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Can the object be a comrade?

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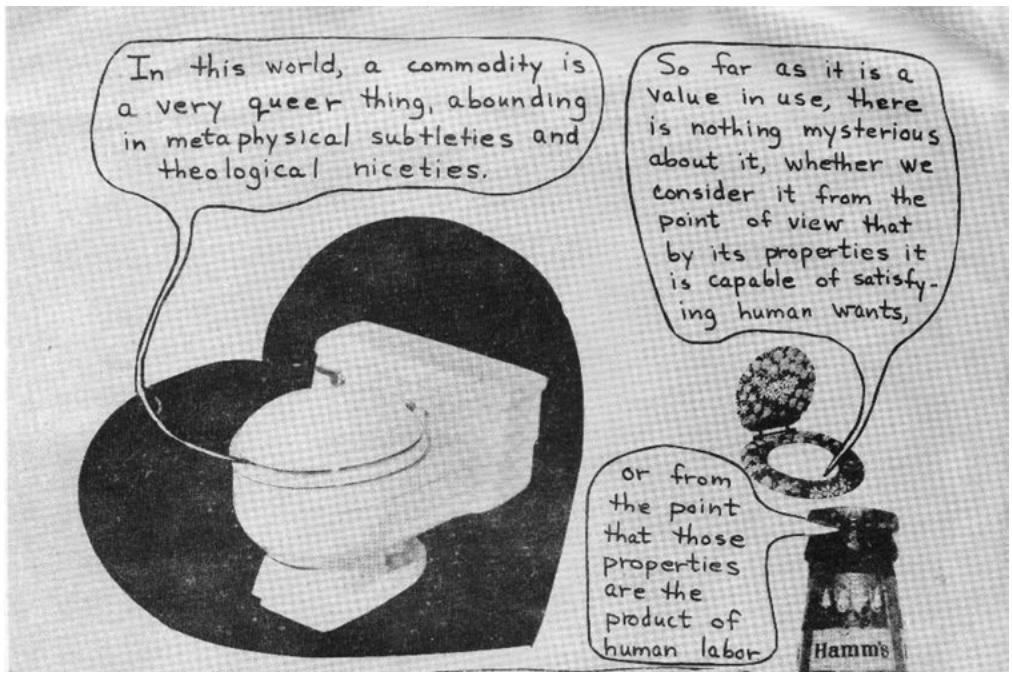

Image from Perlman (1969).

What would commodities say if they could speak? If Marx had listened long enough, would these talking commodities announce the traumas of their exploitative and violent birthing to him? Eventually, one imagines, they would have described the nature of the various forms of labour necessary for their production in the capitalist mode. As Fred Moten (2003) points out, history is marked by the revolt of the screaming commodity: the body of the slave fighting

against its imposed status of thing-liness[1]. The rise of consumer culture, the proliferation and intensification of the commodity form, can be understood as the expansion of the violence of accumulation all across the social field. The ferocious forces which separate the producer from the product of the labour process have not waned; on the contrary, they have become monstrously multiplied and rendered all the more invisible by their ubiquity in the society of the spectacle (Debord, 1983).

But then what is to be done for those who are lost in the supermarket? Would the goal of commodity politics be to break on through the mystical shell of the commodity in order to listen to it speak? If it was possible to break through the fetish character of commodities, would it then be easier to listen to their stories of exploitation and misery, and based upon them formulate new forms of politics? What then would be the politics of commodities without their fetish? Rather than Bruno Latour's 'parliament of things' (1993) would we then have a democracy of ex-commodities?

Stepping back a moment from these real abstractions we can see that the political approach that has tried most consistently to peel back the mystical character of the commodity has been the fair trade movement. As Sarah Lyon suggests (2006), the greatest value of fair trade is less in the concrete benefits it provides (which are much debated) and more in its capacity to demystify forms of commodity production: revealing labour and ecological costs, making the commodities speak forth the truth of their production rather than letting these labours disappear in the magic of market exchange. But the problem with this approach, as Lyon herself realizes, is that the fetish character of the commodity is more than just a phenomenon that can be easily dispelled through somewhat polite conversation and clever marketing. The problem with fair trade is that it does not dispel the mystical character of the commodity so much as inscribe it on an even deeper level, creating a new type of spectacular consumption where consumers from more developed regions can directly subsidize the middle classes of developing areas and reap the benefits of the ethical fetish.

But if the attempt to get beneath the mystical layer of the commodity leads to yet another mystical layer beneath that, what then is to be done? Is there nothing but layer upon layer of fetish?[2] Is there any escape from this? At first glance it seems that the formulation of a commodity politics are trapped in much the same

1 Indeed, slave revolts are integral to the development of the modern world system, including the founding of nations (James, 1989) and the abolition of slavery itself (Hart, 2002).

2 For more on this see Mulvey (1993).

predicament analyzed by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005), where any attempts to escape from capitalist logic merely end up becoming the tools for instilling a new spirit of capitalism. Is it the case, as Mark Fisher has suggested (2009), that the old struggle between subversions and incorporation has been played out, now replaced by a dynamic of *pre-corporation* where apparently dangerous cultural practices are from their beginning formatted according to the logic of the capitalist market?

Ethical spectacle and comradely objects

What I want to explore in this brief piece is a different approach to the problem, one that does not get stuck in the same dilemma. The answer in its most concentrated form is rather simple and obvious: if it seems impossible to escape from the mystical character of the commodity, why not use it instead of attempting to dispel it?

Perhaps the best attempt to think through commodity politics in such a manner is provided by Stephen Duncombe. In his book *Dream: Re-imagining progressive politics in an age of fantasy* (2007) Duncombe proposes an approach based on working through collective fantasies as the basis for a new politics, rather than trying to escape from them. According to Duncombe, all marketing and advertising is about transformation: promising the potential fulfillment, self-betterment, and pleasure through a purchase decision. And while it may be true that ultimately commodities always fail to deliver on these promises (and to some degree they must fail in order to perpetuate continual patterns of consumption), the desires circulating within this process are perfectly realisable. Duncombe works through a number of examples, from Las Vegas to video games, to ask what a politics that took these desires seriously would look like.

What Duncombe proposes instead is what he refers to as 'ethical spectacle'. While the spectacular forms employed within marketing and advertising employ illusion in the pretense of portraying reality, the ethical spectacle instead portrays the reality of its own illusions. Duncombe draws from the ideas of Berthold Brecht, in particular his notion of the 'alienation effect' in which, as part of his plays, he would draw attention to their very status as plays (rather than letting them pass into anything resembling a naturalist narrative). The purpose of ethical spectacle is to remind viewers of the spectacular nature of their conditions. This is done not as a form of critique that creates distance from the situation, but rather brings spectators-potential political actors back to the real conditions they are in without dismissing flows of desire that form the situation. Duncombe likewise describes a number of artistic and protest groups – from the

Yes Men to Reverend Billy – that employ this approach of creating ethical spectacles through their artistic-political interventions.

This argument leads us back to the ideas developed by the Russian Constructivists in the 1920s. Working in the post-revolutionary conditions, and during a period of rapid social change, these artists-engineers tried to figure out what would be the best ways to use artists' practices to aid in the building of a communist society. In the early 1920s they had to think through some of the same questions around the politics [of consumption?] as the introduction of the New Economic Policy partially re-introduced market based exchange into Russia. As shown in Christina Kiaer's study of constructivism, rather than trying to dispel the power of the commodity the constructivists decided to embrace it, 'confronting the phantasmic power of the commodity object and reclaiming it for socialism' (2005: 90). The constructivists, in their quest to free up new technical and industrial capacities, thus strove to break the spell of the commodity while retaining it as a site of individual and collective formation of fantasy. To use Stephen Duncombe's framing, they kept the power of the commodity but turned it into a form of ethical spectacle.

This approach was given its fullest and most complete expression by Boris Avratov, who argued that rethinking one's relation to commodities and objects was part of the overall transformation of everyday life, and thus fundamental. Avratov rejected the idea that objects are passive, or objects of consumption, and thus merely acted upon. For Avratov the idea of the thing as complete and static in its material status, and therefore dead, is what categorizes bourgeois conceptions of material culture. Instead of this approach Avratov argued for understanding objects as fundamentally functional and active, and therefore 'connected like a co-worker with human practice' (1997: 26). While at first glance this argument for the embracing of commodity objects as comrades might seem rather strange, it could also be seen to logically flow from Marx's image of the talking commodity. For Avratov, the task of the proletariat is to 'create a systematically regulated dynamism of things' (1997: 128) extending the processes that are already in motion within commodity production[3]. Thus commodities become not sites of fantasies and mystifications that need to be disavowed, fetishes to be torn away, but rather co-workers participating in the activity of shaping socialist reality, thus recognizing 'affective power of mass produced objects of modernity' (Kiaer, 2005: 27).

3 This connects to the Constructivists notion of faktura, or the surface that shows its own process of making. The Constructivists employed this idea to focus on the self-acting power of matter itself, and thus to approach objects (artistically and otherwise) by trying to work with and through these powers, rather than attempting to impose designs on matters conceived of as passive (Kiaer, 2005: 50).

Communist objects and network cultures

> Production thus produces not only the object but also the manner of consumption, not only objectively but also subjectively. Production thus creates the consumer. (Marx, 1973: 92)

These ideas have been developed recently by Nick Thoburn, who explores the formation of books as anti-commodities, or as communist objects, drawing from the ideas of the Constructivists. For Thoburn the communist object destabilizes the associations and meanings we usually attribute to objects (and their passivity). Thus the communist object holds the potential for opening up a new conceptual framework for understanding labour by considering how it gestures to forms of the labour performed outside independent of the human. Or, to state it bluntly, if objects themselves are workers, this requires a rethinking of exactly what it is to be a worker. Communist objects resist patterns of work, whether from capitalist or communist demands, that more compliant objects submit to. They throw a monkey wrench in the best-laid Taylorist plans.

For Thoburn the communist object is of great importance for the way it, as a comrade and coworker, destabilizes our conceptions and roles by claiming a status of equality, gesturing towards how 'the passional bond it produces emerges in the midst of everyday objects and desires activated in commodity culture' (2010: 9). At the 1925 Paris International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts, Aleksandr Rodchenko quite astonishingly argued that capitalism was not just the exploitation of workers by the inhuman process of accumulating capital, but rather the exploitation of the human and the object (2010: 3). The reframing of communist objects reworks that relation, trying to conceptualize it as a matter of equality[4].

But what then does this interesting excursion through the ideas of the Stephen Duncombe, Nick Thoburn and the Constructivists tell us? At first glance these might seem to be nothing more than the whimsical notions of some artists from a long time ago, now recycled through the equally whimsical wanderings of contemporary social theory. But considered more closely in relation to the rise of digital network cultures these ideas become much more immediately relevant. For what is network culture if not the proliferation of helpful objects, commodities acting in all sorts of non-passive and attempted comradely ways? Nowadays it seems that almost any, and probably every, household object has been fitted with some sort of high tech design feature that aims to facilitate user

4 This statement appeared originally in a personal letter Rodchenko wrote to this wife. Some of these letters were later reprinted as a report on the 1925 Expo. Thus it was never a stand-alone declaration.

experience. Whether or not it actually works that way is another question, but the stated intent is there, albeit stripped of orientation to build a new socialist society through a renewed relation to objects.

If today we are enmeshed in an intensified form of participatory digital production, in the logic of punk capitalism (Mason 2008) and convergence culture (Hay and Couldry, 2012), bastard culture (Schafer 2011), or whatever name you prefer, the questions raised by the Constructivists and the politics of fantasy that Stephen Duncombe explores are all the more important because of how these transformations in cultural production and social relations intensify rather than dispel commodity dynamics. As Owen Hatherley has argued (2008), the interactive formats of web 2.0 in many ways can be seen as degenerated forms of the interactive forms of cultural production that the Constructivists and other artists argued for in the 1920s in their attempts to reshape society. However, the proliferation of interactive formats within net culture has not necessarily meant that anything more interesting is being said or that social relations are being reshaped in the ways that the Constructivists desired[5]. Rather, having to enter a hidden abode of production we find ourselves confronted by an all too visible social factory, where value is produced everywhere extracted from free labour, and exploitation is hidden in plain sight (Bohm and Land, 2012; Zwick et al., 2008).

Where then does this leave us, with what form of commodity politics? Here I would agree with the argument put forth by Frederic Jameson that the analysis of commodification leads us back to 'some prior discussion of the more fundamental phenomenon of objectification as such, or the organization of reality into things' (2009: 257-258). While it is necessary to pass through the politics of the commodity it is inadvisable to remain there. The question then is

5 For Hatherly this is because the rise of participatory culture has neglected the emphasis on learning and education. In other words, participatory formats do not by themselves lead to a greater democratization of social relationships, despite the wishes of many tech fetishists that this would be the case. Likewise it would be important to emphasize that for Arvatov and Rodchenko, activeness or dynamism is not an abstract but a concrete entity rooted in *faktura*. It is rooted in the phsyical nature of the object, and the purposefulness of the constructed object. For Rodchenko, things will become equal, as comrades, when they strive for the same 'higher' ideal (vs. being helpful and serving men/people). Rodchenko admired capitalist objects – engineering, design, etc. – but kept asking 'What for?' He saw them as lacking this 'higher' social purpose. Arvatov seems to have shared the concern; his 'definition' of a 'socialist object' included an awkward word *tselesoobraznost* (which implies purposefulness in a more abstracted sense rather than just a function or utility).

in passing through commodity politics to more fundamental questions of politics and organization, what is it that we learned from the talking commodities that we encountered along the way? What I would venture here is that the task is learning from commodities and objects not as active substances so that we can include them in a democracy of objects. Rather it is more a question of seeing how objects can be temporary autonomous zones that liberate autonomy for the sake of non-humans; and learning from that what exactly autonomy might be when it is a question of autonomy from the human (Morton 2011)[6].

Commodity politics raises the question of whether we can relate to objects as comrades, through that vastly expanding our conceptions of labour, perhaps even forming a post-humanist labour movement (Walker, 2012). It is the challenge of a communism of objects: not a mastery over them, but a comradely working through and with them.

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6 Possible theoretical directions for expanding the ideas developed here could be through Marxist approaches to epistemology and objectification (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Lektorsky, 1980), or through recent discussion around speculative realism and object oriented ontologies (Bryant and Srnicek 2011).

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