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Benjamin in China, or the Silk Market Project: On the changing nature of the commodity

Abstract: The nature of the commodity is changing in the face of the digitalization and financialization of capital and wealth. Using a counterfeit Louis Vuitton bag from Beijing’s Silk Road Market as a metaphor for the commodity in general, this paper applies theoretical insights from Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Jean Baudrillard, and others, to explore the role of perception and representation in new modes of value ascription. I also examine commodification in contemporary capitalism as an object-sign process, concluding with a brief discussion of the ways the “counterfeit” metaphor connects to other economic processes and theories.

Keywords: commodity, commodification, contemporary capitalism, Benjamin, China, counterfeits

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1 Introduction

In June 2013, I walked through Beijing’s Silk Street Market for the first time. I had visited Beijing twice before, once in the summer of 2008 to attend a conference on climate change activism among international youth organizations and a second time in the fall of 2010 with a group of friends en route from Shanghai to Hohhot, the provincial capital of Inner Mongolia. I had been to fake markets before. One of the biggest is in Shanghai, and even in Qingdao, a relatively small city (by Chinese standards, anyway) on the coast near Korea, it is easy to find counterfeit iPhones, luxury goods, computer software, and antiques.

Of course, words like “fake” and “counterfeit” are socially, politically, and culturally loaded. When technology has progressed to the point that “fake” is indistinguishable from “real,” we are forced to reassess our social, cultural, and

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economic appropriations of those concepts. Perhaps there is a dialectical relationship between real and fake, from which emerges a synthesis: the counterfeit.

Counterfeits are an interesting phenomenon. In *Mythologies*, Barthes (2013) studies Parisian manifestations of the bourgeois myth, the mis- and re-appropriation of signs and symbols to sustain and reinforce the bourgeoisie's cultural hegemony. The music hall, for example, is (unsurprisingly, according to Barthes) an outgrowth of the protestant ethic and capitalism's need to constantly reify the physical materials that facilitate its own reproduction (e.g., steel, iron, minerals, etc.). The prominence of counterfeits also implies an interesting relationship between form and function, especially in the context of luxury goods.

As the commodity changes, so must theories used to understand it. In 2009, Žižek argued that the price of the commodity reflects its sociality. Fair-trade coffee, for example, is expensive precisely because it is *not* Folger's or Dunkin' Donuts brand. Perhaps "fairly traded" coffee beans are harvested and processed more socially responsibly, but the fetishized nature of the commodity renders that responsibility irrelevant. Instead, Žižek argues that paying more for fair-trade coffee helps the bourgeoisie calcify its distinction from the proletariat. Not only can the bourgeois *buveur de café* afford the more expensive coffee, which distinguishes her from the working-class coffee drinker who drinks inexpensive (and now, in relation to its fair-trade opposite, irresponsibly sourced) Folger's, she can afford to both explicitly recognize the social relations of commodity production *and* obfuscate the true nature of that relationship. In his heavy accent, Žižek (2010: 3:03) declares, "In the very consumerist act, you buy your redemption from being only consumerist, you know." The price of fair-trade coffee is higher because it includes the price of its opposite, which is not actually its opposite at all. Starbucks has a close relationship with various certifying groups, which lets them put a green leaf on every bag of coffee they sell and advertise their product as sustainable and fair, despite the fact that their coffee beans are harvested by workers chosen from the same pool of labor as irresponsible, cheap, evil, *capitalist* Folger's. If Folger's also put the green leaf on their plastic jugs of ground coffee, would the bourgeoisie pay "fair trade" prices for that coffee, too? Contradictions like this define the so-called logic of contemporary capitalism.

With that said, this paper seeks to explore this kind of new contradiction, where luxury is simultaneously defined by capitalism and set in opposition to it. I will use a counterfeit Louis Vuitton bag I bought one summer in China for forty-nine US dollars as a metaphor to explore the aesthetic perception of value and the changing nature of the commodity, and commodification more generally as an object-sign process.

2 On the bag

In Louis Vuitton's online store, the Keepall Bandoulière 60 (Figure 1) is listed for \$1,680.¹ The historical materiality of the bag could be the topic of separate paper. The leather handles entangle issues of animal rights, climate change, labor, etc. Even here, the materiality of the bag warrants a (brief) closer inspection. The iconic LV monogram is printed in gold on brown plastic or canvas that mimics leather. Louis Vuitton successfully advertises this monogram as representing centuries of *quality*. "The advertisement is the ruse by which the dream forces itself on industry" (Benjamin 2002: 171). Modern Louis Vuitton ads feature celebrities like Bono and his wife Ali Hewson carrying Louis Vuitton duffels through the deserts of Africa, and politicians like Mikhail Gorbachev, sitting stoically in the back of a car beside a Louis Vuitton bag. In the first example (Figure 2), Louis Vuitton explicitly advertises itself as a socially responsible producer of luxury goods. Buying an expensive bag is charitable, not profligate! Moreover, alluding to its brand consciousness by positioning its superstars in Africa (as opposed to Spanish Harlem or West Memphis, for examples closer to home) allows Louis Vuitton to imply its global reach by compressing the distance (both socially and spatially) between Bono's Ireland (the West) and



Figure 1: Louis Vuitton Keepall Bandoulière 60.

Source: <http://www.louisvuitton.com>.

¹ Spring 2014 price.



Every journey begins in Africa. Ali and Bono wear Edun. Ali carries the Louis Vuitton/Edun collaborative bag.
 Photo from the bag, as well as Ali and Bono's New Spanish Conservation Cotton Initiative Uganda.

Follow Ali and Bono on <https://www.instagram.com/bono>

LOUIS VUITTON

Figure 2: Bono and Ali Hewson depart a small airplane somewhere on the African continent. Proceeds from the sale of the bag carried by Hewson go to Conservation Cotton Initiative Uganda.

Ugandan cotton farmers' pastoral homelands (the non- or perhaps anti-West) into a physical space confined within the parameter of the page of a magazine. "The society which eliminates geographical distance reproduces distance internally in spectacular separation" (Debord 1983: thesis 167). The same might be said of time. In the second advertisement (Figure 3), Gorbachev examines the gray, crumbling, graffitied remains of the Berlin Wall. The caption reads "A journey brings us face to face with ourselves." Only by carrying a Louis Vuitton bag is the power and influence of Gorbachev attainable or, alternatively, only powerful



Figure 3: Gorbachev in front of the Berlin Wall with his Louis Vuitton bag, Annie Liebovitz. Source: New York Times.

men like Gorbachev can appreciate the luxury inherent in Louis Vuitton products. Here, time is compressed and the phantasmagoric historicity associated with the Berlin Wall – from its fall back through the Cold War to Nazi Germany, and perhaps back even further to the rise of authoritarianism and the development of Western civilization – is represented in the Louis Vuitton bag, sitting casually beside one of the modern world's most influential leaders. The Louis Vuitton bag encapsulates the triumph of good over evil.

Louis Vuitton advertises itself as classically and universally fashionable – *stylish* – but fashion “was never anything other than the parody of the motely cadaver, provocation of death through the women, and bitter colloquy with decay whispered between shrill bursts of mechanical laughter” (Benjamin 2002: 63). Yves Saint Laurent's famous apothegm (often incorrectly attributed to Coco Chanel), “Fashion fades, but style is eternal,” is true only insofar as style is really just a sign for the influence of capitalism that renders fashionable the myths on which bourgeois cultural hegemony relies. Convenience, quality, craftsmanship, and ethical production are all myths arrogated by and for the bourgeoisie to establish and justify their existence as a separate class.

Louis Vuitton's eponymic founder was born in 1821 in Anchay, France, near the Swiss border. He moved to Paris as a teenager and eventually found work as an apprentice to a box-maker. Vuitton's socio-temporal situation was fortuitous, as the early decades of the nineteenth century experienced a rise in international travel, necessitating innovation in luggage and travel.² The brand's historical progression goes to show how its early development and continued success depend entirely on bourgeois desires and aesthetics. Wealthy Parisians needed luggage that could conveniently accommodate their hoop skirts and top hats for international train and boat travel. Then, travel itself was the signifier of one's wealth, of one's membership in the bourgeoisie, but as travel became more accessible, a new semiotic narrative was required. The LV monogram, introduced in the 1890s, satiated this bourgeois hunger for a sign to distinguish themselves from the working class.

Thus, the Louis Vuitton bag as a commodity derives its value from a number of social, spatial, and temporal elements. It allows its owner to distinguish himself simply by being able to afford a bag that costs almost \$2,000. It is the product of a historical trajectory that transcends any particular socio-spatial moment, culminating in its modern manifestation that encapsulates the bourgeois myth of quality and responsibility while reinforcing class distinctions. Moreover, Louis Vuitton purposely associates itself with French luxury, which

2 <http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/style/articles/2012-07/12/louis-vuitton-history-of-luxury-label-and-outlets-shops-bags-shoes/page/2> (accessed 16 January 2015).

of course carries its own bourgeois cultural connotations. Celebrities and political leaders feature prominently in Louis Vuitton's modern advertisements, tethering its products to cultural, political, and financial prestige.

3 On the counterfeit as commodity

In *Das Kapital*, volume I, Marx (1976 [1867]: 125) defines the commodity simply as “an object outside us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another.” From that simple definition emerges a complex stream of dialectical arguments, where the commodity's use- and exchange-values are split apart, synthesized in the socially necessary labor time that defines value in general, which is then split into different forms of labor, a synthesis, a split, a synthesis, a split, and so on. The counterfeit bag certainly satisfies a complex set of human wants. To those who do not realize it is counterfeit, it denotes a particular social standing akin to Bourdieu's distinctions or Veblen's conspicuous consumption. How, then, is it really different from a “real” bag? How does it diverge theoretically from traditional conceptualizations of the commodity?

If a commodity is an object that satisfies some desire and has both use- and exchange-value, then both the Louis Vuitton bag and its counterfeit are both commodities. In the case of the “real” bag, its uses are myriad: it carries and protects the things you put inside it; it denotes a particular social status, etc. Its exchange value is also easily calculated: it is worth half a similar Gucci bag, a tenth of a small car; money facilitates this universal reduction of the commodity. The counterfeit bag (as long its true nature is not discovered by admirers!) provides similar use-values. And similarly, money precipitates the exchange-value of the bag, although admittedly this exchange-value must be more carefully thought out. I bought a bag for 300 RMB. I could have bought a counterfeit Gucci bag with similar use-values for the same price, or a better quality counterfeit Hermès wallet, which of course has different but similar use-values. Nevertheless, the counterfeit clearly has some kind of exchange-value. Thus, it is also a commodity.

But let us return for a moment to the use-value of the counterfeit. We have determined that its use-value is twofold. First, you can put your clothes in the bag, carry them around, and not worry about them falling out or getting wet in the event that it rains or snows. Second, the bag distinguishes its possessor from those who cannot afford Louis Vuitton, allowing them to occupy (only in the minds of others, and this is important) the class of people/society who 1) are willing to pay a lot for a bag and 2) can afford to do so. Herein lies the

contradiction, since by buying a counterfeit bag instead of a “real” bag, the buyer is obviously unwilling to pay the price of the “real” bag and perhaps (though not necessarily) unable to. From whence, then, doth its value arise?

“In the inverted reality of the spectacle,” writes Debord (1983: thesis 48), “use value (which was implicitly contained in exchange value) must now be explicitly proclaimed precisely because its factual reality is eroded by the overdeveloped commodity economy and because counterfeit life requires a pseudo-justification.” The value of the counterfeit bag arises from its reference to the luxury of the “real” bag, the “factual reality” of which has been eroded precisely as a result of the overdevelopment of the commodity economy that generates its value by creating a transcendent economy of bourgeois cultural and political referents. The pseudo-justification is, for example, the justification that it is alright to pay a lot for a bag if it is responsibly produced when in reality the “counterfeit” bag was produced in a sweatshop in southern China, and it is merely a pseudo-representation of the representation of responsibility, and of luxury.

To those ignorant of the bag’s counterfeitness, my \$49 Keepall Bandoulière 60 from Silk Street market in Beijing signifies the same meanings as Bono’s \$1,680 Keepall Bandoulière 60 from Bond Street in London. I am like Bono, a person who subscribes to particular bourgeois notions of style and fashion. I am like Gorbachev, a person who understands power and hegemony in the capitalist world, a capitalism that is not limited to market economies but exerts its omnipresent influence on cultures, societies, and governments in ways that surpass even the most dispersed religions. But if the “real” bag only represents those qualities, then the counterfeit is a second-order representation, that is, it represents the representations of the qualities of the “real” one. It refers to itself, which according to Hofstadter (1979, 2007), allows consciousness to emerge. For humans, this is a self-referential “strange loop” that, in constantly referring to itself, reassures itself of its own existence. Similarly, the counterfeit Louis Vuitton, with gold LVs emblazoned on its brown plastic-coated canvas, refers simultaneously to its “real” counterpart and to itself, via the toxic, chemical smell of cheap plastic and South China factories. “The smell will go away when you use it,” the shop clerk assures you.

Debord (1983: thesis 53) anticipates this strange loop when he theorizes a society of the spectacle, “where the commodity contemplates itself in a world it has created.” And in this society of the spectacle, in a stage of capitalism later than what most (if any) theorists have successfully understood, we see the commodity surpass the most recent simulacra as conceived by Baudrillard (1994 [1981]). In the case of the counterfeit bag, there is no *precession* of a simulacrum that defines the real; there is instead a precession of simulacra

that merely define other simulacra. The loopiness of the counterfeit is instructive as we examine, for example, different kinds of financial instruments that do not represent a “commodity” in the traditional sense (e.g., gold, pork, wood pulp, etc.) but rather a representation of a representation of (a representation of a representation of... ad infinitum, perhaps) a “real” commodity, which, if infinitely away, does not actually exist. We might think of the types of financial tools that let bankers buy and sell debt, as well as defaults on that debt.

Interestingly (and I will only address this very briefly), the counterfeit is simultaneously a simulacrum *and* a simulation. It is a commodity intentionally bought/used/consumed by its owner to deceive people, and then we get into its properties as a simulacra. Of course, this intentional manipulation of symbols, regardless of their referents, is common. People learn about wine and cheese to fit in at cocktail parties; my southern accent diminishes when I sit in class at Yale; a friend bought an expensive Prada bag she could not afford so that her business colleagues would perceive her in whatever way the semiology of Prada have conditioned them to perceive her (and her to perceive herself). However, surely it is a fairly new phenomenon whereby the commodity, circulating within a capitalist system, both of which are conscious of themselves, allows that perception to define both itself and its “possessor.”

4 Silk street market

On the surface, Emile Zola’s (1992) Denise Baudu and Octave Mouret seem to come from different worlds. Denise is a working-class store clerk who is forced to commoditize her labor power, her species being, only to be exploited by Mouret, the owner of the department store *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Mouret’s department store is not only, in the Benjaminian sense, a temple to the commodity, it is a “temple to Woman,” although if we recognize the commoditization of women (or, the commoditization of Woman) in much of society, these two temples become erections to the same god. His department store bankrupts surrounding businesses, similar to the modern narrative attached to the introduction of supermarkets like Wal-Mart in small towns. Bourgeois morality comes into clear focus in Zola’s novel. Customers, mostly women, are profligate spenders, overtaken by the phantasmagoric images of the commodity, dancing around them, defining and defined by fashion, the ultimate extremes of which are “frivolity and death” (Benjamin 2002: 70).

In a department store, according to Benjamin, “the customers perceive themselves as a mass; they are confronted with an assortment of goods; they

take in all the floors at a glance; they pay fixed prices; they can make exchanges” (Benjamin 2002: 60). But Silk Street Market turns this definition on its head. After being assailed by store clerks – “Welcome! Come in! Look, look! We have nice bags for you, and watches!” – you decide which stall to enter. You browse through wallets, purses, watches. A clerk approaches you and asks what you want. You say that you are looking for a Louis Vuitton bag, not a purse, but a duffel bag that you might take on weekend trips or as a carry-on when flying. She tells you that there are nice bags in the back, and she leads you into a hidden room in the back of the store where the “good quality” bags are hidden from authorities. Or perhaps she pulls out a magazine, not a Louis Vuitton magazine, but a “bag” magazine, from which you can select bags of any internationally known brand – Chanel, Prada, Gucci, Chloé, Hermès, Louis Vuitton, etc. You choose the Louis Vuitton Keepall Bandoulière 60, and the clerk asks you to wait a few minutes. She makes a phone call, and your bag is retrieved from a nearby warehouse. You inspect it. The clerk holds a flame to the handles, she licks her thumb and rubs it against the strap, “Look, real leather.” She invites you to smell it, “Real canvas.” You ask her how much, and she hands you a calculator, asking you instead how much you want to pay. You enter 200 (*renminbi*, Chinese currency). She scoffs, “1200! This is a nice bag!” Eventually you settle on 300 RMB (approximately USD \$49), she packs your bag in the standard Louis Vuitton paper bag, and you leave. Stalls appear homogenous, but prices are not fixed. Few people pay the same price for the same bag, and people compete (at least implicitly) for the best deals. In fact, Silk Street Market represents the ideal of neoclassical economic theory – two actors, each knowing their own value functions, bargain to the optimal price. If a transaction is made, it is because it increases the welfare (i.e., “utility,” monetary wealth) of both actors. Moreover, customers do not perceive themselves as a mass. Indeed, they come from all different countries, and they are at least tacitly competing to see who haggles most effectively. Clerks claim that exchanges and refunds are welcome, but in practice, this is a lie.

Like Denise, store clerks have an interesting, almost erotic relationship with their Mouret. Unlike Au Bonheur des Dames, however, Silk Street Market’s proprietor is not any single person; it is the government, the State. Stalls are individually owned (or rented, since private property ownership is forbidden in China), but clerks are required to display a government decal, a performative measure to legitimize individual stores, while at the same time legitimizing the State’s power by signifying its omnipresent gaze. While Mouret could terrorize his employees with the threat of lay-offs, his masculinity, coupled with his ability to show up any time, unannounced, is sexually threatening. Similarly, the Chinese government can come in, at any time, unannounced, to raid

counterfeit shops. Without delving too much into the political economy of Silk Street Market, clerks keep their doors open through a series of measures – cultivating close relationships with policemen and bribing local officials. Nevertheless, the looming threat of a raid, of the overwhelmingly masculine force of the Police penetrating the otherwise safe space of the counterfeit market, where individual stalls are typically run by women, creates an underlying sexual tension that is reminiscent of Mouret’s department store, and it reinforces the distinction – both socially and physically – between male and female.

Even if Silk Street Market diverges somewhat from department store as conceived by Benjamin and Zola, this in no way diminishes its role as a temple to the commodity and to intoxication by the commodity. Surrounded by commodities, we become enamored by the prospect of possessing them. Subsequently, this gives rise to the society of the spectacle, “where the commodity contemplates itself in a world it has created” (Debord 1983: thesis 53). The counterfeit presents a unique challenge to the theory of the commodity.

5 On price

Benjamin, quoting Rühle, argues that, “with price tag affixed, the commodity comes on the market. Its material quality and individuality are merely an incentive for buying and selling; for the social measure of its value, such quality is of no importance whatsoever. The commodity has become an abstraction” (Benjamin 2002: 181). The counterfeit becomes a second-order abstraction, then, an abstraction of an abstraction. Perhaps this is why the price of the counterfeit is flexible. Whereas the commodity as traditionally conceived, e.g., a “real” Louis Vuitton bag, derives its referents more closely from social truths, the counterfeit derives its referents instead from the *perception* of those social truths. Thus, the price of the counterfeit, i.e., the price of the second order representation of the commodity, i.e., the price of simulacra that precede other simulacra, must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate those individual perceptions.

6 On labor and fetishism

For Marx, the fetish character of the commodity is derived from the obfuscation of the social relationship between people and commodities; in other words, we come to ignore the inherent sociality of capitalist production. The counterfeit

Louis Vuitton bag upends that. After telling a clerk at Silk Street Market which counterfeit bag you want, she quickly calls a friend or relative, who retrieves the bag from an off-site storeroom. The bag he retrieves was produced in southern China in a factory owned and operated by other family members. This extended network of familial relationships renders moot the fetishistic quality of the traditional commodity.

Moreover, the labor that goes into the actual production of the commodity is perverted (or, perhaps, de-perverted) in the production of the counterfeit. Louis Vuitton advertises the care and craftsmanship that is devoted to the production of each of its bags, but this is obvious as a farce. A rose is a rose is a rose, and a factory is a factory is a factory. In the production of the counterfeit, there are no such pretenses. It is understood from the outset that the labor employed in its production toils away in some southern Chinese factory. The clerks selling the bags know this, and the Westerners buying the bag – regaled, as we are in the West, with tales of those exploitative Chinese neo-capitalists – undoubtedly suspect it. Whereas the “real” bag alludes to some vestige of pre-capitalist craftsmen, plying away at the workbenches on a bag that they will be proud to sell, the counterfeit only refers to that allusion, a preceding simulacrum.

7 On architecture and urban form

The materiality of buildings plays a central role in their relationship with society. For Benjamin, the glass and iron of the Arcades was a useful metaphor for malleability, unnaturalness, technological achievement and brittleness of industrial capitalism. Iron and glass, both technological achievements realized fairly late, allowed new forms (and thus functions) to manifest architecturally. But, they were also unnatural. Iron, unlike stone, was not wrought directly from nature, but instead required labor and machinery to turn it into something usable. Like the relationship between pimps and their prostitutes, the iron of the Arcades was strong, unmoving, and masculine, and it supported the fragile, brittle glass. But without the glass, the light of the Arcades was dirty, streaming between metal beams. The glass, like the prostitute, yields to penetration of and for the commodity.

Silk Street Market is a colossal building, six or seven stories plus subterranean levels that connect it to Beijing’s vast subway system. The building’s glass façade is typically covered in posters and advertisements, often for commodities whose counterfeits are sold illicitly inside its walls. Inside the building is a cheap temple to the commodity’s representation. Like Benjamin’s Arcades, glass

walls allow the space of the commodity to be penetrated by the consumer while simultaneously the consumer is penetrated by the commodity. Elevators and escalators, technology, allows the market to reach new heights, like the elevators in Koolhaas' (1997) Manhattan, and it forces us to yield to quicker penetration. There are overpriced restaurants on the top floors of the building, a terrace on the roof, and coffee shops around the first floor. Two central elevators connect customers not only to six phantasmagoric, spectacular floors of commodities, but to restaurants, bathrooms, a hotel and public transportation. Living one's entire life within the confines of Silk Street Market is hardly a stretch of the imagination.

"Paris is built of caverns from which the din of Métro and railroad mounts to the surface, and in which every passing omnibus or truck sets up a prolonged echo," a "great technological system" that connects to a symbol of both ancient Paris and its death: the catacombs (Benjamin 2002: 85). Like changes in fashion, which are "according limited in many cases to prudent alterations by which new apparel can be derived from remodeling the old" (Benjamin 2002: 68), modern iterations of the city – even if they eschew their predecessors – are often (if not always) "alterations... derived from remodeling the old." Haussmann's Paris is an alteration of its predecessor by virtue of being a response to it. New York, in its Koolhaasian delirium, is similarly built from what already existed. When Manhattan was discovered, it was "natural."³ As it urbanized, Coney Island became an escape back to nature, but eventually Coney Island also become overcrowded, and instead of being a natural getaway, it evolved into a fantastic, technological spectacle. Subsequently, Manhattan become "natural" (again), and technological and cultural innovations (e.g., the skyscraper) were "tested" in Coney Island before being implemented in Manhattan. Like the iron and glass that let the commodity penetrate deeper and deeper into Benjamin's Arcades, steel and the elevator allowed Manhattan to reach new vertical heights.

Like Paris and its Arcades, built atop the multiple layers of its predecessor(s), Beijing and the Silk Market in particular reflect an alteration of the ancient urban fabric, instead of a divergence. The cosmological geometry of Imperial China demanded a strict adherence to form. In addition to the four cardinal directions, the center represented a void, the space of the emperor, who was godlike in his existence. From an architectural and urban planning perspective, this manifests in the Forbidden City (the emperor's residence) located in the center of Beijing,

³ There were, of course, Native Americans thriving on Manhattan before settlers arrived in the seventeenth century. By "natural" I mean the Renaissance ideal of some primitive man living in harmony with nature, and not the more modern, Western perception of "natural" as untouched by humans, which might alternatively be called "wilderness."

with a wall around it that roads must go around, not through. The Forbidden City is penetrated only once, by a north-south axis that extends through the front gate of the Forbidden City around which the entire universe is supposedly oriented. Even a cursory look at a map of Imperial Beijing reveals this axial orientation, and it is easy to see that modern Beijing also grew up as a reflection of its imperial predecessor, despite Mao Zedong's violent and public renunciation of China's ancient cosmology.

Historically, only the Chinese were allowed to live and work within the city walls. Foreigners and their goods were, by imperial order, required to stay outside the walls. Silk Street Market, with its variety of "foreign" commodities (bags, tourism, capitalism, ideology, etc.), is appropriately positioned on the eastern edge of the ancient wall, where foreigners would have lived and worked centuries ago. Silk Street Market is located directly across the street from "real" luxury goods stores like Hermès, Rolex, and Louis Vuitton, where you can pay exponentially more for products that are more or less indistinguishable from their counterfeits. It is also situated right in the middle of Beijing's International Trade Center, a financial services complex that initiates and oversees billions of dollars of capital transactions every day. Access to the market is reminiscent of the "great technological system of tunnels and thoroughfares [that] interconnects with the ancient vaults, the limestone quarries, the grottoes and catacombs which, since the early Middle Ages, have time and again be reentered and traversed" (Benjamin 2002: 85). When you alight from the subway at Silk Street Market, a series of tunnels and escalators transport you directly into the market, but that same subway can take you to "traditional" villages on the outskirts of Beijing and on to mining and farming villages even further away from the urban core. Thus, the same "technological system" that allows capital and capitalists to move smoothly between various loci of commodities and money simultaneously facilitates movement between the urban core and its agricultural and mining hinterland.

Indeed, architecture plays a central role in the *Arcades Project*. According to Sloterdijk, in the *Arcades Project*, "an architectural form was declared the key to understanding the capitalist condition of the world" (Sloterdijk 2013: 173). This is obviously true, as the Parisian Arcades – including their materiality, form, and function – are the titular object of analysis in Benjamin's work. As I have discussed above, focusing on the relationship between architecture and society (e.g., comparing the relationship between iron and glass to the relationship between pimps and prostitutes) allows Benjamin to lucidly understand the nature of the commodity, not only in nineteenth century Paris, but in the early twentieth century when he was writing. Sloterdijk, however, suggests that Benjamin's use of the Arcades as a metaphor to understand capitalism was a mistake, proposing instead that London's Crystal Palace is a better choice. His

contention is that Benjamin fell victim to his “rather laconic poetic vision” and that his analyses

were doomed to implausibility through their choice of object, especially as they took the risk, from the outset, of explaining [sic] using an anachronistic phenomenon to explain a current one: they remain fixated on an architecturally, economically, urbanistically and aesthetically obsolete type of building, which was then meant to carry the full burden of hermeneutics of capital. (Sloterdijk 2013: 173–174)

First, the simple fact that Sloterdijk himself is “using an anachronistic phenomenon to explain a current one,” i.e., using the Crystal Palace (which burned down in 1936!) to explain the “world interior of capital,” renders this critique a bit silly, if not hypocritical. Second, the *Arcades Project* was a radical history, not necessarily a critique of “modern” capitalism *per se*. Just because Benjamin’s observations happened to be relevant in the early twentieth century – and just because they remain relevant today – in no way implies that he was *trying* to construct an “anachronistic” critique of post-modern or contemporary capitalism. Sloterdijk’s misunderstanding is most evident in this last, “gotcha!” critique: “Viewed as a whole, Benjamin’s studies document the vengeful joy of the melancholic who compiles an archive of evidence to show that the world has gone wrong” (Sloterdijk 2013: 174). Of course, Benjamin’s project exhibits no value judgments whatsoever, especially toward whatever notion of the “world” that Sloterdijk mistakenly believes Benjamin holds. Instead, Benjamin, like his angel of history, simply looks back on the rubble or (to quote Sloterdijk) the “archive of evidence to show that the world has gone wrong.” And even *if* Benjamin had intended to pass on some moral lesson in the *Arcades Project*, in its present form, such a lesson is inconceivable when we recognize the *Project’s* kaleidoscopic nature, focusing not on any single aspect of society, of the “world,” but a hodgepodge of its elements that, at its limit, might help constitute an understanding of the whole.

Ultimately, then, we can understand the *Arcades Project* as an architectural project that rejects the traditional form of the book, while embracing its function, *and vice versa*. Books, as standalone objects, are architectural in themselves. Wondering through and discovering things in books is virtually analogous to wondering through and discovering things in a city. The *Arcades Project* is Benjamin’s “Book of the Future” (Sussman 2009a). Like architecture or fashion, though, the evolution of the book refers constantly to its predecessor. The *Arcades Project*, as a fragmented anti-book, might be the book of the future, but by referring to “real” books (from which many of its fragments are drawn), Benjamin reaffirms the book’s existence, even if he denounces it. Perhaps this reminds us of our counterfeit Louis Vuitton bag.

8 Commodification as an object-sign process

Scott Lash and John Urry (1994) argue in the *Economy of Signs and Space* that space and time are compressed through transnational communications networks, as well as through their televisual representations. Encounters of global connectedness – coupled with its ability to fast-forward, skip, and rewind (representations and perceptions of) real (and imagined) events – performs a similar effect as Benjamin’s dialectical image, a burst that also compresses time and space through its rupture of both.

Lash and Urry’s important book, however, is now over two decades old. If the communication and video technology of the 1990s compressed time and space, then the internet attempts (but ultimately fails) to destroy them completely, compressing and reducing them to infinitely small points that exist only insofar as we can conceptualize them theoretically. Yet we constantly move between these points, resulting in what Henry Sussman has referred to as a perpetual state of cybernetic “jetlag,” whereby our dizzying contemporaneous existence in multiple time zones leaves us befuddled in a perpetual haze of temporal movement (Sussman 2009b). Although, for example, I now live in Belgium, I work as a student in Connecticut, and I spend much of my time video-chatting friends in Hong Kong and Shanghai, reading news stories from West Africa, receiving e-mails from my parents in Mississippi, and tracking air pollution indexes transmitted from an unmanned satellite stuck onto the side of a Beijing skyscraper.

One might expect the commodity’s grip to weaken given the decreasing physical and temporal spaces in which it can exist. The opposite has occurred. The increasingly perpetual interconnectedness of peoples and cultures *decreases* the space between the sign and its referent.

Using the case of mid-eighteenth century Wedgwood, Agha shows how commodification “[typifies] products as social indexicals of use and users” (2011: 23). He argues that both Smith and Marx’s “convenient vagueness” regarding use-value bolsters an academic “tradition preoccupied with the miasma of exchange under market-driven conditions of market expansion” (2011: 25). Wedgwood china was typified as “emblems of the aristocratic lifestyle” through its marketing as “Queen’s ware” and through its display in department stores among “the vaulted ceilings, the Doric columns, the wide aisles, [and] the sumptuous cabinets” (2011: 26) upper class luxury, a discursive strategy which is common today; the Louis Vuitton store in New York, for example, features a gilded “bag bar” in its expansive, glass-covered store, where multi-thousand dollar luggage and purses are displayed like alcohol at

a pub). Agha discusses contemporary advertising campaigns, as well, which similarly situate their products in a specific discourse of social interaction where particular commodities are meant to evoke a particular lifestyle, which itself is subsequently commoditized (2011: 29–41).

The main contribution of this paper, I hope, is to show how the counterfeit deviates radically from this archetypical object-sign process of commodification. Rather than relying on its physical and thus social placement among other luxury goods to determine its “value,” the counterfeit relies instead on the physical and thus social placement of the “real” Louis Vuitton bag, a relationship that I have already shown to be semiotic in nature via Baudrillard’s notion of the simulacrum. But whereas the real bag references the social prestige that often accompanies its owner’s economic wellbeing (in the case of Wedgwood, this referent was the aristocratic lifestyle), the counterfeit references that social prestige, as well. Thus, two *different* objects rely on the same sign for their commodification. In other words, the object-sign process of the “real” bag’s commodification is symbolic (in Peircean logic), whereas the commodification of the counterfeit is iconic; their referent – social prestige, wealth, whatever – is nevertheless identical.

Another, more concrete divergence: Like Wedgwood plates, real Louis Vuitton bags are displayed in shimmering malls and retail stores among equally expensive products with similar semiotic relationships to discourses of social class, prestige, and wealth. Salespeople often wear sleek black uniforms and their physical appearance usually reflects bourgeois ideals of elegance and beauty (e.g., thin, tall, smooth skin, shiny hair, etc.). More abstractly, these real bags are situated within political discourse through copyright laws and protection, as well as taxes that consumers, retailers, importers, and manufacturers have to pay as the bag moves along the supply chain. From the perspective of political economy, Louis Vuitton bags are entangled in the vast web of financial and cognitive bio-capitalism, not least of all through its parent company LVMH’s status as the world’s largest producer of luxury goods whose revenue in 2012 approached thirty million euros. Apart from Louis Vuitton, LVMH also owns popular brands like Fendi, Givenchy, Dior, Céline, Belvedere (vodka), Veuve Clicquot, DeBeers, and TAG Heuer.

Counterfeits, however, are displayed in shoddy warehouses, in pushcarts that allow proprietors to dash away if police come snooping, or in cramped closets hidden behind secret doors in shops selling otherwise “legitimate” goods. Salespeople forgo the niceties of their counterparts across the street, demonstrating instead a (refreshing) frankness of their intentions – to sell something. Stalls are cramped and either uncomfortably hot in the summer or uncomfortably cold in the winter. Hagging over price is expected. Ironically,

many of LVMH's brands (Louis Vuitton, Dior, Fendi, etc.) are available in almost every individual stall, each a kind of one-stop-shop for a wide range of counterfeit brands. Unlike their "real" counterparts, whose political and especially financial relationships are obscured through deliberately distinct advertising campaigns and storefronts, the counterfeit shop renders visible the intimate connection between "different" luxury goods.

9 Conclusion

This paper is severely limited in its scope and implications, both practical and theoretical. By focusing so acutely on a single object (the counterfeit bag) as a metaphor for the changing nature of the commodity in contemporary capitalism, this paper necessarily ignores many other important aspects of capital's development. In particular, the trend toward financial capitalism and the reliance of the upper echelons of our corporate elite on derivatives and other exceedingly complex financial instruments is very obviously changing the face of capitalism (cf. Marazzi 2010). This paper joins a growing body of literature on the relationship between society and markets, e.g., Donald MacKenzie's (2008) analysis of the performativity of neoclassical economic and financial models and Bryan and Rafferty's (2006) new political economy of financial derivatives. A Benjaminian analysis of the commodity that simultaneously elucidates the semiotic elements of commodification, however, lets us move beyond the familiar critique of markets, finance, and commodities as self-constitutive entities to understand the *process* of that constitution.

If we are to learn anything from Benjamin, and his *Arcades Project* in particular, then we must appreciate its fragmentary, kaleidoscopic nature as a methodology for understanding the present. Sloterdijk assails Benjamin's methodology. What methodology? Unless one is opposed to the overall form of the *Arcades Project* (a critique that would in itself be unfair since it was published unfinished, posthumously) and has considered it within the full range of Benjamin's oeuvre, then any broad, generalized critique is misguided.

By using a counterfeit Louis Vuitton bag as a metaphor for the changing nature of the commodity, this paper has – I hope! – elucidated the role of perception and representation in the ascription of value in contemporary capitalist society. Of course, counterfeit bags are only one facet of the mirror of the commodity, which reflects reality and its representations in a fragmentary, kaleidoscopic nature. In closing, I am reminded of Olafur Eliasson's *Viewing Machine* at the Instituto Inhotim in Brazil (Figures 4(a) and (b)). Through a

(a)



(b)



Figure 4: (a and b) Olafur Eliasson's "Viewing Machine" (2001) at the Instituto Inhotim. <http://www.inhotim.org.br/inhotim/arte-contemporanea/obras/viewing-machine/> (accessed 16 January 2015).

stationary object, constructed of tactile, commonly accessible materials like steel and glass, we see the world refracted, just like the commodity.

Of course, this is only one part of what will hopefully become a larger project to understand the changing nature of the commodity in the face of unprecedented digitalization and financialization of capital, what we might call an *abstractio ad absurdum* of wealth into bytes of data that can zip around the world in the blink of an eye and reemerge in whatever form they wish to take. The counterfeit is a useful metaphor for exploring this fascinating phenomenon.

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Bionote

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