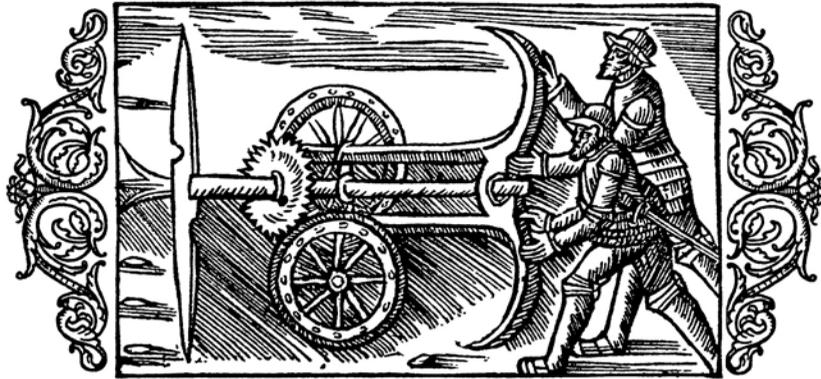


Notes on Marxist  
Art History



Revolving Blades and Wheels from Olavs Magnus, *History of the Northern Peoples*, 1555



■ 1 ■

Marxist art history is not the result of a clinical procedure, performable by any scholar equipped with the correct text or theoretical apparatus; it is, and can only be, the yield of a negativity at work within the historian—a residue, not simply of capitalist relations in the abstract, but of the particular market on which academic labor is bought and sold.

■ 2 ■

Marxist art history has no meaning if it is not written in the service of communism; the same forces that make possible the latter determine the characteristics of the former. But these forces are not immutable: each generation is constrained to write history under conditions that would have been unrecognizable to, and unbearable for, its immediate predecessors. What happens once in the dialectic of labor and capital does not happen twice.

■ 3 ■

For the generation of the New Left, whose commitments and imperatives were shaped as much by the exploits of Che Guevara, Mao, and Giap as by the ubiquitous pomp and circumstance of American hegemony, Marxism meant ideological warfare first and foremost: a struggle to seize the apparatus of knowledge-production from its masters, and to repurpose it in the interests of the underclass. Armed with theoretical materials of French and German derivation (especially Althusser and Adorno), New Left art historians sought to infiltrate a discipline dominated, on one hand, by Cold War liberalism, and on the other, by outright conservatism; refusing activist platitudes as well as the orthodoxies of the previous generation of Marxist art historians (e.g. Frederick Antal, Francis Klingender, and Meyer Schapiro), they sought to reconstruct, in the words of Otto Karl Werckmeister, “a history of art as a product of society, subject to its economic conditions and political organization.” This history amounted to more than a mere tallying of patrons and painters; for example, in his landmark essay, “On the Social History of Art” (1973), T.J. Clark posits ideology as a material substance in its own right: “A work of art may have ideology (in other words, those ideas, images and values which are generally accepted, dominant) as its material, but it *works* that material; it gives it a new form and at certain moments that new form is in itself a subversion of ideology.” In pursuit of an ideological history of art, Clark and his colleagues necessarily limited their focus to the markets and professional discourses proper to art and artists. It was not a question of interpreting art *in terms of capital*, but rather of locating and theorizing the possibility of ideological subversion: a New Left politics *avant la lettre*.

■ 4 ■

Although the New Left found itself anointed, academically if not politically, in the aftermath of May 1968, the foundations of its critical project quickly proved unstable; conservative retrenchment was soon the order of the day. Caught unawares by the revolts of the 1960s, and waking to the flagging profitability of its industrial core, the ruling class responded in the mid-1970s with an all-out campaign of political and economic reform, reorganizing supply chains, workflows, and investment schemes along more circuitous (and, for workers, more precarious) lines and attacking the bases of proletarian power, from social welfare and trade unions to public institutions of education and culture. The academy was swept up in this counter-revolutionary tide: as early as 1973, Werckmeister could write that a competitive ethos was overtaking the formerly collective enterprise of humanist scholarship, favoring “performatory achievements” over the rigors of empirical research. No longer buoyed by external movements or countercultures, Marxist academics would be forced to professionalize according to the writ of the market, abandoning the political tasks of historical materialism in pursuit of individualized projects and idiosyncratic discourses. Inevitably, Marxism would become merely one of several possible critical-theoretical methodologies—a tool in a toolkit: a hammer without a nail.

■ 5 ■

Today, this backlash is a *fait accompli*. Universities have long since shed their ideological opposition to the for-profit sector, repositioning themselves as off-site research-and-development facilities for Big Pharma, Big Energy, and Big Data (to say nothing of their usual paymasters in the war industry)—and also, more insidiously, as factories of student loan debt, now repackaged and sold as a secu-

ritized commodity. In this education-industrial complex, conformity need no longer be guaranteed ideologically; economic and carceral stimulants have proven more than adequate to the production of docility. All forces of violence, soft and hard, converge on these self-described “educational delivery systems,” from institutionalized rape and racism to myriad forms of self-annihilation, social atomization, depression, and fear. Far from constituting a world apart, the millennial campus is the concatenated image of society at large: the same baton blows and rubber bullets greet dissenters here as elsewhere. Ensnared in a Piranesian landscape of upscale “residential life” facilities and LEED-certified biomed laboratories, white-collar aspirants compete to enter the overheated rental and job markets of New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and other so-called “top-tier” cities. Meanwhile, for the blue-collar majority, the term “college” increasingly describes a virtual experience stripped of any and all transformative potential, personal or economic; a bachelor’s degree is simply the prerequisite of a lifetime of treading water. This transformation of the academy from agent of social reproduction to petty vendor of educational goods and services follows the writ of the bond rating agencies, in whose eyes the cultivation of financial assets overrides all other priorities. Capital, and capital alone, keeps the university afloat, calling the shots—calling in the cops.

■ 6 ■

In the 1960s, the lecture hall was ground zero of the New Left insurgency; however, for the present generation, this struggle has shifted to the university gates, which function more than ever as barriers to entry—once opened to proletarian youth, if only slightly, but now decisively closed. For many would-be academics as well, these gates seem increasingly insurmountable: each year, a smaller portion of academic job seekers finds entry into the full-time core of the profession; inevitably, the majority will be shunted into the ultra-exploitative part-time, or adjunct, sector, a netherworld of rock-bottom wages and nonexistent job security. Although labor unions have recently begun organizing in this vast bottomland of the academic system, their efforts are frustrated less by the disposability of adjunct labor than by the essentially undesirable, and even shameful, character of the profession. *Adjuncts do not want to be adjuncts, much less to self-identify as such*; after all, the difference between part- and full-time academic labor is merely statistical, not meritocratic. To advance a Marxist position under these conditions can only mean fighting the professional order, not to preserve it, but rather to destroy it, even at the cost of undermining what remnant of legitimacy still attaches to the tenure system. This is our predicament: bereft of a common stake in the academy, we are compelled to struggle from outside its protectorate—not as “academic workers,” but simply as comrades.

■ 7 ■

Rosalind Krauss, 1976: “If psychoanalysis understands that the patient is engaged in a recovery of his being in terms of its real history, modernism has understood that the artist locates his own expressiveness through a discovery of the objective conditions of his medium and their history. That is, the very possibilities of finding his subjectivity necessitate that the artist recognize the material and historical independence of an external object (or medium).”

■ 8 ■

For us, too, history is only writeable subjectively, as a movement toward objectivity. In the discourse of psychoanalysis, “objective conditions” are established in the realm of the Other—the mother’s desire, the father’s law, etc. It is the same with academic research: the conditions that govern scholarly objectivity are coextensive with our exploitation and domination by the market.

■ 9 ■

No subject exists immediately in the world: all subjectivity exists by and through media, the material substrate of relations. There are no relations without subjects, and no subjects without relations. If a relationship can be conceived, then a subject of that relation must exist, even if its existence cannot be verified. All materials, including imaginary materials, are potential media. There is neither any identity between materials and media nor is there any limit to the number of relations a particular material can afford; there is only the manifold of relational configurations into which materials can be arrayed—configurations which the historian cannot help but alter,



even if only negatively. We therefore agree with Krauss (and, with Krauss, Lacan) up to a point: the history of the subject is locatable only in terms of media (the plural of medium); but we can neither speak of the “independence” of media apolitically nor affirm that this independence ought to be preserved; indeed, we would say the opposite. Since every medium is a medium of something (some latent subjectivity), whatever appears autonomous, i.e. self-mediating, can be revealed to be the medium of something autonomous—the subject *of* autonomy. However, this apparent autonomy is only ever secured dialectically, hence dependently: the independence claimed by a self-grounding subject develops in relation to the subordination of other subjects, other ‘sensuous particulars.’ Autonomy is only ever shored up by means of domination. We call *totalization* the process of a subject’s becoming-autonomous.

■ 10 ■

The art historian is above all a student of relations. In few other disciplines would matters of world-historical importance rest on nearly imperceptible orders of difference, from the details of brushwork or fabrication to the minutiae (and aporia) of ekphrasis. This attunement to relations is art history’s greatest strength and the source of its usefulness for anti-capitalist purposes. Capital is not merely an object of artistic mediation; it is also a force as real and fundamental as the artist’s hand, and perhaps even more so. In other words, we must treat capital like a subject: the subject of the commodity relation.

■ 11 ■

Among all possible constellations of objects and subjects, certain modes of relation have a totalizing capacity—that is, they capture and recode other relations according to a sort of viral logic, supplanting other subjects in the name of a unitary totality (Deleuze and Guattari refer to these as “abstract machines”). The commodity relation is the most abstract, and therefore the most pervasive, of all totalizing subjects. For us, as for Hegel, totality is not an empty category; the universality of any mode of relation implies the existence of a correspondingly universal subject—that is, a subjectivity that has itself as its own ground. Capital is one such self-grounding subject. Marxism’s concern for the totality articulated by capitalist relations does not excuse it from studying other, less totalizing relations; but there is no avoiding the reality of capital-as-totality, and no other way of treating “sensuous particulars” than as moments of that totality.

■ 12 ■

During the course of the past two centuries, art gradually succumbed to the commodity relation; this much we know. But how did it happen? In a recent essay published in *Mute* magazine, Daniel Spaulding points to modernism’s ambiguous complicity in this slow-moving disaster: “Under capitalism, art is and is not like any other commodity. It is and is not like any other congelation of abstract labour time. It occupies something like a permanent gap in the structure of value’s reproduction, and hence is in contradiction with the value-form even as it is nothing other than this relation to it. During the epoch of programmatism [a term taken from *Théorie Communiste*], it was the specific form of this contradiction that accounted for art’s positivity, as a practice that was able to sustain itself, indeed to thrive on its predicament, at least for a time. Modernist art was also negative because it stood for everything beyond the law of value. In certain of those extreme moments that defined its very being, it was nothing less than the concrete figure of utopia. As such, however, it perhaps remained a specific and conflicted instance of the value-form’s own properly utopian content, which is to say its prefiguration of a socialist mode of production that would be even more thoroughly mediated by labour than is capitalism, though under the conscious direction of its human bearers. Hence if class consciousness in its Lukácsian formulation is the self-consciousness of labour, recognising its own alienated essence in the commodity-form, modernist art could be described as something like the moment of value’s self-reflexivity, when it pauses in its circulation and dithers. Modernist art is value thinking its own sublation. [...] In practice this meant that modernism continually ran up against the materiality of its means as the truth of its mythic or utopian ambition, and that this mereness in turn had to be ideologically mediated. (Clement Greenberg’s later work does this.) Moreover, modernist

artists also repeatedly found that their attack on signification threw them into perverse solidarity with the value-form’s own powers of dissolution. Words in liberty and arbitrary signs began to look like money, value’s most general equivalent. Here, it is the art of Picasso in the years around 1912 that remains exemplary. Disenchanted the sign turned out to leave it open to subsumption by the value-form, a process that Picasso himself soon felt it was imperative to resist via a return to outmoded forms of mimesis.”

■ 13 ■

It is one thing to recognize that modernism’s resistance to the money-form rested on its faith in an even more extreme catalogue of social abstractions—such that, ultimately, the latter’s failure would leave art with only the commodity to lean on. But it is a different thing to ask how this sublative urge found a quarter among the avant-garde; and how it came to be mediated, even if only precariously and imperfectly, in view of the obstacle that was, and remains, the “materiality of [art’s] means.” What for Spaulding is art’s intractable materiality—a term that comes to stand in for “everything beyond the law of value”—might be better described, in dialectical terms, as art’s becoming simultaneously anti- and ultra-social, trading particular subjects—someone or somebody—for everybody and nobody at once. Modernism’s history would be a sum of betrayals, a saying-farewell to “forms of mimesis,” and, what amounts to the same thing, to forms of life: ways of laboring, of loving, of walking, of fighting, etc. What purpose has Marxist art history if not to query the graveyard of life-forms, and to perform the autopsy of their disappearance? It is not enough to cite the inevitability of art’s falling to the value-form; in every case—whether it be Titian or Valie Export, *Sans Soleil* or São Paulo graffiti—it bears asking how, dialectically, value and art became aligned. How does capital act on art, and through what intermediaries? Which subjectivities are extinguished in order that capital might assert its autonomy?

■ 14 ■

The media of art are not, as many critics assume, inherently suited to commodification, a relation of purely quantitative or notional equivalence. Difference more than equivalence is art’s primary concern: in the hands of a skilled artist, simple materials and marks become the bearers of all manner of unlikely subjectivities, human and animal, divine and ancestral, corporeal and mineral, etc. This is not to say that art and capital always stood at cross-purposes. In Europe between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, mercantilism effectively laid the foundation of modernism, combining and centralizing huge quantities of dissimilar subjects and objects under the aegis of the world market, and thereby opening a way beyond the contradictory ontologies of Renaissance pictoriality. What resulted was a radical pictorial monism—one form of existence for all things, as unified by the four boundaries of the page or canvas—of which Velazquez and Rubens, Chardin and Goya, were equally inheritors. Under the rule of industrial capital, this monism would be broken along with capital’s claim to perpetuity; yet the breaking was hardly foreordained. No one could know precisely how much of the familiar, tangible world could be let go of before a picture ceased to mediate anything at all—aside from its equivalence to other works made according to the same procedure—or how much of art’s “materiality” could be sloughed off and deskilled before the discipline collapsed from the loss.

■ 15 ■

The subsumption of art to capital is coextensive with, but not analogous to, the subsumption of labor to capital. By coextensive, we mean *related to*; we do not mean *reflective of*. Marxist method is dialectical rather than hermeneutic: instead of interpreting texts according to other texts (as per Panofsky), it positions objects in relation to their corresponding subjects. Theories of reflection are inapposite to Marxism. Art neither imitates nor depicts the totality; it is only ever a part and a moment of that totality. Marxist art history seeks a cartography that is simultaneously an archaeology—a sort of four-dimensional archive of capitalist and non-capitalist relations, interwoven. It is from these depths that the image of utopia is to be assembled.

■ 16 ■

There is only one truly viable alternative to capitalism: the revolution that destroys it. For us, class struggle is not the prelude to a new, perfected society called “communism”; in its revolutionary



form, this struggle simply *is* communism—the implementation of communist measures here and now. The term “communization” denotes a process of the destruction of capital, not a dreamworld to be realized at some future date. Nonetheless, we defend the necessity of utopia as the durable record of proletarian subjectivity—an image encompassing all promises made to it and all memories of its past. It is only in view of this image, utopia, that the proletariat is able to maintain a relationship with its impossibility as a class. It is of its own nothingness, ultimately, that value thinks when “thinking its own sublation”—as in, *We would be nothing without capital*. Communism is the movement that makes this nothing into everything.

■ 17 ■

Although the proletariat is, by definition, unable to realize utopia, it can nonetheless gesture toward it negatively. This project has as its end the end of all autonomous spheres and domains; the academy is merely one such domain, where proletarian life has ceased to be possible.

■ 18 ■

Like all other professional institutions, the academy is a medium of capital: nominally meritocratic, it has been bent by the force of commodity relations to the point of redundancy. Although academic commodities have always been proffered competitively, it is now the market alone—*sans* ideology—that guarantees their continued production.

■ 19 ■

The methods of Marxist art history can only be derived from the movement that builds a plurality: *we, ours*. However, there is no vector of this movement within the academy; plurality is possible only negatively, as everything the academy forbids, everything it designates as abject and improper.

■ 20 ■

Marxist art history can be practiced neither individually nor collectively; it can only be a symptom of the negation of this binary. If Marxist art history provides no materials for the realization *and* negation of proletarian subjectivity, then it ought not to be written.

■ 21 ■

There is no alternative to the academy, no para-academic project that would relieve the burden of proletarianization; there is only the pitched battle against the academy itself, as against the society that reproduces it. The destruction of capital need not end at the university’s gate, but it could certainly begin there.

■ 22 ■

The struggle against the academy cannot be undertaken in the service of academic advancement; it is night-work, *wrong* work, a labor denominated in stolen minutes and hours. This labor is not a compensation for what the academy disallows; its purpose is to render the academy impossible, illegitimate, and contemptible.

■ 23 ■

Marxist art history is a working draft; there is no preferable format for its distribution, no proper context of its publication. Every document of Marxist art history bears the trace of its impropriety; we can only weaponize this attribute, it cannot be bent to the shape of a new legitimacy.

■ 24 ■

The objects of Marxist art history are dictated, not by the discipline at large, but by the subjectivity of its authors. Revolution is the only worthwhile outcome of this research.

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