

THE SPECTACLE

What do we need? While we live in the “modern world,” we are conditioned to want things that we do not need. As an economist, Marx says that if we rely on the market, everything above these essentials is trifling. What does this say about how we value things - like art?

Living in a consumer driven society, altered images are advertised as a way to show us what we are missing, what we *could* have. The “Spectacle,” or image of a thing is not reality. It is fueled by our desires, and as they become warped, the Spectacle feeds our cravings. At its core, the Spectacle is built off our basic ideals, but is then manipulated by the media and sold to us as an enhanced version of what we want. Because these altered ideals are advertised as a form that could never exist in real life, our desires can never be fulfilled.

This sculptural series represents three iconic commodities specific to American culture—the Hostess Twinkie, Marlboro Cigarettes, and Q-Tips. Each of these items has been so taken over by the Spectacle that we identify the actual product by its brand, instead of its use or what it is made of. Each is made with unusual materials that either negate their function or have deceptive qualities. I want the viewer to be presented with an icon that they can easily recognize and then come to a realization that what they are looking at is not the real thing, but merely a representation. If we continue the focus on only the monetary and spectacle value of things, we reduce our lives to a dull, impersonal experience. Is there a way out of this cycle?

Meave

As an art student, I've always been focused in the production and conceptual development of my artwork as well as the history and ideas of other artists. I'm interested in how trends in artistic style changed throughout history and how I can apply that knowledge to my own work. However, I have never really thought about how art is treated today in museums as opposed to individual galleries. Art economics had previously been so foreign to me. Because art has been such a large part of my life, it is important to me that I understand how it fits into the economy, another relatively new topic to me. I started my research in philosophy and economic theory. Looking at topics like commodification in our modern world, I decided that this best fit my desire to learn about how art is valued. This paper is an exploration of how the global trade of artwork has changed how we value it at the personal and intellectual level and how the general process of commodification has changed how we value ourselves and our relationships with others.

What do we need? While we live in the "modern world", we are conditioned to want things that we do not need. The foundations of our lives rest on what we value or deem important. How do we determine what is necessity and what is excess? Karl Marx, a German philosopher and economist, saw the fundamentals of human life needed to live as: air, water, food and shelter. In terms of basic survival, these are our economic essentials. "It is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic, or philosophic forms..." (Marx). He says that everything else -art, music, philosophy, religion- is excess or 'superstructure,' resting atop these four basic needs. If we rely on the market and trade, everything else is trifling. What does Marx's definition of our "essentials" say about art and culture? What is the point of art? When we are deprived of economic necessity or power we look to art, religion, and philosophy to find meaning and purpose. How has our use of these superstructures for fulfillment shaped the way we define our "essentials" today?

Living in a consumer driven society, more of our private lives are being shown and profited on through the media. Altered images of ideals are being advertised to us, showing us what we are missing and what we *could* have. Our desire is fueled by "the Spectacle", or image of a thing, and not the reality. However, it is also our desires that fuel the Spectacle. At its core, the Spectacle is built off of our basic ideals but is then manipulated by the media and sold to us as an enhanced version of what we want. Guy Debord, a french Marxist theorist and philosopher, illustrates this idea in his book *The Society of the Spectacle*: "The more he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own life and his own desires. The Spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer his own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to him" (Debord). We are fed a masked version of our core desires. Because these altered ideals are advertised as a form that could never exist in real life, our desires can never be fulfilled. The Spectacle fuels the commodification of our everyday lives as it strips products of their personal worth and replaces it with the Spectacle values of society, as Debord says. Has the process of commodification changed how we regard each other and cultural aspects of our lives? Our economic system is made possible because of the belief that anything can be given an economic value, and exchanged. Of course, we tend to value cultural commodities, like theater and arts, in a different light than ordinary commodities like shirts and shoes. However, our system is wired to focus not on the content or use value of the commodity, but rather its exchange value. The economic unit for exchange is currency. It's only use is to be exchanged in place of the products

being bought and sold (the alternative is the actually trading of goods without a currency). An object's value is not linked directly to what it can be used for, but what monetary value it can be exchanged for. Commodification is a cycle that is unstoppable and therefore inescapable. As we continue to focus only on the exchange or monetary value of things, we reduce our everyday lives to a dull, impersonal existence.

Not even the most individualistic and unique spheres of art and culture can escape this process. The art trade is often seen as an investment opportunity, valuing the works of artists only for their profitability. The same can be seen in the commercialization of culture. Advertising makes us want more of what we do not need, though it convinces us that we *do* need these things. At the same time, elements of different cultures are being marketed and sold as trends. Engineered by the market economy, commodification is turning our cultural and artistic outlets into interchangeable goods that can be bought and sold, ultimately losing their personal and cultural significance.

Our modern definition of a commodity articulates how it can manipulate our perceptions and systems of value. Something is not a commodity until it is made or produced for sale. Under capitalism, nothing is produced that can't be sold for profit (Leys). The production of commodities is the basis for a capitalist system. Commodification is the transformation of goods and services as well as ideas into marketable items that are produced to satisfy wants or needs. A commodity *appears* to have exchange value as a natural feature. Commodities are therefore interchangeable via money. Although price may deviate from exchange value because of availability or scarcity, as commodities, they maintain the same product value (Ripstein). This means that when something is commodified, it no longer is seen as a specific object with unique worth. The price of these items will vary due to cost of resources and wages, but they no longer have any personal connection to us. By exchanging them with a totally separate item (money), they are virtually interchangeable and have only the value of the number on their price tag. In a purely economic view, every commodity is valued the same, regardless of the work put into them.

There are a few problems with this. Exchange value does not account for the labor time or costly resources that are put into making these products. Usually, for a mass produced item, the exchange value is too cheap considering the labor time that goes into making these products which can result in an exploitation of resources and workers and unfairly low wages. The process that went into making these objects is not considered by the market. Profit is what is sought after. So, any kind of intellectual, moral or personal value held in an object is removed when sold or bought for profit. As our lives become increasingly commodified we experience a sort of dehumanization.

It seems that commodification has been happening for a while, but we haven't acknowledged its presence. This process, as the underlying basis for our economy, has become so engrained in our lives that we don't even notice its effects. What keeps us from seeing it? As we commodify more things there is also an increase in the advertisements that sell them. In Situationist theory, Guy Debord explains the concept of *the Spectacle* as the most glaring and superficial manifestation of mass media (Debord). His book, *The Society of the Spectacle*, is a development of the concept of commodity fetishism and alienation. The Spectacle changes the way we interact socially through the fantasies it projects on commodities. This "fetishism" distracts us from reality and thus alienate us from our authentic lives. In this society, the commodities dictate the lives of the producers and consumers, instead of the commonly believed notion that we control the goods we make and our relationships with them. We merely

contemplate the existence of the Spectacle. Debord says that “everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation” (Debord). The Spectacle is this representation. When we give our desires to the Spectacle, they are manipulated and we no longer have any conscious control over what we want. We no longer live with our authentic desires in mind. The Spectacle builds off of itself after it projects our manipulated desires onto us and then proceeds to further alter them. It is a cycle.

Since the 1920s, advertising has been a major force in shaping the consumer lifestyle. Even when it has been hindered by war or economic downturn, the media still presses us with images of ideal workers and patriots and people we must work towards becoming. Nowadays, as the primary mechanism for spreading the spectacle, advertising and the media shows us images of a commodity paradise, offering feelings of confidence and luxury. We see these images in Figure 1, an advertisement for Dior Men’s Cologne. Jude Law, a well known and easily recognizable celebrity, directs his confident gaze toward you, the consumer. A womanly figure dressed in all black stands behind him, next to one of the legs of the Eiffel Tower. He is in Paris, the city of style and romance. His self-assurance allows you to trust him and his message: “Men like me use Dior Homme”. This campaign plays with our cultural stereotype for finesse and confidence. We recognize the celebrity and the place, so we feel more comfortable exploring what the ad has to say for itself. We begin to believe in this lifestyle being represented, one that our society tends to fantasize about. In order to obtain that lifestyle, we must buy the product it represents.



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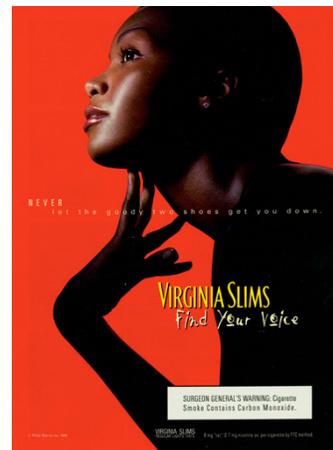
The Dior cologne becomes a commodity when it is stripped of its use value and instead carries the value of the lifestyle it represents. In addition, the name and status of the individual in the advertisement then becomes its own commodity. Jude Law’s filmography and achievements are not being exhibited. His fame is merely being used as a tool to sell a product that has nothing to do with what he’s known for. It is in this way that his name holds commodity value. The commodities that these advertisements are selling become the representation of a perfect, but unattainable life.

Because we live in a world of buying and selling, advertising dominates. We must sell our ability to work in order to make money to buy food and shelter, as well as commodities, to participate in society.

Because of this need for profit, we do not own the things we produce and therefore become separated from our work. This separation is known as “alienation”. Marx says that “selling is the process of alienation”. He believed that the division of labor creates an economic hierarchy which prevents workers to eventually lose control of their lives and their work. If we are speaking on a very basic level, it is true to say that work gives a person some kind of purpose; or rather, we produce labor which produces a product. So, when we are alienated from the things we produce, we are also alienated from our work and why we produce. Commodification seems to both express and create alienation. Workers become objectified because they are only recognized as the commodity they produce. This alienates them from the natural world because they are now considered a commodity. Their work is not appreciated by those who buy the things they make. The worker’s identity is lost in the material object sold on the market. The item serves only as proof of their work. Thus, the worker is dehumanized. Why

does the worker continue to work if they are so undervalued? We need some kind of fantasy to keep us working and participating in society. Debord says that “everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation” (Debord). Unfortunately, the fantasies that arise from this need only build on the selling and production of commodities. The media facilitates these illusions that give us a taste of the lifestyles and appreciation we want. These dreams are projected onto material objects which give us momentary satisfaction. But it is never enough.

Advertising will market products that meet our needs and desires for self worth, something that is stripped from us through alienation. The actual product does not give us this satisfaction, but the image that is advertised and embodied by the product fulfills this missing sense of purpose. We see this in the marketing of products that are completely unnecessary for living. For example, cigarettes are publicized as a symbol of sophistication. Virginia Slims, a women’s cigarette brand, has been selling the image of success and glamour since 1968 (Figure 2). An anonymous woman with elegant features dominates the simple advertisement with effortless beauty. The words “Never let the goody two shoes get you down” are printed over her profile. Refined. Independent. Alluring. All of these characteristics are tied with a product with a recreational use. They are unnecessary and can even be harmful, but buying and using this product may give the consumer a sense of sophistication and beautiful transcendence, not just the nicotine fix. Advertising is focused on selling you a specific commodity that you probably don’t need as a basic necessity for living. They make you believe in the ideal they project onto a product so that you will buy into the illusion. This craving was so ingrained in female society that even when cigarettes were linked to cancer growth in the early 70s, the number of male smokers dropped but smoking increased in women by 400% (Schor).



Most products we see today are advertised to us in idealistic images that provoke (but do not satisfy) our desire (the work of the Spectacle). As we continue to commodify, products become the objects of a “fetish”. Fetishism is the projection of human nature and of human desires onto an external object. In Karl Marx’s critique of capitalism, he says that “A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” (Marx). He means that as we do commodify things to be recognized only for their profit value, we often go a step further to value them as something more. We often project mystical qualities onto the things we buy and come to own. These qualities advance beyond the use and even the monetary value of the product. We believe that by obtaining these material things, we become elevated and arrive at a heightened state of ego or status. We grow attached to material commodities in this way, by attaching our own illusion onto them.

Fetishism not only warps our relationships with the commodities produced on the market, but it also manipulates the relationships between ourselves and our roles in the economy. It represents a different kind of human subjection to commodities than alienation. Marx says that “commodity fetishism is the perception of the social relationships involved in production between money and commodities exchanged in market trade” (Ripstein). He is saying that fetishism strips our social interactions of their personal and moral value and replaces it with the

profit value of whatever the individuals in the relationship produce. Fetishism attaches itself to the products of labor and labor is soon commodified as well (Ripstein). Marx says, “intellectuals live only as long as they find work, and... find work only as long as their labor increases capital. These workers who must sell themselves piece by piece, are a commodity like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all shifts in competition, to all fluctuations of the market” (Willette). Marx is saying that in the process of commodifying the products, the individuals involved in their production become commodities as well. Most workers do not recognize the effects of this ideology and therefore add to the system by selling their labor as a commodity to be bought by employers. Their labor is embodied in a commodity that is valued the same as other commodities. They become separated from their work as it becomes commodified. This is another process of alienation.



In our current market, top brands sell their products so successfully because of this fetishism. Nike sells athletic ability (Figure 3) and Coca-Cola sells youth lifestyle (Figure 4). These idealistic images tap into our human desires and make us want the product so that we can have the fantasy they represent. The brand is then valued as the fantasy they are selling (rather than the product) and become further ingrained in our private lives and culture

through sponsoring and product placement. The ‘logo’ assumes a cultural role and becomes the object of the fetish as well. This is how the “Spectacle” influences our choices in the economy. In a way, the process of commodification is mixed with the Spectacle that advertising projects on these commodities which are then fetishized with the Spectacle illusion. It is a process that repeats and builds on itself, seemingly inescapable.



The Spectacle feeds into the world in its purest form as propaganda. Guy Debord, the creator of the Spectacle, was part of a group of international social activists called the Situationist International (SI) (“Situationist”). Their philosophy was rooted in both politics and art, taking from the writings of Marx and 20th century. They were concerned with these Marxist concepts of commodification and alienation. They believed that the Spectacle was not the domination of the world by images, but the domination of a social interaction mediated by images (“Situationists”). They suggested that the Spectacle manipulated our social relationships with each other and that the images it produced are what drove us to interact. The Spectacle controlled our social existence. The Situationists advocated for a life alternative to those warped by the Spectacle, through the “Detournement” style of propaganda art. Detournement is plagiarism where both the source and the meaning of the original work is overturned to create new work (“Situationist”). A good example of how they use these common images is seen in Figure 5. The poster or comic strip is pulling from the work of the famous 1960s pop artist, Roy Lichtenstein (“Situationist”). They use a well known style to convey the message: “I don’t want to reform Capitalism. I want to change life...” (Figure 5). Their aim was to bring about a revolution in which people would do things out of the sheer enjoyment it brings them, rather than the social or economical expectation expressed by images. They wanted liberation from the alienation from their work as well as the Spectacle that controls

their lives. Many of these works belonged to the S.I. as a whole rather than an individual. Although some of these pieces resembled famous works of the time, they avoided commodification because one could not tie the work to the fame or recognition of an anonymous artist.

Today, in American society, we still need Marx's "basic necessities" to survive, but we have started to market the 'excess' amenities. Every aspect of our lives is slowly becoming a commodity that can be bought and sold on the market. Theater, art, poetry, even religion is used as a tool for advertising or is itself sold for profit. Traditionally, the artist demystifies and explains the phenomena of human life through symbols and ideas, helping us realize and comprehend ourselves. Art used to be a purely intellectual experience, but it has recently become something else.

In the early 20th century, people became more uncertain about what was considered art. Marcel Duchamp and other artists of the time, questioned what classifies something as art. His famous work "Fountain" is a found object, a urinal, that he repositioned and displayed with a signature (Figure 6). Its appearance in a gallery and the signature scrawled on the side transformed the object from a urinal on a shelf in a market to a piece of that that was to be comprehended. This sort of new thinking about what makes something art can be referenced when talking about how we value art today.

The idea that an everyday object can become a work of art has been reversed. Cultural spheres like art and philosophy are being marketed, because of how entangled the economy is with our private lives. Because of this rapid commodification, art is only seen for its profit value. The artist's name becomes the brand of the piece that becomes the product. Collectors and buyers looking for an investment are concerned with the recognition and fame that the artist's name might gain in order to later sell their piece for a higher price. Others buy fine art at sky-high prices to be a part of the social circle in which buying expensive art because you can is a norm. Buying expensive art to be granted a certain social status exhibits the Spectacle that has been placed on a commodity and turned it into a fetish. The desire for this social acceptance, shared by many, is sought through buying the work that represents it. These types of buyers are not as concerned with the intellectual experience the piece offers, nor the process that the artist went through to realize the piece. The work is stripped of everything but its monetary and profit value. The art patron becomes the art "consumer". In our society today, commodification has changed how we value cultural aspects of our lives. The more we offer our lifestyles to the market, the more it adapts to show us what we want to see, in order to sell us a product. As the economic system continues to thrive from



the commodification and advertising of our cultural and artistic outlets, these spheres ultimately lose their personal and intellectual significance.

Looking into the art world today, we begin to see how art is being commodified. The commodification of art is a slightly different process than the original model. The creation of art thrives on innovation, unconventionality and exploration. Art has the potential to elevate and transform the way the public thinks. However, works are now displayed in galleries with a price tag, meant to be admired but also to be bought by the public who wander in. Art objects are not necessarily exchangeable one for the other like other commodities, though they are increasingly becoming so. Art economics generally is based on the scarcity of unique objects (Irvine). Within the past five years, art began to be classified by some as an asset, meaning as an economic resource or commodity. An investment asset is defined as an economic resource that can be converted into cash. Art is then seen as an investment opportunity, and is bought with the expectation of being sold at a greater value when the artist has received greater recognition. A piece's aesthetic and personal value becomes less and less significant. Artists then become cultural producers, laboring in a capitalist system for the benefits of the market. The work of art is a consumer object and therefore must be an object of human desire. Their work then becomes the commodity of a fetish (Willette).

In some ways the Art market serves to make the intangible and personal value of works into exchange value. The value of unique, "priceless" commodities like art works come from fetish desires like symbolic wealth and ownership of scarce goods (Irvine). Commodified art pieces show this value which is translated into cash value and exchanges in the marketplace. Many artists see this process happening to their work and have chosen to express commodification in their art work. Damien Hirst uses art to touch on the commodification of his field. Hirst has crafted a brand identity that has far surpassed the value of his work in importance and profit value (Avramidis). He exhibits the point at which art is no longer the commodity but the image of the artist, their recognizable name, becomes the commodity, or rather, the Spectacle that is fetishized. It is by associations with collectors, dealers art experts, auction houses and museums who affirm that the artist has succeeded by their their credibility and own associations with other artists. This gives the artist merit in his brand. Hirst worked with the esteemed dealer, Charles Saatchi, which also contributes to his Spectacle. This drives the consumer to identify with and recognize the artist's name brand. One of Damien Hirst's famous works "For the Love of God" (Figure 6). gives an example of this Spectacle. This sculpture of a diamond covered platinum skull is worth over \$100 million. Hirst is representing the Spectacle through this piece.



He recognizes that Contemporary Art can sell for incredible amounts of money that do not seem to be objectively merited. The actual work is not the art product that his "brand" is creating. His brand is selling the Spectacle of wealth and "fine art" through a physical commodity (Avramidis). The diamonds themselves could be sold for profit alone but the Spectacle of these expensive materials used in art to make a statement allows Hirst to sell images of the sculpture (in addition to the actual piece) for a very high price. Hirst is an example of an artist that acknowledges and toys with the idea of the Spectacle. But he is still alienated from his work. The actual man who created the work is covered by the fetishized name that he carries. Hirst seems to momentarily escape the

unstoppable commodification by questioning it. But we can never totally escape it by engaging in protest against it. It seems that the only way to escape this cycle is by acknowledging its existence and withdrawing completely from the market economy by not selling art. It is possible to make art for personal satisfaction, but income must come from somewhere for an artist to survive.

Why do we continue to participate in a system that seems to be controlling the way we live? In our American society, we take pride in our freedom and our fight against oppression. Our social and cultural values are continually exploited by our economy for profit, but we do not recognize this as oppression. We are used to naming the *oppressor* or the person responsible, someone to blame and fight against. But, the market is a self-regulated and self-sustaining entity made possible by our participation in it. How can we fight an intangible force that we are a part of? Using trading of goods without a currency may give products back their unique value, but one would have to remove themselves from their community in order to implement this kind of economy. There is seemingly no way out of this system without disconnecting one's self from society as a whole, because of how tightly knit the economy is with social spheres. We have molded our culture into an economic community. To withdraw from the market economy would be to withdraw from the community and cultural society.

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