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The paper discusses the contemporary notion of the collectible masterpiece, which is understood not simply as a visual metaphor that embraces a specific late-capitalist sociopolitical order, but also as the visual equivalent of a long-lasting debate on the iconicity of power. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's research into the conflation of the image and the notion of divine providence, as well as on his account of the theological-economic paradigm of power and sovereignty (the notion of oeconomy), the article analyses the apparently secularized image-production of the historical Avant-Garde. It argues that the notion of the masterpiece, which founds the appreciation of art in modernity (with an emphasis on recent developments), embodies specific theological concepts that were already present during the iconophilic Western word order resulting out of both the Byzantine and Calvinist iconoclasm. The article proposes a pre-modern archaeology of the society of spectacle, as well as illuminating the startling dominance of semiocapitalism's iconicity.

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Semiocapitalism, Spectacle, Eikonomia, and the Function of Art

> God's transcendence has fallen, but he is not dead.
> He is drawn into the fate of man.
>
> Walter Benjamin, *Capitalism as Religion [Fragment 74]*

Much has been said about how images are disseminated through multiple fields of life, ranging from leisure activities to war and surveillance technologies. Moreover, it has been argued that such a proliferation and dissemination of images constitutes the fundamental means by which the flow of capital is sustained in post-industrial society. Guy Debord termed this the "society of the spectacle," and his celebrated thesis that "the spectacle is capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image" is the culminating point of such a long-lasting development.[1] All that we call visuality, which includes making pictures in any form, as well as visual perception and the various products of our imagination inherent to a specific episteme, belong to what Michel Foucault described as a "power-knowledge" system.[2] And even if the power of images is rooted in archaic and idolatrous beliefs in supernatural forces, it has been gradually assimilated by instrumental reasoning and subordinated to commodity production, distribution, and consumption. Making and viewing images therefore mutates into a hegemonic power-knowledge system, which is directly linked to the economic circulation of goods and ideas.

Since the 1980s postoperaist scholars have further developed Debord's conceptual link between capitalism and the power of images by investigating the connection between the financial deregulation so characteristic of our time and the free-floating proliferation of iconic values and meanings.[3] The emergence of the society of the spectacle in conjunction with neoliberalism's financial system resulted in the rise of semiocapitalism, a term deployed by scholars such as Jean Baudrillard and later Franco

Berardi.[4] It designates a late stage of capitalism in which information technologies such as digital trading make it possible to merge the productive use of signs and information with capital valorization. In this regard, economies that capitalize on our attentive time – for instance TV series, social media, online games, advertising, etc. – which are framed as lifestyles and consumer preferences, have partially replaced the production of goods. Producing ideas in the form of visual signs and making people pay for them with their attentive time is the main way to grow profit in the "attention economy," which leads to what Bernard Stiegler has termed "hyperattention," an inevitable over-exploitation of that time. Hyperattention is understood as the current way put in place in accumulating capital.[5] Stiegler describes a historical moment that is characteristic for a global simultaneity of events and attitudes. This was identified by Peter Osborne as the "contemporary," a designation not only of the art of our time in which "the apparent closure of the historical horizon of the avant-garde" took place, but also a different understanding of temporality, sensed as a state of perpetual presentness.[6]

Is it only in the contemporary era, as described by Debord, that images have become synonymous with the valorization of time (the classical notion of capital), or have they always been essential to economy's foundational principles? And if images are capital, as Debord maintains, how does this thesis relate to the historical *a priori* that grounds the knowledge/power regimes which construct contemporary viewers and capitalist consumers? When Debord criticizes his epoch, does he not look back and fantasize about a novel avant-garde which is characterized by radical aesthetic ruptures with the past, and the initial unacceptability of its art to the public? What is the relation of classical or historical avant-gardes to the values of contemporary art? Also, how do they both relate to the valorization of images that sustains the spectacle of late

capitalism, so gloriously projected in the global art of our time? And in what ways does this spectacle relate to the premodern predecessors of knowledge/power regimes?

In order to touch upon these questions, it will be argued that the supposedly iconoclastic stance of the avant-garde is not the *locus amoenus* of all kinds of radical thinking regarding the future of art – as is often the case when one reads between the lines of Peter Bürger's well-known "Theory of the Avant-Garde."[7] Vanguard iconoclasm, as well as its profound pseudo-anarchic anti-institutionalism, actually protracts the religious myths regarding images and their eschatological underpinnings. In this regard, the concept of the avant-garde, but also its evocation – visible in various contemporary attempts to restore art's alleged lost aesthetic autonomy and the non-instrumentalization of artists and artworks in the midst of current semiocapitalism – actually prolong the quasi-theological promises of salvation offered by capitalism, despite the fact that the avant-garde often declared such theological underpinnings obsolete. In order to support this rather bold thesis, I will engage with a genealogical inquiry into the notion of economy, the so-called "second nature that defines probably better than all the other modes the anthropological specificity of the Moderns." [8] I will do so while also discussing how images in Western societies acquired a certain type of power over historical consciousness and an agency over our understanding of temporalities within the institutional field of art. As an outcome of this discussion it will be shown that our appreciation of art in the form of the priceless masterpiece embodies specific theological concepts, present during the early, premodern times of iconoclasm and related to a secular version of theological questions. In the end, I will discuss in what ways debates about the future of art in the current stage of semiocapitalism might benefit from discussions about alternative

economies, which supposedly counteract the mythologized understanding of capitalism's temporality.

Eikonomia: From the Law of the Divine to the Divinity of the Spectacle

The genealogical inquiry into the notion of economy in relation to images draws on Giorgio Agamben's rather idiosyncratic convergence of economics and theology, which constitutes a seminal moment in the philosopher's genealogy of the ontological dispositive. For Agamben the theological notion of economy (*oikonomia*) represents one of the founding concepts of the Occidental episteme; economy's subsequent applications on the one hand, and the notion of the spectacle on the other are the visible manifestations of the power-knowledge system that substantiates modernity.[9] Drawing on Agamben's twofold critique it will be argued that images (intertemporal or even timeless manifestations of divine glory) play an essential role in mediating between these two aspects of the power-knowledge system to which we are all subjected. The birth of the discourse of the masterpiece in Renaissance art treatises (such as Giorgio Vasari's famous *Vite*) during the onset of mercantilism signifies the beginning of this development of the modern Occidental episteme.[10]

Although economy is a term with ecclesiastical and religious roots, it is deployed as a heuristic device in order to investigate the role of power elicited by images in a society infiltrated by them; both the Renaissance and late modern Europe are historical moments that have experienced (although with other means) this deluge of images. Investigation of the concealed history of "iconophilia" and its links to political power and economy should be regarded as an effort to explain our time via its image-saturated discourses.[11] Agamben's genealogical inquiry into the notion of economy has effectively demonstrated

that theological glory (and its modern equivalent – the spectacle of images) should be regarded as the semiotic operator (and a significant conceptual link) between representation and the deployment of power. It is widely known that the term "economy" was introduced into various European languages in the age of absolutism to describe how to manage the princely household. An analysis of the linguistic foundations of this discourse leads us back to Aristotle and Xenophon, who in their writings describe the hierarchical order of the household while offering the master (*despotes*) advice on running it.[12]

However, once St. Paul described himself as a steward (*oikonomos*) of the mysteries of God (1 *Corinthians*, 4), the term acquired a significantly novel and fundamentally political connotation beyond the management of private life. As Emmanuel Alloa maintains: "The decisive factor in this context is the introduction of household economics as theologumenon."[13] In Byzantine theology "economy" or *oikonomia* designates the divine management of humanity's time in its essential or eschatological dimension: the *oikos* of God. In fact, it designates not only the content, but also the method of achieving this goal. The term (understood as *dispensation*) is defined as a temporary abrogation or suspension of the strict laws of theology, an exemption from the immediate obligation of law in certain cases: an absolute and somehow mysterious state of exception (an arcanum, both mystery and secret) which has a real impact on social life. As such, it is conceived as a subtle, discrete strategy, a political tactic of sorts, which allows for various events to be incorporated into a divine – unknown but still historically manifest – plan of salvation, events which could not have been foreseen or explained prior to their occurrence. Economy is thus the visible aspect of a plan followed by God for the execution of salvation in the world.

However, these exceptional events which occur are integrated in retrospect into the overall divine project precisely because

they can't be known earlier. This happens in Orthodox Christianity even more so than in the Roman Catholic Church, as it is based on Holy Tradition and not only the Holy Bible (both are to be understood as twin sources of the faith). This perpetual handing down of oral history from one generation to the next manifests what Jean-Luc Nancy identifies as the specificity of the Christian project: "the Christian faith is itself the experience of its history."[14] As Nancy points out, the execution of salvation "becomes indissociable from human history, becomes human history as such, History."[15] Obviously, there can be no exit from this universal historical temporality, meaning that Christianity monopolizes both the before and the after of humanity.

According to Agamben's reading of this discourse, the Occident (in this regard the Christian universalist project of humanity's history) precludes the evocation of the idea of economy as a synonym for the providential unfolding of history according to an eschatological design, an idea which "has literally shaped and determined from top to bottom the experience of history on which we are still largely dependent."[16]As Agamben maintains, at the moment in which the transcendence of sovereign power became the immanent ordering of both the divine realm and human life, biopolitics emerged: "Political philosophy and the modern theory of sovereignty derive from the first paradigm [God's law]; modern biopolitics up to the current triumph of economy and government over every other aspect of social life derive from the second paradigm."[17]

However, it is intriguing that the political-theological notion of economy is directly interwoven with an immense philosophical enterprise concerning the status and usage of images: the battlefield of an early image war.Actually, the usage of the concept of economy acquired such importance precisely due to this confrontation.[18] During the Byzantine iconoclastic controversy of the 8th and 9th centuries Christianity was

a universal religion, which had gained power by condemning the idolatry of pagan religions. The icon – obviously not meant to be thought of as a pagan idol – was the visible manifestation of semiotic evolution during the Christianized Roman Empire. As an object, the icon obtained divine authority without claiming to have any magical or transcendental status, as this would have amounted to committing idolatry and therefore sin.[19] Rather than copying God's essence, the icon organized and ordered the infrastructure of all earthly and divine signs, based on which God's grace was diffused. For this to happen the icon had to be conceptually linked to the political-theological notion of economy.[20]

Theological glory and political power find their modern equivalent in the spectacle of phantasmagoric images.

The iconoclastic controversy offered the best opportunity for such a conceptual upgrading of the icon's status, and thus also the image's status. The Bishop of Constantinople, Patriarch Nikephoros, who was considered the state minister of the cult, was forced by circumstance to go against the universal authority of an iconoclastic emperor, and employed the notion of economy to defend icons. The patriarch and the important theologian Theodor of Studion shared a recurring phrase with other iconophile 9th-century authors: "[He] who does not recognize the image rejects the entirety of the economy," meaning God's entire management of the world.[21] The patriarch's act of intra-governmental disobedience was a significant shift in the image-political discourse of the time. In a remarkable rhetorical twist the neologism *eikonomia* or "iconomy" was coined by the iconophiles in order to prove that the icon was the visible sign of God's ability to diffuse His authority and dispense His grace, but also in order to semiotically impose the authority of the sign over the sovereign: that is, the image over existing political power.[22]

From now on signs would either challenge power or be its accomplices, gradually contributing to the formation of modern

semiopower.

Iconomy has changed the ways we understand the exercise of political-ideological power via visual signification. The existence of the icon secured the monopoly over the legitimate and acceptable use of any kind of sign, since it allowed for theological-political power to constantly accuse its adversaries (the other-minded) of the sin of idolatry. In order to further strengthen the exceptional status of the icon over all other non-Christian, idolatrous images, the divine icon-sign was founded upon the notion of the *acheiropoieton* (meaning "without-hand-made"). This denotes a particular kind of icon said to have come into existence miraculously, not created by a human painter; a highly valued, rare picture which functioned not only as the iconographic prototype but also as a symbolic archetype for all others – a Christianized ontological equivalent of Platonic truth. While defending devotional images, the status of the icon was raised to a figure worthy of veneration, which ensured the distribution system of divine grace and symbolic power. This was a further development of the Roman tradition of the veneration of the emperor's image across the empire, an image that stood as the official representative entity of the emperor's person. Acting as a visible authority the icon does not simply represent – as Lutheran doctrines would later state – but actually embodies divine prudence. The cult theory of the image first introduced by John of Damascus and later elaborated by Scholastic theologians such as St. Thomas and St. Bonaventure declared that the image of Christ can be made the object of *latria* , and that the honor shown to the image is transferred to the model.[23] Consequently, any change in the status of the icon would have resulted in questioning the major dogma of the state religion and, by extension, not only the faith but also the authority of the sovereign. An ingenious semiotic *coup d'etat* had been employed. It secured the position of art in the divine order, with the image denoting a semiotic state of exception within the

visual disposability of the social, political, and economic status quo. This allowed for a particular, exceptional attribution of significance to artefacts, which could then detach themselves from the economic circulation of mundane, worldly values. They were given an exceptional status, becoming mysterious and literally invaluable "iconic" signs with the power to direct the actual value of all other produced objects and meanings.

The theological underpinning of both imagery and power has been a major field of scholarly debate in recent years by art historians such as Hans Belting and Boris Groys, among others.[24] Agamben discusses the political implications of such a modern world that became an image – first observed by Heidegger and Benjamin – as follows: "If we link Debord's analysis with Schmitt's thesis according to which public opinion is the modern form of acclamation, the entire problem of the contemporary spectacle of media domination over all areas of social life assumes a new guise. What is in question is nothing less than a new and unheard of concentration, multiplication, and dissemination of the function of glory as the center of the political system. What was confined to the spheres of liturgy and ceremonials has become concentrated in the media and, at the same time, through them it spreads and penetrates at each moment into every area of society, both public and private. Contemporary democracy is a democracy that is entirely founded upon glory, that is, on the efficacy of acclamation, multiplied and disseminated by the media beyond all imagination."[25]

The Avant-Garde's Iconoclasm as the Spectacle's Supplement

However, what is less self-evident is that such an intertwining – of the image and the sociopolitical power that media-based images elicit – describes the apparently secularized image-reception during the time of the historical avant-garde,

something that Walter Benjamin was sharp enough to register. In his highly influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935, rev. 1939), Benjamin discusses the demise of the cultic value of the work of art among the abundance of reproducible, standardized, and in this regard "democratized" images offered by the early culture industry of his time. I will argue, however, that rather than repudiating the mystery of the cult image, as the industries of the popular imaginary opted for, the avant-garde's iconoclastic attitude actually reiterated iconomy; it reinforced the special status of imagery in the wake of the advent of film and photography, which is now placed within the larger discourse regarding the "autonomy" of the work of art. This can be seen as the epistemological and social foundation of our society of spectacle. In the deluge of images, only a few constitute a kind of exception that is still needed for the rule to be proven.

The concept of the artwork's autonomy – that is, its opposition to given societal constrains and norms, its anticipated embeddedness in society, and its potential to transform humanity – has been highly prized by the various movements that have defined modern art, from fauvism and futurism to surrealism. After all, the art of the avant-garde can be seen as an effort to answer the Hegelian question of whether art can survive in a late capitalist world. It is no coincidence that the term itself, "avant-garde," coined by the banker and social reformer Olinde Rodrigues, appears almost simultaneously with the Hegelian obituary according to which art "remains for us a thing of the past."[26] Despite this verdict, the post-Hegelians witnessed an overflowing of art images, which emerged following the industrialization of Europe during the 19th century. Tony Bennett coined the term "the exhibitionary complex" in order to describe this early stage in the development of the society of spectacle in the late 19th century, in which everything became visibly accessible and presentable. Drawing on Foucault's theory of

panopticism, and the work of Antonio Gramsci on hegemony, Bennett maintains that the exhibitionary complex was an effective system of late modern subjectification which combined surveillance and spectacle. The issue of spectacle involved the opening up of the city's most hidden spaces – such as sewers and slaughterhouses – as well as newly built museums, department stores, and fairs to the public. An example of the exhibitionary complex's significance was the Great Exhibition of 1851 that took place in London, housed in a space created especially for this type of endeavor, the Crystal Palace. At the exhibition, instead of hiding works in small, private rooms, artefacts were displayed in large, open, transparent areas, and in such a way that they were visible to everyone who wanted to see them. Not only the artefacts but also the public were subjected to this modern doctrine of permanent visibility, since museums, department stores, and fairs turned the viewers themselves into a communal spectacle so that they would adhere willingly to the rules set out by these dominant institutions.[27] The museum presenting official academic art, and the department store offering the goods of Western colonialism became powerful institutions of knowledge creation. This power-knowledge was able to ensure the continuity of a well-functioning capitalist parliamentarianism and the further construction of docile bourgeois consumers.

However, the emergence of the art of the avant-garde in the early 20th century brought to the fore another dispositive of power-knowledge, which operated not on the doctrine of permanent visibility and transparency but rather in spite of it. The culture of the avant-garde imposed a policy of the constraint, omission, and restriction of images. This was carried out neither in their distribution (their reproducibility), nor in their accessibility (their exhibition). This new art of the avant-garde was not necessarily hidden in secluded spaces – although, occasionally, this was the case – but was rather addressed only to the few enlightened ones. It is a well-known fact that the art of

the avant-garde had to sustain a certain mysticism around it, which probably still keeps some viewers outside the museum's walls and definitely many readers away from serious art-critical writing. A telling example is art critic Clement Greenberg's pamphlet "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," published in the American Marxist journal *Partisan Review* in 1939, which defended vanguard culture against both academic "high" art but also the "kitsch" of artificially synthesized mass culture that had been produced by industrialization and offered to the uneducated masses. Greenberg's protocols on how to view, understand, and feel modern art have been exemplary in creating codes of mystification regarding the value of highly sophisticated images. Also, the vanguard artists' strategy of concealment, of "going underground" – one of the dictums of postmodernism's predecessor Marcel Duchamp – accounted above all for an increase in the surplus meaning of art. This meaning – this being my main point – was not revealed at the moment of its production, but was deliberately saved for *future* use.

I stress the notion of future use, since it designates both a dormant symbolic meaning and a monetary equivalent – that is, the prospective selling price of a work of art. In this regard, the futurity of the work of art in the form of an investment asset reveals the eschatological dimension of the "avant-garde project." Here, parallels can once again be drawn to Walter Benjamin's well-known statement that modernism reduces the value of a work of art to an occasional, seemingly unimportant side-effect: that of its display and exhibition. The secularization of the religious icon that was initiated in early modernity (the Quattrocento in the arts) has altered the cult image into an invaluable masterpiece, a treasured display in the palaces of religious and secular princes. In other words, what Benjamin termed "display value" describes in reality a fundamental aspect of Western thinking in the wake of the

mercantilist Renaissance that valorizes appearance and visual disposability over cultic function. Modernity capitalizes the spectacular glory of presence, acting against the remoteness of the image, safeguarded by its cultic value, its "aura." Actually, it was the other progenitor of the term avant-garde, the poet Charles Baudelaire, who observed as early as in the mid-19th century that the best works of art are those that leave the strongest and most lasting impression on the memory.[28] This temporality, associated with the instantaneous viewing process described by a mid-19th-century witness, comes close to the "schizophrenic" temporality of late capitalist or postmodern existence attested to by Fredric Jameson, a temporality characterized by a "preference for heightened but disconnected experiences of the present."[29] This frenzy in times of "hyperattention" actually preserves the institutional blindness proposed to us by the exhibitionary complex.

Contemporary Semiocapitalism and the Valorization of Authenticity

Today, the exhibitionary complex and its Alexandrian culture are constantly preoccupied with historicizing and superficially promoting the visual styles of past times; this is an era obsessed with recycling historical styles in art, architecture, music, fashion, and cinema, as Jameson has observed.[30] However, postmodern retro-culture, with its rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes, is neither the symptom of an "undead" modernism, nor simply the sign of a new type of consumption and planned obsolescence in modernism's quest to create aesthetic surplus value. The art business (museums, collectors, celebrity curators, and corporate mega-artists) is concerned with driving the public's attention to the visibilities of the past and not the needs of today. On the other hand, the avant-garde's constantly deferred meaning, reiterated in postmodernism, operates

within the reductionist parameters of its own late modern functionalization – that is, within a pre-existing economic circuit. In this regard, and seen from today's perspective, the art of the avant-garde should not be understood as the opposite of the hegemonic society of the spectacle, but rather as its supplementary reserve. The avant-garde's iconoclasm provides the means to engender "dormant" meaning retained for future use, which can be called the aesthetic surplus value of semiocapital.[31] This condition has never really been challenged, despite the efforts of Dada, Fluxus, and the Situationist International, to name some celebrated examples of such attempts. (It is still difficult to find museum collectibles related to genuine Dada, Fluxus, or SI actions, since these are often works of art that resist exhibitionary or monetary instrumentalization.)

Drawing on Debord's early analysis, images should be understood in their double nature – both as semiotic operators and as the means to realize financial profit; they are, in other words, a form of fixed capital, a semiocapital. The rise of the avant-garde precisely signified the moment of art speculation. David Harvey puts it aptly: "it was only in an era of speculation on the future and fictitious capital formation that the concept of an avant-garde (both artistic and political) could make any sense."[32] Such a condition of speculating on the future is often visible in various critical accounts of the way in which the contemporary art world defends its exceptional financial status through a highly refined system of segregation, juridical regulation, and legislation on the fringes of the law. As Stefan Heidenreich comments regarding the Geneva Freeport, which while still expanding its premises currently holds up to one million artworks: "It is safe to say, however, that never before now have so many artworks been produced to remain hidden, all enclosed in disenchanted wooden boxes, suspended in a permanent circuit of exchange, in a place called a 'freeport' because it is free of customs duties and taxes of all kinds."[33]Clearly, the

contemporary "temple of the muses" is not the museum, accessible to the enlightened citizen and always in the missionary state of educating him. The museum nowadays is an investor's deposit, isolated from profane, practical life, remote and hidden from public sight. In this regard, the exceptional state of *eikonomia* in its capacity to govern social behavior is re-instituted.

It is clear how the system of art – as stated, an invention of the era of mercantilism – safeguards the masterful original. Western art is based on a tradition in which the genuine masterpiece (among famous ruins all over the world) is treated as a secular reliquary, precisely because the former reliquary, found inside the church, acquired the status of a collectible item of high art. This occurred around the time of Protestant iconoclasm, when civil authorities removed images in order to sell them to emerging collectors of "religious art" in the newly reformed Protestant cities and territories of 16th-century Europe. This is the actual foundation of the secondary art market. Indeed, John Calvin condemned divine images, but not art, while at the same time opening "a door toward the deification of the artist," since "the divine aspect of the work no longer comes from *what* is represented but from the representer."[34] This development went hand in hand with the cult of artistic genius, which began at the time and reached its sublime, elevated peak in the period of romanticism and German idealism.

It is not far-fetched to say that the financial cult of the masterpiece and the Calvinist economy of the so-called "representer" – the artist – was developed throughout the avant-garde and re-emerged in the 1980s as the power of the artist's brand identity and the artwork's asset value.[35] This re-established the iconic status quo of a secularized *acheiropoieton* sign, which seems to embody the divine providence within capitalism, safeguarded in the arcanum of "corporate art" and always in need of exegesis and continuous speculative investment. In our times, speculation, meaning, and having claims

on the future influx of capital have become scopophilic. And this veneration of contemporary icons, this sacralized way of dealing with works of art, gives an additional a twist to Benjamin's critique of modern visuality. The cult of the contemporary *acheiropoieton* stacked in the freeports of neoliberalism in Geneva, Luxembourg, and Singapore epitomizes the eschatological economy of semiocapitalism. The future investment becomes an investment in the future. Such secularized and modernized faith in the management of mankind – in other words, the contemporary power of visual signs-as-capital over life – is dressed up as the eschatological belief of neoclassical economics in progress.[36] Semiocapital produced by the society of the spectacle is therefore the privileged site of the immanent ordering of every aspect of human life.

Language concerning the apparent *innovations*, *changes*, and *ruptures* in the art of our time shouldn't fool us. The basic questions of the post-war hysteria of *neos* and *posts* are "simply rhetorical," because, as Hal Foster maintains, the postmodern condition cannot "tell the difference between a revisionist account written in support of the cultural status quo and a genealogical account that seeks to challenge it."[37] Arguing with Foster, one might simply say that, whenever attempted, the genealogical critique of the avant-garde often ends with the affirmation of the existing status quo of the art world; in other words, even if such a critical account genuinely seeks to challenge the existing condition, it can only reinforce its own perpetuation. Since any challenge ultimately ends up being revisionist despite the initial intention, critique (and art) tends to get stuck in an endless but content-free state of immanence in which, as Osborne observes, "the present of the contemporary becomes shorter and shorter."[38] This is precisely the vicious circle in which every contemporary artist and even art critic is trapped. This historically amnesiac state of free-floating immanence has

been given another name by modernist aesthetic philosophy: "autonomy of the medium." Indeed, Greenberg is again the one who identifies the art of his time – the high modernism of the 1960s following in the steps of the historical avant-garde – as the moment in which the Kantian imperative of aesthetic autonomy came into its own fulfilment. In Greenberg's influential lecture series broadcast worldwide in the 1960s through the *Voice of America*, Kant is conceived of as "the first real Modernist."[39] For Greenberg, the perception of art is not guided by any particular political, religious, moral, or social interest, but rather the aesthetics of form. One might argue that the postmodern aesthetics of the journal *October* – the old Vatican of contemporary art criticism – have replaced the quest for formal beauty (Clement Greenberg) with the quest for the significance of the context (Rosalind Krauss). In postmodern times the universality of beauty has been replaced by the universality of the concept; however, their common foundational grounding – the universality of value – has not been touched. Thanks to both art critics, the Kantian or post-Kantian autonomy of art offers the moral fundament and epistemological justification for the development of aesthetics in the globalized world of financial dominance.

The Secular Acheiropoietic as Semiocapitalism's Annulment?

Is there an alternative? Counteracting the fetishism of the "priceless" masterpiece and the taboo of its economic dimension – meaning art as an investment asset, or as Marcel Duchamp put it as early as 1961, "a commonplace product like soap and securities"[40] – impels us to rethink the foundations of this situation. It was indeed Duchamp, among other heroes of the avant-garde, who, although contributing to the perpetuation of art's arcanum (his work remains a "mystery" for many), reflected

on the idea that the future artist should "abandon his identity, even to the point of no longer having the right to sign his works," while expressing his hope for "a revolution on the ascetic level, of which the general public will not even be aware and which only a few initiates will develop on the fringe of a world blinded by economic fireworks."[41] This was said by one of the few artists who has changed the way we see art (with his ready-mades, which destabilized any notion of authenticity, authorship, or valuable masterpiece), despite the fact that he was never within the economic circles of the art business – an artist who preferred to give away his art to friends rather than offer it to the market. Such a move embodies a possible alternative, by means of which the sediments of authentic originals, artistic egos, or personal signatures and brands are not perpetuated. But at the same time, Duchamp's abandonment of the economics of art – so clearly proven by Maurizio Lazzarato[42] – attests to one of the most striking and intriguing of Theodor Adorno's theses: "Today the only works that really count are those which are no longer works at all."[43]Adorno laconically describes the essentially transitional nature of such signs in his famous dictum: "[...] those works honor the auratic element that abstain from it."[44] This maxim has been reiterated by Alain Badiou in his famous "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art": "Today art can only be made from the starting point of that which, as far as Empire is concerned, doesn't exist. Through its abstraction, art renders this inexistence visible. This is what governs the formal principle of every art: the effort to render visible to everyone that which for Empire (and so by extension for everyone, though from a different point of view), doesn't exist."[45] In view of the revolutionary impetus of both Adorno's and Badiou's adages, shouldn't one question whether a return to a pre-capitalist and, in my view, pre-theological condition of economy is possible? Can contemporary semiocapitalism and the way it affects the status of images be seen separately from the larger context of the Age

of Empire as described by Badiou,[46] or the nihilism of the Occident that defines our time, so aptly described by Friedrich Nietzsche?

For Jean-Luc Nancy, there is a direct genealogical line that relates contemporary semiocapitalism to Christian universalism (or what Jacques Derrida calls "globalatinization")[47] – both different versions of the same mega-project of Occidental nihilism. Nancy clearly understands monotheism as the "monoculture" of value, which "is placed now in 'God', now in 'man', and now in the tautology of 'value' itself."[48] The tautology of value, however, defines semiocapitalism per se, which according to Jean Baudrillard is defined by "the structural revolution of value" that constitutes the foundational moment of our era.[49] And this condition has a long genealogy resting in the Westernization of monotheism (as Nancy implies), consequently resulting in current financial and ideological globalization. Semiocapitalism is the natural development of the "theologico-economico-political affirmation of power, domination, and exploitation" of Christianity's usurpation of both the intelligible and the affective world – with no escape possible![50] In this regard, one may assume that the dispositive of the *oeconomia* simply changes avatars; from the theocracy of the medieval period to the humanism of the Renaissance and the "monovalence of the 'general equivalence'" of advanced capitalism, the development of Western nihilism unfolds.[51] As I implied earlier, the operative modus of the avant-garde mirrors that of capitalism, and therefore surplus meaning in the Western world is always invested in future evaluation and indeterminate growth, sometimes in the name of God, sometimes in the name of Man, and sometimes in the name of Art, but always in the name of profit!

For Nancy, it is clear that "the exit from capitalism [...] can only be envisaged as the exit from nihilism."[52] We might have to look more deeply into the ideological foundations of this capitalist

nihilism in order to find an answer, while shifting signifiers and changing perspectives may also do the trick. A rupture of the all-encompassing totality of nihilism can only take place in the form of a linguistic/semiotic *coup d'état*, an "undoing" that functions as an "exit from within" – but clearly without taking the form of an exodus.[53] It has been argued that the de-temporalizing power of the *acheiropoieton* – meaning the power of the image deprived of its historical time – can be seen as the continuous anticipation of a promised futurity. This paradoxically creates the unquestionable presentness of semiocapitalism, ever-present but always deferring the purpose of its presence to a (supposedly better) future. This is the reason why semiocapitalism's presentness can be called the economy of the revealed truth of the *acheiropoieton* . A genealogical analysis of economic thinking in relation to alternative economic models that abstain from the monoculture of value and its semiotics – research which clearly cannot be done in this paper – might be able to offer an alternative, an exit from within semiocapitalism, an ending of the graciously offered *acheiropoietic* economy of capitalism. Eventually, Adorno's dictum that art should resist capitalism through autonomy might also mean that art should become part of a gift economy (as Duchamp's lifelong commitment largely demonstrated), or any other economy that presents a serious alternative to semiocapitalism's capitalizing on our future, thus offering a different way of understanding economy's foundational myths.

However, and even if such research on alternative narratives of economy cannot be done here, one might indicate the common quality of all these alternative models: a semiotic shift! From my point of view, getting rid of capitalism is clearly a semiotic operation, since as economist Tomáš Sedláček maintains, economy constitutes a system of both religious beliefs and theological disputations translated into economic relations and interactions.[54] Drawing on Nikephoros and Theodor of Studion's

semiotic innovation of the *eikonomia*, one might say that the alternative economic concepts that have been proposed by contemporary thinkers in postoperaist, feminist, or social reproduction perspectives can cause social reality to deviate from the accustomed or expected line or course identified with neoliberalism and its system of art.[55] Scholars belonging to the camp of erratic and unconventional thinking have often attempted to re-establish such a connection between older models of the system of art and prospective courses of action: Georges Bataille tried to pit his innovative economy of reckless expenditure and exuberance against the mainstream economy's foundational dogma of scarcity and acquisition. Jacques Derrida's concepts of hospitality and the gift, which have similarities to Michel Serres's discussion of the "parasitical" relation of labor to society, similarly address the paradoxical nature of exchange and subjectivity. Likewise, Jean Baudrillard proposed to demonstrate spontaneous, undirected playfulness, and invoked the existence of a number of non-fixed, floating values with the help of which we can survive the era of what he called "hyperreality." If art needs to be acknowledged as the "accursed share" – this excessive and non-recuperable part of any economy – then the proposed expenditure (and simulacra) economies would function as contemporary versions of iconomy. Bearing Agamben's thesis in mind, let us, in conclusion, contemplate the following: a novel occurrence of *eikonomia* can potentially become the disturbing incongruity of semiocapitalism – its abnormality, its own state of exception, a reality that contemplates its *acheiropoietic* origin – and in doing so empty out semiocapitalism from the inside. Nihilism's annulment might account for its annihilation: the iconists at work!

1 Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995), 24.

2 Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977* , trans. John Mepham et al., ed. Colin Gordon (London: Vintage, 1980), 197; W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 11.

3 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity*, trans. Joshua David Jordan (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014).

4 Franco Berardi, *Precarious Rhapsody. Semiocapitalism and the pathologies of the post-alpha generation*, trans. Arianna Bove et al., eds. Erik Empson and Stevphen Shukaitis (London: Minor Compositions, 2009), 149.

5 Serge Tisseron and Bernard Stiegler, *Faut-il interdire les écrans aux enfants?* (Paris: Editions Mordicus, 2009), 64.

6 Incidentally, the 1980s witness, as Peter Osborne aptly puts it, "the apparent closure of the historical horizon of the avant-garde; a qualitative deepening of the integration of autonomous art into the culture industry; and a globalization and transnationalization of the biennial as an exhibition form." Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), 21.

7 Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1974). English translation by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); see also: Matei Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).

8 Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2013), xxvi.

9 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo Mandarini (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

10 Giorgio Vasari is today best-known for his volume of biographies of Italian artists, *Le Vita delle più eccellenti pittori, scultori, ed architettori* [*Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*], or "the Vite" for short. The volume was published in 1550 and constitutes part of the documentation of the development of the discipline of the history of art.

11 Bruno Latour, *Iconoclash: Beyond the Image Wars in Science, Religion and Art* (Cambridge MA, London: The MIT Press, 2002).

12 Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Wivenhoe / New York / Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2012), 49, 53.

13 This gives the term an original semantic extension that finds no equivalent in Latin, later to be translated as "dispositio" and "dispensatio" by Tertullian; see: Emmanuel Alloa, "Bildökonomie. Von den theologischen Wurzeln eines streitbaren Begriffs," *Image* vol. 2, no. 6 (2005), 16.

14 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 146.

15 Ibid.

16 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 1.

17 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 44.

18 Marie-Jose Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, trans. Rico Franses (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

19 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 13.

20 Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 3; see also: Susan Buck-Morss, "Visual Empire," *Diacritics* vol. 37, no. 2–3 (2007), 171–198.

21 Alloa, "Bildökonomie," 21; translated by S. B.

22 See Emmanuel Alloa, "Bildwissenschaft in Byzanz. Ein iconic turn avant la lettre?," in: *Philosophie des Bildes*, eds. Anton Hügli and Curzio Chiesa (Basel: Schwabe, 2010), 11–36.

23 Sixten Ringbom, *Icon to Narrative: The Rise of the Dramatic Close-Up in Fifteenth-Century Devotional Painting*

(Doornspijk: Davaco, 1965; 1983), 12.

24 Hans Belting, *Das echte Bild: Bildfragen als Glaubensfragen* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2006); Boris Groys, "The Weak Universalism, *e-flux journal* no. 15 (2010).

25 Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, 255 f.

26 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols. paginated consecutively (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 11.

27 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London/New York: Routledge, 1995), 89–105.

28 Charles Baudelaire, "Salon of 1846," in: *Art in Paris 1845–1862: Salons and Other Exhibitions*, ed. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1965), 50. There may be more than a grain of truth in the observation that contemporary artists find the documentation of their work and its distribution in the media to be more important than the actual work itself! It appears that the value of a work of art equals the attention span it can capture. And this diminishes constantly. Artist Georgia Kotretsos devised a cunning system to statistically record the time an average viewer spends looking at a contemporary artwork at the Art Institute of Chicago. It is telling that the research came to the result that "the duration varied from 1 to 3 to 7 seconds, up to 1 minute 30 seconds, and rarely longer." Georgia Kotretsos, "The Art of Artist Statement encounter and Other experiential accounts of audience members," unpublished lecture delivered on November 24, 2005 at Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, Canada.

29 See: Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in: *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 2002), 13–29. One might add that it is rather regretful that under the pressure of neoliberalism even museums have today become populist arenas of leisure and entertainment, and in doing so simply capitalize on the display value of the exhibited artefacts. Even the benevolent didactics of guided or audio tours, charts, displays, and various other services offered to the general public add to the spectacularization of art, and therefore degrade the deferred temporality of the encounter, which is and must remain at the heart of any work of art.

30 Ibid.

31 In this regard, Walter Benjamin's notion of the work of art's unapproachability, its aura, finds an equivalent in Pierre Bourdieu's notion of the extraordinary status of the cultural field. As Bourdieu makes clear, the cultural field maintains its relative autonomy within the dominant field of power by means of a symbolic disavowal of the

normally accepted modes of exhibiting and displaying social, political, and economic status. However, the autonomy of the cultural field is not maintained in opposition to all ordinary economies, but actually constitutes the other side of the same coin. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 39.

32 David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 1989), 283.

33 Stefan Heidenreich, "Freeportism as Style and Ideology: Post-Internet and Speculative Realism, Part I," *e-flux journal* no. 71 (2016), http://www.e-flux.com/journal/freeportism-as-style-and-ideology-part-i-post-internet-and-speculative-realism/ (accessed January 19, 2020).

34 Alain Besançon, *The Forbidden Image: An Intellectual History of Iconoclasm*, trans. Jane Marie Todd (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 190; my emphasis.

35 Olav Velthuis, *Talking Prices: Symbolic Meanings of Prices on the Market for Contemporary Art* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

36 Scholars beside Giorgio Agamben have emphasized that modern institutions are built on a faith which is at its core theological, fortifying in this respect Charles Taylor's conviction that our secular age is still theological. The formation of what can be called "economic theology" draws a link here to Taylor's thinking; for Taylor, the modern world has not seen the disappearance of religion but rather its diversification, its disguised diffusion into all sectors of human life. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); see also: Jochen Hörisch, *Man muss dran glauben. Die Theologie der Märkte* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2013).

37 Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," *October* vol. 70, *The Duchamp Effect* (Autumn 1994), 5.

38 Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 25.

39 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1965), reprint in: *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Harper & Row, 1982), 5.

40 Marcel Duchamp, "Where Do We Go From Here?," address to a symposium at the Philadelphia Museum College of Art, March 1961, first published in the Duchamp issue of *Studio International*, Jan-Feb 1975, 28.

41 Ibid.

42 Maurizio Lazzarato, *Marcel Duchamp et le refus du travail; (suivi de:) Misère de la sociologie* (Paris: Les Prairies ordinaires, 2014).

43 Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London and New York: Continuum, 1973), 30.

44 Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 311.

45 Alain Badiou, "Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art," trans. Peter Hallward, lecture at The Drawing Center, December 4, 2003, *Lacanian Ink* 22, https://www.lacan.com/issue22.php (accessed January 19, 2020).

46 See: *Badiou and the Political Condition*, ed. Marios Constantinou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

47 *Religion*, eds. Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, trans. David Webb (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 1998).

48 For Nancy nihilism is atheism which is "contemporaneous and correlative with the invention of theism" – that is, the moment in which the ancient "gods are departing into their own myths" and the singularity of God is established. The disappearance of the ancient gods is the matter of a "linguistic trick" first performed by Plato: the cancelation of the plural form, through which a nameless god holds the position or essence of the principle God, God in principle – that is, the foundational moment of monotheism. "In reality this moment responds to the conjunction of Greek atheism and Jewish monotheism in the elaboration of what, under the name of Christianity, constituted the major confirmation of onto-(a)-theology." This moment is the "evaporation of all divine presences and powers, and the designation of a principle that no longer has as divine anything but the name." According to Nancy this nihilism of the name of names shared by "the threefold monotheism of a threefold religion of the book" (Judaism, Christianity, Islam), which was detected early on by Nietzsche in his attack on Christianity, becomes tangible for us in its contemporary avatar, semiocapitalist globalization, the true form of Catholicism (from *kath-olikos* = all-embracing, universal). Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 8, 15, 18, 20, 21, 30, 31.

49 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (London: Sage, 1993), 10.

50 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure,* 39.

51 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 34.

52 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure*, 20.

53 Ibid.

54 As Sedláček argues, "the Bible and economics are more closely tied than one would think." The economist maintains that "the gift is among the anomalies that are hard to explain with existing models," while also pointing toward the religious foundation of the gift, understood in economic terms. A gift economy is the primordial form of producing, distributing, and consuming goods and services. In this regard, one could create the semiotic link between "grace" and "gift" (both meanings are equally conveyed by the Greek word *charis*, the theological meaning of which is "that which brings delight, joy, happiness, or good fortune"), and establish a different understanding of economy. Dispensing grace is the gift's attribute. Despite this long-forgotten anthropological fact, the gift seems to constitute this foreclosed *arche*, the "beginning," "origin," or "first cause" of economy. Tomas Sedláček, *Economics of Good and Evil: The Quest for Economic Meaning from Gilgamesh to Wall Street*, trans. Douglas Arellanes (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 132, 135.

55 We have seen that one of the basic rules defining mainstream economic thinking is that needs have to remain constantly unsatisfied in order for the novel circulation of money and goods to be stimulated. However, this basic assumption of contemporary economic ideology might not be true. Years of fieldwork by Elinor Ostrom (Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences for her work on the commons and governance) and others has shown that humans are not trapped and helpless amid diminishing supplies, and that "utility" might in the end be possible. See: Elinor Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

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