

The Necessary Fetishism of the Work of Art

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Kultur ist Müll, und Kunst, einer ihrer
Sektoren doch Ernst als Erscheinung der
Wahrheit. Das liegt im Doppelcharakter
des Fetischismus.

Adorno, Ästhetische Theorie

I will approach our theme from an aesthetic angle, or perhaps from an angle that signals something like a limit of the aesthetic, where it passes over either into sociology or economy, or inversely into religion and theology. This angle will be provided by the concept of fetishism, which in a particular way weaves together the aesthetic, the social, and the religious, and has had a long trajectory in the social and human sciences from Marx, through Freud, and up to various versions in contemporary thought.

I will look at this concept in four steps: *first*, the initial formulations in Marx, which have at least an indirect bearing on art; *second*, the debate on the possibility of a de-fetishizing of art that took place between two great Marxist thinkers, of which at least one was also Hegelian, Benjamin and Adorno; *third*, I will trace the consequences of this discussion as they were developed and thought through in Adorno's final work, *Aesthetic Theory*; and *fourth*, by way of a conclusion, I will add a few reflections on the transformations of fetishism in contemporary aesthetics, which will elucidate my title, the necessity of fetishism in the work of art.

Marx and the fetishism of commodities

The concept has its origins in the mid-eighteenth century, in the early stages of ethnology, and specifically the writings of Charles de Brosses, whose 1760

treatise *Du culte des dieux fétiches* seems to have put the term into circulation.¹ While the concept was known to Hegel, it only surfaces incidentally in his writings and plays no role in the analysis of the present; for Hegel, it belongs to a superseded stage of development.² It is rather in Marx that it appears as the means for an analysis of the present. Marx too was an avid reader of anthropology and ethnology,³ but here I want to stress something else, namely the background of the theory of commodity fetishism in a particular aesthetic experience, or more precisely the encounter with the kind of display culture that emerged around the time of the 1851 London World Exhibition.

In a trajectory that leads from the initial London exhibition, through the subsequent but lesser known exhibitions in New York (“Exhibition of the Industry of all Nations,” 1853) and Dublin (“Great Industrial Exhibition,” 1853), and up to the “Exposition Universelle” in Paris 1855, a visual culture emerges in which the juxtaposition of commodities and artworks generated what we could call an *immersive experience of modernity*. Immersion here means that artifacts and artworks henceforth would exist in the same space, not just in order to overthrow or re-evaluate values—to elevate industrial objects to art, or bring artworks down from their pedestals—but also, and more importantly, to let us sense the dimension out of which objects emerge, and to invest them with a magical quality that has the power of drawing us into their radiance and power. Marx’s reaction to the 1851 exhibition in London is paradigmatic when he in *Capital I*: 4 analyzes the logic of the commodity and shows how it generates, seemingly out of itself, a particular kind of magic:

¹ On the context of de Brosses’ work, see Madeleine David, “Les idées du 18e siècle sur l’idolatrie, et les audaces de David Hume et du Président de Brosses,” *Numen*, vol. 24, No. 2 (1977): pp. 81-94. For overarching contextualizations of the term, see Emily Apter and William Pietz (eds.), *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), and Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Le Fétichisme* (Paris: PUF, 2002).

² See the fragment on *Volksreligion* in *Werke*, eds. Michel & Moldenhauer (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), 1: pp. 28 and 40, where fetishism is described as an external and objective mechanism in which spirit evaporates; in the lectures on the philosophy of history the emphasis instead lies on subjectivity, and the fetish is understood as deprived of religious autonomy, because it is only a reflection of the believer’s will in an inert object: see *Werke* 12, pp. 123, similarly in the lectures on the philosophy or religion, *Werke* 16: pp. 294f. In neither case is there however any claim that the concept of fetishism would apply to the present.

³ See the excerpts in MEGA IV.1, pp. 320-367. For a discussion of the background to Marx’s theory of fetishism, see Antoine Artous, *Marx et le fétichisme: Le marxisme comme théorie critique* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2006).

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 thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.⁴

Three aspects of Marx's analysis will be highlighted here: *first*, the magic and phantasmagoric power that holds the subject captive—or better: that produces a particular subject of captivity, a subject that exists precisely as a knot in the force field of the phantasma; *second*, how movement, agency, and autonomy are transferred onto the objects because of the inversion of the use-exchange relation, which in turn, and more surprisingly, will form a new bedrock for the idea of aesthetic autonomy; *third*, the new sense of matter and materiality that emerges in between the inherited terms of matter and spirit, folding a spectralized matter and a materialized specter into each other.

First, on the most straightforward level, what is analyzed here is a doubling of use value and exchange value, in which things have become crystallizations of a common social substance, i.e. the force of labor expended in producing them. This doubling, which produces a spectral twin of the real object, is what makes up the fetishistic character of the commodity, and corresponds to the superimposition of symbolical value on everyday objects in religious fetishism. That Marx's concept draws on a tradition in anthropology and comparative religion—as we noted, he probably picks up the term “fetish” from de Brosses—is no doubt what provides his description with its resonances of magical irrationality, but it also records an experience whose result was intended by the organizers of the exhibition. As has been

⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), p. 164.

proposed by Giorgio Agamben,⁵ Marx's reflections on the fetish character of the commodity form echo the intentions of the organizers when they opted for Paxton's Crystal Palace project: this would be a building where the "atmosphere" has itself become perceptible, so that the spectator would experience the distant parts of the pavilion as "enveloped in a bluish halo"⁶ in which all items on display are enveloped in the same experiential field. The architecture with its play of light and shade, fusing inside and outside in a nature-artifice continuum in this way becomes an extension of the aura of the commodity, or more precisely, an apparatus for the *production* and intensification of the aura as an experience that extends to all objects in its domain.

This idea seems to have been picked up by the organizers of the Paris sequel in 1867. The official guidebook states that the public needs something that will make them "halt, astonished, before the marvels of industry," and what the public desires, they suggest, is to "contemplate an enchanted scene (*un coup d'oeil féérique*), and not similar products, uniformly grouped."⁷ Thus, in the Paris version the task seems to have been more about finding a way of countering a development in which the aura would already be in a process of decay, by an intentional re-enchantment of an industrial commodity characterized by seriality, similarity, and uniformity. But regardless of whether the aura is to be intensified or recreated, the strategy of immersion remains the same: to overwhelm the spectator, to produce a sense of awe and wonder that envelops all things.

As for the second point, beyond the fascination exerted by the visual spectacle, Marx's description can also be applied to the idea of the autonomous artwork, in a way that at first might seem paradoxical. On the one hand, the transformation of all things into commodities implies that the sanctity of art is lost; it is cast down from its pedestal. On the other hand, its entry into a sphere of circulation makes it possible for the Kantian framework, which once established autonomy as a distance from the world of utilities, to be derived from a commodity logic in which use value is gradually absorbed into exchange value. Henceforth, it is *because it exists as a commodity*, severed from its former use as moral or religious instruction, that the artwork can be understood to create its own value in a sphere of

⁵ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald L. Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

⁶ Mary Merrifield, "The Armony of Colours as Exemplified in the Exhibition," cited in Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 39.

⁷ Cited in Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 38.

pure, abstract exchange. The artwork is the ultimate fetish, the supreme commodity, and the pure differential relations of economic exchange value are as it were realized exorbitantly in the artwork, whose price is just as open to infinite contextual fluctuations as its aesthetic value.

Put in more sociological terms, this is the moment when the artist's entry into the market creates a new mobility, transforms the audience into an indeterminate public, and gradually comes to render the hierarchies, vocabularies, and codes of the academic tradition obsolete, which for the artists was just as much felt as a liberation as a threat. Here it must be emphasized that commodity fetishism is not a psychological structure, not some perceptual or intellectual mistake that should be corrected, but an objective social structure that determines consciousness and its products. Thus, if art becomes autonomous in the same way as the commodity becomes a fetish, this process cannot be undone by a shift in perception, or a return to a natural object form, since the unfolding of the commodity form irreversibly draws all things into its orbit. On the level of consciousness, this is the condition that allows for art and artists, in a paradoxical counter-movement to the social logic that conditions them, to claim the position of *truth* (an art that saves, preserves, or redeems a dimension of authenticity) against falsity (a commodity that alienates, levels and perverts all human values). This doubling, moving ceaselessly between market value and aesthetic value, and yet upholding an invisible though strict border between them, opens the game of a modernism that locates itself at the critical limit of capitalism while still being dependent on it—tied to its other with an “umbilical cord of gold”,⁸ as Clement Greenberg noted—with all the shifting alliances, projections, and mutual aggressions that such a game entails.

Third and finally, we must note the particular status given to materiality in Marx's account. Nature still furnishes the materials, the wood whose form is changed when it is turned into a table; but when the table enters into the sphere of exchange and circulation, it is transformed into a thing that “transcends sensuousness,” in Fowkes' translation, or, closer to the German: “a sensuously super-sensuous thing” (*ein sinnlich übersinnliches Ding*). It is important here to retain the paradox; the thing is not only *both* sensible and supersensible, but supersensible in a *sensuous, sensible way*, so that the material dimension, while not simply disappearing, becomes as it

⁸ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), repr. in Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism. Vol. 1, Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 11.

were de- or immaterialized, and then reinscribed in a movement of doubling or “spectralization,” which in turn produces a system of mediating and differentiating frames that separate and mediate the two sides—the “visor effect,” as Derrida has called it.⁹

So, the three aspects of the artwork that would seem to emerge from this are the following: it holds us *captive* by exerting a particular fascination that is inextricably bound up with, yet not identical to, that of commodities; it is endowed with an *autonomy* precisely because, by entering into the world of commodities, it not only becomes severed from earlier ties, but also appears to transcend the commodity logic that conditions it; and, it has a peculiar *materiality*, sensible and supersensible at the same time, two sides that call upon each while being mediated through a particular structure of framing.

Aura and autonomy

A particularly complex take on this occurs in the debate between Adorno and Benjamin, on the occasion of the latter’s essay on the work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility.¹⁰ The main exhibit, apart from Benjamin’s essay, will be Adorno’s famous letter to Benjamin from March 18 1936, from which I will only extract the particular problem of the possibility of overcoming fetishism.

Benjamin’s Reproduction essay precisely identifies the three aspects of fetishism that I have delineated above—magic, autonomy, and the materiality—and he does so in the multi-faceted concept of the *aura* that he

⁹ See Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Paris: Galilée, 1993). The visor effect refers to how material frames and devices become props or instruments for the ghostly return of the dead. Derrida develops this on the basis of a reading of *Hamlet*, where the father’s ghost always requires a technical supplement, more precisely the material structure of the armor, in order to appear as present at the very limit of appearing and presence. At the same time, this spectralizes materiality, so that the technical supplement, in relating the two, at once belongs to and does not belong to the empirical world.

¹⁰ The essay exists in three different versions, printed in *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980). I/2 (first and third version) and VII/1 (third version); for a discussion of the differences between these versions and the publication history, cf. the editorial remarks in *GS VII/2*: pp. 661-90. English translation by Harry Zohn, in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969). Henceforth cited: German/English. The exchanges between Adorno and Benjamin on early drafts for the Arcades project would also be important for our theme, but I leave them aside here.

suggests belongs to the traditional work of art,¹¹ and which he now proposes must be dismantled for a new, political art to emerge.

First, Benjamin stresses the magical qualities of the aura: it is derived from the model of the monk in his cell, and infused with a presence that sets the subject apart in a non-social space of contemplation. Just as the artist taps into a magical source, there is a mystical attitude required on the part of the beholder for the work to release its secrets, and Benjamin contrasts the attitude of the magician, who performs an *actio in distans* so as to transfigure the object, to that of the surgeon, who enters into the object, takes it apart in order to understand its structure.

This comes across in cinema, where the distancing built into the productive apparatus encourages the spectator to “test” the actor, and where identification occurs only through the technological mediation. The actor is estranged (*verfremdet*) from himself, since his performance is broken up into a series of discrete moments. If the traditional painter employs a magic charm in order to release the inner essence of the object, the filmmaker penetrates the object in order to decompose it in a series of analytical operations. The new analysis of movement and social space made possible in cinema in fact renders it analogous to psychoanalysis—and Benjamin famously speaks of an “optical unconscious”—where the seemingly marginal slips in our discourse are brought to attention.

Second, the artwork has aspired to a condition of singularity and originality, to an autonomy that would set it apart from other forms of production; but as we saw, this it could do by drawing on commodity fetishism in order to safeguard its own stance vis-à-vis the sphere of other things; as an absolute fetish, existing only in the space of exchange—it has no use, which is why it can attain an infinite economic value—it escapes the substitutability of the commodity. For Benjamin, this is now being transformed because of technical reproducibility, which enters into the substance of the work: the new technological forces of production render the idea of originality obsolete, and the work steps out of its transcendent space-time in order to become a thing among other things, which means undoing its fetishistic magic, making it available for mass consumption, and providing it with a capacity for political agency.

¹¹ The concept of “aura” in Benjamin is obviously complex and highly stratified, and the remarks here only relate to the use of the term in the Artwork essay; for an overview of different senses of the term, see Josef Fürnkäs, “Aura,” in Michael Opitz & Erdmut Wizisla (eds.), *Benjamins Begriffe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), pp. 95-147.

Third, while in the Artwork essay aura is defined as the authority and singularity of the original, Benjamin also adds an analogy to the aura of “natural objects,” which points to a another and equally decisive dimension: an *interior, singular, and unique distance* impossible to abolish by any physical proximity, “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be” (“*einmalige* Erscheinung einer Ferne, so nah sie sein mag,” I/2, 441). In one sense this points to the transcendence of the work over and above its material incarnation, the fact that it belongs to a realm of aesthetic objects by being removed from ordinary space-time. But it also relates back to the *Einmaligkeit* of ritual and sacrificial events, and so to the magic origin of art.

The ritual dimension, Benjamin suggests, was perfected in Symbolism, as in the case of Mallarmé’s at once sacral and formalist poetics, where secular officiates are to read aloud from the great Book, *Le Livre* (which was Mallarmé’s great, unfinished, and no doubt interminable project), so as to regenerate the world on the basis of an art that is nonetheless entirely pure, that goes beyond the world by being altogether Word. But this aura, Benjamin suggests, cannot survive the structure of technological reproducibility, which in modernity has been inscribed into the very core of the object—immediately in cinema and photography, and in a mediate way in the other arts, such as painting, sculpture, literature, each of which in their respective ways find themselves drawn into the force field of the first two, so that they will increasingly tend to appear as reproduced already from the outset. Things now come closer, they shed their distance, and they appear more similar.

This severs the object from its traditional context in a process that is equally destructive and liberating. Benjamin speaks rather brutally of a “liquidation” (*Liquidation*) of the tradition,¹² although for him this in fact promises the emancipation from the burden of an oppressive history. If the aesthetic work of art in its insistent uniqueness originated in a secularization of the religious cult object, and in the guise of a substitute fetish was developed to perfection in Symbolism, this residual ritual dimension now disappears in the era of reproduction, where there is no more transcendence or mystery, only what Benjamin, perhaps somewhat surprisingly,

¹² This brutal vocabulary is no coincidence, and it can be found throughout Benjamin’s writings, which in fact contain a rich array of such “destructive” terms that are not only limited to the sphere of aesthetics: *Liquidierung*, *Zertrümmerung*, *Zerstörung*, *Verwischung*, *Zerstörung*, *Vernichtung*, etc. For an overview, see Dag T. Andersson, “Destruktion/Konstruktion,” *Benjamins Begriffe*, p. 183.

calls the “exhibition value” (*Ausstellungswert*). This seems at once to refer to the work as commodity (as in the world exhibitions, although magic indeed returned here in the guise of fetishism and phantasmagoria) and to the work’s capacity to communicate and enter into the fabric of social life.¹³ Divested of its cult value, the work of art steps out of the aesthetic sphere, and this loss of autonomy renders it useful for new purposes, which for Benjamin means agitation and the active shaping of communal life.

Thus, by dispelling commodity fetishism the destruction of the aura returns art to practice rather than sets it up for contemplation, it gives us a positive approach to serial production and typical objects, and finally, shows us the work as a material construct made up of parts, rather than a mysteriously unified whole. The proximity of this to Bauhaus, Constructivism, the discourse of the artist-engineer etc., has often been noted, and Benjamin himself develops this in other adjacent texts that deal with architecture and literature, for instance “Experience and Poverty” and “The Author as Producer,” although I will say no more about this here.

To these claims, then, Adorno’s letter proposes a series of powerful counterarguments,¹⁴ which will subsequently also form the bedrock for his final claims in *Aesthetic Theory*, where they were developed into a fully-fledged theory of the necessity of fetishism.

First, against the immediate revocation of the artwork’s use value Adorno proposes that the reification inherent in the traditional artwork in its separation from the immediacy of life should not be seen just as a loss or deprivation, but, more fundamentally, as a necessary condition for its capacity to resist society and attain a certain transcendence in relation to the actual world, which is the very precondition for its power to act as a *critique*. It is just as “bourgeois,” Adorno claims, to deny the reification of the subject in cinema (the aura of the theater actor that disappears in the technical dimension of montage), as it is naïve and all too hasty—“it would border on anarchism” (129)—to deny the reification of the autonomous work in favor of an immediate use, i.e., in favor of an art that would lay claim to direct inventions in the praxis of life.

¹³ Benjamin explains the term by reference to the development of cult objects in religion, which become more accessible as they are put on display, and not directly in terms of institutions like museums; as we will see, his argument can however also be linked to the practices of the avant-garde of the time.

¹⁴ See the letter from March 18, 1936, in Benjamin and Adorno, *The Complete Correspondence 1928–1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz, trans. Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999). The following citations with page number are from the same source.

There is indeed for Adorno too an essential disenchantment of the aesthetic moment that occurs through the advance of technique, but the difference is that this has to be understood precisely as an *artistic* technique, in terms of the immanent laws of construction for the work itself. Mallarmé's poetic materialism, which shows us that poetry is made of words, blanks, and the spacing of the page, as well as Schönberg's dodecaphonic method of composing that imposes a seemingly foreign set of "objective" parameters on the composer's subjectivity, dissolve the traditional idea of creation as a mystical act much more efficiently than the practices of the feuilleton writer or the industrial division of labor in the movies, whose disenchanting effects Adorno perceives as vastly exaggerated.

"I cannot express my feelings about the entire piece more clearly than by telling you how much I would like to see a study of Mallarmé precisely as a counter-point to this essay" (128), Adorno writes, a counter-point which implies that it is only when *l'art pour l'art* is seen as essentially related to popular art, as its *precise and determined other*, that we can understand the dialectical totality as a contradictory whole. The aura is broken down just as much in the autonomous work as in the art of mass consumption, but in the first case it is because of an inner, formal development while in the second it is because of external demands, and thus, reification and fetishism are neither simply a loss nor a gain, but both of these at once. In this sense, fetishism cannot be undone in the name of a return to the real, to life, or to immediacy, even though all ways of assuming its challenge are not equal: one can simply give in to it and accept the conditions that it imposes on production, or, which I think is Adorno's Hegelian moment, while understanding it as the necessary condition of modernity, one can at the same time attempt to disentangle a moment of truth that through this necessity also points beyond it, which is the dimension of reconciliation that cannot however be simply presented as a content.

The two extremes, autonomous and popular art, touch each other, but only if they are credited with the same dialectical value, whereas Benjamin appears to simply reject one of them as if it were, in Adorno's expression, "counter-revolutionary" (128). And, he continues, it would be either a bourgeois or a proletarian romanticism, but in both cases a romanticism, to opt exclusively for one of the two versions. In a famous and often cited phrase Adorno summarizes his critique of Benjamin's project to directly transform art to life, when he writes of the respective works of the avant-garde and mass culture that they both "bear the stigmata of capitalism, both contain elements of change (...). Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to

which, however, they do not add up” (“Beide tragen die Wundmale des Kapitalismus, beide enthalten Elemente der Veränderung (...) beide sind die auseinandergerissenen Hälften der ganzen Freiheit, die doch aus ihnen nicht sich zusammenaddieren lässt”) (130). The true is not the whole (a figure on which Adorno will constantly elaborate, up to his dense formula in *Negative Dialectics* in which the whole is the *untrue*) but the *whole differs from itself*, it is split into two halves that can just as little be reconciled as one of them can be simply discarded. And as we will see, the hinge between the two halves will have an essential relation to the fetishism of the work as something that must be worked through, both in theory and practice.

The concept of fetishism in *Aesthetic Theory*

The debate with Benjamin that unfolded around the Reproduction essay would continue to inform Adorno’s postwar writings, and can be taken as one of the essential threads that run throughout his work: it engages the crucial features of art’s autonomy, its relation to the social means and relations of production as well as its own immanent technical procedures, how art is encountered as a phenomenological given,¹⁵ and ultimately its claim to a “truth content” (*Wahrheitsgehalt*) that would be both conditioned by society and set apart from it. While Adorno’s analysis of this passes through many stages, I will here limit myself to considering the analysis of fetishism proposed in *Aesthetic Theory*, where the concept is dealt with in a way that draws out all of its conflicted and even contradictory implications.

The concept is, to be sure, never given a sustained treatment, and we must extract elements of a theory from its many occurrences in shifting contexts that seem to preclude a systematic analysis; and yet, a synoptic overview of his claims show them to be distributed along three lines. *First*, fetishism is perceived as a *negative* process that obscures true relations and processes, whereas art would have the power to counteract its mystifying force; fetishism belongs to the logic of commodities, and if it enters into art, it is as a destructive force. *Second*, fetishism appears as a fundamentally *ambivalent* phenomenon, in being both what art has to fight against and its

¹⁵ Shortly after the exchanges with Benjamin, Adorno develops this aspect in the essay “Über den Fetischcharakter der Musik und die Regression des Hörens” (1938), where it is explicitly linked to sensory apprehension, and shows that the fetish cannot be located solely within the domain of material objects, but must be understood in terms of a general objectification independent of substrate.

inescapable condition; there is no art that is not caught up in commodification, and the task must be to fight it from within. And *third*, as a way of interlacing the first two claims, fetishism is not just a negative although unavoidable external condition of art in the administered world, but also, and more fundamentally, it is the *condition of possibility for its truth content*: it is the rigidifying power of aesthetic objectification that gives art its necessary distance to society, and the good and bad are not external to each other, but as it were two sides of the same loop, so that truth belongs to falsity just as much as falsity to truth.

In this, fetishism is inscribed in the movement of negative dialectics that pits concepts against themselves, not just in order to distinguish a positive sense from a negative one, but more fundamentally to see how they are inextricably intertwined and require a strategic refunctioning.¹⁶ In order to approach this final intertwining, it is however useful to begin by sorting out various claims listed above in a schematic fashion, even though this undoubtedly does some violence to the “paratactic” organization of the text, which does not describe a cumulative movement from one argument to another. As Adorno writes in a letter to Rolf Tiedemann: “a book’s almost ineluctable movement from antecedent to conclusion proved so incompatible with the content that for this reason any organization in the traditional sense (...) proved impracticable. The book must, so to speak, be written in equally weighted, paratactical parts that are arranged around a midpoint that they express through their constellation.”¹⁷

1. As a *negative* concept, which threatens to overtake art, while the latter still retains the capacity to propose a series of countermoves, fetishism enters into art as the idea of the artwork as a thing that can be possessed, in analogy to the idea of an exploitable property within the psychic economy of the self that can be assessed in terms of a balance sheet: “heard the Ninth Symphony tonight, enjoyed myself so and so much” (27/16). The demand for possession that aspires to treat the spiritual like the material makes a

¹⁶ Elsewhere I have tried to trace the trajectory of “realism” in Adorno; see my “Adorno’s Realism,” *Baltic Worlds*, Vol. IX (4) (2016), pp. 28-34. The matrix for his use of the term was in fact established roughly at the same time as the debate with Benjamin, in the quarrel in the late thirties over expressionism that set Lukács against Bloch (a debate in which Adorno himself never took part), and it is developed in Adorno’s postwar writings, ushering in the final complex stance in *Aesthetic Theory*.

¹⁷ Cited in Tiedemann, “Editorisches Nachwort,” *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 541; “Editor’s Afterword,” *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), p. 462. Page references given directly in the text are henceforth to these two editions: German/English.

fetish of works and their hope of duration in the face of the vicissitudes of time, and pushes them into a false eternity that is nothing but a “sickness unto death” (49/36); rather than the mourning that for Adorno must accompany the acknowledgment of art’s finitude and inescapable link to time, it wants to immortalize that which is necessarily bound up with the movement of history.

Seemingly opposed to this fetishist desire for permanence, and yet a consequence of it, the enjoyment procured, as a rest of the mimetic impulse that lies at the origin of art, can in turn be “bartered off as a commodity” (32/22). This indicates the extent to which traces of this archaic fetish at the origin of art still linger on in the present, although in such way that they become reduced to consumable stimuli: “The consumer arbitrarily projects his impulses—mimetic remnants—on whatever is presented to him.” (33/23) Inversely, there is a false and equally fetishistic return to nature that is nothing but a “pantheistic subterfuge” (115/96), which appears as the mask of an endlessly repetitive fate: natural beauty, to the extent that it wants to reach back beyond the mediation through modernity, would contain such a threatening refusal of subjectivity, almost as an overcompensation for the unbridled subjectivization that reduces the work to a bundle of stimuli.

Against these three forms of fetishism—the intrusion of the commodity as a model for possession, the work’s dissolution into stimuli, and the fateful return to nature as a regressive countermove—Adorno proposes that the “darkness” of art might be a way to “cancel the spell that this world casts by the overwhelming force of appearance, the fetish character of the commodity,” first and foremost since artworks “by their very existence (...) postulate the experience of what does not exist and thereby come into conflict with the latter’s actual non-existence” (93/76).

The power of the fetish can however also enter into the very structure of the work, so for instance in the idea of an essential “intuitability” (*An-schaulichkeit*), such that it itself becomes a fetish if it is severed from the conceptual moment: the demand for immediacy violates the fact that art is neither concept nor intuition, but precisely a way of protesting against their separation (148/126). On another level, the very idea of the production of art as dependent on a conception of genius, which from Kant onward began

to be understood as a “separated, abstract subjectivity” (255/224),¹⁸ harbors its particular fetishism, this time oriented toward the depth of the artist; finally, at the other end of the artistic spectrum, the technical forces of production should not to be fetishized in art (323/284), just as little as, more generally, the rationalization of means (439/377), which echoes the earlier critique of Benjamin.

2. As an *ambivalent* concept, fetishism denotes something that does not just threaten to overtake the work from the outside—in order to eventually reappear in its internal structures, as in reified forms of intuitability, genius, and technique—but it belongs to its very mode of existence. If the new becomes a fetish by being drawn into the logic of the commodity, this cannot be dispelled by simply rejecting the latter, but must be criticized from within the work; it expresses “the paradox of all art that is no longer self-evident”, that “something made exists for its own sake” (41/29), and in this sense, it is one with the claim to autonomy. New ways of conceiving works, such as musical notations that rebel against fixation and aspire to create a new latitude and openness in composition and performance practices, are in one sense regressive, Adorno suggests, and their attempts at resuscitating “neumatic-graphic imitations of musical gestures” are “simply reification of an older level (154/130), and yet they have a validity in registering how the work suffers from being a thing, from the fetishization of what in itself is a process: autonomy is a “rigidification” (*Erstarrung*) that breeds insurgencies, and yet there is no way back. In a slightly different context, where the issue is the capacity of art to deliver meaning, he notes the theological roots of this conception, but underscores that it must not be conflated with revelation, since this would “amount to the unreflective repetition of its unavoidable fetish character on the level of theory.” (162/139)¹⁹

The fetishism inherent in autonomy however requires that art always be looked at from the outside as well as from the inside, so as to remind us of its dual character: it is at once autonomy and *fait social*, both of which contain their respective forms of fetishism. In an almost Cagean moment Adorno suggests that we think of music piped into a restaurant, where the

¹⁸ Trans. mod. Hullot-Kentor gives “dirempted, abstract subjectivity”, but Adorno’s point in this context is not that this subjectivity would be characterized by an inner split, but that it is set apart from its social conditions; it is *abgetrennt*, not *entzweit*.

¹⁹ Trans. mod. The adjective “unavoidable” (*unausweichlich*) has unfortunately disappeared from the translation, which somewhat skews the argument. Adorno’s claim is rather that fetishism *must be*, cannot *not be*, repeated on the level of theory, since it is unavoidable, but that this repetition must be carried out in a reflexive way.

“hum of conversation and the rattle of dishes and whatever” (375/328) become part of the work; similarly, the positivist aesthetics that he had denounced earlier for its dissolution of the work into consumable stimuli, for being a fetishism of sensory surfaces, can just as much be marshaled against the “fetishization of artworks that is itself part and parcel of the cultural industry and aesthetic decline,” and it points to the “dialectical element that no artwork is ever pure” (399/347). Fetishism is inevitable, inevitably positive as well as negative, which is why its destructive aspects on one level can be marshaled against those on another; it is a split phenomenon, as it were ceaselessly mutating into its other and back again.

3. As the *condition of possibility for truth*, fetishism first of all sets the work apart from empirical reality, so that simply by virtue of such distance, not because of its actual content, it stands for something else; through its alienation it is also something positive, and what is set up as an “alien and rudimentary fetish that endures in opposition to the subject is the plenipotentiary of the nonalienated” (173/149). This distance, the alienation into an illusory pure spiritual sphere, is itself the result of the work’s spiritualization (*Vergeistigung*),²⁰ which makes it stand apart from the world through its inner facture, its being made into a self-enclosed unity.

In the section that develops the most detailed explication of fetishism (334-338/295-298), by the German editor subtitled “Art’s double character: *fait social* and autonomy; on the fetish character,”²¹ Adorno stresses that the modern phenomenon of art’s emphatic opposition to society is what gives it a social content, not its use of technologies or the empirical stuff that enters into it: art is something “crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself” (335/296), and its seeming asociality is in fact the determinate negation of a

²⁰ An analysis of the series of terms clustering around *Geist* and *Vergeistigung* could be undertaken, which would be analogous to the one here proposed for the term fetish with its cognates. Spirit is on the one hand that into which artworks can be alienated, the domain of the otherworldly, purely ideal etc., on the other hand that which emerges from the inner articulation of the work and exists by virtue of its material configuration. As Adorno often suggest, the process of “spiritualization” in modern art is what from the point of view of traditional art leads toward its becoming non-art, *Entkunstung*, since it increasingly demands that coherence be derived from an internal logic and not from external models. In this sense, a “materialism of the signifier” (to use a term foreign to Adorno’s lexicon, to which he would possibly object, although for other reasons) in literature, or a pure materialism of color in monochrome painting, would be wholly consistent with a fully spiritualized art.

²¹ The headings are not Adorno’s own, but have been inserted in the table of contents by the editors, and they greatly facilitate the reader’s orientation; in the 1997 Continuum edition cited here they have unfortunately been omitted.

determinate society. This however leads into a series of paradoxes: arts' only function is to be functionless, its enchantment is disenchantment, its essential quality is to contradict itself, all of which with respect to commodity fetishism ushers in the claim that "[u]nless it [art] reifies itself, it becomes a commodity" (335/296). It is true that works seal themselves off from what they truly are, i.e. determinate negations of society, and this turns them into ideology to the extent that they posit something spiritual outside of society, but, at the same time, this spiritual dimension—*Geist* now understood not as a sphere outside of the material, but as the *facture* of works, the interplay of their constituent parts that takes them beyond the world of *facts*—is what gives them their critical purchase on reality.

This is why being guilty of fetishism is not in itself disqualifying; nothing is outside of guilt, and the truth content of artworks is predicated upon the fetish character that sets them apart from the empirical world and its instrumentality, to the effect that only what is *useless* is capable of pre-figuring another *use* beyond the equation use-exchange value that is the precondition for commodity fetishism. This is a dimension of the fetish that goes beyond commodities, and artworks can neither exclude nor deny it; they must insist, fetishistically, on their coherence, their *Stimmigkeit*, on being that absolute that they cannot be, whereas simply divesting themselves of fetishism would enmesh them in a false consciousness and a short-sighted praxis that in fact prolongs blindness. Thus, while artworks are never simple things, they nevertheless participate in reification by being modeled on external things, which is why aesthetic objectivation always entail fetishism just as much as it provokes rebellion, as comes across for instance in the idea of "classicality" (441/378), which is a petrification that works must ceaselessly and perhaps even hopelessly fight since it emerges from their own thinghood and from their aspiration to transcend time. In this they are both part of the cultural apparatus and its commodification machinery—they are, in Adorno's stark words, "refuse" (*Müll*, 459/392)—as well as the "appearance of truth" (*Erscheinung der Wahrheit*), they are how truth appears to us as, although broken through the lens of untruth: such is the inescapable double nature of fetishism. If, on the one hand, they always tend to relapse back into a fetishism in which they were rooted already in their archaic origin, and which today has been transformed into the most insidious of processes, on the other hand, "without the fetishism that now verges on becoming art's untruth," there would be no *truth*, since "[o]nly through fetishism, the blinding of the artwork vis-à-vis the reality of which

it is a part, does the work transcend the spell of the reality principle as something spiritual” (596/432).

Transformations of fetishism

By way of a conclusion, then, a few words on what seems like emergent features of fetishism today, located as it is on the threshold between the fetishism of autonomy and that of the commodity, or rather in the loop that binds them together in a structure that “verges on becoming art’s untruth.”

On a general level, we may detect a process that shifts the parameters of commodity fetishism by transferring the logic of the spectacle back onto production itself: the commodity is no longer primarily a material object that crystallizes labor and hides its origins, but it is itself an immaterial entity called information, almost as if the process of ideology would transform its own production into a spectacle to be enjoyed. If Marx in *Capital I*: 4 proposed that the material production process was concealed in order to endow the commodity with a spectral and mysterious life of its own, making it into “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties,” it is now the process itself that is displayed, often couched in a vocabulary of participation and interactivity. While this process is not particular to art, it is here that it reaches a self-reflexive visibility, precisely by folding this visibility back on itself, which in turn produces a subject of captivity even more insidiously caught up in itself than before.

Looking back at the historical avant-garde, which without being explicitly named formed the backdrop for the debate between Benjamin and Adorno in the thirties, we can see how Benjamin’s suggestions were linked to a set of new exhibition strategies, which, even though they may have been unknown to him, provide a particular resonance to his conception of “exhibition value.” From the experiments of the Russian Constructivist avant-garde to its German counterparts, from El Lissitzky to Alexander Dorner, there emerged a vast spectrum of techniques for displaying artworks that in one respect drew on the kind of immersive experience that had been inherited from the nineteenth-century world fairs, while also wanting to foster a critical and reflective attitude—“testing,” as Benjamin said—in their audiences.²² This was an attempt to bring art back to life and everyday experience, to dispel its magical aura and endow it with a political

²² For a discussion, see Charlotte Klonk, *Spaces of Experience: Art Gallery Interiors from 1800 to 2000* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

agency. The same argument recurs in the 1960s, notably in Conceptual art, where the very identity and materiality of the work itself was at stake (sometimes phrased in terms of a “dematerialization”)²³ and audience involvement extended not just to judging, but sometimes even to actualizing the works themselves. With varying levels of clarity and success, the target was the work as a commodity, as a thing that could be bought and sold, and whose value was predicated on being enclosed in the enchanted sphere of the aesthetic.

Processes, contexts, framing conditions, or more generally ideas, were precisely that which emerged as commodities at the moment when Adorno was about to finish his *Aesthetic Theory* in the late 1960s. In a certain way, these are sensuously supersensuous things, *sinnlich übersinnliche Dinge*, but also, inversely, supersensuously sensuous things, *übersinnlich sinnliche Dinge*: they are ideal objects that can be materialized in a manifold of ways, of which a whole tradition of conceptual and post-conceptual art provides us with a vast array of specific modalities. Adorno’s reluctance toward these new works, which he observed primarily in the open forms in music, to a lesser extent in the visual arts, is well known, and in many respects his criticisms echo those against Benjamin in the thirties: their claim to become part of the real world by removing the framing conditions that provide their transcendence converts them into a set of stimuli and deprives them of the capacity of pointing beyond themselves, and they undo the capacity of the subject by abandoning themselves to the blind powers of processes or of the material—all of which, as Adorno at one point remarks scathingly (his target is Cage and the power of pure natural sound), “degenerates at once into culture.”²⁴

Adorno’s resistance to the new forms of artistic production in the sixties was in hindsight misguided, in the end a losing battle, and in this respect it might seem as if Benjamin would have had the last word. But maybe it is more fruitful to see their dialectical exchange as continuing into the present, and to use the concept of fetishism as an analytical tool, rather than as something that at one point would be undone, overcome, or something that simply sinks into irrelevance. For in the process suggested above, the trans-

²³ See the rich collection of sources for this development in Lucy Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973).

²⁴ Adorno, “Vers une musique informelle” (1961), in *Quasi una fantasia, Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), 16, pp. 534f.

feral of immersive power from the finished object onto production itself, where the production of images is laid out before us as a spectacle to be enjoyed, and in which we are called upon to verify our own participation and agency, constitutes a transparency that is itself immediately commodified and offered up for consumption. But even though certain essential features of this machinery will remain hidden, it would be too simple to say that everything remains the same, and that the workings of ideology production would remain in the same state of concealment as before: the fetishizing of the means of production does not abolish fetishism, but pushes it to a new level, that of a fetishism unfolding through the visible and transparent, in which the desire that holds the subject captive is its own desire to itself become part of this very visibility; to monitor and to be monitored, in the end to assure itself of its own existence by applying the panoptic machinery to itself. It is as if the analysis of ideology once proposed by Marx—the mechanism of a *camera obscura* that gives us the image of the world turned upside down, so that ideas, endowed with an agency of their own, would be the source of reality instead of reality the source of ideas—would have been transformed into a theater of sorts, in which the desire to have the real thing is what drives the illusion.

This is one of the reasons why the aloofness and interior distance of the work that Adorno wanted to uphold, against what he perceived as Benjamin's premature rejection of the aura, no longer seems directly applicable: it is the de-auratization of the work that has become a commodity, or in other words, it is that which formerly was understood to resist the commodity form that now functions as the avant-garde of commodification. The question is whether this is a mere inversion, which like most inversions leave the basic premises delineated by Marx intact, or whether it signals, as I think, a more profound mutation in the very form of objects, which in turn calls for a renewed analysis of fetishism. Here too, artworks are somehow clairvoyant entities, just as in the time of Marx, because they, unwittingly or not, prefigure what is to come.