

# INTERNATIONAL LEXICON OF AESTHETICS

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## AESTHETIC ECONOMY

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It. *Economia estetica*; Fr. *Économie esthétique*; Germ. *Ästhetische Ökonomie*; Span. *Economía estética*. The term aesthetic economy designates a characteristic of economy itself, i.e. a certain phase of capitalistic development. The point is that aesthetic aspects become important to what commodities are, to advertising, even to the very production of goods. Aesthetic economy is such phase of capitalistic development (and for sure not the last one) that transforms the system of demands by making needs into desires.

### THE STAGING OF LIFE-STYLES

What is telling about aesthetic economy is that a main proportion of goods are no longer produced to be used and consumed in the strict sense, but for furnishing and embellishing the customer and enhancing his or her life (Böhme 2017a). In the actual developmental phase of capitalism, production of goods is no longer just for meeting basic needs, i.e. for preserving life, but most of it is made for making it a better life. Using commodities no longer means consuming them – that could result in satisfying markets very quickly; effectively ending economic growth. Instead, commodities get old because they “obsolesce” (Marx 1953, Haug 1971), i.e., they either become old-fashioned or were no longer compatible with the rapid development of technical progress. This stems from a transformation of the system of needs: aesthetic production of commodities will no longer meet needs which were to be satisfied and come to rest that way, but desires which will be increased when met. These types of goods when consumed simultaneously stimulate the appetite for more; the appetite for the next generation of that item, the next collection of clothes, next season’s fashion, the latest technical device.

This economic system first affords a change in Marxian analysis of the concept of a commodity. For us, the value of most commodities consists in their power to produce a certain atmosphere of life, i.e. it consists in

aesthetic or scenic effects. Karl Marx (1867) introduced the difference of use value and exchange value in respect of commodities. The use value of a commodity consists in its faculty to be applied for a certain goal in ordinary life. The exchange value of a commodity consists in being valued for exchange on the market. That means that the commodity must already be attractive on the market – this is the point where aesthetics come into play. Indeed, the exchange value continues to play a certain role within the context of commodity use, that is, the exchange value of the commodity is transformed into a new use value: we call it the “staging value”. The commodity has become something valuable in the context of use, i.e. the context of life, because it stages a certain life style. This may come along through providing an outstanding frame for ordinary life, some embellishment for example, but it may also be the case that the commodity serves to stage the lifestyle of the very person. People stage themselves by wearing certain brands, by preferring certain music bands, by furnishing their surroundings with the gadgets related to their hobbies. Thus the staging value of a commodity is a certain use value which is an outcome of transforming the exchange value. This is exactly why this phase of capitalistic development is called an *aesthetic one*. If commodities are made more attractive by certain aesthetic “clothes”, these are no longer done away – being just package, as Haug (1971) stated. On the contrary, their aesthetic outfit actually becomes the value according to which they will be useful in the context of life.

Naturally what we understand to be the aesthetic quality of commodities will be changed by this transformation; having some aesthetic qualities does not simply mean that a commodity is beautiful. This change was already working with using commodities as a status symbol (Baudrillard 1972). For commodities to be effective status symbols, it was not necessary that they had a nice appearance, what is actually necessary is that they had a precious appearance. Generally speaking, what is at stake when commodities should have some staging value is that it contributes to engender an “atmosphere” (Böhme 2017b; Griffero 2017; 2019). Advertising has been using this for some time: commodities do not appear in advertisements as such praising their quality and usefulness, no, they are shown as contributing to an atmosphere or the mood of some scene of living. You don’t praise a kitchen knife by exposing its sharpness and its solidity as a product; instead it is shown as an ingredient of a scene by which somebody acts as a hobby-cook.

## AESTHETIC CAPITALISM

The theory of capitalism, as being aesthetic economy, is made from the perspective of the consumers. Its fundament is the system of needs and desires. This approach has a quite illustrious company: economic classics from David Ricardo to Hegel were written in the same perspective. This is true again for theories of capitalism as waste economy, which understand capitalism starting from luxury consumption of feudal strata up to the leisure class. Karl Marx (1867) conceived of capitalism as an antagonism between labor and capital. Piketty (2014) describes the capitalistic system in the perspective of capital accumulation. The perspectives mentioned do not exclude each other in the sense that one is right and the other wrong, but they make different traits of capitalism visible.

My perspective emphasizes the growing impact of consumption for the system of capitalism and its stability, i.e. of continuous growth. Capitalistic development was self-perpetuating because of producing a huge demand of means for production and distribution. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the entire population has been made costumers of industrial products, creating further economic growth that could not be expected to continue in this direction. Since market saturation dooms further, economic growth may come to an end. But something new is taking place, something which is revitalizing economic growth again – even for an endless period: the transformation of the systems of need and desires. It may be helpful to clarify the terminology in order to explain what this transformation is about. By the term *need*, I understand a type of demands which are satisfied when met: thus, if you are thirsty and drink something, the thirst goes away. In order to underline this relation, I will also refer to basic needs; examples are the need for drinking, for nourishment, for clothing, for protection against climate conditions, for sex. Even erotic demands come to an end when met. Yet, there are demands – I want to call them *desires* – which do not come to an end when met. To the contrary, they will be increased. A classic example is the desire to become famous: if somebody becomes famous, he or she wants to get more famous.

Another example, where a wish is transformed into a desire, is the wish to be seen. This is already an example of aesthetic economy, because the desire to be seen has much to do with personal appearance, outfit, self-staging and, what is more, has engendered a huge branch of economy. The wish, or the demand to be seen, was originally a privilege of the feudal class, the court and the noble men, later of the upper bourgeois class – and then, first of all as an outcome of photography, step by step became the desire of everybody – and this way produced a branch of mass consumption. In this example the desire will be reinforced if you satisfy it. You can prove that through the steady growth of image production and distribution and a growing manifold of means to be present. Walter Benjamin (2008) postulated a human's right to be filmed. Today, everybody wants to be on television (at least once); and while the television capacities are limited, you can make yourself visible (e.g., via YouTube).

Further examples where basic needs are being transformed into desires come from the realm of nourishment and transportation. Somebody who satisfied his wish to change places by traveling during his holidays will afterwards wish to travel even a longer distance. In the realm of nourishment, this situation is much more alarming. Let me mention the demands to eat and to drink being basic needs which really can be satisfied, i.e. come to rest when met. Food industries managed to design drinks and meals, which stimulate one's thirst or hunger. This way, such strategies favor obesity and thus have alarming consequences for people's health.

It may be questionable as to whether an endless increase is possible in this realm, but there are others with which this is true: thus, furnishing our life is an open dimension. There are no limits to staging ourselves through clothing, furnishing apartments and houses. If it seems one could not live even more beautifully and richly, more perfectly and comfortably, there remains still the possibility of an "ideal obsolescence": e.g., that exactly this type of furnishing is out – compared with the most recent trends of fashion or technical equipment – and must therefore be replaced.

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