Commodity aesthetics revisited

Exchange relations as the source of antagonistic aesthetization

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Thus much of this, will make black white; foul, fair...

This line from Shakespeare figures in a longer quotation in Marx's *Capital*, in the chapter on hoarding. The sentence to which the footnote with the Shakespeare quotation is attached, reads: 'Just as in money every qualitative difference between commodities is extinguished, so too, for its part, as a radical leveller, it extinguishes all distinctions.' However, this is not a complete description of what we find in the Shakespeare quote, which is taken from *Timon of Athens* and reads in full:

Thus much of this, will make black white; foul, fair; Wrong right; base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant.
What this, you gods? Why, this
Will lug your priests and servants from your sides;
Pluck stout men's pillows from below their heads;
This yellow slave
Will knit and break religions; bless the accurs'd;
Make the hoar leprosy ador'd; place thieves,
And give them title, knee and approbation,
With senators on the bench; this is it,
That makes the wappen'd widow wed again:
Come damned earth,
Thou common whore of mankind.

Gold, in Shakespeare's accusation, not only extinguishes determinations, but replaces them with their opposite. Some old order, in which everything finds its place according to inherent merits, is repressed by a new order in which money commands. But now Shakespeare seems to be beside the point, because money may command but not in the binary perverting logic of changing all things into their opposites. We understand why Marx stresses the extinction of difference or the indifference effect.

The perverting power 'to make black white' recurs in *Capital*, where Marx speaks about adulteration of bread, referring to the origin, in the history of philosophy, of the term 'sophistication' in the Platonic critique of the Greek Enlighteners, the Sophists:

In fact, this kind of 'sophistry' understands better than Protagoras to make white black, and black white, and better than the Eleatics how to demonstrate before your very eyes that everything real is merely apparent.

Speaking about commodity aesthetics is one way to shed light into some of this sorcery.

Theoretical foundations

My point of departure is the Marxian analysis of the exchange relation. Marx discovers an apparently circular structure of this everyday practice: a commodity is destined for sale; that is, the value that it represents must be realized – the realization problem. What moves the buyer to exchange money for the commodity is the use value. But the use values must be realized too and they are, as Marx says, ‘only realized in use or consumption’ (CI, 126). However, purchase and use are normally separated in both space and time. As a rule, use takes place after sale (if one excludes commodity samples). This leads to the following circle: the realization of use value is the presupposition of the act of purchase, and the act of purchase is the presupposition of the realization of use value – as in the story of the shoemaker from Berlin–Koepenick, who couldn't get a work permit without a residence permit, and no residence permit without a work permit. The shoemaker forced his exit from this circle by imaginary violence: he went to the costumier's and rented the uniform of a Prussian colonel, came back into the city hall of Koepenick and ordered them to give him the permits. But where is the exit from the mutual presupposition/circle of buying and selling?
The astonishing thing is that this chicken-and-egg aporia is ‘forgotten’ by Marx and left unsolved. He displaces the question to a further apparent problem, which lies in the fact that every owner of a commodity only acts for himself while producing for others. ‘But the same process cannot be simultaneously for all owners of commodities both exclusively individual and exclusively social and general’ (CI, 180). To show how this second circle is overcome, Marx introduces the concept of a ‘general equivalent’ as a genetic pre-stage of money. The ‘equivalent commodity’ – gold, for instance – is, on the one hand, a specific use value; on the other, it is always in the form of immediate exchangeability, and thus represents the social nature of private products. But where is the exit from the first circle? ‘Ordinary language offers an answer …: The buyer buys a specific commodity, since he promises himself [to obtain] from it the use value he desires.’ What sets the purchase in motion is the use-value promise. But on which ground should I promise myself that others will meet my needs? The answer seems obvious: what makes me expect use value are the aspects offered by the commodity.

This leads us to scrutinize two poles of the use-value promise: one of subjective activity and the other of the objective data of appearance, which motivate the former. In our perception of such ‘appearances’ we may be additionally influenced by their intersubjective interpretation (for instance, through ‘sales talk’). The relation of exchange, however, is an antagonistic one. In the literal sense of the Greek antagonizomai, exchange action is always opposed action, in so far as those who exchange represent opposite interests. The use-value promise functions, in this antagonism, as a means of power. The ‘forcing effects’ of this power operate within myself. In this sense, Werner Sombart spoke of ‘inner compulsory means’. How do they work?

To understand this, we have to take into account the ‘normal’ role of the ‘imaginary’ in our motivational structure. In this structure drives and needs are articulated with (and condensed within) images: ‘imagining’ ourselves we assume the glance of what George Herbert Mead has analysed as the generalized (anonymous) other. Whenever we act we ‘fill out’ these imaginary spaces. Here, ‘imaginary’ does not mean ‘unreal’. As psychoanalysis and phenomenology have shown, we entertain an imaginary relation to reality.

The use-value promise deploys its real-imaginary power by affecting our self-image. Like the shoemaker from Koepenick, the commodity goes to the costumer’s, though the uniform into which it changes in most cases is not military but a civil one; more often it is the uniform of intimacy. Never is it more in disguise than when it is naked. Deploying its imaginary powers, the commodity borders on illusion or even deception. In deception, the appearance of a use value becomes a deceptive appearance, detaches itself from its ‘reference to reality’ as a mendacious illusion. The other person is meant to take appearance for being and to fall for the ruse. Deception realizes itself as self-deception on the part of the other.

To the extent that the relation of exchange is antagonistic, the boundaries of property have the effect of a filter of appropriation, which, like a windowpane, only lets through specific information and sense data (the visual). The experience that not ‘being’ but ‘appearance’ sets off the act of purchase must sooner or later lead to the fixing of the ‘appearance of use value through abstraction of its reality’ as a special object of work, and its intentional processing by ‘purposeful activity’. ‘The aesthetic in its broadest sense – sensuous appearance and the sense of the use-value – here detaches itself from the thing. Domination and separate production of this aesthetic aspect turn into means for the end of money.’ That Marx forgot this first aporia may be due to the fact that commodity aesthetics under early industrial capitalism did not yet have the significance that it acquired almost immediately after his death, since the 1880s. In 1968, Theodor W. Adorno concluded: ‘Far exceeding what was forseeable in Marx’s day, human needs have now become functions of the production apparatus.’

In The Poverty of Philosophy, however, Marx says: ‘production precedes consumption, supply compels [erzwingt] demand’. Nonetheless, Marx wastes no time on the thought of how this compelling of demand is effected. In the Grundrisse, he touches on this question, where he reflects on the relation of entrepreneurs to the workers’ world as one of consumers: the capitalist seeks here ‘all means to encourage them to consumption, seeking to give the commodity new charms, to persuade them of new needs’. Marx holds ‘this side of the relation of capital and labour’ to be ‘an essential moment of civilization … on which the historical justification, but also the present power of capital, depends.’ But why doesn’t Marx analyse how this ‘civilizational’ effect is reached by capital? The reason seems obvious: the forms in which commodity aesthetics had detached itself from the ‘body’ of the commodity were, in the second third of the nineteenth century, still marginal. At any rate, they interested Marx and Engels primarily as an everyday matter, to which they pointed in order to make their project of ideology-critique plausible to common sense: ‘Whilst
in ordinary life every shopkeeper is very well able to distinguish between what somebody professes to be and what he really is, our historiography has not yet won this trivial insight.9

Against Marx’s assumption that the mutual relationship within capitalist development between productive forces and the creation of new needs leads, under corresponding social relationships, to the development of personality, Hannah Arendt argues: ‘A hundred years after Marx we know the fallacy of this reasoning: the spare time of the animal laborans is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites.'10

Whoever speaks thus exempts his or her own hermeneutic community from the rule, without remarking thereby that the statement is weakened. Consumerism, which Adorno locates entirely in the process of late capitalism, where he sees needs as being ‘totally controlled’,11 seems for Arendt to lie in human nature, since the necessary detour via the analysis of mediations is sacrificed to an anthropological short-circuit. The analytics of commodity aesthetics has to discover these mediations.

**Modes of effectivity**

Deception is fraud, as such widely disseminated, but always as ‘abuse’ or ‘excess’. The normal form is more important. The deception which is no deceit happens in the imaginary. An aesthetic mirror is held up to the senses by commodities or in connection with them. The Archimedean point of commodity aesthetics lies not in the commodities themselves, and not at all in their use value, but in the needs or desires of the prospective buyers. Those images to which their appetites are fixed ‘stick’. Instead of an Archimedean point, one may therefore speak of an Archimedean ellipse of commodity aesthetics, which runs around the body of the commodity. Its two focal points lie outside it: the organizing focus forms the interest of valorization (Verwertung), the material one condenses the ensemble of desires which burn inside the human material. In the manifest aesthetic message, therefore, everything revolves around the addressed human subject. But this subject is only the environment of a system that revolves around itself. Thus, the centrality of the subject is imaginary, or the imaginary aspects of the subject become central.

Normally, a commodity owner who wants to sell his or her commodity uses the appearance of use value in the fashion of Sombart’s inner mode of compulsion, in order to put the other’s desire under his or her spell and to push the wish to appropriate to the point of becoming overwhelming in the other person. All conceivable forms of promise and enticement are directed towards the needs of the potential exchange partner. The latter is supposed to get what (s)he wants, but no longer able to will what (s)he wills. This ‘supposed to’ refers first to the conscious intention and strategy of ‘market interests’ (Max Weber). This intentional character is taken to be real by manipulation theories without testing it. Like all strategy, the strategic imaginary of the commodity aesthetics may miss its goal. This restriction is overcome by the periodic recycling of commodity aesthetic patterns which is driven by the feedback of success or failure. In this sense, Brecht compared the cinema box office with the film critic: the financial hit stays in the repertory and finds imitators; the flop disappears and any similarity to it is avoided. ‘That counts as correct which has already been photographed once and ‘made it’, and that counts as good, which raised a fee.'12 It is sufficient that the market actors hold on to their programme of profit maximizing to give this permanent effect of selection the weight of a subjectless process.

As the bearer of use-value promise, aesthetic abstraction lies at the base of many techniques relevant to sales. Among them are: the shaping of the body of the commodity, the particular elaboration of its ‘skin’, its representation on the package, its decoration in display, its mise-en-scène in the television spot. The aesthetic abstraction of the commodity thus becomes the precondition of an aesthetic specification that is apt to the claim of property rights. One of the classic examples is the idea that a producer of mouthwash hit on a hundred years ago of twisting the neck of the bottle in which his product was sold into a (technically senseless) form which was clearly distinguishable from that of other bottles. The automobile, a serially mass-produced item, became almost from the start normalized as that sort of brand-name item of which the physical appearance represents both the use value and the brand name. Such an aesthetically specified use item in the possession of a corporation can be conceived of as an aesthetic monopoly of use value.13

Copyright laws for such combinations of aesthetic form and linguistic signs were created in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These laws founded the property rights of words and shapes. Apart from the ‘self-promoting’ (Wenick) attires of the particular material configuration of the body of the commodity (which can also be submitted to property rights), the specification is easier to grasp in the combination of figurative appearances (here, of the packaging) and semiotic designation, which distinguishes the
aesthetic as an appeal to meaning and sensuousness. The aesthetic monopoly of use value grants its possessors two new possibilities for maximizing profit: (1) that of monopoly price, (2) that of regeneration of demand. The latter, which has been described as ‘planned obsolescence’ (Packard), may be more accurately described as aesthetic innovation of a commodity. Its effect is the aesthetic ageing (obsolescence) of still functioning products of an earlier shape.14

What explains the drive for aesthetic innovation and obsolescence is the leisure of the new and the demand for conspicuousness (Veblen) or distinction (Bourdieu), regularly followed by a paradoxical mass conformism of distinction. From the standpoint of the producer, the production of distinction is by intent the production of conformism. For those consumers who want distinction, every such conformism motivates anew the desire for a distinctive escape. This craving sets the following cycle in motion and follows it itself: every attractive symbolic or aesthetic distinction is followed – or pursued – by a mass conformism to this distinction, which is then extinguished by this conformism, named general fashion. Craving for aesthetic difference then seeks once again to escape this mass conformity. This process constantly remodels the needs addressed by commodity aesthetics. The offers are not simple answers to needs, but rather reformulate the latter’s demand. Every demand is ‘understood’ as a market demand and related to something purchasable. The excessive desire, whose satisfaction is not purchasable, did not get its due, but its ‘view’ – to vary Walter Benjamin’s famous dictum from his essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’. Since wishes are related to commodities, the expression of wishes is drawn into the aesthetics of these goods. These wishes are thus forced through all conceivable filters and amplifiers by specialists and sent back to the realm of need.

Starting with the body of the commodity, concentrating on its surface, transfigured on the packaging and situated in display and decoration, commodity aesthetics turns into dream movies. The television spots feed into the imaginary spaces of the addressee, functioning like recognized identity moulds to be filled out by commodity consumption. Commodity aesthetics thus overdetermine what G.H. Mead analysed as the role of the ‘generalized other’, by delivering the image or model to be reproduced by consumers. The basic pattern can be seen in an advertisement in a women’s magazine, in which Jean-Paul Sartre read the ‘extraordinary sentence’ ‘Bold or Discreet, But Ever More Yourself.’ Sartre translated this as follows: ‘Purchase like everyone, in order to be like none.’ He added: ‘Herein lies the manipulation.’15

The thesis of manipulation is not false but one-sided. It remains fixed in an actor who is represented as quasi-omnipotent instead of being represented in the process in which, because of the never quite foreseeable reactions of the addressees amidst competing appearances, the manipulator is also included. In the self-organizational form of this process, the tendency which had its beginning in the chicken-and-egg aporia of exchange developed into a powerful catalyst which brings everything cultural to react with the commodity world. This then combines with the subjects that shape their identities in the endless loop of a perpetual commodity aesthetic recycling, from which, to be sure, the cultural forever again reemerges. It does so in the double sense of escaping again and proceeding anew from. On the one hand, the boundary between advertisement and entertainment is blurred; on the other, the aesthetics of entertainment is penetrated by commodity aesthetics.

Again, the border between cultural industry and everyday life is transcended in both directions. The resulting real–imaginary merger has been described as a ‘promotional culture’ (Wernick), though it may be more contradictory. Brecht described this tendency, in his American exile, as an overall expansion of the pragmatic expressivity of selling.16 In the ambience of consumptive passivization, the activity returns in the form of ‘thrilling consumption’, as the English director Paul Anderson represented it in his 1993 film Shopping: consumption as destruction and devouring of oneself.

Commodity aesthetics and art

If one considers commodity aesthetics with the criteria of classical aesthetics, nearness and distance are strangely foregrounded. If morality and aesthetics explain our ‘tastes and sentiments’, as David Hume claimed,17 then commodity aesthetics with its ‘technology of the beautiful’ does this even more. And if Hume describes the effect of every kind of beauty as ‘a peculiar delight and satisfaction, as deformity produces pain’, no matter ‘upon whatever subject it may be plac’d’, then it becomes clear that commodity aesthetics does just this, namely it both depicts ‘delight and satisfaction’ via the emanation of commodity beauty, and also it serves to excite them. Above all, it ties the anticipatory appearance and promise of ‘delight and satisfaction’ to the commodity.

Hegel destroys this false harmony: ‘But Kant has already made an end of this reduction of beauty’s effect to feeling, to the agreeable, and the pleasant, by going
beyond the feeling of the beautiful.18 In fact, Kant defines the beautiful as ‘the symbol of moral good’, which thus lays ‘claim to everyone’s consent’, building on general consensus, ‘whereby one’s temper is aware of a certain … raising above the mere receptivity of a pleasure through sense impressions.’19 This claim, which seems to exclude commodity beauty, is further developed by Hegel: ‘Beauty … must be true in itself.’ No one would ever assert this of the beautiful appearance of the commodity; no one except commodity aesthetics itself. This beauty appears, rather intuitively, to us as something inherently untrue. Its reception is at least ambivalent. The commodity also falls short of the following criterion of the freedom of the contemplating subject of all ‘interests, aims and intentions’ which it ‘wills to assert … in face of the being and properties of things’.20 The commodity also apparently misses the Kant–Hegelian criterion of emancipating things from the servitude of utility. Commodity aesthetics illuminates precisely the interest in useful things. And yet this demarcation does not hold in other respects.

Without doubt, what Hegel says about the work of art is true of commodity aesthetics as well, namely that ‘the beautiful thing in its existence makes its own Concept appear as realized and displays in itself subjective unity and life.’21 To say that the beautiful commodity in its aesthetic existence lets the concept of its use value appear as realized, and shows in itself subjective unity and liveliness, is to describe a typical television spot. Whether it be cleaning agents, cars or packaged nibbles, a scene of happy life as end-in-itself is unfolded around whatever is advertised. Not only artistic beauty, but also of the commodity ‘is the Idea as the immediate unity of the Concept with its reality, the Idea, however, only in so far as this its unity is present immediately in sensuous and real appearance.’22 It is the real imaginary of the ‘good life’ of commodity consumption. Its untruth is not to be grasped formally. It is only susceptible to that critique which genetically reconstructs the mediations. Kant’s dictum that there is ‘no science of beauty, but only critique’23 is doubly true of commodity aesthetics.

Commodity aesthetics stands in a parasitical relation to all art, in fact to all symbolic forms in general, and to all ‘ideological powers’ (Engels). By living off of them, it devours their possibility. In a certain sense, commodity aesthetics becomes an aesthetic parody in the ‘use of forms in the age of their impossibility’ (Adorno). In principle, the ‘overwhelming objectivity of the commodity character, which sucks up all human residues’, consumes all the comprehensibility of art, even (as the Benetton commercials have shown) that which is absolutely irreconcilable. One part of art reacts to this by resisting comprehension, another precipitates itself into the ‘aleatory … as a desperate answer to the ubiquity of semblance’.24 Another part of art reconquers comprehensibility by giving form to the parody.

That commodity aesthetics encloses the very horizon of art from which only single artworks momentarily break away is evident in the eternal return of the new. Nouveauté is aesthetically the result of historical development, the trademark of consumer goods appropriated by art by means of which artworks distinguish themselves from the ever-same inventory in obedience to the need for the valorization of capital, which, if it does not expand, if it does not – in its own language – offer something new, is eclipsed. The new is the aesthetic seal of expanded reproduction.25

Günter Anders, directly countering Adorno, believed that Brecht broke out of this circle in that he ‘restored the original gesture of speaking’ under the condition of constantly being addressed by the media. Brecht ‘reckons with humans who have been formed by these means and is writing now against these means’. Brecht’s ‘profile’ can be only seen ‘correctly’, continues Anders, if one takes into consideration ‘the nowadays most massively advancing “false address” as a foil’, whose interpellation Brecht takes up and refunctions – through estrangement, introducing distance.26

Commodity aesthetics as motor of globalization

The world order of the market sends ahead as its messenger the beautiful appearance of its commodities. Their image excels their reality by far and at great distance. The corrugated-iron huts in the favelas are overshadowed by television antennas. Television is hooked up long before the eventual arrival of a water supply. The expansion of transnational high-tech capitalism into pre- or semi-capitalist societies here finds its most powerful motor. ‘Is there a more globalization activity from within than commerce?’ asks Benjamin R. Barber. He quotes the promotion slogan ‘On planet Reebok there are no boundaries.’ He omits mentioning that insolvent poverty may form an insurmountable limit for commodities, and that those globalization activities are a spooky trade for the majority of people. Not for the commodities, only for their aesthetic casting are there neither borders nor limits (or at least almost none). For the larger part of the world’s population, the promises of commodity aesthetics have no realizable counterpart. This virtuality, however, does not impair the power of those promises, but
rather enables them to exert their influence. Exactly where the aesthetic use-value promises of the world of commodities arrive without commodities, they thereby promise another world. Commodity aesthetics not only extends its border further and further into the realm of cultural industries whose products become less and less distinguishable from it, but this border also loses its meaning in the immense poverty belt around the globe compared to the glamour with which both branches of the illusion industry dazzle. For those without access even to commodities of subsistence, the commodities of the entertainment industry serve as propaganda movies on the mode of life.

Commodity aesthetics is being permanently chased through the filter of market acceptance. The thrust by which it globally casts its spell over people, particularly the have-nots, can be explained by its dialectical structure and function. It embodies the not-yet-reality of the realization of value. In all regards, it obeys the logic of the reverse. It longs for buyers and yet only speaks about happy people. The unhappy glance into the world of commodity aesthetics as into a paradise. What it features as the main thing, the Different, is indifferent to the interest ruling through it, given the egalitarianism of money that recognizes only differences of quantity. If capital has learned to ‘negotiate’ – that is, to ‘incorporate and partly reflect differences, which formerly it tried to bear down,’ as Stuart Hall says – a sharp restriction, similar to the aesthetic abstraction of the commodity, has to be observed: only the cultural representations are involved; the power relationships are not negotiable. Aesthetic representatives of the damnés de la terre migrate into the sphere of symbolic redemption, and this is not unimportant for how those who are represented see themselves.

Commodity aesthetics finds its Archimedean point in the desires it serves, selectively amplifies and reorients. Autà tà prágmata are irrelevant, the actual disposition of things, acts or personal situations. Desires count as interfaces for use-value promises in the mode of the illusion or the imaginary space. The perspective aims at inducing the decision to buy. Commodity aesthetics rules through presented wish-fulfilment, filling people with wishes. In rich societies where capitalist consumerism has already colonized the patterns of living, its gospel is confronted with weary and desensitized people, whose imagination is regularly sobered up by the ‘fulfilling’ of these desires, which ‘leaves so much to be desired’. In the capitalist centres, the consumer ‘strolls around the displays like a bored TV viewer who plays with the remote control’.

When, on the other hand, commodity aesthetics enters the shanties of a pre- or semi-capitalist world, where it is longingly swallowed, the North fills the South with desires by delivering to its masses who live in poverty ‘des irréalisables … à réaliser’, to quote Sartre. Under such conditions the meaning of poverty changes; it turns into the presence of an absence. In the exclusion from the consumption of the typical commodities of transnational high-tech capitalism, the poor keep them present as something missing. What Marx says, in the Grundrisse, about the ‘civilizing influence’ of capital, acquires a vicious glamour along the North–South axis.

Now we can see why Marx is attracted by the Shakespearean logic of opposites, though, on the textual level, he only speaks about the logic of indifference: the pursuit of abstract wealth becomes the source from which modern appearance is streaming. Capital’s indifference towards use value, which is from its standpoint of only transient relevance, expresses itself in its most fantastic staging. The abstraction from use value appears as aesthetic use-value promise. Marx compares capital to a eunuch acting as the pimp, procuring a commodity for each desire: indifference proclaiming difference. Real-abstraction as illusionary concretion-for-others.

Recently, in the huge catalogue for the exhibition ‘In the Designer Park: Living in Artificial Worlds’, at the Matildenhöhe Museum, Darmstadt, Gernot Böhme argued that the frequent marginalization of the commodity itself in commodity aesthetics proves that one can no longer speak of the centrality of the use-value promise. Therefore he prefers Baudrillard’s concept of a valeur/signe whose function would be what Bourdieu
has described as social distinction and inclusion in a ‘distinguished’ group. With this argument he seems to fall back into misunderstanding use value as a kind of technical norm. Such a technical conception holds valid only for some technical products (in terms of material quality and quantity). These items are determined for productive use, mostly, and they are elementary. More complex productive products, such as machinery, have their own commodity aesthetics. The closer we come to consumptive use, the more inappropriate are technical approaches to use value. They suppose a *Homo oeconomicus* outside of every culture and its ways of life. However, use value is a cultural reality, and its destination is to satisfy human needs, as Marx is right to insist, ‘whether they (the needs) arise, for example, from the stomach or from imagination’.

Böhme argues that ‘commodities are no longer presented in their use value, but as elements of a lifestyle’ and ‘in the context of this way of using them [Gebruchsztsummenhangs] the aesthetics of commodities become important’. But this argument is self-defeating: no longer as use value, but in the context of being used; no longer aesthetic use-value promise, but the aesthetic of commodities being staged in the context of some lifestyle use…. It is like the psychoanalytic joke about the Bavarian mother who, when the doctor had diagnosed an Oedipus complex in her son, took the latter aside and comforted him with the words: ‘Oedipus-shnoedipus, everything is fine as long as you love your mother.’ So when in commercials imaginations of satisfaction enter the scene at the price of marginalizing the commodity, they do so in the very right of commodity aesthetics.

Böhme, who makes me say a lot of stupid things, observes a recent shift in commodity aesthetics – its expansion into the production sphere:

Restaurants … are open towards the kitchen … and in the car industry the promotion sector merges with the last stage of the assembly process: this is the transparent manufacture of the Volkswagen Company in Dresden. If until now the production sphere was associated with oil and dirt, with proletariat and alienated labour, here the genesis of a car – of the luxury car Phaeton – before the eyes of the client turns into an aesthetic event.27

Yet, before we generalize too quickly, let us remember: commodity aesthetics is parasitic. It would not be the first parasite to be enormously productive in appearance. Better we use the plural: appearances. The market is split, as is society, and so is commodity aesthetics. The Chickeria and its lifestyle imaginations form only a segment. And Volkswagen doesn’t make the billions it is supposed to in the luxury sector. However, this sector can deliver a certain imaginary surplus, since every commodity aesthetics tends to culminate in images of happiness that constitute a use-value promise that surpasses every possible use value.

**Notes**

2. Ibid., p. 358.
11. Adorno ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?’, p. 117.
22. Ibid., p. 116.
25. Ibid., p. 21.