CHAPTER 2

The Artefacts of Capitalism and the Objecthood of Their Aesthetics

Vrasidas Karalis

The Artefacts of Capitalism

Every individual... neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it... he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.

Adam Smith

The grand Platonic entity called ‘The Market’ has always functioned in an ‘abstract’ way. It sublimated its sellable commodities as experiences both in the order of physical need and that of symbolic imagination. What was sold was not simply the thing-itself, a product or a good—its acquisition also implied participation in the imaginary collectivity of the people who possessed it. The object, which in this exploration will be called artefact, was at the same time the symbol of a bond between its buyers, constructing thus the community of all consumers, and as such embodied the abstract networks of meaning that made it appealing from the moment of its construction to the minute of its acquisition. The purchase of a product transformed both the product and its buyer: the process of transformation was a process of aesthetic sublimation—it changed its materiality into a ‘form’ of mutual recognition.

Capitalist aesthetics were founded around such processes: they instituted invisible bonds above national borders, transcending political, religious or ethnic divisions: a Somali warlord wants to buy clothes from New York and a Taliban martyr communicates messages through the latest American model of mobile phone. The object is the message and is also the bond: by holding it in his hand the enemy of America and of capitalism is subliminally transformed into an American and a capitalist: the possession of the object generates the other in you. Consumer capitalism is structured around such psychological ‘trans-elementation’—it worked by introjecting the other: you buy an American product because you have internalised the aura associated with America.

The critics of capitalism, starting already with romantic thinkers, talked extensively and somehow eloquently about the vulgarisation of aesthetic values. In America, through consumer capitalism, these were constructed for immediate consumption. Critics refused to accept the ability of low-culture, utilitarian and mundane objects to function in the way that high culture products impact their audience: in real history, the introduction of chairs defined more lives than the admiration of Delacroix’s paintings. Capitalism infused everyday objects with the invisible aura of an imaginary self. The possession of an object meant a secret double life for the consumer: the artefact itself becomes the need. People buy objects not only because they need them or because they are brainwashed by advertising: they buy artefacts because they establish connections with others; starting with the act of buying, to that of displaying what they bought, to the final act of replacing an artefact with another. This chain of exchanges is equally important as the actual possession of the object itself: shopping malls are contemporary agoras, semi-religious places where you have to be seen and have to interact. The shopping experience or shopping therapy stands for the self-dramatisation of the self in the public arena: in an era of privatisation the act of being in such public space creates a new persona, indeed a new perception of the self.

In such places of transactions, the consumer’s mania for brand products plays another important role which has to be revalued: buying a Cartier watch or a Versace garment is a symbolic act of social status, wealth and power. But it also implies so much more: a psychoanalytic interpretation would have suggested that such products indicate a profound sense of lack and loss—not simply an excess of money. Buying offers the satisfaction of extending your body and imagining the actual experience of such extension as a social event that has an impact on wider structures of interaction. Consumer society was built around the implied need to be re-connected with the social environ-