MARX, METHOD, AND THE POWER OF ABSTRACTION:
THE AESTHETICS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY

by

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This dissertation is an investigation of Marx's method in his analysis of the capitalist social formation and of his critique of the discourse of political economy.

The study is in two parts. The first part is a close textual analysis of Marx's method focusing on his works, *Capital* and *Grundrisse*. I argue that Marxian political economy is defined equally by a method of dialectical analysis and exposition, enunciating a specific theory and practice of representation which negotiates and harnesses the force of what I call the function of abstraction. The pivotal place of this particular theory and practice of representation in Marx's work is the grounds for my suggestion that Marx's method shares commonalities with, and is structured around the same problematics as, aesthetic discourses. For example, both are fundamentally occupied with the relationship between form and content, and between subject and object, with the creation of thematic imaginaries, with the critical and representational strategy of defamiliarization, with the production of affect, and with the potentially transformative interrelationship which representations have with the reader, viewer, audience or subject.

The second part of the study opens up to a broader analysis of contemporary visual cultural production—the visual arts, advertising, the Hollywood film industry—including the situation which I refer to as "the aestheticization of consumption." I illustrate the continuing adequacy of Marx's method of analysis of, and in, the contemporary globalizing market economy wherein cultural production, and particularly "image production," takes centre stage.
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For my beloved friends
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approval</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quotation</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter One</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marx’s Critique of Abstraction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Two</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism’s Process of Self-Mystification</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Three</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marx’s Theoretical Process I: Abstraction and Representation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Four</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marx’s Theoretical Process II: Historicizing the Dialectic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Five</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediation as Allegory: Reading Political Economy Through the Artwork of Geoffrey Farmer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter Six</td>
<td>224</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Aesthetics of Political Economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Geoffrey Farmer, <em>Hunchback Kit</em>, 2000.</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Geoffrey Farmer, “A Box With the Sound of Its Own Making,” 2002.</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Geoffrey Farmer, <em>Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form</em>, 2003</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Geoffrey Farmer, <em>Entrepreneur Alone Returning Back to Sculptural Form</em>, 2003</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
"They take poetry seriously... Is there anything to be gained by that?"

Marcel Duchamp
Introduction

Several years ago, in a graduate seminar on qualitative research methods in communication studies, I was taken to task by a fellow graduate student for what my colleague perceived as my tendency to corral the group’s discussion towards my own narrow and specialized interest in the relationship between “method” and what is colloquially referred to as “theory.” The substance of my colleague’s reproach was to point out that my concerns—i.e., theory—had little, if anything, to do with the “real world” and, hence, little, if anything, to do with our seminar. The initial deflation I experienced after the exchange was eventually replaced by a sense of the helpfulness of being pushed to articulate, explicitly, for the first time, why I was attracted to certain research questions over others. Several years later, I realize in hindsight, that every research project I have undertaken since that time can be classed as a (slightly) different articulation of the same problematic, a problematic which could be called, “What Does Theory Have to do With the Real World?”, or, alternatively, “Why Method Matters.” The present study remains faithful to this line of research; fundamentally, it is concerned with what “theory” and “method” have to do with one another, and more importantly, what both have to do with the “real world.”

The work of academics—teachers, scholars, critics, theorists—involves the formal and institutionally sanctioned production and dissemination of explanations of the world. The question of both method and theory concerns the “how” of the production of these explanations. First, the study of method involves disclosing the mechanisms by which certain explanations are established or forwarded as a consequence of the submersion or
exclusion of other potential explanations. Second, in an orientation which is related to the first, the study of method involves identifying the historical production and situation of the categories of thought which frame, make possible, and give shape to our analyses. One way of describing both of these orientations is to say that the study of method involves investigating the invisible, unseen, tacit and most often unacknowledged supporting frameworks of the visible, seen, expressed, and acknowledged dimensions of concepts, entities, or social formations. Most importantly, what each of these orientations signal is that the "how" of the production of explanations of the world is a thoroughly political matter—it is a process which can potentially serve to either sustain or challenge existing, material relations of domination and social inequality. The "how" of the production of our explanations is an expression of our "politics."

However, the production of explanations of the social world, and of our relationship to it, is a practice which is in no way limited to the sphere of research institutions and intellectual labour. On the contrary, it is one of the most fundamental and universal practices of "everyday life"; we could hardly be, act, proceed, exist in the world in any capacity in a way that isn't a continuation and expression of a certain (both acknowledged and unacknowledged) way of understanding what it is we are doing, experiencing, witnessing, and dealing with. There is, of course, a method (and theory) involved in the production of these kinds of "everyday" explanations, as well, the politics of which is more often the object of academic investigation than the politics of academic

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1 For instance, an orientation to the question of method—to the "how" of the production of explanations—would find us inquiring about the historical, material, which is also to say, social, forces which are engaged in the construction and continuing currency of a category so overtly ambiguous as "the real world"; What commonly unacknowledged presuppositions have historically been able to take root in the conceptual space that is opened up by such ambiguity?; What are the ideological implications that underwrite the conventional opposition between "the real world" and "theory"?
methods of investigation, themselves. Meanwhile, my reason for drawing attention to the everyday production of explanations is to argue that, in light of the fundamental nature of the practice, it would be difficult to imagine a more general, widely relevant, and "real worldly" question than the question of method. I want to posit, therefore, that neither method nor theory are specialized or narrow interests or fields of inquiry. On the contrary, what I am concerned to interrogate, implicitly, throughout this study, are the dimensions of the current historical moment which offers up, and necessitates the perception of the study of method as a specialized and narrow field of inquiry. What could be the politics of such a perception?

One method of analysis, in particular, is the focus of this study and that is the method of social, material and historical analysis enacted in the work of Karl Marx. While I use many of Marx’s works as source material for the examination of the movement of his analytical method, I focus on the example of method modeled most famously and self-consciously in the first volume of Capital. I refer to Marx’s method as political economy; for Marx, the designation “political economy” refers as much to method of analysis as it does to a particular object of analysis. In fact, what makes Marxian political economy distinct from other methods, is that through its own movement, the distinction between method of analysis and object of analysis is dissolved. In other words, method and object are revealed to share an identity in the social formation itself.

This distinctive movement is part and parcel of Marxian political economy’s more general orientation—which is also to say its politics—namely, its totalizing orientation or movement. This general, totalizing orientation of Marxian political economy is not
critical (or political) per se, however, its engagement does function critically in the context of the contemporary social environment. For example, currently, there exists a habitual, popular, “common sense” perception of the contemporary social world wherein the various fields of activity and experience—legislative politics, the economy, culture and the arts, education, the public sphere, civil society, etc.—are, for the most part, autonomous from one another, discrete and compartmentalized. The goal of a totalizing method of analysis is to construct a different figure of the social world, one where these fields of activity are inherently and intimately interconnected. The present dominant convention of perceiving and representing (on the part of teachers, politicians, the news media, artists, individuals trying to make sense of the world) different geographical locations, moments in history, institutions and fields of activity and experience as discrete and autonomous is an obstacle to understanding how the social world actually works, i.e., in a more complex, holistic and interconnected way. The characterization of Marxian political economy as a totalizing method of analysis refers to the mapping of the interconnections between places, historical moments, people, social groups, and events which conventionally and colloquially appear to have no relationship. Georg Lukacs supported the notion that what defined Marx’s method of critical political economy as distinct from bourgeois political economy was its orientation to the category of totality:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science. The capitalist separation of the producer from the total process of production, the division of the process of labour into parts at the cost of the individual humanity of the worker, the atomization of society into individuals who simply go on
producing without rhyme or reason, must all have a profound influence on the thought, the science and the philosophy of capitalism... [Marx's] science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method[...]. The primacy of the category of totality...

[Lukacs, 27]

When speaking of method, there is another way of describing a totalizing orientation which may be more digestible for some contemporary critics given that it resonates as a more current and less old-fashioned category than totality, namely, interdisciplinarity. To a large extent, the newer “interdisciplinary vision” is essentially the older “totalized vantage point,” but with a different ideological face. The ideological shift in currency from the category of totality to the category of interdisciplinarity is an index of certain material shifts in the social formation which have taken place over time, some of which will be explored in this study. Nonetheless, I hold on to the category of totality throughout this discussion as an attempt to emphasize that the social contradiction which offered up the necessity of a critical, totalizing political economy in the first place, persists and continues to be reproduced, if under different guises.

Meanwhile, a passionate illustration of the necessity and political significance of a holistic approach to the method of social analysis, by whatever designation, is expressed by John Berger in an article which he wrote and posted on the internet on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq. The article, which is called “Written in the night: The Pain of Living in the Present World,” considers the historically unabating catalogue of human suffering which characterizes so much of the “everyday life” of global society, and particularly in the 2nd and 3rd worlds. One dimension of Berger’s analysis, which is not new but which seems so important to articulate over and over again, wherever possible, is that an unprecedented degree of current human suffering and chaos is the direct
consequence of geopolitical action, or non-action—of decisions taken or willfully avoided, often from locations very far away from where the consequences of those decisions are realized: “The shame begins with the contestation (which we all acknowledge somewhere but, out of powerlessness, dismiss) that much of the present suffering could be alleviated or avoided if certain realistic and relatively simple decisions were taken. There is a very direct relation today between the minutes of meetings and minutes of agony” [Berger]. For Berger, while confronting this situation takes place on various levels of experience, one of these levels concerns the method of our analyses—the “how” of the production of our explanations of this situation—in every arena in which they are constructed: in the classroom, in textbooks, at conferences, in the news, in institutions, in parliament, in foreign policy, in domestic policy, in the family, in our entertainments, between friends over coffee, etc. And, here, as Berger explains it, method is a political matter:

Most analyses and prognoses about what is happening are understandably presented and studied within the framework of their separate disciplines: economics, politics, media studies, public health, ecology, national defense, criminology, education. In reality each of these separate fields is joined to another to make up the real terrain of what is being lived. It happens that in their lives people suffer from wrongs which are classified in separate categories, and suffer them simultaneously and inseparably.... To take in what is happening, an interdisciplinary vision is necessary in order to connect the “fields” which are institutionally kept separate. And any such vision is bound to be (in the original sense of the word) political. The precondition for thinking politically on a global scale is to see the unity of the unnecessary suffering taking place. This is the starting point.

[Berger]

What Berger identifies as the starting point in the project of thinking politically on a global scale today, namely a holistic vision of the social world, a vision which is able to
capture and integrate its apparent contingencies, is the starting point and, ultimately, the
eンド point, too, of the following study of Marx’s method. It follows the line of Lukacs’
argument that the category of totality, which expresses a particular orientation to method,
is a lynchorpin for Marx’s analysis of the movement of market society. Marx’s principle
task in his analysis of the capitalist social formation is to demonstrate how the most
fundamental mechanism of that social formation functions, as a structural necessity of its
own reproduction, to thwart such a holistic, integrated and totalizing view of the social
world. Marx’s method of analysis takes the shape it does specifically and necessarily in
response to the obstacles to comprehension put up by the social formation, i.e., the object
of analysis, itself. In other words, if it is a characteristic of the capitalist social formation
that it must thwart an integrated comprehension of its own movement, then the method of
Marx’s analysis is informed by the necessity of addressing this situation.

The principle task of this study is to characterize Marx’s method and how it
addresses this situation, specifically. For instance, one stream of my analysis elaborates
the apparently unlikely suggestion that Marx’s political economic method demonstrates
what I call an “aesthetic sensibility.” In its fundamental occupation with the relationships
between form and content, and subject and object, and by entailing a specific theory and
practice of representation, Marx’s method of analysis can, itself, I argue, be considered a
kind of political aesthetic. The “aesthetics” of Marxian political economy involve,
amongst other things, the production of affect. In the context of Marx’s analytical
strategy, the production of affect describes the potentially transformative effect that
certain representational forms can have on the receiver of those representations. The
method concerns the production of a shock of recognition in the reader, or “subject of
analysis.” It is the shock of the defamiliarizing and gestalt-like experience of recognizing material relationships and interconnections between various, *apparently* discrete and autonomous social spheres of practice and production—relationships and interconnections which have been historically submerged in popular perception and conventional representational practices.

My central argument is that Marx identifies a *social mechanism of abstraction* as the defining characteristic of both the capitalist mode of production (i.e., the object of Marx’s analysis) and of the *method of his own analysis* of the capitalist mode of production. That the object of Marx’s analysis and the method of his analysis share the function of abstraction as a fundamental moment is not a coincidence. On the contrary, it is *because* abstraction is a fundamental social mechanism of capitalist society that it is also fundamental for the method of the study (the analysis, configuration and exposition) of that social formation. This situation reflects the particular relationship between the object and method of analysis which I explore below. Further on, I also explore the very important idea that this situation is not a matter of an analogy between a type of abstraction which takes place in market society and another type of abstraction which takes place in the work of analysis, where the two types of abstraction share similarities or likenesses. I am not attempting, here, to draw a simile between a kind of theoretical abstraction as an element of critique and analysis on the one hand, and a kind of material or social abstraction as an element of an exchange economy on the other. There is only one, singular function of abstraction which is the object of the present study. My point is to demonstrate how *this singular* mechanism of abstraction structures all activity and
spheres of activity in capitalist society, but that this mechanism expresses itself in
different forms depending on the activity or sphere in which it is located.

The first step in the following analysis of Marx’s method is discerning the role
which abstraction plays in Marx’s dialectical reconstruction of the capitalist mode of
production. However, in order to figure the role of abstraction in Marx’s critique, it is
necessary to understand how abstraction functions in capitalist society as figured by Marx
in his labour theory of value. Therefore, in chapter one, as an introduction to, and
foundation for, my investigation of Marx’s method, I sketch Marx’s theory of value and
characterize how the figure of abstraction is expressed there. Chapters two, three, and
four proceed with a close reading and analysis of Marx’s method and how that method is
informed by capitalism’s own historical and structural features. For example, chapter
two consists of a detailed examination of capitalism’s process of generating obfuscating
appearances of itself, thereby thwarting an adequate perception of its own systematicity
on the part of its agents. Chapter three looks at the dual social function of abstraction and
representation, which is the motor of an exchange economy, and determines how this
same dual social function expresses itself in the movement of Marx’s method, as well.
Chapter four articulates what are often considered to be the “historical” elements of
Marx’s method with its “structural” elements, and does so within the framework of the
method’s dialectical movement.

Chapters five and six consist of the elaboration of my argument that Marx’s
method demonstrates an aesthetic sensibility. In these last two chapters the analysis
moves from a close reading of Marx’s texts to a more outwardly looking investigation of
some contemporary forms of cultural expression and the significance of Marx’s method.
of analysis in these contexts. Chapter five, is a case study of how the conceptual movement of the work of Canadian artist Geoffrey Farmer can provide a figure for the movement of Marx’s analytical method. Chapter six situates those elements of Marx’s method which I designate as its aesthetic dimensions in their historical relationship to some material features of contemporary consumer society.
Chapter One

Marx’s Critique of Abstraction

As is well known, Marx begins his investigation of capitalist society by observing what appears to be its elementary unit of wealth, the commodity. Commodities designate goods and products that are produced for the purpose of being exchanged on the market. Market exchange as the primary mode of distributing goods and products amongst the members of a society is a characteristic particular to capitalism. In other kinds of social formation, such as the socialist community, products are produced and distributed through conscious, political, direct and organized means. In a market economy, however, commodities are produced privately and without direct social organization. Commodities are distributed by being bought and sold on the market, i.e., indirectly and impersonally. Therefore, the relationship between commodities on the market and between those who produce, buy and sell them—the relationship between producer and purchaser, purchaser and purchaser, producer and producer, etc.—is also indirect and impersonal, or, mediated by the market and the process of exchange.

As the process of exchange represents one of the defining social relationships in market societies, understanding how the exchange of commodities can occur was one of Marx’s fundamental tasks, as it was for political economists before him. All commodities are use-values, that is, they possess a practical utility which addresses the historical needs and desires of those who purchase and consume them. The commodity’s concrete and particular physical attributes or culturally determined significances identify it as a use-
value and make it incommensurable with all other different, particular commodities or use-values. However, that two different commodities can be exchanged, or that two different commodities can be purchased/sold for the same amount of money, is an indication that these two otherwise incommensurable things are, in some way, equal or the same. The commonality shared by two different, yet exchangeable, commodities is expressed by their equal exchange-values, or the equal amount of money they fetch on the market. But what quality of the commodities, expressed by their exchange-values, allows them to be conceived as equal and exchangeable things when their use-values, or practical characteristics and utilities are incommensurable? What makes three yards of linen exchangeable with five pounds of tea, or a $100 toaster equal to a $100 pair of running shoes?

Marx’s Labour Theory of Value and the Social Function of Abstraction

For Marx, the understanding of the mechanism of exchange and the entire process of value in market societies is realized through the analysis of human labour. Human labour is the substance of all value; the one property which all commodities share is their identity as products of human labour. The substance or the source of commodities as use-values is concrete and particular human labour, i.e., the specific labour of the weaver, the tailor or the engineer. However, commodities are not exchanged as particular use-values but as equalized exchange-values. As different concrete and specific forms of human labour are no less particular and incommensurable than the use-values which they produce, concrete labour cannot be the substance of exchange-value. The originality of Marx’s labour theory of value was his identification of a different kind of labour as the
substance of exchange value. Marx refers to this different kind of labour as socially
equalized abstract labour, or, abstract universal labour:

If then we disregard the use-values of commodities, only one property
remains, that of being products of labour. But even the product of labour
has already been transformed in our hands. If we make abstraction from
its use-value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms
which make it a use-value. It is no longer a table, a house, a piece of
yarn or any other useful thing. All its sensuous characteristics are extin-
guished. Nor is it any longer the product of labour of the joiner, the
mason or the spinner, or of any other particular kind of productive
labour. With the disappearance of the useful character of the products
of labour, the useful character of the kinds of labour embodied in them
also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different
concrete forms of labour. They can no longer be distinguished, but are
all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the
abstract.

[Marx, 1976, 128]

The concept of abstract labour can only be derived from a totalized and historical
perspective of the organization of human labour in market society. In all kinds of social
formation, market economies and otherwise, the totality of the human labour necessary
for the reproduction of that social formation must be divided amongst its labouring
members. Therefore, in all societies, individual and specific forms of labour become
social labour in the context of that society’s total labour force orchestrated into branches
of production. In I.I. Ruben’s words, “[l]abor is social if it is examined as part of the total
mass of homogeneous social labor or, as Marx frequently said, if it is seen in terms of its
‘relation to the total labor of society’” [Ruben, 141]. In socialist communities, where the
social division of labour is directly and politically organized, and where the distribution
of goods is based on need or other criteria, labour is social but remains concrete. In
commodity economies, however, the situation is different. Here, production is divided
amongst various private enterprises and labour only becomes social through the exchange
of privately produced products on the market. Therefore, the division of labour is carried out indirectly and impersonally, that is, solely through the mediation of market activity (as opposed to through the mediation by the state, for example). And just as commodities, in order to be exchanged, must be equalized as exchange-values, so too must the human labour which creates commodities as values—and exchange-values, as the expressions of commodities as values on the market—be equalized as abstract labour: “Social or socially-equalized labor in the specific form which it has in the commodity economy can be called abstract labor” [Ruben, 97]. Abstract labour is the substance of value, and the latter’s expression or social form as exchange-value:

Experience shows that this reduction [of concrete labour into abstract or simple labour] is constantly being made... A commodity may be the outcome of the most complicated labour, but through its value it is posited equal to the product of simple labour, hence it represents only a specific quantity of simple labour. The various proportions in which different kinds of labour are reduced to simple labour as their unit of measurement are established by a social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers; these proportions therefore appear to the producers to have been handed down by tradition.

[Marx, 1976, 135]

We have yet to identify all aspects of the “social process that goes on behind the backs of the producers” and transforms individual and particular concrete labour into abstract labour. Corresponding to the development of a society’s material-technical productive forces and the level of productivity of labour in the various branches of manufacture, the amount of labour time required to produce a certain commodity, and the level of skill and work intensity required to produce that same commodity, becomes standardized into a unit of ‘socially necessary labour-time’ in that branch of production. In Marx’s words, “[s]ocially necessary labour-time is the labour-time required to produce
any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society” [Marx, 1976, 129]. Abstract labour refers to this socially average unit of labour-power which stands over-against the concrete, particular labour of individual producers and individual production enterprises. If one unit of socially average labour has become the standardized requirement for the production of one coat, regardless of whether the tailor actually takes 1.25, 1, or .75 units of labour-time to produce the coat, and regardless of whether the tailor is particularly skilled, or is an apprentice, the value of the coat will express one unit of abstract, socially necessary labour. Therefore, to exchange commodities on the market, all physical properties of those commodities are abstracted so that they are exchanged only as equal values. To be exchanged as equal values, commodities must represent equal amounts of abstract, socially necessary labour. Abstract labour represents the abstracting of all individual and specific characteristics of actual, physical labour resulting in socially average labour-power. The transformation of concrete into abstract labour is realized through the process of exchange. I.I. Ruben describes this social function of abstraction and equalization in this way:

in a commodity economy... concrete labor of producers is not directly social labor but private, i.e., labor of a private commodity producer... This private labor can become social only through its equalization with all other forms of labor, through the equalization of their products... [i.e.,] shoes are equalized as values with a given sum of money (and through the money with all other products as values). Thus the labor materialized in the shoes is equalized with all other forms of labor and, consequently, sheds its determined concrete form and becomes impersonal labor, a particle of the entire mass of homogeneous social labor.... The transformation of private labor into social labor can only be carried out through the transformation of concrete labor into abstract labor... [Abstract labor] is labor which becomes social labor only as impersonal and homogeneous labor.... This equalization of
labor may take place, but only mentally and in anticipation, in the process of direct production, before the act of exchange. But in reality, it takes place through the act of exchange, through the equalization of the product of the given labor with a definite sum of money. If the equalization precedes exchange, it must yet be realized in the actual process of exchange.

[Ruben, 141]

It may be tempting, if erroneous, to make the assumption, given the primary role which abstract labour plays in the process of exchange, that concrete, specific labour and the historical development of either the individual skills of workers or technical capability is irrelevant in a commodity-economy—that concrete labour does not factor into the latter's analysis or that concrete and abstract labour share no critical relationship. The opposite is the case. Socially necessary abstract labour as both substance and source of a commodity's value (and hence exchange-value) is a conventionally accepted average of the various specific amounts of time, skill and intensity of labour that are involved in the production of that product at a given historical moment. If new technologies or degrees of skill are introduced into the production process which change the actual amount of labour time required to produce a certain product, and if that new production process becomes conventional in a given society, it follows that the socially average amount of labour required to produce that product is adjusted. The unit of socially necessary abstract labour which corresponds to this average must, therefore, also adjust. Once again, this adjustment is not directly or consciously organized by producers but takes place indirectly, "behind the backs of producers," mediated solely by the exchange of commodities/values on the market. I.I. Ruben clearly configures this crucial relationship between concrete and abstract labor:

The magnitude of value changes in dependence on the quantity of abstract,
socially-necessary labor, but because of the two-fold character of labor, the changes in the quantity of abstract, socially-necessary labor are caused by changes in the quantity of concrete labor, i.e., by the development of the material-technical process of production, in particular the productivity of labor. Thus, the entire system of value is based on a grandiose system of spontaneous social accounting and comparison of the products of labor of various types and performed by different individuals as parts of the total social abstract labor. This system is hidden and cannot be seen on the surface of events. In turn, this system of total social abstract labor is put into motion by the development of material productive forces which are the ultimate factor of development of society in general.

[Ruben, 119-120]

Abstraction as the “Centre of Gravity” of an Economy of Exchange

If the concrete and particular production process is the foundation of a commodity economy, then the process of the abstraction and subsequent equalization of human labour is the motor of that economy. While concrete labour is the substance and source of use-value, abstract labour is the substance and source of value, as well as the social form of value on the market, namely, exchange-value. According to Marx, it is value, or the expression of abstract labour, which is the one property which all different commodities have in common and which allows them to be equalized and exchanged:

“[A quarter of wheat] is exchanged for other commodities in the most diverse proportions. Therefore, the wheat has many exchange-values instead of one.... [These exchange-values must] be mutually replaceable or of identical magnitude. It follows from this that, firstly, the valid exchange-values of a particular commodity express something equal, and secondly, exchange-value cannot be anything other than the mode of expression, the ‘form of appearance,’ of a content distinguishable from it” [Marx, 1976, 127]. This content is value and, at the same time, congealed abstract labour—the invisible “third thing”: “[Two different commodities which can be exchanged, which have equal
exchange-values,] are therefore equal to a third thing, which in itself is neither the one nor the other. Each of them, so far as it is an exchange-value, must therefore be reducible to this third thing” [Marx, 1976, 127].

Marx considered his discovery that, with respect to the capitalist mode of production, commodities contain both concrete labour and abstract labour, that they are both use-values (in their consumption and use) and values/exchange values (in their economic role), to be one of the most pivotal moments in the analysis of capitalism: “I was the first to point out and examine critically this twofold nature of the labour contained in commodities….this point is crucial to an understanding of political economy...” [Marx, 1976, 132]. Marx’s discovery implies that a social mechanism of abstraction, whereby all particular human labour is emptied of its particular characteristics and reduced to simple, universal labour, is the core function of the capitalist mode of production. Thomas Keenan makes a similar argument for the fundamental priority of a function of abstraction in a market economy:

The radical heterogeneity of use values must be reduced, and that reduction or overcoming is to be accomplished only by an equally radical ('total') abstraction that massively and systematically effaces the differentiation of every use value, everything. The difference of every use (property, thing) ‘must’ be dissolved by the force of abstraction. And every exchange relation is characterized by (performs) this abstraction.

[Apter and Pietz, 165]

Or, in Marx’s words: “[S]ince capital as such is indifferent to every particularity of its substance, and exists not only as the totality of the same but also as the abstraction from all its particularities, the labour which confronts it likewise subjectively has the same totality and abstraction in itself” [Marx, 1973, 296]. Furthermore, this mechanism of
abstraction is a specifically historical phenomenon in that it defines only the capitalist mode of production, where the process of exchange puts its imprint on all social relationships and becomes the form of the entire process of social reproduction [Ruben, 149]. In the preface to the first edition of Capital, Marx writes, “The value-form of the product of labor is not only the most abstract, but is also the most universal form, taken by the product in bourgeois production, and stamps that production as a particular species of social production, and thereby gives it its special historical character” [Marx quoted in Ruben, 114].

The Materiality of Abstraction in Market Society

At this point, it is necessary to characterize the function of abstraction more precisely in order to understand why, for Marx, it is a defining moment of the capitalist mode of production. For instance, it would be a mistake to conceive of the mechanism of abstraction as a strictly *formal* process played out on “real,” concrete labour. Nor is abstraction a *cognitive* process where “real,” individual labour practices are reduced in thought to their common denominators; abstract labour is not an idea, nor an ideal average of different historical instances of actual human labour. Such a misrepresentation would leave Marx’s analysis vulnerable to the critique of idealism in the sense that the entire capitalist formation appears to unfurl from the concept of universal abstract labour. However, as Chris Arthur points out, the critique of idealism is not valid because, for Marx, abstract labour does not begin as a concept but is the very “real” consequence of specific material conditions and circumstances: “Marx is well aware that his procedure, in postulating an abstract universal as an explanatory concept, bears some comparison
with the idealist procedure of exhibiting the 'sensuous-concrete' as the realization of the universal. However, the difference is that he exhibits this relation as the consequence of certain material relations of production—not of the dialectic of ‘the concept’” [Mepham and Ruben, 106].

Marx is careful to posit abstract labour as a “real” and material organizing entity in capitalism. In the Grundrisse, Marx states,

Indifference towards any specific kind of labour presupposes a very developed totality of real kinds of labour, of which no single one is any longer predominant. As a rule, the most general abstractions arise only in the midst of the richest possible concrete development, where one thing appears as common to many, to all. Then it ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone. On the other side, this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer from one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference.

[Marx quoted in Mepham and Ruben, 92]

This passage introduces several formulations which need to be explored. First, in the course of analysis, “abstract labour” is the category, the indispensable tool, of the theorist which facilitates the demystification of the exchange process in market society. However, abstract labour does not begin as a category, or explanatory concept. Abstract labour can only become a concept and a useful category for the theorist because it exists first as a material reality in market society. It exists independently of the cognitive processes of both theorists and the producers whose activity brings it into existence. Tony Smith argues,

The notion of abstract labor is not won through a formal cognitive process of abstracting a common feature shared by all commodities. It emerges instead from the social process of commodity exchange, a real process that
is independent of the subjective cognitive acts of the theorist. And abstract labor is an abstraction that uncovers the essential determination of the object realm under investigation. It captures the intrinsic specificity of a particular form of social production. For both of these reasons abstract labor must be considered as a "real abstraction" rather than as a merely formal abstraction.

[Smith, 68-9]

I.I. Ruben similarly emphasizes the point that abstract labour is not a "theory" for measuring social labour, nor a psychological orientation of workers and producers in a market society, but a social function which is carried out everyday in the social process of production and the equalization of commodities in exchange: "Abstract labor does not express a psychological equality of various forms of labor, but a social equalization of different forms of labor which is realized in the specific form of equalization of the products of labor" [Ruben, 71]; "In Marx's theory of value, the transformation of concrete into abstract labor is not a theoretical act of abstracting for the purpose of finding a general unit of measurement. This transformation is a real social event" [ibid., 144].

Second, the equalization of distinct human labours, which is the condition of abstract labour, refers not to a theoretical equalization but to a particular historical situation where the production process, the social division of tasks amongst workers, and the technical forces of production have developed to the point where individual workers have an indifferent relationship to their labour activity. When the different labours involved in one branch of production, or between branches of production, become divided up into smaller and smaller, more precise tasks, repeated over and over again by workers, the amount of individual skill required for each task diminishes proportionally. That less or no specific skill is required for each task, means workers can move from task
to task indiscriminately. In this stage of historical development of the production process, "individuals are not organically linked with labour in any specific form, but change their activity as circumstances demand" [Arthur quoted in Mepham and Ruben, 93]. As Marx points out in the above passage, this situation is only the case in the most advanced historical stages of social production, and it is only at this stage when abstract, universal labour as a category of thought can emerge.

The Production of the Universal

This brings us to the third point raised by Marx in the above passage. Chris Arthur states, "[t]he abstract category ‘labour’ is... not merely an ‘abstract expression’ developed by thought to comprehend concrete richness. In this society, in which ‘individuals easily pass from one type of labour to another,’ labour as such is the means of creating wealth, not only categorically but ‘in reality’” [Mepham and Ruben, 93]. It is only in this historical situation where individuals have established an indifferent relationship to their labour, where ‘individuals easily pass from one type of labour to another,’ that labour can become a universal category—as Marx states, a thing which “appears as common to many, to all... [and which] ceases to be thinkable in a particular form alone.” The abstraction of specific human labours is the condition for the emergence of both the social reality, and the concept, of universality: “In commodity production universality emerges as a result—and as an abstract totality—insofar as each producer succeeds in finding a way to express the universal side of his labour...” [Arthur in Mepham and Ruben, 99]. In History and Class Consciousness, Georg Lukács argues that Marx accurately configures a dialectical relationship between abstraction and universality...
wherein, as a result of the particular historical development of market society, each is simultaneously cause and effect of the other: "the universality of the commodity form is responsible both objectively and subjectively for the abstraction of the human labour incorporated in commodities. (On the other hand, this universality becomes historically possible because this process of abstraction has been completed.)" [Lukács, 87].

Finally, Marx argues, the function of abstraction and universality, both as moments of the same social production process, and as concepts or categories of thought (the latter being the theoretical expression of those material social relations), take on the appearance of independence from those material circumstances which are actually their conditions of possibility. This situation has two historical consequences: On the one hand, social production relations where private labour practices are organized and mediated solely by the exchange of things on the market (what Marx refers to as objective dependency-relations) come to dominate those labouring individuals who are actually the source and creators of wealth. Human beings and their social relationships come to be dominated by things, or, as Marx expresses it, come to be "ruled by abstractions." On the other hand, universality, as a category of thought, also takes on the appearance of independence—takes on a "life of its own"—and comes to dominate the production of explanations of the social world in what Marx refers to as a "reign of ideas." It is not a coincidence, therefore, that philosophical idealism in Europe developed historically at the same time as an exchange economy was establishing itself as the dominant form of social organization. Philosophical idealism, characterized by the explanatory priority of abstract categories, is a consequence of the same material, social
function of abstraction which makes possible the equalization of human labour and the exchange of the products of that labour on the market. Marx states,

These *objective* dependency-relations, also appear, in antithesis to those of personal dependency (the objective dependency-relation is nothing more than social relations which have become independent and now enter into opposition to the seemingly independent individuals; i.e. the reciprocal relations of production separated from and autonomous of individuals) in such a way that individuals are now ruled by *abstractions*, whereas earlier they depended on one another. The abstraction, or idea, however, is nothing more than the theoretical expression of those material relations which are their lord and master. Relations can be expressed, of course, only in ideas, and thus philosophers have determined the reign of ideas to be the peculiarity of the new age...

[Marx, 1973, 164]

The Inversion of the Abstract and the Concrete

To say that “individuals are now ruled by abstractions,” is also to describe the inversion which takes place between the abstract and the concrete in capitalist society—i.e., the abstract takes priority over the concrete. For example, in an exchange economy, commodities as use-values, as sensible-concrete things, have significance merely as the *forms of expression* of their essential identities as values. The sensible and particular thing-like quality of the commodity becomes merely a property of the commodity’s identity as a value, the only thing which “counts” in exchange. Similarly, the particular human labour embodied in the commodity “counts merely as a hypostasis of the abstractly universal” [Arthur in Mepham and Ruben, 109].

This situation also implies an inversion of form and content. As I just described, labour as a specific human activity becomes the form of appearance, or a property, of abstract labour, while the latter becomes the content or essence of value. Abstract labour takes on the appearance of an autonomous entity which guides the development of the
entire capitalist structure. As Chris Arthur explains, "[t]he secret of the structure and
development of the capitalist economy is to be found right at the start when the material
abstraction of commodity exchange creates the reality of pure forms [i.e., transforms
form into content], which then embark on their own logic of development... and the
entire system has to be grasped... as form-determined" [Arthur in Moseley, 66]. Or, what
is to say the same thing, the system must be grasped as determined by the inversion of
form and content. Here is Marx’s articulation of the situation (in a draft of an unpublished
chapter of Capital: Vol. 1):

Within the value relation and the value expression included in it, the abstractly universal does not count as a property of what is concrete, and sensibly-real, but the opposite holds: what is sensibly-concrete counts as mere appearance-form or determinate realization-form of the abstractly universal. It is not that the labour of tailoring, which resides for example in the equivalent coat, possesses within the value-expression of linen the universal property of also being human labour. The opposite holds: Being human labour counts as its essence, being the labour of tailoring counts only as the form of appearance or definite form of realization of this its essence... This inversion whereby the sensible-concrete counts only as appearance-form of the abstractly universal, and it is not to the contrary that the abstractly universal counts as property of the concrete—this inversion characterizes the value-expression. At the same time it renders difficult its comprehension. If I say: Roman Law and German Law are both law, that is obvious. But if I say, on the other hand, the Law, (this abstract entity) realizes itself in Roman Law and German Law, (these concrete laws), then the connection becomes mystical.

[Marx quoted in Mepham and Ruben, 104]

Several “inversions,” therefore, characterize the capitalist mode of production: the
inversion of the abstract and the concrete, of form and content, and of the universal and
the particular. Each of these different inversions, however, are merely different ways of
expressing the same social process. Furthermore, as Marx explains, it is these inversions

25
which render the mechanics of the capitalist mode of production mystical and, therefore, difficult to comprehend.²

Critique and Utopia

Marx’s configuration and historicization of the function of abstraction in capitalism entails both a critical and a utopian moment which have not, as yet, been identified. Marx is unambiguously critical of the ascendancy of the abstract over the concrete: the abstraction and equalization of individual human labour is the condition for the exploitation of workers for the extraction of surplus value; it is the condition for the domination of human beings by the products of their own labour; it entails the displacement of relations between people by the relations between things; finally, it entails the alienation of human beings from their own labour (which is sold as labour-power to the capitalist for a wage) and, therefore, from their own species-being.

However, the moment of Marx’s critique of abstraction also opens the door to an alternative, utopian configuration which would be the supersession of the contradiction between the abstract and the concrete (between the universal and the particular, between form and content) by doing away with the private property relation which characterizes production in market society. Such an historical development could free the process of the socialization of labour to realize its full potential of overcoming scarcity and to do so without alienating human beings from each other, from their labour and from the

² Later on, I examine, in detail, how Marx’s method of analysis takes the shape it does specifically and necessarily in response to the obstacles to comprehension put up by the object of analysis, itself. In other words, it is a characteristic of the capitalist mode of production that it thwarts its own self-comprehension, and the method of Marx’s analysis is informed by the necessity of addressing this situation. I will also piece together the argument that the mechanism of abstraction which thwarts the comprehension of the mechanics of an exchange economy, on the one hand, is the same mechanism which Marx harnesses in his analysis, on the other.
products of their labour. In this way, the universalizing movement of the socialization of labour would function to support and secure the particular integrity and individuality of each human being’s labour.

It is important to make the point that this utopian configuration, which we can follow Marx in calling socialism, is not, in any way, an historical inevitability. Capitalism will not march along towards socialism teleologically, irrespective of the actions taken by human agents of social change. Nor is Marx’s analysis of capitalism teleological, even though it does involve the logical and necessary development of categories and social processes. Why it is necessary for capitalism to develop in certain ways once specific social functions and mechanisms have been historically established, and why this formulation is not a teleology, will be explored later on. For the moment, the point is that the supersession of the abstract-concrete contradiction can be precipitated only by the historical abolition of private property from social production relations. And, the abolition of private property will be a matter of political will and action. Chris Arthur also makes this point:

...since the mode of abstraction is material, arising out of the actual relationships of private producers, Marx is not to blame for thinking it. He far from accepts this inversion as the ultimate truth, as his critical concept of “commodity fetishism” shows.... Marx does not pass off the abstract universal as a concrete whole. His theory is immanently critical of the estrangement of the abstract from the concrete in commodity production. He seeks the supersession of the contradiction not in a speculative reconciliation but in an historical change, through which property is socialized in order to match the increasing socialization of the productive forces.... Social labour can come to itself as a synthesis of these moments, as concretely universal, insofar as a change in the relations of production overcomes the estrangement between them. Socialism is the genuine unity of the many in the one.

[Mepham and Ruben, 107-8]
Marx can only suggest this utopian configuration (socialism)—can only imagine the supersession of the contradiction between the abstract and the concrete—because the conditions for its realization (social labour and the productive power of cooperation in the labour process, for example) already exist in the capitalist mode of production. “The problem and the means of solution arise simultaneously,” meaning that both must be material realities before they can exist conceptually [Marx, 1976, 60-1]. The utopian moment of Marx’s critique is, therefore, neither a teleology, nor a conceptual idealism. As Arthur points out, concrete universal labour would be the result of the kind of utopian social change suggested by Marx. Concrete universal labour refers to labour that is socialized directly according to political will and reflecting the needs of both producers and consumers of the products of labour, as opposed to labour socialized indirectly through the market. In other words, concrete universal labour entails the “unity-in-difference of individual labours… sustained by the practical truth of the universality of labour as a productive force divisible, according to social need, qualitatively and quantitatively… The abstract equivalences of the labours as mere work, and their different forms, may be counterposed in thought but are practically unified, at least where relations of production are immediately social” [Arthur in Mepham and Ruben, 107].

Expressions of the Function of Abstraction

The designing and organizing power of the social function of abstraction is not limited to the sphere of labour, the production process, exchange—what we may call the economic sphere. On the contrary, the mechanics of the capitalist mode of production, which for the purpose of this study I have identified as the function of abstraction, permeate and
organize all spheres of activity in bourgeois society. I touch on this formulation above, however, it is necessary to explore in more detail how the (same) function of abstraction takes various forms of expression in capitalist society. The consequences of abstraction, for example, can be observed across a range of experience from the large, trans-individual social process of the formation of the state and civil society, to what appears to be the most intimate process of the formation of individual subjectivity.

With respect to the formation of human subjectivity, we have already observed that in an exchange economy, the totality of a society’s labour practices (social labour) is not immediately and directly organized but divided amongst private production enterprises. The various labour practices involved in private industry only become social labour through their indirect organization, or mediation, by the market. Commodity producers are not organically linked to each other in any way in a market economy even though the “fact” of social labour—that a society’s total labour is shared amongst different branches of production—is a necessity for the reproduction of that society. Marx’s denomination for this situation as the objective dependency-relation expresses the subsequent contradiction: the relationship between commodity producers is one of objectively necessary indifference, or, necessary fragmentation. We have also already characterized how, in an exchange economy, the equalization of human labour both requires, and is a consequence of, the situation where workers move easily, and indifferently, from one labour activity to another. This alienation of workers from their own labour, as it is described by Marx, is also expressed in the commodification of labour-power, or, the purchasing of workers’ labour-power by the capitalist for a wage. Alienation, therefore, as one form of the function of abstraction in capitalist society,
expresses itself in the fragmentation of human beings from one another, and also in the 
dehumanization of workers—in the self-identification of workers as commodities to be bought and sold. As Melvin Rader argues,

The inherent tendency of capitalism, Marx contends, is to concentrate economic power in the hands of the few. Thereby the multitude of workers are largely deprived of self-direction and become cogs in the economic machine.

The worker sells his labour-power in order to make a living. Because his labour-power is inseparable from his person, he is forced to trim his personality to the level of a commodity.

[Rader, 173-4]

The function of abstraction is embodied in workers subjectively and psychologically, as a personality and as a way of relating to her/himself and to others. As Jochen Schulte-Sasse states, “[t]he language of abstraction that prevails in late capitalism is the expression as well as the precondition for alienated subjectivity” [Schulte-Sasse in Bürger, xxxi]. However, subjectivity is also a physical construction, as Marx points out. The extremity of the physical embodiment of abstraction in capitalism is expressed in the crippled and “monstrous” bodies of workers produced by the industrial revolution which Marx documents, but which continue to be produced today, particularly, in third world industrial production. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx states, “[l]abour does not only produce goods: it also produces itself and the worker as a commodity, and indeed in the same proportion as it produces goods…. Production does not only produce man as a commodity, the human commodity; in conformity with this situation it produces him as a mentally and physically dehumanized being” [Marx in Rader, 174].
Similar to the way that the social function of abstraction is a material and historical condition for the production of the category of universality, the abstracted and fragmented subject evolves in correspondence with the category of “the free individual.” As Marx states in the Grundrisse, “the exchange of exchange-values is the productive, real basis of all equality and freedom… as pure ideas [the latter] are merely the idealized expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations they are merely this basis to a higher power” [Marx, 1973, 245]. Human beings come to the market to exchange their private property (in the form of commodities, money or labour-power—the latter two also being commodities) as free, equal and independent individuals. Or, more accurately, a market economy, the law of value, private property, etc. require the identification, if not the essence, of those participating in exchange as free, equal and independent individuals. It is the same thing to say that political will or coercion must appear as absent from the functioning and organization of the free market. Unlike feudalism, for example, where a subject’s social role and status was defined by traditional social hierarchies founded on various forms of political domination, in capitalism, “politics,” in this sense, must be evacuated as a social and ideological organizing principle. Furthermore, the evacuation of politics from the relations of production and exchange is the condition for the possibility of identifying these relations as their own, self-adequate sphere of activity, namely, the economy. The materialization of “economics,” as an identifiable and isolatable set of activities and social relations is, itself, an expression of the function of abstraction. In bourgeois society, social power is not political but founded on the impersonal law of value and exchange, or, in other words, social power becomes “purely economic.” Derek Sayer makes this same point:
The bourgeoisie, by contrast [to pre-capitalist forms of domination], rules impersonally—and is the first class in history to do so—in the context of the formal equality of all individuals. The form in which bourgeois social power is embodied is the “purely economic” (and specifically alienated) one of its property, in the modern meaning of the word. Control over people (and their labour) is mediated through control over things. The ultimate expression of this impersonal social power is in money—‘the consummate fetish.’ In bourgeois society, according to [Marx in] the Grundrisse: “The reciprocal and all-sided dependence of individuals who are indifferent to one another forms their social connection. This social bond is expressed in exchange value… the power which each individual exercises over the activity of others or over social wealth exists in him as the owner of exchange values, of money. The individual carries his social power, as well as his bond with society, in his pocket” (156-7).

[Sayer, 1987, 105]

“Civil society,” as the arena of economic activity, is the resultant social sphere of the evacuation of politics from the social process of production and exchange. As the domain of production and exchange, civil society is a private sphere in that it is characterized by the activity of, and social relations between, private producers. Furthermore, as the domain of activity carried out by apparently independent and mutually indifferent individuals, producers can only proceed as egoistic and self-interested participants—the material structure and corresponding logic of market society forbids the existence of a universal, organizing principle which could orchestrate the unity-in-difference of those participants.

The abeyance of direct political and organic social organization which marks the evolution of civil society also marks the evolution of the modern state. Like two sides of the same coin, civil society and the modern state are mutually defining, and both are mediated by, and expressions of, the material production relations of exchange (which is also to say, the social mechanism of abstraction). A society of individual producers
whose relationship to one another is necessarily impersonal, indifferent and indirect, precludes the existence of an organic social bond or arena for the expression of commonality or mutuality, of common or collective social concerns and for collectively-defined activity. The modern state is the abstracted or idealized expression of the absence of an organic and direct social collectivity. The "citizen" is the identity of the subject of the modern state—of the idealized collective domain of bourgeois society—and "law" is the formal code of that idealized collectivity, reciprocity and general interest. Marx states, "political emancipation is the reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, to an *egotistic, independent* individual, and, on the other hand, to a *citizen*, a juridical person" [Marx in Sayer, 1987, 102].

The development of the modern state is coterminous of the establishment of civil society where the mutual and reciprocal relations of independent individuals are governed by law. Furthermore, both civil society and the modern state are historical contingencies of bourgeois society. In *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law*, Marx refers to this process as the “abstraction” of the state:

> The political constitution as such is brought into being only where the private spheres have won an independent existence. Where trade and landed property are not yet free and have not yet become independent, the political constitution too does not yet exist... The abstraction of the *state as such* belongs only to modern times, because the abstraction of private life belongs only to modern times. The abstraction of the *political state* is a modern product.

[Marx in Sayer, 1987, 97]

Alternatively, Marx refers to this process as the “idealism” of the state, as he does in “On the Jewish Question”:

> [T]he completion of the idealism of the state was at the same time the
completion of the materialism of civil society. Throwing off the political yoke meant at the same time throwing off the bonds which restrained the egoistic spirit of civil society. Political emancipation was at the same time the emancipation of civil society from politics, from having even the semblance of a universal content.

[Marx in Sayer, 1987, 102]

The social function of abstraction, therefore, can be denominated in various ways: individualization, political emancipation, the idealism of the state, the materialism of civil society. However, it is important to remember that each of these phenomena is a different expression of the same social process, all realizing themselves in various moments of the capitalist totality: "state formation and individualization are complimentary processes, entailing one another: the abstraction of the state and the abstraction of the individual originate in 'one and the same act'" [Sayer, 1987, 102].

Expressions of Abstraction and their Necessary Appearance of Autonomy

To say that the state, law, the juridical individual, etc. are abstractions is not to say that they don't really exist, that they are not "real." It is, instead, to insist on their inseparability from capitalism's "economic" structure—the relations of production and exchange [Sayer, 1987, 109]. Marx also insists that these expressions of the relations of production are necessary forms of market society. In The German Ideology, for instance, Marx argues that the state and law, are necessary forms of bourgeois rule: "the individuals who rule in these conditions—leaving aside the fact that their power must assume the form of the state—have to give their will—a universal expression as the will of the state, as law" [Marx in Sayer, 1987, 109-110]. Once again, Marx's insistence on the necessity of these forms is not a teleological formulation. That a mechanism of value and exchange becomes established as a society's dominant and defining mode of
production is a matter of historical contingency. Nonetheless, that same mechanism, if it comes to define a society’s mode of production, can only function in certain ways and requires a certain type of organization of its elements to reproduce itself.

In order for an exchange economy to become established and be reproduced, a certain contradictory situation must realize itself (as a necessary component of the structure): On the one hand, all moments of the capitalist totality—all forms, expressions, relations, etc.—are inseparable. Each element originates in, and is mediated by, the same process of exchange (which is organized by the logic of value, which is the expression, itself, of abstract labour, or, the social function of abstraction). On the other hand, each moment requires the appearance of externality and autonomy. Expressions such as the state, law, the juridical citizen, the free individual, etc. must assume the identification of independent, non-economic phenomena. As Derek Sayer points out, abstract expressions such as the state and civil society are constituted in capitalism as autonomous, and therefore, identifiable domains:

In the bourgeois world, “civil society” ceases to be directly “political.” Or, to use a formulation I would prefer since it is less anachronistic than Marx’s own, civil society as such is actually constituted, and becomes a possible object of theorization, for the first time, as a society of (formally) free, equal, independent human individuals. Unlike in feudalism, individuals’ differential material positions do not—in appearance at any rate—any longer coincide with differential “political” powers, statuses or rights. They can be conceived of as a “private” matter, irrelevant to one’s “public” existence as a citizen. At the same time, and correspondingly, an identifiable “public” sphere—the state—is also demarcated for the first time, as (ideally) the domain of ‘the general interest,’ in which all equally partake as citizens.

[Sayer, 1987, 102; first emphasis mine]

For the most part, Sayer reiterates ideas which I have already approached in this discussion with the exception of one significant point. The apparent autonomy of civil
society and the state also marks their objectification, or, as Sayer puts it, they become “possible objects of theorization.” And, I would add, they also become possible objects of institutionalization.

In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Peter Bürger forwards this same formulation in his analysis of the institutionalization of art and the objectification of aesthetic experience in bourgeois society. Bürger states, “the autonomy of art is a category of bourgeois society that both reveals and obscures an actual historical development” [Bürger, 36]. Just as in pre- or non-capitalist social formations human labour is organized organically and qualitatively with respect to the particular needs of both producers and consumers of the products of labour, Bürger observes that, in these same formations, “artistic” activity and practices are also integrated into the social totality in purposeful ways and in practical contexts of everyday life. In pre-capitalist contexts, for example, art was part of the fabric of religious rituals and celebrations, served didactic purposes, and was commissioned by the nobility for specific purposes. “Art” was integrated into all areas and moments of life-activity such that it could not be identified as a separate or autonomous sphere of activity or set of artefacts. The designations “art” and “artistic,” at this historical moment, are premature, for art, as an isolatable activity or end, has not yet become an identifiable concept.

Throughout the development of an exchange economy, “art” comes to be produced for, and exchanged on the market. This transition marks several historical developments, for example, “the [art] collector who acquires the work of prestigious artists on the growing art market” comes to replace “the individual who commissions an artist to create something for a specific purpose” [Bürger, 37]. The independently
working artist, who produces for an anonymous market, and the art collector are historical correlates; their identities are made possible by the mediation of the market in the production and consumption of art, and signal the abstraction of “artistic” practices from their former integrated relationship to the social world [ibid.]. The abstraction of art made possible by the market is also the condition for its autonomy—for the possibility of conceiving of art as an isolatable sphere of human practice. Art becomes, like the state and civil society, a possible object of theorization. Therefore, the abstraction/autonomy of art also signals the possibility of aesthetic philosophy. Bürger maps this historical development:

Not until the 18th century, with the rise of bourgeois society and the seizure of political power by a bourgeoisie that had gained economic strength, does a systematic aesthetics as a philosophical discipline and a new concept of autonomous art come into being. In philosophical aesthetics, the result of a centuries-long process is conceptualized. By the “modern concept of art as a comprehensive designation for poetry, music, the stage, sculpture, painting and architecture which did not become current until the end of the 18th century,” artistic activity is understood as an activity that differs from all others. “The various arts were removed from the context of everyday life and conceived of as something that could be treated as a whole....” With the constitution of aesthetics as an autonomous sphere of philosophical knowledge, this concept of art comes into being. Its result is that artistic production is divorced from the totality of social activities and comes to confront them abstractly.

[Bürger, 41-42]

The figure of aesthetic thought will play a central role in my exploration of Marx’s method of analysis later on. For the time being, Bürger’s configuration points to another defining feature of capitalism, namely, the fragmentation of the social world that accompanies the development of bourgeois society. Similar to the way that producers in a market economy must appear as atomized, independent and free individuals, so too does
market society require that art and aesthetics (or the domain of cultural production and consumption, more generally), civil society (as the domain of economics), and the state (as the domain of politics) appear as independent and autonomous spheres of activity. Once again, this situation illustrates the fundamentally contradictory character of the capitalist mode of production: all spheres of the social world remain, essentially, integrated by, and inseparable from, the organizing logic of exchange, while generating the necessary appearance of their fragmentation and mutual isolation. Furthermore, the fragmented appearance of the social world is no less a material and historical reality than its integrated essence; it is as material and “real” as is the contradictory relationship between appearance and essence.

This observation brings me to a point which will be very significant later on in the discussion. The appearance of the social world as fragmented and isolated spheres of activity is not just an “ideology” of capitalism—although it expresses itself as that, as well—but a material condition of capitalism’s reproduction. If this appearance is jeopardized or threatened in some way, that is, if the ultimate identity of these spheres of activity with the function of exchange (or abstraction) is exposed, capitalism is put in crisis. Currently, capitalism is undergoing just this crisis, brought on, in part, by the (sometimes politically motivated and sometimes not) activity of human agents and, in part, by capitalism’s own immanent development. Furthermore, this crisis has been developing towards a more increasingly acute state from Marx’s day to our own. For example, as capitalism must continuously expand its sphere of operation in order to survive—in order to reproduce itself (a property of the capitalist mode of production which I have not explored in this discussion)—it does so by commodifying more and more elements of the life-world—of everyday life—until every last conceivable moment of public and private life is abstracted and harnessed for the service of exchange and profit. Taking the arts and the sphere of cultural production as an example, when Marx was writing in the mid-19th century, the appearance of the autonomy of the arts—music, painting, theatre, etc.—from economic concerns was less strained. Today, the economic dominance of the culture industries, particularly in light of the virtual identity of popular cultural production and the mass media—radio, television, film—creates a situation which Fredric Jameson refers to as “the culturalization of capital,” where it becomes almost impossible to conceive of cultural activity in anything other than its commodified form. Consequently, the pervasiveness of the function of exchange—“the profit motive,” in colloquial terms—becomes increasingly transparent and the appearance of autonomy of “culture” and the “economy” collapses—is brought to crisis. The continuous development of this crisis over the last century and a half is what makes our current situation, the contemporary historical “stage” of capitalism, exactly that of Marx’s day, and so very different, all at the same time. A central task of this dissertation is to examine how and why the current crisis of the ever more strained appearance of autonomy of the sphere of cultural production makes Marx’s analysis of capitalism, and his method of analysis in particular, the most appropriate and relevant approach to that object today.

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Conclusion: Dialectic, Method, and the Abstraction of Analytical Thought

We have already determined how certain concepts or categories of thought, such as equality, the free individual, universality, come into being in bourgeois society as forms of expression of the material relations of production that characterize that society. As such, abstract categories, are historically contingent upon, and entirely inseparable from, the material conditions of that mode of production. In a letter Marx states, "[categories are] the abstract ideal expressions of... social relations. Indeed, the categories are no more eternal than the relations they express. They are historical and transitory products" [Marx in Sayer, 1987, 126]. Therefore, as Derek Sayer points out, "[f]or Marx, our categories of analysis inescapably partake of the social reality they seek to depict" [ibid.]. We have also already observed that these categories, like all forms of expression of abstraction in an exchange economy, appear as autonomous entities independent of that economy. For Marx, the historical occasion for such a critique was philosophical idealism, the dominant presence of which from the 18th century to Marx's day inspired him to describe the era as characterized by the reign of ideas. It is necessary to explore, briefly, the historical situation of one philosophical idealism, Hegelian dialectical thought, because it bears significantly on my discussion of Marx’s method later on.  

The fragmentation of human thought and universal categories from their source in material production relations allows for the institutionalization of philosophy, as in

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4 There is much debate surrounding the nature of the influence, if any, of Hegel’s dialectic on Marx’s method; however, this debate is not the concern of this study. In my analysis of Marx’s method, I do contend that this method entails a dialectical reconstruction of its object, generally, and a historicization of Hegel’s dialectic, in particular. The task of this study is to characterize and historicize Marx’s dialectical approach to the analysis of capitalism, and to demonstrate its continuing usefulness. This study does not take on the task of justifying why it is appropriate to call Marx’s critique a dialectic in the first place. For the moment, I am introducing Hegel’s dialectic strictly as an illustration of a mode of thought which can be historicized as the expression of certain material social relations.
Bürger's example of the institutionalization of art, as well as, for the construction of philosophical systems where the elemental categories appear to be self-generating. Marx demonstrates that once certain social relations become stabilized, capitalism develops according to an immanently necessary logic. As Tony Smith puts it, capitalism is "a totality that posits and then supersedes its own conditions" [Moseley, 29]. Proceeding according to its own logic, capital is necessarily in a state of constant motion and change; by continuously reproducing itself, capital is continuously changing into something else. Tony Smith argues that Hegel's dialectic, as a philosophical system of self-generating categories, is an expression of capital's immanent self-generating logic. A system of self-generating categories has as a condition of possibility the abstraction and alienation of human thought:

In capitalism, human creations such as commodities, money and capital have taken on a reified form and lord over their creators. An automatic logic generating determinations out of itself is appropriate to such a reified reality. Capital itself is shown by Marx to be a self-moving subject, a totality that posits and then supersedes its own conditions. Capital forms a relatively self-subsistent whole that is continuous and self-reproducing. In this sense it appears to be an instantiation of what Hegel termed "the Concept" (Begriff), the culmination of his Logic. In both cases we have alien pseudosubjects that subjugate real individuals. From this perspective dialectical logic is a perversion of thought, but this is what makes it a suitable method for understanding the perverted reality that is capitalism. [Smith in Moseley, 29]

Smith's final point is that Hegel's dialectic is a distortion, but a productive distortion. It is a product of the alienation of human thought—of the material relations of exchange—the power of which Marx harnesses for the illumination of the distorting mechanism of the exchange relation, itself. In the case of Hegel's dialectic, the product serves to expose the source of its own creation. Marx states in the Economic and
Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, “[t]he positive thing that Hegel achieved here—in his speculative logic—is [to show] that the determinate concepts, the universal, fixed thought forms in their independence over against nature and spirit are a necessary result of the universal alienation [Entfremdung] of the human essence, hence also of human thinking” [Moseley, 42-43]. Hegel’s philosophical system allowed Marx to glean that the social relations which produce abstract, alienated labour must express themselves in the form of money (the universal commodity), just as abstract, alienated thinking must express itself in the form of a freestanding logic (Hegel’s system of universal categories) [Murray, 43]. Marx employs Hegel’s dialectic in the exposure of its own historicity. Paul Mattick echoes this reading in his own account:

Hegel’s dialectical logic provided Marx with an irresistibly attractive rhetoric for the depiction of the system of economic categories that structure social action in capitalist society. Hegel’s illusion that his concepts themselves generated the movement of his systematic treatment of cognition mirrors the illusion of humankind under capitalism that the social relations that are their own historical product have an ineluctable life of their own. At the same time, although not strictly speaking a logic, the Hegelian system included a highly sophisticated account of theory construction, in particular in the social sciences, stressing the interconnectedness of theoretical categories.

[Mattick, 131]

Mattick argues that Hegel is ‘under the illusion that his concepts themselves generate the movement of his dialectical system.’ Whether or not this is an adequate reading of Hegel’s work is beyond the scope of this discussion. What is relevant to the present study is Marx’s employment of categorical thought in his analysis of capitalism and his historicization of those categories in the process. It is important to mention that Marx’s “correcting” Hegel—his historicizing of Hegel’s categories, his ‘standing Hegel back on his feet’—is not motivated by the need or desire to address a theoretical flaw in
Hegel’s conceptual system but by the need to articulate that system with the social world it seeks to represent. Theory is inadequate when it is confined to philosophers; it is only self-adequate, and therefore can only have material efficacy, when it is “grasped by the masses,” or, more accurately, when it is grasped collectively and socially. For Marx, the sublation of dialectical analysis can only be realized in general experience. Mattick points out that this formulation orients Marx’s critique of classical political economy which, as a critique, is guided by Marx’s observation of “real” contradictions experienced in bourgeois society and not by the conceptual inconsistency of the political economic theory of his day:

Since in Marx’s conception theories are to be understood as representations of socially regulated experience, theoretical critique here echoes Hegel’s remark that dialectical consciousness is not “peculiarly confined to the philosopher,” so that it “would be truer to say that dialectic gives expression to a law which is felt in all other grades of consciousness, and in general experience.”… Marx represents a further, and distinct, development of the idea, since he regards his theoretical Aufhebung, the critique of political economy, as a response not to some inherent necessity located in the inadequacy of the conceptual structure of classical economics but as called for and rendered possible by the experienced crisis tendency of capitalism and the workers’ movement responding to it. It was experience of the limits of capital that suggested the limits of political economy.

[Mattick, 122]

Exactly how Marx ‘harnesses the power of the dialectic (categorical thought) in order to reveal the mechanism of exchange’ and its imprint on bourgeois society, as I argue he does, will be the focus of my discussion of Marx and method in subsequent chapters. Before proceeding with that discussion, it is necessary to elaborate on one further characteristic of the capitalist mode of production which I approach only superficially in this chapter, namely, capitalism’s process of “self-mystification”—the necessity of market society to generate distorted self-appearances which hinder its
adequate representation/analysis. Marx’s method is defined by the necessity of addressing capitalism’s self-mystifying process.
Chapter Two

Capitalism's Process of Self-mystification

Capitalist society generates mystifying and obfuscatory appearances of itself and this process is a necessary condition of capitalism's reproduction. The present chapter looks at how Marx, and other theorists working in the tradition of Marxist critique, analyze this specific difficulty presented by the capitalist mode of production and sets the stage for a more elaborate characterization of Marx's method of analysis. En route, I introduce the relevance of the concept of history to a discussion of Marx's method, and argue that one way of expressing capitalism's self-mystifying process is as the repression of an historical sensibility and collective subjectivity in capitalist society.

The Discrepancy between Essence and Appearance

To continue developing terms and themes introduced in the preceding chapter, we can situate capitalism's self-mystifying process in the discrepancy between the essential structure and mechanism of an exchange economy and the distorted appearances which that set of social relationships necessarily generates. We have already observed how the interconnectedness and inseparability of the moments of the capitalist mode of production nonetheless appear as discrete and autonomous entities, such as an independent civil society, the state, an institutionalized set of art and cultural practices, etc. In the tradition of Marxist thought and debate, this discrepancy is referred to as the contradictory relationship between capitalism's essence and appearance.
The discrepancy between essence and appearance, as we have observed, is a necessary consequence of the nature of the essence, itself [Murray in Sayer, 1987, 93]. For example, it is an essential character of an exchange economy that producers appear to come to the market as free and independent individuals. However, if the extent of an individual’s private property is his or her labour-power, as the sole means of survival in a market economy, that individual is in no way free not to sell his or her labour-power to the capitalist for a wage. Similarly, the nature of competition amongst private production enterprises (the consequence of the withdrawal of politics from the organization of a society’s total labour and the subsequent indirect organization, or mediation, of a society’s total labour by the market) entails that capitalists are not free not to generate profit in the course of the production process, and are, therefore, not free not to exploit workers in the production of surplus value. The necessary and deceptive appearance of freely interacting (buying, selling, producing) individuals, realizing their own self-interests, and sharing only this drive towards self-interested ends as a common bond, exists both as a consequence of, and in contradiction to, market society’s nature of essential un-freedom. The concept or category of “freedom,” itself, likewise thoroughly a product of the material, social relations of market exchange, must appear as an independent and timeless (ahistorical) ideal value which buttresses the social structure and helps to secure its reproduction by rationalizing its justness in the minds of its agents. In the Grundrisse, Marx describes the genesis of the modern concepts of freedom and equality in this way:

Out of the act of exchange itself, the individual, each one of them, is reflected in himself as its exclusive and dominant (determinant) subject. With that, then, the complete freedom of the individual is posited:
voluntary transaction; no force on either side; positing of the self as means, or as serving, only as means, in order to posit the self as an end in itself, as dominant and primary [übergreifend];... the other is also recognized and acknowledged as one who likewise realizes his self-seeking interest, so that both know that the common interest exists only in the duality, many-sidedness, and autonomous development of the exchanges between self-seeking interests.... Therefore, when the economic form, exchange, posits the all-sided equality of its subjects, then the content, the individual as well as the objective material which drives towards the exchange, is freedom. Equality and freedom are thus not only respected in exchange based on exchange values but, also, the exchange of exchange values is the productive, real basis of all equality and freedom. As pure ideas they are merely the idealized expressions of this basis; as developed in juridical, political, social relations, they are merely this basis to a higher power.

[Marx, 1973, 244-45]

Freedom and equality must, and do, appear as the ideals according to which capitalist relations of production are organized—they appear as the source and origin of the resulting social formation. Marx demonstrates, however, that the abstract categories of freedom and equality only appear as such, but are actually, in essence, the products of the developing relations of exchange in market society. Marx often refers to the appearances of market relations as the “imaginary expressions” or “phenomenal forms” of essential relations: “The imaginary expressions arise... from the relations of production themselves. They are categories for the phenomenal forms of essential relations. That in their appearance things often represent themselves in inverted form is pretty well known in every science except Political Economy” [Marx in Sayer, 1979, 68]. Of course, it is the categories of political economy, and political economy as a discipline, itself (as, itself, one of the phenomenal forms of market relations), on which Marx focuses his analytical attention in order to demonstrate the inversions of essence and appearance that take place in the course of their being posited as categories. Figuring this
necessary process of inversion is also to figure the way in which capitalism inherently
obfuscates and distorts the perception of its own modus operandi—"the structure of
capitalism...produces its own misperception" [Callinicos, 131]. A great deal of the labour
of Marx's "economic" writings involves the disclosure of how categories such as surplus
value, profit, ground rent, interest, the wage-form, etc. produce such misperceptions.

For example, in the section titled "Estranged Labour" in the Economic and
Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx discusses how the worker, by selling his or her
labour-power to the capitalist for a wage, relinquishes mastery over his/her labour and the
products of labour and alienates him/herself from his/her own species-being and the
production process. On one level, therefore, workers are the agents of their own
alienation and produce the relationship of the capitalist to labour as one of master over
the labour process and its products: "Just as [the worker] estranges from himself his own
activity, so he confers to the stranger [the capitalist] activity which is not his own" [Marx,
1978, 79]. In this way, Marx argues, private property, as the law and "right" of the
capitalist, is produced as the necessary consequence of alienated labour and is not, as it
appears to be, the source of alienated labour:

Private property thus results by analysis from the concept of alienated
labour.[...]

True, it is as a result of the movement of private property that we have
obtained the concept of alienated labour... from political economy. But on
analysis of this concept it becomes clear that though private property appears
to be the source, the cause of alienated labour, it is rather its consequence,
just as the gods in the beginning are not the cause but the effect of man's
intellectual confusion.[...]

Only at the very culmination of the development of private property does
this, its secret, re-emerge, namely, that on the one hand it is the product of
alienated labour, and that on the other it is the means by which labour
alienates itself, the realization of this alienation.

[Marx, 1978, 79]
Here, Marx reveals that private property and alienated labour are each other's cause and effect, or, to put the matter another way, as each is an expression of the same social process, they are tautological. Marx also argues that there is a discontinuity between the development of private property and alienated labour as historical phenomena, on the one hand, and as analytical categories—as the explanatory tools of political economists—on the other; they are not parallel developments. Each of these observations reveals something about the character of Marx's method of analysis which will be explored later on. For the moment, the significant point is that with respect to the "common sense" appearances of the social world which market relations generate, all is not what it appears to be. Marx illustrates this situation with many different examples in which he reveals the various inverted forms and distorted perceptions of the social world that are expressed by each of the analytical categories circulating in classical political economic discourse. However, one soon comes to realize that through Marx's many different examples, and by way of his analysis of the various political economic categories, Marx is, in fact, retelling the same story: The source of all wealth in capitalist society is located uniquely and essentially in the productive power of human labour (in a specific social form of labour, cooperative labour) while appearing to be located in the reified and fetishized forms which labour assumes in an exchange economy: land, as the source of rent; nature, as a living productive force of use-value which is then confused with exchange-value; money, as interest-bearing capital; circulation, or, the buying and selling process; speculation; and, of course, things—the products of labour, an "immense collection of commodities." That the source of wealth appears to be located in all these forms, and not in the productive power of socialized labour (the productive power of
cooperation in the labour process) is “[t]he fetishism peculiar to the capitalist mode of production” [Marx, 1976, 1046]. In Capital III Marx states,

Capital appears as a mysterious and self-creating source of interest—the source of its own increase. The thing (money, commodity, value) is now capital even as a mere thing, and capital appears as a mere thing. The result of the entire process of reproduction appears as a property inherent in the thing itself... In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish, self-expanding value, money generating money, are brought out in their pure state and in this form it no longer bears the birthmarks of its origin.

[Marx in Sayer, 1979]

Ideology and Science

The discrepancy between capitalism’s essential structure and movement on the one hand, and the way it appears to function as a social organization on the other, is what makes capitalism difficult to analyze and comprehend; this inherent obstacle to comprehension is at the heart of capitalism’s self-mystifying process, as Marx explains in Capital III:

If, as the reader will have realized to his great dismay, the analysis of the actual intrinsic relations of capitalist production is a very complicated matter and very extensive; if it is a work of science to resolve the visible, merely external movement into the true intrinsic movement, it is self-evident that conceptions will arise about the laws of production in the minds of agents of capitalist production and circulation will diverge drastically from these real laws and will merely be the conscious expression of the visible movements.

[Marx in Sayer 1979, iv]

Marx describes the method of analysis required for the difficult task of comprehending the “true intrinsic movement” of capitalist production as scientific; it is a “work of science” to reveal the complicated and often indirect mediations which tether capitalism’s
ideal forms of expression to the material relationships—the social structure—which offer them up.5

Marx’s strategy in referring to the work of analysis which capitalist production renders necessary as a “science” is, in part, a critique of the scientific and authoritative status of empirical analysis which gripped much of the intellectual imagination of Marx’s day. Marx’s analysis, itself, involves empirical observation and critique; however, Marx rejects the idea that empirical observation, on its own, can reveal the “kind of hocus pocus” which goes on “behind the backs” of capitalism’s agents. The gathering of empirical data is a necessary moment in the equally necessary mapping of capitalism’s phenomenal forms, however, it is not equipped, as Marx argues, to pierce the essential reality of these forms; a science adequate for the task cannot pause on “the collection of dead facts” [Marx and Engels, 1970, 48]. Marx argues unequivocally that to render the logic of value in exchange relations is a matter of analysis that transcends the capabilities of sense perception: “We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish; it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing possessing value” [Marx, 1976, 138]. And again, later in Capital, Marx states, “this much is clear: a scientific analysis of competition is possible

5 Marx’s designation of his analytical work as scientific has been the occasion for criticism, particularly, on the part of theorists working from within the post-humanist discourses, such as, post-Marxism and post-structuralism. The post-humanist critique of science or, more accurately, the critique of ideologies of scientific discourse since the Enlightenment, is part and parcel of the post-humanist critique of essentialism, more generally. What is more interesting and relevant to the present discussion than the substance and validity of that critique, is investigating the historical conditions which make that critique possible in the first place. Marx, for example, understands his own critique and method—whether we call it science, dialectical analysis, categorical thought, etc.—as a particular consequence of a very specific set of material and historical conditions; it is a matter of certain developing historical contingencies which, at some point of development, offered up the possibility of thinking dialectical movement as a concept, as a theoretical expression of that material and historical conjuncture. I argue, here, that one of the ways of characterizing this historical conjuncture is as the development of the social function of abstraction. With respect to the post-humanist critique of science, as far as its articulation with my interests, here, is concerned, the question to ask is how has the material and historical conjuncture changed and developed that it has since offered up, and made it possible to think, anti-essentialism and its concomitant critique of scientific discourse? Fredric Jameson explores this question in revealing and useful ways. See, for example, chapter one of The Political Unconscious, his article “Periodizing the 60s,” and The Seeds of Time.
only if we grasp the inner nature of capital just as the apparent motions of the heavenly bodies are intelligible only to someone who is acquainted with their real motions, which are not perceptible to the senses” [Marx, 1976, 433]. A science adequate for the comprehension of capitalism must facilitate the perception of a dynamic social structure—a totality in motion—which is beyond the grasp of immediate observation; its task is to represent what is not immediately representable.6

In History and Class Consciousness, Lukács argues that it is not a coincidence that in bourgeois society, social and “economic” analysis should be dominated by (a type of) empiricist or “scientific” approach which authorizes the enumeration of “facts,” collection of “data,” and calculation of statistics. Such methods take cues from the natural sciences “in the way in which science distills ‘pure’ facts and places them in the relevant contexts by means of observation, abstraction and experiment” [Lukács, 5]. Capitalism, Lukács points out, encourages such methods of analysis where historical phenomena are taken out of their social contexts and isolated so as to be observed and interpreted “without outside interference” [Lukács, 6]. Just as the abstraction of human labour in exchange allows labour to be quantified, the same function expresses itself in the “scientific” isolation of historical phenomena which are abstracted and quantified as data and statistics—reduced “to their expression in numbers and numerical relationships” [Ibid.]. In this way, the function of abstraction which makes possible the production of idealized philosophical systems such as dialectical or categorical thought (as was demonstrated in chapter one), is also the condition of possibility for empirical science.

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6 The theme of representation will become central in this discussion later on. I demonstrate that a particular mode of representation is inherent to the function of abstraction and, hence, to the development of an exchange economy in general. As such, this same mode of representation also becomes pivotal to Marx’s method of analysis.
Dialectical thought and empirical science are both mediated by the same social process; they are two sides of the same historical coin. Here, Lukács describes how scientific methods of analysis are mediated by the capitalist mode of production:

The fetishistic character of economic forms, the reification of all human relations, the constant expansion and extension of the division of labour which subjects the process of production to an abstract, rational analysis, without regard to the human potentialities and abilities of the immediate producers, all these things transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived. In this way arise the ‘isolated’ facts, ‘isolated’ complexes of facts, separate, specialist disciplines (economics, law, etc.) whose very appearance seems to have done much to pave the way for such scientific methods. It thus appears extraordinarily ‘scientific’ to think out the tendencies implicit in the facts themselves and to promote this activity to the status of science.

[Lukács, 6]

We can also articulate the concepts of ideology and ideology critique with Marx’s call for a type of scientific analysis that reveals the discrepancy between the “perverted appearances” [Marx, 1972, 49] of capitalist society and its intrinsic movement. The idealized, phenomenal forms of capitalism are “ideological” in the sense that they are distorted inversions of essential social relations and misleading in their apparent autonomy and immediacy (i.e., unmediated character). For Marx, therefore, ideology critique is akin to his scientific method. As Derek Sayer argues, “[s]uch divergence of [phenomenal] forms and [essential] relations provides the basis for Marx’s conception of ideology and at the same time defines the project of his science. A consciousness grounded in direct experience will be ideological to the extent that the phenomenal forms it departs from do distort their underlying relations, and where this is the case it is the job
of science to expose the latter and explain why their forms of manifestation should be deceptive" [Sayer, 1979, 9].

Phenomenal, ideological appearances, as we know, are the forms of expression by which capitalist relations represent themselves in the perception of capitalism’s agents. Through their reproduction over time, these ideological forms achieve what Marx calls “the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life” [Marx in Sayer, 1979, 9] and come to be perceived as simple “fact” or common sense. Phenomenal forms are not false in the sense of being “unreal”; they have both material conditions (i.e., essential production relations) and material consequences in market society. According to Lukács, “the semblance of independence [of the various elements of the social world] is no mere ‘error’ simply to be ‘corrected’... It is rather the intellectual and conceptual expression of the objective social structure of capitalist society” [Lukács, 230]. Therefore, as Sayer argues, it is not accurate to ascribe the fetishism of capitalism’s distorted appearances to

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\[7\] My configuration of the concept of experience (later on in the discussion) differs from Sayer’s configuration of the concept in this passage. Sayer uses the term “direct experience” to designate experience that is ideological because it is “grounded in” capitalism’s phenomenal forms. By implication, for Sayer, there must also exist “indirect or mediated experience” as experience “grounded in” capitalism’s essential production relations. To my mind, it makes no sense to speak of either direct or indirect experience, as it is impossible that experience could be grounded, solely, in either one or the other—either phenomenal forms or essential relations. All experience is “grounded” in the contradiction between phenomenal forms and essential relations. It is the discrepancy between them which underwrites capitalist production and, therefore, it is that discrepancy which informs an agent/subject’s experience in capitalism. My understanding of the category of experience, then, entails that, while perception and experience are intimately related, they are not continuous. While perception can be “ideological” in the sense that it can reflect or express solely those distorted appearances of capitalist production, experience can never be “purely” ideological in this way in that it will always resonate with the “truth” of capitalism’s contradictory nature. This is not to say that there are not very diverse and disparate experiences of the capitalist mode of production. The experience of the proletariat is very different from the experience of the capitalist, and yet each is equally contradictory—each reflects the same contradiction. Because capitalist relations can only express themselves in reified phenomenal forms, any attempted representation of capitalism as a dynamic social structure, as a totality in motion, will be, to some degree, inadequate. Experience, then, offers a greater possibility of approaching the sense of capitalism as a contradictory totality than can its representation; one experiences capitalism as a totality even though one cannot depict it as such, in a fully adequate way, in its entirety. This is how I understand Fredric Jameson’s claim that totality is an experiential phenomenon in capitalist society as he argues in chapter one of The Political Unconscious and in his article “Cognitive Mapping.” I explore this theme, and Jameson’s argument, in more depth further on.
the intellectual shortcomings of agents: “the mechanism of fetishism is akin to that of a mirage rather than a hallucination. It is not that people mistake what they see, what they see misleads them, for thoroughly objective reasons to do with how it presents itself to their consciousness” [Sayer, 1987, 42]. Marx makes the point throughout his work that the way in which people perceive the world arises out of the relationships in which they participate, and not vice versa. These relationships are therefore the source of the fetishism characteristic of market society and not any cognitive deficiencies on the part of capitalism’s agents.

Theorists often equate ideology with language in the sense that a dominant ideological perception of the social world always entails the dominance of a certain managing or containing language (or discourse). This formulation is not incorrect in that language and perception are always mutually informing—one cannot exist without the other; each expresses the other. With respect to the function of ideological forms, Schulte-Sasse states, “the predominant ideology of a period could be interpreted as a strategy of textual domination, with the goal of robbing the dominated groups, sexes, nations, and classes of the language necessary for interpreting their situation” [Bürger, xxvii]. This argument is useful so long as we recall that every language, discursive or ideological formation arises from the structure of the social world itself and cannot, in interpretation, be detached from these material roots. In this sense, ideology is a

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8 In The German Ideology, Marx makes this same argument in his critique of the philosopher’s tendency to grant language an inadequate independence: “For philosophers, one of the most difficult tasks is to descend from the world of thought to the actual world. Language is the immediate actuality of thought. Just as philosophers have given thought an independent existence, so they had to make language into an independent realm. This is the secret of philosophical language, in which thoughts in the form of words have their own content. The problem of descending from the world of thoughts to the actual world is turned into the problem of descending from language to life” [Marx, 1970, 118].
"strategy of textual domination" with no perpetrator. John Mepham’s articulation of ideology and language, therefore, may be closer to the mark:

The conditions for the production of ideology are the conditions for the production of a language, and can only be understood by reference to the structure of forms and social practices which systematically enter into the production of particular concepts and propositions in that language. Ideology is not a collection of discrete falsehoods but a matrix of thought firmly grounded in the forms of our social life and organized within a set of interdependent categories. We are not aware of these systematically generative interconnections because our awareness is organized through them… the puzzle of money is especially like the puzzle of language.

[Mepham in Sayer 1979, 160]

Totality and Mediation

To say that ideology, the fetishism of capitalism’s phenomenal forms, or the production of misleading representations of the social world, which is to say the same thing, is a “strategy of domination without a perpetrator” requires qualification. In forwarding this argument, one cannot neglect that the “misleading representations” generated by capitalism serve the interests of some agents and work against the interests of others. The apparent freedom of the worker to sell his/her labour-power to the capitalist, and the apparent equality of the capitalist and worker in the exchange relation, serve the interests of the capitalist at the expense of the interests of the worker. This representation of
situational freedom and equality obscures that while the worker appears to be paid for his/her full day’s labour, s/he is, in fact, only paid for part of her/his labour while part of the value produced by the worker goes to the capitalist in the form of surplus value.

To say that this process of misrepresentation has no perpetrator must also be qualified, and doing so requires the introduction of the concept of totality—a concept which has, until now, only lurked in the wings of this discussion but, from here on, will take its place at centre stage. I demonstrate in chapter one that the production process in market society (which involves the buying and selling of labour-power, the production of commodities including services, the buying and selling (exchange) of commodities, or, circulation, as well as, the generation of various spheres of activity and institutions (“state apparatuses” in Althusser’s lexicon) such as the state, the educational system, law, cultural industries, the mass media, etc., which support and aid in ensuring the reproduction of the production process, itself) is an articulated whole—network, structure, system—which interconnects and integrates the various moments through the exchange relation and the logic of value, the mechanism of which I describe as the social function of abstraction. Marx mobilizes the category of “totality” to designate the sense of this articulated and dynamic social whole.

Human relationships, between worker and capitalist, for example, and the activity of human agents in market society—their “intercourse and association”—produce the social totality. The social totality is the creation of all its participants—its perpetrators—even though these human agents are often unconscious of this creation in that its mechanism takes place, as Marx points out, “behind their backs.” Capitalism’s fetishized appearances, the appearances of its discrete and autonomous elements, are equally a part
of the social totality as are its essential relations. However, it is a function of these fetishized forms that they take on the appearance of objective, "natural" and immutable forces standing over against their own creators as alien powers—as the location of the domination of capitalism's agents. Marx provides examples of this inversion throughout his work. In this example, in *The German Ideology*, Marx is discussing how, in capitalism, productive forces appear to be the attribute of private property as opposed to the attribute of individuals:

> [T]he productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals; the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of these individuals. Thus... we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property.

[Marx in Sayer, 1987, 45]

In C. Arthur's introduction to *The German Ideology*, he describes Marx's concept of alienation as "a process whereby a subject suffers from dependence upon an apparently external agency that was originally his own product" [Marx, 1970, 15]. Alienation, therefore, is simply another way of describing capitalism's process of self-mystification, both of which entail the obstruction of the perception of totality. As Marx describes, here, in the *Grundrisse*, it is the inability of capitalism's agents to perceive the social totality—the interconnectedness of the elements of the social world—which corresponds to the appearance of capital as a force which stands above them as an alien and dominating force:

> As much, then, as the whole of this movement appears [in essence] as a
social process, and as much as the individual moments of this movement arise from the conscious will and particular purposes of individuals, so much does the totality of the process appear as an objective interrelation, which arises spontaneously from nature; arising, it is true, from the mutual influence of conscious individuals on one another, but neither located in their consciousness, nor subsumed under them as a whole. Their own collisions with one another produce an alien social power standing above them, produce their mutual interaction as a process and power independent of them. Circulation, because a totality of the social process, is also the first form in which the social relation appears as something independent of the individuals, but not only as, say, in a coin or in exchange value, but extending to the whole of the social movement itself. The social relation of individuals to one another as a power over the individuals which has become autonomous, whether conceived as a natural force, as chance, or in whatever other form, is a necessary result of the fact that the point of departure is not the free social individual.

[Marx, 1973, 196-7]

It is only from the perspective of the social totality that any individual element of the capitalist mode of production can be adequately grasped; “any single element is what it is only by virtue of its relationships to others” [Sayer, 1987, 19]. Only from the perspective of totality can it be demonstrated that each element—capital, wage-labour, exchange-value, private property—contains within it all the others: “The moments of a totality... can be known and understood only if we know the relation of each to all the rest, and it is this systemic structure of relations which constitutes the totality” [Norman and Sayers, 33]. According to Lukács, it was Marx’s unswerving insistence on analyzing bourgeois society from the perspective of totality—through the category of totality—that defines Marx’s method as a revolutionary new science:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought, but the point of view of totality. The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel and brilliantly transformed into the foundations of a wholly new science. The capitalist separation of the producer from the total process of production, the division of the
process of labour into parts at the cost of the individual humanity of the worker, the atomization of society into individuals who simply go on producing without rhyme or reason, must all have a profound influence on the thought, the science and the philosophy of capitalism.... [Marx’s] science is revolutionary not just by virtue of its revolutionary ideas which it opposes to bourgeois society, but above all because of its method[:]

The primacy of the category of totality...

[Lukacs, 27]

From the point of view of totality, each element is implicated (sometimes by way of very complex mediations, but implicated, nonetheless) in all the others. Therefore, it makes no sense, in this context, to speak of a strictly ideological or economic phenomenon, as these things, while never collapsing into one another (hence, the necessity of the concept of mediation in their analysis), are not exclusive. For this reason, the study of ideological or cultural—i.e., “non-economic”—activities, production and phenomena is not peripheral in the analysis of capitalism; it is as feasible to detect the figure of the social totality in the sphere of cultural practice as it is in the economic sphere. The fetishization of cultural activities in bourgeois society as autonomous and as not defined by a particular set of historical, social relations of production is achieved at the expense of a comprehension of the whole. As Lukács states, “[t]he superior strength... [of a totalizing point of view in analysis] lies in the ability to look beyond the divisive symptoms of the economic process to the unity of the total system underlying it. In the age of capitalism it is not possible for the total system to become directly visible in external phenomena” [Lukács, 74].

That a totalized view of the social world is thwarted by capitalism’s external phenomena, that the perspective of totality is obscured by capitalism’s self-generated appearances, poses the central problematic with respect to Marx’s method of analysis. Capitalism’s self-mystifying process implies that the object of analysis cannot be reconstructed directly or immediately from material at hand; one cannot produce an
adequate likeness of bourgeois society or any of its elements directly from the observations and data which the object offers up for analysis. C. Arthur states, "[t]he problem is not at all that of a pure or simple case to be isolated from concrete complexity. It is a matter of how to articulate a complex concept that cannot be grasped by some sort of immediate intuition" [Moseley and Campbell, 19]. For this reason, the analysis of bourgeois society must address the task of mapping the complex interconnections, or mediations, which comprise the social totality but which are not immediately apparent. If these mediations are not immediately apparent, then they must be recreated conceptually and theoretically. This task has been described in terms of the necessity of the thought process in the reconstruction of the social totality. Tony Smith, for example, states,

The intelligibility of the concrete and material can only be grasped through asserting the priority of the thought process over how the concrete and material is given in appearances. The task of thought is first to pierce through the appearances to that depth level... and then to proceed to the mediations that connect the depth level with the given appearances. To fulfill this task it is not sufficient for thought to assert its independence; it must assert its primacy over the appearances generated by the real process.... [Marx] assert[s] that it is only in thought, in theorizing, that the intelligibility of the world can be grasped.

[Smith, 1990, 37]

At first, the argument that thought, or "theory," must assert not only its independence in analysis but its primacy over empirical data and observation resonates as suspiciously idealist. However, as we recall, the possibility for abstract, categorical thought is, itself, rooted in the function of abstraction, in the material relations of the exchange process. The form which categorical thought takes in Marx's method, Marx's dialectical critique, is, therefore, at the same time, the fetishized product of the social process of exchange, and the means by which the internal mechanism of that process can
be discerned and reconstructed in thought. This is the moment where the contradiction between theory and practice, itself a product of bourgeois society, is overcome. The understanding that one’s theoretical practice has certain material, historical conditions, and that only as a consequence of historical change can the truth of theory be realized (as demonstrated in chapter one), materializes thought, and renders the “theory-practice problem” obsolete. According to Marx, “[P]hilosophy can only be realised by the abolition of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realisation of philosophy” [Marx, 1970, 14]; with respect to the orientation of agents to the social world, thought and practice are not discrete and autonomous moments. Lukács expresses this formulation in Lenin, A Study on the Unity of His Thought:

Without orientation towards totality there can be no historically true practice. But knowledge of the totality is never spontaneous, it must always be brought into activity “from the outside,” that is, theoretically… As Lenin knew, the totality of being as it unfolds objectively is infinite, and therefore can never be adequately grasped. A vicious circle seems to develop between the infinity of knowledge and the ever-present dictates of correct, immediate action. But this abstract-theoretical insolubility can—like the Gordian knot—be cut through practically. The only sword suitable for this is that human attitude for which once again we must refer to Shakespeare: “The readiness is all.”

[Lukács in Jay, 127]

For Lukács, and for Marx, the comprehension of historical transformation and the ability to bring about historical transformation are always interrelated and, in some historical circumstances, even the same gesture. The comprehension of historical transformation requires the perspective of totality wherein the relationships between objects, people, phenomena, are as fundamental as (and, in fact, constitutive of) the objects, themselves. Widening the analytical gaze to incorporate the relationships which embed and animate objects makes it possible to understand how the consequences of
activity and practice reverberate throughout the entire network of the social formation, situating the apparent contingency of social change in a new light and in a new reality. For this reason, the perception of the significance of historical events and activities cannot be grasped in an immediate and unmediated way, as Lukács explains in History and Class Consciousness:

[N]either the people who experience it nor the historian have direct access to immediate reality in these, its true structural forms. It is first necessary to search for them and to find them—and the path to their discovery is the path to a knowledge of the historical process in its totality. At first sight—and anyone who insists upon immediacy may never go beyond this ‘first sight’ his whole life long—it may look as if the next stages implied a purely intellectual exercise, a mere process of abstraction. But this is an illusion which is itself the product of the habits of thought and feeling of mere immediacy where the immediately given form of the objects, the fact of their existing here and now and in this particular way appears to be primary, real and objective, whereas their ‘relations’ seem to be secondary and subjective. For anyone who sees things in such immediacy every true change must seem incomprehensible. The undeniable fact of change must then appear to be a catastrophe, a sudden, unexpected turn of events that comes from outside and eliminates all mediations. If change is to be understood at all it is necessary to elevate their interrelatedness and the interaction between these ‘relations’ and the ‘objects’ to the same plane of reality. The greater the distance from the pure immediacy the larger the net encompassing the ‘relations,’ and the more complete the integration of the ‘objects’ within the system of relations, the sooner change will cease to be impenetrable and catastrophic, the sooner it will become comprehensible.

[Lukács, 153-4]

It is important to remember, however, that any theoretical or conceptual reconstruction of the social totality will never be wholly successful in the sense of being “complete.” Two (related) characteristics of the social totality preclude its “complete” representation, in any form: first, its boundaries must ultimately exceed the limits of even the most studied attempt to become conscious of them and, second, it is not static; it is a fluid structure which exists in constant motion and transformation. In Specters of
Marx, Jacques Derrida uses the notion of “haunting” as a figure for the alterity that is always structurally implicated in any identity: “to haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept” [Derrida, 161]. Any conception or representation of the social totality will be haunted, in Derrida’s sense, by the immediately absent presence of its object; one must “summon the very thing that will never present itself in the form of full presence” [Derrida, 65]. In the same way, in analysis, Marx must summon capitalism in the attempt to approach its totalized representation. The difference between Marx’s formulation of the inevitable gap between the object and its conceptualization/representation is that, for Marx, this distance which ‘introduces haunting into the construction of a concept’—which renders an immediate and direct comprehension of the capitalist mode of production impossible—is an historical development, a product of the capitalist mode of production, itself. It follows, then, that the dissolution of the gap between object and conceptualization cannot be brought about by theory or analysis, alone, but only through the transformation of the mode of production—by deposing the relations of private property:

[Forms and products of consciousness cannot be dissolved by mental criticism, by resolution into “self-consciousness” or transformation into “apparitions,” “specters,” “fancies,” etc. but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which gave rise to this idealistic humbug; that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other types of theory.]

[Marx, 1970, 58-59]

Totality as History

While the social totality is never fully present in conception or representation, it is always fully present in experience. It is a full and complete presence which animates and
motivates and structures identity and experience in ways of which agents are sometimes conscious and sometimes not. In this way it is both controllable by, and controlling of, the human agents which both create and shape it, and bear its weight. Totality is, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggests, simply another name for history:

When the subject recognized himself in history and history in himself, he does not dominate the whole,...but at least he is engaged in a work of totalization. He knows that no historical fact will ever have its whole meaning for us unless it has been linked to all the facts we are able to know, unless it has been referred to as a particular moment in a single enterprise which unites them, unless it has been placed in a vertical history which is the record of attempts which had a meaning, of their implications and of their conceivable continuations.

[Merleau-Ponty, 31]

"Marx’s dictum: ‘The relations of production of every society form a whole’ is the methodological point of departure and the key to the historical understanding of social relations” [Lukács, 9]. To say that the perspective of totality is essential to Marx’s method of analysis is also to insist upon an historical perspective, and in a more expanded sense than colloquial understandings of “history” nominate. In the context of Marx’s analysis, history, like totality, refers to the whole network of social relations, institutions, traditions, discourses, conventions, ideologies, accepted wisdoms, alliances, prejudices, conflicts, antagonisms—the invisible (except in its effects) structure into which human agents are born and which becomes for them, as Jameson remarks, the “objective situation to which they are not free not to react” [Jameson, 1971, 285]. Marx’s well-known notion, that humans create their own history but not under conditions of their own choosing, reflects this sense of history as totality: history both transcends and is the creation of individual subjects. In The German Ideology, Marx states that, in history,
at each stage there is found a material result: a sum of productive forces, an historically created relation of individuals to nature and to one another, which is handed down to each generation from its predecessor; a mass of productive forces, capital funds and conditions, which, on the one hand, is indeed modified by the new generation, but also on the other prescribes for it its conditions of life and gives it a definite development, a special character. It shows that circumstances make men just as much as men make circumstances.

[Marx, 1970, 59]

As Derrida might express it, history is an objectivity which is always haunted—history is objectivity and alterity in one concept. Or, in Jameson’s words, history entails “the invisible shaping power… which everywhere exceeds the existent or the isolated fact, just as it betrays its omnipresence in all the contents of my consciousness, from the social to my very language, none of which belongs to me. The birth of history is just that acknowledgment of… totality” [Jameson, 1990, 90-91].

If, then, as I have described, capitalism’s self-mystifying process entails the suppression of a totalizing perspective, it follows that an historical perspective of the social world is also suppressed in the capitalist mode of production. An historical sense of the social world is obscured in two (related) ways: first, social relations, phenomena, etc., appear to be given, natural, timeless, and immutable when they are, in fact, products of certain historical circumstances and developments and, second, the interconnectedness of phenomena is unrecognized in light of their appearance as “isolated facts.” Of course, it is not merely for the sake of accuracy that historicizing “the facts” of bourgeois society defines Marx’s method of analysis: if one understands social phenomena as the products of historical development, it is possible to conceptualize those phenomena as continuing to develop into something else. Furthermore, as Lukács makes the point, what those
phenomena can develop into depends upon laying bear the conditions from whence they come:

The unscientific nature of this seemingly so scientific method [economic theory based on statistics] consists, then, in its failure to see and take account of the historical character of the facts on which it is based... As the products of historical evolution they [these facts] are involved in continuous change. But in addition they are also precisely in their objective structure the products of a definite historical epoch, namely capitalism. Thus when 'science' maintains that the manner in which data immediately present themselves is an adequate foundation of scientific conceptualization and that the actual form of these data is the appropriate starting point for the formation of scientific concepts,... [i]t uncritically accepts the nature of the object as it is given and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of 'science.'

[Lukács, 6-7]

To say that the two senses in which history is repressed in capitalism (i.e., that phenomena appear to be given and immutable, on the one hand, and autonomous from all other phenomena, on the other) are "related" is overly hesitant; they are, in fact, two different ways of describing the same process—each distorted appearance inherently entails the other. To chart the historical development—the lineage—of a certain phenomenon is to establish how that phenomenon came to be as a consequence of its relationships with all other phenomena—and vice versa. That capitalism's repression of history is double-edged in this way is articulated by Peter Bürger in his case study of the creation of the concept of autonomous art in bourgeois society. According to Bürger, on the one hand, the category of autonomous art expresses the real situation of art in bourgeois society. Just in the way the state and civil society assume the roles of independent entities in market society—assumptions which have real, material, organizational consequences for that society—so, too, does the institutionalization of art mark its perceived and therefore, on one level, functional dissociation from, as Bürger
puts it, “the praxis of life in bourgeois society” [Bürg,er, 46]. The category of autonomous art is faithful in the sense that this development is “real;” however, the category is also false in that it obfuscates an important part of this story, namely, that autonomous art is an historical phenomenon—that it was once perceived and functioned as an integrated, non-isolatable part of social life:

[T]he autonomy of art is a category of bourgeois society. It permits the description of art’s detachment from the context of practical life as a historical development—that among the members of those classes which, at least at times, are free from the pressures of the need for survival, a sensuousness could evolve that was not part of any means-ends relationships. Here we find the moment of truth in the talk about the autonomous work of art. What this category cannot lay hold of is that this detachment of art from practical contexts is a historical process, i.e., that it is socially conditioned. And here lies the untruth of the category, the element of distortion that characterizes every ideology... The category ‘autonomy’ does not permit the understanding of its referent as one that developed historically. The relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society thus becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society. [Bürg,er, 46]

That the object-world appears as something separate from the subject is the consequence of the repression of historical thought and an historical sensibility in bourgeois society. From a totalizing, historical perspective, the object-world is simply the ruins left by other subjects to be added to, worked on, transformed or reproduced by subsequent generations. If the categories of production are historicized, the ‘immense collection of commodities’—wealth, capital—does not stand over against workers, but is the product of their own labour—the self-same expression of their own agency. Marx’s method, defined by the imperative to reanimate an historical sensibility, is significant not only as an approach to exposing the essential mechanism and movement of an exchange economy but also as a method of transforming subjectivity, itself, in its relationship to the
object-world by revealing that the two are, in fact, one and the same. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, history is subjectivity:

History is not only an object in front of us, far from us, beyond our reach; it is also our awakening as subjects. Itself a historical fact, the true or false consciousness that we have of our history cannot be simple illusion. There is a mineral there to be refined, a truth to be extracted, if only we go to the limits of relativism and put it, in turn, back into history. We give a form to history according to our categories; but our categories, in contact with history, are themselves freed from their partiality. The old problem of the relations between subject and object is transformed, and relativism is surpassed as soon as one puts it in historical terms, since here the object is the vestige left by other subjects, and the subject—historical understanding—held in the fabric of history, is by this very fact capable of self-criticism.

[Merleau-Ponty, 30]

Situating Collectivity

So far, we have established that a totalized point of view, the view from history, and the collapsing of the subject-object opposition are all different ways of describing the same thought process. Furthermore, it is a thought process which cannot be contained within the category of thought or the idea without distorting its continuous relationship to the material world it attempts to grasp and transforms in the grasping: “The totality of history is itself a real historical power,” even though it has rarely been recognized as such [Lukács, 152]. However, there is yet another way of describing this process. The construction of the social world can only be a collective project, a collective history. The revelation of subjectivity as history can never refer to individual subjectivity—it is as impossible a concept as is the concept of an individual language. The concept of subjectivity is equally a social phenomenon; subjectivity, itself, can only be a collective
project. A totalized, historical perspective entails, therefore, the situation of the collectivity, or, to use that currently old-fashioned expression, class consciousness.9

Class consciousness, or the perspective of the collectivity, expresses the transformation of the agent of capitalism at the moment of objective self-consciousness—at the recognition that the subject’s knowledge of the totality is also to constitute the totality. Class consciousness implies the articulation of the objective and subjective experience and awareness on the part of the “group” (as unity-in-difference) as subject. It implies the totalized self-consciousness which, as Fredric Jameson points out, has a concretely decentring effect on the individual, wherein the individual recognizes him/herself as part of a greater dynamic structure [Jameson, 1981, 74]. Marx’s distinction between “class-in-itself” and “class-for-itself” marks this totalizing transformation which is the realization of Marx’s theory and method. Class consciousness refers to a concrete, universal, and trans-individual perception—a kind of “group thinking” where “the individual’s fate is inextricably linked with the fate of the group”: “Class consciousness... is a kind of ‘group think,’ a collective, interactive approach to recognizing, labeling, coming to understand, and acting upon the particular world [which] class members have in common” [Ollman, 156].

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9 There is what can almost be described as a tradition of attacking the concept of class consciousness in Leftist theoretical discourse, most often as a function of various critiques of anti-essentialism. Many of these critiques have validity and instill a worthwhile sense of necessary caution when wielding the category. The critique has been important in particular historical contexts where it can be demonstrated that power-invested differences amongst members of a community or social group have been disguised and ignored in the course of forwarding the interests of “the greater collectivity.” But however significant as a caution, the critique of class-consciousness cannot replace either the category of collectivity in analysis or the understanding of collectivity’s imperative material force in historical and political projects. My description of the concept as “old-fashioned” is, therefore, not at all flippant. Understanding and mapping the material conditions that result in the concept of collectivity appearing as currently outmoded (which is also to ask how and why it is possible to think of it as something that can be jettisoned) is central to this study.
Class consciousness does not refer to *individual* subjectivity. This point is articulated extensively by Lukács and by Bertell Ollman. For example, Ollman states, "[t]he main content of class consciousness... is not to be had by asking members of the class what they think or want, but by analyzing their objective interests as a group of people embodying a particular societal place and function. It is... the appropriate consciousness of people in that position, the consciousness that maximizes their chances of realizing class interests, including structural change where such change is required to secure other interests" [Ollman, 156]. It is in this sense that I describe class consciousness above as an *objective* subjectivity—a notion which is only contradictory in the historical context of a fetishized subject-object opposition. As an objective, historical and collective subjectivity, class consciousness is not expressed by agents' psychological dimensions, nor as "the sum or average of what is thought or felt [about their life situations] by the single individuals who make up the class [or group]" [Lukács, 51]. In this way, collective subjectivity has something of a group-conditioned unconscious element [Lukács, 52] which may be better described by Raymond William's notion of a "structure of feeling" which expresses the articulation of the subjective and objective experience of the social world [Williams, 109]. The experience of the social world can be personalized, on an immediate level, as something individual and, yet, it is conditioned by the reality of being a part of a larger community—it is conditioned by history.

Lukács figures the historical collapse of subject and object in class consciousness in another (related) way. For Lukács, because a fragmented and partial view of capitalist society serves the interests of the capitalist class, a totalized, holistic and objective class consciousness cannot develop with respect to this social group. The perspective of the
social totality is contradictory to, and undermines, the class aims of the bourgeoisie. The reverse is true for the proletariat. A totalized and objective grasp of the social world serves the interests of the proletariat by revealing the reality of their structurally necessary exploitation in an exchange economy and by facilitating a sense of their collective interests as a group. As Lukács argues, the self-knowledge of the proletariat as collective subject overlaps with the knowledge of society as a whole:

It was necessary for the proletariat to be born for social reality to become fully conscious. The reason for this is that the discovery of the class-outlook of the proletariat provided a vantage point from which to survey the whole of society.... [For the proletariat the total knowledge of its class-situation was a vital necessity... because its class situation becomes comprehensible only if the whole of society can be understood; and because this understanding is the inescapable precondition of its actions. Thus the unity of theory and practice is only the reverse side of the social and historical position of the proletariat. From its own point of view self-knowledge coincides with knowledge of the whole so that the proletariat is at one and the same time the subject and object of its own knowledge.

[Lukács, 20]

The self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society. When the proletariat furthers its own class-aims it simultaneously achieves the conscious realisation of the—objective—aims of society.

[Lukács, 149]

The historical collapse of subject and object in the social position of the proletariat which is the condition of class consciousness is, itself, made possible by market society and the exploitative relations which are endemic to it. The vantage point of the collectivity has its source in (the necessity of confronting) the gap between appearance and essence, and the contradictory experience of the social world in bourgeois society. Lukács states, "[w]ith capitalism, with the abolition of the feudal estates and with the creation of a society with a purely economic articulation, class
consciousness arrived at the point where it could become conscious” [Lukác, 59]. At first, Lukác’s formulation of the situation of the collective subject appears to be the precise opposite of that of Theodor Adorno. For Adorno, capitalism could never produce a collective, revolutionary subject. Adorno argues that human subjects of the “administered world” are so fragmented and function with respect to such “damaged intersubjective knowledge” that any sort of collective sensibility and action is precluded [Arato and Gebhardt, 199].

In fact, the formulations of Lukác and Adorno for the possibility of collective subjectivity in bourgeois society are only immediately oppositional. This situation can be illustrated by examining Bertell Ollman’s enumeration of both the historical factors which inhibit the formation of class consciousness and the historical factors which encourage class consciousness. According to Ollman, the factors which inhibit the formation of class consciousness include: the segmentation of the labour force and coterminus fragmentation of the interests of workers, institutional racism, sexism, nationalism and other means of dividing workers, the expansion of the consciousness industries and capitalist ownership of almost all mass media, and the failure of Soviet-style socialism seen as a dystopian model of what happens to all attempts at radical reform [Ollman, 163]. If one were to perceive these factors as static and ultimately dominating properties of the social formation (in other words, if one were to view these factors undialectically), one’s analysis could rest securely on one side of the antinomy expressed by Lukác and Adorno’s apparent impasse, i.e., one could posit, with Adorno, the impossibility of the development of a substantive collective subject in capitalism.
However, Ollman also enumerates historical factors which, he argues, can encourage the development of class consciousness: the intensification of capitalist exploitation (i.e., crisis), the concentration of capital and the related accentuation of class differences, the closing and narrowing of existing career options (small business, for example), increasing evidence of irrationality and immorality of capitalism (conspicuous consumption and waste amid growing poverty), unemployment, job insecurity, loss of savings, homes, farms and small businesses, erosion of welfare benefits and social spending, cutbacks in education spending, social programs and healthcare spending, and the evident failure of traditional economic and political strategies (like trade unionism and voting for leftist political parties) [Ollman, 166]. Ollman’s catalogue of historical developments imply that, given capitalism’s inherent contradictions, crisis in capitalism is a structural inevitability which is, in fact, the case. However, that capitalism’s underlying contradictions, and hence the source of crisis, become sufficiently transparent as to facilitate the development of a collective subjectivity is not an historical inevitability. Such a development is contingent upon the actions (and the continuity of theory and practice expressed by those actions) of capitalism’s agents and the methods of crisis management (including political will) which are in place at a given historical moment to deflect and interrupt the threatening transparency of the contradictions of the social structure. Therefore, we can follow Lukács in positing capitalist relations as the condition for the possible development of class consciousness, but must avoid mistaking this development for an historical necessity (class consciousness is not inevitable, for instance, in the way that crisis is an historical inevitability in capitalism).
However, what makes Ollman’s historical “pros and cons” lists interesting for the discussion of collective subjectivity, and significant for framing the apparent impasse between the formulations of Lukács and Adorno, is that all the factors on both lists describe the same historical process. What Ollman does not point out is that the two lists are not contradictory; they do not depict opposing or discontinuous historical developments of the capitalist mode of production. On the contrary, the lists are continuous. They each enumerate various expressions of the same social process—the same relations/mechanism of exchange. Another way of putting it would be to say that the lists represent the same social process from different vantage points, or, at different stages of historical development.

For example, Ollman’s first list—the list of historical factors which inhibit the development of collective subjectivity—represents the social contradictions which inhibit a totalized and historical grasping of the social world. Ollman’s second list—the list of factors which encourage the development of collective subjectivity—merely summons the same social process—the same set of contradictory relations—but at a stage of development when the process’ fundamental contradiction has been pushed to the point of expressing itself in crisis. As Lukács points out, crisis in bourgeois society is nothing other than the intensification of capitalism’s “mundane reality”: “On closer examination the structure of a crisis is seen to be no more than a heightening of the degree and intensity of the daily life of bourgeois society” [Lukács, 101].

Marx makes the point time and again that this intensification is a continuous development (a dialectical

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The significance and poignancy of “everyday life” in bourgeois society as the arena for the expression of crisis and contradiction is explored complexly and productively in the work of Henri Lefebvre (cf. especially *Everyday Life in the Modern World*) and Michel de Certeau (cf. especially *The Practice of Everyday Life*).
reversal) and not a break or interruption in capitalism’s mode of existence: the essential social process (function of abstraction, exchange relations, or however you want to call it) which defines capitalism, i.e., makes it what it is, is also the process of its undoing—the source of capitalism’s potential extinction. Therefore, what appears, immediately, to be a theoretical impasse between Lukács and Adorno is not an impasse at all. The historical conditions which make class consciousness an impossibility are the same conditions which make class consciousness a possibility at a different stage of development.

So far in this chapter I have represented, in various ways, what is, in fact, the same problematic. Capitalism’s self-mystifying process expresses itself as the discrepancy between essence and appearance, as the repression of the point of view of totality, as the repression of an historical perspective, and as the inhibiting of collective subjectivity. Marx’s method of analysis is therefore shaped by the goal of resurrecting these submerged figures, of summoning these ghosts which haunt the fetishized appearances of bourgeois society. Marx’s historical project (his analysis of capitalism, or, his critique of political economy, which is to say the same thing) entails discovering a new way of figuring, analyzing and representing the collective subject—the social totality—while recognizing that the only tools available for this undertaking are the conceptual creations of market society itself.

Cognitive Mapping: History as Absent Cause

The formulation of the concept of totality (and its various aliases), as well as, the formulation of the centrality of this concept to the depiction of Marx’s method which
informs the discussion in this chapter (and throughout the dissertation) takes its cue predominantly from the work of Fredric Jameson. The concept of totality, or, “History,” in Jameson’s work, refers to the social whole which cannot be adequately or directly conjured in representation, but which informs every representation as its social-material location/moment of origin. In a discussion of Adorno’s “non-empirical, speculative theory of society,” Jameson expresses this sense of history as totality by way of Adorno’s figure of “society”—“undefinable at any given point yet omnipresent”: “while the notion of society may not be deduced from any individual facts, nor on the other hand be apprehended as an individual fact itself, there is nonetheless no social fact which is not determined by society as a whole” [Adorno in Jameson, 1967, 142]. As “that which can never know full representation,” history is, nonetheless, ever present—in every action, speech, cognition, representation, ideology, etc.—as an “absent cause” [Jameson, 1988b, 150]. Furthermore, because history is only present as an absent cause, at least in the context of capitalism, it is only accessible to perception as an (inadequate) representation—“we approach it [history] only by way of some prior textualization or narrative (re)construction” [ibid.]. Transcoding this situation into the language of psychoanalysis, contact with history will always pass through the imaginary, or, in an Althusserian sense, will always be ideological.

Jameson appropriates the term “cognitive mapping” to describe the construction of imaginary or ideological representations of the social totality. Cognitive mapping describes the “function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity” [Jameson, 1988b, 146]. While Jameson’s studies of this modeling of the social totality focus on cultural and aesthetic texts, literary and filmic
texts, in particular, the category of cognitive mapping can frame virtually any genre of representation of the social world, from “public” and institutional texts, such as, legal, governmental or nationalist discourses, popular culture (print, film, television, radio) and news media texts, scientific and technological discourses, advertising, architecture, and the visual arts, to the “private” and “individual” reflections on, and perceptions of, one’s relationship to the social world which oil the gears of everyday life. Of course, these “private and individual” reflections are never just that: they are always, already social in that they are just as materially rooted in the social totality as any institutionally sanctioned representation; that the social collectivity precedes the individual—makes the category of the individual possible—is a well-rehearsed Marxist observation (and one which I explore in chapter one).

“Institutional” or “individual,” cognitive mapping refers to the construction of these (always somewhat distorted) symbolic figures through which (unrepresentable) history finds ways of expressing itself [Jameson, 1988a, 350]. Cognitive mapping, therefore, fuses with Althusser’s conception of the positive or productive function of ideology: both are necessary functions which attempt to bridge “the gap between local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures in which he or she is situated, a gap between phenomenal perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience; but this ideology as such, attempts to span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations” [ibid., 353]. Jameson cites Kevin Lynch’s argument that “urban alienation is directly proportional to the mental unmapability of local cityscapes” [ibid.]. Cognitive mapping expresses,

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11 One interesting example of a scientific narrative which expresses a very particular way of figuring the social world is explored in Donna Haraway’s reading of the Human Genome Project. Cf. Haraway’s “Deanimations: Maps and Portraits of Life Itself.”
therefore, a fetishized and utopian moment, simultaneously: representations of the social world will always be a distortion, to some degree and, yet, the capacity to signal towards even the possibility of collectivity is progressive and valuable. As Jameson argues (with reference to Lynch's assertion above), "the incapacity to map socially is as crippling to political experience as the analogous incapacity to map spatially is for urban experience. It follows that an aesthetic of cognitive mapping in this sense is an integral part of any socialist political project" [Jameson, 1988a, 353].

History (totality, sociality, collectivity, etc.) as absent cause may be forced underground in these "cognitive maps" of the social world, however, evidence of history's informing presence does not disappear completely. On the contrary, history leaves traces on the figures through which it expresses itself. Like cognitive mapping, then, the detection of these traces is a significant element of contemporary Marxist analytical projects. What Adorno calls "theory," for example, is "the detection of the absent presence of totality within the aporias of consciousness or of its products" [Jameson, 1990, 252]. In Jameson's words, the task of a Marxist interpretation of texts is "to [restore] to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history" [Jameson, 1981, 20]. Jameson uses the concept of a "political unconscious" to describe that which is repressed in the text, and which must be restored to the text's surface by the theorist. To say that all texts—literary, filmic, scientific, "personal narratives"—are informed by a political unconscious is to say that all texts "must be read as a symbolic meditation on the destiny of community" [Jameson, 1981, 70]. In the context of a Marxist method of analysis, discerning the traces of the collectivity—the mapping of a text's political unconscious, its buried social and political content—is,
according to Jameson, "the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation" [ibid., 17]. We can understand Marx's critique of classical political economy in these terms: Marx's reading of classical political economy seeks to restore to the surface of that text the buried content of the essential social relations of capitalist production—i.e., the history—which informs it.

In the chapters that follow, I attempt to discern the traces of a submerged collectivity—i.e., to perform the kind of mapping which Jameson describes—with respect to one cultural text, the conceptual artwork of Vancouver artist, Geoffrey Farmer. This reading is inspired by the task of demonstrating the continuing relevance of Marx's method of analysis to an historical understanding of contemporary forms of cultural production. En route, it is necessary to take a closer look at the particular mechanics of Marx's method.
Chapter Three

Marx’s Theoretical Process I: Abstraction and Representation

The task of chapters one and two was to examine certain characteristics of Marx’s *object* of analysis—the capitalist mode of production—and to make the argument that these characteristics (e.g., the fundamental nature of the function of abstraction, its generation of obfuscating self-appearances, its repression of totalized, historical and collective vantage points) determine the *form* of Marx’s method of analysis. A detailed examination of Marx’s method itself, and why this method must be grasped as a form of *dialectical critique*, is the task of chapters three and four.

The Dialectic of Form and Content

The observation that the form of Marx’s method is inscribed in the object of analysis cannot be passed over too quickly for it is marked by a dynamic between form and content which, as Jameson points out, is “the central operative mechanism of both the Hegelian and Marxist dialectics” [Jameson, 1971, 327]. I have already observed this particular relationship between form and content, without specifically referring to it as such, in Marx’s analysis of the various (inadequate) forms which human labour must assume in an exchange economy: through the social process of abstraction, human labour expresses itself in the form of abstract, socially equalized labour. Abstract labour, at the same time, expresses itself in the form of value; abstract labour is the *content* of value. Value, in the process of exchange, is also a content which expresses itself in the
form of exchange-value; exchange value is the social form of the product of labour, and so on.

What is significant about the relationship between form and content in Marx’s analysis is that form does not precede content but is generated by content; the social forms of the exchange process are expressions of the logic of the historical content. With dialectical thought, “form is regarded not as the initial pattern or mold, as that from which we start, but rather as that with which we end up, as the final articulation of the deeper logic of the content itself” [Jameson, 1971, 328-9]. The form of Marx’s method is likewise generated by, is an expression of, its content. As I point out in both chapters one and two, dialectical thought is itself the expression of the social function of abstraction in the realm of theory. According to I.I. Ruben, with respect to Marx’s configuration of the relationship between form and content, Marx is, methodologically, the inheritor of Hegel as opposed to the inheritor of Kant:

[O]n the question of the relation between content and form, Marx took the standpoint of Hegel, and not of Kant. Kant treated form as something external in relation to the content, and as something which adheres to the content from the outside. From the standpoint of Hegel’s philosophy, the content is not in itself something to which form adheres from the outside. Rather, through its development, the content itself gives birth to the form which was already latent in the content. Form necessarily grows out of the content itself. This is a basic premise of Hegel’s and Marx’s methodology, a premise which is opposed to Kant’s methodology.

[Ruben, 117]

For Marx, the relationship between form and content is also a figure of motion and transformation. As Jameson argues, that “the new is to the old as latent content working its way to the surface to displace a form henceforth obsolete” expresses Marx’s model of historical transformation; it is ultimately a revolutionary model [Jameson, 1971,
Speaking of the revolutionary character of his method, Marx states in the second German edition of *Capital I*:

> In its rational form [the dialectic] is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors because it includes in its comprehension and affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary.  

[Marx in Norman and Sayers, 23]

The transformation of one mode of production to another (or historical development and change within a mode of production) entails the formalization (the becoming regular or hegemonic), in some cases gradual and in some cases abrupt, of earlier and at one time only occasional or exceptional elements of the previous mode of production or historical moment. As Marx held, the "seeds" or "raw material" of any future social formation must always, already exist in the present formation.

In light of this understanding, the question of "form" can never be an ahistorical matter (despite the attempts of a tradition of formalist, textual criticism (New Criticism, for example, or some occasions of poststructuralist and postmodernist "readings") to disgrace historical approaches to textual analysis). The form of every analytical approach, including Marx's dialectical analysis, is the expression of some particular historical content; it is "the working out of content in the realm of the superstructure" [Jameson, 1971, 329]. Furthermore, the *adequation* of form to content functions as a particular historical index. We have observed that in an exchange economy there exists a discordance between social content and its necessary forms of expression. This situation manifests as an historically conditioned, structural inadequacy with respect to any attempt
to represent the social formation, whether in artistic practices, juridical discourse, or critical analysis, and Marx’s analysis of capitalist production is no exception:

[F]or Marxism the adequation of object to subject or of form to content can exist as an imaginative possibility only where in some way or another it has been concretely realized in the social life itself, so that formal realizations, as well as form defects, are taken as the signs of some deeper corresponding social and historical configuration which it is the task of criticism to explore.

[Jameson, 1971, 331]

There do exist differences of degree of adequation between approaches, likewise historically conditioned and, yet, also reflecting the choices made on the part of representing agents—the artist, the critic, the policy-maker, etc. Switching to the language of Gayatri Spivak’s deconstructivist Marxism, the “space” of the double-bind\textsuperscript{12}—i.e., representing the social world is both an imperative and an impossibility—is the location of the critical task and hence the location of agency;\textsuperscript{13} it is the place where one’s politics are realized [Spivak, 1988, 105].

Finally, the dialectical relationship between form and content which is expressed in Marx’s analysis, as well as, on the occasion of Marx’s analysis, signals an affinity between Marx’s method and what I want to call an aesthetic quality or sensibility. From here on in the discussion I will be piecing together the argument that Marx’s method of analysis displays a type of aesthetic sensibility. I also want to argue that the perception of Marx’s analysis as demonstrating an aesthetic affinity is a consequence of the current historical moment, that is to say it is rooted in particular developments of the contemporary mode of capitalist production, and that perceiving Marx’s method in this

\textsuperscript{12} For Jameson, this double-bind is social and an historically conditioned appearance; for Spivak, it is textual and irreducible. For both Spivak and Jameson, as well as for Marx, it is structural.

\textsuperscript{13} On this point, Spivak and Jameson would agree.
way offers up the possibility of making several fruitful observations about the present historical conjuncture. This argument will unfurl in due course throughout the discussion.

Presently, it is enough to point out that the aesthetic sensibility of Marx’s analysis is an amalgamation of several characteristics. One of these characteristics is the centrality of the form-content dynamic to Marx’s method which, as Jameson points out, is “essentially aesthetic in origin, for it was evolved from Hegel’s studies in theology and in the history of philosophy, not to speak of art itself, or in other words from materials which belong essentially to the superstructure” [Jameson, 1971, 328]. Jameson suggests that Marx’s “metaphorical transfer” of the form-content dialectic from the context of artistic and “superstructural” material to the context of social production relations has an explosive, defamiliarizing effect on the historical understanding of social transformation. That which in the context of the history of artistic and literary forms appears commonplace and mundane, in the context of the history of social production appears as a revolutionary mode of framing history and the social world as the product of human labour:

This is, indeed, the secret of its [the concept of the form-content dialectic] enormous force in Marx’s hands: for what is relatively transparent and demonstrable in the cultural realm, namely that change is essentially a function of content seeking its adequate expression in form, is precisely what is unclear in the reified world of political, social, and economic realities, where the notion that the underlying social or economic “raw material” develops according to a logic of its own comes with an explosive and liberating effect. History is a product of human labor just like the work of art itself, and obeys analogous dynamics: such is the force of this metaphorical transfer, which at the same time goes a long way toward accounting for that profound affinity between literary criticism and dialectical thinking in general...

[Jameson, 1971, 328]
Designating the Abstract and the Concrete

So far, I have identified and characterized a social function of abstraction as the central mechanism of the capitalist mode of production and argue that this function of abstraction subsequently underwrites Marx’s method of analysis, as well. Other than describing it as a type of thought process which prioritizes a categorial reconstruction of the object of analysis, I have not yet demonstrated exactly how Marx harnesses what he calls “the power of abstraction” in his analytical project [Marx, 1976, 90]. To begin this demonstration, it is necessary to identify what exactly is being designated by the categories “abstract” and “concrete” in Marx’s conceptual repertoire.

In Marx’s Interpretation of History, Melvin Rader points out that the word “concrete” is “derived from the past participle of the Latin verb concrescere, meaning to grow together…. [T]he concrete is that which has organically grown together and remains unfragmented. It is the whole in its integrity. If we think of an object as a whole, we are thinking of it concretely. ‘Concrete’ means taken all together” [Rader, 151]. Rader argues that this definition is the operative sense of “concrete” as a category in the work of both Marx and Hegel, and that it can qualify both objects and ideas [ibid.]. The concrete is therefore another way of designating the sense of totality, or a totalized whole. To forward a “concretely” rendered object or phenomenon invokes the totalized, historical and collective vantage point outlined in chapter two.

On the other hand, the verb “to abstract,” according to Rader, is “derived from the Latin verb abstrahere, ‘to draw away,’ meaning to withdraw or separate in thought or in objective matter of fact. In thought, abstracting is the focusing of attention on some part or aspect of an object, usually for the purpose of contemplation or understanding…. 
Sometimes the verb 'to abstract' means not simply to focus but objectively to separate. Hegel, for example, says that to amputate an arm is to abstract it from the human body" [Rader, 150]. We can recognize this understanding of "the abstract" as the fragmented, atomized, or isolated object or phenomenon from the discussion in chapter one of the abstracted phenomenal forms of production relations in market society. As we recall, for example, Marx refers to the functional appearance of the state as an independent and autonomous entity—as something separate from its essential conditions of possibility in market relations—as "the abstraction of the state."

Marx's configuration of abstract labour can also be characterized in these terms. Abstract labour describes the transmogrification of concrete human labour in the process of exchange wherein one single element of human labour's virtually infinite variety of attributes—namely, its ability to be reduced to, and stand as, a quantifiable unit of measurement—is separated and isolated from the whole and, in fact, dominates the whole. In an exchange economy, the part (abstract labour) dominates over the whole (concrete, human labour). Concrete human labour is the source and substance of use-values. However, in exchange, use-values must express themselves as values, and hence exchange-values, and it is abstract labour—quantifiable, socially equalized labour, the structural potentiality that is an isolatable element of all human labour—which is alone the source and substance of exchange-value.

It follows, then, that the abstract-concrete distinction not only designates the distinction between the part and the whole. It also designates the distinction between the general, simple and abistorical on the one hand, and the particular, complex and historical on the other. Concrete labour, for example, is historically situated human labour in all its
specificity and with all its particular attributes. Abstract labour, however, as the use-value for capital, is “absolutely indifferent to its particular specificity”; it is merely the fact of labour, labour as a generality, “labour pure and simple” [Marx, 1973, 296]. It is the potential of all human labour to function in this purely economic role—as abstract labour—which is isolated and prioritized in the exchange relation. Abstract labour functions as the totality of all specific human labour abstracted as the fact of labour, in general. Marx makes this point in the Grundrisse in an outline of the relationship of labour to capital:

[A]s the use value which confronts money posited as capital, labour is not this or another labour, but labour pure and simple, abstract labour; absolutely indifferent to its particular specificity, but capable of all specificities.... since capital as such is indifferent to every particularity of its [labour’s] substance, and exists not only as the totality of the same but also as the abstraction from all its particularities, the labour which confronts it likewise subjectively has the same totality and abstraction in itself. For example, in guild and craft labour, where capital itself still has a limited form, and is still entirely immersed in a particular substance, hence is not yet capital as such, labour, too, appears as still immersed in its particular specificity: not in the totality and abstraction of labour as such, in which it confronts capital.... [Capital] confronts the totality of all labours potentially, and the particular one it confronts at a given time is an accidental matter. On the other side, the worker himself is absolutely indifferent to the specificity of his labour; it has no interest for him as such, but only in as much as it is in fact labour and, as such, a use value for capital.

[Marx, 1973, 296-7]

From the perspective of totality, no object, phenomenon or identity exists in and of itself, but only in its situated interrelatedness to all other phenomena or identities. To say that every identity is defined by its relationships to other identities is also to say that it is as much defined by what it is not—by what exceeds it—as by what it is, in any sense of self-containment. Furthermore, it is the interaction and mutual dependency of identities which is the source of motion and transformation. The abstract, therefore, refers
not only to that which is taken partially or in isolation, but to that which is static. In Sean Sayers' "On the Marxist Dialectic" he states, "[e]verything has self-identity... [but] nothing is merely self-identical and self-contained, except what is abstract, isolated, static and unchanging. All real, concrete things are part of the world of interaction, motion and change; and for them we must recognize that things are not merely self-subsistent, but exist essentially in relation to other things" [Norman and Sayers, 3].

Marx inherits this understanding of the abstract and concrete from Hegel. In *Phenomenology of Mind* Hegel states, "[t]he subsistence or substance of anything that exists is its identity; for its want of identity, or oneness with itself, would be its dissolution. But self-identity is pure abstraction" [Norman and Sayers, 3]. For Hegel and Marx, a concrete identity is, therefore, not self-adequate. It cannot be a strictly positive identity, but is constituted by a negative element as well, the present and defining absence of all that it is not. Identities (objects, phenomena, etc.) are occasions of the opposition between positive and negative elements. Another way of describing this fundamental, structural, positive-negative opposition which constitutes all identity is in terms of the fundamentally organizing function of the dialectical contradiction. The dialectical contradiction is the structural logic of concrete identity:

[T]hings which are merely positive, which merely are what they are, are abstract and dead. Nothing concrete and real is merely positive. Everything is contradictory and contains negative as well as positive aspects within it. The dialectical notion of contradiction is that such conflicts between opposed aspects are necessary and essential... [The dialectic] is a logic in the sense that it specifies the laws of thought which must be adhered to if reality is to be grasped concretely.

[Norman and Sayers, 16 and 18]
Abstraction and Categorial Thought

Dialectical thought is therefore concerned with the attempt to portray things (the social world, for example) as concrete and, for both Hegel and Marx, dialectical thought was conceived as a critical comment on the abstract character of classical metaphysics [Norman and Sayers, 3]. For example, in this passage from The Poverty of Philosophy, Marx describes as an "illusion of metaphysics" the attempt to understand the concept of property in bourgeois society outside of the context of bourgeois production as a totality:

In each historical epoch, property has developed differently and under a set of entirely different social relations. Thus to define bourgeois property is nothing else than to give an exposition of all the social relations of bourgeois production. To try and give a definition of property as of an independent relation, a category apart, an abstract and eternal idea, can be nothing but an illusion of metaphysics or jurisprudence.

[Marx in Sayer, 1987, 21]

If the goal of Marx’s analysis is the portrayal of the capitalist mode of production in its concrete and interrelated complexity, as a totality, then the claim that a function of abstraction is the central mechanism of Marx’s method appears to be counterintuitive. This is, in fact, the case: as Marx argues by way of an organic metaphor, it is the “force of abstraction” which allows the “microscopic anatomy” of bourgeois society to be ascertained: “[T]he body as an organic whole is more easy of study than the cells of that body…. in bourgeois society the commodity-form of the product of labor—or the value-form of the commodity—is the economic cell-form…. [But] in the analysis of economic forms,… neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both” [Marx, 1976, 90].

By "economic cell-form," Marx is referring to the economic category. The category is the fundamental unit of Marx’s analysis, of his thought process; it is the
building block of the dialectical reconstruction in thought of the object of analysis. A
category can be thought of as a concept, but it is a particular kind of concept. It is an
abstraction, however, it is a universal or *totalized* abstraction. The category “tree,” for
example, contains within it every individual and particular (concrete) tree, in all their
diversity and specificity (amongst species and amongst individual members of a species).
At the same time, the category “tree”—the thought-concept “tree”—is also the
abstraction of all specificity: the category contains *all* specificity and, therefore, none.
We have just observed this situation with Marx’s category of abstract labour. Abstract
labour functions in exchange through subsuming all specific and concrete occasions of
human labour and rendering redundant the specificity of each. Abstract labour stands in
the place of *all* particular human labour and, therefore, for no single instance of it. In
accordance with the idea of a category as the site of an abstract universalizing (totalizing)
of differences, Tony Smith defines a category as a structure which reconciles the
universal and the individual: “It [a category] is a principle (a universal) for unifying a
manifold of some sort or other (different individuals, or particulars). A category thus
articulates a structure with two poles, a pole of unity and a pole of differences. In
Hegelian language this sort of structure, captured in some category, can be described as a
unity of identity in difference, or as a reconciliation of universal and individuals” [Smith,
1990, 5].

Categories, therefore, carry out the same function of abstraction in the realm of
thought—at the level of the concept—as is carried out in a commodity economy through
the process of exchange. As I have already argued, categorial thought, such as dialectical
criticism, is one form, or expression, of this same process as it manifests in the
superstructure. This situation is just one of the ways in which we can situate Smith's claim that "Hegelian method is of crucial importance to Marx's position, due to a number of perverse features that this method shares with capitalism" [Smith, 1993, 16]. Some of the features which the dialectic shares with capitalism, such as the fundamental nature of motion and transformation, the structural contradiction, and its immanent systematicity will be explored through this and the following chapter. Right away, however, we can say the dialectic shares features with capitalism because it is the expression of capitalism; capitalist relations of production are the source and substance of the dialectic. Yet, the dialectic is not unique in this situation. All theoretical and philosophical speculation engages categories. As Smith points out, "it is impossible to engage in [any] discourse without employing categories... The philosophical appropriation of immediately given experiences is an appropriation of categories" [Smith, 1990, 4].

Yet, for Marx, the dialectic was the most adequate method of analysis of the capitalist mode of production for one further particular reason. With the dialectic, the theoretical process of abstraction is followed through to the point where the categories, themselves, betray their own oppositional structure by reflecting back upon themselves—turning the category into its own object (for Hegel and Marx)—and revealing the category as a product of a particular historical conjuncture (for Marx). In other words, dialectical thought is immanently self-reflective: "Usually we are content to employ categories in an unreflective fashion. But for Hegel [and Marx] the highest form of thought occurs when thought makes itself its own object. This occurs whenever our thinking considers the basic categories we employ in and of themselves, rather than in terms of their reference to specific objects of experience" [Smith, 1990, 4]. The self-
reflectivity of a dialectical system of categories is what distinguishes the latter from other forms of philosophical abstraction. Marx’s critique of Ricardo in *Theories of Surplus Value*, Part II pivots on this distinction:

Ricardo commits all the blunders, because he attempts to carry through his identification of the rate of surplus-value with the rate of profit by means of forced abstractions. The vulgar mob has therefore concluded that theoretical truths are abstractions which are at variance with reality, instead of seeing, on the contrary, that Ricardo does not carry true abstract thinking far enough and is therefore driven into false abstraction.

[Sayer, 1979, 122: emphasis added]

The difference between Marx and his predecessors, such as Ricardo, was not that they focused on different objects (Marx incorporated the already existing economic categories of market circulation, ground rent, labour, property, accumulation of capital, etc., into his own work) but that Marx integrates these categories into, what Jameson calls, a “unified field theory” [Jameson, 1971, 183]; Marx situates these categories as parts of a larger whole. Totalizing analyses which situate economic categories thus, threaten the classical political economists’ depiction of the potential for economic and political freedom and equality within the relations of capital, obliging them “to pursue their research on a fragmentary and empirical level only” [Jameson, 1971, 138].

Jameson calls the dialectical self-reflectivity which distinguishes Marx’s analysis from other occasions of philosophical abstraction as “thought to the second power,” and describes it as a kind of intellectual and experiential shock which accompanies the moment of the theorist’s self-consciousness of the unity of their own activity and the object under investigation:

There is a breathlessness about this shift from the normal object-oriented activity of the mind to such dialectical self-consciousness—something of
the sickening shudder we feel in an elevator's fall or in the sudden dip in an airliner. That [sic.] recalls us to our bodies much as this recalls us to our mental positions as thinkers and observers. The shock indeed is basic, and constitutive of the dialectic as such: without this transformational moment, without this initial conscious transcendence of an older, more naïve position, there can be no question of any genuinely dialectical coming to consciousness.

[Jameson, 1971, 308]

According to Jameson, dialectical thinking requires a continuous shifting of the register of thought to include the analyzing process itself along with the object being analyzed. How the analyst is able to position her/himself in relation to the object, as, in fact, part of that object and how s/he is able to think about that object (i.e., synchronically or diachronically, the categories available to her/him, the a priori postulates to which s/he is oriented, etc.) is incorporated into the analyst's expanded, totalized object of analysis. Simply put, the thought process is brought to bear on dialectical analysis, itself, in an attempt to discern its own limits, presuppositions and potentialities. Not only is this movement a possibility, it is one of dialectical thought's defining moments. Jameson describes this theoretically self-conscious movement as,

an intensification of the normal thought processes... as though in the midst of its immediate perplexities the mind had attempted, by willpower, by fiat, to lift itself mightily up by its own bootstraps... dialectical thought tries not so much to complete and perfect the application of [nonreflective operative procedures] as to widen its own attention to include them in its awareness... This is indeed the most sensitive moment in the dialectical process: that in which an entire complex of thought is hoisted through a kind of inner leverage one floor higher,... standing outside its previous exertions in such a way that it reckons itself into the problem...

[Jameson, 1971, 307-8]

[D]ialectical thinking is... a thought about thinking itself, in which the mind must deal with its own thought process just as much as with the material it works on, in which both the particular content involved and the style of thinking suited to it must be held together in the mind at the same time.

[ibid., 45]
This moment of self-reflectivity signals the dialectic's potential utopian movement. The dialectic's "inner leverage" which seeks to hoist thought to a vantage point of self-critique, positions dialectical thought both inside its mode of production (of which it is a product) and as attempting, at the same time, to move outside its own historical situation through the latter's critique and conceptual reconstruction. The dialectic's "utopian impulse" is another way of describing the attempt to reflect back upon its own conditions of possibility, in other words, to think beyond and outside one's historical and material situation.

It is not enough to say that some processes of abstract thought are self-reflective while others are not. If we push the observation of the relation between abstraction and self-reflectivity far enough, a more intimate—and immanent—relationship between them is revealed, namely, that the perspective of self-reflectivity is made possible by, and is the logical consequence of, the function of abstraction in the form of dialectical critique. The demonstration of this relationship requires some backing up. The function of abstraction in Marx's analysis takes the form of the thought process, or, the conceptual reconstruction of the object of analysis. Marx's dialectical reconstruction of the object entails the logical mapping of the interrelations and movement of the categories which the object offers up as markers of its immediate intelligibility. For example, an exchange economy offers up certain categories of intelligibility which reflect its immediate appearance: freedom, equality, the individual, property, reciprocity, labour, capital, etc. Marx's conceptual task is to reconstruct the systematic interrelatedness of these categories in such a way as to allow the theorist to transcend the object's immediate appearance and reveal a more concrete, totalized (and, hence, mediated) rendering of that
object. According to Smith, dialectical method “begins with an apprehension of...[the] real process [the social world], moves to an appropriation of the fundamental categories implicit in that apprehension, and then orders those categories. This ordering can be termed ‘the process in thought,’ or ‘the logical process.’ The goal is not to ‘create’ the world out of thought... but to reconstruct the intelligibility of the world, and this requires appropriating the fundamental categories that capture that intelligibility” [Smith, 1990, 8, 5]. Capital, Smith argues, is Marx’s “systematic theory of economic categories ordered according to a dialectical logic taken over from Hegel” [Smith, 1990, ix].

In order for the thought process to reflect back on its object, to reveal something that is immediately “hidden” about its object (which is also the moment of categorial thought’s self-reflectivity), thought must achieve a provisional independence from its object. I have already pointed out (in chapter two) that during the course of Marx’s analysis, the thought process not only takes on a relative autonomy with respect to the object, it must assume a position of dominance over the object. Earlier I described this possibility in terms of the necessity of the forms of expression of market society, such as theoretical discourse, to appear as independent and isolated entities. Hegel also describes this “attitude of freedom” which thought achieves in consciousness. He states,

In order that this science [Hegel’s own theory] may come into existence, we must have the progression from the individual and particular to the universal—an activity which is a reaction on the given material of empiricism in order to bring about its reconstruction. The demand of a priori knowledge, which seems to imply that the Idea should construct from itself, is thus a reconstruction only... In consciousness it then adopts the attitude of having cut away the bridge from behind it; it appears to be free to launch forth in its ether only, and to develop without resistance to this medium...

[Hegel in Smith, 1990, 5: emphasis added]
In chapters one and two, we observed an example of the “freeing of categories” from their roots in the mode of production in Peter Bürger’s analysis of the historical development of aestheticism and the autonomous institution of art. With the idea that the reconstruction of categories’ systematic interrelations precipitates the self-reflectivity and self-critique of categorial thought, we can now follow Bürger’s analysis to its conclusion. We recall that the appearance of art’s autonomy in bourgeois society is a function of market relations of production and its historical condition is the eradication of art’s political status, or, in other words, the abstraction of art practices from their former integration with the praxis of everyday life. Not until art develops as a functioning autonomous reality in bourgeois society does the concept of aesthetic experience come into existence, as well as, the possibility of art’s institutionalization. This situation is what Bürger calls “the shrinking of experience”: the experience of the specialist artist in bourgeois society becomes narrowed, isolated and “can no longer be translated back into the praxis of life” [Bürger, 33]. Aesthetic experience is the correlative of the shrinking of artistic experience: “aesthetic experience is the positive side of that process by which the social subsystem ‘art’ defines itself as a distinct sphere. Its negative side is the artist’s loss of any social function” [ibid.].

Most significantly, what makes the historical development of aesthetic experience a potentially progressive development is that the moment of art’s autonomy is also the moment of art’s potential self-reflectivity. The freeing of art from its integrated social function is the historical condition of art’s self-critical capability. Bürger states, within [institutionalized art practices], there still function contents... that are of a thoroughly political character and thus militate against the autonomy principle of the institution. The self-criticism of the social subsystem that is
art can become possible only when the contents also lose their political character, and art wants to be nothing other than art. This stage is reached at the end of the nineteenth century, in Aestheticism.

[Bürg, 26: emphasis added]

According to Bürg, the self-critical potentiality of art in bourgeois society manifests itself in the work of the early 20th century avant-garde. The avant-garde movement in art expressed itself as a critique of the loss of the artist's socially integrated function. But this critique only becomes possible once art becomes a distinctive subsystem in bourgeois society. The autonomy of art expressed in the concept of "art for art's sake," is the historical precondition of art's self-critique: "the full unfolding of the constituent elements of a field is the condition for the possibility of an adequate cognition of that field. In bourgeois society, it is only with aestheticism that the full unfolding of the phenomenon of art became a fact, and it is to aestheticism that the historical avant-garde movements respond" [Bürg, 17].

For Bürg, as well as for Marx, the historicizing of (aesthetic) theory entails comprehending the connection between the historical unfolding of an object and the categories of intelligibility that correlate to that object: "the unfolding of object and the elaboration of categories are connected. Historicizing a theory means grasping this connection" [Bürg, 16]. This understanding is pivotal in Marx's analysis of capitalism. I discussed in chapter one how, for Marx, human labour only becomes "labour as such," labour in its most general, simple and abstract form, in the most economically developed social formation—bourgeois market society. It is, therefore, only in the context of bourgeois society that labour becomes a category which can reflect back upon other various instances and forms of human labour, and the organization of human labour, throughout history. The social function of abstraction which underwrites labour in its
most general form in bourgeois society makes possible labour as a category through which other historical instances of human labour can be made intelligible. Despite this situation, the category of labour is no less solely the product of the most modern form of social development. The centrality of this formulation for my discussion of Marx's method demands quoting Marx at length; in the Grundrisse Marx states,

Labour seems a quite simple category. The conception of labour in this general form—as labour as such—is also immeasurably old. Nevertheless, when it is economically conceived in this simplicity, “labour” is as modern a category as are the relations which create this simple abstraction. The simplest abstraction... which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.

The example of labour shows strikingly how even the most abstract categories, despite their validity—precisely because of their abstractness—for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within these relations.

Bourgeois society is the most developed and the most complex historic organization of production. The categories which express its relations, the comprehension of its structure, thereby also allows insights into the structure and the relations of production of all the vanished social formations out of whose ruins and elements it built itself up, whose partly still unconquered remnants are carried along within it... Human anatomy contains a key to the anatomy of the ape. The intimations of higher development among the subordinate species, however, can be understood only after the higher development is already known. The bourgeois economy thus supplies the key to the ancient, etc.

[Marx, 1973, 103-5: emphasis added]

The elaboration of the systemic relationship between the categories that are the products of bourgeois society can also reveal the character of production in past economies. Therefore, the social function of abstraction, which only develops fully in bourgeois society, is also the mechanism through which the conceptual reconstruction of the historical movement from past social formations to market society, as well as, the
essential structures of past and present economies, can be mapped. The dialectical movement at the core of this formulation can be expressed in this way: the mechanism of abstraction which is the historical condition of capitalism’s inherent tendency to obscure its own essential structure, relations, modus operandi, etc.—its tendency to thwart its own adequate representation on the part of its agents—develops, at the same time, as the mechanism through which capitalism’s essential structure can be revealed and reconstructed in the course of analysis.

It is because categories are abstractions—simple and general forms—that they can be made to refer to, and illuminate, the organizational dynamics of modes of production other than their own. This understanding marks the moment of Marx’s “putting Hegel back on his feet”: the structural-logical exposition of market society’s economic categories is, itself, in Marx’s analysis, radically historicized (I elaborate this point in chapter four). Marx requires and, in fact, harnesses the function of abstraction—a particular expression of an historically specific set of social relations—in order to perform his logical reconstruction of that same historical formation. The function of abstraction is both the modus operandi of the capitalist mode of production and of Marx’s analytical intervention; the logic of capital makes possible its own critique.

Beginnings, Endings, and the Movement in Between: The Fundamental Nature of the Process of Exposition in Marx’s Method

This section is a summary of an argument I have yet to make. With the help of C. Arthur’s formulation of Marx’s method in his “Against the Logical-Historical Method,” I will sketch the outline, and particularly the movement, of Marx’s theoretical process. (A detailed elaboration of the elements of that process will be carried out in chapter four.)
Marx’s analysis begins by positing what appears to be a simple, immediate, and empirical “fact” of the capitalist mode of production, namely, the commodity as the elementary unit of bourgeois wealth. From here, the analysis proceeds through the various forms of the production process, ascending in complexity with each progression until a more complex and totalized form of capital can be posited. In the language of dialectical thought, Marx derives the form of capital from the commodity form. It is not until Marx reaches the end of this derivation process—not until capitalist production has been arrived at (constructed) in the analysis in its approximate complex, concrete, and totalized form—can the theorist’s gaze reflect back upon the initial point of departure, the empirical commodity, as something conceptually transformed in the course of the analysis. The commodity as the starting point for the mapping and comprehending of the capitalist formation, by the end of the mapping process, is revealed as the logical result of capitalist production. Marx states, in *Capital* Vol. I,

As the elementary form of bourgeois wealth, the commodity was our point of departure, the prerequisite for the emergence of capital. On the other hand, commodities appear now as the product of capital.

The circular nature of our argument corresponds to the historical development of capital. Capital is predicated on the exchange of commodities, trade in commodities, but it may be formed at various stages of production, common to all of which is the fact that capitalist production does not yet exist, or only exists sporadically. On the other hand, a highly developed commodity exchange and the form of the commodity as the universally necessary social form of the product can only emerge as the consequence of the capitalist mode of production.

[Marx, 1976, 949]

At the end of the process of deriving capital from the commodity, the point of departure (the commodity) is re-presented as the result [Arthur, in Moseley and Campbell, 30]. However, the resulting concept of the commodity is not the same as that
which was posited at the outset: “The commodity, as it emerges in capitalist production, is different from the commodity taken as the element, the starting point of capitalist production” [Marx in Moseley and Campbell, 31]. By the end of the derivation process, the commodity emerges as an adequately concrete and totalized entity, as one element that emerges as a product of a greater whole. Through the course of analysis, it becomes clear that the commodity is not the source of bourgeois wealth but the thing-like expression of value in an exchange economy, the repository of abstract labour as it expresses itself in exchange-value. Furthermore, only in the context of an exchange economy as a fully developed and functioning social formation, is it revealed to be the case that value must necessarily be expressed in the form of the commodity. At the start, the concept of the commodity can only be posited as a contingent, empirical fact. By the end of the analysis, the commodity, as something “grounded in the totality,” can be posited as the necessary expression of the general form of the product of labour [Arthur in Moseley and Campbell, 31]. Arthur argues,

The point is that only at the end is the commodity so posited. At the beginning, as such, it cannot be; for that would be to presuppose what has still to be accomplished; only through the dialectical development of the value-form can we understand just what a commodity really is, and why we had to start with it defined in the most elementary and presuppositionless fashion. The commodity cannot be known as what it is, and what it is grounded in, until this development is complete. To say at the start that the commodity as a simple universality presupposes capitalist production would be nothing but a promissory note—or sheer dogmatism.

[Arthur in Moseley and Campbell, 31-32]

In retrospect, from the vantage point of the reconstruction of capitalist production as a fully developed formation, the commodity as an empirical fact from whence the analysis began, reveals its identity as an abstraction only—as a category which allowed
the process of derivation to proceed. The commodity’s identity as an abstraction cannot be immediately perceived as such, at the outset of the analysis. Through the development of the commodity-category to its conclusion in the form of capital, the category of the commodity reflects back on itself in a moment of self-critique and reveals its initial identity as an abstraction. Capitalist production, as a totality, is conceptually reconstructed through the “negation” of the commodity-category [Moseley and Campbell, 30]. It is the same to say that the concept of the commodity “is enriched when it is grasped as reproduced through the immanent drive of the system” [ibid., 31]. In the language of dialectical thought, this contradictory movement is referred to as dialectical suspension, where in the progression of forms, the substance of earlier forms is both negated by and contained within the new, more complex form which develops out of the old content. “Suspension” expresses the contradictory state of both putting an end to the earlier form and carrying it forward to a higher level.14 (This movement will be explored in more detail with respect to Marx’s analysis later on.) “Thus the commodity that results from capitalist production emerges on a higher level of social being” [Moseley and Campbell, 31]. The end point of the analysis of the commodity must be different from the point of departure—i.e., the commodity-concept with which Marx begins his analysis must be different from that which results—in order for the analysis to move forward and escape a kind of circularity: “there would be no advance at all if there was not some difference between beginning and end” [ibid.].

Just as the totality of the system of capitalist relations cannot be immediately perceived on the part of its agents and, thus, must be reconstructed through the mapping

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14 I have chosen to use the word “suspension” instead of the more frequently used word “sublation” as the translation of Aufhebung because I think it more adequately expresses the dual movement of negating and carrying forward.
of its various mediations, Marx cannot begin his analysis with capitalist production as a whole. The totality cannot be the point of departure as it cannot be immediately given. This implies that the starting point of Marx’s analysis, and the starting point of a dialectical analysis of a totalized object, in general, is problematic. It is this dilemma which accounts for the movement of the analysis/theoretical reconstruction that then follows [Moseley and Campbell, 30]. As a necessity, Marx must start with an abstraction—the commodity-category—and move toward the more concrete concept of capitalist production as a whole. The theoretical reconstruction of the object is, by necessity, a movement; the steps which lead up to, and through to, its positing must be shown. For example, Arthur states, “Marx starts with the commodity conceived implicitly on the basis of capitalist production, but his argument achieves precisely the explicit demonstration that for the commodity in its universality and necessity to subsist this is indeed its presupposition” [Moseley and Campbell, 32]. I am arguing that not only does Marx achieve the demonstration of the commodity as part of a larger whole, but that the comprehension of the larger whole cannot be achieved outside of the process of its progressive demonstration. Following the process of the theoretical exposition of the object—the journey of the analysis—is a condition of an adequate comprehension of that object.

Finally, the fact that Marx’s analysis, by necessity, takes the form of a movement—a development, a progression—signals another way in which we can describe Marx’s method as demonstrating an aesthetic sensibility. Another way of describing the structure of Marx’s analysis is as a narrative. Much has been written about

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15 In chapter four, I discuss how Marx confronts the dilemma of the starting point of the analysis of capitalism through the construction of what I will call “origin narratives,” or, fictional and provisional origins.
the narrative process and structure, especially in discussions of the literary form of the novel as a particular aesthetic form which develops historically in correspondence with bourgeois society; it is a central theme of the Western Marxists, and Lukács, in particular. Jameson identifies narrative as one of the central figures of a Marxist critical method of interpretation, as central to an understanding of ideological analysis and, as such, the narrative process is a guiding theme in *The Political Unconscious*:

These divergent and unequal bodies of work [examples of narrative analysis] are here interrogated and evaluated from the perspective of the specific critical and interpretive task of the present volume, namely to restructure the problematics of ideology, of the unconscious and of desire, of representation, of history, and of cultural production, around the all-informing process of narrative, which I take to be (here using the shorthand of philosophical idealism) the central function or instance of the human mind. This perspective may be reformulated in terms of the traditional dialectical code as the study of *Darstellung*: that untranslatable designation in which the current problems of representation productively intersect with the quite different ones of presentation, or of the essentially narrative and rhetorical movement of language and writing through time.

[Jameson, 1981, 13]

I examine in detail the specific characteristics of the narrative form of Marx’s analysis in the following chapter. For the moment, I will point out that its task is not a mimetic recreation of the object but a conceptual or logical one, as Jameson argues, having more in common with Althusser’s sense of the adequate task of historiography, generally: “not to elaborate some achieved and lifelike simulacrum of its supposed object, but rather to ‘produce’ the latter’s ‘concept’” [ibid, 12]. As will become clear, this is the sense in which it is more appropriate to describe the form of Marx’s analysis as a logical narrative than as an historical narrative. Jameson also points out that what I am provisionally calling Marx’s logical narrative can be likened to the Nietzschean model of...
the genealogy, where historical elements are not presented linearly but are subordinated to the task of the logical reconstruction (a synchronic perspective) of a present structure:

Diachronic representation in Marx is not constructed along those principles of continuity which have been stigmatized as Hegelian or evolutionary. Rather, the constructional model is quite different [sic.], which Nietzsche was the first to identify and to designate as the genealogy. In genealogical construction, we begin with a full-blown system (capitalism in Marx, and in the present book, reification) in terms of which elements of the past can “artificially” be isolated as objective preconditions: genealogy is not a historical narrative, but has the essential function of renewing our perception of the synchronic system as in an x-ray, its diachronic perspectives serving to make perceptible the articulation of the functional elements of a given system in the present.

[Jameson, 1981, 139]

Marx’s Method as a Theory of Representation and the Role of Representation in an Economy of Exchange

If, for Marx, an adequate analysis of capitalist production as a totality requires the demonstration or exposition of its conceptual construction (i.e., if the analysis has a narrative structure), then it follows that a particular process of representation is fundamental to Marx’s method. Marx’s method entails a theory of representation. Here, I want to argue that Marx’s labour theory of value functions on two levels: in a more narrow or restricted sense, it is a theory of the (historical and social) construction of economic value in a fully developed exchange economy; in a wider and more general sense, the theory of value is a theory of a specific function of representation which achieves a definitive status in the capitalist mode of production. It will shortly become clear that another way of understanding the social function of abstraction, is as a particular function of representation.
Let us begin where Marx begins, with a category. More specifically, let us begin with an alternative articulation of how categories function. We have discussed the function of categories as a type of universalizing or totalizing abstraction wherein all particular and concrete difference or variation is subsumed and erased. Using the example of abstract labour, I have demonstrated this process from several different analytical perspectives in the discussion thus far, each time reaching the same conclusion: the eclipsing of the concrete particularity of human labours and the concomitant material realization of abstract labour in the exchange process is the motor\textsuperscript{16} of capitalist production. This process is the source and substance of value, the means of positing exchange-value, the motor of circulation, of the valorization of capital, the extraction of surplus-value, etc. It represents the very \textit{possibility} of capitalist production and reproduction.

We have also observed that this same function of abstraction is likewise the mechanism of Marx’s analytical project which takes the form of mapping the systematic interrelation of categories offered up by the object. Once again, categories perform the function of totalizing abstraction; the role of the category is to stand for \textit{all} particularity and difference as a generality and, hence, no one particular concrete object or phenomenon. The category does not reference any single particular instance of anything; its function is to name something which has no literal, immediately concrete referent. For example, Marx must posit the commodity-category in order to derive the concept of capital. We know, however, (in retrospect) that the “commodity” which initiates the derivation of capital in Marx’s narrative is an abstraction. It does not refer to any one

\textsuperscript{16} It may be the motor, however, in no way can abstract labour be the “origin” of capitalist production, as we will see.
particular, concrete commodity, *per se*; it has no literal referent. As we have observed, the point of departure for the progressive representation of a complex totality poses a dilemma for Marx. Marx addresses this dilemma by positing a category—by positing a *name* for something which has, in fact, no literal referent.

One way of describing this situation is as a *rhetorical strategy* known as *catachresis*. Rhetoricians refer to catachresis as an abstraction “structured like the imposition of an improper name on something that has none of its own” [Keenan, 182]. In other words, a catachresis is a name which has no literal or adequate referent, but is used as if it did, temporarily and provisionally, so that a narrative can be constructed around it [Best, 481]. Like the function of the commodity-category in Marx’s reconstruction of capitalist production, the catachresis is a naming mechanism which facilitates a subsequent representation. Elsewhere, I have discussed this rhetorical device in the work of Gayatri Spivak who employs the concept in precisely these terms, describing catachreses as “masterwords which mobilize”:

The name “woman” in feminist or antisexist narratives/analyses, “worker” in labour-oriented or anticapitalist narratives/analyses, “value” in Marx’s narrative of the money form, “power” in Foucault, “native” and “colonial” in antiimperialist critique... are catachreses, or, “masterwords which mobilize.” For the Subaltern Studies group, the name/catachresis “subaltern,” for which there is no adequate referent, allows the group to “spin the narrative” of counterhegemonic insurgency.... The practice of *naming*, provisionally, which allows certain versions of history to be written, is a catachrestic strategy. Catachrestic strategies allow the players (the protagonists, antagonists, victims, aggressors, bystanders, etc) in the historical, political (inter)national drama to be named “so that the story can deliver its moral.”

[Best, 481]

To figure Marx’s analysis of capitalism—which must, arguably, be understood as a political project in a general sense, given the specific articulation of theory and practice
in Marx’s formulation—as hinging on a kind of literary trope, may appear to some (some of those theorists who insist on a territorial distinction between the object of social science and the object of literary theory, perhaps?) as a trivialization of Marx’s project and a means of evacuating its political import. This would only be the case, however, if we were to perceive the concept of catachresis in isolation and not as a representational function that expresses a particular historical, material, and social situation more generally. A theory of representation and a particular representational function underwrite Marx’s method of analysis because an historically particular kind of representational function is the central mechanism of an exchange economy. Consider Paul de Man’s description of the catachresis:

[Catachreses] are capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by virtue of the positional power inherent in language. They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachreses:... the word can be said to produce of and by itself the entity it signifies, [one that] has no equivalence in nature. When one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain... one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters. [de Man in Keenan, 182]

For Marx, bourgeois economy is precisely this world of ghosts and monsters: an exchange economy is haunted by the ghosts of those things which it cannot name, by such ghosts which are abstracted and erased (exorcised) from its operational and rhetorical perimeters—the ghost of concrete human labour, for instance. Therefore, if exchange is a function of representation, it is also, or perhaps more accurately, a function of misrepresentation or the failure of representation in bourgeois economy. As Sourayan Mookerjea points out, exchange hinges on the misrepresentation (the inadequate representation) of human labour as the labour-category: “The differentiation of the
concept of 'labour-power' from the category of 'labour' has everything to do with representation, or rather, with representation’s failure. The differentiation points towards a concealed blank-spot, indicates that some 'reality' of labour is missing from the representation of 'labour' in the value of a commodity' [Mookerjea, 64].

Spivak uses the term “value-coding” to refer to the way in which the function of value in Marx’s analysis expresses not only the realization of economic value in the narrow sense, but also a representational process in a wider, more general sense. Spivak reminds us that, according to Marx, value functions in an exchange economy as a representation; value cannot appear on its own but only through its representation as exchange-value:

\[ \text{Value is... a differential and a representation. It is an abstraction that is represented in exchange-value. Exchange-value, at the same time, is a representation that is produced by value as its presupposition. This play of difference and representation inhabits the simplest act of exchange, the most primitive appropriation of surplus, as well as the most spectacular orchestration of super-structural economics. Marx is here presenting the fundamental conditions of operation of the economic sphere: difference... and representation...} \]

[Spivak, 1987, 40-41]

Spivak reads value in Marx’s analysis as a function of abstraction and representation. Having no literal referent, it follows that value functions in Marx’s work as a catachresis [Best, 490]. Value is a name which Marx must secure, provisionally, before his narrative of the social relations of capital can proceed [ibid.]. And, like all catachreses, and like all categories, value is, on one level, a misfit. Earlier, we observed how the necessary discrepancy between essence and appearance in market society entails that an entirely adequate representation or mapping of that totality, from within that totality (social formation), is an impossibility. All instances and practices of representation in capitalism
produce misfits, to some degree, including Marx's own. The category and the catachresis are superstructural expressions of this situation; categorial thought expresses this inherent discrepancy in the sphere of philosophical production, just as catachresis expresses the inherent failure of representation in the sphere of rhetoric and literary production.

We see that Marx posits a function of representation in the very initial moments of his analysis of the exchange relation. For two physically different commodities to be exchanged, they must meet as equal values. A single commodity cannot be a value in and of itself, but only in its relation to another different commodity of equal value. In this relation, the value of commodity A (e.g., a coat) can only be expressed in commodity B (e.g., some linen). To appear at all, the value of the coat must represent itself in the physical entity of the linen. To exist, value must be represented in the body of something that it is not; value exists only as a representation and, more specifically, as a misrepresentation—as a misfit: "the coat cannot represent value towards the linen unless value, for the latter, simultaneously assumes the form of a coat.... Hence, in the value-relation, in which the coat is the equivalent of the linen, the form of the coat counts as the form of value. The value of the commodity linen is therefore expressed by the physical body of the commodity coat, the value of one by the use-value of the other" [Marx, 1976, 143].

In the value-relation between two commodities (different, as use-values and equals, as values), one commodity functions as the value-form while the other functions as the equivalent form. The equivalent form is the physical representation (Darstellung), of the value form—it acts as a "mirror of value" [ibid., 150]. In other words, "use-value becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, value," or, the "natural form" of
commodity A is the representation of the value-form of commodity B [ibid., 148]. Again, in Capital Vol. I, Marx states,

[Value] is quantitatively expressed by the exchangeability of a specific quantity of commodity B with a given quantity of A. In other words, the value of a commodity is independently expressed through its presentation [Darstellung] as “exchange-value.” When, at the beginning of this chapter, we said in the customary manner that a commodity is both a use-value and an exchange-value, this was, strictly speaking, wrong. A commodity is a use-value or object of utility, and a “value.” It appears as the two-fold thing it really is as soon as its value possesses its own particular form of manifestation [its representation], which is distinct from its natural form. This form of manifestation is exchange-value, and the commodity never has this form when looked at in isolation, but only when it is in a value-relation or an exchange relation with a second commodity of a different kind.

[Marx, 1976, 152]

As Marx points out, a commodity “cannot make its own physical shape into the expression of its own value,” therefore, requiring the substitution of the physical shape of another to perform this work. Like all instances of representation, the exchange relation involves the substitution of the expression (appearance, representation, etc.) for the object or referent (this situation does not necessarily imply that the object or referent precedes its expression or representation). The positive quality or self-adequacy of the object in this case is always, already deferred beyond the horizon of the process of signification. As a description of the exchange relation, this is also, of course, a description of language. Thomas Keenan argues, “[e]xchange is a matter of signification, expression, substitution, and hence something that must be read.... Value is a signification and must be read, a purely verbal ‘like.’ This is what Marx calls the ‘language of commodities,’ der WarenSprache, the discourse of likeness without likeness, engaged in by
commodities as soon as they enter into the abstracting-ghosting relations of exchange”
[Keenan, 174, 176].

Here, the similarity between the function of value and the function of language is that both facilitate a process of communication. Communication can be described as the transaction between two unlike entities made possible by their sharing of a common code of exchange. In the case of the exchange relation, for two physically different commodities to be exchanged as equivalents, they must have a third thing in common [Best, 491]. Whatever that third common thing is will be the code of their transaction [ibid.]. Marx calls this third common thing—the code of exchange, the thing which makes exchange possible—value [ibid.]. In exchange, value stands in the place of (is substituted for) a shared certain amount of congealed labour-power, or, abstract labour. Value, then, is the possibility of the mediation of two different commodities through their abstraction. Thomas Keenan states, “[f]or exchange to take place, some axis of commonality or channel of communication between different things and within different uses must be invented or opened or breached. Something like abstraction is supposed to do it” [Keenan, 167]. Similarly, for meanings or ideas to be communicated between two or more different people, those people must also share a common code of exchange [Best, 491]. This code can be named in various ways: a language, a linguistic code or grammar, a logic or frame of reference, a system of representation, a discourse, an ideology, an episteme, or, in Spivak’s lexicon, a code of value (hence, her use of the term “value-coding”) [ibid.]. For both Marx and Spivak, therefore, value stands for the possibility of an exchange [ibid.]:

“Value-form” is the name of that “contentless and simple [einfach]” thing
by way of which Marx rewrote not mediation, but the possibility of the mediation that makes possible in its turn all exchange, all communication, sociality itself... [Value is] the possibility of mediation (through coding) so that exchange and sociality can exist... Marx’s point of entry is the economic coding of the value-form, but the notion itself has a much more supple range.

[Spivak, 1993, 61-62]

The concept of value-coding in Spivak’s work refers to something like an orienting logic or framework—something which has no content, per se, no appearance or existence as an isolated thing, but which facilitates the making intelligible of anything [Best, 491]: “[value is] something which cannot appear but must be presupposed to grasp the mechanics of the production of the world” [Spivak, 1993, 12]. As in Marx’s formulation, both the narrow and general senses of value (in other words, the two senses of what is essentially the same function) come together: value is a type of representation (Darstellung), or, more precisely, the possibility of representing one thing as something else—the possibility of representing concrete particular labour as abstract labour, or one coat as twenty yards of linen. What is more, Marx harnesses value—“the power of abstraction”—to serve his own interests: the function of abstraction-representation which Marx calls value and situates as the motor of an exchange economy is the very function which allows Marx to name value in the first place and, subsequently, unfurl the narrative of capitalist production [Best, 493]. It is the same function of value which allows Marx to abstract from the apparently adequate phenomenal experience of workers in bourgeois society in order to represent their relationship to capital, and to each other, in a different way [ibid.].

The theory of representation entailed by Marx’s analysis of capitalist production reflects what Richard Rorty describes as the primary occupation of post-Cartesian
philosophy with the concept of representation [Callinicos, 120]. Rorty states, “To know is to represent accurately what is outside the mind; to understand the possibility and nature of knowledge is to understand the way in which the mind is able to construct such representations. Philosophy’s general concern is to be a general theory of representation” [ibid]. However, Rorty continues to argue that by the second half of the 20th century, developments in philosophy “undermined the notion of the mind as the mirror of nature,… [signaling] the general collapse of the representational view” [Callinicos, 120].

Amongst other manifestations, this “general collapse of the representational view” is witnessed by the targeting of the concept of representation, and the vaporizing of its correlative concept, the object (or referent), in poststructuralist, postmodernist, deconstructivist, and post-Marxist discourses and analyses which characterize much theoretical production of that time. Interestingly, although, not surprisingly, Marx’s formulation of representation presages this theoretical development, as well. As we have established, in Marx’s analysis of exchange, every representation is always also the site of a misrepresentation—representation is always a misfit. The structure of capitalism inherently generates its own misperception. In this sense, it is the development of capitalism, itself, which is the catalyst for the general collapse of the representational view. On this issue of representation’s failure, the difference between Marx and the post-representational analytical philosophers (a century later) is that, for Marx, the collapse of the representational view is an attribute of modernization itself; its condition is the historical development of market society.
Chapter Four

Marx’s Theoretical Process II: Historicizing the Dialectic

Marx never wrote a treatise on method; he left no formal or systematic discussion of his dialectic. Marx’s most sustained exploration of method is found in the “Introduction” to the *Grundrisse*, a work intended for self-clarification and not for publication. Louis Althusser has argued that Marx would have written a “Dialectics” had he found the time [Althusser, 1969, 174]. We know from Marx’s biography that “the dull compulsion of economic necessity” found him in a constant struggle to find the time for his own work.\(^1\)

Still, amongst Marx’s many pages, he found no place for such a discussion, suggesting that there are other reasons why Marx didn’t give priority to such a project. For example, Marx’s concern with philosophy, and what we today call “theory,” was in its relationship to revolutionary political activity. It’s not appropriate to speak of “method” in the context of Marx’s work as something isolatable, or as something in or for itself: Marx’s method of analysis exists in a relationship of mutual determination with the object of analysis—they cannot be separated except in abstraction. The form of Marx’s method evolves out of the contingencies of the “content” he is attempting to explain, and it would be a reification to represent his method as something which can be identified *a priori* and applied to various contents. Instead, in Marx’s work, the culmination of dialectical method, and the culmination of the analytical project, lies in the *transformation* of the object. Another reason why Marx may not have prioritized a work dedicated to the explanation of his method may also be that, especially later in his life, Marx’s intended

\(^1\) For a particularly good biography of Marx, cf. Francis Wheen’s *Karl Marx*. 

115
audience for his work was not just (or even primarily) philosophers, political economists, or academics—those who might call for such an explanation of method. Because Marx’s political project was the revolutionary transformation of bourgeois society, he was attempting to speak to the potential agents of social change (the proletariat, for example)—those for whom a demonstration of the “how” without the “why” may not be sufficiently compelling.

Despite these reasons why Marx may not have pursued a sustained account of his method, sustained discussions of method flourished in subsequent Marxist thought, especially after the 1920s. An interesting question to ask would be what were the particularities of the historical situation in that, for Marx, such work was not a priority while 60 or so years later it became an urgency? Perry Anderson suggests that as a result of several historical factors such as the perceived failures or constraints of existing communist and socialist movements and “official” Parties, a political environment in Europe and the United States hostile to the Left, and the experience of Fascism, work in Marxism tended to “retreat” to the university and become the domain of philosophers, especially in the case of those Anderson identifies as the “Western Marxists”:

No philosopher within the Western Marxist tradition ever claimed that the main or ultimate aim of historical materialism was a theory of knowledge. But the common assumption of virtually all was that the preliminary task of theoretical research within Marxism was to disengage the rules of social enquiry discovered by Marx, yet buried within the topical particularity of his work, and if necessary to complete them. The result was that a remarkable amount of the output of Western Marxism became a prolonged and intricate Discourse on Method.

[Anderson, 52-53]
Reconstructing the Object, Part I: The Abstract-Concrete Dialectic, Once Again

One of the most famous and frequently discussed passages on method in Marx is a section in the introduction to the *Grundrisse* called “The Method of Political Economy” [Marx, 1973, 100]. In this section, Marx argues that it has been traditional for those analyzing the political economy of a given society to begin their analysis with what they perceive to be the “real and concrete” preconditions of that social and economic order, such as the nature of the population, the distribution of resources among the classes, characteristics of production and consumption, etc. [ibid.]. Marx points out, however, that these “real and concrete” preconditions are in fact abstractions because they do not acknowledge all the other elements of the social order to which they are interrelated. The notion of population, for example, does not explain anything in isolation from the notion of the social classes of which it is composed. Similarly, as Marx points out, the notion of social classes presupposes wage labour, capital, and so on. The movement of classical political economy, therefore, Marx describes as one from the “chaotic conception of the whole,” or the “imagined concrete” (which, for Marx is an abstraction), “towards ever more simple concepts... [arriving] at the simplest determinations” such as money, value, division of labour, exchange value, etc. [ibid.].

On the contrary, Marx argues, the scientifically more adequate method would travel in the reverse direction: the movement of a dialectical, political economic analysis would be from the identification of those simplest, abstract determinations—division of labour, money, value, etc.—(i.e., categories, not yet necessarily recognized as such), ascending through the reconstruction of these simple abstractions and arriving at a properly totalized conception of the concrete whole: “From...[the simplest
determinations] the journey would have to be retraced until I had finally arrived at the population again, but this time not as the chaotic conception of a whole, but as a rich totality of many determinations and relations” [Marx, 1973, 100]. From this description, it has become a commonplace among Marx’s commentators to characterize Marx’s dialectic as a movement from the abstract to the concrete.

However, there is much more to be said about this movement and, of course, volumes more have been said about it. On the question of method, the following passage from the Grundrisse has been the object of a great deal of scrutiny:

The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a process of concentration, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception. Along the first path the full conception was evaporated to yield an abstract determination; along the second, the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.... the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind.

[Marx, 1973, 101]

Here, the result of analysis is the totalized, “concrete in the mind,” the totalized conceptualization of the object, which is distinguishable but not separate from (mediated by) the real, historical object, or, social totality. For example, the totalized concrete concept of population is the complex combination and reconstruction in thought of all the abstract determinants and categories (social class, and from there, division of labour, value, property, etc.) together with the initial “imagined concrete” object (which Marx also reveals to be an abstraction).
The initial, imagined “chaotic conception” of the social formation is a materially and historically conditioned object or observation. In other words, it is a concept which is offered up to the observer marked by the mystified appearances generated by market production relations. It is filtered through the observer’s sense of personal experience, sense experience, a sense of the empirically given—it includes “common sense” or what is “naturally” perceived. This initial (common) sense perception of the social world is no less an integral part of bourgeois society than are its essential production relations and, as such, constitutes an important part of the object of analysis. Once again, in the Grundrisse, Marx reminds us that bourgeois society as an object of study “is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality” [Marx, 1973, 106]. Nonetheless, it is imperative that a distinction be posited between the two: recall that in The German Ideology, Marx and Engels warn, in a polemic against the empirical historians of their day, that to limit one’s analysis to the object of the more immediately perceived, empirical sense of the world is to render history no more than a “collection of dead facts” [Marx, 1970, 48].

This observation is not meant to stigmatize empirical work wholesale, for as I have emphasized above, for Marx, empirical work is an important component of the conceptual reconstruction of the social totality. The abstract determinants or categories, on the other hand, are not available to the senses or to empirical observation. They must be deduced through the work of theoretical abstraction. Marx’s “unity of the diverse” is the combination of both these initial observations and categorial elements. Furthermore, it is a reconstruction which, like the social totality it seeks to capture, becomes greater

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18 It is important to point out and emphasize that there is nothing natural about these “natural” perceptions, about common sense or about empirical data. A particular and dominant ideological, epistemological and phenomenological frame of reference historically offers up certain data for such naturalized categorization. My saying that this observation is a commonplace (and it is) is one example.
than the sum of its parts (I outline the steps involved in this theoretical suspension later on).

Through the course of the dialectical, theoretical process, the totalized concept is arrived at as a result; it is not a place from which one can begin one’s analysis because it is only available to the analyst, in a representable form, as a consequence of this dialectical work. On the other hand, with respect to the concrete totality which exists as a historical reality—the historical reality of bourgeois society, for example—it must be considered as a point of departure and not a result. It is a point of departure not as a perception but in the sense that it is the ground from which all conceptualizing efforts spring forth—it is ground zero, so to speak. It is the complex historical whole (we could also call it the mode of production) which forms the enabling precondition of all analytical work—any work—and offers up the categories and presuppositions (the “problematic” in Althusser’s terms) with respect to which all thought is oriented. The historical concrete totality, therefore, is the point of departure for a process of dialectical thought which reconstructs through abstraction the raw material of the appearances, ideologies, empirical data, etc. that are the real objective artifacts of the historical concrete totality and arrives at a totalized concrete reconstruction of the latter in thought.

Reflecting on this movement as Marx expresses it in *Capital*, Ernest Mandel argues that it is correct but incomplete, therefore, to describe it as a movement from the abstract to the concrete. Mandel illustrates his point with reference to Marx’s point of departure of his analysis in *Capital*, the commodity. Mandel argues that Marx begins with a concept of the commodity which is not abstract (or, at least, is not immediately perceived as an abstraction), but a concept of the sensual object, “an elementary material
phenomenon,” together with all its given appearances and objectifications, as the basic unit of capitalism [Mandel, 1976, 20]. From the observation of this elementary material phenomenon, this “chaotic whole,” Marx distills the abstract categories which he will use to reconstruct this figure of the commodity—value, use-value, exchange-value, division of labour, abstract labour, private property, etc. Therefore, Mandel argues that the movement of Marx’s dialectic is from the material concrete to the theoretical abstract to the concrete totality (in thought). Furthermore, the more adequately the concrete totality in thought resembles the historical totality, the more scientific is one’s analysis:

[Marx] starts from elements of the material concrete to go to the theoretical abstract, which helps him then to reproduce the concrete totality in his theoretical analysis. In its full richness and deployment, the concrete is always a combination of innumerable theoretical “abstractions.” But the material concrete, that is, real bourgeois society, exists before this whole scientific endeavour, determines it in the last instance, and remains a constant practical point of reference to test the validity of the theory. Only if the reproduction of this concrete totality in man’s thought comes nearer to the real material totality is thought really scientific.

[Mandel, 1976, 21]

The authority and force of a scientific approach, Mandel argues, was intended, in part, to buttress Marx’s revolutionary project in that it served to silence those who would criticize that project on the grounds that its author was labouring under a lesser objective sense of “revolutionary passion and compassion for the downtrodden and the oppressed” [Mandel, 1976, 17]: “Precisely because Marx was convinced that the cause of the proletariat was of decisive importance for the whole future of mankind, he wanted to create for that cause not a flimsy platform of rhetorical invective or wishful thinking, but the rock-like foundation of scientific truth” [ibid.].

121
The scientific analytical process of distinguishing between and, more importantly, of determining the relationship between, or mediating, the appearances and the essences of the production relations of bourgeois society is carried out in the movement between the abstract and the concrete in Marx’s method. Mandel argues that appearance and essence in Marx do not refer to different realities but to “different levels of determination” in the cognitive process, and to prioritize one over the other would be to fail to render the dialectical relationship between the two [Mandel, 1976, 20]:

It is necessary to integrate “essence” and “appearance” through all their intermediate mediating links, to explain how and why a given “essence” appears in given concrete forms and not in others. For these “appearances” themselves are neither accidental nor self-evident. They pose problems, they have to be explained in their turn, and this very explanation helps to pierce through new layers of mystery and brings us again nearer to a full understanding of the specific form of economic organization which we want to understand.

[Mandel, 1976, 20]

In *Late Capitalism*, Mandel argues that the concrete is, therefore, both the starting place and the goal of interpretation [Mandel, 1978, 14]. For Mandel, the more conventional description of Marx’s dialectic as ascending from the abstract to the concrete (which is Marx’s own description of the process) neglects that such a process must be preceded by a movement from the concrete to the abstract because the abstract is not a place of departure but the result of the previous work of distilling the initial concrete into its abstract determinants [*ibid.*]. There is, however, a confusion with Mandel’s formulation. Mandel wants to identify “the commodity” with which Marx initiates his analysis as an instance of the initial, material concrete, and does not make a distinction between it and the “concrete” entity that is the *ground* of Marx’s analysis, namely, the real, historical totality of bourgeois society. In Mandel’s formulation, Marx’s
initial commodity and bourgeois society as an historical phenomenon exist on the same level of determination in the analytical process. Collapsing these two moments into the initial material concrete, “chaotically conceived” or otherwise, is the way in which Mandel is able to map Marx’s analysis as moving from the (material) concrete, to the (theoretical) abstract, and back to the (now totalized, conceptual) concrete. This is the way in which Mandel figures the concrete as both the starting place and the goal of interpretation.

However, to figure Marx’s initial “commodity” and “real bourgeois society” on the same level of determination in Marx’s analysis is inaccurate. As we have already discerned, real bourgeois society is the ground and presupposition of Marx’s analytical process. It is a concrete, historical totality and, as such, it does not have an immediate appearance, in “the commodity” or otherwise, and it cannot be immediately represented so as to serve as the starting place of the analytical narrative. The social totality’s totalized conceptualization or representation is the goal of the narrative or reconstructive process. The social totality—real bourgeois society—is not one moment of the cognitive process but the possibility of the cognitive process. Reality is not the outcome of thought, Lukács reminds us in History and Class Consciousness, it is the “starting point for perception and ideas” [Lukács, 9].

The commodity posited in the beginning of Capital does not share this status. As we have also already explored, the concept of the commodity which Marx posits at the beginning of his analysis can only be conceived of, initially, as an empirically posited phenomenon. As such, it is a partiality—one element observed in isolation from the totality of social production relations and, hence, an abstraction: “capitalism is
constituted as a totality. This totality forms its elements in such a way that taken apart from it they are denatured" [Arthur in Moseley and Campbell, 22]. Furthermore, by following the course of the analytical process, and in retrospect, it is revealed that the commodity does not, in fact, refer to an empirical phenomenon at all, but is a category which functions as a necessary, initiating, abstract moment in the theoretical derivation (reconstruction) of capitalist production. C. Arthur argues,

[the analytical process] necessarily must start somewhere; but if this starting-point is ripped out of the whole,... abstracted thus, it is necessarily inadequate as a characterization both of itself and the whole. However, the exposition can then proceed precisely by questioning its status. Insofar as this abstracted element has no meaning outside the structure to which it belongs, only at the end of the reconstruction of the totality is its truth unfolded: truth is system from an expositional point of view.

[Moseley and Campbell, 23]

Therefore, in both moments of the analysis (initially and in retrospect), for Marx, the commodity is an abstraction and cannot be identified, as Mandel would have it, as an instance of the material concrete. What is more, as Arthur explains, the “truth” of the commodity as one element of a systematic and fluid whole, is only revealed in the exposition of the movement of that totality. Here is Arthur’s articulation of this situation, illustrated through the category of value instead of the commodity-category:

[value cannot be defined in the simple sense of either a substance pre-existing exchange or as a mere phenomenal relation, but only as a moment of a totalizing process of development of internally related forms of a complex whole. Capital is the most complex value form; indeed, in a sense it is the value form, because only at this level of development of the concept of value can we grasp that value is a real substance, instead of a vanishing mediator in exchange.... A methodological consequence of this understanding is that the concept of capital itself (as the most highly mediated) requires, not a definition, whether nominal or real, ostensive or stipulative, but a dialectical exposition of its inner self-development.

[Moseley and Campbell, 30]
Such an unfolding of form, discovering deeper essential determinations at each stage, requires not a "rigid definition" of value but an exposition of its movement. In such an exposition, this system of forms must be grasped as a totality, not as a set of independent stages.

Ibid.

I have laboured at length over an adequate representation of the movement of Marx’s analysis and, specifically, over how to depict the dynamic between the abstract and concrete moments of that process, because it continues to be a point of confusion and debate amongst scholars of Marx’s method. Consider, for example, Derek Sayer’s articulation of this dynamic:

Marx commences the plan [for a method]... with “the general, abstract determinants which obtain in more or less all forms of society”—transhistorical categories, in our parlance. We might, then, take these as the “simple abstractions,” out of which we hope ultimately to generate a “reproduction of the concrete by way of thought” [Grundrisse, 101].... But this road is closed. For, as argued at length above, as class concepts such categories can neither grasp empirical particulars nor provide a point of departure for their deduction. To make the deduction we would have to introduce additional, “concrete” premises. If “abstract” means transhistorical, therefore, we can only develop historical categories by “ascending” precisely from the “real and concrete.”

[Sayer, 1979, 95]

There are several problems with Sayer’s formulation. First, Sayer’s distinction between transhistorical and historical categories betrays a misunderstanding of the nature of the category, itself. All categories are historical, as is categorial thought, in general, in the sense that they are products of a particular historical development and mode of production—they are rooted in specific historical production relations. However, all categories are also “transhistorical,” following Sayer’s usage of that term, in that they are abstractions and, as such, are capable of reflecting back on, and illuminating the character of, historical formations other than that which they, themselves, presuppose. Second,
when Marx writes, “the concrete... is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception” [Marx, 1973, 101], Sayer mistakenly interprets this statement to mean that the theorist initiates her/his analysis by conceptualizing some concrete, “empirically particular” historical situation as the analytical starting point. However, Marx’s point is that this “concrete, historical situation” is always, already the ground out of which anything the theorist is able to conceptualize must necessarily have already sprung. The concrete ground of analysis is not something which the theorist conjures as in some mental or intellectual exercise. The concrete is that which has allowed the theorist to think or conceptualize anything.

Finally, Sayer associates “empirical particularity” with the instance of the concrete. This association is inaccurate. We have discerned that, for Marx, empirical observation is indeed the starting place of analysis; however, as a fragmented and non-totalized observation, it represents the initial instance of the abstract as opposed to that of the concrete. Scott Meikle makes this same conceptual and terminological error in his article, “Dialectical Contradiction and Necessity” [in Mepham and Ruben]. In this article, discussing the same passage on method from the Grundrisse, Meikle refers several times to the “concrete empirical data” from which Marx “constructs abstractions” [Mepham and Ruben, 11], for example: “Marx’s dialectical method requires that the categories in which a science is presented dialectically be derived from a detailed appropriation of the concrete empirical data of the field in question” [ibid.]. Referring to empirical data in this way, as concrete, is misleading in the context of Marx’s method.
This rather subtle distinction is also overlooked in Bertell Ollman’s formulation of the movement between the abstract and concrete moments in Marx’s theoretical reconstruction. Here is Ollman’s description of the process:

[Marx’s] method starts from the “real concrete” (the world as it presents itself to us) and proceeds through “abstraction” (the intellectual activity of breaking this whole down into the mental units with which we think about it) to the “thought concrete” (the reconstituted and now understood whole present in the mind). The real concrete is simply the world in which we live, in all its complexity. The thought concrete is Marx’s reconstruction of that world in the theories of what has come to be called “Marxism.” The royal road to understanding is said to pass from the one to the other through the process of abstraction.

[Ollman, 24: emphasis added]

While Ollman does not make a distinction, we know that, for Marx, “the world in which we live, in all its complexity,” and “the world as it presents itself to us,” are two different things. According to Marx, while both things are “real” (in Ollman’s sense), the former is indeed a concrete formation while the latter is the appearance of that formation and, hence, an abstraction. Marx’s characterizing of his method as scientific is predicated precisely on recognizing this distinction. Ollman, on the other hand, collapses the two things within the designation of the “real concrete.”

Ollman’s formulation can be elaborated in one further respect. Ollman situates the process of abstraction as strictly a thought process, as a conscious intellectual maneuver, without historicizing abstraction as a material process which underwrites market society in a wider sense. For example, Ollman states,

In one sense, the role Marx gives to abstraction is simple recognition of the fact that all thinking about reality begins by breaking it down into manageable parts. Reality may be in one piece when lived, but to be thought about and communicated it must be parcelled out…. Marx constructs his subject matter [through abstraction] as much as he finds it…. [W]hat counts
as an explanation is... determined by the framework of possible relationships imposed by Marx's initial abstractions.

[Ollman, 24 and 39]

I agree with Ollman's articulation of Marx's theoretical process, here. However, Ollman does not map the relationship between abstraction, as Marx's intellectual strategy, and abstraction as the social, material function which allows exchange in a commodity economy to proceed—he fails to situate Marx's theoretical method as an expression, itself, of bourgeois production relations. It must be made clear that Marx is able to "think about reality by breaking it down into manageable parts" because reality, in capitalism, is already broken down into fragmented and isolated parts. That thinking and communicating about reality in capitalist society, as Ollman puts it, "must be parcelled out" is an expression of the parceling out of the whole of the social world in capitalism—through the division of labour, the fragmentation of the organic community into juridical individuals, divisions of class, the fragmentation of social activity into the apparently independent spheres of the economy, politics, culture, etc.

Reconstructing the Object, Part II: An Historical Versus a Structural Exposition

Debates surrounding Marx's method have tended to polarize around the characterization of Marx's mode of theoretical reconstruction as either historical/progressive, on the one hand, or structural/logical, on the other. The work of Georg Lukács, for example, is often read in support of a radically historical understanding of Marx's method, while the work of someone like Louis Althusser has been forwarded in support of the understanding of Marx's method as demonstrating a structural/logical orientation. In this section, I will briefly characterize what is understood by the historical vs. structural mode of
reconstruction "debate." More importantly, however, I will demonstrate that Marx labours within both these modes of analysis and that the structural and historical elements are mediated in his work. In fact, I argue that the structural and historical moments of Marx’s analysis have a kind of dialectical relationship—that they are moments of the dialectical movement of the process of Marx’s theoretical reconstruction of capitalist production.

Discussions surrounding Marx’s method were dramatically reanimated in the wake of the publication of the Grundrisse. Many commentators reformulated their readings of Marx based on the formulations expressed there, while others used it to support or confirm previously formed interpretations. The Grundrisse is a collection of notebooks wherein Marx recorded his notes, research and thoughts for the purpose of self-clarification in preparation for the writing of his later “political economic” works and, in particular, Capital. One famous and often reproduced passage on method in the “Introduction” to the Grundrisse articulates virtually all the key propositions for this discussion. Therefore, it will be helpful to have Marx’s statement in full:

In the succession of the economic categories, as in any other historical, social science, it must not be forgotten that their subject—here, modern bourgeois society—is always what is given, in the head as well as in reality, and that these categories therefore express the forms of being, the characteristics of existence, and often only individual sides of this specific society, this subject, and that therefore this society by no means begins only at the point where one can speak of it as such... This is to be kept in mind because it will shortly be decisive for the order and sequence of the categories. For example, nothing seems more natural than to begin with ground rent, with landed property, since this is bound up with the earth, the source of all production and of all being, and with the first form of production of all more or less settled societies—agriculture. But nothing would be more erroneous. In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others.... In bourgeois society... [agriculture]
more and more becomes merely a branch of industry, and is entirely
dominated by capital. Ground rent likewise.... Ground rent cannot be
understood without capital.... Capital is the all-dominating economic
power of bourgeois society. It must form the starting-point as well as the
finishing-point, and must be dealt with before landed property.

It would therefore be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic
categories follow one another in the same sequence as that in which they
were historically decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their
relation to one another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the
opposite of that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds
to historical development. The point is not the historic position of the
economic relations in the succession of different forms of society....
Rather, their order within modern bourgeois society.

[Marx, 1973, 107-8]

When Marx says that our subject of study—modern bourgeois society—begins
before the point at which we can speak of it, he means that we can only speak about the
capitalist mode of production through its categories, but that the capitalist mode of
production as a complex whole pre-exists any of those individual categories—the whole
produces its apparent determinants. In the passage above, Marx uses the example of
ground rent to illustrate this apparent conundrum. Ground rent appears to be one of the
simple determinants of the capitalist mode of production. Chronologically, ground rent
can be said to pre-date capitalism as different forms of ground rent ("primitive" or
"natural" forms as opposed to the "social" form associated with capitalism) can be
identified as existing in various pre-capitalist modes of production. However, when the
object of inquiry is the capitalist mode of production in its complex totality,19 the
sequence 'ground rent (as one of the determinants) leading to capitalism' does not hold.
Ground rent, in modern bourgeois society, can only be explained from the point of view

19 The "capitalist mode of production in its complex totality" does not exist in any pure way: it is always
the combination of residual elements of previous modes of production, as well as, the germinating seeds of
future ones.
of the totality: ground rent must presuppose the whole capitalist edifice—“ground rent cannot be explained without capital.”

Herein lies one aspect of the relationship between the historical and structural elements of Marx’s method. The above passage from the *Grundrisse* makes clear that a distinction must be made between the process of *investigation* of the capitalist mode of production and the process of *representation* of that complex totality. In investigation, Marx proceeds historically (for example, in much of his work in the *Grundrisse*): capitalism did not arrive full blown, but bit by bit, by slow, and very often painful (for its agents), increments. Capitalism marks a particular historical development, as well as, a particular historical development and sequence of the interrelationships of the categories which express its being. However, in the process of representation of the results of Marx’s investigation of bourgeois society, his approach is not historical, in the sense of being linear or chronological. Marx argues that in the representation of his object of study (for example, in the representation of modern bourgeois society in *Capital*) it is “unfeasible and wrong” to present the economic categories in the sequence of their historical development. Marx’s goal in *Capital*, instead, is to represent how economic categories are products of the social and historical totality, and to demonstrate how these categories are mediated in the context of that totality. This latter method of representation can be described as structural or logical in character.

Ernest Mandel has come to similar conclusions with respect to this aspect of Marx’s method. Mandel argues that Marx’s method requires that analysis begin *after* the collection and synthesis of historical and scientific data and that the method for gathering this data is necessarily different from the method of its exposition [Mandel, 1976, 19;
1978, 15-16]. For Mandel, the former involves the gathering and grasping of "empirical facts"\(^{20}\) while the latter involves their dialectical reorganization in a way which reveals the material reality in thought [Mandel, 1976, 19]. Further, Mandel points out that in *Capital*, Marx demonstrates how a basic "determinant" of capitalism such as commodity production must, at the same time, be understood as presupposing capitalism as a fully developed formation [Mandel, 1976, 21]. Therefore, "[i]n that sense it is true that the analysis of Volume I of *Capital* is logical (based on dialectical logic) and not historical" [ibid.].

In *Reading Capital*, Althusser also mobilizes the above passage from the *Grundrisse* in support of his prioritizing of a "logical" Marx over an "historical" one. Many commentators have criticized Althusser's position as, itself, an undialectical prioritization of the "logical Marx" which neglects how the logical and the historical are equally essential moments in Marx's work and neglects the way in which Marx mediates these two moments. I believe there is validity to these critiques. Nonetheless, Althusser's formulation can be useful in its recognition of the important distinction between the two moments in Marx's method. Althusser claims that the logical order of Marx's exposition is a step by step inversion of the historical order [Althusser, 1970, 47]. According to Althusser, it is with respect to this logical order of thought that Marx is able to construct the "articulated-thought-totality" of the capitalist mode of production "which has to be produced in knowledge as an object of knowledge in order to reach a knowledge of the... real articulated-totality which constitutes the existence of bourgeois society" [Althusser, 1970, 48]. This is the way in which Marx articulates what Althusser calls the object of

\(^{20}\) In light of the passage from the *Grundrisse* I cite above, Mandel's description of the historical process of investigation and analysis merely as the gathering and grasping of empirical facts is somewhat oversimplified.
knowledge (the concept of the capitalist mode of production as a whole—the object of analysis) and the real historical object. Knowledge of the real, concrete, historical society is only attainable through the "detour through abstraction" which, for Althusser, constitutes the process as scientific [ibid.].

If Althusser has been criticized for elevating to distortion the importance of a logical process in Marx over an historical process, Lukács has been criticized for the opposite tendency. Nonetheless, Lukács, too, argues that in Marx's analysis of capitalism, the organization of the economic categories "constitute neither a purely logical sequence, nor are they organized merely in accordance with the facts of history" [Lukács, 159], leading us to conclude that the organization of categories is a matter of both these things. Further on in History and Class Consciousness we find out that, for Lukács, this is, in fact, the case, and that a logical reconstruction of the categories is a methodological necessity because the categories, and the totality whose forms of existence they express, are radically and universally historical [Lukács, 186].

Lukács argues that the way in which human agents perceive the organization of social and economic categories is an index of those agents' self-consciousness of their social existence and their place and role in the latter's constitutive social relations [Lukács, 185]. At the same time, the organization of society's categories is entirely an historical matter; it is not a "natural" or transcendent organization, but one which is determined by the particular historical contingencies of the social totality. Any organization of categories, therefore, reflects the situation of the social whole and not necessarily the chronological development of its historical forms [ibid., 186]. History is

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21 An adequate characterization of what has been called the Lukács-Althusser debate is beyond the scope of this discussion. Cf. Fredric Jameson, "Marxism and Historicism," The Ideologies of Theory Vol.2.
the product of the activity of human beings. This activity is realized in social forms which come to confront human beings as objective and oppressive forms and which must then be overthrown. History is also the course of this overthrowing: "history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man" [ibid.].

Because of this constant historical movement, Lukács argues,

It is therefore not possible to reach an understanding of particular forms by studying their successive appearances in an empirical and historical manner. This is not because they transcend history... The truth is rather that these particular forms are not immediately connected with each other either by their simultaneity or by their consecutiveness. What connects them is their place and function in the totality and by rejecting the idea of a 'purely historical' explanation the notion of history as a universal discipline is brought nearer. When the problem of connecting isolated phenomena has become a problem of categories, by the same dialectical process every problem of categories becomes transformed into a historical problem. Though it should be stressed: it is transformed into a problem of universal history which now appears... simultaneously as a problem of method and a problem of our knowledge of the present.

[Lukács, 186]

At least one of Lukács' points here is that a method of analysis must seek to remove the obstacles which historical circumstance has thrown up to foreclose a knowledge of the present. But this method, itself, will have been produced by certain historical conditions, even if that method has a logical or structural organization. The historicizing of the possibility of knowledge of the present moment is what, dialectically, hoists this method to the level of self-reflectivity—what makes it, in Lukács' words, a "universal discipline" of the particular, or, the ever present, ever elusive horizon of interpretation. Now we can see that Fredric Jameson's injunction to "Always historicize!" (the opening two words of The Political Unconscious) is not inconsistent with his description of this injunction as the "'transhistorical' imperative of all dialectical thought" [Jameson, 1981, 9]. Marxism
is the “science” of locating the historical possibility of different forms of thought (critique, analysis, interpretation, modes of understanding and producing explanations of the world) without disavowing their own particular validity and contextual usefulness: “In the spirit of a more authentic dialectical tradition, Marxism is here conceived as that ‘untranscendable horizon’ that subsumes such apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” [ibid., 10]. Every mode of thought is, itself, a system (or structure) with a history.

Jameson points out that modes of production are always the dialectical mediations of structure and history—are always synchronic systems which have particular historical conditions of existence [Jameson, 1988b, 155]. This in no way, for Jameson, implies that modes of production are static, rather it is a way of referring to the necessary mode of representation of their historical totality. For example, when Jameson refers to Marx’s *Capital* as a “synchronic” model (as opposed to a genetic construction), he is not disavowing the role of a concept of history, but rather, as he argues, identifying a “new and original form of historiography, a structural permutation in the latter’s narrative form or trope” entailing the “narrative reconstruction of the conditions of possibility of any full synchronic form” [ibid.]. Jameson refers to this historicizing method (the “Marxist ‘solution’ to the dilemma of historicism”) as “structural historicism” [Jameson, 1988b, 172].

Jameson’s designation of Marx’s method as a structural historicism marks an important distinction with respect to situating the object of Marx’s analysis in *Capital*. In *Capital*, Marx is not representing the historical development of a mode of production.
Instead, Marx is representing and historicizing an already fully developed, synchronic structure—capitalism. Indeed, Marx supports his analysis in *Capital* with much empirical, historical material, such as, his extensive discussions of the feudal mode of production and the history of workers’ struggles around labour regulations. However, this historical material does not serve the construction of an historical narrative of the development of capitalism, but the narrative reconstruction of a fully developed, structural formation. The difference is important because it underlines a potential conceptual error which Marx is very cautious to avoid, namely, the representing of earlier historical moments and formations as *anticipating* the present formation. Those who would characterize the movement of Marx’s analysis of capitalism as teleological fail to recognize that Marx’s method enacts the *critique of*, in Peter Bürger’s words, “the progressive construction of history as the prehistory of the present” [Bürger, 20]. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx criticizes the “so-called historical presentation of development [which] is founded, as a rule, on the fact that the latest form regards the previous ones as steps leading up to itself” [Marx, 1973, 106]. And, as Bürger points out, this historical error is foreclosed through the accomplishment of the self-reflectivity (or self-criticism) of the present—when the categories of intelligibility (products of the present formation) achieve the moment of self-reflectivity [Bürger, 21]. Once again, in the *Grundrisse* Marx states,

> The Christian religion was able to be of assistance in reaching an objective understanding of earlier mythologies only when its own self-criticism had been accomplished to a certain degree.... Likewise, bourgeois economics arrived at an understanding of feudal, ancient, oriental economics only after the self-criticism of bourgeois society had begun.  

[Marx, 1973, 106]
Marx does not represent the feudal mode of production, therefore, as *anticipating* the social formation which chronologically follows it. It is not until capitalism is a fully developed formation that it achieves the capacity of self-criticism and, at the same time, and as a function of that self-criticality, the capacity to reflect back on previous modes of production in order to discern the historical relationship *between* itself and other modes of production. But this relationship can only be discerned in retrospect. Therefore, as Jameson argues, “to return to *Capital*, Marx’s discussions... are reconstructions of what, once capital is fully emergent as such, can now be rewritten as the latter’s preparatory requirements, it being understood that *within feudalism* these phenomena were not anticipatory of anything, since in that synchronic system capital as such did not yet exist” [Jameson, 1988b, 155].

The idea that a (logico-structural) reconstruction of capitalist production as a fully developed synchronic formation necessarily precedes and, in fact, facilitates the adequate conceptualization of capitalism’s historical development *as* a social formation can be illustrated by way of Derek Sayer’s problematic reading of Marx’s portrayal of “formal” and “real” subordination of labour to capital in *Capital*. Sayer misleadingly reads the categories of formal and real subordination of labour as only designating an historical sequence in the development of capitalist production relations instead of representing a logical relationship between categories which express the situation of capitalism as synchronic whole:

[In Marx’s reconstruction of the genesis of capitalist production, he] distinguishes two moments in this process which he terms the “formal” and the “real” subordination of labour to capital respectively. This distinction is employed in *Capital I*... The *formal* subordination of labour to capital refers simply to the conversion of previously
independent producers into wage-labourers. This enables their combination under the aegis of a single capitalist, and provides the social basis of Manufacture (as Marx calls the early period of capitalist production...) The real subordination of labour to capital occurs only when the capitalist labour process had developed to a point where it technologically requires such combination, that is with the advent of Modern Industry wherein the instruments of production are such that they can only be used co-operatively. These two stages are characterized by different forms of capitalist exploitation. In the former, absolute surplus-value or surplus-value derived from mere extension of the working day prevails. In the latter, it is relative surplus-value or surplus-value obtained by shortening necessary labour-time relative to the length of the working-day by technical innovation which predominates.

[Sayer, 1979, 84-5]

While different methods of the extraction of surplus-value (relative or absolute) may, indeed, be dominant at different historical periods, Marx’s goal is not only to figure them as chronological in the way that Sayer perceives. For one thing, it may just as well be the case that both forms of the extraction of surplus-value could be observed in each of the historical stages which Sayer identifies. However, more importantly, it is misleading to represent the formal and real moments of subordination of labour to capital as only marking an historical chronology of events. The concepts of formal and real subordination indeed function as logically derived categories in Marx’s narrative reconstruction of the history of capitalist production. However, it is not until the historical stage of development of capitalist production which Sayer associates with the real subordination of labour—i.e., it is not until the capitalist mode of production has become a fully developed formation—that the material conditions are such that the category of formal subordination of labour (or the category of real subordination, for that matter) can be thought or conceived. During the earlier stages of the emergence of capitalism, before its full development, the material conditions necessary to think either category do not exist. The category of formal subordination of labour cannot come into
existence as an explanatory concept until after the fact—the category is the product of a fully emergent capitalist mode of production. Sayer’s “earlier historical stage” is, therefore, a product of the designated “later stage.” The situation is the same for the categories of absolute and relative surplus-value. Both categories are the products of the “later stage” of capitalist development, the latter being the condition for the historical association, in hindsight, of absolute surplus-value with an earlier historical stage of emergence of capitalist production.

We can see, then, that Marx’s method is a combination of historical and structural analysis, the latter consisting of the mapping of the systematic interrelationships of categories of intelligibility. As Tony Smith argues, it is the combination of an historical and structural movement which distinguishes Marx’s method from that of Hegel. Further, not only are these two apparently contradictory movements compatible, each lays the ground for the other:

In any empirical study categories will be employed. There is no choice about this. The only choice is whether those categories will be employed in an unreflective fashion, or whether they will be considered in and for themselves qua categories. Empirical social scientists typically take the first option, considering basic categories only in so far as they have empirical applications. Hegel took the second option. Marx combined the two. Capital includes numerous empirical studies that remain of interest to historians and social scientist [sic.] today, studies that Hegelian philosophers would never undertake. But Marx felt that categories ought not to be employed in an unreflective fashion in these empirical studies. And this requires that they be considered in abstraction from any specific empirical application. Marx learned from Hegel that when fundamental categories are so considered, they have immanent systematic connections with each other. Tracing out the immanent systematic connections among categories allows us to employ these categories in a reflective fashion when we later turn to empirical investigations. That Marx constructed a categorial theory in Capital is no cause for shame from the standpoint of a commitment to empirical studies. For it is in no sense designed to replace such studies. It complements such studies by making those who undertake them reflect upon the conceptual
tools they employ. [Smith, 1990, 29-30]

We can support Smith’s formulation of the complementary relationship in Marx’s method between empirical and historical investigation and categorial analysis. However, I want to argue that the relationship is yet more complex than Smith represents it, here. The relationship must also be discerned on another level. While Smith’s explanation of the relationship as complementary is accurate, it does not capture the way in which the historical and categorial moments of Marx’s analysis enact, themselves, a dialectical movement. For it is not merely the case that the collection of empirical and historical data sets the stage for categorial analysis which, in turn, sets the stage for further empirical/historical investigation. Nor is it sufficient to posit the vigilant self-reflectivity required of empirical social scientists with respect to the categories they employ as Marx’s “lesson of the day.” In addition to these observations, Marx’s methodological point is to demonstrate that the reconstruction of the immanent and systematic interconnections of categories carried through to its logical culmination in the moment of categorial self-reflectivity is also, at that same moment, the radical historicization of that system of categories. It is only at the point when categorial thought achieves the expression of a fully immanent systematicity does that conceptual system betray itself as a purely historical phenomenon, rooted in particular historical, social and material circumstances, conditions and relations. In Capital, Marx carries through the logical analysis of political economic categories to the point where that analysis turns into (makes possible) what was formerly its apparent opposite—the radical historicization (the critique) of political economy.
Here is the location of dialectical suspension [Aufhebung] in Marx’s analysis: the moment when the logical reconstruction of the capitalist mode of production turns into the historical situating of that logical system (and the possibility of its conceptual reconstruction) as a product of that same mode of production is truly the moment of Marx’s putting Hegel back on his feet. Marx’s analysis enacts the dialectical mediation of the two apparently contradictory movements of the representation of capitalist production—historical analysis, on the one hand, and the dialectical, logico-structural unfolding of categories, on the other. To put it another way, Marx historicizes the Hegelian dialectic, by way of (or, through the course of) the dialectical unfolding of the latter’s own immanent structure. Marx suspends and historicizes the history-structure contradiction. As Roland Barthes points out, “[a] little formalism turns one away from history… a lot brings one back to it” [Barthes, 112]. Describing his own departure from the Hegelian form of the dialectic, Marx states,

To Hegel, the life process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurges of the real world, and the real world is only the external phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.

[Marx in Sayer, 1987, 86]

A number of theorists (some of whom I have discussed—Lukács, Mandel, Jameson, Bürger, Smith, for example) recognize Marx’s method as demonstrating a combination of both historical and structural (or logical) elements and formulate the particular relationship between these elements in various ways. With the possible exception of Lukács and Jameson, however, none state explicitly that the historical and logical elements of Marx’s analysis enact, themselves, a dialectical movement. Jindřich
Zelený, for instance, states that “[t]he logical procedures do not simply exist alongside historical procedures [in Marx’s analysis]; between them there are complex connections: they are mutually presupposed[...], mutually connected with one another and form a total process of investigation. The two are forms of the unified dialectical method of investigation of phenomena” [Zelený, 66]. However, other than to say that the historical and logical elements are mutually presupposed and complexly connected in Marx’s dialectical form of analysis, Zelený does not offer a more precise explanation of exactly how these elements are connected.

Importantly, however, Zelený does locate the conditions of possibility for Marx’s theory of capitalism in the relations of capitalist production, themselves. He argues,

[Zelený, 70]

Zelený’s statement supports an idea which should, by now, be evident: the designation of Marx’s process of theoretical reconstruction—the mapping of the systematic interconnections of capitalism’s categories enacted most famously in chapter one of Capital I—as a logical unfolding (as opposed to an historically chronological unfolding) in no way indicates a severance of Marx’s theory from the material “reality” of the social world. To say it is a logical reconstruction is not to say it is an idealist one. On the contrary, as I.I. Ruben emphasizes, the dialectical movement of categories is merely a function of a specific system of social relations: “One concept grows out of another only in the presence of determined social-economic conditions.... [Further, the] system of
economic concepts [itself] grows out of the system of production relations. The logical structure of political economy as a science expresses the social structure of capitalist society” [Ruben, 91-2].

Reconstructing the Object, Part III: The Dialectical Unfolding of Categories

Until now, I have not taken a more detailed look at the categorial process, or the logical moment, of Marx’s analysis. The following characterization relies on Tony Smith’s formulation of the process in his The Logic of Marx’s Capital. In this book, Smith argues that the model of Marx’s dialectical derivation of categories follows essentially that of Hegel.

In Marx’s dialectical process there are three types of categorial structures: the first expresses a moment of unity, the second expresses a moment of difference, and the third expresses a moment of the mediation of unity and difference, or, “unity-in-difference.” More precisely, with the first type of category, the moment of unity is stressed or explicit while the moment of difference remains implicit [Smith, 1990, 6]. With the second category, the moment of difference is explicit while the moment of unity is merely implied, and with the third category, unity and difference are made explicit simultaneously [ibid.]. The three types of categories are systematically and immanently connected, and represent a progression of ascending complexity and concreteness [ibid.]. The first categorial structure is the most simple and abstract, while the third is the most complex and concrete.

The structure of the first category, the category of unity, conveys the sense of “an aggregate of isolated and self-contained entities, each of which is treated as a simple
unity in itself" [Smith, 1990, 13-14]. The category of the individual, as the atomized and self-contained “unit” of identity in bourgeois society, itself a product of bourgeois society, is an example of a category of unity. The concept of the individual is the most simple and abstract form of identity generated as a category of intelligibility by a developed exchange economy.

However, as we know, the unified and self-contained character of the individual in bourgeois society is an appearance only. As a product of an exchange economy—i.e., of certain social relations—the identity of the individual is logically presupposed by the identity of the social group. The individual does not exist outside of its relationship to all other members of the social formation. Membership in a social collectivity is what each individual has in common. The social formation itself is what unites, and makes possible, each individual identity. The structure which is exemplified by the identity of the individual over against the identity of the unifying group is the structure of the second category, or, the category of difference. This second category is a structure with two poles: “The first is the pole of the different unities or beings. The second pole is that [which]... subsumes those separate beings under common principles.... [T]he dominant characteristic of this structure is the difference between the two poles” [Smith, 1990, 14].

The category of the worker in Marx’s analysis is an example of a category of difference. Individual workers are unified by their common subjection to the capitalist formation. The identity of the worker exists over against the identity of the capitalist structure. The relationship between the two polar identities is one of exploitation and negation. As such, this second category is as unstable as the first category because the pole of the unifying structure both requires the existence of the pole of the worker and
jeopardizes its existence, simultaneously. The individual workers are unified by the structure only indirectly and objectively. In this category, the worker identity constitutes what Marx calls the identity of the "class-in-itself."

With the structure of the third category, the category of unity-in-difference, the polar structure of the second category is overcome through the realization of the mutually determining and affirming relationship between the once polarized identities of individual entity and group of entities. As Smith points out, unity-in-difference is another way of describing the reconciliation of universal and individual [Smith, 1990, 14]: The third category "allow[s] for a mediation between these two levels, a unity-in-difference in which each pole remains distinct from the other while being reconciled within a structured totality.... [D]ifferent individuals retain their autonomy within a unity strong enough to maintain them" [ibid.]. Marx's category of the "class-for-itself" is an example of a category of unity-in-difference. Here, the identity of the individual worker or class member, and the identity of the structure or social formation, are revealed as the same continuous identity. The social formation is nothing other than the historical sedimentation of the labour and practices of individuals. Workers determine and produce the social formation at the same time as they are determined and produced by it. Lukács' formulation of the worker class in bourgeois society as the potentially self-adequate (collective) subject of history articulates the structure of unity-in-difference—of the reconciliation of universal and individual.22

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22 Note that, for Marx, no identity within the context of capitalist production expresses the structure of unity-in-difference. Capitalism's material and structural contradictions do not allow for the development of such an identity. Within capitalism, for example, property, commodities, money, and capital continue to be perceived by workers as alien, objective forms which have power over them, thus, forbidding the reconciliation of individual and objective structure [Smith, 1990, 52]—hindering capitalism's agents from perceiving these alien forces as a continuous part of their own identity and subjectivity. Capitalism, therefore, generates categories of intelligibility that are restricted to the level of second order categories,
The way in which categories are immanently connected can be described as a function of a dialectical contradiction [Smith, 1990, 6]. I have already referred to Smith’s description of a category as “a principle that unifies a manifold” [ibid.] in the sense that it subsumes and incorporates all specificity and diversity within an abstracted identity—tree, worker, labour, etc. This is also a way of describing another idea which I have already rehearsed in this discussion: no identity, phenomenon, object, etc. exists strictly as a positive and self-adequate entity but as something defined by its relationship to all other identities, phenomena, objects. Therefore, every identity expresses the absent presence of all that it is not. It follows, then, that if a category is posited as the means of signifying a simple, unified identity, that category will also inherently be the location of a contradiction between the unity that is being posited, emphasized, or made explicit, and the diverse manifold which that category also, always implies.

To address this contradiction, a second category must be posited, one which emphasizes or makes explicit the moment of diversity and difference [Smith, 1990, 6]. In the language of dialectical thought, this second category is referred to as “negating” the initial category. The moment of negation is not a doing away with altogether, but the making explicit of what was previously present but only implied. Hegel states that when “the universal of the beginning of its own accord determines itself as the other of itself, i.e., categories of difference. The instability of categories of difference express the inherent instability of the capitalist formation. As Marx demonstrates in his analysis, capitalist production is constantly in crisis: “Marx’s theory of crisis is meant to show that the unity imposed by capital accumulation breaks down without alleviating subjugation to the capital form” [Smith, 1990, 53]. Nonetheless, and because of this instability, the capitalist mode of production is structurally predisposed to the identity of unity-in-difference; the historical development of this identity is an inherent structural possibility of capitalist production. The historical realization of that identity, however, is not an inevitability; it is contingent upon the actions of historical agents who may foment a transformation of the material reality of the mode of production—for example, the transformation to a socialist mode of production, in Marx’s analysis.
[this] is to be named the dialectical moment.... [T]he dialectical moment... consists in
positing in it the difference that it implicitly contains” [Hegel in Smith, 1990, 7].

However, once the initial category of unity has been negated and superceded by
the second category of difference, this second category also expresses a contradiction.
This time, the contradiction expressed is the reverse of the initial contradiction: with the
second categorial structure, the moment of difference is emphasized or made explicit at
the expense of the moment of unity which, in turn, assumes the status of the merely
implied [Smith, 1990, 6]. The “stage of difference is itself one-sided and partial” [ibid.,
7]. The second category, therefore, must also be negated and superceded by a third
category which returns to an expression of unity but, this time, not through the sacrifice
of an expression of difference. The dialectical process is not cyclical but linear and
progressive. With the third categorial structure, the moments of unity and difference are
revealed (and, hence, reconstructed) in thought as mutually determining and are made
explicit simultaneously. This is also the expression of a concrete totality in thought, and it
contains unity and difference in simultaneous suspension: “When the stage of difference
is dialectically negated, we once again have a category of unity, but now it is a complex
unity, one that incorporates the moment of difference” [ibid., 7].

The third categorial structure, unity-in-difference, is the most complex and
concrete moment of the derivation process. However, its positing does not signal the
conclusion of the analytical process. For the third category can then be posited as the new
initial category of simple unity “from a higher level perspective”—the more adequately
totalized perspective—which is achieved through the dialectical movement itself. The
third category becomes the new initial category in a new dialectical derivation process. In
this way, dialectical “cognition rolls onwards from content to content” [Hegel in Smith, 1990, 7], step by step, from unity through difference to unity-in-difference, where the positing and overcoming of dialectical contradictions is the motor and logic of each transition [ibid.]. Hegel states, “at each stage of its further determination it raises the entire mass of its preceding content, and by its dialectical advance it not only does not lose anything or leave anything behind, but carries along with it all it has gained, and inwardly enriches and consolidates itself” [Hegel in Smith, ibid.].

We can take Marx's analysis of the simple, expanded and general forms of value in *Capital* I as an illustration of the categorial movement described above [Marx, 1976, 138-163]. In the process of conceptually deriving the money form of value, Marx begins by positing the category of the simple form of value which is expressed in the exchange of two different commodities. In this instance of the most simple form of exchange, x amount of commodity A is exchanged for y amount of commodity B. The common feature shared by the two different commodities which facilitates their exchange as equals is value. The value of commodity A is expressed in the phenomenal form of commodity B. Here, the simple form of value is considered a category of unity in that value is expressed in the single, isolated, unified, phenomenal form of commodity B [Smith, 1990, 80]. The exchange equation can be represented as, “a single, unified commodity = another single, unified commodity.”

Right away, however, it is clear that this is not an adequate representation of the value form in an exchange economy. In a developed market economy, no two different, individual commodities are ever exchanged to the exclusion of all other commodities. Instead, on various occasions, commodity A may be exchanged for commodity C, D, or
E, etc. As Tony Smith points out, "[t]he value form is a form of social production. Production on a society-wide scale necessarily involves many different sorts of commodities" [Smith, 1990, 80: emphasis added]. Furthermore, the unified category of simple value is unstable because it does not express explicitly the inherent structural possibility of one commodity being exchanged for an indefinite variety of other different commodities. Two different commodities can be exchanged because they are exchanged as abstractions—all physical properties of the commodities are rendered irrelevant in the transaction. As an abstraction, a commodity can just as readily be exchanged for any number of different commodities as it can for any particular one. This inherent structural tendency remains only implied in the simple form of value.

Following through the logic of simple exchange entails the positing of a second category which Marx calls the expanded form of value. With the expanded form of value, x amount of commodity A can be exchanged for y amount of commodity B, or z amount of commodity C, or n amount of commodity D, and so on. The exchange equation can be expressed as, "a single, unified commodity = an indefinite number of different commodities." The expanded form of value is a category of difference because it emphasizes and makes explicit the manifold of diverse commodities which are necessarily and structurally made equal in the process of exchange. Smith states,

[i]n the... [simple] form these other commodities are present implicitly, but are not explicitly acknowledged. Hence we must move to a more concrete and complex category in which the fact that the value of commodity A can be expressed in any of an indefinite number of different commodities is explicitly stated.... The transition from the... [simple] form to the expanded form is a dialectical ordering in which a category of simple unity is systematically prior to one of difference.  

[Smith, 1990, 80-81]
The category of the expanded form of value is more concrete and adequate than the category of the simple form of value because, as Marx points out, it is only by positing the concept of an expanded form of value is it possible to conceive of abstract labour, as opposed to concrete and particular human labour, as the source and substance of value. Marx states,

The value of a commodity, the linen for example, is now expressed in terms of innumerable other members of the world of commodities. Every other physical commodity now becomes a mirror of the linen’s value. *It is thus that this value first shows itself as being, in reality, a congealed quantity of undifferentiated human labour. For the labour which creates it is now explicitly presented as labour which counts as the equal of every other sort of human labour, whatever natural form it may possess, hence whether it is objectified in a coat, in corn, in iron, or in gold. The linen, by virtue of the form of value, no longer stands in a social relation with merely one other kind of commodity, but with the whole world of commodities as well. As a commodity it is a citizen of that world.*  

[Marx, 1976, 155: emphasis added]

However, the category of the expanded form of value expresses the manifold, or *totality*, of diverse commodities *at the expense of* the possibility of expressing a sense of the singular, unified, individual commodity. For example, with respect to the expanded form of value, Marx carries on to say, “[a]t the same time, the endless series of expressions of its value implies that, from the point of view of the value of the commodity, the particular form of use-value in which it appears is a matter of indifference” [ibid.]. As such, this second category seeks to transcend this instability by unfolding into a third category wherein unity and difference are both expressed explicitly. Marx refers to this third category as the general form of value. Once again, this category is characterized by the making explicit of that which is merely implied in the category which precedes it in the logical progression. With Marx’s second category, it is an
inherent (yet implied) structural possibility that if the value of a single commodity (commodity A) can be expressed in the phenomenal forms of commodities B, C, and D, etc., then the values of commodities B, C, D, etc. are expressed by the single phenomenal form of commodity A. Marx’s third category, the general form of value, is, therefore, the reverse of the second category, and the exchange relation can be expressed as, “an indefinite number of commodities = a single, unified commodity.”

With the general form of value, the values of all different commodities—“the whole world of commodities”—is expressed by a single commodity which stands simultaneously as the universal commodity of exchange [Smith, 1990, 81]; this “form of value is simple and common to all, hence general” [Marx, 1976, 157]. As Smith argues, the tendency for the values of the world of commodities to be expressed in a single commodity “is based on the manner in which this eases generalized commodity exchange” [ibid.]. The universal commodity, which later on in Marx’s analysis becomes the money form, is a category of unity which incorporates but leaves intact the expression of all different commodities: “This general form is a unity in which all different commodities can express their value.... a unity which unites all differences, an identity of identity and difference, a stable form which manifests the value form to the greatest extent possible... (i.e., to the greatest extent possible under the condition that commodities alone are considered)” [Smith, 1990, 81-2].

The unity which is expressed by the general form of value is that all commodities in an exchange economy express themselves, commonly, as values—as something which is “not only differentiated from... [their] own use-value, but from all use-values” [Marx, 1976, 158]. The form of the universal commodity of exchange becomes the form
“assumed in common by the values of all commodities; it is therefore directly exchangeable with all other commodities. The physical form of the... [universal commodity] counts as the visible incarnation, the social chrysalis state, of all human labour” [Marx, 1976, 159]. This last point is important because it demonstrates the way in which the general form of value, as a category of unity-in-difference, is the most concrete and adequate category of the progression: not until the positing of the general form of value does it become clear that, in market society, commodities come into relation with one another as exchange-values [ibid., 158], and that this relationship can only be realized as a purely social (and, hence, historical) one:

It thus becomes evident that because the objectivity of commodities as values is the purely “social existence” of these things, it can only be expressed through the whole range of their social relations; consequently the form of their value must possess social validity....

The general value-form, in which all the products of labour are presented as mere congealed quantities of undifferentiated human labour, shows by its very structure that it is the social expression of the world of commodities. In this way it is made plain that within this world the general human character of labour forms its specific social character.

[Marx, 1976, 159-60]

What is most important to grasp with respect to the present discussion of Marx’s method is that Marx’s conceptual reconstruction of the simple, expanded and general forms of value is not the depiction of an historical ordering, but a logical one; the progression from one category to the next represents, not an historical progression, but a logical progression. The three categories do not depict three subsequent historical stages of development; they do not mirror the historical unfolding of the real process of production [Smith, 1990, 21]. As Marx reminds us,

It would... be unfeasible and wrong to let the economic categories follow
one another in the same sequence as that in which they were historically
decisive. Their sequence is determined, rather, by their relation to one
another in modern bourgeois society, which is precisely the opposite of
that which seems to be their natural order or which corresponds to
historical development. The point is not the historic position of the
economic relations in the succession of different forms of society....
Rather, their order within modern bourgeois society.

[Marx, 1973, 107-8]

The simple form of value, therefore, does not represent some early stage in the historical
development of capitalist production. On the contrary, all three categories only come into
existence when an economy of exchange has become fully developed—has become the
dominant organizing principle of social production and reproduction. The categories’
theoretical arrangement in analysis, after the historical fact of capitalist production’s
development as the dominant form of social production, serves to reveal the nature of
bourgeois society as a totality. As an object of categorial reconstruction, this totality is a
synchronic structure, a system of interrelations, even though it is always understood as a
structure, with a history. It is true that Marx dedicates large sections of Capital to the
description of empirical material and historical developments and events [Smith, 1990,
95]. However, as Smith points out, this description does “not determine the categorial
ordering of the theory” [ibid.]. Smith argues,

The model presented at the beginning of Capital,... does not represent some
stage of simple commodity production historically prior to industrial
capitalism. There has not existed in history any such stage. The model at the
beginning of Capital is instead a thought construct won by abstracting from
generalized commodity production all but its simplest elements. Marx,
proceeding systematically to progressively more concrete and complex
elements, then reconstructed the inner logic of this mode of production.

[Smith, 1990, 21-22]
Therefore, Smith continues, “[t]aken as a whole, Capital provides a systematic reconstruction of a historical phenomenon, not a historical account of the genesis of that phenomenon” [Smith, 1990, 95].

Origin Narratives, or, the Dialectic of Cause and Effect

We have established that the ordering of Marx’s theoretical reconstruction of the capitalist mode of production assumes the form of a systematic or logical, as opposed to an historical, progression. Take, for example, the category of exploitation. Marx derives the concept of exploitation out of his re-formulation of the labour theory of value. The labour-power of the worker creates more value for the capitalist than the value of that labour-power itself. In other words, in the worker-capitalist exchange relation, the capitalist exchanges less value (in the form of money, or, a wage) for more value (in the form of labour-power). This difference in the amount of value exchanged between the worker and the capitalist is the root and definition of exploitation. For Marx to arrive at this definition of exploitation, the concept of abstract labour as the source and substance of value (i.e., the labour theory of value) must already be in place. “If the labor theory of value is abandoned, then Marx’s category of exploitation may not be able to be formulated” [Smith, 1990, 114]. In terms of the historical development of capitalist production, however, this representational sequence or narrative is not adequate. Historically speaking, economic value as the expression of abstract labour does not precede exploitation; instead, the two things develop concurrently. From the point of view of the social totality, value and exploitation presuppose one another—one does not develop prior to the other.
In a similar fashion, Marx derives the category of capital accumulation from the category of exploitation. In Marx’s analytical narrative, exploitation is expressed by, or takes the form of, the extraction of surplus value by the capitalist from labour-power. Exploitation, or the extraction of surplus value, makes possible the accumulation of capital on the part of the capitalist (and, subsequently, the expansion of capitalist production). Logically, therefore, the category of exploitation precedes the category of capital accumulation, as it does in Marx’s reconstruction process. Historically, however, once again, this sequence cannot be adequate, for the capitalist has had to accumulate capital already—i.e., he or she has had to accumulate capital in the form of some type manufacturing enterprise (however rudimentary), for example—in order to be in the position of extracting surplus value from labour-power.23

However, when it comes to the positing of “origins,” it is not merely the case that Marx’s logical or systematic process of reconstruction is at odds (discontinuous) with a linear historical mode of representation. On one level, Marx’s reconstruction even appears to be at odds with itself. Throughout Marx’s analysis, he posits certain categories as ordering or deriving categories from which other categories are subsequently ordered or derived. Above, we saw that Marx posits the labour theory of value as a deriving category from which he derives the categories of exploitation, capital accumulation, and so on. Here, we can describe the labour theory of value (or abstract labour) as occupying

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23 At this point in Marx’s analysis, Tony Smith points out that Marx “breaks through the circularity” of the relationship between exploitation and accumulation by interrupting the logical reconstruction of the totality of capitalist production with the historical account of primitive accumulation. This is one way in which, according to Smith, the logical and historical elements of Marx’s method exist in a mutually supportive correspondence. While I agree with Smith’s formulation of Marx’s interlacing of logical and historical narratives in his analysis, I will argue that the relationship between categories (such as exploitation and accumulation) which seem to pose a dilemma for the positing of historical origins of the development of capitalist production is not exactly “circular” in the way that Smith describes. I will offer a different way of figuring the relationship between categories through the idea of the dialectic of cause and effect and Marx’s positing of what I call origin narratives.
the position of condition or "cause" in the developmental chain, whereas exploitation and capital accumulation can be situated as the effects of that cause. However, at other points in the analysis, Marx reverses this sequence. At different moments in the narrative reconstruction, Marx describes abstract labour as the effect of the exchange process, a process which necessarily presupposes that exploitation and capital accumulation are already factual realities. In this way, Marx's reconstruction appears to be circular and self-conflicting.

Examples of developmental "causes" which, later in Marx's analysis, turn out to be the "effects" of that same process they were earlier described as initiating (and vice versa) can be found throughout Marx's works, and Capital, in particular. Throughout Capital, Marx constructs several different narrative sequences which depict the development of capitalist production (which, as we will see, on one level, actually depict the systematic development of the categories of capitalist production). However, each of these narratives locates a different starting place or originating moment for that development. The result is that, within the same analysis, Marx seems to posit multiple and simultaneous origins of the development of capitalist production. In light of this observation, some have accused Marx's analysis of being self-contradictory.24 For example, at one point in Capital, Marx constructs a narrative in which he posits the circulation of commodities as the necessary originative moment in the development of capital [Marx, 1976, 247]. A few pages later, Marx constructs another narrative, this

24 Many critics consider Marx's positing of multiple and concurrent origins of capitalist production to be a self-contradictory flaw in Marx's analysis, and spend critical energy attempting to discern what Marx intended as the true and adequate historical origins and developmental sequence of capitalist production. In my opinion, these attempts miss an important point with respect to Marx's method, as I will explain. My understanding that these critiques of Marx currently circulate is based on witnessing and participating in several conversations and debates held at the Languages and Politics of Contemporary Marxism Conference (University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 1996) and the Marxism 2000 Conference (University of Massachusetts-Amherst, 2000).
time, where the availability of “free” workers who sell their labour-power on the market as a commodity is identified as the “one historical pre-condition” of the development of capital \cite{ibid., 274}. Later on, Marx posits co-operation as the origin of capital \cite{ibid., 453}. And again, further on, Marx states, “[a] division between the product of labour and labour itself, between the objective conditions of labour and the subjective labour powers [is]... the real foundation and the starting point of the process of capitalist production” \cite{Marx, 1976, 716}.

It is not the case, however, that by positing various, (apparently) distinct origins of capitalist production, Marx contradicts himself, or offers a self-conflicting analysis. I have argued throughout this discussion that Marx’s method takes its characteristic form as a consequence of the properties of his object in question. We have discerned that the two defining properties of the capitalist mode of production which inform Marx’s method are, first, that it is a complex totality—a social structure or whole—and, second, that it is a fluid process—it exists in a state of constant motion and transformation. Earlier (chapter two), we saw how these properties are the source of a representational dilemma with respect to the object of analysis. On the one hand, the representation of a fluid structure or process implies the requirement of a linear or progressive representational approach which would necessarily misrepresent the holistic character of a structured totality. On the other hand, an imagistic or gestalt-like representational approach which would seem to more adequately capture a structured totality, would also misrepresent the progressive character of that object as a frozen snapshot. Representing a totality is challenged by the fact that each of its elements or moments cannot be adequately grasped outside of the whole network of their relationships to all the other elements and moments.
that constitute that whole. As Fredric Jameson has said, it is "as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything" [Jameson, 1971, 306].

This representational challenge posed by the nature of the object to be represented is illustrated, for example, by what earlier appeared to be the circular situation of the role of the accumulation of capital in the development of capitalist production. Marx's challenge is to demonstrate how accumulation must be understood, most adequately, if counter-intuitively, as being both the condition of capitalist production, as well as, the latter's effect, all at the same time. In Capital, Marx states: "If, therefore, a certain degree of accumulation of capital appears as a condition of the specifically capitalist mode of production, the latter causes conversely an accelerated accumulation of capital. With the accumulation of capital, therefore, the specifically capitalistic mode of production develops, and with the capitalist mode of production the accumulation of capital" [Marx in Zelený, 73-74].

What seems to be Marx's contradictory positing of multiple origins is, in fact, the form taken by Marx's attempt to solve this representational dilemma. I refer to the various developmental progressions recounted by Marx, wherein each account offers a different, yet, viable location from which to proceed to trace the outline of the whole, "origin narratives." Each origin narrative offers an "accurate" rendering of the object and stands on its own, as such. However, in the context of all the origin narratives taken together (i.e., from the vantage point of the end of the analysis—in retrospect), we see that each starting place must also be considered as only offering a provisional representation of the object. By demonstrating that it is possible to draw out the movement of capitalist production starting from various different elements of that
totality, by the end of the exposition, Marx has demonstrated, *at the same time*, that no single element, *in itself*, is adequate as a starting place from which to trace that movement. This is one expression of the dialectical movement of Marx's method and analysis: the character of the totality that is revealed by the possibility of identifying various origins of that totality during the course of the analysis, *by the end of the analysis* has been suspended in the form of its opposing character—a totality with no particular, identifiable origin. From the perspective of the end of the reconstruction process, the capitalist mode of production, as a totality, is represented as having no single identifiable origin, *per se*. This is why, from retrospect, each origin narrative must be considered as provisional. There is no adequate origin when speaking of a totality, in general. To speak of many origins is, dialectically, at the same time, to speak of no single origin.

The form of Marx's theoretical reconstruction is, therefore, able to capture and make explicit both the sense of the object as a holistic structure and as a fluid process. The sense of capitalism's continuous movement and transformation is captured in the various origin narratives or developmental sequences which express not only that that formation has evolved from a prior state to its current one, but that its inherent tendency is to continue evolving into something else. The sense of capitalism as a structured totality is captured by revealing that that formation has no particular originating moment, but exists as a network of relationships between its various elements.

Figuring the particular character of capitalism as a structured whole is central to the work of Louis Althusser. Althusser points out that no resulting characteristics or "effects" of the capitalist mode of production can be traced back to simple origins or

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25 Here, I am emphasizing that, at this moment, Marx's interpretation of capitalist production and his method of interpretation are revealed as inherently articulated. This example demonstrates that, in Marx, method of analysis and content of analysis are provisionally distinguishable, yet, continuous identities.
"causes." Instead, these characteristics will always be the effects of the complex structure, as a whole. In other words, each resulting characteristic of capitalism will have multiple, simultaneously conditioning determinations, or be “overdetermined,” in Althusser’s lexicon. This situation implies, therefore, that each resulting characteristic or “effect” of capitalism presupposes the whole capitalist structure, including those things which were once identified as the latter’s simple origins or “causes.” Althusser states, “Marx does not only show that every ‘simple category’ presupposes the existence of the structural whole of society, but also, demonstrates that far from being original, in determinate conditions, simplicity is merely the product of the complex process” [Althusser, 1969, 1961]. Althusser continues to argue that “simple origins” do not exist in Capital. A simple category, like “labour,” is not an origin but a product of the social whole; the latter cannot be reduced to simple origins [ibid., 1951]: “What Marxism refuses is the (ideological) philosophical pretension to coincide exhaustively with a ‘root origin’” [ibid., 1981].

We looked at this movement in Marx’s analysis earlier when we observed how an exchange economy generates simple categories which make it possible to reflect back upon and illuminate the nature of the structure, itself. These categories or “effects” of the social structure are subsequently posited by Marx, in the course of analysis, as provisional “causes” in the development of that structure. In the Grundrisse, Marx figures the relationship between wage labour, capital and landed property in such a way that expresses this dialectic of cause and effect. Marx states, “Capital, when it creates landed property, therefore goes back to the production of wage labour as its general creative basis. Capital arises out of circulation and posits labour as wage labour; takes form in this
way; and, developed as a whole, it posits landed property as its precondition as well as its opposite” [Marx, 1973, 278-9]. Here, causes are revealed as effects and perceived effects are posited as preconditions. As Marx states a few pages later, “[n]othing can emerge at the end of the process which did not appear as a presupposition and precondition at the beginning” [ibid., 304]. And, again, further on: “as soon as capital has become capital as such, it creates its own presuppositions… These presuppositions, which originally appeared as conditions of its becoming—and hence could not spring from its action as capital—now appear as results of its own realization, reality, as posited by it—not as conditions of its arising, but as results of its presence” [ibid., 460].

Another way of describing what I have called origin narratives is as the existence of different locations from which to observe the totality, where each location is merely a different moment of that totality, it being understood that they are all different moments of the same process, or different points of what is, nevertheless, the same structure. What I have called Marx’s construction of origin narratives is related to what Bertell Ollman identifies as “Marx’s practice in abstracting vantage points” [Ollman, 73: emphasis added]. Ollman states,

Equally characteristic of Marx’s practice in abstracting vantage points is the easy facility he shows in moving from one to the other. Aware of the limitations inherent in any single vantage point, even that of production, Marx frequently alters the angle from which he examines his chosen subject matter. While whole works and sections of works can be distinguished on the basis of the vantage point that predominates, changes of vantage point can also be found on virtually every page of Marx’s writings. Within the same sentence, Marx can move from viewing wages from the vantage point of the worker to viewing it from the vantage point of society as a whole. [Ollman, 73]
Ollman’s formulation further serves to counter the claim that Marx’s positing of multiple origins of capitalist production in his reconstruction process is self-conflicting. Different elements of a structured totality will come into relief depending on from what side, angle, perspective or vantage point the theorist is reconstructing that totality-object. Or, as Ollman points out, for Marx, it could be more accurate to say that what we may initially construe as different elements of the structure are, in fact, the representation of the same process or relationship, merely observed from different angles. This situation, according to Ollman, is what Marx refers to as “identity”:

In one place, Marx says by “identity” he means a “different expression of the same fact” [Theories of Surplus Value, part 2]. This appears straightforward enough, but in Marx’s case, this “fact” is relational, composed of a system of mutually dependent parts. Viewing this mutual dependence within each of the interacting parts, viewing the parts as necessary aspects of each other, they become identical in expressing the same extended whole. Consequently, Marx can claim that labor and capital are “expressions of the same relation, only seen from opposite poles” [Theories of Surplus Value, part 3]. Underlying all such claims are abstractions of extension that are large enough to contain whatever is held to be identical.

[Ollman, 42-43]

For Georg Lukács, the necessity of recognizing and positing the identity of the various elements of a totality is also a matter of method. According to Lukács, “the essence of the dialectical method lies in the fact that in every aspect correctly grasped by the dialectic the whole totality is comprehended and... the whole method can be unraveled from every single aspect” [Lukács, 170]. The revelation of the essential identity of what initially appear to be distinct or oppositional moments or categories, such as the identity of “cause” and “effect,” is a hallmark of Marx’s method and dialectical
thought, more generally. It is the characteristic movement by which, according to Fredric Jameson, we can describe dialectical thought as “tautological” [Jameson, 1971, 341].

The idea of the dialectical tautology conveys the sense in which two seemingly opposed or independent categories, moments, phenomena, or events are, within a dialectical framework of analysis, revealed as expressions of one and the same object. When cause is revealed as effect and vice versa, the logical implication (which seeks explicit expression) is that cause and effect were one and the same in the first place. In fact, each dialectical tautology is fundamentally the expression of one identity, in particular, namely, the identity of subject and object [Jameson, 1971, 342]. The subject-object opposition is suspended in the realization of the subject that she/he, along with the analyzing process itself, is part of the larger totality which is also the object of her/his analysis. The empirical and objective distance the (apparently) independent observer imagines to be between her/himself and the phenomenon or object in question is revealed, in the course of analysis and in hindsight, as non-existent, and replaced by an intimacy so acute that the distance between subject and object disappears altogether.

Jameson explains:

Nondialectical thought establishes an initial separation, an initial dualism, naively imagining itself to be a subjectivity at work upon an objectivity wholly different and distinct from itself. Dialectical thinking comes as an enlargement upon and an abolition of this initial dualism, for it realizes that it is itself the source of that external objectivity it had imagined to be something separate; and this must now be understood... in the Marxist sense in which the external world is the product of human labor and human history so completely that the human producer is himself the product of that history.

[Jameson, 1971, 342]
Here, once again, we have arrived at the revolutionary force of Marx's method although, this time, from the vantage point (by way of the origin narrative) of a dialectical configuration of identity. The realization that the subject is both the creator and the creation of the social world—the realization of the identity of subject and object—is imperative for Marxist interpretations which strive to demonstrate that human labour, and not reified economic categories (property, capital, commodities, money, etc.), is the source of social value and of the social relations which confront it as a dominating objective force.
Chapter Five

Mediation as Allegory: Reading Political Economy Through the Artwork of Geoffrey Farmer

The discussion of the import of dialectical contradiction and/or identity (we have discovered that they are, in fact, the same thing) in Marx’s method at the end of chapter four provides us with a rationale for turning away from a “narrow” focus on Marx’s analytical procedure, per se, and outwards, towards other contemporary social phenomena and practices, in order to discern how the two “levels”—how the “this and that,” the “here and there,” the “then and now”—might be conceptually articulated. I am referring to the idea that we can posit an identity between the concept of Marx’s method which I have constructed in the preceding pages (a concept of method which emphasizes a function of abstraction and representation, history, totality, dialectic, and expresses what I am calling an aesthetic sensibility) and the particular character of the contemporary capitalist social formation, roughly periodized by the second half the 20th century to the present. In other words, that which I have forwarded, here, as the orienting concepts of abstraction/representation, and the necessity of the theoretical and imaginative retrieval of a collective, historical and totalizing vantage point (as well as, my choice to capture both of these things within the concept of “an aesthetic sensibility”) in the formulation of a Marxian method of social analysis, all express, themselves, the particular contradictions which characterize the contemporary capitalist formation. Therefore, we can think of my privileging of the aforementioned concepts with respect to the project of mapping Marx’s method as enunciating (and participating in the
constitution of) a certain ideology of this “stage” of capitalist formation—this stage of modernization—the various characteristics of which are reflected in its different aliases: post-industrial society, society of the spectacle, the information age, consumer culture, image society, network society, postmodernism, globalization. Each one of these designations offers a particular “cognitive map” of the contemporary social formation and, in part, the task of the remaining discussion is to sketch some of the mediations entailed by an identification of the present project of representing Marx’s method with some of the characteristics of the contemporary social world expressed by these designations of it.

The Making Alike of Different Things, or, the Exchange of Political Economy for Art

One of the “objects” of the present examination of Marx’s method must necessarily be contemporary capitalist society, itself. As such, my description of the remaining discussion as a turning away from Marx’s analytical procedure is, on one level, merely a pretense. To shift the focus “outwards” towards an examination of some of the features and social contradictions which serve to define what is distinct about the present historical conjuncture is also to reveal something about—to historically situate—the possibility of grasping and figuring Marx’s method in the particular way that I do, above. Simply put, the path which turns away from the question of Marx and method will inevitably carry us back there. This idea is merely another way of expressing the dialectical “lesson” of the “dependency of thought on its own content or object” [Jameson, 1971, 342]. Fredric Jameson summons Theodor Adorno’s essay “Society” as a context for the necessity of grasping this dialectical lesson, the neglecting of which has
been, likewise, the source of much confusion with respect to Adorno’s formulation there [ibid.]. For example, if we lose touch with a sense of the mediation between the concept of society—the possibility of thinking society in a particular way—and society as an empirical object of observation and scrutiny, then we may conclude that Adorno confuses these two things by indiscriminately shifting back and forth between them. On the contrary, as Jameson points out, Adorno’s method and goal is to illustrate how an adequate grasping of either object requires a sense of the interdependence of both, as well as, a sense of the interdependence of the, nonetheless distinct, registers of thought which each object enunciates.

Thus the reader of such an essay as Adorno’s “Society” may too rapidly conclude that the writer has unjustifiably mingled two different types of considerations, two wholly different objects of research—that he frequently, and indeed deliberately, confuses social theory or the history of various concepts of society with sociology or the empirical study of the various existing societies themselves. And it is certainly true that Adorno’s is an incessant shifting of reference back and forth between the two levels: for as we have already seen above, he aims precisely at demonstrating that the difficulties inherent in the concept of society…result not from imperfect theorization, which greater ingenuity or more accurate data might be expected to rectify, but rather from the objective condition of society itself as a real object, undefinable at any point and yet omnipresent, whose control over individuals is reflected in the very contradictions of the idea itself…

[Jameson, 1971, 342-3]

Similar to the two mediated, yet distinct, registers between which Adorno’s theoretical construction of “society” reverberates (as depicted by Jameson), I have offered two senses of a function of abstraction, likewise mediated, yet distinct, between which the present discussion has also shifted back and forth: one is the figure of abstraction as the material function which motors exchange in a market economy, and the other is the figure of abstraction as the conceptual function of Marx’s method of analysis.
I have argued that there exists a relation of identity between these two figures of abstraction, and describe their mediation in the mode of production, or, in other words, depict them as two different moments of the same social process or object. Like the relationship between Adorno’s “two objects” above, we can describe the relationship between the two figures of abstraction as constituting a vertical (syntagmatic or metaphoric) relationship in the sense that they express two different “levels” or registers of thought. The register of the possibility of thinking the historical object (i.e., the register of abstraction as conceptual function, or Adorno’s theorizing of what makes certain conceptions of society possible) expresses a degree of self-reflectivity that is not expressed on the register of the representation of the historical object, itself. And yet, because this former register of thought is as much a product of the social totality—the same, singular social process—it, too, enacts the contradictions which structure that social process, if in its own particular way.

The contradiction which structures the register of the concept—the register of thought which reflects upon the historical possibility of conceptualizing objects—is that the enunciation of a higher degree of self-reflectivity, necessarily, at the same moment, enunciates a higher degree of reification. We have already discovered that this is the case in our earlier examination of the particular function and capability of categorial thought (chapter three). It is a consequence of the complete abstraction (or reification) of the category of thought—its complete “denaturing,” the absolute emptying of the possibility of it making any historically particular or concrete reference—that it is possible for the category to reflect back on historical moments and processes that are not its own (i.e., allows for the possibility of genealogical constructions), as well as, on the category’s own
procedural dimensions. The reification of categorial thought is also its potential to be productive. The register of the concept also expresses a higher degree of reification in terms of its appearance of greater autonomy with respect to the mode of production than, for instance, does the apparently more immediate register of the historical object. Recall Marx's denunciation of the philosophers who administer to a "new age" characterized by the "reign of ideas" [chapter one; Marx, 1973, 164]. According to Marx, while philosophical ideas and categories (or "theory," for a more contemporary reader) are "nothing more than the theoretical expression[s] of those material relations which are their lord and master" [ibid.], it is a feature of an exchange economy that they appear as autonomous entities, independent of that economy. 26 We can say, then, that the objects of the register of the concept offer themselves up as more complexly mediated entities than do historical objects; in capitalism, it is necessary that the former appear to exhibit a further degree of mediation with the mode of production.

This formulation is the basis for my earlier identification of a vertical relationship between the two registers of thought in question, and their corresponding objects—however much we now realize that the verticality their relationship expresses must be considered as historically provisional, or as an ideology of the mode of production, itself. The task of the remainder of this chapter, however, is to map a different relationship between the particular "practice of representation" entailed by Marx's method of analysis as I have characterized it in the preceding chapters, and another practice of representation entailed in the work of contemporary artist Geoffrey Farmer. This time, the relationship between these two representational practices can be described as a horizontal (paradigmatic or metonymic) relationship. Conventionally, the practice of analysis and

26 Cf. chapter one for a detailed discussion and examination of this situation.
critique (and, in Marx's case, we can locate this practice more specifically within a tradition of political economic analysis and critique), and the practice of creating works of art are considered to be very different endeavours. As much as this is, indeed, the case, in the following discussion, I will figure a possible mediation of the two very different practices in the contemporary mode of production. I will do this by demonstrating how both practices, in similar ways, respond to, and are structured by, common social contradictions that are reflected in both their form and content, or more specifically, by the blurring of the distinction between (or, the dialectical identity of) form and content in each example. I describe the relationship which I will demonstrate between Marxian political economic analysis, on the one hand, and creative, artistic production, on the other hand, as being horizontal in the sense that the two things express a kind of "lateral or metonymic likeness" wherein the one practice can be seen as extending out to meet the other as its continuation, as opposed to the metaphoric expression of the possible substitution of one for the other. Therefore, one of the goals of the following representation/analysis of the artwork of Geoffrey Farmer is to reveal how that work can be made to reflect back on the figure of a Marxian method of political economic analysis. I believe that a particular reading of Farmer's work can serve to further support the representation of Marx's method as demonstrating an aesthetic sensibility in its contemporary manifestation.

In A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy, Marx refers to the "perverted appearances" of an exchange economy as the "prosaically real" [Marx, 1972, 49]. According to Marx, as he expresses the matter in a letter to Engels, political economy must respond to these perverted appearances—the distorted and reified "prose"
of market relations—by presenting modern bourgeois society as a "dialectically
articulated artistic whole" [Marx, 1976, 944; emphasis added]. In this chapter, I look at
how the obstacles thrown up by market society which hinder such totalizing articulations,
and which express themselves in the form of Marx’s method of analysis, can also be seen
to animate the form and content of Farmer’s articulations in the sphere of artistic practice.
In chapter six, I introduce some ideas from the tradition of aesthetic theory, as well as,
some contemporary responses to the “question of aesthetics and politics,” in order to
discern why we may be justified in designating the conceptual construction of
“articulated wholes” as an aesthetic, as well as, political—and political economic—
project.

Mediation and Allegory

The concept of mediation has taken centre stage several times in this discussion, yet it is
possible to demonstrate a further dimension of its centrality to Marx’s method through its
articulation with the concept of allegory. Colloquially, allegory is most often thought of
as a literary, narrative operation; it refers to the narrative structure and process of
recounting, constructing or positing one narrative by way of the construction, positing,
etc. of a second narrative. The allegorical text is, therefore, the telling of two “stories” at
the same time, the first, the explicit or “literal” narrative and, the second, the implied
“subtext” or “intended meaning” of the first, explicit narrative. In other words, the
allegorical operation is a method of indirectly addressing or representing one thing while
apparently addressing or representing something else. In this sense, we can also think of

27 The material for the following formulation of the concept of allegory was gathered during a seminar
called “Allegory and the Dialectic” conducted by Fredric Jameson from August to December, 1999, at
Duke University, NC.
allegory as a process of transcoding, wherein one thing is expressed by taking the shape
and form of another. Here, the definition of the allegorical operation begins to slide into a
more general definition of the representational function itself and, in particular, echoes
that function of representation we identified earlier on as the exchange relation and the
labour theory of value.

We could even say, in this more general vein, that the act of explanation, itself,
demonstrates an allegorical sensibility in that it posits both a distinction and a
relationship between a text, event, object, etc. and its “meaning.” In Brecht and Method,
Fredric Jameson points out that “every interpretation of a text is always protoallegorical,
and always implies that the text is a kind of allegory: all positing of meaning always
presupposes that the text is about something else” [Jameson, 1998, 122]. In casting its net
so widely, this definition of allegory is in danger of being rendered useless and collapsing
altogether. However, this is not a characteristic particular to the concept of allegory,
alone: the dialectical situation of every concept or category—which is inherent to the
concept and, at the same time, historically so—entails that in forwarding its own logic,
the concept inevitably moves away from itself; the elements which make something
distinctive are always the same elements of its undoing, of its logical evolution into
something else. However, that this should be the case need not undermine an explanatory
concept or category’s provisional usefulness. With respect to the usefulness of the
concept of allegory, Jameson continues to say that “attention... [must] be turned to the
way in which controls are placed on the text to limit those meanings, to restrict their
sheer number, to direct the pervasive and omnipresent interpretive activity” [Jameson,
1998, 122].
The possibility of allegory depends upon the condition where a distinction can be made between a text (object, event, etc.) and its meaning, or, in other words, between its explicit expression and its implied one.\textsuperscript{28} Transcoding this observation into the terms of my earlier characterization of an exchange economy, we could say that this condition is part and parcel of a more general condition expressed by the discrepancy between the appearances of the social world generated by bourgeois society and the latter's essential social relations and processes of production. Allegory, therefore, bespeaks a certain reification which we can call (amongst the various different ways we have named it so far) the "crisis of representation." The crisis of representation expresses itself in various guises depending on the sphere of reference, from its concomitant "crisis of mediation" wherein capitalism compromises the capacity of its agents to perceive the interdependency (identity) of its apparently atomized elements (the sphere of social production), to the "gap" between signifier and signified (the sphere of linguistic, conceptual, or theoretical production).

We can describe the historical occurrence of allegory, therefore, as addressing a situation where the representational system is experienced as inadequate: allegory is a method of representing, indirectly, that which cannot be represented directly or adequately—to tell one (unrepresentable) story by way of another. In chapter two, I identified some of these "unrepresentable stories" in the demonstration of how capitalism hinders the expression of an historical sensibility, of a collective subject, and of the representation of the social world as a totalized whole—the allegorical operation assumes a dominant presence when certain thoughts and ways of seeing the social world become

\textsuperscript{28} This is also the historical condition of irony, a situation I will explore further in my discussion of the work of Geoffrey Farmer.
unthinkable. In performing this function, the allegorical text relinquishes claims to representational priority or stability; it cannot offer a stable or completely adequate, one to one relationship with the "historical reality," events, characters, or places for which it is solicited as a stand-in. It is the character of the allegorical reference, as, itself, an expression of the situation of the crisis of representation, that it cannot be anchored down, that it "comes loose":

Allegory consists in the withdrawal of its self-sufficiency of meaning from a given representation. That withdrawal can be marked by a radical insufficiency of the representation itself: gaps, enigmatic emblems, and the like; but more often, particularly in modern times, it takes the form of a small wedge or window alongside a representation that can continue to mean itself and to seem coherent.

[Jameson, 1998, 122]

So, for example, we could say that my designation of Marx's method of analysis as a kind of function of abstraction is an allegory for a more general social function of abstraction which has become historically submerged in conjunction with the difficulty of its collective perception and mapping. We could, indeed, position the former figure of abstraction as a kind of "small wedge or window" existing alongside the latter, suggesting something of a relationship between them but without compromising the individual coherency of either figure. This suggested relationship is, of course, their mediation in the mode of production and, here, therefore, the allegorical reference signals the failure of that mediation to make itself explicit. The crisis of representation, on another level, always signals a crisis of mediation—they share an identity (which we could also structure as an allegory).

The allegorical operation addresses that peculiar reification of market society which expresses itself as the inability to mediate—or, the perceived dichotomy and
opposition between—the universal and the particular. The relationship between the universal and the particular is not itself allegorical, rather, allegory achieves rhetorical ascendancy when such connections have been submerged. Therefore, in the traditional abstractions of philosophical discourse where the positing of a connection between the universal and the particular has currency (signaled by the language of “universal truth” and “mankind” and other such presently stigmatized grand narratives), allegorical thought is squeezed out—becomes redundant. In the present environment, where, in many camps, discourses of the particular (and its correspondent, “the local”) have achieved an elevated and prioritized status over those of the universal (evidenced, for example, by the vast circulation of postmodernist discourses and analyses in the 1980s and early 90s), allegory, as a rhetorical strategy, represents the attempt to negotiate this absence of the universal in “our age” of the submersion of categorial thought and the disgrace of philosophy and metaphysics. “[T]he very notion of a world-view or a metaphysic… is the first casualty of modernity itself,” Jameson argues in Brecht and Method, and continues on to describe how Toa, in Brecht’s work, functions as a “place-keeper for the metaphysics that have become impossible” [Jameson, 1998, 12]. Here, another word for “place-keeper” could be allegory. Allegory, as the production of narrative “stand-ins,” is, itself, a stand-in for a necessarily submerged metaphysical thought which expresses its immanent and historical suppression as a (nonetheless, legitimate) political injunction (“let the subaltern speak for themselves!”) and a falling out of favour.
Historical Allegories: The Hunchback and The Blacking Factory

The centrepiece of Geoffrey Farmer’s installation entitled *Hunchback Kit*, is a tall, narrow case which resembles the metal-reinforced carrying cases most often used to store and transport film and photographic equipment. Similar to the standard electronic equipment case, Farmer’s case is fitted with molded foam with spaces cut out in which the objects to be housed and transported in the case are placed. The dimensions of the case, however, are exaggeratedly non-standard: it is thirteen feet long, and only as wide and deep as is required to fit a single videotape laid on its side. The case houses a varied collection of made and found objects: a child’s hunchback costume, a selection of video tapes including an instructional video on the application of stage makeup, a small suit of multicoloured feathers, copies of Victor Hugo’s novel in various editions and translations, delicate aluminum tubes crowned with tiny LCD lights, a yellow light bulb, some rope, and handmade tools for crafting, we are told, do-it-yourself gargoyles. The only apparent connection between the objects in this otherwise seemingly random and eclectic, and rather paltry, collection is that each object either refers, in some way, to Victor Hugo’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, or is an object which could be of some use in a (amateur) theatrical production, presumably, of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

While each of the collected objects fits within the case, when the piece is installed, several of the objects are removed and placed around the gallery space, depending on the layout of the gallery and the disposition of the installer. The piece includes an installation manual written by Farmer. When objects are removed, they are

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29 *Hunchback Kit* was first installed at the Catriona Jeffries Gallery (Vancouver) in 2000, and, again, later that same year at the Art Gallery of Ontario. The piece was subsequently purchased by the Vancouver Art Gallery.
© Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit*, 2000
Reproduced by permission of the artist and courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery.
© Geoffrey Farmer, *Hunchback Kit*, 2000
Video still, “How to Make Your Own Gargoyle”
Reproduced by permission of the artist and courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery.
replaced in their compartments by white styrofoam dummies carved into the shapes of the missing objects. The gallery space is incorporated into the installation in other ways: as with many of Farmer’s installations, the different rooms and corners of the gallery are quite literally connected, and connected to the work, in this case, by thread and by a trail of snowflakes cut from magazine pages which descends the gallery stairs. When the piece was first installed in the Catriona Jeffries Gallery, bare light bulbs were suspended from the ceiling and extended down to the lower level of the gallery, producing a paradoxically minimal and mundane, yet cathedral-like effect. A “rose window” was painted on the gallery’s front window, but instead of stained glass, consisted of a large opaque black blob. Incidentally, the black blob absorbed so much heat that it shattered the front window of the gallery, subsequently producing a mosaic, stained glass effect.

According to the artist, before evolving into what became Hunchback Kit, the project was originally conceived as a simulated archival project featuring an inventory of objects and artifacts which referred, in some way, to the life and works of Charles Dickens (and his novel Oliver Twist, in particular), as well as, to the contemporary film industry. The collection of materials included such things as, publicity materials from various movie productions of Dickens’ novels, set décor and props, and costumes, such as the patched urchin costumes worn by Fagin’s young pickpockets. Farmer intended to house the simulated archive in a second simulated film industry artifact, a model of a movie props and equipment trailer constructed in the gallery space. The trailer was intended to double as a makeshift movie set, with the reproduction of Fagin’s lair built inside.
While this project, entitled *The Blacking Factory* (a detail taken from Dickens’ biography; Dickens laboured in a blacking factory as a boy), was conceived prior to *Hunchback Kit*, it was realized subsequently. Its final form is different form its original conception. *The Blacking Factory* is dominated by a full-size reproduction of a film industry trailer (28 feet long, 13 feet high, and 8 feet wide), such as those large white truck-trailers used for actors’ dressing rooms and for storing and hauling equipment. It consists of a steal frame, covered with thin wooden panels painted white, and has been left hollow, with no floors or roof. The rivets of the real trailers have been simulated by plastic screw caps glued onto the panels and the frame. The model has genuine trailer wheels (altered) and genuine trailer details, such as decals and lights, that were either purchased or found as scraps from old trailers. The dirt which would naturally be found on the real trailers has been painted on. The trailer has a kind of eerie or ghostly presence in two senses. First, upon inspection, it is clear that it is not a genuine trailer and, yet, the reproduction is adequately faithful to the real object that a viewer could immediately mistake it as such at first glance. Second, the odd, incongruity of the thin and light materials used (veneer, plastic) to recreate what is actually such a large and heavy object produces the effect of a kind of shadowy, ghost-like relationship of the reproduction to the real object. The installation consists of other elements, as well: a prop newspaper box containing a prop newspaper (the newspaper headline speaks of a new bullet train running from San Diego to Vancouver), and a looped film projection made from two photographic stills simulating the explosion of the gallery in which the piece was first installed.

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30 *The Blacking Factory* was first installed in the Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver) in 2002 and later purchased by the National Gallery (Ottawa).
Reproduced by permission of the artist and courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery.
© Geoffrey Farmer, *A Box With the Sound of Its Own Making*, 2002 DVD projection, *The Blacking Factory*
Reproduced by permission of the artist and courtesy of Catriona Jeffries Gallery.
The complexity of Farmer’s work, and the great number of different, yet integrated, ideas and themes which the work interrogates (including the legacy of a Western “tradition” of conceptual art practice in which Farmer’s work has been situated) precludes a comprehensive analysis of the work, here. Given the purposes and constraints of the present discussion, it is necessary to artificially contain the numerous conceptual trajectories offered by the work (unfortunately, by neglecting them) and focus only on those elements which help to illuminate my own formulations.

Despite this caveat, it does not seem eccentric to begin an analysis of these two of Farmer’s installations by questioning the significance of the particularly overt references to Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens, their literary works, and the social milieux of 19th century Paris and London. One way of understanding these references is as performing an allegorical function. We have already discerned that allegory refers to the operation whereby one narrative “stands in for” (makes reference to, represents, mediates) another which, for one reason or another, cannot be represented. As is the case with Hunchback Kit and The Blacking Factory, the allegorical figure often marks a resemblance between a past situation, event, transformation, etc. and a present one. However, perhaps more significant than drawing a parallel between two historical moments, Farmer’s installations articulate these two historical moments and figure a continuation between them. Generally speaking, we can call this historical continuation or process, the “then” and “now” of which is allegorized in both Hunchback Kit and The Blacking Factory, modernization.

In fact, modernization has long functioned as a codeword for the totalized historical movement that is the overdetermining structure of an inventory of interrelated
phenomena. These phenomena include the shift from feudal obligation to wage labour as the dominant social relationship, the stabilization of a free market economy, the industrial revolution, the establishment of the factory system, colonialism and the imposition of a European, imperialist “world order,” the challenging, and eventual unseating, of a theological (religious/Christian) explanation, ordering and governing of Europe by the humanist principles of the scientific, technological Enlightenment and the corresponding separation of Church and State, also referred to as secularization. Both Victor Hugo and Charles Dickens were literary figures whose work is most famously and conventionally recognized as the narration and documentation of the social pain and upheaval which accompanied the revolutionary economic, social and cultural transformations of 19th century Europe. Both Dickens’ representations of urban poverty, the exploitation of factory workers and, especially, child labour, and Hugo’s romantic and gothic nostalgia for a pre-capitalist, pre-industrial and pre-secular social order (represented by Notre Dame cathedral, itself) speak of the casualties of modernization.

What, then, is the contemporary situation being allegorized by these 19th century narratives of exploitation, displacement and painful social transformation, and why is this situation unrepresentable in a more direct way such that the allegorical figure becomes a necessary stand-in? It is not a stretch to argue that the social transformations which have taken, and continue to take, place in the (Western) social world of late 20th and 21st century capitalism, in tandem with rapid developments in digital/computer/new information/communication technologies, are as defining, revolutionary, and “world-ordering” as those which marked the social landscape of 18th and 19th century Europe. At first glance, the social world of 19th century Europe, existing at the very dawn of
industrialization and a newly dominant exchange economy, could hardly appear more
dissimilar and alien to the contemporary, globally-capturing social formation of high
tech, digitally networked, virtual-cyber-wired-etc., consumer capitalism. However,
despite the obvious differences between “then” and “now,” Farmer’s allegorical figures
serve to remind us that the story of the contemporary social, political and economic
formation (for which commentators have introduced many names, the most current and
familiar being “globalization”) is no less a story of exploitation, disenfranchisement,
poverty, child labour and social, political, economic and cultural marginalization. But
even more significant than any likeness which can be posited between these historical
narratives is the demonstration that they are, in fact, the same narrative, that they are two
different moments of the same historical process. The movement from colonialism to
decolonization to neocolonialism, from national (if this ever really did exist) to

31 To say that contemporary consumer capitalism is globally structuring, and cannot be conceptually
restricted to the experience of those in the West (or the North, or the first world), is in no way to argue that
global capitalism has a homogenizing or leveling effect on the different locales and constituencies it
materially and logically incorporates. In fact, the situation is the reverse: the present “world order” could
likely not survive the crisis that would ensue should the populations of the third world find themselves in
the situation of being able to consume (goods and natural resources) and produce waste to the degree and at
the rate of that which has become standardized in the North. The very reproduction of global consumer
capitalism is contingent upon preserving the difference between the forms through which it materially,
socially, politically, and economically expresses itself in the first world and in the third. For example, the
difference, or gap, between the first world and the third world which global consumer capitalism must
preserve takes such forms as, expensive labour-power (to sustain consumption) vs. cheap labour-power (to
sustain production), a high living standard vs. a low living standard, a relatively high degree of
environmental protection regulation vs. environmental devastation, industry based on high tech,
management, information and research and development services vs. industry based on the production of
goods and exportable agricultural products, relative political stability vs. political instability, “democracy”
vs. totalitarian regimes, and so on. All this is merely another way of articulating the recognition of the
dependency of global capitalism on what is more commonly referred to as an international division of
labour. The fact that, as consumer capitalism expands (as it must), it looks to the third world as a source of
new and vast markets for goods and, therefore, must, at the same time, make materially possible the
consumption of these goods by third world populations, as well as, instruct them to be “more like us” in
their consumption practices and ideologies, is just one of the inherent contradictions and immanent crises
of global capitalism which must be managed in one way or another.

32 An inventory of some of these names would include, post-Fordism, postindustrial society, the network
society, postmodernity, postcolonialism, the information age, and Empire.
international to global capitalism, from imperialism to Empire,\textsuperscript{33} or from the steam
generator to the computer processor, is as much a narrative of historical \textit{continuation} as it is
a narrative of historical \textit{transformation}.\textsuperscript{34} It marks the continuation of a socially
organizing logic of exchange, the rule of private property, social divisions based on
whether one is a buyer or a seller of labour power, the domination of the third world by
the first, and so on.

As allegorical figures, therefore, the industrial revolution, the dismantling of
traditional ways of life, the organization of labour around the factory system, and the
related European class struggles of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century—representations of which were
popularized by Dickens and Hugo in their novels—function in Farmer’s installations in
two ways: first, to facilitate the allusion to a present situation by way of a past one and,
second, to mediate between the past and the present. Here, allegory foregrounds the
connectedness and historical continuity between “then” and “now,” and suggests that
political agitation around labour issues and the social contradictions of contemporary
consumer society are not new developments, but have a long genealogy.

In “Marxism and Historicism,” Jameson argues that an individual historical text,
such as a novel by Dickens or Hugo, necessarily calls forward the entire mode of
production of which it is an expression [Jameson, 1988b, 174-5]. In this way, a spectator
of Farmer’s installation, in her/his encounter with the figure of such an historical text,
enacts more than the confrontation between one individual and an individual historical

\textsuperscript{33} Here, I am invoking the concept of “Empire” as it is configured in the book, by that same title, written by
Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt. Empire is the name Negri and Hardt give to the current social formation
of globally organized capitalism. In their analysis, Negri and Hardt demonstrate how Empire is both a
continuation and a transformation of previous social formations of capitalism.

\textsuperscript{34} To recognize any historical movement as both a continuation and a transformation is also to demonstrate
how the relationship between a past historical moment and the present enunciates both a dialectical
contradiction and a dialectical identity.
text. It also enacts the confrontation between one mode of production and another—between a past social formation and a present one. As such, the relationship between the reader or spectator and the historical text is not just a relationship between two individualities, but a relationship between two collectivities, or, two collective subjects [ibid.]. Furthermore, by positing a continuation—an identity—between this past collective subject and a present collectivity, as Farmer's works do, the objective distance between subject and object, upon which notions of scrutiny, observation, and judgement depend, is destabilized. Here, as Jameson points out, the past collective subject scrutinizes and passes judgment on us, as much as we reflect upon it:

[W]e must try to rid ourselves of the habit of thinking about our (aesthetic) relationship to culturally or temporally distant artifacts as being a relationship between individual subjects.... It is not a question of dismissing the role of individual subjects in the reading process, but rather of grasping this obvious and concrete individual relationship as being itself a mediation for a nonindividual and more collective process: the confrontation of two distinct social forms or modes of production.... Our individual reading thus becomes an allegorical figure for this essentially collective confrontation of two social forms.

If we can do this, I suggest that a second reformulation of the nature of this contact between present and past will gradually impose itself. We will no longer tend to see the past as some inert and dead object which we are called upon to resurrect, or to preserve, or to sustain, in our own living freedom; rather, the past will itself become an active agent in this process and will begin to come before us as a radically different life form which rises up to call our own form of life into question and to pass judgment on us, and through us on the social formation in which we exist. At that point, the very dynamics of the historical tribunal are unexpectedly and dialectically reversed: it is not we who sit in judgment on the past, but rather the past, the radical difference of other modes of production (and even the immediate past of our own mode of production), which judges us, imposing the painful knowledge of what we are not, what we are no longer, what we are not yet.

[Jameson, 1988b, 174-5]
One of the ways in which Farmer carries into the present the historical narrative of the social transformations with accompanied early capitalist production is by way of copious references to the contemporary Hollywood (i.e., commercial, US dominated) film industry. It is significant for the present analysis of *Hunchback Kit* and *Blacking Factory* that Dickens' and Hugo's representations of the social world of 19th century London and Paris took the form of novels, literary and aesthetic forms which were also popular, commercial entertainments. If the novels of Dickens and Hugo represent very early stages of the commodification of cultural texts, the Hollywood movie industry has become the symbol of its apogee. More significantly, the film and entertainment industry, which has become one of the most profitable (and, hence, most exploitative) branches of capitalist production operating today, marks the transition in the West from the centrality of the production/consumption of goods to the centrality of the production/consumption of the image. In Guy Debord's words: "This is the principle of commodity fetishism, the domination of society by 'intangible as well as tangible things,' which reaches its absolute fulfillment in the spectacle, where the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible *par excellence*" [Debord, paragraph 36]. The movie industry is, itself, an example *par excellence* of just how profitable the selling of "spectacles"—the new "intangible tangibles"—can be, granting the reality of an exchange economy as a function of the exchange of representations a new, almost poetic, dimension of transparency and literalness.

The movie industry is also held up as the foremost example of the possibility of what is referred to as synergy, or the interlacing of various branches of production and
goods around the selling of one particular "representation"; a single film production becomes the occasion for the production and consumption of a large variety of other products related, in some way, to the discursive universe of that film, such as, clothing, music, video games, toys, food, sporting events, cars, and so on. Furthermore, Hollywood's enormous success as an exporter of its products has placed it at the centre of debate concerning the cultural and economic (material and ideological) colonization of other nations and, most alarmingly, third world nations through the economies of scale and global reach of the US-dominated culture industry. The transnational presence of the US movie industry would be particularly evident for Farmer who lives and works in Vancouver, a location preferred by the industry both for filming and postproduction, thus earning the city the alternative title of "Hollywood North." When moving throughout Vancouver, it is nearly impossible not to encounter some neighbourhood which has been taken over by the large white movie trailers like the one Farmer reproduces in *The Blacking Factory*. One of the primary reasons for choosing Vancouver as the location for Hollywood productions is because of the advantageous exchange rate of the American dollar in Canada, resulting in lower labour and production costs. The transposition from Los Angeles to Vancouver is, therefore, a mark of what is commonly referred to as flexible accumulation—the reorganization of capitalist production taking place, roughly, since the mid 1970s, characterized by the restructuring of labour forces and a greater mobility and deregulation of labour and production practices with the goal of a more efficient extraction of surplus value.

It would seem, then, that the Hollywood movie industry is a particularly concentrated site of the features which characterize contemporary developments of
capitalist production. It is as though the majority of the most recent attempts to name the present historical conjuncture—information age, society of the spectacle, image society, neocolonialism, flexible accumulation, as well as, Jameson's description of the current "culturalization of capital"—and all the social transformations which these designations index, come to a crossroads in the figure of the contemporary network of enterprises which form the constellation of the Hollywood film industry. The seemingly incongruous juxtaposition in Farmer's installations of references to the novels of Hugo and Dickens and references to the commercial film industry figure the almost unimaginable continuity of the development of the social contradictions of 19th century production (which Hugo and Dickens both chronicled and confronted in their own "cultural productions") to the present day.

Even in Hugo's and Dickens' day, a certain ambiguity and duplicity is expressed by the cultural text which is, all at once, an aesthetic and artistic expression, a piece of social commentary, and a commercial entertainment. Such ambiguity is an expression of the social contradictions which necessarily structure a cultural text which is, on the one hand, a commodity, and on the other hand, claims an independence or a certain distance in kind from the economic process which incorporates it. As an entertainment, or commodity, the text participates in and depends on (and is the very icon of) the same social and economic apparatus of which its aesthetic face purports a kind of independence and sovereignty, and from which its critical face purports adequate objective distance so as to pass judgement. In Hugo's and Dickens' day, the colonization of cultural activities and texts by the economic logic of commodity exchange had begun, but was a relatively recent phenomenon. Therefore, while this "brand" of
interconnectedness of the economic and cultural spheres was already a social reality, as it remains so today, the *appearance* of this relationship was quite different. In the 19th century of Hugo and Dickens, it was much more possible (than it is today, for instance) to *conceptualize* a sphere of cultural, aesthetic or artistic practice which was distinct from the sphere of economic practice and which was not dominated (in terms of its form, content and production) by the organizing logic of market exchange.

Today, the situation of the cultural text is quite different: the ambiguity of the cultural text—the expression of its internal and situational contradictoriness—is more acute and, at the same time, so commonplace as to be completely taken for granted. Currently, the collapsing of cultural production with the business of commercial enterprise is so virtually complete, that it has been for some time almost impossible to imagine them as two separate things; it is an apparent commonplace, an invariable, ahistorical “fact,” that cultural texts are publicly circulated, received, or have any sort of public life at all, *as commodities*. But even to register cultural texts as commodities is to register their informing social contradictions, and this contradictoriness is not part of their popular persona: cultural products simply “are what they are,” and for the most part, their structuring contradictions have been discretely closeted. Currently, therefore, the underlying contradiction of the cultural expression or text which is also obliged to fulfil its dual role as agent for the extraction of surplus value, expresses itself in this way: the more acute the contradictory status of cultural texts becomes, the less remarkable and more “natural” and familiar it appears—the more it generates a kind of “perceptual numbness” [Jameson, 1998, 39] towards its situation. Now, we can see that allegory, as an operation which facilitates a conceptual mediation, can work in two opposite
directions, as it does in Farmer’s work: first, it can figure the connectedness of two (or more) seemingly discrete moments and, second, it can pull apart distinctive moments which have collapsed into the appearance of a single identity.

So far, with respect to the deployment of allegorical figures in Farmer’s work, we have looked at the what but not the why—i.e., why should Farmer find it necessary to represent themes such as the painful social transformations which accompany the “progress” of capitalist production in a non-direct, oblique or allegorical way? We have already traveled most of the necessary distance in answering this question in our examination of capitalism’s process of self-mystification (chapter two). The commonsense, popular perception of the contemporary social world tends to be one where the different fields of activity and experience—politics, religion, economics, private and domestic life, culture and the arts, etc.—are understood as existing autonomously from one another, discrete and compartmentalized. Furthermore, we have examined how market relations of production necessarily foster this appearance and thwart a perception of the social world in which these spheres of activity are viewed in their interconnectedness. Capitalism’s self-mystifying process is, therefore, another way of describing what we have also characterized as the current crisis of representation, where the dominant and conventional representational system is inadequate for capturing a sense of this interconnectedness.

The baleful political significance of this particular expression of the crisis of representation is described by John Berger in an article titled, “Written in the Night: The Pain of Living in the Present World.” Berger posted the article on the internet in February, 2003, as an assessment of the fevered state of confusion that seemed so acutely
to grip the world on the eve of the US invasion of Iraq. For Berger, the virtually global expression of fear, anger and confusion is symptomatic of the collective inability to map the interconnectedness of the social world and, specifically, the inability to perceive how capital underwrites this interconnectedness while obfuscating it at the same time:

People everywhere, under very different conditions, are asking themselves—where are we? The question is historical not geographical. What are we living through? Where are we being taken? What have we lost? How to continue without a plausible vision of the future? Why have we lost any view of what is beyond a lifetime?… Might it not be better to see and declare that we are living through the most tyrannical—because the most pervasive—chaos that has ever existed? It’s not easy to grasp the nature of the tyranny for its power structure (ranging from the 200 largest multinational corporations to the Pentagon) is interlocking yet diffuse, dictatorial yet anonymous, ubiquitous yet placeless. It tyrannises from offshore—not only in terms of fiscal law, but in terms of any political control beyond its own…. Its ideological strategy… is to undermine the existent so that everything collapses into its special version of the virtual, from the realm of which (and this is tyranny’s credo) there will be a never-ending source of profit…. Most analyses and prognoses about what is happening are understandably presented and studied within the framework of their separate disciplines: economics, politics, media studies, public health, ecology, national defence [sic.]. In reality each of these separate fields is joined to another to make up the real terrain of what is being lived. It happens that in their lives people suffer from wrongs which are classified in separate categories, and suffer them simultaneously and inseparably…. To take in what is happening, an interdisciplinary vision is necessary in order to connect the “fields” which are institutionally kept separate. And any such vision is bound to be… political. The precondition for thinking politically on a global scale is to see the unity of the unnecessary suffering taking place. This is the starting point.

[Berger]

Berger’s urgent and rightfully exasperated analysis of the collective inability to figure and locate the “source” of human suffering in the world today echoes Fredric Jameson’s prognosis that “reification… affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality. It is a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects or models his or her insertion into the collectivity” [Jameson, 1988, 146]. The allegorical
operation, as a kind of representational strategy or aesthetic response to this type of
reification, can be understood as a method of mediating historical moments, geographical
locales, events, and social groups which appear to have no direct relationship. In
Farmer’s installations, for example, without positing overly simple or direct mediations,
allegory functions to make connections between a past historical moment and the present,
between former centres of colonial empire and a neocolonialist global economic order,
and between those often unrecognized individuals and social groups who bear the brunt
of such developments, then and now. Here, allegory functions for the artist in the way
that the concept of mediation functions for the historian, the social analyst, or the political
economist. Jameson argues, “[m]ediations are... a device of the analyst, whereby the
fragmentation and autonomization, the compartmentalization and specialization of the
various regions of social life... is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a
particular analysis” [Jameson, 1981, 40]. In Farmer’s case, it is on the occasion of a
particular installation. And, given the necessarily creative and aesthetic energy demanded
by the project of imagining the conventionally unimaginable, perhaps it is the artist, more
so than the historian or social theorist, who is better suited to the task. Raymond Williams
seems to suggest as much:

In the study of a period, we may be able to reconstruct, with more or less
accuracy, the material life, the general social organization, and, to a large
extent, the dominant ideas. It is often difficult to decide which, if any, of
these aspects is, in the whole complex determining; their separation is, in
a way, arbitrary, and an important institution like the drama will, in all
probability, take its colour in varying degrees from them all. But, while
we may, in the study of a past period, separate out particular aspects of
life, and treat them as if they were self-contained, it is obvious that this is
only how they may be studied, not how they were experienced. We
examine each element as a precipitate, but in the living experience of the
time every element was in solution, an inseparable part of a complex
whole. And it seems to be true, from the nature of art, that it is from such a totality that the artist draws; it is in art, primarily, that the effect of a whole lived experience is expressed and embodied.

[Williams in Schiller, 118-9]

That "function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity" [Jameson, 1988b, 146]—the function which Jameson asserts has currently broken down—is what is referred to by Jameson, amongst other things, as "cognitive mapping." Cognitive mapping is a totalizing representational function—the figuration of the social totality, and of the individual or collective subject's relationship to that totality. As a predominantly representational practice, and one which is necessarily occupied with the question of form, Jameson argues that it may be most adequate to think of cognitive mapping as an aesthetic project. However, we have observed through Marx's analytical approach, the centrality of such a mapping capacity to an historical, political and collective sensibility and, as such, Jameson argues, cognitive mapping is "an integral part of any socialist political project" [Jameson, 1988a, 353] and, I would add, to political economic analysis. However, we have also observed (in chapter two), that market production relations will always preclude a completely adequate, direct, or transparent representation of the social totality. The characteristics of the way in which a particular society's reification expresses itself will, therefore, reveal something about the state of that society's "mental unmapability" [ibid.] and vice versa. Nonetheless, figures of the social totality will, and do, break through, even if in distorted and symbolic ways, in an attempt to "span or coordinate, to map, by means of conscious and unconscious representations... the gap between the local positioning of the individual subject and the totality of class structures[,]... a gap between phenomenological
perception and a reality that transcends all individual thinking or experience” [ibid.]. That in market society this gap cannot be done away with completely is the reason why, for Adorno, works of art can only reveal the “reality” of the social world in a negative, antithetical, i.e., mediated way:

Art exists in the real world and has a function in it, and the two are connected by a large number of mediating links. Nevertheless, as art it remains the antithesis of that which is the case. Philosophy has acknowledged this situation by defining art as “aesthetic appearance.”… [T]he content of works of art is not real in the same sense as social reality. If this distinction is lost, then all attempts to provide a real foundation for aesthetics must be doomed to failure. But artistic appearance, the fact that art has set itself apart in qualitative terms from the immediate actuality in which it magically came into being, is neither its ideological Fall, nor does it make art an arbitrary system of signs, as if it merely reproduced the world without claiming to possess the same immediate reality. Any view as reductive as this would be a sheer mockery of dialectics. [Adorno, 159]

I hope, by now, that the grounds for a proposed “likeness” and intersection between Marx’s method (as a form of dialectical, political economic critique) and a kind of aesthetic sensibility and practice are coming into focus. Francis Frascina states, “works of art are representations—whether or not resemblance to the ‘real’ world was of interest to their producers…. Artists work within changing systems and codes, as do practitioners of other disciplines. These systems and codes are the means by which people represent some kind of cognition of their world. Individual works of art, therefore, do no provide transparent illusions of ‘reality,’ or of the ‘world,’ but constitute determined and produced allusions to it” [Frascina, 30-31]. Both Marxian political economy and aesthetic practices, therefore, as the latter are described by Frascina, are concerned with “some kind of cognition of the world,” each by way of self-reflective representational strategies, and each by interrogating the illusion of transparency with respect to those
representations. Furthermore, each of the two projects is concerned, in some way, with the production of affect; without the presumption of being able to control or predict the precise contours of its affective energy, each projects seeks some kind of transformative response on the part of the recipients of those representations—the generation of a new experience and a new perception of the world and one’s relationship to it. A more sustained theorization and historicization of what I have chosen to call the aesthetic sensibility of a Marxian political economic method is the task of chapter six. Meanwhile, there are still more things to be learned about this intersection by looking at the work of Geoffrey Farmer from a different angle.

**Geoffrey Farmer’s Time is Out of Joint: What’s so Embarrassing about History?**

In addition to the more “wide angle” historical and allegorical gestures demonstrated by Farmer’s installations, these works also map more localized social contradictions, as well. For instance, Farmer’s work also interrogates the current relationship between art—its objects, institutions and the practice of making it—and other dimensions of the social, political and economic world. For example, the many allusions to the contemporary movie industry which are present throughout most of Farmer’s works—and by extension, allusions to that industry’s notoriously exploitative economy, the global, colonizing influence of Hollywood, its monumental production of waste, it collusion in a particularly conservative economy of image and spectacle, and its participation in often gendered, racialized and homophobic stereotyping—introduces the question of what art (including the occasion of Farmer’s own), the business of the culture industry, and the politics of image production have to do with one another. Most significantly, Farmer’s work
investigates the contemporary possibility and capacity of art to comment on, and participate in, other constituencies and spheres of life, work, experience and activity which are, perhaps, only apparently distinct from it. If Farmer’s work offers a productive vantage point with respect to the interconnections of the social totality it is not because it positions itself as having a distanced or objective relationship to that totality but as participating in it.

As such, and as I suggest above, there are other more localized and thematically self-reflective reasons why, in his representational practice, Farmer might proceed in an oblique or allegorical way. One reason has to do with the history of both “conceptual” and “political” art. More specifically, it has to do with the representational obstacle thrown up by the social contradictions which, since the early 20th century, torment artwork and artistic practices that seek to express (and interrogate their own capacity for) a wider social and political engagement. The specific dimensions of this problematic shift depending on the historical context in which one observes it. For instance, one version of this problematic was the central occupation of the aesthetic theories of the Western Marxists, and took the form of debates around what constituted a progressive political aesthetic—for the day—and rehearsed oppositions such as realism versus expressionism, or, realism versus the non-mimetic, anti-representational aesthetics of modernism or the avant-garde.

Today, this problematic expresses itself in a slightly different variation. Farmer’s work has been situated with respect to the history of an artistic tenor referred to as conceptualism. Emerging in the late 1960s and 1970s, conceptual art was characterized, amongst other things, by an acute intellectualism and self-reflectivity with regards to art’s
institutionalization and to whether or not art's institutional status compromised its capacity to function in the social world as anything other than a reflection of the market-oriented status quo. In other words, in the context of the ever more seamless integration of art and commerce, particularly evident by the 1980s, many artists were concerned with investigating the possibility of art's "progressiveness" while also functioning in collusion with "the art market." The concern with art's potential for a greater "social and political significance" also reflected a thematic tenor that was particular to this historical moment as well. Beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s, and gaining momentum throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, what was being expressed amongst many artists was a benevolent desire to represent those subjects, events, experiences and locales which had been "written out" of official versions of history. This desire to represent the unrepresented enunciates an historical conjuncture with the ongoing social struggles associated with that time, referred to as the "new social movements"—the anti-Vietnam war movement, the civil rights movement, the women's movement, the gay rights movement, and nationalist, anti-colonial movements in the third world. However, it was recognized that this benevolent desire to speak on behalf of the historically marginalized and silenced was, at the same time, inhabited by its own critique: power is in play in the practice of representation itself; to represent the silenced and marginalized is to "stand in for them" and silence them once again.

This conundrum became extremely aggravated in the late 1980s with identity politics. The contradictions involved in the well intentioned but problematic injunction to "let the oppressed speak for themselves" characterized the acutely contested terrain of representational politics. Reification expressed itself in the intellectual and conceptual
oppositions that ensued: divisions were drawn, camps were formed, and positions became dogmatic. It became colloquial to consider an artist’s or critic’s attempt to represent or reference marginalized identities or experience in which he or she did not historically participate as naïve and embarrassing at best, and politically dangerous and exploitative at worst. This reification also took another form; it was also expressed in the theoretical fetishism of individualism and difference, and in the depreciation of collective experience and the submersion of a collective sensibility. The concept of a collective identity or subject, which metonymically came to represent “traditional” leftist class-oriented political projects and critique, was perceived as hopelessly outmoded, not to mention politically suspect, itself, as a function of the colonization, homogenization, and suppression of difference with respect to identity and subjectivity. As Jameson, points out, the historical submersion of the collective subject assumed the public, aesthetic and intellectual persona of a “debate” between identity politics and class-based analysis:

[The repression of collective experience] first seeks to play off identity-political themes against class ones, and then, on another level, to depreciate politics altogether—as the action of collectives—in the name of the personal and of individual ownership. In the 1960s many people came to realize that in a truly revolutionary collective experience what comes into being is not a faceless and anonymous crowd or ‘mass’ but, rather, a new level of being... in which individuality is not effaced but completed by collectivity. It is an experience that has now slowly been forgotten, its traces systematically effaced by the return of desperate individualisms of all kinds.

[Jameson, 1998, 10]

In their book, Empire, Negri and Hardt describe the same historical situation from a slightly different angle yet again. Negri and Hardt are concerned, amongst other things, to posit and characterize the contemporary identity of what they refer to as “the multitude”—a political identity which articulates both movements of collectivity and
difference. During the course of this task (which is, itself, marked by the problematic we have currently been exploring), the authors describe what they understand as the unrepresentability of contemporary social and political struggles. According to Negri and Hardt, contemporary struggles have no language or rhetoric of their own and are forced, therefore, to adopt the outmoded and anachronistic communicative postures of the social struggles of the 1960s. The awkwardness of the translation—the poor fit—only serves to further aggravate the “paradox of incommunicability” with which contemporary struggles are faced and must negotiate [Negri and Hardt, 56]:

We must admit, in fact, that even when trying to individuate the real novelty of these situations, we are hampered by the nagging impression that these [contemporary social] struggles are always already old, outdated, and anachronistic. The struggles at Tiananmen Square spoke a language of democracy that seemed long out of fashion; the guitars, headbands, tents, and slogans all looked like a weak echo of Berkeley in the 1960s. The Los Angeles riots, too, seemed like an aftershock of the earthquake of racial conflicts that shook the United States in the 1960s. The strikes in Paris and Seoul seemed to take us back to the era of the mass factory worker, as if they were the last gasp of a dying working class. All these struggles, which pose really new elements, appear from the beginning to be already old and outdated—precisely because they cannot communicate, because their languages cannot be translated. The struggles do not communicate despite their being hypermediatized, on television, the Internet, and every other imaginable medium. Once again we are confronted by the paradox of incommunicability. [Negri and Hardt, 56]

At this point, it may seem as though we have left the analysis of the artwork of Geoffrey Farmer long behind. However, such is not the case: expanding upon the above historical and conceptual field of reference is, in fact, to narrow in on that target. For the very awkwardness and outdatedness which Negri and Hardt identify as ideologies of “the paradox of incommunicability,” as well as, the embarrassment and suspicion which adhere to attempts at representing the socially subaltern—like the embarrassment and
suspicion which, today, tends to accompany “sincere political commitment” given its potential for misdirection and its apparent facility for being diffused and reabsorbed by the systems of racism or economic marginalization which are often its targets (i.e., its facility for appearing foolish)—are some of the central themes of Farmer’s work. What I have attempted to do in the preceding discussion is to historically situate, and map the political economy of, these important themes for Farmer’s work: awkwardness, outdatedness, embarrassment, suspicion, and, soon to be added to the list, irony, are some of the particular ideologies and (aesthetic) expressions of the contemporary mode of production.

Farmer’s references to these themes are carried out both formally and in the content of his installations, although the distinction between form and content is blurred in the course of making the reference. For example, anachronism (embarrassment, outmodedness, etc.) is very often figured or represented in Farmer’s works by references to forms of past, “dated” artistic movements and expressions. In other words, the forms of past art practices, modes of representation and critique become the content of Farmer’s installations. In particular, Farmer often makes reference to past art forms (usually emerging from the 1960s and 70s) which are associated with, and express, some kind of self-conscious political commitment, position or critique. In an installation titled *Universal Pictures II*, Farmer makes reference to the legacy of 1960s-style protest and demonstration by displaying protest signs—rough, handmade signs with slogans seemingly quickly composed, with words crossed out, representing varying degrees of literacy, all protesting the Hollywood film industry. The signs were leaned up against the

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35 *Universal Pictures II* was first installed in the Monte Clark Gallery (Vancouver) in 1999. The show was mounted shortly after demonstrations in Hollywood by motion picture unions and workers against the loss of film industry jobs to Canada and to Vancouver, in particular.
gallery wall, as if abandoned, reminiscent of the waste and debris that litter the streets after a demonstration. Some of the signs read:

YOU
ARE SINCERELY INVITED TO A
FUNERAL FOR THE MOVIE INDUSTRY
AND THE STARS, PRODUCERS, LAWYERS,
MAKE-UP ARTISTS AND THE SHARPIES
WHO MADE IT
WERE MADE BY IT
AND DIED OR ARE DYING WITH IT
OUT!
WE DON'T NEED YOUR CONFUSING
NO FANTASIES/WE HAVE ENVIRO-
MENTS PROBLEMS, DRUGS AND
NEGLECT OF ELDERLY PEOPLE,
VIDEO ARTISTS AND THE SICK.

GONER
LOST FOREVER, MEMORIES
AND REALITY BEING REPLACED,
ALTERED AND LOST FOREVER

In another of Farmer’s installations stands a large black figure draped in a makeshift black cloak, under which one can make out a black costume wig, and holding a push broom where one would expect a scythe. A small gallery label near the figure reads, “The True Meaning of Embarrassment (sculpture).” Farmer’s work asks the question how and why certain concepts, styles, modes of thought, ways of seeing the world, critiques, intellectual positions, politics, or modes of representation which, at one time enjoyed currency, find themselves out of fashion, awkward, embarrassing or unthinkable. In particular, Farmer interrogates the idealism, naïveté, and embarrassment often associated with apparently outmoded expressions of political commitment. In an installation entitled Catriona Jeffries Catriona,\textsuperscript{36} which Farmer, at one time, intended to title “Herstory,”

\textsuperscript{36} Catriona Jeffries Catriona was first installed in the Catriona Jeffries Gallery (Vancouver) in 2001.
Farmer explores the historical shifts in the way feminist principles have informed the production, formal properties, exhibiting practices, and institutionalization of art. For example, Farmer appears to be interested in why art forms influenced by the feminist intellectual tenor of the 1970s—personal narrative and autobiography, a confessional brand of identity politics, a focus on the body, a desire for art as healing and ritual, the legitimating as “art” those forms of work traditionally domesticated and feminized as “craft”—currently appear as quaint, outmoded and functional only as historical indexes:

In Farmer’s piece sketchy black scribbles on the wall and a swing that hangs from the ceiling of the gallery are a reference to a 1970s body art performance by Carolee Schneeman in which, suspended from the ceiling on a swing, the naked artist drew on gallery walls just far enough out of reach that the only marks she could make there were scribbles or scratches. A vitrine in the front window of the gallery contains a historical display of artists’ books of an imagined group of feminist artists, one which is titled The Herstory of Catastrophe, suggesting perhaps among other things an accurate premonition of the foreclosure of such feminist aims in art and its abandoned optimism over a politics of consciousness. Other art historical references, like Farmer’s oblique reference to Felix Gonzales-Torres’ work Perfect Lovers, 1987-1990, in which a pair of synchronized white clocks made reference to AIDS and gay relationships, make similar reference to a lineage of work equally threatened by its own sincerity and autobiographical content.

[Brown and Best, 4]37

The formal elements of Farmer’s work, his use of performance, installation, and sculpture based on found, discarded, trivial or mundane objects, and non-heroic materials (tinfoil, tape, cardboard boxes, styrofoam, used clothing), also reference a tradition of art’s resistance to its commodification, to the marketable aura of the art object, and to an idealist formulation of value in artistic production. The use of meager and found materials and objects, reminiscent of Marcel Duchamp’s readymades, echoes a

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37 This passage, taken from the catalogue essay for Catriona Jeffries Catriona, was written by Lindsay Brown. Cf. Brown and Best.
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movement critical of the valorization of the precious, heroic and monumental art object that emerged with the Dadaists and the avant-garde, as well as, Duchamp's critique of "representational or vision-oriented" art. Today, these aesthetic strategies and occasions of formal resistance to art's own commodification also appear outdated and historically exhausted in the present context of the increasing seamlessness and identity of the cultural and economic spheres, of art and the art market.

The contradiction which underwrites the inclusion of throw-away materials in high art—an inclusion which immanently elevates the abject materials to a monumental status quite apart from their everyday values—today, no longer seems even to register, never mind facilitate the kind of estrangement or defamiliarizing effect it might have announced at a different moment in history. What Farmer seems to be "making strange" is that in the current rhetoric of artistic forms this contradiction no longer seems strange at all; it is sufficiently commonplace to be no longer remarkable. Therefore, not only have the everyday objects and materials been emptied of their everyday uses-values, they have also been emptied of any strategic or critical facility to comment on their own reification. As a result, Farmer's installations tend to convey a strong sense of nostalgia, as if the collection of objects mourn the loss of their functioning, useful roles; they mark a scene where the action and evidence of life have passed on, like a prop-strewn stage set after closing night when all the actors have moved on.

Farmer's objects and materials have already been flattened out, obsolesced or otherwise emptied of their use value and symbolic meanings... Flubbery, limp and denatured, the objects somehow suggest by their very limp exhaustion and deathly repose a potential haunting or resuscitation because they so strongly appear to lie in wait for their own revival or re-use. They evidence a worn-outness resulting from history, and not merely the singular history of their own use. The also suggest a "post-industrial" melancholy
that things in general have been used up or made extinct in their fantasia-like march toward obsolescence.  

[Brown and Best, 4]

Farmer may use the artifacts and debris of popular culture, but his work is not “about” popular culture, per se. Farmer’s work invokes nostalgia for a social world that is experienced as meaningful, collective or vitally enchanted, and the substitution of a reified world of commodities and images which promise meaning, purpose, satisfaction and fulfillment but, instead, litter the landscape as failed and exhausted emblems. Farmer collects and arranges the debris of consumer culture in an attempt to reanimate and re-enchant those emblems and interrupt their reification. In this way, Farmer’s work can be illuminated by the philosophy and method of Walter Benjamin. In the early decades of the 20th C, Benjamin, too, observes a fragmented society where any meaningful social cohesion and sense of community as collective subject had disintegrated and been replaced with the reified object world of industrial capitalism—a world which promises intersubjective meaning and “magic” but which delivers only alienation, disenchantment and a numbing flatness. Benjamin responds to this situation by attempting to resuscitate an historical sensibility or vantage point. Benjamin’s strategy is to collect social and cultural fragments—the debris of modern, urban industrial society—which he then “quotes” in the construction of a type of literary collage meant to “shock” an audience into new recognitions and understandings, and towards the historical recollection of a different social organization: “The result is an allegorical art that reveals once again the natural physiognomy of the present as ‘ruin’ and juxtaposes to the ruins of the bourgeoisie elements of dream, memory and fantasy stimulated by shock but recalling or anticipating a different, collective character of experience. It is this juxtaposition that is

38 This passage was written by Lindsay Brown.
called the ‘dialectical image,’ standing still without resolution... but inviting the dreamer to awake” [Arato and Gebhardt, 213].

Farmer’s allegorical strategy bears a resemblance to Benjamin’s theory of the potential defamiliarizing value of the fragments and debris of modern popular culture. I have described allegory as a mode of representation which makes an appearance when certain ways of seeing the world (as an interconnected whole, for example) become unthinkable or unmappable. Farmer’s anachronistic references and archiving of the detritus of popular consumer culture can also be understood to function allegorically. Discarded objects, someone’s thrown-away letter or drawing, used clothing, all seem to stand in for the people, places, historical moments and events that have been lost or marginalized from official historical narratives, institutions and the “common knowledge” of what is significant or relevant. Through its many references to past forms of artistic and political expression, Farmer’s work is also an archive of submerged ideas and ideologies, political debates and slogans, artistic experiments, modes of critique, and conceptualizations of the social landscape. At the same time, therefore, the work stands as an allegory for the always evolving mode of production which necessarily calls such different figures of itself into being with each stage of its transformation. The work foregrounds the submersion of this sense of historical progression by recreating the feeling of humility, discomfort and embarrassment one experiences, for example, when looking at old photo albums, confronted by documents of the past which persist in haunting the present despite efforts to hide them away—documents of dated haircuts and spoken word poetry, ripped t-shirts with safety-pins and celebrations of the postmodern,
painted vans and any performance art having to do with menstrual fluid, the optimism and sincerity of "make love not war."

The historical moment which Farmer both enunciates and must respond to, may, in fact, present him with similar representational obstacles to those of Benjamin, more than six decades later—the submersion of a sense of history and of a collective sensibility, the fragmentation of the social world, the numbing flatness of consumer society, etc. However, as I have suggested, the "then" and "now" are sufficiently different so that these contradictions often express themselves in new ideological forms. It could be argued that the historical conjuncture referred to as conceptual art, with its characteristic intellectualist gestures, and critical and abstract detachment is, itself, one ideological expression not only of art's simultaneously forced and voluntary autonomy from the social world, but also art's inability to even represent what lays "outside itself"—i.e., to attempt to figure its own mediation with the social world—without inviting suspicion and censure as to its lack of political and intellectual sensitivity and sophistication.

Autoreferentiality in aesthetic practice can then be understood as one symptom of, and response to, this historical situation. Both consciously and unconsciously, artists and theorists, alike, in response to the historical and ideological "off-limiting" of the social world as object or "content" (which, of course, also precludes understanding the social world as the content of one's own subjectivity), have directed their critical gaze back on the representational practice itself. However potentially productive and revealing the heightening of the self-reflective gaze of aesthetic and critical practice may be, the shift from a register of outward-looking referentiality to one of self-referentiality and auto-
critique results in work which can be overly safe and potentially irrelevant as it immunizes itself from political blunder and critical attack. It would seem that contemporary artistic practice must negotiate an apparent double bind: on the one hand, art which takes the risk of commenting on the social world also risks exploiting those constituencies it seeks to represent, as well as risking the embarrassment of what Adorno calls “commitment.” On the other hand, art which attempts to safeguard against this possibility by limiting its reference to its own formal operation or to the artist’s own “inner world” (as if this were not mediated by history and the social totality) risks being perceived as solipsistic, irrelevant or sanitized.

Autoreferentiality is a characteristic gesture within the conjunction of conceptual art. It was also the signature of aesthetic modernism and modernist literature, in particular. Here, Fredric Jameson describes how autoreferentiality, in this latter instance, also functioned as a type of “supplementary content” when alternative possibilities for art appeared to be foreclosed:

Autoreferentiality has long been thought not merely to be a crucial sign and marker of what counts as modernist in literature, but also to be an operator of modernism’s inherent aestheticism and the way in which, as a kind of artistic tropism, it inveterately grows inward towards itself, makes its own situation, and forms a new and often unconscious type of content. It can be argued that self-reference is not its only content but, rather, something like a supplementary connotation by which the work seeks to justify its own existence; and the unique historical situation in which autoreferentiality gradually comes into being is constituted—the breakdown of the public, the crisis of the genres, art’s loss of status in the market—can itself be documented.

[Jameson, 1998, 89]
Irony as Aesthetic Ideology

The attitude of the self-referential gesture characteristic of much conceptual art, including Farmer's installations, however, is different from that of the modernist gesture, as it must be, given the historical distance that separates the two expressions. If the modernist gesture expresses the contradiction between the committed work of art and the autonomous or detached work of art, purporting the illusion that a designation or choice can be made between them, then the current gesture expresses the discomfort of the impossibility of that opposition, of that choice—that the integration of commerce and cultural expressions is adequately complete to have submerged the contradiction altogether. In this way, as I will argue, Farmer's installations express the historical necessity of a second level self-consciousness—a self-referentiality once more removed from the object as compared with the earlier gesture. I will refer to this aesthetic posture as irony.

The figure of irony has become something of a popular cultural *Zeitgeist* since the latter part of the 1980s, corresponding with the explosion of discourses around postmodernism. Irony, for example, was the password for Generation X, a demographic which also came of age in the late 80s. What I am referring to as irony is characterized by an uneasy oscillation between sincerity and a slightly mocking (though, generally, not mean-spirited) detachment. The ironic posture cannot rest on either side of this opposition; in fact, the opposition is displaced. Irony, in contemporary cultural expression, represents the exhaustion and displacement of the contradiction between the "authentic" and the "commercial" text; it expresses the judgement of redundancy on the "authentic versus commercial" discourse or ideology.
Farmer's work enacts this sense of irony succinctly in its own oscillation between an uneasy sincerity and an intellectual and critical detachment. One example is the way in which the work expresses itself as the inheritor of two quite distinct and, in many ways, contradictory artistic lineages: first, a more sincere and earnest, committed, self-consciously political, while often personal and autobiographical lineage informed by feminist principles; and second, a more cool and detached, opaque and defensive, intellectual, conceptual lineage.

Vancouver, in particular, is a location associated with the artistic conjuncture referred to as photo-conceptualism—a heritage whose presence for Farmer would be virtually inescapable. In a video produced for *Catriona Jeffries* Farmer plays these two influences off one another in an ironic way: the video pans the Vancouver skyline, a view which has a rhetorical familiarity for much photo-conceptualist work, while in a flat confessional voiceover, Farmer speaks earnestly as an artist who proceeds through “feeling,” criticizing those distanced, self-absent conceptual artists who don’t acknowledge their “drinking problems” in their work [Brown]. Farmer’s ironic relationship to the heritage of conceptual art is also referenced in an installation titled *Puppet Kit.* One element of the installation is a remake of Andy Warhol’s eight-hour experimental film *Sleep* in which Warhol sleeps in real-time. In Farmer’s video loop the viewer is presented with a ragged furry green puppet, whose chest rises and falls in simulated sleep by the movement of an unseen arm. The puppet’s wide open, googly eyes are strangely reminiscent of the familiar image of Warhol’s blank stare [Brown]. The video loop is labeled, “Difficulty is the Puppet’s Social Defense.”

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39 *Puppet Kit* was first installed in the Contemporary Art Gallery (Vancouver) in 2001.
Farmer's ironic and, often, humorous references to both the rhetoric of conceptualism and to the rhetoric of a more sincere political commitment or attachment does not signal a rejection of, or a disdain for, either art lineage. Rather, irony, as an aesthetic ideology, expresses a sense of homelessness. It signals the appearance of an impossible choice between two positions or foundations of expression, both of which appear to preclude the other, while neither appearing equipped to adequately capture the present historical moment. As Richard Rorty argues, irony evidences the situation of having multiple "vocabularies" available at one's disposal while experiencing none of them as representationally self-adequate:

All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes. They are the words in which we tell, sometimes prospectively and sometimes retrospectively, the story of our lives. I shall call these words a person's "final vocabulary."…

I shall define an "ironist" as someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies, vocabularies taken as final by people or books she has encountered; (2) she realizes that argument phrased in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power of herself. Ironists who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.

I call people of this sort "ironists" because their realization that anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed, and their renunciation of the attempt to formulate criteria of choice between final vocabularies, puts them in the position which Sartre called "meta-stable": never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves.

[Rorty, 73-4]
In the case of Farmer's work, art's two vocabularies or postures which the artist seems obliged to both choose between and reject are, on the one hand, an integrated and critical closeness with the social world and, on the other hand, a kind of "art for art's sake" detachment from the social world. That Farmer approaches both options with humour, coyness, an intentional awkwardness or lack of confidence suggests that each orientation is now experienced as abject and futile—as something which must be camouflaged, allegorized, approached obliquely or with intentional duplicity. However, in addition to Rorty's impossible choice between two opposing vocabularies, Farmer's aesthetic of irony suggests an identity between the two expressional options—that these two apparently oppositional orientations are, in fact, two alternative expressions of the same historical moment and set of circumstances, namely, the intimate integration of artistic and commercial activity such that both the posture of an uncompromised criticality and the posture of an uncompromised autonomy are equally thwarted. The activity of artistic expression expresses its irrepressible contradictory identity in the context of market society. A sense of disappointment and skepticism that art can ever again be politically or commercially uncompromised is reflected in Farmer's work's haunting expression of loss, nostalgia, and melancholy. Once again, the abject objects and materials which comprise many of Farmer's installations appear as traces that mark the scene of an action already completed, where all that is left is the debris of a now absent presence. The viewer senses that s/he has arrived too late and, like an archaeologist or investigator, must conceptually piece together what has taken place at the site according to the scattered remains and artifacts.
In a discussion of allegory in *Fables of Aggression*, Fredric Jameson argues that “any [aesthetic] form... must be read as an instable and provisory solution to an aesthetic dilemma which is itself the manifestation of a social and historical contradiction” [Jameson, 1979, 94]. Here, I am arguing that irony is one way of naming the aesthetic posture of Farmer’s installations and, furthermore, as an aesthetic ideology, irony is, indeed, an expression of a present social and material contradiction. As the expression of a certain contradiction, irony’s inherent ambiguity is also an expression of “difficulty.” Part of the “folklore” surrounding Farmer’s work concerns its reputation for posing an interpretive difficulty for viewers. Such a response to the work may be unwittingly appropriate: thematically, the work is *about* difficulty; formally, the work *enacts* difficulty. Both in terms of its allegorical movement which belies a stalled representational function, and in terms of its ironic posture which signals an impossible choice between inadequate representational vocabularies, Farmer’s work assumes the status of both perpetrator and victim of the thwarting of an easily or directly accessible narrativity. Farmer’s work is *about* the crisis of representation.

Creating some of this narrative difficulty is the fact that the work never seems to rest on either side of the contradictions which inform it. The work oscillates restlessly, anxiously and indecisively between the contradictory impulses which are specific to it but which also mediate the work with its greater social context. Difficulty, frustration, melancholy, and loss are related expressions of the contradictions which torment the work at its core: 1) Identity, the location of negotiation between oneself and the rest of the world, is both enabling and constraining, both stalls communication and is its only possibility, is the only potential source of political progressiveness and is always already...
politically suspect; 2) Sincere social and political commentary can only be approached ironically and ambiguously; 3) Performance art, intended to connote presence, ritual and immediacy, forms the content of a video, the document of a now absent, decontextualized and past event; 4) Performance and installation, art forms intended to connote resistance to the economic logic of the art market and the commodifiable status of the art object, are enacted in a commercial gallery and subsequently purchased, often by large institutions. The honesty of the work is expressed in its duplicity.

There is also a certain honesty in the ambivalence which an aesthetic irony expresses towards its own material contradictions and towards the historical circumstances which give rise to it. The ambivalence of the ironic posture is in the same vein as that which Marxism inevitably expresses towards capitalism as the most progressive historical conjuncture to date, and the material out of which all future developments will be fashioned, as well as, and at the same time, an irrational, harmful and exploitative social formation to be willfully succeeded. As Jameson points out in *Brecht and Method*, “[a] Marxist aesthetic which does not make a place for this fundamental ambivalence, this fascination with and excitement at everything perverse and suspicious, unclean and scurrilous, about the beast itself, will always strike outsiders as unacceptably puritanical or prim and excessively decorous, as repulsive as middle-class respectability itself” [Jameson, 1998, 149].

However much Farmer’s work seems to recount the frustration of being trapped within its own unavoidable contradictions, it also seems to long for (which is also to hint at) the possibility of some other posture, of something beyond its inadequate options for self-expression. For example, as we have already discerned, the allegorical figures in
Hunchback Kit and The Blacking Factory are imperfectly totalizing figures. The allegorical movement of those installations gestures towards a holistic and historical narrative of the social world—a way of figuring a social interconnectedness which can illuminate the identity of seemingly oppositional positions, points of view, or modes of expression, as well as, mediate different historical moments and geographical locales. This gesture towards something beyond the impossible choice between inadequate options is something like Fredric Jameson’s figure of the work’s “political unconscious.” It signifies the work’s ultimately irrepressible historical and collective impulse. For example, however contradictory and stalled the ironic posture of Farmer’s installations must necessarily be, Farmer’s irony is also immanently an historical, social, and collective posture. Like Rorty’s multiple vocabularies, the ironic posture implies that there is always a different way of seeing things, of saying things, of understanding and experiencing the world. Irony is always articulated, decentred; it necessarily speaks from two or more locations at once. Irony is, therefore, itself, an imperfect figure of totality.

In Catriona Jeffries Catriona, the work’s ironic posture, as an imperfect figure of totality, takes a particularly overt visual and literal form. Here, Farmer literally and physically constructs a type of imaginary “totalizing system” which seems to express, at once, sincerity, humour, and a self-mocking humility even while making its “grand” totalizing gesture. Rehearsing what is by now a canonical concern in installation art practices for the question of a work’s site-specificity and its relationship to the gallery space as the work’s physically, historically and institutionally defining context, Farmer constructs (with cardboard and duct tape) a system of “air-transport” ducts and vents that connect all parts of the gallery. Explained in an adolescent-style drawing which diagrams
the (purely fictional) function of the duct-system, cool air is brought in from the street and carried downstairs to the workstation which Farmer has constructed (also out of cardboard) in the administration area of the gallery. From the workstation, the duct returns warm air which is carried by more ducts running throughout both floors of the gallery and which is eventually delivered back outside “in a kind of [imaginary] economy of air conditioning that connects all the spaces in the gallery” [Brown]. The gallery space becomes part of the regulating machine, like a system of interconnections that narrativizes the space and movement of the installation. The title of one of the installation’s homemade “vintage 70s” artist’s books reads, “How it is Possible For a Series of Images to Present a Story Which is However Minimally but Always Narrated.”

In this chapter, I have demonstrated a likeness between the concerns which animate the aesthetic practice of artist Geoffrey Farmer and the concerns which must also animate a contemporary Marxian political economic method of social analysis. For each of these forms of practice, these concerns are both historical and about history. In the preceding chapters, I have articulated these concerns as a problematic: how and why does a social formation structured by an economy of exchange necessarily repress an historical, collective and totalizing sensibility and vantage point, whether it be in the context of artistic expression, social analysis, economic or cultural policy-making, popular or institutional political practice, etc.? With respect to both Farmer’s artwork and a current Marxian political economic method of analysis, each of these practices interrogates, and takes its shape through its response to, the representational obstacle entailed by the
contemporary dimensions of this problematic. This obstacle or challenge to representational practices (examined closely in chapter two) is, itself, one form of expression—the ideological manifestation—of the historical, social and material contradictions particular to market society and the present historical conjuncture of the capitalist mode of production (as it was the task of chapters 1-4 to demonstrate). In the following and concluding chapter, I will explore how the particular dimensions of the present historical conjuncture serve to underline, and call into play, what I earlier designate as the aesthetic sensibility of a Marxian political economic method.

\[40\] In the case of Farmer’s practice, that his work functions in this way may be intentional or unintentional— the distinction is unimportant for my analysis.
Chapter Six

The Aesthetics of Political Economy

The modern history of the concept of aesthetic is marked both by an opposition and by the (utopian) movement beyond that opposition. In the western philosophical tradition, the matter of aesthetics—which, as a discipline, today, appears entirely out of date41—has been formulated, for the most part, in opposition to matters that are categorized as cognitive, intellectual, or conceptual. Only the late 19th century witnessed an exception to the aestheticism-intellectualism opposition, as expressed in the work of the Romantic poets and epitomized in the figure of Mathew Arnold. During this time, the ideals of progress and enlightened reason that were initially associated with the industrial revolution and a burgeoning bourgeois economy were collapsing under the weight of the barbaric realities of the factory system and the extreme poverty and hardship experienced by the labouring classes. As exemplified by the philosophical ideas of Mathew Arnold, "high culture," and literature, in particular, were held up in contrast and opposition to the brutality and barbarism of industrial society. Aestheticism represented, in the contemplation and pursuit of absolute perfection, both a position from which to judge, as well as a retreat from, the apparent anarchy engendered by bourgeois society. As Peter Osborne points out, in the late 19th century, aestheticism was associated with intellectualism “in a conception of ‘high’ culture in which the contemplative character of

41 It is not insignificant to my general analysis that the notion of aesthetics as a discipline should today strike one as an anachronism, in the same manner as does the contention “truth is beauty,” etc. It is my argument that the presence of a formal, institutionalized, and culturally identifiable or conspicuous discourse on aesthetics gradually disappears at the same time, and in (indirect) relation to, the growing pervasiveness and determining grip of an “aesthetic logic.”
aesthetic disinterest act[ed] as a modern-day surrogate for the ancient contemplation of ideas” [Osborne, 1].

However, by the early 20th century, the continuity of aestheticism with intellectualism was already being severed and the perception of their incompatibility was becoming conventional. Such a perception was expressed, for example, by Marcel Duchamp’s disdain for “retinal” painting, by his “ready-made” sculptures, and by the devaluation of the auratic and singular art object that characterized the general movement of the work of the Avant-garde. By this time, and in the context of the critique issued by the Avant-garde, for instance, aestheticism signaled an aristocratic loyalty to the outmoded and anachronistic cult of beauty and to the conception of the inspired heroic artist which now appeared to have aligned itself with the interests of the recently established art market. In Osborne’s words, aestheticism came to signify an “anti-intellectual form of cultural elitism, the claims to universality of which are based on little more than a mystical veil of intuition shrouding a defense of inherited authority” [Osborne, 2]. This is the critique of aestheticism which underwrites the opposition of the Conceptual art conjuncture of the 1960s and 70s to the concept of aesthetic, as well as, the “antipathy of cultural studies and art theory of the 70s and 80s to anything connected to aesthetics” [ibid.].

What seems odd about a conceptual-aesthetic opposition is that it appears to be both current and anachronistic, at the same time. While continuing to hold sway, a conceptual-aesthetic opposition must be included within the generic family of “mind-body dualism,” and rehearses, therefore, a similar epistemological problematic: Are meaning and “truth” (the meaning and truth of art, for instance; the truth of the world and
the self which art gestures towards) appreciated and communicated through intellectual, cognitive, or conceptual endeavour, or are they discerned and captured more immediately by the senses, as physical experiences or feelings? Even posing the question seems old-fashioned.

Despite the anachronistic feel to the issues and ideas that surround the question of aesthetics, the language of aesthetics is, today, making a comeback. A spectre of aesthetics is haunting western popular cultural discourses as if there were a collective desire to affirm Oscar Wilde’s suggestion that in matters of grave importance style, and not sincerity, is the vital thing. I have already hinted at my argument that particular and identifiable historical circumstances mediate the occurrence of an aesthetic sensibility as a contemporary “structure of feeling.” The task of charting some of these historical circumstances is part of the work of this chapter. I want to argue that the popular and collective, sometimes self-conscious and sometimes not, recognition of a discordance between “style” and “sincerity” (as one way of articulating the matter) reflects another historical discordance between the way the social world is experienced by its agents and the way it presents itself, between what it purports to deliver and what it is experienced as actually delivering, between substance and appearance. The contemporary resurging presence of popular “aesthetic languages” or frames of reference (witnessed by everything from postmodern discourses of “the play of surfaces” to the popular explosion of television makeover shows) expresses an historical moment when the aggravation that is experienced as a result of this discordance has never before been experienced so acutely, at the same time as it has never been more pervasive and unremarkable—the banal and intolerable background of everyday life.
The Historical Roots of Aesthetic

The modern usage of the term aesthetic is traced back to the mid-18th century when the word was adopted from the Greek word, aisthesis, "meaning sensation or perception by the senses" [Osborne, 1]. As Jonathan Réé points out, it was not until this time that any specific connection was made between the notion of aesthetic, as knowledge acquired through sensory perception, and the arts [Réé, 58]. Not until the mid-18th century, and (not coincidentally) around the same time as the production of art emerged as its own discrete, "relatively autonomous domain of practices, experience, authority and value" [Osborne, 1], did "aesthetics" come to "describe the science of the fine arts and perhaps the source or criterion of artistic value" [Réé, 58].

Most commonly, the earliest usage of the modern sense of aesthetic as pertaining to the sensual experiences of, and responses to, art is attributed to Alexander Baumgarten in a work titled Reflections on Poetry, published in 1735, and in two unfinished textbooks titled, Aesthetica, published in 1750 and 1758 [Réé, 58]. Réé argues, however, that Baumgarten's texts are not the legitimate source of a modern usage of aesthetic in that Baumgarten spoke only of sensory knowledge, in general, and of what he called aesthetica, or, the objects of sensory knowledge. Baumgarten did not identify or privilege art, in particular, as an object and generator of sensory knowledge [ibid.]. Instead, Réé argues, the "real begetter" of the notion of aesthetic as a philosophical doctrine concerned with the sensual experiences of, and responses to, art, per se, was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing in a work titled Laokoon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry published in 1766 [ibid.]. Lessing's text offers the earliest version of what could be called an "aesthetic theory of the arts" [ibid.]. Here, Lessing develops a theory in which the aesthetic value of
the five “fine arts”—poetry, music, architecture, sculpture and painting—is characterized by the nature of their interaction with the two “higher senses” of hearing and sight (the “lower senses” of taste, touch, and smell are not relevant for the fine arts according to Lessing).

What is interesting for the present discussion is Lessing’s association of each of the two higher senses, vision and hearing, with a certain representational problematic. For Lessing, the sense of sight is defined by its ability to perceive spatially, systematically or structurally—that is, sight involves the perception of relationships between objects and between the elements of an object. Hearing, on the other hand, involves the perception of temporal sequences, or the procession of auditory objects detected by the ear one after another. Réé points out,

The peculiarity of eyesight, according to Lessing, was its ability to detect several spatially separate realities in a single moment or Augenblick, whereas the other senses—the “dark senses” as Lessing called them—were confined to a procession of qualities which file past our consciousness one by one.... Painting consisted of “figures and colours in space” depicting “objects whose wholes or parts coexist.” Poems, on the other hand, made use of “articulated sounds in time” (or “signs that follow one another”) and they should therefore be used to represent “objects whose wholes or parts are consecutive.” Painters should dwell on the static simultaneous complexities of visible space, while poets could be set free to follow sequences of temporal events, especially human actions and passions.

[Réé, 59]

In the Critique of Judgement, published in 1790, Kant reworks Lessing’s aesthetic theory of the arts without fundamentally disturbing its formulation as a sensory and representational problematic while reproducing, if in a more complex version, Lessing’s space-time dualism and the mapping of these concepts onto the senses of sight and
hearing.\textsuperscript{42} In Kant's formulation, he makes a distinction between "inner intuition," which demonstrates a temporal movement, and "outer intuition," which synthesizes (or, \textit{totalizes}, in a sense) our knowledge of the "outside" phenomenal world (our knowledge of "objects in space" [Rée, 60]) provided to us by the combination of our five senses [Rée, 60]. Upon this distinction, Kant maps the "arts of space"—painting, architecture, sculpture—and the "arts of time"—music \textit{ibid.}. While Kant wants to elevate the arts of time as superior to the arts of space, poetry, which Kant ranks as one of the highest valued of the fine arts, nevertheless presents Kant with a categorial problem in that he perceives it as incorporating both the spatial and temporal sensory dimensions \textit{ibid.}.

What is a categorial problem for Kant, however, transforms into its own solution with Hegel. As presented in his 1823 \textit{Lectures on Aesthetics}, Hegel maintains the division between the visual/spatial arts and the temporal/auditory arts, as well as the hierarchy that that dualism has already come to express: "In Hegel's system, vision was more grossly physical than hearing, and the spatial arts were therefore inferior to the temporal ones" [Rée, 61]. However, the greater physicality of sight and the spatial arts is not, for Hegel, a liability of the latter, \textit{per se}. Rather, the more physical character of the spatial arts is a liability because it is an obstacle to the true vocation of all the fine arts: the transcendence of their sensual origins in the gesturing "towards a realm of higher spiritual truth, as plants grow towards sunlight" [Rée, 60]. Hegel offers a dialectical solution to Kant's dilemma in the form of writing. Poetry, which for Kant is a categorial confusion in its straddling of the spatial-temporal division becomes, for Hegel, and for the same reason, a "total art" [Rée, 61]. Poetry is the "absolute and true art of the spirit"

\textsuperscript{42} Doing so was a matter of Kant changing his mind: In the \textit{Critique of Pure Reason}, in 1781, Kant rejects the notion of an aesthetic theory of art altogether [Ree in Osborne, 59].

229
because it is the formalized and spatialized representation of speech, of
temporality. For Hegel, writing is “visual sound”; it is the dialectical sublation of vision
and sound. Most importantly, it is only by way of the formalizing and spatializing—the
representation—of speech as writing that it is possible to become conscious of either
speech or writing as language. The consciousness, or self-reflectivity, of language is
what hoists the artwork towards the realm of the spirit. For Hegel, poetry is, therefore, a
total art—an art of the spirit—in that it facilitates the movement of inhabiting while
reflecting upon that inhabiting, in the same moment:

Even our own mother tongue remains mysterious to us till we have
learned to recognize it visually, through the medium of writing. In some
ways writing offers a more “roundabout way to ideas” than speech,
according to Hegel; but still we need to be able to represent speech to
ourselves in the form of writing if we are to understand it consciously as
language... This contradiction between language as sound, spoken “in
time” to the ear, and language as script, written “in space” for the eye,
served to raise our minds towards “the more formal nature of the
sounding word and its abstract elements,” thus enabling poetry, best of
all the arts, to purify and spiritualize our inner subjectivity.

[Rée, 61]

An Aesthetic Point of View

Turning, now, to the question of Marx’s method, and to my argument that Marx’s method
demonstrates an aesthetic sensibility, this brief sketch of the early history of formulations
of the modern notion of aesthetic offers glimpses into what might be analytically useful
in positing a likeness between the “question of aesthetics” and the “question of political
economy.” Given my characterization of Marx’s method thus far, we can identify the
same representational problematic as animating both the movement of Marx’s analysis,
as well as, early formulations of an aesthetic theory of artistic signification and delivery.
For Marx, an adequately totalizing political economy, or historical method of analysis, needs to synthesize temporal and spatial mechanisms of representation in order to capture both the temporal/processional and spatial/structural/systematic dimensions of its object, capitalist society. Marx's analysis of capitalism is, therefore, amongst other things, an index of an aesthetic problem. Marx required a spatial-temporal dialectic of representation which would both express (inevitably), as well as confront the reification of these two dimensions as contradictory, or as exhibiting a dualism, as is the case in the context of an exchange economy. In other words, that the representation of a spatial or structural phenomenon should appear contradictory to, or at odds with, the representation of a temporal or processional phenomenon is one of the historical and ideological expressions of market society which a Marxian political economic analysis must address.

That the discipline of aesthetics, also a modern phenomenon (i.e., a phenomenal expression of the capitalist mode of production), should express this same representational dualism is no coincidence. Artistic expression was perceived as constrained to signify, or convey meaning, either visually and, therefore, spatially, or audibly and, therefore, temporally. Like Hegel's description of poetry, Marx seeks to enact a kind of "total art" which enunciates or reveals the identity of form and content—the identity of method of analysis and object of analysis. And like Hegel's description of poetry as language's self-reflective achievement through its formal representation, the identity of form and content in Marx's analysis is achieved through the self-reflectivity (which is also to say, the historical self-consciousness) of categorial thought and of the function of abstraction, more generally.
In the beginning of this chapter I argued that the history of the notion of aesthetic is the site of both an opposition and the gesturing beyond that opposition. At least since Baumgarten's construction of the concept, aesthetic has involved the idea of training and judgement, or the role of the senses in the judgement and knowledge of beauty and perfection [Osborne, 2-3]. More specifically, the question of aesthetic has concerned whether or not there is a relationship between the senses and cognition in the judgement and knowledge of beauty, and if so, what is the nature of that relationship. And as much as constructions of the notion of aesthetic posited an opposition between cognition and sensory perception, they also posited the idea of their mutual dependency; the concept of aesthetic spoke as much to the condition of a harmony between the senses and between the senses and cognition, as much as it was oriented to their partitioning. In this sense, as Osborne points out, the history of the concept of aesthetic has been “double-coded” [Osborne, 3]: on the one hand, it is coded as being in opposition to and, therefore, excluding the cognitive faculty; on the other hand, it is coded as being in constant interaction with the cognitive faculty. In its latter configuration, [aesthetic] refers to a relation (a relation of reflection) between the faculties of sensibility and those of understanding and reason, respectively. Here, aesthetic includes reference to the two other cognitive faculties. Most fundamentally, it is concerned with the “harmony” of these three faculties [sensibility, understanding, and reason] and hence with the unity of subjectivity itself.

As a consequence of this double-coding, the logical indeterminacy of aesthetic judgement may be read in two radically different ways, giving rise to quite different assessments of the philosophical significance of aesthetics: (i) as a type of cognitive inadequacy, and (ii) as a movement towards an experience of totality and a metaphysics of subjectivity (the relational totality of cognitive faculties).

[Osborne, 3-4; second emphasis added]
It is the second formulation of the significance of aesthetics that is pertinent for my argument, here. Osborne recognizes, above, two predominant characteristics of what he calls “an aesthetic point of view”: the movement towards an experience of totality, and the logical indeterminacy of aesthetic judgement. The second characteristic is a consequence of the first; an aesthetic judgement is logically indeterminate because of the nature of totalized experience. Where aesthetic knowledge is conceived of as the totality of sensual and cognitive faculties, the implication is that these faculties are relational, that they are mutually informing, that they intermingle. However, it also implies that these faculties are to be distinguished from one another, that they do not perfectly overlap, even while the boundaries between them—where one begins and the other ends—can never be adequately determined. That reason and logic are always exercised, in the course of subjectivity, through their intermingling with other “non-logical” (sensual, for example) faculties, this totalizing movement precludes logical determinacy. According to Osborne, this “aesthetic problematic” has participated in shaping the history of the “continental” or “modern European” philosophical project:

[This] understanding of aesthetic judgement has provided the starting point for a variety of engagements with both the metaphysical and epistemological traditions which… involve alternative conceptions of the philosophical project itself. Hermeneutics, dialectical logic, Nietzschean affirmation, negative dialectic, deconstruction, a Lyotardian thinking of “the event,” and even Deleuzean materialism, all take their cue, in one way or another, from Kant’s conception of a judgement which is reflective and undetermining in its logical form. “Continental” philosophy, one might say, views the world from an aesthetic point of view.

[Osborne, 4-5]

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Osborne distinguishes the continental philosophical tradition from the analytical, Anglo-American philosophical tradition which he argues corresponds to the former assessment of the significance of aesthetic as a type of cognitive inadequacy [Osborne, 4].
We can add Marxian political economy to Osborne’s list of philosophical projects which have been informed by an aesthetic point of view (bearing in mind that Marxian political economy always exists in excess of its identity as a philosophical project: it is always also a project of subject formation, and a project of collective subjectivity, in particular). And like the items on Osborne’s list, we can also consider Marxian political economy as a context in which a connection can be traced between an aesthetic point of view and a logical indeterminacy. Meanwhile, Osborne continues to extend the line of connection further to include the instance of critique: the aesthetic and, therefore, indeterminate character of a totalizing point of reference (of historical analysis, or of a “theory of art”) entails that the latter must necessarily take the form of critique in that its conclusions are singular, contingent, and non-systematic (in the sense of not being able to be reproduced in a controlled experiment, for example). In other words, a theory of history, like a theory of art, cannot be a science, in the contemporary sense of that word:

It is the virtue of “an aesthetic point of view,” in the expansive post-Kantian sense, that it is at once systematic in its philosophical orientation (that is, directed towards reflection on the relations between the elements of a whole—paradigmatically, the faculties of the human subject) and anti-systematic in form, since the singularity of the judgements to which it leads means, in Kant’s words, that “there neither is, nor can be, a science of the beautiful.” There is only critique.

[Osborne, 5]

Marxian political economy, furthermore, takes the form of critique not as a consequence of some inherent deficiency, but as a consequence of its constitutive excess: a totalizing/aesthetic point of view seeks to capture both logic and logic’s “other,” the negative, in addition to, and as a constitutive element of, the positive, or, in the case of market society (as object of analysis), the social relations which mediate and offer up the
latter’s appearances or working myths. I am identifying the constitutive excess of Marx’s
totalizing method as an element of its aesthetic sensibility in the way that the notion of
aesthetic, itself, has traditionally designated “that constitutive excess which marks art off
from other kinds of intellectual production” [Osborne, 8]. The constitutive excess of
Marx’s totalizing method expresses the condition of its object, or, the social totality. The
constitutive excess of the social totality, itself, is what leads Fredric Jameson to describe
the totality as something which is more adequately captured as “experience” than as a
more “directly enumerated” object of analysis, in the sense that experience encompasses
a dimensional complexity and a collaboration of the faculties that eludes the boundaries
and sensibility of more traditional analytical procedures. Experience and a transformed
sense of agency always trump analysis; in the case of Marx’s dialectic, they are the goal
of analysis or its culmination. This does not mean, however, that experience and a
transformed agency can bypass analysis; they are dependent upon analysis at the same
time as they are its dialectical resolution. In this way, the notion of aesthetic signifies a
way of conceptualizing method and method’s potential precipitate, simultaneously.44

Jacques Rancière, in his article, “What Aesthetics Can Mean,” formulates a notion
of aesthetic that is relevant for the present discussion. Rancière identifies aesthetics as a
particular, historical “regime of art” which is also a certain regime of thought, or, a set of
possibilities for conceiving of artworks and art practices: “[Aesthetics] is itself a regime
of art, a specific mode of the possibility of works, combining forms of visibility and
enunciative possibilities. It is a system of relations between doing, seeing, saying and
sensing” [Rancière, 19]. Rancière distinguishes aesthetics from “poetics,” the latter being

44 I return to this formulation further on and explore it more fully in the context of Julia Kristeva’s
designation of the moment of sublimation as aesthetic.
the regime of art which precedes aesthetics, locating the transition between the age of poetics and the age of aesthetics as commencing in the mid 18th century. According to Rancière, poetics and aesthetics mark distinctly different enunciative possibilities or economies of art practices; it is not simply the case that aesthetics comes to name what poetics once did [ibid.]. Poetics designates a regime of art that is distinctive as a regime of \textit{representation}, or, “a system of norms founded on the principle of mimesis” [Rancière, 20]. The heart of the poetic system, however, is not the production of resemblances, \textit{per se}, but the continuity between this production and the affective capacity of the works, or how the works are received. The poetic system pivots on “the adaptation of the means to the end,” on the accordance or harmony between address and reception [ibid.]. Rancière states,

In the poetic regime, it is always an \textit{aesthesis}, taste or pleasure, that provides the final proof that the resemblance has been successfully achieved. And this proof is final because what is verified is not whether the work resembles its model but whether the faculties of making and of sensing are well adapted to each other, whether they spring from the same nature.

[Rancière, 21]

The transition from a poetic economy to an aesthetic economy of art involves the displacement of the mimetic principle. In the poetic regime, the artwork fulfils the role of intermediary in establishing a relation of resemblance and continuity between the sensual, emotional and intellectual experiences associated with production, on one side of the equation, and reception, on the other side. However, in the aesthetic regime, the function of the work is no longer to establish resemblances; rather, it is to present an insensible thing—a thought, idea, emotion, etc.—in the form of a sensible thing—a poem, painting, sculpture, etc. According to Rancière, the most remarkable thing about this transition is
that this characteristic function is, at the same time, the initial instance of the self-reflectivity of thought: “the aesthetic regime of art is the one where thinking of art is identical to an idea of thought itself” [Rancière, 18]. The act of “transcoding” an insensible (thought) into a sensible initiates thinking about thought, so that “the thought of thought,” or the self-reflectivity of thought, is a function of the aesthetic regime, generally. In preceding chapters, we identified categorial thought (the foundation of Marx’s dialectical critique) as, first, the historical expression of an exchange economy and, second, defined by its inherent potential for self-reflectivity. If Rancière’s argument is valid, the two-term identity of exchange economy and categorial thought can be expanded to include a third term, aesthetics. For categorial thought is another way of naming “the thought of thought” which, according to Rancière, we can also name aesthetics.

There are several moments, in fact, where Rancière’s description of what takes place at the site of the aesthetic work of art bears a striking similarity to my depiction of the movement and situation of Marxian political economy. For example, Rancière states, “The place of art is the place of the adequation between a sensible different from itself and a thought different from itself, a thought identical to non-thought” [Rancière, 19]. He continues,

The aesthetic regime of the arts is a new regime of speech, of the non-sensible to which it testifies, and of the mode of this testimony. Speech is no longer the instrument whereby thought is expressed and defines a

45 This formulation undermines the conventional opposition between aesthetics and the principles of conceptual art. As the latter involves the self-consciousness and the foregrounding of the “idea” of art—the elevation of the in-sensible in relation to the sensible, along with the revocation of the norms of artistic value which must necessarily accompany such a shift—it follows that conceptual art is only conceivable from within, and in relation to, the aesthetic regime of thought upon which the self-reflectivity of art’s gestures are contingent.
visible [as in the poetic regime of art]. It is the place where a signification becomes a sensible form, or a sensible form becomes a manifestation of sense, of meaning.... The aesthetic regime of art [seeks to identify] ... pure sensible presence and the invisible of thought[,]... to render sensible that immateriality of the sensible which is the materiality of thought.

[Rancière, 23-25]

The movement of Marx’s political economic analysis is also that of the adequation of the sensible and the in-sensible; it is also the attempt to render sensible (in the form of the analysis) the idea (the thought) of the materiality of thought. Above all, the aim of a totalizing analysis is to demonstrate the identity of, and to chart the lines of mediation between, a society’s material social relations and the thought constructs which that network of relations offers up as apparently untethered and self-generating entities.

**Exchange as Representation as Ratio, and the “Extirpation of Animism”**

Rancière refers to the poetic regime of art alternatively as the regime of representation and argues that the representational mode of art begins to be displaced in the 18th century by the mode of aesthetics. Here, Rancière equates the representational mode with the principle of mimesis. I would argue, however, that the aesthetic mode also adheres to a principle of representation, albeit a *non-mimetic* representational norm. The aesthetic mode of art, in Rancière’s formulation, is motored by the non-mimetic representation of one thing (a sensible) in the form of another (an insensible). Marx uses the word *Darstellung* to signify this same representational function whereby one thing is expressed or represented by taking the form of something else.\(^46\) Aesthetics is the expression of the principle of the making equivalent of two unlike things—in the case of art, a sensible and an insensible, an idea and a sculpture, an emotional configuration and a painting, etc. Of

\(^{46}\) It is also this sense and mode of representation which defines the notion and historical instance of “representational politics.”
course, the function of the making alike of two unequal things is a very familiar theme in
the present discussion; it can also be named the function of commodity exchange, or, the
function of abstraction, both of which I have identified as functions of representation.

Equivalence, exchange, translatability, non-mimetic representation (Darstellung),
abstraction—all are expressions of (the norms of, the motor of, etc.) the capitalist
historical conjuncture. And in recent history (since the 1970s, in particular), the
privileged way of naming the medium of the function of equivalence is “language”: “The
general name taken by this equivalence in the aesthetic mode of art is language. The
aesthetic mode of art is the one where the arts are no longer distributed hierarchically
according to their proximity with the power of words to make us see, where instead they
are equivalent as languages” [Rancière, 24]. Unlike in the poetic regime, in the aesthetic
regime, art forms are not prioritized or valued, in themselves, one over another: literary
language, the language of painting, sculpture or installation, architectural language, filmic
language, theatrical language—all perform equally well the capacity to translate some
idea, concept, meaning, etc. into a sensible form and vice versa. Unlike in the poetic
regime, in the aesthetic regime there is no apparent organic relationship between form
and content; a certain content can be expressed in virtually any sensible form. As much as
the arts in the aesthetic regime perform and mediate this equalizing, abstracting function
they are also objects of it: as Rancière points out above, the various arts, themselves, as
sites of the mediation or translation between the sensible and the insensible, are
abstracted from their particular formal characteristics and made equivalent through the
performance of this transaction.
Jay Bernstein, in his analysis of some photographic works of Cindy Sherman, similarly draws attention to the way in which the filmic genres referenced by the artworks carry out an abstracting function which is, at the same time, a demonstration of the formal and conventional character of the meaning-conveying process. Bernstein states,

In her [Sherman’s] late works various genres—fantasy, horror, pornography—are employed as mechanisms of abstraction, appropriate to photography, that release such embodiment for judgement. The consequence of the abstraction and reformation of the material is to reveal what might be called the syntactic quality of its objects—their being forms of meaning beyond, and necessary conditions of, representational meaning. If this latter term is correct, then she is a modernist.

[Bernstein, 109]

Of course, the meaning-conveying process (of art, or more generally) only demonstrates a formal and conventional character, or is only also a process of abstraction, in terms of the historical stage of development of a certain situation or context which we have referred to, so far, by several names: the logic of exchange, the aesthetic regime of art, modernity. Bernstein chooses to highlight the connection between modernity and a reflective emphasis on the formal character of representational meaning by his designation above of Sherman as a modernist. What Bernstein argues, here, is that Sherman can recall and reformulate the various filmic genres by way of the formal medium of photography because the film genres are abstracting mechanisms which convey meaning as a function of their ability to equalize two distinct expressions—meaning is conveyed formally and is not dependent upon the historical instance of the embodied film performance or work. We recognize the horror movie as such, or the porn movie as such, to a large extent because of the conventional scenarios and character types, the relationships between the characters, the pace of the action, the lighting and
sets, etc. and not because of the particularities of the film narrative. Bernstein argues that Sherman draws attention to, and reflects upon, filmic language by translating it—and by demonstrating that it can be translated—into photographic language. The function of abstraction (or the logic of exchange) is also, as I have pointed out before, another way of describing the function of language.

However, all these things are also another way of expressing the logic of the ratio: 2 lbs of tea is the equivalent of 3 yards of linen, and so on. We know that in an exchange economy, the function of abstraction expresses itself as the logic of the ratio, the cornerstone of Enlightenment discourses of rationality, instrumentality and progress. And, as Bernstein points out, the domination of the logic of the ratio and of instrumental rationality in modern society, according to Horkheimer and Adorno in Dialectic of Enlightenment, has as a consequence “the processive demythologization and disenchantment of the world” [Bernstein, 110]. The ratio, as a function of abstraction, involves the evacuation of concrete particularity. It involves a disembodiment, like that represented by and in Sherman’s photographs. It involves the “extirpation of animism,” in the words of Horkheimer and Adorno. In other words, the logic of the ratio involves a kind of death or, perhaps more accurately, the abolition of life:

“The disenchantment of the world,” they [Horkheimer and Adorno] claim, “is the extirpation of animism.”... they elaborate: “The ratio which supplants mimesis is not simply its counterpart. It is itself mimesis: mimesis unto death. The subjective spirit which abolishes animation from nature can master this inanimate nature only by imitating its rigidity and abolishing its own animism in turn.”...

By abstracting from sensuous particularity, enlightened conceptualization brackets the most salient feature of the perceptual object: that the very thing before our eyes is a living being. In treating every object as in principle subject to mean-ends [sic.] ratio...
the world, or, perhaps, first brackets and then excludes the cognitive experience of our perceiving living beings like ourselves...

[Bernstein, 111]

We have already examined how, for Marx, the function of abstraction, as it is expressed in the exchange of commodities on the market, enacts a kind of death: through the process of exchange, living, particular, and concrete (in the sense of holistic and non-abstracted) human labour is transformed into abstract, universal labour—labour which can be expressed as a ratio—which is then fetishized in the apparent dead matter of the commodity. Living relationships between human labourers are supplant by the objective relations between (dead, de-animated) things. Furthermore, according to Bernstein's reading of Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the subject of capitalism, or the Enlightenment individual, whose authority is displaced by so much dead matter, mimics this death in the internalization of the abstracting logic (i.e., the principles of rationality) of her/his social environment: "The rational subject in deploying the abstract conceptuality of enlightened reason is mimetically adopting himself to the world already disenchanted into dead matter. He (she?) is imitating, introjecting, death" [Bernstein, 111]. Bernstein follows this line of argument to say that the extirpation of animism, which is "systematically connected to societal rationalization," [ibid.] comes to present itself as the disappearance of the human body, as an image or theme in artworks, or materially, as Marx demonstrates in his analysis of the reconfiguration of social relations in an exchange economy. Not only is the disappearance of the body a "fundamental process within the modern world," more essentially, Bernstein argues, it is "what modernity is" [ibid.

242
The extirpation of animism results in what Bernstein calls “linguistification,” or, the transformation of “the experience of life into a series of abstract, hygienic signifiers” [Bernstein, 112]. We have seen that Jacques Ranciere describes this same process as the proliferation of languages. One of the most famous descriptions of this process, however, is made by Marx in the opening sentence of Capital: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’ [Marx, 1976, 125]. In an exchange economy, the fetishization of commodities and what Bernstein calls linguistification are two different ways of describing the same process; in other words, they refer to the same process from different vantage points. The “free-floating signifier” is the ideological expression of a social formation organized around a material process of abstraction. Only in this historical context can language be perceived as coming untethered from that to which it refers. The dominant presence of categorial thought in virtually all social arenas—cultural, political, economic, etc.—is one historical example of this situation. Within the arena of intellectual production, that which is referred to as the linguistic or semiotic revolution in “the history of ideas”—theoretical projects which recall, reformulate, incorporate or move forward from the work of Saussure, for instance—is another example. As we know, this same material process of abstraction is what makes possible the exchange of two commodities, of two unlike things. Abstract labour stands as the substance of a commodity’s exchange value only when concrete and particular human labour has been untethered from the commodity (which now stands as a husk or shell, like an “abstract, hygienic signifier”) and from the process of the commodity’s social existence. In an exchange economy, commodities are no longer understood as the repositories of living
human labour and become “dead matter,” and society’s wealth, an immense collection of
dead matter.

For Marx, commodities are ghosts—they are the traces of a life-force or anima
which used to stand in that place but which has been displaced, extirpated. Marx’s
analysis of capitalism, in its totalizing, holistic and concretizing movement, counters the
abstracted apprehension of commodities as so much dead matter, and facilitates the
apprehension of commodities as, instead, the repositories of living human labour. As
such, Marx’s critique of political economy portrays the reanimation of that evacuated
spirit and the re-enchantment of that dead matter. Bernstein recalls that for Horkheimer
and Adorno, the idea of aesthetic is one way of naming projects that involve the portrayal
of the re-enchantment of dead matter [Bernstein, 113]. “Mana,” or, “the moving spirit,”
is, for Horkheimer and Adorno, the core of aural art which opposes reification and
disenchantment:

[A]ural art is always a spiritualized,… animated other; hence aesthetic
semblance is always the semblance of life, an illusory infusion of life into
dead matter. The uncanniness of aesthetic perception is thus not only the
experience of meaning in what otherwise lacks meaning—brute sound,
paint on canvas; for something to be meaningful is equally for it to be the
bearer of life. Artistic materialism… can be… seen as a form of animism.
The production of aural works is the production of a semblance of a
Living thing.

[Bernstein, 113-4]

Therefore, as both are projects of aesthetic reanimation, we can posit a likeness
between the movement of Marx’s method of analysis and what Horkheimer and Adorno
call artistic materialism. We can also recognize that the notion of aesthetic, in the sense
of Rancière’s proposal of a regime of non-mimetic representation, is similar to (another
expression of) the function of abstraction in that it signifies, at the same time, an obstacle
to be overcome and the means by which to overcome it. Recall Marx’s argument that “in the analysis of economic forms,... neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both” [Marx in Rader, 156]. Here, abstraction refers to the analytical potential of categorial self-reflectivity. On the one hand, the aesthetic regime co-ordinates, simply, with modernity—with the social domination of a logic of exchange and its cause/consequence, the alienation (and abstraction) of human beings from their own productive life-force and collective identification. On the other hand, aesthetic refers to the holistic imaginative and conceptual effort to put the fragmented pieces of the picture of the social world together again in what Marx calls, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, “the appropriation of human reality”:

Man appropriates his manifold being in an all-inclusive way, and thus as a whole man. All his human relations to the world—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, observing, feeling, desiring, acting, loving—in short, all the organs of his individuality, like the organs that are directly communal in form, are in their objective action (their action in relation to the object) the appropriation of this object, the appropriation of human reality.

[Marx in Rader, 160]

In a general sense, aesthetic refers to the relationship between a subject and an object as a problematic. Recall that the notion of aesthetic developed not just in reference to the human sensual faculties but, more specifically, to the experiential potential offered up by the harmonious collaboration of the human senses. Melvin Rader also describes Marx’s proposal for the possibility of a “whole concrete person” as an aesthetic project [Rader, 160]. Rader states,

If we employ the word “aesthetic” in its original etymological meaning,
namely, "pertaining to the senses," we must conclude that Marx’s ideal of human life is strongly aesthetic in tinge. By the term "senses," Marx means "not only the five senses, but also the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (desiring, loving, etc.)" [Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, 161]. The realization of the human potential brings into play the whole concrete person, including his individuality, his emotional and sensory versatility, and his capacity for love and fellowship. Although this human fulfillment is "aesthetic" in the widest meaning of the term, it includes "aesthetic" fulfillment in its more limited artistic meaning.

[Rader, 160]

In the capitalist mode of production, the worker, or seller of labour power, is an individual whose faculties are fragmented or abstracted, as opposed to a whole, concrete human being whose faculties are aesthetically and organically coordinated and unified. The creation of unified human beings is both a subjective and objective project. On the one hand, it is objective in that it is a revolutionary project; it is the consequence of the transformation of the social world through the eradication of private property. On the other hand, it is subjective in that social transformation requires the action of human agents who have the coordinated faculties required to apprehend and imagine an alternative to the empirical status quo. As an analogy, one could say that the readers of Capital must have the faculties (and these are not strictly intellectual or analytical faculties) to meet the analysis there half way. This situation, in itself, can be described in terms of an aesthetic problematic. The realization of aesthetic value is also both a subjective and an objective problematic: it concerns a coordinated relationship between the aesthetic object and the subjective faculty for experiencing and identifying with that object on the part of the beholder, listener, etc. According to Marx in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,

The most beautiful music has no meaning for the non-musical ear, is not an object for it, because my object can only be the confirmation of one of
my own faculties. It can only be so for me in so far as my faculty exists for itself as a subjective capacity, because the meaning of an object for me extends only as far as the sense extends (only makes sense for an appropriate sense).

[Marx in Rader, 161]

Here, we return to an idea which we explored much earlier on in this discussion of Marx’s method of analysis—an idea which makes reference to the dialectical relationship between subject and object, between the agents of capitalism and the capitalist mode of production which confronts those agents as an objective structure. In order to transform their social world, agents must already have activated those faculties required to undertake the task of social change. At the same time, the very act of undertaking that task transforms the agents of change, re-coordinates their faculties. This process bears a striking similarity to the following description of Francis Bacon’s theory of painting and method as depicted by Sylviane Agacinski:

It is not that the painter does not anticipate anything, it is not that he has no project, no idea. Of course not. He sees something in his mind—but, having tried a way of doing things, having tried a technique which leaves a great part to chance, to accident, his prior vision is transformed by painting. It is transformed “by the very fact that there is painting,” says Bacon. So that, in this case, far from being submitted to what it represents, far from reproducing the visible or even making something visible, painting is more a technique for transforming the visible: transforming appearances, transforming accepted images that have already been seen and are known (or even already painted, like the Velasquez painting), transforming mental images, that is to say our most familiar and most used representations—transforming clichés.

[Agacinski, 104]

Agacinski’s description of Bacon’s theory of painting recalls my description of Marx’s method earlier on, in chapter three. There, I describe the goal and movement of Marx’s method as entailing not only a more adequate, totalized representation of the social world—i.e., not only the achievement of a certain product—but also the involvement of
the reader in the *process* of the representation of the object of analysis. One of the goals of Marx’s method lies in the transformation of the reading, conceptualizing and participating subject as she or he follows the process of the theoretical reconstruction of the newly totalized object and her/his relationship to that object. In this way, the undertaking of political economic analysis becomes an allegory for social change, itself, by portraying the mutual and dialectical transformation of subject and object, as well as, by transforming the sense of the relationship *between* subject and object through the demonstration of their identity—an identity which is historically and *necessarily* veiled in a market economy. Marxian political economic analysis is a *symbolic resolution* of the social contradictions that are expressed by the mode of production; as Jameson states in a discussion of the method of Brecht, “such, at any rate, is the *supplementary allegorical energy* of… [this method]” [Jameson, 1998, 47].

**Representing the Lost Object: The Economy of Melancholia**

However, what if the contradiction which Marx’s analysis symbolically resolves through the representational process of rendering its object in a particular, totalized way, can, itself, be understood as a consequence of the breakdown in the function of representation? In other words, what if the contradiction which political economy seeks to symbolically resolve through a representational method is the crisis of representation, itself? This is, indeed, the situation in the case of Marxian political economy. Throughout the earlier part of this study, I demonstrated that the social function of exchange expresses itself, amongst other things, as the forestalling of a totalizing and holistic vantage point—in the obscuring of a view and understanding of the interconnectedness of
capitalism’s various moments—on the part of capitalism’s agents. I demonstrated that capitalism must necessarily present itself as a set of historically contingent, autonomous and atomized elements which appear to have no necessary interrelationship, despite that the nature of this social formation is otherwise. Georg Lukács makes this point:

[In the development of capitalist society] various aspects of economy are expanded and intensified, so that the ‘totality’ becomes ever more closely knit and substantial.... As a result of the objective structure of this... system, the surface of capitalism appears to ‘disintegrate’ into a series of elements all driven towards independence. Obviously this must be reflected in the consciousness of the men who live in this society...

[Lukács, 1977, 31-2]

One of capitalism’s fundamental contradictions is that it is a social process which must represent itself to the contrary of that which it essentially is—an interconnected and totalized structured whole. The thwarted adequation of capitalism’s essence and necessary appearance hinders the transformation of that social formation by suspending the distinction between subject and object, or, in other words, by obscuring the identity of the subjects of capitalism (those who create it, are the bearers of it, are subjected to it) and capitalism as an objective entity. The collective and popular perception of capitalism as a totalized and holistic structure—as the product of agents’ own labour and activity—can, therefore, in the context of an exchange economy, be described as a “lost object,” the popular retrieval or introduction of which is one required element of any revolutionary project.

In her book, Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia, Julia Kristeva characterizes the psychic conditions of depression and melancholia as “supported by intolerance for object loss and the signifier’s failure to insure a compensating way out of the states of withdrawal in which the subject takes refuge to the point of inaction
(pretending to be dead) or even suicide” [Kristeva, 10]. Kristeva’s formulation, here, can further illuminate the movement (and what I have called the aesthetic dimension of that movement) of Marx’s method of analysis. In psychoanalytic models, psychic development is structured around the common, central and foundational psychic event of the loss of the maternal object. Kristeva argues that normal psychic maturation involves resolving or negating this loss—this initial experience of abandonment—through symbolizing activity, through the processes of incorporating language and of representational practices. While the subject cannot retrieve the original lost object, s/he can adequately enough capture it symbolically, or signify it, allowing normal psychic development to proceed. On the contrary, according to Kristeva, depression and melancholia are psychic states which refer to subjects for whom, and for whatever reason, the original loss of the maternal object is especially traumatic or intolerable and the event is subsequently disavowed by the subject, arresting the process of its mourning and deferring, indefinitely, its symbolic recovery. As Kristeva articulates above, depression and melancholia are characterized by the condition of “asymbolia,” a breakdown in the function of representation, in the subject’s ability to signify and to utilize language as compensation for the lost object resulting in withdrawal, inaction and the mimicry of death.

There is a likeness between Kristeva’s formulation of the condition of asymbolia and the social condition of the collective subject in the capitalist mode of production. Like Kristeva’s depressive or melancholic subject, the collective subject in capitalism experiences a breakdown in the signifying function, in the possibility of representing and articulating the social world in a particular (totalized) way. The stalling of this
representational function is accompanied by a withdrawal from public activity, the muting of collective expressions of agency, a popular passivity, a sense of powerlessness and paralysis in face of "the way things are," and, extending Kristeva's formulation, a mimicking of the death of the collective or social subject. The lost, "unnamable" object—the object which, in capitalism, must be submerged and defies representation—is the object which shares an identity with the collective subject, itself, and to which we can only allude by way of previous, historical attempts at naming it: community, communism, socialism, utopia, the image of some "progressive" post-capitalist social formation, sociality itself.47

In Kristeva's model of the depressive psychic state, she argues that the stalling of the subject's capacity for signification expresses itself in the subject as a "psychomotor retardation" or "language retardation"—the literal slowing down and exhaustion of the subject's speech or linguistic activity [Kristeva, 33-34]. The speech of the depressive person becomes slow, repetitive and monotonous: the depressive person utters "sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill. Even phrases they cannot formulate" [Kristeva, 33]. The idea of language retardation is significant in two ways with respect to the comparison of Kristeva's depressive or melancholic subject and the collective subject in capitalism.

First, Kristeva argues that language retardation results in the subject demonstrating a skewed sense of time [Kristeva, 60-1]. Because, as Kristeva argues, the "time in which we live is the time of our discourse," the subject does not develop a sense

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47 It is important to point out that sociality in capitalism must be submerged but it cannot be eradicated. To eradicate sociality would be to eradicate human life, itself. We saw, early on in the discussion, that the capitalist mode of production is founded and dependent upon a social division of labour but that its socialized character must be obscured from popular perception and it must appear as an aggregate of individual production enterprises.
of temporal continuity, a sense of before and after, a sense of a "past towards a goal" direction [ibid.]. Instead, the subject’s sense of time is that of a series of exploded moments which lock the subject into the past (however, it is the nostalgic, stationary past, and not the notion of the past as the historical antecedent of the present and future), and block out a perspective of the future [ibid.]. Kristeva argues that the lost object is, therefore, not a place or a thing but a particular sense and experience of time [ibid.]. The subject’s skewed sense of temporality is coterminal with the breakdown of the subject’s faculty of signification. This situation recollects that of the collective subject in capitalism: throughout this discussion, I have demonstrated that the breakdown in the collective subject’s capacity to perceive, picture, represent the social totality is also to describe the popular, collective submersion of an historical sensibility—the ability to perceive, recognize and represent historical continuity, the connection between “then,” “now” and “that which may possibly be.”

It is not a coincidence that within the discourses of postmodernism, as the theoretical and ideological expression of late 20th century capitalism, the category of history, as well as, references to traditions of historical thought and historiography were aggressively submerged, if not publicly pilloried. What took their place was a rhetoric of variations on the theme of “history collapsing into a series of present moments.” Within this rhetoric, history becomes imagistic; it becomes, in Kristeva’s words, a “series of exploded moments.” As was the case, particularly in North American popular cultural expression, throughout the 1980s and early 90s, the proliferation of historical images—an index of the evacuation of the popular perception of history as a material force—was accompanied by a decline in the popular and collective ability to represent—to grasp,
categorically—history as a continuum, as a set of social relations handed down from one
generation to the next, as a material force.

Second, Kristeva argues that language retardation amounts to a “learned
helplessness” on the part of the depressive subject which also recollects the condition of
learned passivity and the perception of the lack of agency on the part of the collective
subject in capitalism. Kristeva describes the state of learned helplessness as such: “when
all escape routes are blocked, animals as well as men learn to withdraw rather than flee or
fight. The retardation or inactivity, which one might call depressive, would thus
constitute a learned defense reaction to a dead-end situation and unavoidable shocks”
[Kristeva, 34]. The capitalist mode of production produces a similar type of retardation
and arrested development in the social subject. A version of this analysis was also
offered by Bertold Brecht who argued that the bourgeoisie, as a collective subject,
internalized the sense of danger that complex, historical thought represented with respect
to their interests in capitalist society. This potential danger was expressed by the
collective submersion of such complex and historical thinking by transforming it into
something less threatening: “The bourgeoisie was obliged to liquidate its purely
intellectual exertions in a period when the pleasures of thinking were likely to involve
immediate risks for its economic interests. Where thought was not completely turned off,

48 A point to remember is that, in capitalism, under the conditions of an historical reification, the perception
of the lack of agency (on the part of the collective subject) amounts to an actual lack of agency. It is for this
reason that, in capitalism, the transformation of the subject’s perception of their relationship to the social
formation (i.e., the perception of the relationship between subject and object) amounts to an incipient
transformation of the social formation. In capitalism, perception is a material force, both with respect to the
reproduction of the social formation and to its transformation.

49 A further analogy between Kristeva’s depressive subject and the social subject in capitalism can be
drawn around the concept of “affect.” Kristeva states, “Unbelieving in language, the depressive persons are
affectionate, wounded to be sure, but prisoners of affect. The affect is their thing” [Kristeva, 14]. An
historical connection can be traced between this concept of affect, on the level of the individual psyche, and
Negri and Hardt’s observation in their book, Empire, that production in the contemporary historical
conjunction (i.e., “Empire”) is characterized by the predominance of what they call “affective labour.” I
map and explore this argument in a forthcoming article.
it became ever more culinary. Use was still made of the classics, but an ever more
culinary use” [Brecht in Jameson, 1998, 37]. Jameson’s commentary on this passage
from Brecht further supports my effort to map a relationship between a certain
socioeconomic context and a type of subjective economy:

There is here the suggestion, not of outright censorship, but of an
instinctive self-repression of real thought, of an all-too-knowing turning
away from anything that might lead you to unpleasant truths and to ideas
of action which either promise guilt or ask you to change your life. This
is not, I think, a ‘vulgar Marxist’ analysis... On the contrary, it would
seem to have its affinities with Freud’s view of the patient he called the
Rat Man, who had to make himself stupid, to stop himself from thinking,
in order not to confront the unwanted and thereby unconscious realities
of his own existence. Consumer society today, in the United States and
increasingly elsewhere, faces a similar dilemma and a similar block
when it come to thinking about the end results of its socioeconomic
system; and has certainly sacrificed its classics to far more elaborate
culinary distractions.

[Jameson 1998, 37]

Kristeva, likewise, “expands” her analysis to consider the melancholic and
depressive states on the level of societies and, thereby, approaches (if not exploring the
idea systematically) the notion of the social subject (without, however, making the
specific argument that depressive states or the crisis of signification are structured by the
social institution of the logic of exchange). Kristeva argues that crises of thought, speech
and representation emerge in societies in response to large-scale, violent social traumas,
such as the Holocaust, Hiroshima, world wars, etc., or in response to “economic,
political, and juridical bankruptcies” [Kristeva, 221]. As instances of what are often
popularly perceived of as unquestionable and unavoidable social violence continue apace
in the present, Kristeva observes a proliferation or, at least, a more obvious display of
psychic disorders refined by the discourse of psychiatry [ibid., 221-2]. She argues, “What
those monstrous and painful sights do damage to are our systems of perception and
representation. As if overtaxed or destroyed by too powerful a breaker, our symbolic
means find themselves hollowed out, nearly wiped out, paralyzed” [Kristeva, 223]. The
result of such traumas, according to Kristeva, are a collective “illogicality and silence”
[ibid., 222]. Furthermore, Kristeva argues, “Melancholy becomes the secret mainspring
of a new rhetoric” [ibid., 224]. More specifically, society is gripped by an *apocalyptic*
rhetoric which is “carried out in two seemingly opposite, extreme fashions that
complement each other: a wealth of images and a holding back of words” [ibid.].

As we have already just partly explored, contemporary western (especially, North
American) market society seems to bear this analysis out strikingly well: the crisis of
signification—the breakdown in the popular and collective faculty of representing, to
ourselves, the complexity and historical dimensions of the social world—has, indeed,
been accompanying by the proliferation and predominance of images in the public
sphere—images which, as was recognized as early as the 1960s by Guy Debord, assume
the role of the perfect, idealized commodity. Once again, the image is an important index
in postmodern discourses and, of course, rightly so, given its ongoing socially organizing
presence. This latter situation is reflected in the general intellectual acceptance of the
name “image society” as a reference for the historical period that witnessed the explosion
of postmodern discourses, and it is a name which continues to have currency.

So far, in this section, I have been drawing out the likenesses between Julia
Kristeva’s model of the depressive subject and my own model of the social subject in the
capitalist mode of production. My reason for doing so is to illuminate some aspects of the
process that is the capitalist mode of production, itself. For instance, the point of
Kristeva’s study is to demonstrate how emotional trauma structures the psyche in a particular way in the case of the depressive or melancholic (these conditions are to be distinguished but share a similar structure) individual. Similarly, I argue that the capitalist mode of production is experienced as a sort of social trauma which structures both the material and ideological (they share a mediated identity, after all) reality of the social or collective subject. I’m arguing that the characteristic “symptomatic expressions” of this latter structuring process, on the level of society, are similar (analogous) to the symptoms of the structuring trauma on the level of the individual subject. Of course, the idea that the capitalist mode of production manifests itself on all levels of expression, including the levels of psychology and subjectivity, is not new; it was one of the foundational premises explored by the Western Marxists, such as Lukács and Gramsci, and by the Frankfurt School theorists, Adorno in particular. Jameson describes how this “generation” of Marxist theory is characterized by it occupation with the question of how subjects come to internalize the logic of exchange to the extent that the employment of external coercion in the reproduction of its hegemony becomes virtually redundant:

The principle characteristic of this new Marxism is the feeling that Western society has somehow become a total system, and that what used to be held together by external constraint, by easily identifiable coercive forces and physical violence, has now been interiorized by means of general cultural conditioning, through advertising and the mass media. In an economy which has transcended physical need, but which depends for its functioning on the constant sale of new products, artificial needs must be stimulated and maintained: everyone reproduces the market system within himself like a conscience.

[Jameson, 1967, 140]
Conclusion: Marxian Political Economy as “Resolutionary” Allegory

However, the goal of exploring Kristeva’s models of psychic development for the present study cannot rest here. For it is not immediately apparent how my preceding argument coordinates with my analysis of Marx’s political economic method. At this point, the analogy with Kristeva’s model can be extended further to make apparent that coordination. My argument all along has been that Marxian political economy is, at the same time, one of those symptomatic expressions of the “capitalist trauma” and a fruitful approach to addressing and confronting it. Marxian political economy points to the “way out”; it is a “resolutionary allegory.” I have also directed much of my attention in this discussion to defining the notion that Marx’s analytical “way out” of the universe of contradictions offered up by the capitalist mode of production demonstrates an aesthetic sensibility. Similarly, Kristeva describes one potential “way out” of the depressive or melancholic state as an aesthetic process. Furthermore, it is a process which she alternatively refers to as sublimation:

The melancholy Thing... prevents working out the loss within the psyche. How can one approach... [a resolution]? Sublimation is an attempt to do so: through melody, rhythm, semantic polyvalency, the so-called poetic form, which decomposes and recomposes signs, is the sole “container” seemingly able to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing.

[Kristeva, 14]

Kristeva focuses on the example of literary creation as a (normally unconscious) gesture on the part of the subject to confront object loss, to cease the denial of separation of subject and object, and to engage in the symbolic recovery of the object. The literary representation functions as an indirect (mediated) expression of the subject’s psychic
scenario. According to Kristeva, literary creation enacts for the subject the sentiment of, "‘no, I haven’t lost; I evoke, I signify through the artifice of signs and for myself what has been parted from me’...[ensuring] the subject’s entrance into the universe of signs and creation" [Kristeva, 23]. The aesthetic gesture enacts a similar movement in writer, reader, or viewer [ibid., 22]. It is a movement which is more cathartic in character than elaborational, and it can facilitate “a survival, a resurrection” (or “rebirth”) of the psychic subject [ibid., 24; 51]. Kristeva explains,

[A]esthetic and particularly literary creation, and also religious discourse in its imaginary, fictional essence, set forth a device whose prosodic economy, interaction of characters, and implicit symbolism constitute a very faithful semiological representation of the subject’s battle with symbolic collapse. Such a literary representation is not an elaboration in the sense of “becoming aware” of the inter- and intrapsychic causes of moral suffering; that is where it diverges from the psychoanalytic course, which aims at dissolving this symptom. Nevertheless, the literary (and religious) representation possesses a real and imaginary effectiveness that comes closer to catharsis than to elaboration; it is a therapeutic device used in all societies throughout the ages.

[Kristeva, 24]

Similarly, I have argued that the totalizing, representational process of Marx’s political economic method moves towards symbolically restoring the lost totalized, historical vantage point on the part of the reader or author. By following the representational process of the analysis, the reader reenacts the movement of historical continuity, the aesthetic expression of which is narrative. The structure of literary or analytical narrative can be seen as an allegory for historical continuity, itself.

Fictional representations stand as consciously or unconsciously⁵⁰ constructed imaginary explorations of modes of understanding or experiencing the social world that

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⁵⁰ The social meaning of these representations, which is what I’m concerned with, here, is something other than a collection or a mean of different individual interpretations of them. I am attempting to recollect the
are structurally precluded in the material reality of market society. These aesthetic and "utopian" representations—visions of a better social world, sublimatory solutions—are found not merely in examples of what are conventionally considered to be the high or profound art forms. All such representations, high or low, at least in the context of an exchange economy, will express the social contradictions which inform them.

Advertising or promotional texts, for example, are no less worthy examples of social, utopian imaginaries just because they are conventionally perceived as low-brow, compromised or "fallen" aesthetic forms. In fact, because of advertising's abundance of texts and its ubiquity in the public and private sphere—the promotional image/text could easily be considered the emblem of contemporary popular cultural expression—advertising is a particularly overt and historically appropriate example of aesthetic representations which circulate in the public sphere on the currency of a social and utopian vision of a better world.

Advertising does much more today than extol the virtue of certain commodities and products; this latter is merely a tangential task. The predominant function of advertising is to connect, symbolically, for potential consumers, the act of consuming these commodities with specific idealized and utopian experiences. Advertising does not promise us things so much as it promises the experiences and sensations of well-being associated with the conditions of community, familial bonding and harmony, love, sexual fulfillment and satisfaction, fulfillment in work, physical beauty, virtual bliss in leisure pursuits, material comfort and abundance, a life of infinite variety, peaceful sleep, cures and remedies for all physical and emotional ailments and pain, individualism and

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notion of the collective subject and the notion of class consciousness to which it corresponds. I believe that the idea of social or collective meaning also overlaps with Raymond William's notion of "structure of feeling."

259
individuation, convenience, mobility, freedom, and so on. Today, before all else, advertising is an industry which produces and sells affect. Advertising is the purest and most adequate example of what Negri and Hardt describe as affective labour, the type of labour process which characterizes contemporary capitalist production, in particular:

Health services, for example, rely centrally on caring and affective labor, and the entertainment industry is likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affect. This labor is immaterial, even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible, a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion. Categories such as “in-person services” or services of proximity are often used to identify this kind of labor, but what is really essential to it are the creation and manipulation of affect. Such affective production, exchange, and communication are generally associated with human contact, but that contact can be either actual or virtual, as it is in the entertainment industry.

[Negri and Hardt, 292-3]

The concept of the production of affect brings us to another, related, phenomenon of contemporary market society to which Marxian analysis must develop the faculty to respond, namely, the aestheticization of consumption, or, the consuming of affect. The aestheticization of consumption refers to the increasingly secondary importance of the physical commodity and the prioritization of the commodity’s image for the consumer in consumption practices. The commodity’s meaning and value for the consumer is perceived to be more a function of its image, which is to say its communicated affect, than it is a function of its physical properties or its functionality. Commodities, in the present mode of production, with increasing conventionality, are consumed for the images that they convey. The commodity’s image is the representation (verbally or pictorially) of the affect associated with that commodity—with whatever sentiment, emotional state, or mode of well-being it postures. This phenomenon has occurred, at least exceptionally, as long as consumer society has existed, however, it has come to
represent consumption's defining movement in the present mode of production in post-industrial, consumer societies. The notion of the aestheticization of consumption is an extending, generalizing and intensifying of Guy Debord's analysis of the prerogative of the image in *Society of the Spectacle*. In Debord's analysis, the spectacle becomes the privileged commodity in consumer society as the ultimate form of commodity reification. Presently, even the most mundane and banal commodities are "spectacularized"—are consumed as images; everything in contemporary consumer society takes on an aesthetic dimension.

That contemporary Marxian political economy should also express an aesthetic sensibility is neither good or bad, *per se*; it is neither a progressive or reactionary development, in itself. Marx's method cannot help but be, amongst all else, an index of its historical moment. However, this situation also implies that, as a method, it is both lumbered by the social contradictions which inform it, at the same time as it bears the fruit of that moment's progressive or utopian possibilities. Marx's method *must* assume each of these two postures like two sides of the same piece of paper. We can, therefore, understand Marx's method as enact[ing an *identity* between the apparently conflicting positions on method and aesthetics assumed, quite famously, by Lukács and Adorno.

For Lukacs, the novel functions as a type of aesthetic and symbolic resolution to the experience of alienation and fragmentation of the social world, in the sense which I have been elaborating throughout this chapter. In the context of market society, and the concomitant extinction of collective forms of social life where there exists an organic relationship between individual and community, the novel responds to the individual's inability to make sense of everyday existence, and to his/her intuitive search for a new
sense of totality in order to make life meaningful again [Wise, 69]. Terry Eagleton argues that the task of the novel, for Lukács, is to "mirror in microcosmic form, the complex totality of society itself... and [thereby] combat the alienation and fragmentation of capitalist society, [by] projecting a rich, many-sided image of human wholeness."

Eagleton in Wise, 69].

Adorno's position with regards to the potential for artworks to make progressive political gestures in market society is a response to, and a critique of, that of Lukács. For Adorno, the contradictory structure of market society is such that every and any aesthetic representation of it, regardless of how self-reflective may have been the process of its creation, will also demonstrate this contradictory structure. The artwork cannot, therefore, perform the type of symbolic resolution of the fracturing of social life and, consequently, of subjectivity, itself, which Lukács would have it perform. Instead, according to Adorno, the best the work can do is to draw attention to the contradictory status of the social world by pointing to its own contradictions. In other words, the work indicates towards the truth of society by demonstrating how that truth is necessarily foreclosed in the instance of the work's own structure—like a kind of "negative knowledge of the actual world": "a successful work... is not one which resolves objective contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised in its intermost [sic.] struggle." [Adorno in Wise, 71].

Both Lukács' position and Adorno's position reflect partial truths—each speaks from "one side of the piece of paper." The point, however, is that the two positions speak from the same piece of paper, in other words, they share an identity. These two seemingly
contradictory points of view are actually two different ways of articulating the same act of mistakenly locating the reconciliation of subject and object (or, the possibility of reconciling subject and object) in the *products* of aesthetic practice, as opposed to locating it in the aesthetic practice itself, i.e., in the process of representation (theoretical reconstruction, signification, etc.). The reconciliation of subject and object cannot be represented; it is a representing. This practice may take various forms and names, but the one under scrutiny has been Marxian political economy.
Conclusion

In the consumer economies of the North, we are presently living a “theoretical age.” Throughout this study, I argue that what we call “theory” is one of the phenomenal expressions of the present stage of the capitalist mode of production. A material function of abstraction, which structures our present social formation, offers theory up to us as one of its expressions. However, theory is also, at the same time, a mechanism which can serve to uncover capitalism’s own mechanisms. In Jay Bernstein’s words, theory is a tool for disclosing the “unseen within the seen” [Bernstein, 143]. Theory shares this objective with Marxian political economy. Making visible that which is invisible in capitalist society, for example, is one of the principle tasks of Marx’s method—to make visible, even to the imagination of capitalism’s agents, the human, concrete, productive life-force which is the invisible substance of capitalism’s dead forms. It is a mistake, however, to understand the work of theory as taking place strictly within the domain of specialists, intellectuals or academics when it is, in fact, a logic which structures the majority of our everyday practices in the social world of contemporary capitalism. To behold various material goods—cars, running shoes, appliances—and yet to “see” in their place things such as status, class mobility, group membership or peer acceptance is also the work of theory, even though it is work which goes on, for the most part, behind our backs.

Sylviane Agacinski states, “[t]he theoretician never stops at what is visible. In this, he is perhaps closer to the common onlooker than one thinks. ‘Most people see through their intellect more often than through their eyes’ remarked Paul Valéry, ‘instead of seeing
coloured spaces, they become acquainted with the concepts.' It is too little repeated:
most people are theoreticians” [Agacinski, 100].

One of the contradictions of contemporary market society is that that which I am
calling our theoretical age is characterized by a strong popular mistrust of complexity,
intellectual or analytical abstraction, as well as, and at the same time, the dominant
presence of a rhetoric of commonsense, transparency and a straightforward “what you see
is what you get.” Fredric Jameson has argued,

[In our present context, empirical thought and a commonsense viewpoint
only serve to reinforce the existing institutions—not only because they lead
us to imagine that such institutions are eminently natural and self-
explanatory…—but also, and primarily, because the only way to under-
stand a fact which is part of a total system is to begin with an idea of the
totality. This is what Adorno calls speculative theory: it is what we may
also call dialectical thinking…

[Jameson, 1967, 141]

Global, social networks—interwoven economic, political and cultural processes—which
are increasingly complex, expansive and immediate in their interconnectedness, have, so
far, positioned subjects with a stronger experience of, and view to, their containment than
to their creative possibilities as agents of change and manifestation. This situation makes
the mistrust of analytical abstraction and the dominant ideology of commonsense
transparency a powerfully conservative social force, as it was in Marx’s day, but with a
characteristically different set of ideological supports. A Marxian critique of political
economy, therefore, continues to be a fundamental tool—one of the fundamental
analytical tools, I argue—in confronting and redirecting the momentum of such social
forces, but will only function as such if its own form reflects a self-consciousness of the
structuring contingencies of its historical moment. Following this line of thought, what I
offer in this study is the outline and genealogy of a “speculative Marxist method”—a "theoretical Marxism" and an "aesthetic Marxism." My argument has not been that this is the most adequate Marxism per se, rather, merely, the most historically adequate Marxism. I mean this in the sense of Christopher Wise in his paraphrasing of Jameson: ‘‘Like any other cultural phenomena,… Marxism varies according to its socioeconomic context.’ In other words, Marxism is capable of projecting ‘any number of possible ideologies,’ each one ‘situation specific to the point of encompassing the class determinations and cultural and national horizons of its proponents’’ [Wise, 72].

There are, and must be, different Marxisms for different times and different socioeconomic contexts. We can characterize the contemporary socioeconomic context—the present “stage” of capitalist production—by way of the category of aesthetic. Here, I’m using the category of aesthetic to refer to the conjuncture of several phenomena: the crisis of representation, giving priority to form over content (or, colloquially, style over substance), the proliferation and prerogative of the image, the institutionalization of the severed subject and object, the increasing centrality of the production of affect, the aestheticization of consumption. The present historical development of capitalist society, our theoretical age, interpolates us as aesthetic subjects; it offers up for us to claim, to borrow Peter Osborne’s phrase, an “aesthetic point of view.” Again, in my appropriation of it, an aesthetic point of view refers to the general sensibility of, and specific material contradictions which structure, the present historical vantage point. Although, as such, an aesthetic point of view also informs our conceptual possibilities, including our analytical strategies and proclivities. The question, therefore, of which throughout this discussion I have been formulating through the answering, is actually the inverse of the question
asked by the Western Marxists and the Frankfurt School Theorists. The “cultural Marxists” asked, how is the “question of aesthetics” expressed from within the framework of a Marxian critique of political economy? What, as Marxists, do we make of aesthetics? My question, on the other hand, has been what sort of figure of Marx’s method is rendered by an aesthetic point of view? What, as aestheticians, do we make of Marxism?

The present historical moment offers up a Marxian political economy that privileges and gives priority to questions about the social functions of perception and representation. Generally speaking, this focus is not new: giving priority to the questions of “how and which” material relations inform the social processes of perception and representation, for example, also characterized the work of the Western Marxists, such as, Georg Lukács, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Ernst Bloch, Bertold Brecht, Walter Benjamin. Attention to these questions, in addition to a related focus on the role of culture and aesthetics—cultural and aesthetic expression, practices and institutions—in the capitalist formation, distinguished the work of the Western Marxists from the more apparently “socially immediate and integrated” and less theoretical work of the Second International Marxists which preceded them chronologically. However, like the historical development of the tendencies of the capitalist formation, itself, an analytical/theoretical tendency, perspective, or line of thought in the context of the capitalist formation can only remain current—can only reproduce itself over time—by revolving into something else. At least, the theoretical line must announce itself as something else (which, in a way, is to say the same thing), something else which appears relevant and current in its new historical context. For this
reason, the current configuration of Marxian political economic critique, which gives priority to the social functions of perception and representation in the reproduction and transformation of the social formation, will be, at the same time, an extension of, and a departure from, the configuration and focus of the earlier Western Marxists. A contemporary Marxian political economy is an expression of the same, persisting social contradictions, while reflecting their current and historically particular characteristics and manifestations.

In this study, I identify and discuss, if briefly, several of these historical characteristics and manifestations of the contemporary stage of the mode of production which situate a current Marxian method of analysis, and I list them above as qualifications of a general “aesthetic” orientation. These qualifications, themselves, are mediated by other social developments, in turn. For example, all of them—i.e., the various elements of what is conventionally referred to as contemporary “image society”—are mediated, in one way or another, by the intensifying grip and pervasive structuring force of the commercial mass media on our social environments, public and private (and, specifically, the dismantling of the division/distinction between public and private spheres in this mediatized context). In the cases of the intensifying prerogative of the spectacle, the aestheticization of consumption and the priority of the communicated affect associated with commodities in sphere of consumption, the consequence of these situations is to render the commodity a “second-order fetish.” In other words, these situations make a fetish of the already fetishized commodity in exchange.

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51 This list is far from exhaustive. The compilation of a more comprehensive characterization of the various material conditions of the contemporary social world which situate its mediated theoretical, philosophical, aesthetic and ideological gestures and expressions is beyond the scope of the present project. It is, however, the focus of a subsequent project which is in progress.
The dominant dynamic of what I'm calling the second-order fetish is one of the characteristics which makes the current stage of the mode of production distinct from other historical contexts. For example, in one moment, the second-order fetish expresses itself in the various examples of the popular aesthetic posture of a seemingly non-tormented and guilt-free (untethered) irony (as opposed to the tormented and tortured modernist irony of the first decades of the 20th century). In another moment, the second-order fetish also expresses the increasingly dominant regime of capitalist accumulation referred to as financialization, or finance capitalism. In this instance, within the context of the recently defining economic presence and role of finance capital—the buying and selling of bonds, mutual funds, interest-bearing capital, stock market investment and speculation—the circulation process, which, according to Marx, is already fetishized as the location of the production of value (as opposed to the value-adding activity of labour), appears to be rendered redundant to the production of value altogether, and finance capital assumes the role of a second order fetish, here, as well. These are some of the social, historical and material conditions which comprise the totality which both offers up and requires the particular form of Marxian political economic method which I map in this study.

A Marxian political economic method which gives priority to the interrogation of the social functions of perception and representation must partake of a reification in order to expose one. As an analytical strategy, Marx harnesses the same, reifying social movement which he seeks to uncover and re-present for the reader. This idea of choosing the non-choice of making useful that tendency which one also seeks to resist recalls Adorno’s sense of the negative-truth function of art. The “truth” of art is that it is obliged
to express the social contradictions it seeks to resist and transcend: "[R]eification defines the situation and the element which the work [of art] wishes to resist, but it also defines the logic of that resistance, as a kind of homeopathic remedy which fights a general logic of objectification by way of the objectification of its own forms" [Jameson, 1998, 46].

If the social function (referred to in this study as a function of abstraction) which Marx's method seeks to uncover can be identified as a form of reification, as Marx's analytical strategy we could call this same reifying function a type of defamiliarization, or *estrangement*. In both senses, reification refers to the function of segmenting or breaking up into atomized parts [Jameson, 1998, 46]. We have identified various examples of this reifying movement throughout this study: the material relation of exchange, the social division of labour in a free market system, the division of labour within the production enterprise (Taylorism), the idealizing of the state and civil society, the institutionalization of art and the creation of the discipline of aesthetics, the possibility of philosophical idealism and categorial thought, etc. For example, as we observed, Marx's own method of categorial thought proceeds by breaking down the object of analysis into its smallest "units" of intelligibility and then conceptually reconstructing these units in a particular way. What are generally considered to be the aesthetic strategies of defamiliarization and estrangement can be likened to the movement of Marx's method in that they also harness this type of reification: the breaking up of a representation into its constituent elements in order to demonstrate how they were (historically) put together in the first place. Defamiliarization or estrangement are the aesthetic expressions of the fundamental Marxian political economic movement of *historicization,* or, the exposing of the historical conditions of the seemingly "natural,"
ahistorical and immutable social object, as well as, exposing the ensuing ideological consequences of the sedimentation of certain ways of seeing, situating and understanding the “reality” of the social world. The identity of Marx’s method of historicization and the aesthetic strategy of defamiliarization or estrangement can be observed in Jameson’s description of the “estrangement-effect” in the work and aesthetic method of Bertold Brecht:

What history has solidified into an illusion of stability and substantiality can now be dissolved again, and reconstructed, replaced, improved... The process of aesthetic autonomization [reification], breaking the action up into its smallest parts, thus has symbolic as well as epistemological meaning: it shows what the act “really” is, no doubt, but the very activity of breaking it up and “analyzing” it is itself a joyous process, a kind of creative play, in which new acts are formed together out of the old, in which the whole reified surface of a period seemingly beyond history and beyond change now submits to a first ludic unbuilding, before arriving at a real social and revolutionary collective reconstruction.

[Jameson, 1998, 47]

The estrangement-effect is another way of referring to the project of interrogating our social mechanisms of perception and representation. The current, historical relevance of this project, which continues since the early decades of the 20th century, signals the persistence of the popular perception that elements of the social world—economic/market relations, the political structure, the educational system, institutions, laws, etc.—are eternal and immutable, despite the common, popular experience that they are otherwise. Within the historical context of a popular “perceptual numbness,” [Jameson, 1998, 39] which is the necessary structural tendency of the capitalist mode of production, the goal of both aesthetic estrangement and Marxian political economic method is the “recovery of perception,” [ibid.] by way of a particular representational strategy (i.e., by making the object in question “look strange”), leading to the renewed
analysis of social experience and the refiguration of the relation between subject and object.

Breaking the “habit” of ahistorical perception, or, more precisely, laying bare the contradictory social mechanisms which require the submersion of an historical vantage point, must be one element of any radical political project undertaken in the context of contemporary consumer capitalism. A type of strategic reification is the foundational movement of the conceptual demonstration that the social world is a particular construction and can, therefore, be changed and re-constructed differently. In the present historical conjuncture, the interconnectedness of practices of perception and representation with socially transformative political projects makes the question of aesthetics matter. On the one hand, aesthetic concerns matter, in the sense of signifying within greater political contexts, because they are always mediated by historical and social processes which transcend the parameters of any designated “aesthetic moment.” However, my task in this study has been to demonstrate not only that aesthetics are political, but the demonstration of the aesthetic dimensions of contemporary politics. Within the historical context of contemporary consumer capitalist societies, the analysis of the material conditions of the reproduction and transformation of the social formation expresses itself as a question of perception and representation—a situation we could call the aesthetics of political economy.
REFERENCES


