

Comments on the tragedy of use-value - Postliterate - Medium

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It has been a grave mistake, wherever present, to conceptualize the social functions of the commodity-form as being in the first sense a transhistorically innocuous use-value, and in the second sense a historically specific form of domination which we call value. There are, of course, those who are so entranced by bourgeois logic as to claim both properties to be transhistorical—with only the appearance of value in the value-form as being specific to the capitalist mode of production—but this vulgarity is not the topic of this essay; only those who bifurcate capitalist domination into a simple transhistorical/historically-specific duality of use-value/value, respectively.

The fact of the matter is that use-value, in the sense of an abstract logic of utility which can be demarcated, is specific to the capitalist mode of production.

Use-value exists to act as the material bearer of value; it is an inherently abstract term. The determination of “utility” in pre-capitalist social formations was more communal and passed on by tradition, it did not acquire an absolute form because the production process was not yet both its own result and presupposition. This is reflected in Marx’s comments in the *Grundrisse* regarding capitalism as a system of “general utility” — such generality, in-itself, became possible only as a result of the capitalist production process. This is reflected in and reproduced by the behavior of the

“consumer” — that abstract category which complements the abstract producer. The consumer embodies the logic of the market and exchange and is not passive or innocuous; the consumer helps create the “system of general utility” along with the producer.

Let us observe the socialization process of capitalism more closely. The value of the commodity is socially validated by its realization as a general utility — in other words, when a sizable portion of society all coalesce into realized consumers, and purchase the product. This realized utility anticipated by the producer of the commodity is severed from social context to a degree virtually unprecedented in human history, being nothing more than a *means to more value*. It is thus produced and reproduced by the asociality of value, the alienated self-mediation of capital. By anticipating the consumer dynamic, the producer does not produce an innocuous use-value realized as value, but rather produces a capitalistically-determined use-value, whose existence is determined by alienated political economy for the sole purpose of reproducing and expanding it.

The consequences of this are immense. By producing a use-value whose purpose is to reach as many consumers as possible, this use-value is optimized to be as popular, mass-appealing, and subsequently superficial as possible. This also relates to the specific nature of capitalist interdependence; by equally reproducing society as producers and consumers, society is brought under a single, abstract logic — moreover, as production is socially validated by and thus dependent on its realization in consumer logic. Today this logic grips almost the entire world at once.

Art is a sphere of cultural production which simply cannot withstand the pressures of the capitalist system of general utility. Adorno owes this to the very nature of art: art begins when one attempts to articulate something beyond directly relatable existence, when one attempts to say something that could not be articulated in a clear and unambiguous manner. When art is pulled under the logic of capitalist production, it is forced into a system where — instead of being the product of a visionary artist defying what was hitherto articulable — the product must be popular, mass-appealing,

and subsequently immediately relatable and recognizable. Art is not simply hurt by this systematic superficiality — it is effectively forced to *stop existing entirely*.

But we need not limit our analysis to the production of art under capitalism. When we consider the transfiguration of needs for the capitalist valorization process alongside the demands of consumerist logic, together we reach the notion of *spectacle*. The two aspects reinforce each other, together constituting a spiraling dynamism which both transforms the material world and develops its own totalizing worldview; the spectacle thus becomes an all-encompassing byproduct of capitalist society.