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Filming Capital, Masking Democracy: Cinema and the Politics of Appearance

Abstract

This essay rethinks cinema's political vocation through a Marxian theory of appearance. Reconstructing the passage from civil society to the State, it argues that modern democracy functions as a scene of masking, where the antagonisms of capitalist society are re-presented as the universality of citizenship. Drawing on Sohn-Rethel's notion of "real abstraction," Rubin's account of value, and a Lacanian reading of fetishism as imaginization, the article contends that cinema is not merely a medium to represent exploitation but a "science of appearance" capable of staging how mediation is naturalized as immediacy. The methodological core is an inquiry into montage—from Eisenstein's unrealized Capital project to Alexander Kluge's *News from Ideological Antiquity* (including Tom Tykwer's "The Inside of Things")—to show how associative construction can "open" the commodity and make visible the hidden networks of production, circulation, and belief that sustain democratic equality as semblance. The conclusion posits a double bind: film can reproduce fetishism by pacifying conflict, yet it can also interrupt it by converting surfaces into sites of proof, thereby re-politicizing spectatorship and illuminating democracy's dependence on capitalist appearance.

Keywords

Cinema and politics, Commodity fetishism, Real abstraction, Democracy, Capitalism.

1. Civil Society and the Illusion of Universality

The relationship that Marxian thought maintains with the sphere of citizenship, democracy, and therefore with the State, is, as is well known, a matter of great complexity. When in 1843 Marx wrote the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*,¹ he focused above all

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on the concept of civil society (*Bürgerliche Gesellschaft*). Civil society is the sphere in which proprietary individuality, theorized by modern bourgeois political thought, expresses its freedom only in a formal and abstract sense, through a network of relations that appear free but are in fact regulated by the domain of private law. It is only through a complex system of mediations – bureaucracy, administration, and the network of professional corporations – that civil society can articulate its truth-content in the universal sphere par excellence, namely, the State.

This idea, according to which, in Hegel, the State becomes the higher synthesis that sublimates and resolves the private contradictions of civil society by universalizing them, belongs, in Marx's view (who is critical of this position), to the sphere of mere appearance. The principle whereby in civil society the private dimension is organized by the jurisprudence of the contract between formally free individuals, who attain a universal dimension only once this sphere is sublimated into the State, in fact forgets that "Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another."² A sum of relations that, from the very outset, takes on the form of a disjunctive and conflictual bond rather than that of a unity sublimated in the State. It is here that civil society begins to assume the attribute of "bourgeois," and thus to embody only one part of society.

When, in *On the Jewish Question*, Marx returns to these themes, he adopts a vocabulary with a theological resonance: the heaven of politics is marked by a transcendence separated from the earthly sphere of civil society, where the material life of the individual is defined by the egoism of someone like the bourgeois, who "regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers."³ This is the constitutive split that characterizes modernity: on the one hand, the individual is a citizen of the State; on the other hand, as a member of society, he is a bourgeois who, driven by his own self-interest, exploits his fellow man, who, deprived of property (or better: expropriated of his property), is forced to sell his labor-power in exchange for a wage. This is why, according to the Marxist tradition, the passage from the bourgeois of civil society to the citizen of the State takes the form of an inversion of reality and masking: the society divided by the egoistic competition of private interests ends up appearing, in the sphere

¹ K. Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* (1843), translated by M. Milligan and B. Ruhemann, *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1975, pp. 3-129.

² K. Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Oekonomie* (1857-58), translated by E. Wangermann, *Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 28, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1986, p. 195.

³ K. Marx, *Zur Judenfrage* (1844), translated by C. Dutt, *On the Jewish Question*, in *Marx-Engels Collected Works*, vol. 3, Lawrence & Wishart, London 1975, p. 154.

of the State (and even more so in the democratic State), as if it were governed by the principle of the universality of citizenship.

2. Commodity Exchange and Real Abstraction

What we wish to focus on here is precisely the term *appearance*, around which Marx would construct the core of his mature argument in *Capital*.⁴ Capitalist relations are torn by a fundamental division: in bourgeois society, two types of individuals confront one another – though by this point they are no longer the formally free individuals of *On the Jewish Question*, but subjects determined, even in their most intimate and unconscious behaviors, by the social class to which they belong. On the one hand are those who decide how the labor process is organized; on the other, those who, in order to survive, must sell their capacity to work to someone else (and who therefore, during the span of the working day, cannot decide how to use their own life – that is, their labor-power). Yet this antagonistic split that divides society is transfigured, in the sphere of circulation, into a context in which equality seems to reign – in that peculiar form that is the exchange of equivalents on the market.

How is it possible, then, that the tearing antagonism running through society should present itself, in the sphere of the market and of politics, as a pacified relation between equals? How is it that the divisions permeating society are erased, inverted, and come to appear as something other than what they really are – or, as Marx puts it, turned upside down? In what sense is the sphere of politics, of the State, of democracy not only the site of formal equality but also of dissimulation, deception, concealment, and masking? In what way does capitalism constitute a mode of production governed by appearances rather than by harsh and prosaic reality?

At this point, it is useful to recall the argument made by, among others, Alfred Sohn-Rethel who argued that the very form of democratic equality and even of rational thinking is inseparable from the abstraction produced by commodity exchange:

The formal analysis of the commodity holds the key not only to the critique of political economy, but also to the historical explanation of the abstract conceptual mode of thinking and of the division of intellectual and manual labor which came into existence with it.⁵

⁴ K. Marx, *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1867), edited by P. North, translated by P. Reitter, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ 2024.

⁵ A. Sohn Rethel, *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit: zur Epistemologie der abendländischen Geschichte* (1972), translated by M. Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour. A Critique of Epistemology*, Macmillan, London 1978, p. 33.

The exchange of commodities is not only an economic act but also a “real abstraction”: it forces individuals, whatever their social position, to relate to one another as formally equal bearers of exchange-value. This abstraction, inscribed in the act of exchange itself, becomes the unconscious matrix from which juridical equality and the political form of democracy draw their legitimacy. What appears in the sphere of politics as the equality of citizens is therefore grounded in the abstract equality enacted daily in the market. The democratic community of formally free and equal subjects presupposes, and is sustained by, the fetishistic disavowal of the underlying relations of exploitation. In other words, the “freedom” of the citizen is made possible only because the market has already instituted a field where antagonism is displaced and refigured as equivalence.⁶ Democracy, then, is not the overcoming of class division, but its ideological re-presentation in a form that conceals exploitation under the mask of equality.

3. Cinema and the Politics of Appearance

Our thesis is that in a social organization dominated by appearances, cinema can play a fundamental role. Not so much as an instrument of representation of social conflicts in society, as it is very often understood, but as a site in which phantasms, appearances, and images are elaborated in their most sophisticated form. This begins with the deconstruction of the commodity form – the locus par excellence in which the empirical dimension reveals itself as saturated with phantasms and deceptions – which, according to Marx, was the point of entry for understanding the capitalist mode of production. The basic idea is that the sphere of circulation, of politics, and today we might say of democracy, must be exposed in its phantasmatic dimension. And that to do so requires examining how this process of enchantment and production of belief actually functions.

The notion that cinema could serve as a medium where such a reflection might be developed is not, in fact, new. Nearly a century ago, Sergei Eisenstein set out to confront a problem that still resonates today: how can capitalism be represented on screen? After the success of *October* (1928), he began planning a film adaptation of Marx’s *Capital*. The project was never completed, but the notebooks he left behind – published in recent editions by Elena Vogman⁷ – show the audacity of his attempt. Eisenstein understood that the central difficulty lay in the commodity. A commodity is not a simple object but a social relation: the visible surface

⁶ On this point, see the first chapter of S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Verso, London 1989, pp. 1-56.

⁷ E. Vogman, *Dance of Values: Sergei Eisenstein’s Capital Project*, Diaphanes, Zurich 2019.

of countless invisible mediations. Faithful to his constructivist conception of cinema, he imagined a montage that would refract the commodity into a multiplicity of images and then recombine them so as to reveal what fetishism ordinarily conceals. Film, he argued in his feverish prose, might disclose this enigma even to the most humble worker or peasant.

Although Eisenstein never realized *Capital*, the question he posed – how to make the complexity of the capitalist mode of production visible – has haunted cinema ever since. In the contemporary moment, with global value chains stretching indefinitely,⁸ commodities circulating more freely than people, and the enigma of value becoming ever more opaque, the urgency of this question is only sharper. Since the 2008 financial crisis, a wave of artists, filmmakers, and theorists have returned to the problem of the capitalist image. Among them is Alexander Kluge, whose monumental nine-hour film *News from Ideological Antiquity* (2008)⁹ directly stages the unresolved task of “filming *Capital*.”

At the core of Kluge’s project is the same paradox that troubled Eisenstein: the relationship between the commodity form – the elementary unit of capitalism – and its sensible appearance. A commodity seems immediate, natural, self-contained; yet it is the result of an elaborate socio-symbolic process. In an interview included in the film, quoting Ovid, Peter Sloterdijk calls it a metamorphosis: at once fluid and processual, yet fixed in the solidity of a priced object. The commodity’s true nature vanishes at the very point where it presents itself as an autonomous thing. Its immediacy is an effect of erasure, mediation disguised as presence, a social process masquerading as image.

This logic is exemplified in a short feature within Kluge’s film, directed by Tom Tykwer and aptly titled *The Inside of Things*. The sequence begins with a banal image: a woman runs past a building. The frame freezes, and for nearly ten minutes a voice-over isolates each detail of the shot – the intercom, the lock, the house number, the woman’s leather shoes, her handbag – asking where each came from, when it was invented, how it is produced. The frozen frame becomes a catalogue of commodities, each implying global trade, labor processes, and financial circuits. What first appeared as a simple everyday perception is suddenly revealed as the visible surface of vast and invisible networks. To “open up” a commodity in this way is to retrace its hidden itinerary: workers, designers, investors,

⁸ S. Mezzadra, Brett Neilson, *The Politics of Operations: Excavating Contemporary Capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham 2019.

⁹ For a publication of some of the material of the film see: A. Kluge (with P. Sloterdijk, D. Dath, O. Negt), *Idéologies: des nouvelles de l'Antiquité. Marx – Eisenstein – Le Capital*, Théâtre Typographique, Paris 2014.

bankers, logistical infrastructures. All of these conditions are erased from immediate perception, and yet they silently structure it.

Eisenstein himself had already anticipated such an associative method. To move, as he provocatively wrote, “from a bowl of soup to the British vessels sunk by England,” he turned to the “Ithaca” episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, composed as 309 relentless questions and answers. This “catechistic” structure suggested for him a cinematic model of endless excavation, where every answer generates a further question. Fredric Jameson described Eisenstein’s vision as “a Marxian version of Freudian free association”¹⁰: a chain of hidden links leading from everyday experience back to the sources of production. Like Freud’s “navel of the dream,” such a method plunges vertically into the abyss of determinations, interrupting narrative continuity to stage instead clusters of associations charged with affect.

Eisenstein’s notebooks are full of such delirious examples. To depict the link between mechanization and unemployment, he imagined Shanghai streetcars with thousands of coolies lying across the tracks. To represent finance, he rejected images of stock exchanges in favor of “tiny details” worthy of Zola: a concierge moonlighting as a broker. To dramatize the contradictions condensed in a single commodity, he turned to silk stockings, where moralists, artists, industrialists, and exploited women workers were all entangled. Most famously, he drafted a scene in which a wife cooks soup, from which an associative chain unspooled:

Throughout the entire picture the wife cooks soup for her returning husband. NB Could be two themes intercut for association: the soup-cooking wife and the home-returning husband. Completely idiotic (all right in the first stages of a working hypothesis): in the third part (for instance), association moves from the pepper with which she seasons food. Pepper, Cayenne, Devil’s Island. Dreyfus. French chauvinism. Figaro in Krupp’s hand. War. Ships sunk in the port. (Obviously not in such quantity!!) nb Good in its non-banality – transition: pepper-Dreyfus-Figaro. It would be good to cover the sunken English ships (according to Kushner, 103 days abroad) with the lid of a saucepan. It could even be not pepper – but kerosene for a stove and transition into oil.¹¹

What these examples dramatize is the method itself: beginning with the immediacy of an object, then unraveling the infinite regress of mediations that make it possible. As Marx observed, a commodity “seems, at first glance, like an obvious, trivial thing,” but then “it metamorphoses into a sensuous supersensuous thing”¹² that perception cannot grasp. A

¹⁰ F. Jameson, *Marx and montage*, “New Left Review”, (58), 2009, p. 113.

¹¹ S. Eisenstein, *Notes for a Film of Capital*, translated by M. Sliwowski, J. Leyda and A. Michelson, “October” (2), 1976, p. 17.

¹² K. Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, cit., p. 47.

bowl of soup, a pair of stockings, even a smartphone: each becomes a portal to the world-system of extraction, production, and logistics that remains absent from the finished object.

It was Isaak Illich Rubin¹³ who, in the 1920s, first emphasized that the processes of enchantment, mystification, and fetishistic inversion – the very opacity and dissimulating quality of the commodity – should not be dismissed as a secondary or cultural superstructure, peripheral to the functioning of capitalism. On the contrary, they constitute a crucial foundation for understanding Marx's theory of value. The metamorphosis through which surplus-value, extracted across innumerable sites and dispersed temporalities, appears in the form of an objective property of things is not a matter of ideological deceit but a structural necessity. It is the very condition under which capitalist exploitation becomes manifest.

In Lacanian terms, commodity fetishism – understood as the translation of relations of domination from being direct, personal, and visible into relations that are objective (*sachlich*) and naturalized – can be seen as a process of imaginization. This transformation is not incidental: it is inherently visual. The way capitalism appears, the way it takes on a perceptible form, is itself the means through which its asymmetric structure of exploitation necessarily inscribes itself in the sensible world. In other words, capitalism is transposed into an image precisely through this process of fetishistic displacement.¹⁴

For cinema, then, the problem is not simply how to depict exploitation, antagonism, or value “as they really are.” The challenge is to think the necessity of appearance itself: to make visible the very logic by which capitalism disguises mediation as immediacy. Cinema, in this sense, becomes a science of appearance.

If democracy, in the Marxist tradition, is inseparable from the sphere of appearance – where the contradictions of society are transfigured into the illusion of equality – then cinema can provide a privileged standpoint from which to interrogate this paradox. In democracy, the bourgeois divisions of civil society are displaced into the sphere of citizenship, where all appear as equals. But this equality is itself an effect of masking: the antagonisms that divide society are not abolished but re-presented under the sign of universality. Cinema, by staging and deconstructing appearances, makes it possible to reveal both sides of this process: the power of images to conceal and pacify, and their capacity to expose and unravel.

¹³ I. I. Rubin, *Очерки по теории стоимости Маркса* (1924), translated and edited by S. Takenaga, *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value. Conceived as a Variorum Edition*, Brill, Leiden 2025.

¹⁴ See P. Bianchi, J. H. Wiebe, *Lexicon for an Image of Capital*, “South Atlantic Quarterly”, 124 (4), 2025.

In this sense, cinema allows us to think democracy not simply as the institutional form of political equality, but as a field of phantasmatic operations where belief, deception, and ideology are manufactured. To confront the images of democracy critically is thus to recognize their double function: they can serve the fetishism of capital, presenting a reconciled world of exchange and equivalence, but they can also break open the surface, showing the fractures and antagonisms that lie beneath. The wager of a Marxist theory of cinema is that, by turning appearance into an object of inquiry, film can illuminate how democracy itself is caught in the play of visibility and concealment that defines capitalist modernity.

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