a laptop that may be in London one day and Seoul the next becomes part of their daily performance—becomes a performance that mirrors those on screen. This project is ultimately an exercise in social montage that goes beyond using the social life of this or that object (pepper or a pair of silk stockings) in a cinematic sequence to represent capitalism. If any one object is privileged here it is the DVD set itself, which articulates the contradictions of contemporary cultural production and consumption as forms of performative labor (see Figure 11.6).

![Figure 11.6 Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity* and other Kluge DVD sets (2010)](image-url)
III. The making of Labour: The Movie

In the term “work of art,” “work” is used in a verdinglichte sense: with this notion we usually refer to an object as something that has been “worked,” that has been made, while at the same time, this quality of having been fashioned itself disappears within it. What, however, if we were to conceive of this work as activity rather than object, as travail rather than œuvre? It is precisely this operation that is central to realizing the promise of “an aesthetic which is not limited to the sphere of ‘the artistic.’” Art work becomes aesthetic practice, or aesthetic praxis.

Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello have argued that there are two traditions in the critique of capitalism: a social critique focusing on inequality and poverty, and an artistic critique focusing on alienation and sensuous impoverishment. However, these two strands have been interlinked practically from the beginning. Much early socialist thought as well as Marx’s thinking can be seen as re-politicizing Schiller’s Aesthetic Education, with the end of the division of labor making possible a more sensuously rich and diverse existence. When in The German Ideology Marx predicted (or demanded) that under communism there would no longer be specialized painters, who are exclusively that, but only people who also paint, he announced the transformation of work as the aesthetic project par excellence. In a communist society, you would hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner. Marx was sarcastic about Fourier’s notion that future work would be like play and disparaged Schiller’s aesthetic idealism, yet this passage presents a provocative radicalization of such utopian notions. In Marx’s political aesthetics, work is not play in some hazy idealist way, but is a continuous challenge to different senses and capacities of the worker as sensuous being.

What, then, of aesthetic practice in today’s regime of accumulation? The productive logic of today’s “creative industries”—as the obnoxious phrase goes—differs both from that of classical film production and from that of modern visual art. The dominant form of film production in the twentieth century was modeled on (or part of) industrial capitalism, with specialists in various disciplines selling then labor-power to the studio. By contrast, the production of art was largely artisanal, with artists selling their works on the market. The latter case always seemed difficult to understand in terms of a Marxian labor theory of value predicated on a quantitative abstraction—labor-power as based on the idea of socially necessary labor-time. However, even the apparently more “normal” case of the culture industry in fact provided many anomalies, both in the fluctuating value attributed to individual stars and in the profit of films—which, all efforts by studio management to the contrary notwithstanding, continued to escape standardization. Increasingly, the exception has become the norm. Today, in the networked Facebook economy, the process of value creation becomes so scattered and distributed that attempts at quantification seem increasingly hopeless. If, according to “Metcalfe’s law,” the value of a communication network is proportional to the square (!) of the number of its users, then quantity itself is clearly full of theological whims.

For the Marx of the Grundrisse, the conclusion to be drawn from the growing role of technology in production could only be that the whole basis for capitalist production is undermined. “As soon as labour in the direct form has ceased to be the
great well-spring of wealth, labour time ceases and must cease to be its measure, and hence exchange value [must cease to be the measure] of use value.”  

This means that:

[P]roduction based on exchange value breaks down, and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis. The free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the general reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific etc. development of the individuals in the time set free, and with the means created, for all of them.  

Thus the contradictions of capitalism would have exploded, and wage labor would have been rendered obsolete.

In post-Fordist practice, however, these contradictions have been contained (albeit barely) in part because of the rise of new forms of labor and of value. Fixed capital (technology) unchains surplus-value production. The rise of “Immaterial labor” served to destroy the status of abstract labor—of quantifiable, average labor-power as the measure and source of wealth, without destroying capitalism in the process. As Negri has argued since the 1970s, value is no longer anchored in labor time and labor value; it is up for grabs. This goes not just for iPhones or sneakers; the value of “immaterial labor” is similarly unmoored, resulting in a few big-name brands and a large precariat. It becomes impossible to assert the value of labor-power when, in conjunction with the absence of collective bargaining, under- and unpaid work proliferates. One might argue that what is at play here is simply the familiar “transformation problem,” dialectic of value and price, with the latter becoming ever more autonomous from the former. This autonomy ultimately, however, undermines the status of labor as measure; as labor becomes unquantifiable and “timeless,” so to speak, value becomes indeterminate. If the value of Facebook or Apple depends on millions of users or customers, whose value-producing activities include clicks that take a fraction of a second but ultimately also encompass large portions of their lives, then commodity fetishism has stopped being an illusion and become a reality.

In this situation, any attempt to “film Capital” or to “film capitalism” must also foreground the production, distribution, exchange, and consumption of cultural commodities. Around the time of the release of his Film Socialisme, Jean-Luc Godard developed a curious fantasy that involved parachuting a young boy and girl into France and having them screen the film at cafés in order to investigate if and how it should be released “officially.” Reflecting the crisis in cinema distribution for “difficult” films, this utopian scheme also foregrounds Film Socialisme’s status as a problematic commodity. While The Forgotten Space is a film that can easily be shown in art spaces, Steyerl’s In Free Fall was made expressly for the latter. Whether one calls these works “films” or “videos” now seems to depend mostly on the economy they’re in (that of the cinema or that of art); technically speaking, they were all produced in digital video, including The Forgotten Space. As digital files, these works are potentially as mobile as financial capitals, but restrictions are imposed on their circulation. In keeping with the art world’s economy of exclusivity, Steyerl’s or Formwalt’s video essays cannot be viewed online in
their entirety—that is, unless you have a password because you are a curator, collector, or critic. 46 The “commoners” need to go to a museum or gallery to view the pieces. Steyerl has argued that the museum is now part of the post-Fordist “social factory” that exceeds traditional boundaries and spills over into almost everything else. It pervades bedrooms and dreams alike, as well as perception, affection, and attention. It transforms everything it touches into culture, if not art. It is an a-factory, which produces affect as effect. 47

An art space

is a factory, which is simultaneously a supermarket—a casino and a place of worship whose reproductive work is performed by cleaning ladies and cellphone-video bloggers alike. In this economy, even spectators are transformed into workers. 48

Steyerl’s lecture-performance I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production (2013) is a live essay that has also been turned into a video (see Figure 11.7). Accompanied by a variety of projected images, Steyerl speculates on “mass art production” and on whether it could change the world as much as the mass production of arms. Steyerl begins by mentioning a “Comrade X,” a Kurdish fighter imprisoned in Turkey, who became fascinated with Les Misérables as a political work of art, to which he wanted to write a sequel. Steyerl dryly remarks that this should be sufficient proof that she didn’t make Comrade X up, as she clearly never would have chosen Les Misérables—that sentimental proto-telenovela with all its cliffhangers. In fact, in contrast to Comrade X, Steyerl focuses not so much on the work’s pseudo-revolutionary content but on its

Figure 11.7 Hito Steyerl, I Dreamed a Dream: Politics in the Age of Mass Art Production, 2013, performance view
productive logic as manifested in its form—which was shaped by nineteenth-century newspaper serials and the modes of production and consumption they generated. This was precisely the early form of the culture industry noted (but not emphasized) by Marx. Steyerl here foregrounds the impact of this nascent culture industry in a manner that recalls Marx’s statement that “Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer.” What it also produces is the producer, but in contemporary immaterial labor the dividing line between production and consumption is of course tenuous at best—as the case of “ordinary people” who (in a kind of perversion of Benjamin’s productivist aesthetic) audition to appear on “idols” shows.

Like the works of the feuilleton hacks with whom Hugo had to compete, Steyerl notes that *Les Misérables* reads a like a permanent public audition by the author. Completing the novel check by check, the serial writer “rambles on commission”—the pitch has become part of the drama. Steyerl leaps from this to Susan Boyle’s performance of *I Dreamed a Dream* from the musical version of *Les Misérables* on a British talent show, and forges a *now-time* between the 1832 failed revolution portrayed by Hugo and the situation of the 2011 precariat. There is another species of miserables around—they are onstage, they are the losers mocked by posh juries. We live in a casting economy, in which we constantly pitch our projects; Steyerl shows artists in Berlin queuing up outside after a call for an “open” exhibition by the Deutsche Bank art space, and then goes on to imagine and perform a pitch for a project on the basis of Comrade X’s dream, which she reads in front of Karaoke screen with lyrics to *I Dreamed a Dream* (with accompanying music). Her project involves a green-screen montage of people in nineteenth-century and contemporary museum architecture, with a “rabble” of post-Fordist extras who are about to be slaughtered on barricades. In this bizarre pitch situation, the audience of the performance becomes a quasi-jury, complicit in the culture of permanent auditioning.

Even those who really have nothing to gain from becoming integrated in “semiocapitalism” de facto participate in this audition economy—like some of the subjects in *The Forgotten Space*. In making their suffering visible, in affording them the opportunity to speak out, the film also participates in contemporary accumulation—like a politicized counterpart to contemporary reality soaps and casting shows, in which the underclass is put on display for the embattled middle class to smirk at. In this respect, Christoph Schlingensief’s 2000 piece *Bitte liebt Österreich* (a.k.a. *Austländer Raus*) needs to be mentioned as a brilliant exercise in performative materialism: here, the container was not used for shipping goods but for housing asylum seekers allegedly about to be expelled from Austria. A video feed from the container was broadcast via Internet television, and by voting, Big Brother-style, viewers could send their least favorite “candidates” away (back to where they came from). The winner was to win a residency permit. By placing his containers in the middle of Vienna, Schlingensief created a volatile situation at the height of Jörg Haider’s power; but the piece did not simply instrumentalize the then recent “Big Brother” format to make a political point. Rather, the film director turned “actionist” artist made a social montage that meshed different types of labor and forced non-labor, with asylum seekers usually being kept off the “official,” “visible” labor market, and thus also from casting shows.
In effecting a montage between different forms of primitive accumulation and different forms of exploitation, the point can, of course, not be that “artists are the new asylum seekers,” as one deluded Dutch novelist put it. Rather, in opposition to a certain post-Operaiast tendency to focus exclusively on immaterial labor in the metropolitan Western context, one should precisely insist on discrepancies as well as similarities, and on solidarity on the basis of vast discrepancies in privileges among the underprivileged. Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki’s *Labour in a Single Shot*, on which they worked in the years before Farocki’s death in July 2014, takes the form of a series of workshops in some fifteen cities on different continents, including Cairo and Rio de Janeiro. The results have been presented online and in exhibitions such as that at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin in 2015 (see Figure 11.8).

While the “primitivist” focus on short single-shot films à la Lumière suggests an abandonment of montage, the constellation of screens in the HKW show resulted in a parallel, spatial montage. The space becomes a zapping zone. This also means that the artistic labor of the workshop participants is largely subsumed under Ehmann and Farocki’s double curatorship-as-authorship. Within the latter, Farocki is usually foregrounded since there are ample opportunities for comparisons with his filmic oeuvre. The present text obviously cannot escape these mechanisms, but they must at least be acknowledged and problematized. While the result is more than the sum of its parts, the legal status of the individual films and recompense (if any) of their makers remains unaddressed and, by consequence, extremely hazy. With its networked approach, the project is hyper-contemporary in a way that Ehmann and Farocki never fully acknowledge; here, the labor of authorship becomes such a scattered and aggregate condition that it is clouded and obscured. The classical Marxian reflex of “descending into the hidden abodes of production,” which sustains a good part of Farocki’s oeuvre, and *Labour in a Single Shot*, becomes questionable in the process.

**Figure 11.8** Antje Ehmann and Harun Farocki, *Labour in a Single Shot*, HKW Berlin, 2015, installation view
Nonetheless: In a situation marked both by the precarization and simultaneous intensification and extensification of many types of work and by a potentialized productivity of technology that makes a mockery of the term “dead labor,” *Labour in a Single Shot* presents a montage that allows one to ask certain questions; it is questionable—fragwürdig—in good as well as bad ways. Particularly interesting films in this mix are Nicole Teeny’s *The Writer* (Boston, 2013), in which the camera pans across a messy apartment floor to show a young woman lying on bed with her MacBook, diligently typing into the tilted laptop, working in a place associated with escape from work (see Figure 11.9); or *Data Center* in Berlin (by Marjus Bauer, Susanne Dzeik and Rene Paulokat, 2012), which shows a maintenance worker doing his rounds inside the server center that keeps the cloud afloat. However, less “advanced” forms of work can hardly be said to be less contemporary; they function as part of the same global economy with all its inequities. It is contemporaneity itself that is asynchronous and fractured.

One film that manages to condense this into a single shot is Cristián Silva-Avária’s *The City, the Runners and the Fisherman* (Rio de Janeiro, 2012), which shows a solitary fisherman on a small boat casting his net in the background, slowly drifting on the bay, while the viewer glimpses mobile urban professionals racing by on colorful bikes in the foreground. Here, parallel montage has been incorporated into the “single shot” itself, and the result is at the very least compellingly suggestive. The same can be said of *Labour in a Single Shot* as a whole: placing precisely observed specifics in a fragile constellation rather than abstracting from them to grand overarching theories, the project poses an aesthetic and theoretical challenge that is not likely to go away anytime soon. Film has left the dream factory to enter a larger social factory that is virtually coterminal with the world.
Filming Capital

Notes


Against Farocki’s claim concerning the non-representation of labor, one could invoke Lang’s Metropolis and Chaplin’s Modern Times—films by auteurs who, at those respective moments, had a high degree of autonomy in their selection and treatment of subjects. Lang’s film in particular, however, is a strained and confused allegory on labor relations.


6 Marcuse, “Cultural revolution,” 129.

7 Marcuse, “Cultural revolution,” 129.

8 As for the aesthetic dimension of the commodity form, see Chapter 3 by Sami Khatib in this volume.


15 The selection of works lays no claim to being exhaustive; in particular, I have not included some high-profile but problematic and unproductive projects such as Isaac Julien’s; for a critique of his films Kapital and Playtime, see Toscano and Kinkle, 177–183. Julien has since staged a public reading of Marx’s Capital at the 2015 Venice Biennale: not a collective reading and discussion of the book, but a continuous reading-out loud of the text by performers.


17 While co-director Noël Burch has largely rescinded his 1960s modernism, and appears to embrace a neo-Lukácsian aesthetic, the result is fortunately not in keeping with some of Burch’s stated intentions.


19 Adorno remarked on film in his early essay on Wagner, in the Kulturindustrie chapter of the Dialectic of Enlightenment, and more extensively in Composing for the Films (1947), which he co-authored with Hanns Eisler, and in the 1966 essay “Filmtransparente.”


21 Burch, “Essay Film.”

22 The term cinemarxism is sprayed on a wall in One Plus One (1968). Kluge and Farocki, of course, actively participated in this aesthetic-political moment.


24 Burch, “Essay Film.”


31 Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, Geschichte und Eigensinn (Frankfurt am Main: Zweitausendeins, 1981), 28–38, 542–57, etc.


33 Hardt and Negri, Empire, 258 (italics removed). David Moore has rightfully criticized Negri and Hardt for privileging “informational” accumulation over other forms of contemporary primitive accumulation, which means that they effectively become
complicit with the systemic obfuscation of these forms of labor: “Presto, we have
globalized information workers. One wonders if the coltan diggers in the eastern
Congo shovelling the essential mineral for cell-phones, Sony play-stations, and NASA
space-stations under the guns of Rwandan-backed warlords, are ‘conscious’ of their
new power, and whether their subjectivity was the force behind this constellation of
extraction, production, and consumption.” David Moore, “Hardt and Negri’s Empire
and Real Empire: The Terrors of 9–11 and After,” http://www.acme-journal.org/vol2/
Moore.pdf (last accessed on July 6, 2017).

34 See David Riff, “‘Is this for real?’ A Close Reading of In Free Fall by Hito Steyerl,”
36 The locus classicus is of course the passage in The German Ideology. Late in his life, in
Anti-Dühring, Engels used a related example to drive home the point, contra Eugen
Dühring, that labor has no intrinsic value and that “production is most encouraged by
a mode of distribution which allows all members of society to develop, maintain, and
exercise their capacities with maximum universality. It is true that, to the mode of
thought of the educated classes which Herr Dühring has inherited, it must seem
monstrous that in time to come there will no longer be any professional porters or
architects, and that the man who for half an hour gives instructions as an architect will
also act as a porter for a period, until his activity as an architect is once again required.
A fine sort of socialism that would be—perpetuating professional porters!” See
Frederick Engels, Anti-Duehring. Herr Eugen Dühring’s Revolution in Science, in
37 Prawer, Karl Marx and World Literature, 80, 206 (Schiller), 290–91 (Fourier).
38 See also Sven Lüticken, “The Coming Exception: Art and the Crisis of Value,” New Left
39 Jodi Dean discusses Metcalfe’s Law in The Communist Horizon (London/New York:
Verso, 2012), 129.
40 Marx, Grundrisse, 705.
41 Marx, Grundrisse, 705–706.
42 For early comments by Negri on the rift between labor and value, in the context of a
discussion of inflation, see “Crisis of the Planner-State: Communism and Revolutionary
Organization” (1971), in Books for Burning: Between Civil War and Democracy in 1970s
Italy, trans. Francesca Novella and Timothy S. Murphy (London/New York: Verso,
2005), 1–50. On labor time and the dissolution of the “discrete and manoeuvrable time”
of classic industrial capitalism in “The Constitution of Time” (1981), in Time for
43 Diedrich Diederichsen has argued that the value of an artwork is created not simply by
the artist, but also in part by other parties that invest their time—critics, collectors, all
kinds of viewers. This is a fair point, one that can in fact be extended to all kinds of media
products; it is a staple of post-Fordist theorizing that viewers or users now produce
surplus value. Diedrich Diederichsen, On (Surplus) Value in Art (Berlin: Sternberg Press,
2008); and Diedrich Diederichsen, “Time, Object, Commodity,” Texte zur Kunst, 88
(December 2012), http://www.textezurkunst.de/88/time-object-commodity/ (last
accessed on July 6, 2017).
44 “Jean-Luc Godard speaks with Daniel Cohn-Bendit: A Smile that Dismisses the
Universe,” http://cinemasparagus.blogspot.nl/2010/05/jean-luc-godard-speaks-with-
daniel-cohn.html (last accessed on July 6, 2017).
See the technical specs here: http://www.theforgottenspace.net/static/info.html.


Steyerl, “Is a Museum a Factory?”

Marx, Grundrisse, 92.

These examples are taken from a number of films made during the Rio de Janeiro Labour in a Single Shot workshop.

http://www.labour-in-a-single-shot.net; http://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/2015/eine_einstellung_zur_arbeit/eine_einstellung_zur_arbeit_start.php (last accessed on July 6, 2017). I reviewed the HKW show for Mute (http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/taking-potshots-labour [last accessed on July 6, 2017]), and parts of my texts have been repurposed here.
Marx as Art as Politics: Representations of Marx in Contemporary Art

Johan F. Hartle

The relation of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relations of heaven to earth. The political state stands in the same opposition to civil society, and it prevails over the latter in the same way as religion prevails over the narrowness of the secular world.

Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question”

The artworld stands to the real world in something like the relationship in which the City of God stands to the Earthly City.

Arthur C. Danto, “The Artworld”

Marx, and not just Marxism, is a recurrent motif in contemporary art—extensively and persistently so. This is no coincidence, for the proper name “Karl Marx” stands out as a metonymy for a reflection on modern capitalism and as a reflexive attitude concerning its broken normative promises: the equality of rights and opportunities and the universality of capitalist society’s social norms. This aim towards the universal includes the normative implications of aesthetics, once established as a discourse on the legitimacy of (potentially) universal judgments of taste and the possibility of the absolute, on the realization of potentiality through one’s own sensuous activity.

These normative promises are always abstract and concrete and the same time: They are concrete as they have been posed at times of revolutionary upheaval and fundamental social change and thought through in the most advanced philosophical systems of their time, but abstract as they have never considered the question of their own realization as an issue of their own validity. When Frederick Engels called the “German working-class movement” . . . “the heir to German classical philosophy,” he aimed at precisely this double character of the idealist set-up of the German philosophical tradition: It takes nothing less than a struggling proletariat to realize and actualize the promises of bourgeois society, which otherwise tend to fall back into mere idealism and ideology. The proletariat, in Engels’s understanding, is thus the agent of an immanent critique of bourgeois revolution, reminding it of its strong normative claims and its universalism.

This double character of broken promises and their actualization thus identifies two important aspects of Marxism: (a) the general nature of ideology, which also
pre-structures (b) the idea of immanent criticism grounded on historically unfulfilled normative potentials. This link between ideology (semblance) and immanent criticism particularly applies to the fine arts, which are unavoidably bound to their semblance character. Peter Bürger has most pointedly described the tradition of the historical avant-gardes as a critique of idealist aesthetics, criticizing the beauty of art for its lack of consequences in the real world. The self-critical nature of modern art thereby also constitutes its dialectical nature: It keeps turning itself against itself, a leading strand of discourse in art theory and criticism. Adorno had formulated this very dilemma of modern art as follows: “The dialectic of modern art is largely that it wants to shake off its illusoriness like an animal trying to shake off its antlers.” Ever since this dialectical move of the historical avant-gardes, art has had, in other words, a hard time accepting its own legitimizing function. The contemporary name for this contradictory dimension of art is “institutional critique.”

The main claim of this chapter is to show that this conceptual tension in the constitution of contemporary art and a continuity with certain traditions of institutional critique characterize the contemporary artistic reference to Marx. These contemporary artistic references to Marx, it will be argued, are at the core of these very tensions: They mediate between unfulfilled claims once established with the normative discourse of art on the one hand, and the insistence on its ideological nature, its immanent contradictions, and its semblance character (and semblance character at this point really means: ideology) on the other.

In other words: The artistic reference to Marx is about “Marx” as a figure of artistic self-reflection, captured in the immanence of art. In these references, Marx allegorically stands for the conceptual structure of art itself: an idea, as Joseph Kosuth had (with, admittedly, very different ambitions and in a quite different context) formulated for conceptual art. Counterintuitive as it may seem, the presence of the letter and likeness of Marx in contemporary art in this way supports art’s claim to autonomy rather than its subjection to politics. But, dialectically speaking, this is a politics of autonomy that emphasizes the necessity of a Marxian impulse in contemporary art and links art to politics from within.

I. Icons of grandpa Marx

There are, however, several lineages of Marx-images in the history of modern art, and Marx has not always been a properly artistic subject. In the history of Western art several links have been pointed out between the modernist striving for autonomous art and the political struggle against capitalism. Not only has the modernist impulse to abstraction been discussed as reaction to and critical reflection of and on reification, revolutionary change and artistic innovation have for a long time defined the unity of the political vanguard and artistic avant-garde for many political movements. As Fredric Jameson has emphasized:

[In the twentieth century art itself is bound up with the problem of the avant-garde—that people today cannot imagine the degree to which, before the break of
Stalin’s socialist realism in the early 1930s, the two avant-gardes were absolutely linked, and the fortunes of avant-garde art were never felt to be dissociated from those of vanguard.  

In a 1933 poster for the Marxistische Arbeisterschule (MASCH), finished just before the national socialist Machtergreifung, Fred Gravenhorst brings these two motifs together in paradigmatic form. With a Bauhaus-inspired head of a New Man on the left and the portraits of Marx and Lenin on the right, it suggests the inseparable unity of the aesthetic and the political revolution, the formation of new types of subjectivity in line with the project of communism (see Figure 12.1).

And while the roughly sketched heads of Marx and Lenin remain in the background, in red lines on a black background, the typified and simplified head turns left, geometrical forms (diagonal lines, a triangle) connect his sense organs (eyes and ears) and forehead (brain) and mouth (his capacity of expression) with the emblem of the MASCH. The New Man of the avant-garde, his perception, thought, and speech could still be directed by the political ideas of Marxism. The figure of Marx (and Lenin) could still represent the aesthetico-political pathos of the new.

This relation between aesthetico-political renewal with all its inherent iconoclasm and the reference to the figure of Marx was, as is well known and as Jameson suggested in the above quoted passage, interrupted, while “Marx” successively developed into an icon of the state apparatus. To a great extent the figure of Marx disappeared from the imagery of advanced Western art, for which it no longer seemed to be able to serve as leitmotif.

Figure 12.1 Fred Gravenhorst, Announcement of new classes at the Marxistische Arbeisterschule Leipzig, 1933
The likeness of Marx remained, however, one of the most commonly used portraits in public imagery and in visual culture: on political posters, and, sometimes, merchandise of trade unions and socialist organizations. The icon of Marx as an element of general political culture (as opposed to the specific interest in the specific desires of advanced art) is representative of the most common and most dominant tradition of representing Marx. Generations of artists, attached to socialist and communist organizations, could refer to the likeness of Marx as to an allegory of a somewhat clearly identifiable political struggle and itinerary. In the same sense the official representation of Marx (Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and so on) in state socialist countries was part of a political culture as well, within which Marx turned into a state founder and a patriarch of a whole political tradition.

Given these specific functions and usages of a political iconography of Marx, it is not surprising that the canonical images of Marx refer to photographs of his mature life, whereas the likeness of the young Marx remains rather unknown. The image of the young Marx has only found its way into public imagination through the children’s book Mohr und die Raben von London (1962), and the television production of the same title (1968, both published/produced in the GDR), whereas the first reliable photographic images of Marx (from 1861 to 1866) show him in his mid-40s. In the history of the working class movement’s early references to the likeness of Marx, they are mostly based on 1872 and 1875 photographs, the pictures of Marx that still are the most famous and widespread (and which were partly reproduced as motif of lithographs in the various editions of Capital).

Such references to Marx in a broader political imagery emerge as early as the 1890s. They lead to their own political iconology and tradition of historical painting that leads all the way through to the strictly political art of the 1980s in Eastern Europe, East Asia, and the related communist organizations in the West. In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century the likeness of Marx can, however, mostly be found on vernacular objects (decorative plates, postcards, pieces of embroidery, and so on) and posters. Thereafter it is especially in the early years of Soviet Union and, of course, the post-Second World War culture of the Eastern European and then also East Asian communist countries, that the likeness of Marx becomes part of a general rhetoric of socialist realist modern art.

The oldest monumental representations of Marx were, most likely (and as suggested by Mikuda-Hüttel) the Marx-monument of Alexander Matveev in front of the Smolny (see Figure 12.2), and Mesenzev’s Marx and Engels statue at the Moscow Teatralnaya Square, which were unveiled to the public of the newly founded Socialist Republic in 1918. Matveev’s Marx is not only quite contemporary in his geometrically accentuated features (one might think of the typed masks of avant-garde theater). His appearance also shifts between the proud gesture of a conqueror having won a decisive battle and, now almost looking relaxed, the even-tempered and superior confidence of the revolutionary thinker who knows history to be on his side. The bold and provocatively confident Marx is exceptional in some respects, certainly because of his quite profane and human posture somewhere between pride, optimism, and relief, nonchalantly leaning on the right leg, the right hand stuck into his coat, and a provokingly sharp-edged left shoulder toward which he turns his head to a daring look ahead.
The canonization of a monumental Marx in the following decades turned him into a more grim and decisive, because of his *staatstragende* (literally: state-bearing) function (imagine the weight!), and also far less dynamic figure. Lively debates took place concerning the degree to which Marx could and should become monumentalized and it seems as if the general tendency towards “idolatry” began as late as after the death of
Lenin in 1924, which also produced the grouping Marx/Engels/Lenin and, of course, Stalin (who was, in the second half of the 1950s, replaced by the trinity Marx/Engels/Lenin). It is in this context that the political and aesthetic debates concern rather the adequacy of the representation of Marx than the question of the precise systematic—let alone artistic!—merits of his work. The debates surrounding the adequacy of the representation of Marx and his tradition were passionate. Brecht famously intervened by rejecting the idea of an Über-Marx idealized as a mythical, godlike figure: “Man verschone uns endlich mit diesem Popanz eines jupiter tonans.” [“Please spare us—finally—the bugaboo of this thundering Jupiter (Jove).”]

Debates about the representations of Marx were not in a strict sense aesthetic, concerning the foundation of a tradition rather than the function and structure of a Marxist aesthetics per se.

In this context the attempt to install a tradition (either as the foundation of the socialist state or as a counter-narrative, with various hybrid forms in between), “good grandpa Marx” appears in various forms: reading, studying, among workers, and at work, as the supersized head in the background of revolutionary historical events (as in Diego Rivera’s mural in the Palacío Nacional in Mexico City), or even as spiritual healer (as in Frida Kahlo’s 1954 painting Marxism will give Health to the Sick). Sometimes the image of Marx has been used to personify an anti-tradition of deviation, pop, or juvenile hedonism (as in Hrdlicka’s Marx as Streaker, in the influential Marx on a Bicycle Poster of the Slovenian designer Matjaž Vipotnik). Whether as a grim and powerful Über-Marx or as the youthful Marx from next door, however, the represented Marx remained part of a visual discourse to define a tradition and a collective identity, part of a general political culture.

It is not surprising that the monumentalism of political culture under cold-war conditions produced its own superlatives, too. Lew Kerbel’s portrait of Marx (1961 in Karl-Marx-Stadt) has long been the biggest (and heaviest) monumental portrait in the world. It might be Ludwig Engelhardt’s monument Karl Marx and Frederick Engels in Berlin, however, which remains as the most famous public representation of Marx and Engels. It is still present in public space as one of the few standing (or even newly installed) socialist monuments.

Sybille Bergemann’s photograph (see Figure 12.3) of the half-finished monument has become emblematic for the unrealized potential contained within the legacy of Marxism as much as his spectral character.

It was used with good reason, therefore, as the cover image for the German edition of Derrida’s Specters of Marx, which discusses the absence of a certain presence of Marx after the monumental Marx had passed away (and in this case, dismantled, not deconstructed). Bergemann’s decapitated Marx and Engels are half present and half absent, yet embody a kind of monumental power that needs to be restrained, reminiscent of Prometheus in chains, as which Marx has appeared since the early 1840s, when the Neue Rheinische Zeitung faced Prussian censorship. But this clumsy attempt of exorcism to put the specter in chains (very much like that specific exorcism of the holy alliance which Marx and Engels refer to at the beginning of The Communist Manifesto), also appear to be helpless. Even though half absent, the remaining half of monumental and forceful presence maintains its own necessity.
II. The labor of melancholy: recycling a ghost

One of the typical figures along the lines of which Marx regularly gains access to the field of contemporary art is the figure of the specter or the ghost, half present and half absent, as in Sybille Bergemann's photograph of Ludwig Engelhardt's sculpture *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels* when it was still in the making. The merging of presence and absence reflects the general historical development: The omnipresence of Marx is no longer. In this sense the political icon “Karl Marx”—as we find it in the monumental sculptures across the extended Soviet empire—had to lose its immediate plausibility before Marx could allegorically turn into a figure of artistic self-reflection.

As alluded to above, it is for good reasons that the photograph was used as the cover image of the German edition of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, in which only half a Marx remains. Derrida's reading of Marx as a “hauntologist” (alluding to both “ontology” and “being haunted”) famously presented Marx as a philosopher whose political promises remain valid only as (somewhat decapitated) messianic promises without any perspective of realization. But Derrida also presented Marx as a philosopher who teaches us to deal with the ways in which the present is not identical with itself, as the thinker of a reality that contains contradictions and anachronisms and the indefinite longing for a future that might never actually come—or for a radical democracy that is, as it were, always to come.
In its direct and literal references to Marx, contemporary art regularly presented Marx as a metonymy of such a yearning for the absent and of the insistence of contradiction in the constitution of the present that survived Marx’s own passing. There seems to be no space left for any kind of embodiment of an institutionalized presence (of a state, a community and a clearly identified tradition). Most of the theoretical references to Marx in contemporary cultural criticism are of that same structure: they are dealing with *Marx after Marxism*—as a survivor or a ghost, maybe to be interpreted or, rather, as Stuart Hall famously said, “a problem, as a trouble, as danger, not as solution.”

The image of Marx and the media of its representation have always been in tension with each other. Most likely the *Bild* (projected images, the imaginary) of Marx and the concrete *Bildnisse* (materialized images) of Marx never have been congruent. But the destruction and disappearance of the state socialist tradition in the European East, which, in some sense, had been founded by and grounded in Marx, only increases this tension: From now on any contemporary Marx in the Western world has to dwell in minds rather than in state institutions or in concretely manifested, public icons.

It is not only the untimely character of Marx, however, that gives him a ghostly appearance. Marx himself ridiculed ideas that had no social fundament and that were, in the words of *The German Ideology*, no “real movement,” which is how Marx and Engels described communism. Having lost his socio-economic “base,” and therefore becoming an almost purely “superstructural” phenomenon—most of the powerful strands of twentieth and twenty-first century Marxism, of Western Marxism, were already forms of *cultural Marxism*—Marx turns precisely into that which he himself had ridiculed as ghostly (by merging *Geist* as mind or spirit and intellect with *Geist* as specter and ghost: *Gespenst*). To quite some extent this characterizes the development of communism from a “real movement” to a Platonic “Idea” (as one finds particularly in the discussions started by Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek).

Such a spectral Marx, a mere trace of his own monolithic presence, could be seen at the 2011 Venice Biennale: With her illuminated fragile grid installations, which projected the shadow of the likeness of Marx on the wall, Gloria Argeles presented Marx as such a ghostly shadow. In Argeles’s series, however, Marx disappears as but one ghost among many. He is presented somewhat arbitrarily between Hannah Arendt and Sigmund Freud. He is thus presented as but one of the many inhabitants of an “uncanny” present, thereby also leaving open the question of how and what of Marx could possibly be of any contemporary relevance.

For this is only where the labor of melancholy (that does not only, in mourning, process a loss, but also emphasize an indirect continuity) begins, not where it ends: How to make sense of Marx today, how to inherit his legacy? The question of legitimate inheritance (not the least relevant to the polemical dispute between Derrida and his contemporary Marxist critics), the question of whose father Marx was and which sons and (if Derrida is right, less importantly so) daughters legitimately continue the mission, keeps complicating Marxist debates.

The problem of inheritance and its implicit questions of political subjectification was, of course, not alien to Marx himself: It was a key subject in the most famous of all plays of Marx’s favorite writers, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In the *Eighteenth Brumaire*...
Marx refers to Hamlet's first encounter with his dead father (by famously quoting: “Well grubbed, old mole!”) and thus draws an analogy between old Hamlet and the revolution.\textsuperscript{24} Importantly: It is Hamlet's father who instructs him to take revenge, as the state Denmark is not in good shape. It is also Hamlet's father, who represents the promises of the order of the Danish kingdom. As a ghost (somewhat undead) and no longer king, he represents subversion:\textsuperscript{25} He is the convincing point of reference for (revolutionary) immanent critique.

With slightly different cultural reference the oedipal figure of the (undead) father appears in a sculpture by the Mexican artist Pedro Reyes. Already the title explicitly states (referencing the title of a poem by Chilean writer Nicanor Parrá): The Corpse of Karl Marx is Still Breathing (2012; see Figure 12.4). In Reyes's work, however, it is not only the undead father, but also a father that is not recognized as a father that is still breathing. Reyes's bust is reminiscent not only of Karl Marx but also of the Star Wars villain Darth Vader (whose specific feature is his heavy machine-like sound of breathing). That not only opens up yet another field of associations (thinking of the semantics of the Cold War—the cosmically extended arms race, the SDI program, and so on. All these references had originally been inscribed into Star Wars when it was first produced), but it also specifically emphasizes the necessity with which Karl Marx's legacy is inscribed even into contemporary identities: It's time to meet your makers.

But, again, how, and which? The cracks in Marx's original tombstone (the less representative one, hidden in the overgrown part) at Highgate Cemetery in London, is the subject of a video by the Columbian artist Milena Bonilla, emphasizing the fact that

\textbf{Figure 12.4} Pedro Reyes, The Corpse of Marx is Still Breathing, 2012
the legacy of Marx—his tombstone—is, metaphorically speaking, cracked, fragmented, divided into different lines of traditions (see Figure 12.5). The very fact of a cracked legacy, however, opens up various dimensions of interpretation of a tradition that—precisely for this reason—is no longer monolithic, that no longer has the shape of a unified stone.26

Ants and a snail are crawling over the tombstone, quite drastically pointing out the crudely material dimension of death itself (profaning even the profane: Marxian materialism). The allegorical allusion to hard-working ants, following their everyday life organized by hard labor, and the extremely slow movement of the snail, somewhat alluding to the fact that revolutionary history has not moved quite as quickly as Marxist revolutionaries might have hoped, reminds us of the unfulfilled promise of Marxism itself: natural history moves on, runs over Marx’s own tombstone. Ants, like bees, which, as Marx writes,27 differ from the architect because they don’t have an intentional plan, are the allegories of such natural history. The unfulfilled dream and broken promise of the Marxist legacy is present everywhere.

One contemporary artist who almost obsessively refers to the writings and the likeness of Marx (in reading seminars, performances, and in various other media), almost doggedly trying to make sense of his legacy (and thereby also exposing the complications of doing so), is the Austrian-American artist Rainer Ganahl. His work on Marx and Marxism includes reading seminars, fashion shows (referencing high, so-called avant-garde fashion under the name Comme des Marxistes, 2013), jewelry, and installations.

His 2011 installation Skizze zu einem Kopf aus Glas (Sketch for a Head of Glass, see Figure 12.6) presents the famous portrait of Marx made out of broken glass and old plastic bottles. The material emphasizes the somewhat tramp-like appearance of Marx, alluding maybe to the sub-proletarian survival strategy of collecting deposit bottles as
an allegorical form of contemporary global misery. Besides these allusions to waste, to fragmentation and poverty, however, the *Sketch for a Head of Glass* also presents a strong metaphor of political gathering: By constructing the head of Marx out of waste, Ganahl literally recycles social fragments (one might say, of social experience) and turns them into the head (and spirit) of Marx, which is suspended from the ceiling, hovering above the heads of the spectators as a unifying social imaginary, a strategically effective ideology. The head of glass is a multitude, the composition of a collective subject.

The title *Head of Glass* is a reference to both Werner Herzog’s (1976) film *Heart of Glass* (in which the actors had to play under hypnosis) and to the famous 1980s Blondie song of the same title ("Once I had a love and it was a gas—Soon it turned out I had a heart of glass," . . . "Once I had a love and it was divine—Soon found out I was losing my mind"). Both of these sources stem from the old days of the later Cold War, when Marxism seemed to have been a real historical force. And both of them suggest somewhat blinded and undirected actions, driven by unconscious energies: Marx as a seducer of the masses. This is, at least in the Blondie song, also coupled with a strong
sense of nostalgia ("once" . . . "it was a gas"), referencing precisely these good old times of the Left, but probably also characterizing most contemporary references to the spirit of the somewhat innocent disco music of the late 1970s (and the times “when we were still young,” when the spirit—Geist—of rebellion was still alive). Marx appears as a retro-phenomenon somewhat akin to disco and other forms of fashion (which identifies the previously mentioned layer of Rainer Ganahl’s artistic work: the fashion shows Comme des Marxistes). However, this layering of various temporalities (the present of a past dream for the future) identifies one of the central dimensions of a world that is not one of the spectral dimension of the present.

Ganahl’s Head of Glass, however, refers not only to the likeness of Marx, to Werner Herzog, and Blondie, but also varies one of the famous (typically chiastic) phrases of Marx. By deviating from the idiomatic formula of the heart of glass, Ganahl also switches from head (reason) to heart (passion) in a way similar to Marx’s famous saying in the “Introduction to the Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right,” where he states: “In the struggle against that state of affairs, criticism is no passion of the head, it is the head of passion.” The merging of intellect and passion is a key element of social criticism in its Marxian form.

So what is a head of glass? The idiom of a “heart of glass” characterizes a fragile and vulnerable psychological disposition prone to intense (and unreasonable) emotional involvement. A head of glass, in parallel, could be understood as a sensitive and fallible mental disposition prone to intense intellectual involvement. But as the title suggests, Ganahl’s Head of Glass is a sketch. The project of a mind that is still to be realized and maybe is to remain a project: a spectral non-identity of the present with itself rather than the foundation of concrete social institutions and solid political communities. This Marx is not bodenständig and earthbound but shaky and floating.

If Derrida’s Specters of Marx (and the idea of spectrality as such) deals with the way in which the world is not identical with itself, and time is out of joint, it always also deals with a key element of the aesthetic. Adorno kept emphasizing the same, relating it more clearly, however, to the world of aesthetic experience: the non-identity of the world with itself is one of the dimensions of aesthetic semblance. As aesthetic objects, objects are more than what they appear. In that sense the spectral Marx gives a plausible example for the various possible interpretations of the conjunction Marx and the aesthetic. The specter of Marx is an aestheticized Marx.

But not only for these, essentially aesthetic reasons does the idea of a flying and partly ghost-like Marx—that Ganahl’s sketch presents in his own way—have such a remarkable conjuncture in contemporary art. In the video-work use! value! exchange! of the British artist Phil Collins it is again, just as in Sybille Bergemann’s photograph (see Figure 12.3), Ludwig Engelhardt’s sculpture Karl Marx and Frederick Engels that turns into a semi-material ghostly appearance. Phil Collins filmed the massive monument while it was temporarily dislocated, hovering above the trees and passers-by in Berlin (see Figure 12.7).

Obviously, these images remind of the iconoclastic fury against the monuments of State socialism in post-1989–91 Eastern Europe (and the parallels with the Saddam regime are never really far behind). In the specific context of Collins’s use! value! exchange!, however, the images of hovering Marx and Engels do not only point at the
ghostly existence of a Marxist tradition, which might continue living as something undead, but also allow us to re-access key aspects of the Marxian critique of political economy that certain deconstructive aestheticizing appropriations of Marx had systematically denied.

Phil Collins’s video use! value! exchange! in this sense is a somewhat archaeological project about the hidden knowledge of a forgotten past. It consists of a 21-minute video in which a former teacher of political economy re-enacts the lectures that she used to teach at the Hochschule für Ökonomie in Berlin-Karlshorst (now Hochschule für Technik und Wissenschaft) before the collapse of the GDR. The video is thus a short introduction to Marx’s Capital, a re-enactment of the specific knowledge, the specific system of Marxist knowledge that was structurally denied after 1989–91.

Already this archaeological dimension of the lost and the forgotten gives, as it were, concrete meaning to the idea of Marx as a ghost. But there is another dimension to it: While Capital is taught throughout use! value! exchange!, the hovering of the Berlin monument of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels comes in precisely at the point when the lecture on Marx’s critique of political economy arrives at the definition and explanation of surplus value, at precisely the moment of Marx’s Capital when the “phantomlike objectivity” of the commodity reveals its vampire-like quality to suck the blood of living labor in the name of the dead. This clearly presents a utopian firmament of the wealth that the proletariat could have access to, but it also presents Marx (with the key category of his critique of political economy) as a high-flyer far above the heads of the average.

And there is yet another dimension to this: In at least one respect Phil Collins has a more convincing reading of Marx than Derrida. While Derrida reconstructs Marx’s ontology (and “hauntology”) in light of the tension between use-value and

Figure 12.7  Phil Collins, use! value! exchange! (Video Still), 2010
exchange-value, and keeps forgetting the dynamics of exploitation expressed by surplus value, Collins hits the nail on the head: we live in a world of ghosts and vampires precisely because of the exploitative nature of capital. Marx is thus not the only ghost—there might in fact be much more scary ones under our own contemporary condition.  

III. Marxist discourse as art as idea

Much of the contemporary Marx-works (of contemporary Kunstmarxismus, artsy Marxism) is about learning, which is to say about recycling, that is, re-appropriating knowledge that seems to have gotten out of hand. Especially in Collins’s videos much of this re-appropriation is comprised in the idea of reenactment. Concepts, methods, and techniques or reenactment are, of course, quite diffuse. Next to the detective-like and thus cognitive dimension of reenactment (classically emphasized by Robin George Collingwood), it is mainly the practical political and experimental appropriation of history that has been emphasized in recent discussions. And against the background of these dimensions of reenactment it is maybe no coincidence that a year before Capital had become a film (Alexander Kluge, Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike, 2007) it had been turned into a theatrical play—by the German theater group Rimini Protokoll.  

Artistic learning processes, performative work that theatrically discloses the work of Marx through (sometimes untimely or even: ostentatively painful and absurd) reenactment, have been a specialism of other contemporary visual artists as well, especially that of Milena Bonilla, Rainer Ganahl, and Dmitry Gutov.

The Russian artist Dmitry Gutov keeps re-writing Marx quotes in gestural paintings, which allude to classical clichés of painting (the idea of the individual stroke of the brush, the handwriting) but also of reenactment in an explicitly exegetical manner. Gutov’s marxological exegesis thus also refers to (Christian) theology: Whereas the reference to exegesis suggests purely textual work, the works of Gutov are also iconic to the extent that they are also paintings. Then again, they are not really icons as the iconic dimension is attached to the representations of texts. In the last instance Gutov’s icons are not icons, but ideas, aesthetically reflexive works of Platonist Marxism.

Such a theological/marxologist gesture also characterizes another set of works of the Columbian artist Milena Bonilla, who, right-handed herself, copied a shortened version of Marx’s Capital, as it is used by Latin American trade unions for the education of workers, by rewriting it with her left hand. The product is a so-called sinister manuscript (playing on the double etymological dimension of sinister meaning “obscure” and “untrustworthy,” in some languages, and “left”), printed in three versions: the limited and super-expensive luxury version in leather (five copies for more than 10,000 euros), the still limited middle-class version (in an edition of 1,000 for about 50 euros), and the working-class version printed in 5,000 copies, given away for free. The monk-like reenactment of Marxian knowledge presents Marx’s work in analogy with the biblical tradition, a master-discourse, to be appropriated through the hard labor of exegesis and hermeneutics.

Milena Bonilla’s monk-like and self-disciplinary work, being a strategy of individual rather than a collective practice, contrasts with the collective reading seminars of
Rainer Ganahl. Throughout the years Ganahl has documented his learning processes with photo series of lectures that he has attended and with videos, notes, and sketches that document his own practice of learning languages. Furthermore, he staged numerous reading events, re-enacting 1970s political reading groups (as forms of socialization that were presenting alternatives to state and capital) in art spaces to discuss the work of Marx word-for-word. The most famous of these interactive group performances took place in a stretch limo driving around the 2009 Armory Show in New York, pushing the contradiction of an artsy Marxism to the extreme: Marxist revolutionary prose in combination with high-end luxury lifestyle.

Experimenting with inappropriate spaces for teaching Marxist discourse has also been a technique of Pedro Reyes’s video series Baby Marx (2011, ongoing), reminiscent of parody puppet shows (like the 1980s British television show Spitting Image). This series presents Marx and his illustrious interlocutors (most importantly Adam Smith, but also Frederick Engels, Frederick Taylor, Lenin, Mao, and Che; see Figure 12.8) somewhere between mocking frivolity and the didactic simplicity of children’s television.

Quite obviously, both Marx and his counterpart Adam Smith allegorically stand for two political models supposedly contradictory to each other; they are puppets of their own ideologies. These are discussed on the level of everyday-life conversations—such as the question of sharing a piece of cake, the value of eco-industries, or the evaluation of a Warhol painting. The Baby Marx videos address the relation between art, theory, and emancipation directly and playfully. And playfully appropriating Marx also means: through parody—ironically a stylistic gesture that Marx himself felt particularly close to.

Not only by the use of puppets itself, which already belittles the grandeur of the opposing political paradigms, the sexualized rhetoric and the general gesture of travesty also contribute to disenchanting their political clashes. The main means of parody is the unacknowledged love relation between Marx and Smith. But the moments of travesty reach further: because of his anachronistic dress and his pigtail wig, Che

Figure 12.8 Pedro Reyes, Baby Marx (Still), 2011
Guevara mistakes Adam Smith, indeed played by a female puppeteer, for a woman. And both Marx and Smith, in a somewhat sexualized moment of role-swapping, allude to sexual practices of fisting with reference to the political rhetoric of the “invisible hand” and the “raised fist of the revolution” as they become aware of the puppeteers literal invisible hand “inside” them. This contrasts directly with the apparently harmless character of puppets, whose minimal features also allude to the “sanitized” graphics with which young adults are taught “sexual education.”

The passionate but unacknowledged love relation between Marx and Smith, however, is about more than pure travesty. It expresses a dialectical structure. Hegel himself had originally used love as a key example for what dialectics was meant to be: a structure of reflexivity, of finding oneself in the other and a totalizing overcoming of the Kantian opposition between duty and inclination. The dialectical love of Marx and Smith emphasizes this mutual dependency: they cannot do without each other.  

But as much as for the major part of contemporary artistic positions on Marx, Reyes’s *Baby Marx* works is also conceived as a series about art—and most of the conversations are staged in the Walker Art Center (in the exhibition itself, in the restaurant, the gift shop), again and again circling around conditions of artistic production. In this way, however, the love/hate relationship between Marx and Smith identifies two issues. On the one hand, it identifies the inherent necessity of the capitalist business called “art” to produce values irreducible to the market (social values of symbolic equality, solidarity, universality). On the other hand, it underlines the negative fixation of critical art practices on the apparently despised opposite (capital, power, the market). Why not be constructive for a change? This mutual constitution of oppositional forces (Marx versus Smith, commercial art versus critical art, and so on) comprises the inner dialectic of the return of Marx in contemporary art. As emphasized before: the figure of Marx is used regularly as a metonymy for the institutional critique of contemporary art, either in its commercial nature or its class character.

The unacknowledged relation of Marx and Smith, then again (one might also think of the title of Giovanni Arrighi’s book, *Adam Smith in Beijing*, suggesting another bawdy alliance between Smith and communism), reminds us of the numerous complications of radical politics in the further course of history. There are intermediate zones between communism and capitalism, between representational and popular democracy, state and market, and so on. The recent Bolivarian experiments in finding the socialism of the twenty-first century are another case in point.

If *Baby Marx* associates learning and melancholy, this conjunction becomes even more explicit in the work of Chilean artist Alfredo Jaar. In Jaar’s *The Marx Lounge* (Liverpool 2010, Amsterdam 2011, Seville 2011), the dimension of loss and melancholy quite clearly reflects upon the social function and limits of art.

At first sight, however, *The Marx Lounge* deals with the continuity of the Marxist legacy itself. But, *The Marx Lounge*, too, turns Marx into art and into an idea. Art provides, as Alfredo Jaar stated at the opening of the exhibition in Amsterdam, “models of thinking,” and “each one of these works [referring to the books on the table] contains a model of thinking the world.” Based on the realm of ideas (which Marx himself rather ironically referred to in his critique of the young Hegelians), *The Marx Lounge* seems to be a truly committed and decent attempt to deal with
the tradition of emancipatory struggles and all the hopes and dreams that it had produced.

Jaar’s work is not only—and maybe not even so much—about real movements and worldly struggles but rather about an aesthetic allusion to the absent, to a sphere of aesthetic semblance. The *topos* of learning is not only exposing a conceptual and intellectual dimension of art. It also refers to something non-factual, which is always necessarily present not only in aesthetic semblance but also in learning processes, in knowledge that is not yet realized and in worlds that are still rather to be imagined than to be experienced. Analogously (although, however, more explicitly in line with deconstructive theory) Louis Marin has emphasized the radically textual dimension of utopia:

[I]t must never be forgotten that, first and foremost, utopia is a book. Its productive practice makes us realize what reading books, since the Renaissance, has impelled us to forget: It is a text whose reality is nowhere. It is a signifier whose signified is not a spatial and temporal ideality or a rational intelligibility. It is the product of its own play within the plural space it constructs. Utopia is tied to the book and to the world of discourse as the articulation of the world and of history.  

To speak more explicitly about the construction of the factual and the counterfactual in *The Marx Lounge* a few details are important: The Lounge consists of a big furnished reading room with couches, reading lamps, and a large $2 \times 10$ meter black table filled with neatly presented books of a (broadly understood) leftist tradition. The walls are painted red, and the name of the installation shines in yellow neon lettering above the heads of the spectators (see Figure 12.9).
Because of its suggestions of intimacy, with sofas and red walls, and because of the neon lettering, The Marx Lounge is also reminiscent of a brothel, where “innocent and noble ideas” are turned into sheer commodities and into mere objects of aesthetic desire—especially clear in the Amsterdam version of The Marx Lounge, in a city that presents its so-called Red Light District as one of its main sightseeing spots.

As said before, this is not only and not even particularly about Marx. In more than one respect The Marx Lounge is about art, about its institutional conditions and its political potentials. Alfredo Jaar’s The Marx Lounge thus addresses the necessary distortions the work of Marx has to undergo when it enters the institutional context of art. One may infer: In the commercialized art world even Marx, the most prominent critic of commodification, falls prey to its logics and will be prostituted. The political impact of art has clear limits.

Next to the allusions to prostitution another detail is important in this respect: the fact that the huge black table clearly resembles a deathbed. When politically radical ideas enter the realm of aesthetic semblance they change their status: In The Marx Lounge, Marx is not only distorted but mortified. This very fact stresses not only the general affinities between museum and mausoleum that Adorno had emphasized about fifty years ago:

The German word, ’museal’ [’museumlike’], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association.50

But let’s move back from Jaar’s lounge to the apparently parodic and funny Baby Marx series. For Baby Marx, too, includes the reflection of a distant and heaven-like realm of ideas that, in all of its purity, seems to be out of reach. Some of this is present in the enigmatic character of puppets in general, and the minimally anthropomorphic style of the Baby Marx puppets in particular, reminiscent of Bauhaus and Soviet theater (such as the theater of Meyerhold). With their motionless faces, the simplified and aestheticized puppets speak out of a distant world.

Reyes is more of a formalist than the general tone of laughter suggests. The puppets are emphatic pieces of craft, carefully designed and produced. These puppets aren’t only naïve—the naivety itself is reflected upon. Reflected-upon naivety, however, as one could say with Schiller, turns into sentimentality.51 Such sentimentality is a moment of aesthetic imagination, which already implies the awareness of a fundamental absence. Naivety, in other words, is a thing of the past, yearned for by a melancholic present.

This sense of melancholy is just as much implied in the allusion to children’s television and to the simplicity and naivety of easily identifiable ideological systems. It is not only the memory of Sesame Street that pushes the button of nostalgia.52 Again, the times (as in Ganahl’s Sketch of a Head of Glass) “when we were still young” and when the major ideological clashes were still openly present all over the planet stand for the big utopian promises of the twentieth century. These were the times when
politics still seemed to be simple and Marxist hopes (movements, struggles, particularly in the so-called “Third World”) were still alive.  

IV. Politics for art’s sake: producing the subject for an object

In his 1965 essay *Commitment*, Theodor Adorno refers to an interesting statement of Brecht, who “once calmly wrote that, to be honest, the theatre was more important to him than any changes in the world it might promote.” This sounds surprisingly escapist and apolitical for a political artist like Brecht. But the statement can also be read differently: Theater (art) needs politics for its own realization; it is immanently linked to it and turns into politics if it takes its inherent principles sufficiently seriously.

There is one specific reason for this immanent relation between art and politics that leads to an artistically reflexive dimension of learning: For artistic authorship is, regardless of all its romantic misunderstandings, not an omniscient position, and art does not just find the universal audience with easy access to the advanced forms of artistic practice—processes of learning are necessarily involved.

If *use! value! exchange!*, the Reading Seminars, Baby Marx, and The Marx Lounge are reflections upon Marx in terms of education, this dimension is crucial. In the third of his *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx writes: “The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that the educator must himself be educated.” Likewise, the artist does not simply transmit the truth. She might, however, provide means to learn the truth. The emphasis on education is thus an emphasis on providing the means for making advanced art possible at all.

Rainer Ganahl once phrased his own understanding of learning processes in political art as follows: “Art is not only about beauty and politics but also about the education of our sense of beauty and politics.” Education, however, means that both audience and producer, educators and the educated, need to be educated. Marx famously stated a comparable (if not the same) idea in the *Grundrisse*: “Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer.” These consumers are more than consumers only. And aesthetic production (much like emancipatory forms of education) operates differently than production according to a fixed plan. By producing not only intellectual associations but, with the means of collective education, also discourse and types of collectivity, a number of the key works discussed above create both associations of thought and associations between people. In that sense they are almost Marxist interferences. For, interestingly, communism is nothing else to Marx than the “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.” It is not a discourse of the master (in both the Lacanian and non-Lacanian senses) with an omniscient author to begin with, its openness to learning processes can thus at least just as much be inspired by aesthetic practices as by means of explicit and end-oriented forms of propaganda. Playful and experimental adaptations and appropriations of Marxism are therefore maybe far more akin to the emancipatory strife of the Marxian project than it might seem.
The many layers of this alliance—between art and politics—thus allow for the following conclusion: With their emphasis on learning processes, a great deal of the contemporary representations of Marx are just as much transcending autonomous art as they are sticking to its idea. Beyond the realm of mere art, on which they are all based, however, the works of Phil Collins, Rainer Ganahl, Alfredo Jaar, and Pedro Reyes create discursive communities, and help us to understand Marxist discourse in its own right. In such production of discourse art is more than art. It helps to construct a politics. Through an aesthetic odyssey of his own, Marx is coming home.

Notes


2 See Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-garde (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 20–27.

3 Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 102.


8 Although not fully academic in its character, the 2013 publication Ikone Karl Marx. Kultbilder und Bilderkult, ed. Elisabeth Dühr (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2013) gives a far-reaching account of the history of Marx-portraits in the context of political
culture. Although it does not dig into the question of the systematic role that Marx (and his likeness) plays in contemporary art and aesthetics, and although it neither truly analyzes and interprets the rich collection of Marx images that it collects while it treats them as a pure (quasi-religious) icons, I have been strongly inspired and am deeply indebted by its choice of images and its historical sketches.

9 One might particularly think of the tradition of Mexican muralists from Diego Rivera to David Alfaro Siqueiros and Gabriel Flores. It corresponds, both formally and politically, with the realism of painters like the Italian Renato Guttuso and innumerable but anonymous painters and poster designers of the Portuguese Carnation Revolution. Even painters with major success on the capitalist art market (like the German painter Jörg Immendorff) were, in the 1970s, card-carrying members of communist organizations (in Immendorff’s case the KPD/AO).


16 The author is indebted to Ksenija Berk, who has brought this poster and the history of its reception to his attention.

17 The one shining example for a newly installed socialist monument is Hans Haacke’s installation piece on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz, Berlin (2006), consisting of a selection of Luxemburg quotes set into the pavement that confront unsuspecting passers-by with the history of a radically social understanding of democracy.

18 The surrealist avant-garde (around Georges Bataille) expressed their own vision of aesthetico-political revolution in the image of decapitation—such as the title of the journal edited by Bataille and others between 1936 and 1939: Acéphale. See Denis Hollier, ed., The College of Sociology (1937–1939) (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

19 See for instance Alex Thomson, Deconstruction and Democracy (London: Continuum, 2005).


26 A motif that one finds in a similar fashion in Mike Leigh's 1988 film *High Hopes*, with the famous scene in front of the official Marx monument at Highgate Cemetery, where the protagonist couple (Cyril and Shirley) is also trying to appropriate and make sense of the no longer merely clear tradition of Marx.


35 Referring to two examples of GDR-art (Ludwig Engelhardt's monument *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels* and Senta Baldamus *Jugend der Welt*), the artistic status of which became problematic with the collapse of their specific system of valorization: the art system of the GDR, also poses the self-reflexive question concerning the historical-political condition of art. I discuss this in my text "Back to School. Die Geschichte der Gegenwart" in Phil Collins's marxism today (prologue) and *use! value! exchange!*” in *Display | Dispositiv. Ästhetische Ordnungen*, eds Ursula Frohne, Lilian Haberer, and Annette Urban (Munich: Fink, forthcoming).


See Chapter 11 by Sven Lütticken in this volume.

Rimini Protokoll, a group of German dramatists who have staged *Capital, Volume One* in several contexts since 2006. For instance, see Rimini Protokoll, “Karl Marx: Capital, Volume One,” http://www.rimini-protokoll.de/website/en/project_92.html (last accessed on July 6, 2017). In the 2015 Venice Biennale *Capital vol. One* was also read by actors, staged by the chief curator of the Biennale, Okwui Enwezor.

In fact Walter Benjamin was fascinated by the way in which painters imitated monks to appropriate the legacy of Christianity. See: *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1998), 167.


Alfredo Jaar’s opening speech can be seen on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrqlpRtjP5c (last accessed on December 29, 2012). The respective quotes appear at around 2’ and 3’.

As, for instance, in the *German Ideology*, where Marx and Engels write: “Since the Young Hegelians consider conceptions, thoughts, ideas, in fact all the products of consciousness, to which they attribute an independent existence, as the real chains
of men (just as the Old Hegelians declared them the true bonds of human society) it is evident that the Young Hegelians have to fight only against these illusions of consciousness.” In *MECW: vol. 5 1845–1847* (New York: International Publishers 1976), 30.


52 The *Sesame Street* show has been broadcasted since 1969 in over 140 countries. It can be considered the most successful and influential children’s television show on the planet and therefore also as one the most powerful tools to shape the collective imagination of children.

53 Particularly in these times, of course, the rhetoric of puppets (“puppet state,” “capitalist puppet,” and so on) was predominant.


59 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, “Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *MECW: vol. 6*, 506. See also my chapter on Free Associations (Chapter 4) in this volume.
Index

Abensour, Miguel, xxxii, 91 n.45
abstraction, xxii, xxxix, xlvii, 7, 19, 49–64, 68–9, 75, 106, 168–74, 209, 229–33, 238, 241, 252
accelerationism, 9–12, 20 n.31, 21 n.43
accumulation, 10, 12, 34, 50, 231, 235–40
Acha, Juan, xlviii, 203, 204, 218, 220–2
action, xxxiv–xxxv, lvii n.151, 7, 23–34, 39–41, 43 n.14, 44 n.26, 47 n.54, 49, 74, 92 n.54, 103, 128, 142, 175, 205, 212–13, 221–2; (see also praxis)
active exhibitions, 194; (see also art actions)
actualization, xxxii–xxxiii, 26, 29, 35–7, 41, 45 n.36, 170–1, 175
Adorno, Theodor W., xi, xxvi, xlvii, 73, 93 n.73, 112, 126, 233, 241, 248 n.19, 252, 262, 267, 269,
272 n.31; Aesthetic Theory, xlix n.5, 73, 93 n.73, 252
aesthetico-political, xiv, 3, 88, 93 n.70, 73, 204, 211, 218, 219, 222, 223–4, 225 n.4, 233, 271 n.18
Agamben, Giorgio, 191
aisthesis (aisthetikos), xiii, xxxiv, xlvii, 3, 8, 35, 40–1
alienation, xix, xlvi, 4–7, 97, 112, 123, 126, 130, 138, 165, 171, 181 n.73, 75, 76, 208–10, 241
allegory, xiii, xlvii, 50, 64–9, 178 n.30
Althusser, Louis, xxxii, 21 n.37, 74, 79, 112, 163, 180 n.68, 204, 207, 211, 218–19
American minimalism, 188–9
Anderson, Kevin B., xvii, 161 n.5
Anderson, Perry, 11–13
Anscombe, G.E.M., 28–9, 42 n.3
anti-aesthetics, 214, 221
arbitrariness, 53, 60, 64–8, 78–9
Arendt, Hannah, xxxii, 23, 27–33, 43 n.14, 44 n.26, 47 n.43
Aristotle, xv, xxxi–xxxiii, xlv, lv n.108, 23–37, 40–1, 42 n.4 n.6 n.8, 43–4 n.23, 44 n.25, 45 n.34, 46 n.37 n.38, 47 n.54, 112, 180 n.66; De Anima, 23, 31–5, 43 n.21, 46 n.38; Metaphysics, 25–6, 29, 42 n.4 n.10, Nicomachean Ethics, 24, 27–8, 32
art actions, 38, 41, 212–13
art market, 112, 119, 241, 266, 271 n.9
art object, xlii, xxxv, 17, 204, 209–14, 218–22
association, xlii, xlvii, 36, 73–5, 79–88, 93 n.69, 70, 269; psychological (free), 10, 77–9, 89 n.7, 90 n.29, 91 n.47 n.51, 92 n.54, 169–70, 235; political, 75–7, 82, 90 n.19, 177, 180 n.60
autonomy, 49–50, 53, 66, 77, 167, 177, 210, 242, 252; of the aesthetic, xii, xxxi–xxxii, xlii, 8, 19, 252; of value, 53–6, 68; (see also signifier, autonomy of)
avant-garde, xv, xxvi, xxxi, xlv, 8, 12, 210, 220–2, 230, 252, 271 n.18; relation to political vanguard, xxxii, 252–4; Russian 187, 194–201
de Balzac, Honoré, xvi, li n.36, lii n.49, 88, 99
base, economic, 6, 116, 121, 128–33, 136–7, 146, 151, 238, 258
Baudrillard, Jean, x, 231
Bauer, Bruno, 5, 104
Baumgarten, Alexander Gottlieb, xxvi, xxix, xxxix, xxxix, 5
beauty, x, xiii–xiv, xviii, xxxv, xxxix, xlvii, 4–7, 64, 101–6, 165–6, 170, 195–7, 252, 269; metaphysical basis for, 99; Vischer’s concept of, 97–101, 108 n.17
Benjamin, Walter, xx–xxi, xxxvi, lii n.64, 8, 12–13, 38–40, 47 n.45, 62–9, 71 n.35,
72 n.38, 233, 244, 270 n.6, 273 n.41;  
*Arcades Project*, xx, xlvii, 64–7, 93 n.70  
Bennett, Tony, xxiv–xxv, xliii  
Bergemann, Sybille, 256–7, 262  
Berman, Marshall, 10–14, 16, 18  
body, xx, xxiv, 18, 30–1, 58, 86–8,  
93 n.64, 106, 170, 199; collective,  
xx, xxx, liv n.98, 79; of the commodity,  
57–8, 61–2, 121  
Boltanski, Luc, 241  
Bonaparte, Louis, xxxv, 4, 8, 14–15, 140,  
143–5, 152, 154–7, 159–61  
Bonilla, Milena, 259–60, 264  
Bosteels, Bruno, 211, 223–4, 226 n.35  
bourgeoise, xii, xiv, xvi–xviii, xx–xxi, xxv,  
xliii, liv n.101, 4, 7, 9, 12, 14–18,  
51, 63, 67, 73, 76, 81–3, 106, 111, 117,  
131–46, 157–60, 171, 191, 207, 251;  
aesthetics of, xxx–xxvi, 210, 230  
Brecht, Bertolt, xliii, l n.18, 13, 229, 256,  
269  
Broadie, Sarah, 40, 44 n.25, 47 n.51  
de Brosses, Charles, 230  
Burch, Noël, xlix, 231–7, 248 n.17  
Bürger, Peter, xxvi, xliii, 8, 252; *Theory of the  
Avant-garde*, xxvi, 252  
Burke, Edmund, xx, 98–100, 108 n.20, 113  
Burke, Kenneth, 132  
Bustamante, Maris, 222–3  
capital, xxiii–iv, xxxii, xxxvii–viii, xlv, xlix,  
lii n.49, 4, 9, 54, 66, 73–7, 80–2, 220, 229,  
235, 240, 264; accumulation of, 12, 50;  
fixed, 238, 242; money as, 45 n.34, 57–8,  
60, 64, 237; movement of, 45 n.34,  
237–8; representing, 235–42;  
reproduction of, 12, 35; time of, 11  
Castoriadis, Cornelius, 83, 87  
Chiapello, Éve, 241  
Chytry, Joseph, xxviii  
cinemarxism, 235, 248 n.22  
cognitive mapping, 231  
collaboration, artistic, 41, 212  
collective organization, xx, xxx, liv n.98, 38,  
158, 165, 168, 173, 177, 199, 206–7,  
211–12, 215 (see also self-organization)  
Collins, Phil, xlv, xlix, 262–4, 270  
comedy (the comic), 14–16, 101, 104–6,  
113, 116, 132, 134, 137, 147  
commodity, x, xxxvi, xlvi, 15, 18–19,  
44 n.26, 46 n.37, 49–69, 77, 88, 106,  
116–23, 171, 237, 263; artwork as, 112,  
239, 242; commodity-language, xlvii,  
59–69, 120; dual character of, 49–59, 67;  
fetishism, xlii–xliii, 13, 62–3, 67, 73, 82,  
111, 181 n.75, 230, 242; supra-sensuous  
nature of, xxxvi, xlvii, 62  
communism, xix, xxviii, xxxvi, xxxviii, xl, 4,  
12–14, 45 n.30, 136–8, 185–6, 193, 253,  
258, 266, 269; artist under, 241;  
primitive, 125–7, 136; council, 84;  
Eastern European, 185, 191 (see also  
party)  
connectivity, 76, 78, 81–2, 84–5, 89 n.14  
consciousness, x, xlvi, 5–6, 22 n.63,  
90 n.32, 113, 119–21, 123–42, 145–7,  
204, 209–11, 273 n.48; class, xliii n.4;  
false, 56–7; practical xxi–xxiv, lii n.61,  
75; self, 7, 100, 158  
contradiction, xviii, xxxvi, xxx, 102, 113, 139,  
160, 175–6, 208, 257–8; in capitalism, xi,  
xxxv, 8–11, 19, 21 n.37, 54, 100, 134, 240,  
242; in Eighteenth Brumaire, 142–6; in  
aesthetics, xxvi, xlv–xlvi, 252, 265  
copyright, xlvii, 170–4, 177  
counter-information, 213, 219, 222  
creative labor, (see artist, labor of)  
critique (criticism), xiii, xiv, xv, xix, xxii,  
xxxvi, xlii, 5, 7, 10, 19, 22 n.80, 32,  
44 n.26, 75, 104, 131, 179 n.60, 180 n.68;  
of aesthetics, xlv, xlvii, 73–4, 195–6,  
204, 220–2; in aesthetics, xiii, xxvi, xlii,  
41, 165, 191, 206, 209–11; ideology, xlii,  
xlv, 32, 204, 211, 218–19; institutional,  
199, 203–4, 213–19  
Cuban Revolution, 203, 207, 218, 226 n.31  
cult, xii, 62–3  
curator, 190–1, 193, 243  
“Curso Vivo de Arte”, 218  
cut, 54–5, 67–8  
Darwin, Charles, 92 n.59, 123  
death, 65, 113, 159, 192, 201, 260; drive, 14  
Deleuze, Gilles (and Guattari, Félix), xvi,  
93 n.69  
democracy, xxix–xxx, 30, 91 n.45, 143, 160,  
168, 190, 204, 206, 211–12, 224, 257, 266,  
271 n.17
dependency theory, 203, 214, 220
Derrida, Jacques, xvi, xxix–xxx, lli n.64, 14, 257–8, 263, 272 n.23 n.32; Specters of Marx, 62, 256–7, 262
determinism, xxxii, 11–12, 111, 129, 132, 136, 210, 218
diachronicity, 116, 128, 146
dialectic, xv, xiv, xlii, 7, 8, 12, 16, 98–101, 104–5, 118, 124, 127–30, 137–9, 143, 146, 170, 210, 220, 242, 266, 273 n.45; dialectical materialism, 111, 116, 131–2, 211; dialectical montage (see montage); of art, 252; of capital, xxxvii, lvi
difference, x–xi, xxix, 51–7, 64–9, 118, 125–7, 178–9 n.34; (see also repetition, difference with)
division, xviii, 112, 126, 166; of class, xxviii, xxx; of labor, xi, xxxii, xxxix, xl–xli, lvii n.148, 43 n.14, 46 n.37, 85, 125–7, 130–3, 166–7, 169, 186–7, 196, 241
drama, l n.18, 100, 132, 134, 143, 146; dramatis personae, xxxvi, 18, 153; (see also tragedy)
dunamis, 25, 33, 35, 46 n.38
Eagleton, Terry, xxvi–xxvii, xlii, 87, 164, 167
Early Marx, (see Marx, young)
Ehrenberg, Felipe, 206, 213, 215
Ehmann, Antje, 245
Eisenstein, Sergei, xlv, xlvii, 229, 233, 235, 237
empiricism, 50, 73
evergeia, xxxiii, xlvi, 23–35, 41, 42 n.7 n.8 n.11, 43 n.14, 46 n.36 n.39; (see also praxis)
Engelhardt, Lewis, 256–7, 262, 272 n.35
Engels, Frederick, xlix n.6, 77, 92 n.59, 125, 138, 145, 152, 153, 155, 156; with Karl Marx, x, xii, xxii, xxxiii, xlv, xlix n.6, li n.36, liv n.93, 3, 8, 9, 76, 81, 84, 111, 123, 159, 186–90, 193, 196–7
English political economy, xvii, xviii, 115, 123
enlightenment, 15, 135, 167, 169; French, xxxii; British/Scottish, 77, 82
Enzensberger, Hans Magnus, 230
essay film, 231, 234–5
exhibition, 189, 190–6
Facebook, 239, 241–2
family, li n.33, 4, 100, 124, 126, 144, 160
farce, xlvii, 14, 18, 100, 104–5, 140–1, 145 156–7
Farocki, Harun, 229, 245, 247 n.4, 248 n.22
Fechner, Gustav Theodor, 78
Fedorov-Davydov, Alexei, 194–5
fetishism, (see commodity, fetishism of)
Feuerbach, Ludwig, xviii, xvi, xxxiv, 4, 5, 41, 62, 115, 131, 171, 181 n.69, 181 n.74, 208–9
Fichte, Johann Gottlieb, xiii, 103, 173–4, 179 n.46, 182 n.93
film, xlv, xlvii, xlix, 13, 38–40, 229–50
Fluxus, 213
form-content/form-matter dichotomy, xvii, xxxi, xxxiv, xxxv, 12, 14, 18, 35, 37, 50, 64, 116–17, 119, 121–3, 130, 136–8, 141–2, 165, 171, 174–6, 229, 243–4
Formwalt, Zachary, xlv, xlix, 237–9, 242–3
Foucault, Michel, xvi, xxxvii, 87, 92 n.62, 118, 194
Fourier, Charles, xix, xx, liv n.94, 76, 89 n.14, 241
freedom, xviii, xxvii, xxxvi, xlv, lvii n.151, 81; of the press, 102, 152, 180 n.60; (see also association, political)
Frente Mexicano de Grupos Trabajadores de la Cultura, 204, 214
Freud, Sigmund, xlv, xlvii, 73–4, 79–88, 90 n.32, 91 n.39, 92 n.54, 92 n.61, 94 n.76
Friche, Vladimir, 195–6
Fried, Michael, 188–90
Ganahl, Ranier, xlv, xlix, 260–2, 264, 265, 269–70, 273 n.42
gattungswesen, (see species-being)
gaze, 164, 188–91
German Democratic Republic, 254, 263, 272 n.35
genus, 29, 170, 181 n.69, actualization of, 170; (see also species-being)
Gerard, Alexander, 77, 78
German Idealism, xiv, xviii, xx, xxvii, xxxiv, xlii, 6, 26, 42 n.6, 103, 123, 129
God, lii n.64, 5, 171, 181 n.74
Godard, Jean-Luc, 242
von Goethe, Johann Wolfgang, xii, xvii, xxviii, 6, 26, 42 n.6, 103, 123, 129
Gramsci, Antonio, xxiii, xl, lv n.119, lvii n.147, 91 n.38, 163, 168, 179–80 n.60
Gravenhorst, Fred, 253
Greenberg, Clement, 196
Grimm, Reinhold, 105
Gruppen movement, 204, 206, 207, 211–14, 218–19, 224, 225 n.3, 226
Guattari, Félix, xvi, lvi n.141, 93 n.69; (see also Deleuze, Gilles)
Gutov, Dmitry, xlv, 264
Habermas, Jurgen, xxix, 23, 27, 30, 33, 44 n.26, 90 n.63
Hamacher, Werner, 59, 63, 71–2 n.35.
Hardt, Michael, lvi, 239, 248 n.33
Harltey, David, 77, 87
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, xvi, xxi, xviii, xxviii, lvi n.58 n.64, 4, 5, 26, 44 n.26, 98, 101, 109 n.41, 113, 115, 132, 135, 146–7, 163, 210, 230, 266, 273 n.45; aesthetics of, xxviii, 98–101, 103, 118; Marx's critique of, xviii, xxviii, 3, 5, 7, 10, 17, 105, 140, 146, 155–6; *Phenomenology of Spirit*, xviii–xix, li n.33, li n.46, 49; *Philosophy of Right*, li n.46, 6, 162 n.2; (see also Young Hegelians)
hegemony, xxviii, 67, 165–70, 176–7
Heidegger, Martin, xiii, 22 n.80, 31–2, 42 n.3, 43–4 n.23, 47 n.56, 71 n.23, 164
Heine, Heinrich, xvii–xviii
Herbert, Johann Friedrich, 78
Herwegh, Georg, xviii
hiddenness, xxxvi, 80, 88, 118–23, 136, 142, 188–93
Hijar, Alberto, 203–4, 213, 218–20, 224, 227 n.51
Honneth, Axel, 44 n.26
Hörisch, Jochen, 63, 65
Hugo, Victor, 154, 244
Hume, David, 77–9, 87
Hutcheson, Francis, 77–8
ideological critique, (see critique, ideology)
ideology, xi, xxvi, 21 n.37, 32, 62, 74, 75–6, 79, 80, 82, 85, 112, 169, 204, 218–19, 251–2, 261; aesthetic, xiv, xxv, xlviii, xlvi; production, 204, 219
imagery, 88, 152–61, 253–4; Greek, 159, 166; Roman, 157, 160
imagination, xxii, xxiv, xxxix, 16, 77–9, 98, 161, 169, 198, 209, 212, 274 n.52; aesthetic, 152; utopian, 185–6
Immortal Technique, xlv
individual, xv, xix, xxviii, lvi n.151, 10, 33, 36, 41, 45 n.30, 49, 50, 81, 85–8, 122, 125, 130, 157, 164, 169–70, 172, 190, 196, 242; individualism, xlviii, 207
industry, x, xxxv, 8–10, 81, 105, 124, 133, 135, 158, 160, 175, 193, 206, 238, 241, 248 n.29, 249 n.42; creative, x, 241;
culture, 204, 218, 220–1, 238, 241, 244; industrial revolution, xvii; industrial working class, xx, 76; postindustrial, 239
installation, xlviii, 187–201, 205–6, 235, 258, 260, 267, 271 n.17
institutional critique, (see critique, institution)
intervention, xxvi, xxxiii, lvi n.49, 39, 169;
political, xvi, xxxviii, 131, 151–5, 161, 204
irony, xlvii, 100, 112, 122–4, 133, 136–40, 143, 146, 155
isomorphism, 85–7, 93 n.73
Italian autonomism, xxxviii, 238
Jaar, Alfredo, xlvi, xlix, 235, 266–8, 270, 273 n.47
Jameson, Frederic, x, xxvi, lvi n.121, 10, 21 n.56, 74, 112, 230, 231, 233, 235, 252–3, 272 n.32; *Political Unconscious*, xxvi
Judd, Donald, 188–9
Jullien, Isaac, xlv, 247 n.15
Kabakov, Ilya, 190, 192, 197–201
Kant, Immanuel, xii–xiii, xviii, xxviii, xxxiii–xxxiv, xxxv, xxxix, xli, 3, 3, 5, 6, 51, 82, 86–7, 103, 108 n.14, 176, 178 n.25, 179 n.46, 266; *Critique of Judgment*, xviii, 99
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kellner, Hans</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerbel, Lew</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kierkegaard, Søren</td>
<td>xix, l n.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kierkegaard, Søren</td>
<td>xix, l n.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kinesis</td>
<td>xlvi, 23, 26, 29, 31, 35, 42 n.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kluge, Alexander</td>
<td>xxxvi, xlv, xxviii, 87, 233–5, 237, 239–40, 248 n.16 n.22, 264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kompridis, Nikolas</td>
<td>xxix, 22 n.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krahl, Hans-Jürgen</td>
<td>238, 248 n.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kubofuturism</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labor</td>
<td>xiv, xix–xx, xxiv, xxviii, xxiv, xl–xli, xlviii, xlv n.5, lvi n.124, 6–8, 10, 17, 23, 26–7, 30–41, 44 n.26, 45 n.36, 49, 59–60, 76–7, 80, 87, 97, 112, 170–1, 180 n.68, 181 n.75, 208, 248–9 n.33; immaterial, xvii, xl, 238, 240, 242, 244–5; labor-time, 117, 242, 249 n.42; organization of, xii, 59, 73, 193–7; power, xxxvi–xxviii, 31, 82, 85, 241; representation of, 229–34, 247 n.4; sensuous, xiii, 4; theory of value, 116–23, 137, 230, 241–2, 249 n.36 n.42; (see also artist, labor of and division, of labor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacan, Jacques</td>
<td>xvi, 55–6, 269</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laclau, Ernesto</td>
<td>74, 79–80, 218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>language</td>
<td>xiv, xxii–xx, xxiv, xxv, xli, xlvii, lvi n.64, 13, 16–17, 39, 49–56, 68–9, 71 n.24, 75, 89 n.8, 115, 120–1, 146, 154–5, 158, 180 n.66, 213, 224; linguistic turn, xxiii, lii n.61, 16; (see also commodity, commodity-language)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laplanche, Jean</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lassalle, Ferdinand</td>
<td>xviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin America</td>
<td>203–5, 207–8, 211, 213–14, 218–24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lenin, Vladimir Ilyich</td>
<td>xiii, xii, xx, xcv iii, xci–xlii, xlvi, 4, 8–18, 21 n.37, 22 n.63, 76–7, 81, 84, 125, 131–2, 137–8, 153, 159, 162 n.25, 256; <em>Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right</em>, xxxii, 171; <em>Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte</em>, xxxiv, xlv–xlvi, xliii, 4, 10, 13, 21, 22 n.63, 105, 110 n.56, 115, 140–5, 151, 153–61, 162 n.25; <em>German Ideology</em>, xliv, xlviii, lii n.55, 7, 14, 77, 97, 124–5, 127, 186–7, 209, 211, 241, 249 n.36, 258, 273 n.48; <em>Grundrisse</em>, xxii–xxv, lvi n.61, 4, 7, 17–18, 161 n.8, 220, 241–2, 269; journalism of, xlviii, 102, 106, 152–3, 172; <em>Paris Manuscripts</em>, xviii, xxxix; poetry of, xii, 101; representation of, xliv, 254–60, 262, 271 n.8; <em>Theses On Feuerbach</em>, 4, 5, 41, 97, 114, 171, 181, 208, 269, 274; the young, xii, xlv, xlviii, xxxviii, lv n.117, 23, 33, 35, 62, 106, 165–77, 211, 229, 254, 273</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifshitz, Mikhail</td>
<td>xii, 104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lissitzky, El</td>
<td>xlvi, 190, 192–6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locke, John</td>
<td>xix, 6, 77–9, 108 n.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lukács, Georg</td>
<td>xi, xii, xxvii, xxxvi, xxviii, xlv, 92 n.54, 98, 104, 230, 233, 248 n.17; <em>Aesthetics</em>, lvi n.124; <em>History and Class Consciousness</em>, lvi n.151, 65–6, 91 n.47, 92 n.53 n.55; <em>Theory of the Novel</em>, lii n.83, 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxemburg, Rosa</td>
<td>84, 92 n.54, 271 n.17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

M-19, 213, 222
Machiavelli, Niccolò, 163–4 *(see also virtù)*
machine, xx, xxiii–xxiv, xxxviii, 39, 130, 195, 259
Malevich, Kaszimir, 187–8, 194; *Black Square*, 188–92, 197–8
manifestation, xxi, xxvii, xxviii, xlii, 5, 28–31, 34–6, 43 n.12, 80, 94 n.76, 136, 169–70, 173, 177, 179 n.46, 185; art as, 112, 197, 244
manifesto, form of, xxxiii, 8, 11–12, 38–9 *(see also Marx, Karl, manifesto)*
Marchart, Oliver, xliii
Marcuse, Herbert, xii, xxviii, xlii, li n.40, 74, 207, 229–30; *Affirmative Character of Culture*, xxv–xxvi
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, xv
masquerade, 11, 155–9, 162 n.22
material, xix, xxvi, lii n.61, 26, 53, 55, 62, 66, 68, 72 n.38, 82, 87, 88, 209, 218, 220; conditions, xvii, xxii, xxiii, xxix, 9, 124, 130, 141–2, 145, 164, 166, 169, 185, 188, 209; history, xiii, xvi, xxxvi
materialism, xiv, xvi, xlviii, xx, xxv–xxvi, xxix, lii n.64, lviii n.155, 5, 41, 51, 56–7, 71 n.28, 78–9, 98, 105, 154, 162 n.16, 190, 207, 244, 269; historical, xii–xiii, xxiv, xxvi, xxxix, xlvii–xlviii, 14, 115–16, 124, 132, 153–4, 218; of Marx, xxx, 32, 80, 185, 260; (see dialectic, dialectical materialism)
Matveev, Alexander, 254–5
McNally, David, xx, xxi
Mehlman, Jeffrey, 14, 105
Menke, Christoph, xxix
metaphor, xxix, xlvii, 46 n.37, 50, 53, 59, 118–26, 129, 136–9, 142, 143, 145, 146, 154–5, 221
Metcalfe’s law, 241, 249 n.39
method, xlvii, 50, 74–5, 79–88, 91 n.47, 129, 195
Mexican conceptualism, 203–24
Mexican muralism, 206–7
Michael, Christopher Domínguez, 206
Mihaltianu, Dan, xliv
Mill, James, 33, 37, 45 n.32, 78
modernism, 8, 10–11, 14, 18, 86, 112, 230; modernist art, xxiii, 190, 197–201, 210, 248 n.17, 252
money form of value, xlvii, 55, 58, 117–18, 122, 139, 144
montage, 12, 229–40, 244–6
monument, xlii, 254–5, 262–4, 271 n.17, 272 n.26 n.35
morality, xii, xv, xxiv, xxix, xxxiii, 40, 63, 72 n.35, 100, 114, 171, 176
Muñoz, Víctor, 212, 214
museum, xv, 197, 199, 212, 242–3, 244, 268
naïveté, xviii, xxvii–xxviii, 155, 268
negation/negativity, xvi, xxi, xxviii, li n.46, 5, 8, 19, 21 n.37, 53, 55, 60–1, 68, 99, 103, 139, 188, 207; double, xxii, 7, 100–1, 104, 108 n.27, 129
Negri, Antonio, xxxii–xxxiii, 239, 242, 248 n.33, 249 n.42
Negt, Oskar, 87, 239, xxxvi
neo-paganism, 62–3
Nietzsche, Friedrich, xiii–xvi, xix, xxviii, xxix–xxxii, l n.14 n.16, liv n.92 n.100, 72 n.35, 87, 90 n.32, 92, 100, 103, 113
No-Grupo, 204, 213–16, 221–3
no-objetualismo, 220–1
nothingness, 187–90, 192
novel, 39, 187, 230, 233, 244
objectification, xxxvi, 4, 7, 26, 33, 36–7, 45 n.36, 131, 189 (see also subject-object dichotomy)
objectivity, xii, xxxiv, 9, 57–8, 62, 70 n.23, 98; phantom, 66, 263
Old Testament, 17, 157, 158
ontology, xxx, xxxiv, 7, 47 n.43, 58, 79–82, 84, 85, 162 n.16, 175, 257, 263; political, 91 n.51, 93 n.69
organization, xxx, xxxv–xxxvi, xlv, 59, 82, 84–5, 87–8, 187, 193–7, 248 n.29, economic 125; historical, xxiii, xxxi, xxxvi–xxxvii, xxxix; political, lvii n.151, 34, 54, 81, 85; social, xx, xxxvi, liv n.98, 76–7, 125, 127, 133, 136; (see also self-organization)
Osborne, Peter, 11–13, 14, 233
painting, 102, 106, 187, 189–90, 196, 198–9, 214, 241, 254, 256, 264, 271 n.9, 273 n.40
Paris Commune, xiv, l n.16, lvi n.128, 141, 145, 160, 170
party, 16, 84, 92 n.53, 135; Communist, 84, 191, 194, 196, 210
Paz, Octavio, 210, 221
Peck, Raoul, xliv
phronesis, xxxiv, 23–5, 27, 32, 39–41, 42 n.12, 47 n.51 n.56
Plato, xv–xvi, xvii, xxxi, xxxiii, xl, 7, 31, 87, 101, 258, 264
play, xviii, xix, xxviii, xxxix, liv n.94, 82; aesthetic, xli; drive, 37, 166, 169
poiesis, xlvii, 24–36, 38, 42 n.8, 43 n.14, 44 n.26, 46 n.42, 180 n.66
poetry, xv, xlii, xxviii, xxxiv, 98, 101; of the future, xxxv, xli, 8, 17, 18, 21 n.56, 159
(post also Marx, Karl, poetry)
Pollock, Jackson, 24
Pontalis, Jean-Bertrand, 79
Postone, Moishe, xxxviii, 180 n.68
praxis (practice), xi, xxi, xxv–xxvi, xxiii, xxxiv, xxxv, xlvi, 23–34, 38, 41, 42 n.11, 43 n.14, 44 n.26, 47 n.43, 93 n.73, 115, 127–9, 171, 180 n.66, 203, 204, 206–11, 218–19, 241–2
precariat, 239, 242, 244
proletariat, xvii–xviii, xxx, xxxiii, lvii n.151, 4, 10, 16, 22 n.63, 54, 68, 84, 105, 132, 134–46, 140–1; negativity of, 60; revolution of, 4, 14, 85, 142–3
propaganda, 193, 196, 269
Prussia, 145, 168; press censorship in, 102, 104–5, 174–6
psychoanalysis, xlvii, 55, 73, 74–5, 78–81, 83–6, 89 n.14, 91 n.37
psychology, 73, 78–80, 91 n.39, 92 n.61, 165
Punin, Nikolai, 194
Rancière, Jacques, xiii, xxx–xxxii, xxxix, xl–xlii, xlv, liv n.98, livii n.144 n.154, livii n.155, 3, 39, 46–7 n.43, 87–8, 94 n.76, 164, 178 n.19, 274 n.58; Distribution of the Sensible, xxxi, 17–19, 38, 88
Raphael, 186–7
rationality, aesthetic, xxxii, 81, 82, 85, 87
realism, xvi, xl, 132–3, 158, 190, 196, 207, 210, 226 n.29, 230, 252–4, 271 n.9 n.12
reenactment, 264
relations of production, xlix n.5, 8, 12, 21 n.37, 32, 52, 73, 82, 83, 128, 131
repetition, xxxiii, 4, 15–18, 31, 105, 155–8, 270 n.1; with difference, 18, 156
representation, xxx, xxix–xxxii, 73–4, 78–83, 91 n.37 n.38, 93 n.69, 146–7, 168–9, 211, 214, 219, 221–4, 230, 237; anti-representation, 79, 90 n.30; disrupting, 87–8; repetition as, 18; symbolic, 93 n.69; (see also labor, representation of and Marx, Karl, representation of) repression, 74, 80, 82–3, 85–8, 94 n.76
reproduction, xxx, xxxvi, xxxvii, 34–5, 54, 87, 124, 156–7; of capital, 12, 35
Reyes, Pedro, 259, 265–6, 268, 270
Ricoeur, Paul, xiv, 90 n.32
Romanticism, 86, 103, 113, 172
Rose, Margaret, xviii, 174
ruinedness, 65–8
Russian constructivism, 193
Sánchez Vázquez, Adolfo, xlviii, 203–5, 207–11, 218–20, 224
de Saussure, Ferdinand, 52–6, 68
Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph, xviii, xxviii, 5, 99, 108 n.17
Schiller, Friedrich, xii, xviii, xxviii–xxix, xxxix, xlvii, 39, 87–8, 100, 104, 164–71, 172–7, 178 n.34, 268 Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, xxviii, 87, 163–70, 177 n.8, 178 n.27, 181 n.88 (see also play, drive)
Schlingensief, Christoph, 244
science, xxix, xl, 21 n.37, 74, 106, 111–12, 115, 116, 132, 238; bourgeois, 51, 111; social, 114
sculpture, 259, 262 (see also monument)
Sekula, Allan, xlix, 231–3, 235–7
self-education, 168–9
self-organization, xxxiv, xl–xlii, 73, 76–7, 168
self-regulation, xxxii, liv n.96, lv n.115, 79, 81–2, 85–8
self-understanding, 101–3
semblance, xv, xvi, xxii, xxvi, xxx, xxxiii, xxxvi–xxxvii, 37, 39, 68, 78, 252, 262, 267–8, 272 n.31
senses, x, xiii, xxx, xxxv, xxxvi–xxxix, xlvii, 36–8, 46 n.42, 79, 165, 166; organization of, xii–xvi, 10; transformation of, xli, 3–10, 13–14, 17–18, 21 n.37, 74, 230
sensuousness, xiii–xiv, xviii–xix, xxiii–xxvii, xxix, xxxvi–xlii, 4–6, 41, 171, 208–9, 230, 241, 251 (see also commodity, suprasensuous nature of)
sentimentality, xxvii, 133, 268
Shakespeare, William, xvii–xviii, xxiii–xxiv, lii n.52; Hamlet, 258; Tempest, 9, 20 n.29
Shelley, Mary, xx–xi
signifier, xlvii, 50, 63–5, 80; materiality of, xxxiii, lii n.61; autonomy of, 52–7, 60, 68
Silva-Avária, Cristián, 246
sinnlichkeit (see sensuousness)
Siqueiros, David Alfaro, 219–20
social production, xlvi, 23, 32–5, 41, 44 n.26, 52, 128, 162 n.16, 193
Social Realism, (see realism)
socialism, xix, xxxii, xli, xliii–xliv, lvi n.121, 10, 21 n.56, 37, 40, 73, 137–8, 145, 171, 196, 206–10, 230, 241, 249 n.36, 253–4, 258, 266; associationism in, 75–7, 83–4; French, xvii, xix, 123; utopian, xix, 115, 138, 185–6 (see also realism and monument)
sociology, xlii, xlv, lviii, 194–6, 207
Sohn-Rethel, Alfred, xl, xlvii, 50–2, 56
sovereignty, xxix, xxxii, xlviii, 47 n.43, 88, 171, 190–2, 196
Soviet Union, 185–201, 209–10, 226 n.29, 235, 254, 257, 268 (see also realism and monument)
species-being, xviii, xxxviii, xlvi, 4, 7, 18, 23, 33–5, 41, 170–1, 176–7, 180 n.66
spectator, 37–8, 104, 187, 188, 189, 193–4, 243
specter, xxx, liv n.93, 66, 75, 152, 158, 256, 257–9, 262–4
spontaneity, xiv, xviii, xxxv, xlii, xlvi, lvi n.151, 35, 79, 83–4, 89 n.14, 92 n.54, 165, 179 n.34, 211–12
Stalin, Josef, 191, 204, 207, 252–3, 256
Steyerl, Hito, xlix, 235–7, 240, 242–4
Stirner, Max, xlvi, 186–8, 193, 196
structuralism, 81, 204, 211, 218, 220; linguistic, xiii, 53, 154 (see also de Saussure, Ferdinand)
style, xx–xxii, xxxiii, xlvi–xlviii, 108 n.33, 172–4
subject-object dichotomy, xix, xxxv, 3, 5, 7, 18, 30, 33, 36, 44, 98–9, 180 n.68, 100, 208
subjectivity, xii–xiii, xvi, xxiv, xxvii–xxviii, xxix–xxx, xxxv–xl, lvi n.140, 7, 77, 87–8, 98, 168, 209, 249 n.33; new forms of, xxxv, 9–10, 253
sublime, xx, xlvii, 98–105, 109 n.41
superstructure, 6, 91 n.38, 116, 121, 127–31, 136, 146, 151, 210, 238
Suprematism, 187–9, 192–6, 199
surplus, xxv–xxvi, 169; value, x, xx–xxi, 9, 54, 97, 208, 242, 249 n.43, 263–4
surrealism, xx, 197, 271 n.18
synecdoche, xlvi, 113, 115, 122, 138
Szondi, Peter, 100
Taminiaux, Jacques, 7
Tarabukin, Nikolai, 193
techn, xx, 23–5, 30, 42 n.12, 187
technology, xxxv, 8, 12–13, 21 n.49, 38–9, 116, 130, 232, 237–8, 241–2, 246
temporality, 11–12, 16, 239
therapeutic, 75, 81–4, 87, 92 n.55
Tomšič, Soma, 53, 56–5, 71 n.2, 91 n.37
Toscano, Alberto, (see cognitive mapping)
de Tocqueville, Alexis, 112, 114, 115
totality, lvi n.151, 64, 74, 92 n.55, 102, 103, 138, 166, 194, 201
tragedy (the tragic), xv, xviii, l n.18, li n.33, 14, 100, 103, 105–6, 116, 132, 134, 137–8, 140–3, 147
transparency, 189–90
tropology, xxi, 115, 118, 122–3, 128, 137–8, 146–7
ugly, 99–100, 139
unconscious, 13, 38, 40, 54–7, 60–1, 68, 79–80, 92 n.54, 185, 188, 190, 197, 210
use-value, xxv, xxvi–xxvii, 49–56, 60–9, 71 n.29, 120–1, 263–4
utopia, xx, xxv–xxvii, liv n.94, 83, 138, 185, 267 (see also socialism, utopian and Fourier, Charles)
vanguard, (see party)
Venice Biennale (2011), 258
verkehrung, 61–2, 71 n.28
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Index</th>
<th>283</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Virno, Paolo, xxiv</td>
<td>whole, xv, 84–5, 122, 126, 136–8, 143, 167–8, 177 (see also totality)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>virtù, xiv, xiii–xiv, xx, xxxii–xxxvi, lv n.108 n.115, 42 n.6, 168</td>
<td>Winckelmann, Johann Joachim, xxviii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vischer, Theodor, xlvi, 95–106, 107 n.8, 108 n.17, 110 n.59</td>
<td>Wundt, Wilhelm, 78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>visibility, xxix, xli, 17–19, 77, 188–90, 193, 197–8, 201, 230, 244–5</td>
<td>Young Hegelians, xviii, 4, 62, 156, 266, 273–4 n.48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voloshinov, Valentin, 85</td>
<td>Zhdanov Doctrine, 210, 226 n.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>