

“Sensuous Supra-Sensuous”: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction*

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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, 1807¹

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, 37²

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

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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).³ 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.”⁴

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.⁵

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.”⁶ 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.”⁷ 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.¹¹ It is in this sense that the *proletariat* as “the privileged social embodiment of the structural contradictions of capitalism”¹² 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.”¹³ 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.”¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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",¹⁷ 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*.¹⁸ 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, 163¹⁹

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."²⁰ 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.”²¹

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 (“*ständigheit*”) over against (“*gegen*”). The compound “*Wertgegenständlichkeit*” thus presents a paradoxical venture: the purely social category of the value stands over against (op-posit 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 transcendently 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.

C I, 143²⁵

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.²⁶

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 “Warensseele” (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 [...].³¹

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.”³² 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).³³ 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, 290³⁴

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.³⁵ 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 transcendently 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.”³⁶ 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.³⁷

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.”³⁸ 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.³⁹

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” (J 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.⁴⁰ 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 transcendently 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-ish 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-ish 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 sensuous-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 than 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 intertwinement of the linguistic medium of presentation and its presented object of political economy. This intertwinement 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

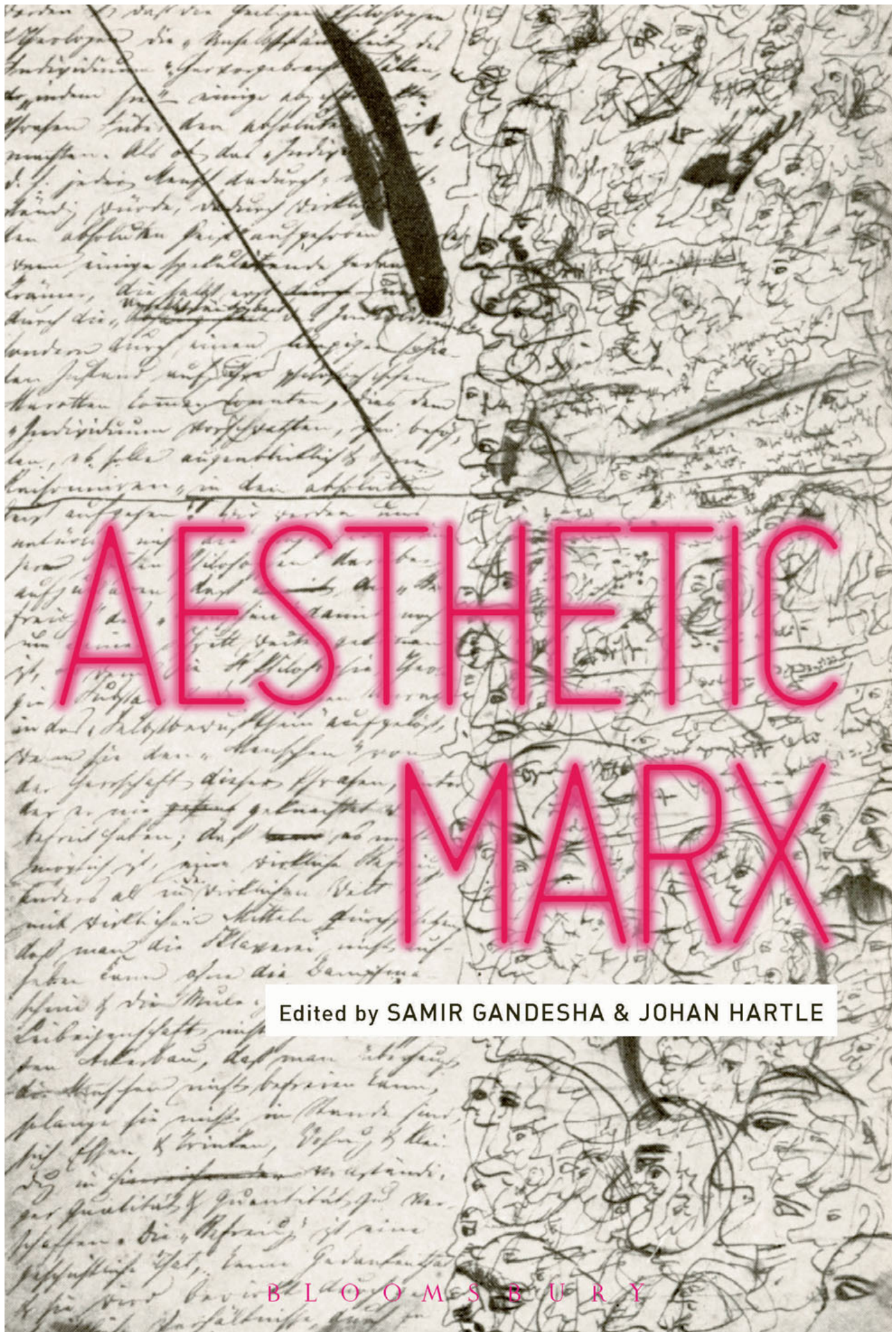
- 1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel: *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer; Karl Markus Michel, Werke, Vol. 3 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 235, trans. Terry Pinkard, 2010, URL: <http://terrypinkard.weebly.com/>, (last accessed October 18, 2016).
- 2 All English translations are taken from the online resource www.marxists.org, URL: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/commodity.htm> (last accessed October 18, 2016).
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- SW, volume, page: Walter Benjamin. *Selected Writings*, ed. by Marcus Bollock, Michael W. Jennings, 4 vol. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996ff).
- 3 Emphasis mine.
 - 4 Cf. Alfred Sohn-Rethel: *Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 19ff.
 - 5 I rely here on Samo Tomšič's path-breaking account in *The Capitalist Unconscious* (London: Verso, 2015), 29.
 - 6 Sohn-Rethel: *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 25.
 - 7 Ferdinand de Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, trans. Wade Baskin (New York: Philosophical Library, 1959), 79. My reading relies here on Tomšič: *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 31.
 - 8 Saussure: *Course in General Linguistics*, 67.
 - 9 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 17.
 - 10 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 29f.
 - 11 See Tomšič *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 113f.
 - 12 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 161.
 - 13 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 161.
 - 14 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 17.
 - 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.
 - 18 Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious*, 112, 117.
 - 19 Translation modified, cf. MEW 23, 85.
 - 20 Sohn-Rethel: *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, 57.
 - 21 Georg Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat," in *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 128.
 - 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 unfafßbar 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.

- A detailed discussion can be found in Dominique Pradelle’s instructive article on “Gegenstand” in Barbara Cassin et al. (ed.): *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014). See also Martin Heidegger: *Das Ding*, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, Gesamtausgabe, I. Abt., Bd. 7: Vorträge und Aufsätze (1936–1953) (Frankfurt a. M.: Vittorio Klostermann, 2000).
- 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.
 - 25 Trans. modified, cf. MEW 23, 66.
 - 26 Werner Hamacher: “Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*”, trans. Kelly Barry, in Michael Sprinker (ed.): *Ghostly Demarcations. A Symposium on Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx* (London: Verso, 1999), 175.
 - 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).
 - 30 Werner Hamacher: “Lingua Amissa,” 174.
 - 31 Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx. The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), 208.
 - 32 Derrida: *Specters of Marx*, 209.
 - 33 Trans. modified, cf. GS VI, 100.
 - 34 Trans. modified, cf. GS VI, 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.

- 36 Werner Hamacher: "Guilt History. Benjamin's Sketch 'Capitalism as Religion'"; trans. Kirk Wetters, *Diacritics* (Fall-Winter 2002), 87.
- 37 Jochen Hörisch: *Kopf oder Zahl. Die Poesie des Geldes* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1996), 247, trans. mine.
- 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.
- 40 Cf. Hörisch: *Kopf oder Zahl*, 248.
- 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.



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Contents

List of Illustrations	vii
Notes on Contributors	viii
Introduction	x
Section I Aesthetics/Emancipations	
1 Three Logics of the Aesthetic in Marx <i>Samir Gandesha</i>	3
2 <i>Poiêsis, Praxis, Aisthesis</i> : Remarks on Aristotle and Marx <i>Henry W. Pickford</i>	23
3 “Sensuous Supra-Sensuous”: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction <i>Sami Khatib</i>	49
4 Free Associations: On Marx and Freud <i>Johan F. Hartle</i>	73
Section II Style and Performativity in Marx	
5 On Beauty and its Challenges: Friedrich Theodor Vischer and Karl Marx <i>Anna-Katharina Gisbertz</i>	97
6 Marx: The Philosophical Defense of History in the Metonymical Mode <i>Hayden White</i>	111
7 Imagery as Weaponry: <i>ars gratia belli</i> <i>Terrell Carver</i>	151
8 Radical Schiller and the Young Marx <i>Daniel Hartley</i>	163
Section III Modes of Artistic Production	
9 Installing Communism <i>Boris Groys</i>	185
10 Marx’s Aesthetics in Mexico: Conceptual Art After 1968 <i>Robin Greeley</i>	203

11	Filming Capital: On Cinemarxism in the Twenty-first Century <i>Sven Lütticken</i>	229
12	Marx as Art as Politics: Representations of Marx in Contemporary Art <i>Johan F. Hartle</i>	251
	Index	275