

Tom Holert

“A live monster that is fruitful and multiplies”: Capitalism as Poisoned Rat?

01/07

e-flux journal #36 — July 2012 Tom Holert
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One must wonder now whether it is useful to keep to the animist strands and currents in popular beliefs about (as well as venerable theories of) political economy, capitalism, and the commodity – or is it actually quite futile? The question seems rather pertinent when it comes to posing Anselm Franke’s *Animism* project clearly and polemically within contemporary anticapitalist, anti-neoliberal, and decolonizing struggles. I see it as a potential contribution to the productive confusion generated by haggling over certainties and consensus within these struggles, and I am particularly interested in those instances where capital, capitalism, and/or “the markets” are figured as living, acting entities endowed with agency. Moreover, I would like to ask how this assumed agency is imagined to be linked to animism as a discursive practice, as well as whether – at the very moment the concept, or indeed the word “animism,” is introduced into discourses of politics, economy, and culture – a specific and efficient metaphor becomes activated, transforming and virtualizing our relation to capital.

We all know how metaphors of agency are used to describe, for instance, price movements “as action, as [...] internally driven behavior of an animate entity;” markets are regularly portrayed as agents that, although impersonal and nonhuman, nevertheless expect and react, appreciate and punish, sulk and rejoice depending on the behavior of economic actors both great and small.¹ In trade papers and stock market commentary, financial markets are often served up to us in anthropomorphic or animalistic metaphors: “The Nasdaq climbed higher,” “the Dow fought its way upward,” or “the S&P dove like a hawk.”² Markets are “sensitive to social media moods,” they have “mood swings too,” they “rise on optimism,” and have all kinds of “feelings.” At the same time, markets are perceived as threatening, capricious, vengeful, and so forth; they are envisaged as being capable of arousing emotions in us, of acting on the affects of those whose fortunes depend on their alleged volatile moods.

Particularly in the current phase of capitalism, the one in which abstraction and destruction have converged to an extent that has no historical precedent, metaphors of body and soul are proffered to help comprehend the incomprehensible, intangible operations of contemporary networked financial markets. They also function as reasons for the most tangible and comprehensible structural inequalities, social catastrophes, and natural disasters that issue from them.

It may be a critical (de)constructivist commonplace to emphasize the discursive processes that lead to the “naturalization” of

02/07



Gustaf Mantel, from the series of *Living Movie Stills: American Psycho* (2000), 2011.

capital. However, it is worth mentioning that even if one critiques capitalism as a “system’ that profits by its reproduction” (Judith Butler), this way of speaking still tends to naturalize, even anthropomorphize, capitalism – of which one could say, it is precisely a “humanism” that uses humanity as an abstraction to propagate “the sphere of commodity exchange [as] a true Eden of innate human rights,” as Karl Marx put it.³ In other words: a world where freedom and equality rule because everybody relates to everybody else as a commodity-owner.⁴ No wonder Louis Althusser pushed for Marxism as an anti-humanism. But would he have also accepted the idea of an anticapitalist, or “post-capitalist,” animism?⁵

Here it may be useful to briefly revisit the concept of commodity fetishism, or what cultural theorist Steven Shaviro (following Michael Taussig) has dubbed “capitalist animism”: the conception of the commodity being endowed with a soul. Shaviro rightly stresses that fetishism and animism are constitutive of capitalism and life under capitalism. He writes of “commodity fetishism” as a “set of ritual practices, stances, and attunements to the world, constituting the way we participate in capitalist existence.” Shaviro further contends

03/07

that “commodities [are] actually alive: more alive, perhaps, than we ourselves are ... The ‘naïve’ consumer, who sees commodities as animate beings, endowed with magical properties, is therefore not mystified or deluded. He or she is accurately perceiving the way that capitalism works, how it endows material things with an inner life.”⁶

Here, capitalism is a reproductive power that animates (endows) inanimate things “with an inner life,” with an agency of sorts. And by being conceived as an animator of the inanimate, capitalism emerges as the source and the object of the very ritual practices that Shaviro asserts are fundamental to life under capitalism. (Toni Negri would term this the “real subsumption of life” under capital). The inner life of the commodity therefore corresponds to the inner lives of those who are subjected to the transformations of the valorization process, to the shift of surplus-value accumulation from the sphere of production to the sphere of reproduction, circulation, and exchange, thereby putting the entire lives of people to work.

According to this “anthropogenetic model” (Christian Marazzi), living beings are transformed into fixed capital and value is extracted from the production of forms of life.



Gustaf Mantel, from the series of *Living Movie Stills: A Clockwork Orange* (1971), 2011.

In vintage Žižekian fashion, critic Mark Fisher responded to Shaviro's suggestion that consumers are, by default, animists by asserting "that there is [in fact] no 'naïve consumer' who 'believes' that commodities are animate beings. Asked if they think that commodities are alive or possess will, consumers will snort derisively. Nevertheless, they will continue to act *as if* commodities are animate entities." Consumers, in Fisher's view, "are [at the level of belief] hard-headed, disenchanting Anglo-Saxon utilitarians": they "can participate in capitalist animism – because it is not they who believe, but the commodities themselves."⁷

These two versions of capitalist animism – the one which sees the practices under capitalism as structured by animist beliefs, and the other which renders the human actors as stern utilitarians while the commodity does the believing – affirm that the soul-searching of recent critiques of post-Fordism and financialization has resulted in a revival of the animist aspects of the theory of the commodity.

It was Walter Benjamin, in "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," who suggested that commodities are inhabited and guided by a "soul." Commodities acted and behaved as if they took part in a passionately affective relationship with human beings as actual or potential consumers: "If there were such a thing as a commodity-soul ... it would be the most empathetic ever encountered in the realm of souls, for it would be bound to see every individual as a buyer in whose hand and house it wants to nestle."⁸ Otherwise, the commodity – while it may still speak and whisper – is depleted of empathy and compassion, to use Benjamin's words.⁹

"Commodity-soul" (*Warensseele*) had been coined by Marx – "in jest," as Benjamin commented. Marx also once used the term "value-soul"/"soul of value" (*Wertseele*). Furthermore, Marx speaks of the metempsychosis or transmigration (*Seelenwanderung*) that takes place when productive labor combines raw material with the means of production to produce a new product. The *soul* of the commodity is to be understood as the relationship between exchange value and use value as it is embodied in the commodity. The commodity actually exists (as commodity) quite abstracted from its materiality, in a spectral oscillation, as a thing hovering between sensuousness and supersensuousness in the "physical immanence of value" (William Pietz).¹⁰

In Marx's view, the commodity-*Ding* is generated by its exchange value, that is to say, as social process and relation. In this sense, to speak of the commodity-soul is to speak of value (abstracted labor) as an animating force dwelling

in the "value-body" (*Wertkörper*) that incarnates it. Since the commodity value "deflects the incorporated creative life towards equivalence within an exchange" (Nancy), the "soul" of the commodity is the paradoxical *animus* of a living corpse, a zombie-soul. Consequently, Franco "Bifo" Berardi suggests that we speak of "thanato-politics": "the submission of intelligent life to the dead object, the domination of the dead over the living."¹¹ Indeed, there is a well-established tradition in cultural theory and cultural production of allegorizing the "thanato-politics" of the commodity soul through the figures of the alien or the zombie.¹²

Of course, the notion of the "commodity-soul" must be understood in the context of Marx's polemical theory of the "fetish character of the commodity" in *Capital Volume 1*. Here, he turns the materialist histories of "primitive" religions he discovered in enlightenment scholars such as Charles de Brosses against the idealist social philosophies of his time.¹³ Entering the "misty realm of religion," he proposes a phenomenology of the "monetarization of social life" (Pietz).¹⁴

Marx thus draws an analogy between religious fetishism (including animism) – where "products of the human brain seem to be independent beings endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations with each other and with the human race" – and capitalism – the "realm of commodities" where the "products of people's hands" interact independently from their makers. "This," he writes, "I call the fetishism, which sticks to the products of labor as soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities."

The most important step in this process of fetishization was the rise of central banks and the emergence of money as credit-money, "an object that seems to embody its own temporal existence in its capacity to bear interest."¹⁵ William Pietz has pointed out that the "magical moment of fetish formation" introduced in the first chapter of *Capital* sees Marx actually illustrating a crucial "modal shift," "the mysterious transubstantiation of common social practices into custom or law sanctioned by the community as whole," a "transition of general form into *universal* form." This universal form exists as a material object. Capitalist production has therefore become "a mode in which social value is fetishistically materialized."¹⁶

Summarizing a complex argument about the fundamental level of fetishized relations, Pietz writes that "'capital' is the substantive name for the unity of a socially (if unconsciously) organized material system of growth and reproduction whose effective components and

04/07

e-flux journal #36 — July 2012 Tom Holert
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visible forms are things, people, and money.”¹⁷ The principles and rules that capitalism imposes on the social field have become universal. Capital has invaded and transformed the world on a global scale. It has, as Marx claims, only “one single-minded life impulse,” which is “the drive to create value and surplus-value.” This “life impulse” (*Lebenstrieb*) is also dubbed, in the same paragraph, “the soul of capital” (*Kapitalseele*). And this soul feeds off the dead, since “capital is dead labor, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labor, and lives the more, the more labor it sucks.” Capital is thus envisioned as a horrifying, shape-shifting, dialectical entity that combines cannibalism with autopoiesis, that consumes life in order to consume itself. It is “a live monster that is fruitful and multiplies” (Marx).



Gustaf Mantel, from the series of *Living Movie Stills: Young Frankenstein* (1974), 2011.

The eerie rhetoric Marx deploys to render the frantic self-digesting and self-creating activity of capital has of course not gone unnoticed. The best known example of reading Marx as a gothic novelist is arguably Jacques Derrida’s *Specters of Marx*. The pervasive presence of “fetishist phantomaticity in general and its place in *Capital*” and its importance as a “theoretical moment” that reaches beyond the exegesis of Marx led Derrida to claim that what is at stake is “everything which *today* links Religion and Technics in a singular configuration.”¹⁸

And it is clearly *technics* – digital technology, electronic infrastructures, databases, computing, and so forth – that constitute contemporary capital and enable the all-embracing real subsumption of life under capital that we witness today. Increasingly, capitalism is pictured as “an Alien monstrosity, an insatiable Thing that appropriates the energy of everything it touches and, in the process, propels the world toward the inorganic.” The latter are the words of artist and writer Gean Moreno from his recent essay on “the inorganic.”¹⁹ Moreno proposes an animist turn in

the critique of capitalism as an all-devouring, depleting, and dissoluting force, “a vast inhuman form, a genuinely alien life form (in that it is entirely non-organic).” He asks, “What if we propose that capitalism has something like agency and that this is manifested in ecophagic material practices? Capitalism eats the world. Whatever transformations it generates are just stages in its monstrous digestive process.” Finally, Moreno suggests that we investigate this alien life according to “an anti-anthropomorphic cartography, a study in alien finance, a *Xenoconomics*,” to find the cracking or tipping points of capital’s inorganicism.²⁰

Though this is not exactly terminology from my own lexicon, I am tempted to follow these suggestions a bit further, for they seem to address the question of animism as inspiration and conceptual hub of subversive (and quite likely *aesthetic*) strategies of fighting the metastable and uncontrollable/entropic order of contemporary capitalism. Moreno’s suggestions are promising because they explicitly acknowledge capitalism as the “live monster,” the *beseelte Ungeheuer*, whose very liveliness is to be explored in the inorganic. Or would we, by doing this, depart from the very space in which it appears appropriate and reasonable to speak of animism at all? To put it another way: Does the “post-capitalist animism” of a humanized world once envisioned by Michael Taussig continue to be a viable perspective under the rule of the inorganic?²¹ Or is this rule itself simply to be pitied?

When Marx wrote of the “live monster that is fruitful and multiplies,” he used, in the German original of the passage (the reference was dropped altogether in the English translation), a well-known quote from Goethe’s *Faust*. “*Ein beseeltes Ungeheuer, das zu ‘arbeiten’ beginnt, als hätt’ es Lieb’ im Leib*” is taken from the chorus of a song that appears in the scene in Auerbach’s cellar. The song tells the story of a kitchen rat that is poisoned by the cook, who sadistically watches the creature die a torturous death. In the English translation of this scene the situation is horrifying, even more so than in the German original:

By torture driven, in open day,
The kitchen he invaded,
Convulsed upon the hearth he lay,
With anguish sorely jaded;
The poisoner laugh’d, Ha! ha! quoth she,
His life is ebbing fast, I see,
As if his frame love wasted.

CHORUS

05/07

e-flux journal #36 — July 2012 Tom Holert
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Is this perhaps the fate of Capitalism that Marx had in mind? To die like a rat poisoned by a torturing cook? Who could this cook possibly be? Who has the power to kill the Capitalism-rat, “just to watch him die” (Johnny Cash)? With the knowledge of the lyrics of the song from Auerbach’s cellar, Marx’s image of the frantic liveliness of the monster may be read as the picture of a vivacity doomed to end deplorably. It’s a fantastic image in all senses of the word. An image for the 99 percent? “As if his frame love wasted.”

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This essay was originally delivered as a paper during the workshop/panel “Animism and Capitalism” in the course of the “Animism” conference at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, March 16-17, 2012.

06/07

Tom Holert is an art historian and cultural critic. A former editor of *Texte zur Kunst* and co-publisher of *Spex* magazine, Holert currently lives in Berlin and is an honorary professor for art theory and cultural studies at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. He contributes to publications such as *Artforum*, *Texte zur Kunst*, *Camera Austria*. Among his recent publications are a book on migration and tourism (*Fliehkraft: Gesellschaft in Bewegung – von Migranten und Touristen*, 2006, with Mark Terkessidis), a monograph on Marc Camille Chaimowicz’ 1972 installation *Celebration? Realife* (2007), a collection of chapters on visual culture and politics (*Regieren im Bildraum*, 2008), and a reader on the visual culture of pedagogy (*Das Erziehungsbild. Zur visuellen Kultur des Pädagogischen*, 2010, ed. with Marion von Osten). Holert’s last film *The Labours of Shine* was included in the 2012 “Animism” exhibitions at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and e-flux, New York.

e-flux journal #36 — July 2012 Tom Holert
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2
See *ibid.*

3
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4
See Thomas Keenan, "The Point Is to (Ex)Change It: Reading Capital, Rhetorically," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 152-185, here 171f.

5
The latter concept was created by Michael Taussig. See his *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 99.

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Ibid., 32.

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See William Pietz, "Fetishism and Materialism: The Limits of Theory in Marx," in *Fetishism as Cultural Discourse*, ed. Emily Apter and William Pietz (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press 1993), 119-151, here 145.

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12
See, for example, Lars Bang Larsen, "Zombies of Immaterial Labor: The Modern Monster and the Death of Death," *e-flux journal* 15 (April 2010), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/zombies-of-immaterial-labor-the-modern-monster-and-the-death-of-death/>.

13
See Pietz, 130.

14
Ibid., 146.

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Ibid., 148.

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20
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21
Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, 99: "Post-capitalist animism means that although the socioeconomic exploitative function of fetishism ... will supposedly disappear with the overcoming of capitalism, fetishism as an active social force inherent in objects will remain. Indeed it must not disappear, for it is the animate quality of things in post-capitalist society ... that ensures what young Marx envisaged as the humanization of the world."

07/07

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