

Title:

A Very Strange Thing: Commodity Discourse in Cultural Theory and Design

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to bring to design dialogue an expanded meaning of the term “commodity” by revealing its presence and discussion in other disciplines via the writings of some of the predominant thinkers through history. Particularly germane to design are the notions of commodity fetishism and commodity aesthetics eloquently outlined in treatises by Karl Marx and Wolfgang Haug. Experiments in generating innovative forms largely perceived as imperative creative exercises in design are, according to Marxist thought, merely attempts to valorize capital. The redesign of product forms is labeled by Marxists as ‘aesthetic aging,’ and referred to as an activity with sole purpose of forcefully outdated existing products. Also critical is the notion discussed by Marx, and later by Walter Benjamin, that human (and maybe robotic) labor-power expended in the making of the commodity is invisible to the consumer, thereby degrading as a value. By referring to a commodity as a product (a visible, tangible termination of the process of design and manufacture), designers align themselves at the other extreme of this idea. Modernist thinking emphasized the visibility of function and means of manufacturing of products, revealing an interesting antithesis. Theodor Adorno likens the production of culture to that of mass-produced objects. He therefore portrays the commodity as a metaphor for culture by equating its means of generation, which relies on standardized industry, to that of cultural production. Not habituated to fundamental discussions of capitalism and political economy, the inclusion of such material will challenge existing definitions of objects within the debate of design history.

“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.”

- Karl Marx (1967: 163)

Introduction:

Commodities are routinely studied, analyzed and debated by disciplines such as industrial design, anthropology, political economy as well as media studies and cultural theory. Though scholars in design, media studies and cultural theory regularly undertake examination of the commodity in generating critical discourse in their respective fields, the language used and nomenclature adopted differ and common points of convergence are rarely encountered. Terms such as form, use and utility may often be employed to mean different things. The symbolic meanings and values attached to commodities vary widely within these fields of study, and are at times in violent disagreement with each other. Design discourse largely discusses processes, systems, and methodologies of design construction and synthesis, whereas cultural theory and media studies typically deconstruct materiality, drawing upon political, economic, sociological, and anthropological approaches to analysis. Not habituated to fundamental discussions of capitalism and political economy, the inclusion of such material will challenge existing definitions of objects within the debate of design history. An understanding of the politics of power, central to cultural theory, can better inform designers just as comprehension of the design process can educate cultural and social theorists. The research project briefly outlined in this paper is a part of a larger study that aims to interrogate respective

methodologies, promote dialogue, and suggest avenues for research as well as teaching across these fields. This may challenge existing definitions and parameters of our disciplines. Design may become less instrumentally pragmatic, more informed by the social, political and economic concerns central to cultural and media studies. Similarly, cultural and media studies might supplement its analysis of institutions, texts, audiences, and technologies with a deeper consideration of technological objects and the processes of their evolution.

Starting with issues related to commodity fetishism outlined by Karl Marx in *Das Kapital* (1887), leading up to Robert Miklitsch’s *From Hegel to Madonna: A General Economy of Commodity Fetishism* (1998), this paper will bring to design dialogue some of the positions of political economists and cultural critics on the commodity from a perspective largely and generally alien to design. Treatises by Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Wolfgang Haug will also be discussed and contrasted with contemporary issues in design.

Commodity as Value

One of the most exceptional early discussions of the commodity is found in Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* originally published in 1867. Marx’s definition of the commodity as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (1967: 35) is expansive enough in its circumscription to be acceptable to this day to industrial design’s resolute advocacy of user satisfaction. However, further analyses reveal points of departure and contradiction that are of interest. Marx viewed objects from two distinct perspectives, which he referred to as *use-value* and *exchange-value*, the former responsible to the object’s utility and the latter to its tradability. He severed the worth of the object from its utility by postulating that when commodities are traded, their exchange-value manifests itself as entirely independent of their use-value. In fact, he assigned them antipodal forms, a physical or natural form and a value form by writing, “the value of commodities is the very opposite of the coarse materiality of their substance, not an atom of matter enters into its composition” (Marx 1967: 47). This dichotomy between materiality and value may be likened to a similar schism that existed in design dialogue between form and function, albeit with different understandings of the terms. To Marx, utility was more corporeal and inherently wedded to the materiality of the commodity, but its exchange-value was more ephemeral. In contrast, Modernist design thinking attached utility to the concept of function, a less tangible entity than its earthly form, which was essentially the materiality of the commodity.

	commodity	
Marxist theory	use-value [utility]	exchange-value [tradability]
Design theory	form [body]	function [utility]
	tangible	intangible

Figure 1. The Commodity in Marxist Theory and Design Theory

The Soul of the Commodity

In his fascinating discussion of the fetishism of commodities, Marx attributes mystical character to a table that has been fashioned from a natural, ordinary material— wood. “So soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. 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 ‘table-turning’ ever was” (Marx 1967: 71). This mysterious quality of the commodity, according to Marx, is not born from its utility, but is derived from the human labor expended in its creation. Marx gives the commodity a voice that speaks to the consumer. In *Capital (Das Kapital)*, he writes, “Could commodities themselves speak, they would say: Our use-value may be a thing that interests men. It is no part of us as objects” (Marx 1967: 83), suggesting that the commodity attracts the customer on account of its utility value. This notion is at odds with the popular belief that in a market flooded with commodities that offer nearly identical functionality, the commodity body (appearance) can provide the necessary enticement to the buyer. For Wolfgang Haug, commodities are seen “casting flirtatious glances at the buyers... which they use in courting the human objects of affection” (1986: 19). In his description of the arcades in Paris (shopping malls of mid 1800s), Walter Benjamin writes about the commodities and the spell they cast on the stroller (*flâneur*). “The commodity itself is a speaker here... the commodity whispers to a poor wretch who passes a shop-window containing beautiful and expensive things. These objects are not interested in this person; they do not empathize with him” (Benjamin 1973: 55). However, in describing the stroller’s search for something new in the arcades, Benjamin disagrees with Marx in saying that the novelty of a commodity does not lie in its use-value. In externalizing the thoughts of the commodity, Marx, Haug, and Benjamin bestow on it an animate quality, albeit an amoral one. Industrial designers too give voice to commodities by creating a visual/tactile language that offers semantic cues to the user. This voice however, is that of reason, one that offers assistance on how to interact with the object. The commodity is at once seductive and instructive; it lures and it befriends.

The Labor Process in the Commodity

According to Marx, the labor that is employed in the production of the commodity is invisible to the user. “In the finished product the labor by means of which it has acquired its useful qualities is not palpable, has apparently vanished” (Marx 1967: 183). This concealment was seen as negation of human activity and likened to degradation of labor. Not unlike Marx’s reactions to capitalist modes of production were the pleas made by proponents of the Arts and Crafts movement (who were also opposed to such dehumanization) by recalling craft ideals. Early protagonists of Modernism too, through their emphasis on the removal of ornamentation, rallied for an honesty in the use of materials and a “proud and frank exhibition of working processes” (Pevsner 1936: 30). It has been suggested that Marxist arguments of labor were valid only within pre-industrialized methods of production and cannot be used to study current practices. In fact, replacement of human labor with the robotic arm of automated manufacturing has only added to the incognizance of commodity production, and consumers are less aware than ever of how products are made.

Commodity Aesthetics

One of the earliest discussions of product form in post-Marxist thought is seen in the work of Wolfgang Haug in his book titled *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics: Appearance, Sexuality and Advertising in Capitalist Society*, in which he coins the term “commodity aesthetics.” In the equation of the use- and exchange-value, Haug introduces a third element, *appearance* of use-value— that which promises the buyer a certain use-value. He refers to this as an illusion and defines commodity aesthetics as “the sensual appearance and the conception of its use-value,” a device with the sole aim of accumulation of capital (Haug 1986: 17). Indeed, the practice of industrial design partially grew of this very desire to increase sales of products in a market flooded with too many goods. Meikle argues that “industrial design was born of a lucky conjunction of a saturated market, which forced manufacturers to distinguish their products from others, and a new machine aesthetic...” (1979: 39). Though referred to

by responsible designers as the stigma of styling, modification of product form for increased profits and market differentiation is not necessarily viewed as a vile practice in industrial design.

Over and above the function of capital gain, Haug attributes to aesthetics the ability to control people through the device of sensuality. Cloaked in lascivious forms, these goods offer erotic promise, exploit the libido, and empty the pockets of the unsuspecting onlooker, turning her into a buyer. Ironically, this provocation by capitalists also stimulates illegal acquisition by thieves. On the other hand, it is not unusual to find in the language of design such descriptors as “sensuous” and “sexy” used in extolling the properties of a product. In fact, peddling beauty is often seen as the primary goal of industrial design. A recent essay referring to designers as “experts in the application of beauty,” emphasizes that “regardless of how important the measure of innovation and environmental impact are, beauty is the number one criteria for good design” (Viemeister 2001: 39). Paradoxically titled “Beautility,” this essay equates beauty to culture and fulfillment, and assigns it a position at the apex of a redesigned hierarchy of needs called Tucker’s Hierarchy (Viemeister 2001: 41). Though the dominant attribute assigned to aesthetics is that of control in both industrial design and political economy, in the former it is accepted as a noble and rightful goal, and in the latter as a deceptive trick. Such contrariety of opinion about the seductive nature of the commodity reveals the extreme positions taken by the two disciplines in their study of the same subject. Haug’s critique of the aesthetics of commodities should be introduced into design education to shift the locus of the curriculum from its current emphasis on consumption toward one balanced by the hypercritical stare of political economy.

Commodity Aging

Designing obsolescence into commodities, a practice rampant in developed countries and promoted by designers, marketers, and salespeople, has been widely decried on grounds of environmental responsibility. Aesthetic innovation, a routine activity of industrial design, takes on a manipulative role when its purpose is to reduce the use-lifetime of the commodity under the guise of unsatisfied need. Haug refers to this as “product senility” (1986: 40) that leads to a reduction of its use-value in terms of quality as well as quantity. It is interesting to note that Victor Papanek (whose book *Design for the Real World* was published the same year as Haug’s first German edition of *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics*) echoed his sentiments of the diminished value of a commodity forced into senility. Papanek (1971) believed that objects designed to be discarded soon after production led to a “Kleenex culture,” which would expand the notion of disposability to human values. The critical notion of value, economic as well as social, therefore, surfaces in the discussion of obsolescence.

Haug argues that the process of redesign subordinates the use-value of the commodity to a brand name, thereby assuring a position in the market for the next new product through the illusion of an ameliorated use-value. Designers continue to populate the world with commodities that are often mere adjustments of form that sell because of the force of a pre-established brand identity. When the image of the corporation has established itself with conviction in the buyer’s mind, use-value is eclipsed entirely and, under the deception of brand loyalty, is not even missed. The promise of use-value is replaced by the promise of brand ownership, which is a paradoxical situation since it is in fact the buyer who is owned by the corporation. The process is then repeated with the next commodity in an endless cycle of acquisition and devaluation. Aaron Betsky, in a catalog of iconic products refers to them as “solid shapes we can desire, use, wear down and throw out, only to look for future targets for our object lust” (1997: 202).

The Commodity as Desire

Aesthetic modification is akin to molting; as the skin ages, it is exfoliated. The novelty of the commodity Benjamin talked about is referred to by Haug as its fetish character. Alluding to the deceptive illusion presented by the commodity-body, Haug believes that “appearance always promises more, much more than it can ever deliver” (1986: 50). The skin of the commodity, which is at times the realm that industrial design is limited to, becomes the receptacle for its exchange-value rather than its use-value. Creative operations are performed on the skin to stimulate desire and to valorize capital, but are often justified as attempts to satisfy a wider range of user needs. Equating the buyer’s gaze to voyeurism and the exchange-value to sexuality, Haug relegates the role of commodity aesthetics to the “sexing-up” of the object, a term that also appeared in Papanek’s writing (1971: 151). Papanek attacked design in its effort to create object lust merely by changing its skin, a process that has since been accelerated with the rapid replacement of electromechanical components with digital ones.

Commodity as Need

“In the field of design, the expression of ideas is not the central issue. This lies in creating ideas in the ever-changing disguises of protean capital” (Haug 1986: 92). Under the pretense of appeasing the desires of society, corporations fill their coffers, carefully selecting only those needs that can be satisfied, making the designer a pawn in the scheme of capital valorization. Corporations are likely to take this attitude a step further by creating needs rather than satisfy existing ones, as is exemplified in Sony’s perceived design philosophy. Wolfgang Schmittel writes “Sony’s concept of creating a market instead of merely filling a demand, has become a fundamental policy, and governs the promotion and sales of all Sony products” (1975: 174). As design methodology has evolved, the role of ethnographic research and observation of users has taken center stage. Designers routinely watch and study people to identify opportunities where a new commodity can be inserted. Though not all such activity can be dismissed as capital driven, it certainly generates new needs adding to the proliferation of gadgets, meanwhile satisfying one primary need— that of the capitalist.

The Commodity as a Part of the Culture Industry

Referring to culture as an industry, Theodor Adorno, who was one of the leading members of the influential Frankfurt School of sociology, likens its production to that of commodities, making it a part of the capitalist economy. For Adorno, if the commodity combines use- and exchange-value, exchange-value deceptively takes over possession of use-value. This is distinctly visible in objects whose worth rises exponentially through design (either of the form or advertising) in spite of the lack of enhancement in its utility value. “The more inexorably the principle of exchange value destroys use values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment” (Adorno 1991: 34). This process of the destruction of use-value and its subordination by exchange-value is hastened by industrial design. “Function is out. Form is in. From radios to cars to toothbrushes, America is bowled over by style,” proclaims the sub-heading of an article titled “The Rebirth of Design” in *Time* magazine (Gibney and Luscombe, 2000). The cover features Mark Berthier’s lime-green Rubber radio, photographed in a goldfish bowl, charming and seductive, but assigned the existence of an ornamental fish trapped in the living room.

Commodity as Use, Exchange, and Sign

Marx’s discussion of political economy is questioned by Jean Baudrillard through the argument that polar terms (use and exchange) are generally biased toward one extreme, in this case the exchange-value, which is the force behind the circulation of the commodity. He instead emphasizes use-value as a necessary principle that has to be established before the possibility of any economic exchange can be realized. Where Marx saw the use-value as concrete, Baudrillard explains it as an abstraction of a

“system of needs” (1981: 131). He further expands the discourse by overlaying the commodity system with structural semiotics, and referring to the commodity, which, like a sign-form, is a code managing the exchange of values. Robert Miklitsch’s account of commodity fetishism attempts to include, into the use- and exchange-value equation, sign-value as well, thereby creating by extension, the “commodity-body-sign” an entity that is expressive of this triadic relationship. His economic account addresses the “specific allure, produced today via packaging and advertising, marketing and publicity, that is the hieroglyphic of the postmodern (art-) commodity” (1998: 78). He too, like Marx and Benjamin, treats the commodity as an object that is lusted after, exemplifying how design plays a significant role in every stage of its development cycle— from form generation to the creation of point-of-purchase material.

Conclusion

The debate presented here about the commodity is derived predominantly from its economic function, and assumes a capitalist structure, where production is fueled by a desire for capital gain. The structures of industry, labor, and economy have changed significantly since *Das Kapital*, and so have patterns of consumption. Though a dissection of the commodity that reveals merely use- and exchange-values might seem trifling, it is a model that can broaden the understanding of the object of design and present it as an object of political economy as well.

Industrial design has continued to be a slave to the manufacturing power and capital, though many changes have been observed in the profession as it has evolved. It is heartening to see that an emphasis on responsible design that goes beyond aesthetic adjustments is being practiced and seen in such areas as design for need, design for special populations, user-centered design, and sustainable design. This discourse offers a perspective largely ignored in design dialogue, and attempts to make design less design-centric.

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