

**MARX ON FORM AND CONTENT:  
IT'S ALL ABOUT STRUCTURE, IT'S ALL ABOUT ARTWORK!**

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## ABSTRACT

MARX ON FORM AND CONTENT:  
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This study aims at providing a reading of the first chapter of Karl Marx's *Capital* Volume One titled 'Commodity' in terms of the aesthetic categories form and content. Marx's *Capital* analyzes the form and content of value in commodity mode of production. Throughout his analyzes, Marx provides valuable insights for understanding the relations between the categories form and content. Form and content are also important categories for the domain of aesthetics, and actually Marx's use of such categories is inspired from aesthetic. This study first provides a reading of the target text especially focusing on the analysis of the relation between form and content. Then it reviews the use of the same terms in (Marxian and non-Marxian) aesthetic literature. Finally it proposes certain premises for a new understanding of socialist realism based on two main vectors of this study: namely, Marx's political-economical and philosophical analyses of the categories form and content, and the aesthetic understanding of the same categories. The proposed premises are 1) historical socialist realists and socialist way of expressing the reality in arts should be distinguished from each other, 2) the congruence between form and content should be seen as only one way of socialist production of art, and 3) forms should be seen neutral insofar as they are a tool of artistic production.

**Keywords:** Marx, form, content, aesthetics, socialist realism

## ÖZ

### İÇERİK VE BİÇİM ÜZERİNE MARX: ALTI ÜSTÜ BİR YAPI, İÇİ DIŞI BİR ESER!

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Bu çalışma, Karl Marx'ın *Kapital*'inin (1. Cilt) 'Meta' başlıklı ilk bölümünün estetik biçim ve içerik kategorileri üzerinden bir okumasını sunmaktadır. Marx'ın *Kapital*'i meta üretim biçimi içinde değer biçimini ve içeriğini çözümler. Marx, bu çözümlenmeleri boyunca, biçim ve içerik kategorileri arasındaki ilişkileri anlamaya yönelik önemli görüşler ortaya koyar. Biçim ve içerik, estetik alanı için de önemli kategorilerdir ve aslında Marx'ın bu kategorileri kullanımı, estetik esinlidir. Bu çalışma önce hedef metni özellikle biçim ve içerik arasındaki ilişkinin çözümlenmesine odaklanarak okumaktadır. Ardından bu terimlerin (Marksçı ve Marksçı olmayan) estetik literatürdeki kullanımını inceler. Son olarak bu çalışmanın iki ana vektörü temelinde, yeni bir sosyalist gerçekçilik anlayışı için belirli öncüller önerir. Bu vektörler, Marks'ın içerik ve biçim kategorilerine yönelik siyasi-iktisadi ve felsefi çözümlenmeleri ile bu kategorilerin estetik alanda anlaşılma biçimleridir. Çalışmada önerilen bu öncüller şunlardır: 1) Tarihsel sosyalist gerçekçilik ile gerçekliği sanatta sosyalist açıdan dışavurma birbirinden ayrı görülmelidir, 2) içerik ve biçim arasındaki uyum sosyalist sanat üretiminin yollarından sadece biri olarak anlaşılmalıdır, 3) biçimler, sanatsal üretimin bir aracı oldukları sürece tarafsız olarak görülmelidir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Marx, biçim, içerik, estetik, sosyalist gerçekçilik

***For my lost comrades...***

*Their memory is, maybe not always the 'content' but always the 'essence' of the  
'form's I look for.*

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## PREFACE

As a Marxist-Leninist activist, I have been involved with Marxist political economy since my high school days. I remember me, some 20 years ago, navigating through some encyclopedia pages in order to get a feeling of how ‘tendency of the rate of profit to fall’ looked like. Since I was also interested in various disciplines of art, especially poetry, music and theatre, I was involved with not only works of various artists but also the aesthetic ideas of Mayakovsky, Brecht, Lukács, Zhdanov, Neruda, Nazım Hikmet, Louis Aragon and others. As a “natural” consequence of being a Marxist-Leninist activist in Turkey, I found vast opportunities to read Marxian literature both in politics and aesthetics in the years I had been torn apart from daily life and put into prisons.

Even though I “operated” within the domains of ideology, both in theoretical and practical levels, for long years, I became interested in the problem of ‘ideology’ as such only when I prepared my graduation thesis for the Department of Theatre in Ankara University. Around a concept I coined (“ideological fiction”) I attempted there to discuss how ideological ideas are put together within the context of a work of art. During my investigations, I had to focus on *German Ideology* and *Capital*, especially the part titled ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity’ in the latter. Until then, I was used to exploit the concepts of form and concept in a rather loose and undefined manner. Then I decided to take a closer look at Marx’s insights on economic forms and their respective concepts. This master thesis gave me the opportunity to do this, and I hope I took some steps forward for this purpose.

Now, a new field of investigation began to loom in front of me. Actually it appears in this study as a brief subpart, namely ‘The Dialectic(s) of Dramatic Structure’. I have vague ideas about what some of those dialectics might be. But I am well convinced that the principle dialectic in the dramatic structure is that working between story and character, or action and actor. I am not sure if I will ever be able to arrive at a point where I will have, at least, a general knowledge of dialectics working in artistic



production. But I hope my future investigation on the dialectics working in dramatic structure will be a step for this purpose.

The basic premises of the aesthetic position I still hold had been shaped under the challenging conditions I described above. Tens of my friends from those years are not living any more. They had been killed in cities, mountains and prisons of my country. Some of them had been burnt to death, some of them had been shot, some were killed in torture and some preferred to remain hungry for the sake of protecting the basic humane conditions of their existence up until the point where they did not exist anymore.

I had produced some pieces of art and theoretical writings for them and with them. I had discussed many points I treat here, for the first time, with them. They sometimes agreed, sometimes disagreed with me, but in each case, their contribution to my mindset was undeniably invaluable. Therefore this study is dedicated to their memories. Those memories cannot and should not always constitute the content of my endeavors in the domain of artistic production, but they are always ‘the essence’ of them.

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In a word cloud prepared by Panayiotis T. Manolakos (Figure 1), the most used words in the first volume of *Capital* are shown in proportion to their frequency (Manolakos 2008). The word “form” is one of the most pronounced words in the cloud. As is stated in *Marx’s Capital* by Fine and Saad-Filho,

[The] divorce between reality (or content or essence) and the way it appears (or form) is a central aspect of Marx’s (dialectical) thought. It forges the link between abstract concepts (such as class and value for example) and their concrete and practical presence in everyday life (through wages, prices and profits). (Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, 4)

Thus, we have a cleavage between, on one hand content, essence etc. on the other, form, appearances etc. For example, as it will be unfolded by *Capital*, exploitation is *concealed* by the free labor market, or money is a *form* of ‘labor’ (a term, which is not only the linguistic opposite of the ‘capital’ but also the most used word in *Capital*.)

In this study, I aim at reading the form and content categories as included in the works of Karl Marx (in particular, in the first chapter of *Capital*) in terms of the philosophy of art, or aesthetics, and drawing some conclusions for a socialist theory of art. Thus, the whole point of this study is actually to make what Brecht does not find appropriate to do (see the epitaph in the beginning of this chapter). Although his rhetoric belies this, I believe that, the German playwright’s position towards these categories is not at all in discrepancy with that of the ‘classics’, which are not really designed in order to teach writing novels, but still can help to those who want to write them.

The single working hypothesis for this study was, we can pass certain things from Marx’s treatment of the concepts form and content in *Capital* to an account of the theories of art. What is to be learned, i.e. what is to be passed to the account of the aesthetic domain, will be the destination of this journey into *Capital*, or more truly, the journey itself, rather than being its starting point.

The methodology of this study is composed of the following intermingled steps:

1. I read through the first chapter of *Capital* by lending a special focus to the categories of form and content. The passages treating concepts such as ‘content’, ‘essence’ and the like on one hand and ‘appearance’, ‘form’, ‘phenomenon, and the like on the other are considered also insofar as they are used in lieu of or interchangeably with the content and form categories respectively. (Following table gives a list of the synonyms that are used in Marxian literature interchangeably with the categories, respectively, content and form.)

• <b>content</b>	• <b>form</b>
• reality	• appearance
• essence	• phenomenon
• substance	• expression
• hidden substratum	• form of manifestation
	• form of expression
	• presentation

Figure 2: Synonyms of 'content' and 'form' in the context of *Capital*

2. I consider the Marxist classics in general (especially works of Marx, Friedrich Engels and Lenin) and the studies rested upon or dealing with them or those discussing the aesthetic issue in question (including but not limited to the works of G. W. Hegel, Georg Lukács, M. Kagan, G.N. Pospelov, F. Jameson and others) again in terms of the categories of form and content. Also any other resources, ranging from ancient Greek classics to contemporary

philosophers, are referred to insofar as they might lend an insight to the discussion.

3. Based on these two considerations, I will try to derive some conclusions regarding the categories of form and content in artworks. I am expecting such conclusions to be helpful in discussing socialist art (or socialist realism in particular) in today's world.

The form of my thesis, which will be a product of this methodology, will consist of the following moments.

The Second Chapter titled 'Laying the foundations', first provides an overview of the categories form and content in Marxian literature. It considers the relation between Hegel and Marx as both a continuity and discontinuity. Then it discusses Marx's philosophy of art mainly based on Mikhail Lifshitz's important book *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx* as not a basis but a reference of this investigation. Although I attempt to derive the aesthetic implications of Marx's account of the concepts of form and content in *Capital*, I discuss these concepts only insofar as they are based on his political economy.

The Third Chapter receives its title from Althusser's famous *Reading Capital* although I am not relying at all on his reading. This chapter tells "the story" of commodity and especially, the most important aspect of it, namely the value-form. The chapter, whose structure is inspired from the structure of a theater play, includes a foreplay, three interludes and five acts. The foreplay is an introduction to the "adventures" of the embryonic form of value, i.e. commodity. Labor, as the creator of commodities and thereby values, is presented as the protagonist of the play - even if it does not show up physically in all acts, it is the principle actuator of the all story. Five acts, which unfold the value-form of commodity as simple, expanded and general forms of value, are interrupted with three interludes. The first one relates to the analogies, metaphors and signs used by Marx in *Capital*. I believe that they are important keys to understand the aesthetic implications of the work. The second and third interludes provide an example of such implications based on Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck*. However, the content and artistic structure of play is not a point of consideration. This play is rather considered with regards to its most abstract form as



a play. The final Act features a discussion of ideology in Marx, especially in connection with the fetishism of the commodity. It aims at showing that ideology is not a mere deception, but an illusion rooted in the reality which it inverts.

The fourth chapter titled 'Form, Content and Formalism' traces the categories form and content and the issue of formalism in the aesthetic domain. In addition to lexical definitions of said terms, various Marxist approaches to these concepts, including that of Lukács, Kagan, Brecht, Jameson and others, are elucidated here. Nevertheless, it cannot provide a satisfying definition, on which there is a wide agreement, for the concepts in question.

The fifth and the final chapter, as its title 'Discussion and Conclusions: An Aesthetic Reading of *Capital*' implies, harvests the implications of all previous discussions. I attempted to bring together and produce a consistent picture from the data derived from a reading of the first chapter of *Capital* from the viewpoint of 'form' and 'content' categories, and from the data of my aesthetic readings, again, in connection with these categories.

The fifth chapter is, in one sense, the 'telos' of the all previous moments of this study. Following a brief summary of the elaboration of form and content categories in the first chapter of *Capital*, it enumerates the conclusions beginning from the very basic one, namely 'Forms to exist.' Here, I summarized Marx's method of analyzing the forms – his way of solving the riddle posed by the Sphinx called 'form' – and then tried to extrapolate Marx's political-economy approach to the categories of form and content to the aesthetic domain.

Under the subtitle of 'Dialectic "society" of form and content "and its enemies"' inspired clearly from Karl Popper's famous work, I interpreted the illusory aspect of forms. Here, I also tried to base the Marxian approach of giving precedence to content over form upon the labor theory of Marx, and to explain some of the under- and over-interpretations of the supremacy of content. This discussion extended to the subtitle 'Some attempts to solve the riddle', where I wanted to explain the form-giving operation in a form and content relation and possible metaphors for understanding this operation.

‘Dialectic(s) of dramatic structure’ attempts a brief introduction to dialectics working in dramatic structure (including literary works not penned for stage or screen) and especially focuses on the main dialectic between story and character, or action and actor, in this structure.

The final subtitle of this chapter, ‘Towards a socialist realism defined with content rather than form’, refers to the main rationale of my whole investigation, namely to come up with a new formulation of socialist realism. The preposition ‘towards’ in the title already explains that I cannot even claim that I am close to the accomplishment of this task. Nevertheless, I hope the three statements I made here will be a point of departure for this long journey. The last section of this chapter, ‘Limitations: Instead of an Afterword’ briefly discusses the limitations of this study in completing this journey and suggests certain fields for enriching the fruits of this investigation.

## 2. LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS

[The] attitude on the part of Marx toward aesthetic value is clearly related to his discovery of commodity fetishism, as well as his solution of the problem of the subjective and the objective in economic life . . . [W]hile working on *Capital* Marx was interested in categories and forms bordering on the aesthetic because of their analogy to the contradictory vicissitudes of the categories of capitalist economy.

— Mikhail Lifshitz<sup>2</sup>

### 2.1 An overview of the categories form and content in Marxian literature

Marx refers to bureaucracy as state “formalism” while analyzing it in his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. His points can be used as a sort of entry door to his views on the issue of form and content.

The state formalism, which the bureaucracy is, is the state as formalism, and Hegel has described it precisely as such a formalism. Because this state formalism constitutes itself as a real power and becomes itself its own material content, it is evident that the bureaucracy is a tissue of practical illusion, or the illusion of the state. ...

Since the bureaucracy according to its essence is the state as formalism, so too it is according to its end. The real end of the state thus appears to the bureaucracy as an end opposed to the state. The mind of the bureaucracy is the formal mind of the state. (Marx, CHPR 1970)<sup>3</sup>

So in a given object (here, state) when a given thing “constitutes itself as a real power and becomes itself its own material content” it becomes an illusion. If one

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<sup>2</sup> Lifshitz 1973, 96

<sup>3</sup> Digital version of the source can be found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/index.htm>.

considers the important implications of the term “illusion” in arts, things get even more complicated. Of course, here, ‘formalism’ is used in a critical manner but not as an aspect of an artwork. As we will see, work of an artist always conceals the raw material s/he derived from the world outside. A formalist attitude towards art can render this concealing process, one that not only conceals the material under the “skin” of artistic form but one that also conceals the realities of the world outside the work of art.

The first theories on form can be located on the line of history back to Plato and Aristotle. However, Hegel, as a philosopher, who holds that “It is the nature of the content, and that alone, which lives and progresses in philosophic cognition” (qtd. by Jameson 1974, 329) and who deeply influenced Marx, is an especially important milestone on this line of history. Therefore certain points he makes on form and content categories might be helpful in understanding the Marxian way of looking at them.

## **2.2 Hegel and Marx: A continuity and discontinuity**

Before taking a look at Hegel’s writing, it might be meaningful to follow the famous or notorious relation between two thinkers. Marx, in “Afterward to the Second German Edition” (1873) to *Capital*, famously said:

My dialectic method is not only different from the Hegelian, but is its direct opposite. To Hegel, the life-process of the human brain, i.e., the process of thinking, which, under the name of “the Idea,” he even transforms into an independent subject, is the demiurgos of the real world, and the real world is only the external, phenomenal form of “the Idea.” With me, on the contrary, the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought. (Marx, C, I)

He is, however, fast enough to add:

The mystification which dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands, by no means prevents him from being the first to present its general form of working in a comprehensive and conscious manner. With him it is standing on its head. It must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell (ibid).

In a letter dated 1858 to Ferdinand Lasalle , he said: “[the Hegelian] dialectic is, to be sure, the ultimate word in philosophy and hence there is all the more need to divest it of the mystical aura given it by Hegel.” (Marx and Engels, MECW 1975-2005, 321) Lenin also thinks that all good Marxists

...ought, *ex officio*, to constitute a “Société des amis materialistes de la dialectique hegelienne” [“Society of Materialist Friends of Hegelian Dialectics”]. Modern natural scientists (if they know how to seek, and if we learn to help them) will find in the Hegelian dialectics, materialistically interpreted, a series of answers to the philosophical problems which are being raised by the revolution in natural science and which make the intellectual admirers of bourgeois fashion ‘stumble’ into reaction. (Lenin, *On the Significance of Militant Materialism* 1972)<sup>4</sup>

Hegel is not only a sort of “preface” to at least one of the mainstreams in Marxist thought in general, but also the particular categories such as form, content and essence are widely found in Hegelian writings. Hegel in his *Phenomenology* says:

Just because the form is as essential to the essence as the essence is to itself, the divine essence is not to be conceived and expressed merely as essence, i.e. as immediate substance or pure self-contemplation of the divine, but likewise as form, and in the whole wealth of the developed form. Only then is it conceived and expressed as an actuality. (Hegel 1977, 10-11)

If we take aside the references to “divine essence” as an example of what Marx calls “the mystifying side of Hegelian dialectic”, Hegel explains that neither form nor content can be regarded as completely independent from each other. As Lenin stated: “What Hegel demands is a Logic, the forms of which would be ... forms of living, real content, inseparably connected with the content.” (Lenin 1976). This is the unity of the contradictions, but we have to give account of their opposition if we do not want to get lost in “the night in which ... all cows are black.” (Hegel 1977, 9) Hegel, saying “the form is the innate development of the concrete content itself” (*ibid.*, p.35), already defines this unity as a “development” and thereby as a difference.

Pilling also points out the direct difference of Marx’s dialectical analysis in *Capital* from a Hegelian dialectics. What Marx does is not working within the domain of

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<sup>4</sup> Digital version at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1922/mar/12.htm>

concepts. He especially warns against this kind of a misconception insisting that “economic concepts reflect real human practice” (Pilling 1980)

It will be necessary later, before the question is dropped, to correct the idealist manner of its presentation, which makes it seem as if it were merely a matter of conceptual determination and of the dialectic of these concepts. Above all in the case of the phrase: product (or activity) becomes commodity; commodity exchange value; exchange-value, money (quoted in *ibid*).

Marxist dialectic, readily recognizes the interdependence between the dialectical dualities, but also – being a ‘materialism’ – it seeks to define to what extent which is dependent on other. The duality between matter and idea can be said to be the one underlying any duality, and in this context, content and form. Also the duality between the base and the superstructure (or *infrastructure* and superstructure) is another manifestation of the matter and idea duality. Beginning from *The German Ideology* (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 1968) there are important references to this duality. Some of these references will be considered in the following chapters with regards to their relation with the categories under discussion.

Mainstream Marxists, virtually without exception, tend to accept the matter side of said underlying duality as the determinant of its idea side. One of them, Lukács, explains in his *Estetik* (Lukacs 1985, 253-255) that the dependence of form on essence shows itself more pronouncedly in mimesis in comparison with the other areas of human endeavor. This dependence is a very tight one and the formal elements are transformed into content related elements. The content should carry the formal elements and show an orientation towards it from the very beginning for becoming an appropriate content to this form. All factors related to content and form group together for arousing emotions and thoughts.

The problem of form and content in artworks is not only an aesthetic but also an ideological and political problem for socialist thinkers. Lunacharsky’s quote from F. I. Kalinin’s “The Way of Proletarian Criticism” points out the part to be assumed by this issue in the class struggle:

If the bourgeoisie, brushing aside the thought of the imminent collapse of the capitalist system, has devised for itself a world of pleasant day-dreams and fantasies,

through the prism of which it wants to make us see all the events and phenomena of the world, then the proletariat must ruthlessly expose these mirages. . . . In the search for the form and content of proletarian literature, its evaluation —proletarian criticism— must above all approach the matter deliberately and systematically.(Lunacharsky 1967)<sup>5</sup>

Bertolt Brecht, one of the greatest artists and art theorists of Marxism-Leninism and a good learner from Hegel, is especially important in considering the artistic categories within the context of the problem of “realism” in arts. Although this problem has connections with the philosophical realism, in this context, these connections do not need to be detailed. However, the differences between Brechtian and Lukácsian understandings of realism had a close connection with their understanding of the relation between form and content.

With his stance in the so-called “formalism debate” or “expressionism debate” in the postwar period, Brecht held that to consider realism as a problem of form was itself a version of formalism. In one of his contributions to the formalism debate, he reminds the Marxist emphasis on Hegel’s statement that the real is concrete. Critics, said Brecht, should not be a proponent of realist tradition in arts but real itself. Critics should discuss the correspondence between the artwork and reality, but not the form utilized by the artist for expressing such reality. Otherwise, they will find themselves limiting realism to works of certain classical artists, and they will look for a correspondence to the forms used by them. This, as it were, artistic “scholasticism” itself is formalism in its regarding form as the criterion of reality.(Brecht 1997, 80-81)

Brecht’s points will be handled in more details in this study while discussing the issue of form and formalism in aesthetics. This discussion will be always connected to the categories of form and content in Capital. So, it might be helpful to take a look at how these categories are treated by Marx.

Geoff Pilling, in a chapter titled “Form and content of knowledge” in his *Marx’s Capital, Philosophy and Political Economy* explains the significance of these categories in Marx’s political economy studies:

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<sup>5</sup> Digital version at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/lunachar/works/silhouet/index.htm>

For Marx a study of the concepts of political economy as they had arisen in the pre-1830 period was decisively important for he held that without conceptual thinking, no conscious thinking was possible. Unlike the political economists he could not take the forms developed by the subject as ready and given. These *forms* had to be investigated, because it was only through them that the *content* of bourgeois relations developed and revealed itself. (Pilling 1980, my italics)

Pilling explains that Marx's objection to empiricists was directed at the exclusive attention that they paid on the *source* of knowledge but not to its *form*. Ricardo, who rightly saw labor as source of all values but neglected the form assumed by it, was making the same mistake. Here the Kantian and Hegelian ways of considering such categories mark an important watershed, on the latter side of which Marx positioned himself. As Rubin stated in his *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value* again in a chapter on "Content and Form of Value":

[O]n the question of the relation between content and form, Marx took the standpoint of Hegel, and not of Kant. Kant treated form as something external in relation to the content, and as something which adheres to the content from the outside. From the standpoint of Hegel's philosophy, the content is not in itself something to which form adheres from the outside. Rather, through its development, the content itself gives birth to the form which was already latent in the content. Form necessarily grows out of the content itself. This is a basic premise of Hegel's and Marx's methodology, a premise which is opposed to Kant's methodology. From this point of view, the form of value necessarily grows out of the substance of value. (Rubin 1972)

Rubin calls attention to a certain paragraph in *Capital* regarding the passage from exchange value to value. Exchange-value, as will be seen in the following pages, is considered as one of the most pivotal forms of labor in *Capital*.

[E]xchange-value, generally, is only the mode of expression, the phenomenal form, of something contained in it, yet distinguishable from it. . . . The progress of our investigation will show that exchange-value is the only form in which the value of commodities can manifest itself or be expressed. For the present, however, we have to consider the nature of value independently of this, its form. (Marx, C, I, 37,38; also quoted in Rubin, *ibid.*)



Rubin points out an important misunderstanding related to the theory of value in Marx. This mistake is equating labor with value. However,

Labor cannot be identified with value. Labor is only the substance of value, and in order to obtain value in the full sense of the word, labor as the substance of value must be treated in its inseparable connection with the social “value form” (Rubin 1972)

Thus, it is extremely important to distinguish two categories from each other. Actually Marx handles value from three angles: “The decisive, crucial point consists of revealing the necessary internal connection between the *form*, *substance* and *magnitude* of value” (Marx, C, I, 34) (my italics)

As Rubin stated, whereas this was often overlooked because Marx analyzed them separately, he emphasized in more than one place that he was analyzing the various aspects of the same object, namely value. (Rubin 1972)

Now we know the *substance* of value. It is *labor*. We know the *measure of its magnitude*. It is *labor-time*. What still remains is its *form*, which transforms *value* into *exchange value*. (Marx, C, I, 6) (Marx’s italics)

Up to now we have defined only the substance and magnitude of value. Now we turn to the analysis of the form of value. (*Ibid.*, p. 13)

Beginning from the second edition of *Capital*, these connection sentences had been taken out but the related chapter is divided into sections titled: “Substance of Value and Magnitude of Value and “Form of Value or Exchange Value.” According to Rubin,

The obligation to analyze value in terms of both of the factors included within it means an obligation to keep to a genetic (dialectic) method in the analysis. This method contains analysis as well as synthesis. On one hand, Marx takes as his starting-point the analysis of value as the finished form of the product of labor, and by means of analysis he uncovers the content (substance) which is contained in the given form, i.e., labor. (Rubin 1972)

As John Mepham said, Marx’s is a *general* point but not one confined to a particular form and content relation. (Mepham 1979) In Chapter 19, Marx makes this clear:

. . . in respect to the *phenomenal form*, “value and price of labour,” or “wages,” as contrasted with the *essential relation* manifested therein, viz., the value and price of labour-power, the same difference holds that holds in respect to all *phenomena* and their *hidden substratum*. The former *appear directly and spontaneously* as current modes of thought; the latter must first be discovered by science. Classical Political Economy nearly touches the *true relation of things*, without, however, consciously formulating it. This it cannot, so long as it sticks in its bourgeois skin. (Marx, C, I, 542) (Mepham’s emphases)

It can never be overemphasized that, even though the materialist thinker named the content as the determinant, or the “hidden substratum” of things, he, as a dialectical thinker on the other hand, never overlooked their form. Actually, as a critic of classical economist Ricardo, who tended to reduce the form (value) to content (labor), he

want[ed] to show why this content acquires a given social form. Marx does not only move from form to content, but also from content to form. He makes the “form of value” the subject of his examination, namely value as the social form of the product of labor - the form which the Classical Economists took for granted and thus did not have to explain. (Rubin 1972)

The important point in the Marxist way of comprehending things, to me, is the method involving the combined use of analysis and synthesis: to break things down into their various aspects only for having a more thorough combination of them later on. Same approach applies to the relation between base and superstructure, and form and content of a work of art – which is the principle concern of this study. At the end of the day, however we distinguish their various dialectical aspects, the object of our investigation is always a whole. Everything is all about structure, everything is all about artwork. The art producer is to break down her work into ‘part’s only for obtaining that ‘all.’

Before following an instance of this sort of analysis in the opening chapter of *Capital*, a short look at what had been said by Marx on art can be a relevant interlude. Even though Marx’s theory of art, if there is such a thing, is not the main concern of this study, his own ideas on the issue might be a kind of entry door to the corridors of this complicated issue.

### 2.3 Marx on philosophy of art

As has been already said, the direct interest of this thesis is not in Marx's thoughts on philosophy of art, which are in fact not expressed in a systematic way in his oeuvre. As Mikshail Lifshitz put it in his *The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx*, when the philosopher of the working class took to the stage, "The working class was not concerned about the shift of social interest from poetry to prose." (Lifshitz 1973, 9)

This was a time corresponding to the end of the "aesthetic period" when discussions on concepts such as 'the beautiful' and 'the sublime' and issues "concerning the role of genius, the value of art, the imitation of nature" and the like were dear objects of intellectual interest. While political dominance was passing to the hands of the bourgeoisie, the theoretical issues of art and aesthetics began to be limited to a narrow circle of scholars. Thus, more practical issues of art gained importance and problems of art became much more intertwined with social reality.

Marx and Engels were busy with analyzing the economic structure underlying society. Marx<sup>6</sup>, however, not only repeatedly made points which are directly and indirectly related to arts and culture but also,

while working on *Capital* [he] was interested in categories and forms bordering on the aesthetic because of their analogy to the contradictory vicissitudes of the categories of capitalist economy. (ibid, 96)

Indeed, Marx's history of economic forms contains a logic of development parallel to that of aesthetic forms.

Then, actually, this study is a sort of 'reverse engineering.' Whereas Marx drew upon the aesthetic categories for analyzing capitalist economy, I am trying here to draw upon his analyses for the sake of a better understanding of the categories of form and content in aesthetic theory from a Marxian perspective. Jameson, having quoted the abovementioned passage from Lifshitz, also emphasizes that

what is most striking about the distinction between form and content is that despite the enormous range of phenomena to which it will be applied, the concept is

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<sup>6</sup> And Engels also. But since my concern here is the Marx's work, I will refrain from mentioning Engels's studies as soon as possible, which is not an easy job, because despite some scholars might contest, the studies of two thinkers were very much intertwined with one another.

essentially aesthetic in origin, for it was evolved from Hegel's studies in theology and in the history of philosophy, not to speak of art itself, or in other words from materials which belong to the superstructure (Jameson 1974, 328)

When one speaks of dualities – e.g. between form and content – within a Marxist context (this context will be elaborated on toward the end of this study), s/he should remember that Marx's materialist dialectics “is grounded in historical reality with all its contradictions and contrasts.” (Lifshitz 1973, 74) So, maybe the first thing to consider while discussing the categories of form and content is their being a dialectical unity rather than two isolated extremes. But, to put it in Hegelian terms, this is an “identity-in-difference.” So it is a unity and difference at the same time. Lenin, who attaches a great importance to the dialectics in *Capital* (Pilling 1980), explains this dialectics in the following way:

The condition for the knowledge of all processes of the world in their “self-movement”, in their spontaneous development, in their real life, is the knowledge of them as a unity of opposites. (Lenin, On the Question of Dialectics 1972)

So is, for example, the relation between exchange-value and use-value. As I will discuss in details in the following parts of this study, the latter, which is related to the specific quality of things, had great importance in ancient society, what dominates capitalism is the former. (Lifshitz 1973, 95)

While Marx was working on the first volume of *Capital*, he was asked to write a one-page article on aesthetics for the *New American Encyclopaedia*. Although he did not do this for he found the one page limit “ludicrous,” he made comprehensive quotations from various writers on aesthetics.

One of his quotations from Vischer, who in turn quoted from Schiller, is important in terms of Marx's view on the distinction between subjective and objective: “Beauty is simultaneously an object, and a subjective state. It is at once *form*, when we judge it, and also *life*, when we feel it. It is at once our state of being and our creation.” (quoted in *ibid*, 96, my italics) Apparently, the word “life” here was read by Marx as a member of the set composed of the synonyms of the term ‘content’ (see Figure 2 on page 3 in this study).

[Marx] regarded both the subject and the object constituting an aesthetic field as somehow complete and harmonious structures; at the moment of the experiencing of artistic values, each evinces a relative autonomy in respect to other human functions and to the larger setting; so that subject and object together momentarily constitute a "rival world" to that in which we live. (Morawski 1970)

As to the form and content of that 'object' (the artwork) Marx holds that "form is the ensemble of artistic means, or the requisite harmonious organization of elements within a total aesthetic structure," and a letter from Engels to Mehring states that one had to "lay the main emphasis on content." (ibid) However this necessary emphasis led to a neglect of the formal side of the equation, which was unfortunate, as Engels explains:

Marx and I always failed to stress enough in our writings and in regard to which we are all equally guilty. That is to say, we all laid, and *were bound to lay*, the main emphasis, in the first place, on the *derivation* of political, juridical and other ideological notions, and of actions arising through the medium of these notions, from basic economic facts. But in so doing we neglected the formal side — the ways and means by which these notions, etc., come about — for the sake of the content. (Engels, Letters: Marx-Engels Correspondence 1893 2000)<sup>7</sup>

Especially from Althusser on, there is a thread in the Marxist tradition of thought to postulate a discontinuity between Marx and Engels; between Marx and Engels, and Lenin; or even between different "periods" of Marx. The issue of 'epistemological break' (as claimed by Althusser in his *For Marx*, see (Althusser 1969)) cannot be discussed for the purpose of this study. However, one of Marx's passage from *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* – a book which he considers *Capital* to be a "continuation" of (89) – clearly stands in the same position with Engels with regards to the primacy of content. Marx, in his *Critique*, refers to the social relations of production as "the real foundation, on which rise legal and political superstructures and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" work (Marx, *Contribution* 1979, 11).

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<sup>7</sup> An online version of this letter can be found at [http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93\\_07\\_14.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1893/letters/93_07_14.htm)

Can we consider the binary opposition between the “foundation” and “superstructure”, as a version of the opposition between content and form? My answer is a clear Yes. Because, as it will be seen while I discuss *Capital* and the issue of ‘ideology’, forms of appearances are causes for the illusions in the consciousness of men. Human beings see the reality or content upside down through such forms.

Lifshitz also explains the connection between Marx’s aesthetic and economic interests especially in his interest in the concept of ‘the sublime’ within the context of what he calls the “dialectics of measure.”

[Marx] notes those things which indicate its quantitative character (in the sublime, too, ‘the qualitative becomes quantitative’): the tendency toward endless movement, the pursuits of the grandiose, the transcendence of all boundaries and all ‘measure.’ (Lifshitz, 96)

In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 he would also dwell on how the quantity of money became more and more “man’s sole essential trait.” It reduces everything to an abstraction, a quantitative thing. The real measure becomes “*measurelessness* and *immeasurability*” (quoted by *ibid*, 97) or – according to another translation – “*excess* and *intemperance*.” (Marx and Engels, 1844 MSs and Manifesto 1959, 116). However, the *1844 Manuscripts* hold measure to be the objective foundation of beauty. (Morawski 1970)

This measurelessness and “formalism” – the exchange-value is a form of value and a reduction to it might well be called a formalism<sup>8</sup> – is actually what produces capitalism in contradistinction to simple commodity economy based on “measure” – the hometown which capitalism left for good. One can easily notice the inspiration of the following passage, namely the formalist motto: “Art for the sake of art!”

Accumulation for the sake of accumulation, production for the sake of production: this was the formula in which classical economics expressed the historical mission of the bourgeoisie in the period of its domination. (p.742)

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<sup>8</sup> The issue of formalism will be treated in a separate subtitle, see p. 45. For the purposes of this paragraph, it can be defined as unduly giving precedence to the formal characteristics of an object over its content-related characteristics.

Even though the analogy is obvious, Marx avoided “general, superficial analogies and comparisons between intellectual and material production.” (quoted by Lifshitz 1973, 98) Artists are not productive workers. The idiosyncratic place of art production in society is not the main concern of this study, but, bearing this in mind, one must be careful not to extend too far the analyses related to the economy over the domain of art.

Capitalism, as it did in the domain of productive forces, in culture also had a destructive and productive force at the same time. In capitalist society, the decadence of artistic creation is a fact. Nonetheless, the glory of the past ages was thanks to the immaturity in social contradictions; adverse outcomes of capitalist society in the domain of art is actually a result of maturing social conditions.

The contemporary “pimp,” bourgeoisie (it *prostituted* everything) also changed the works of art into exchange values, but this also enabled people – as said in the *Communist Manifesto* – “to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind,” (Marx and Engels, 1844 MSs and Manifesto 1959, 212) thus breaking the illusions of the previous social orders. Classics were of course supreme achievements, but the proletarian revolution would lay the basis for a new “renaissance” of arts by annihilating the commodification of all kind of production including art. (Lifshitz 1973, 98-100) This ‘renaissance’ of art from the womb of proletariat, certainly, needs to have a sound comprehension of the categories form and content with regards to arts.

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Having seen the adventure of the categories of form and content in Marxian literature and Marx’s general approach to art as a human endeavor, I will attempt to read the first chapter of *Capital*, where these two categories are used as the methodological basis of Marx’s analysis of commodity, from the perspective of the relations between form and content.

Pilling, in a chapter titled ‘The Significance of the opening chapters’ quotes Lenin to depict how “a correct understanding of the opening chapter of *Capital*” was “a vital precondition for understanding the work as a whole.” (Pilling 1980) In the same vein, Jameson also says:

The most striking model of the way in which content, through its own inner logic, generates those categories in terms of which it organizes itself in a formal structure, and in terms of which it organizes itself in a formal structure, and in terms of which it is therefore best studied, is perhaps that furnished us by Marx's economic research . . . Thus the opening chapter of *Das Kapital*, with its establishment of the commodity and its description of the relationship between the idea of commodity and that reality of commodity production which it both reflects and attempts to comprehend, is a classic demonstration of intellectual categories (Jameson 1974, 335).

This chapter of *Capital* is also very important for my investigation here since it elucidates virtually all the instants of form and content relations that are to appear throughout the work. Therefore, my investigation will be based chiefly on this part of Marx's masterpiece.



### 3. READING CAPITAL

Of course, we have all read, and all do read *Capital*. For almost a century, we have been able to read it every day, transparently, in the dramas and dreams of our history, in its disputes and conflicts, in the defeats and victories of the workers' movement which is our only hope and our destiny. Since we 'came into the world', we have read *Capital* constantly in the writings and speeches of those who have read it for us, well or ill, both the dead and the living, Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov, Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, Trotsky, Stalin, Gramsci, the leaders of the workers' organizations, their supporters and opponents: philosophers, economists, politicians. We have read bits of it, the 'fragments' which the conjuncture had 'selected' for us. We have even all, more or less, read Volume One, from 'commodities' to the 'expropriation of the expropriators'.

— from *Reading Capital*<sup>9</sup>

In his 'Preface to the First Edition' of *Capital*, Marx describes the challenges of introducing new dimensions to a new science, namely to political economy. This introduction not only needs to distinguish the technical terms from everyday use but also needs "a revolution in the technical terms of that science" (111). "There is no royal road to science," says Marx in another Preface<sup>10</sup>, "and only those who do not dread the fatiguing climb of its steep paths have a chance of gaining its luminous summits" (104). Marx takes this path from the gate of forms of value.

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<sup>9</sup> Balibar and Althusser 1970, 13

<sup>10</sup> To French edition.

Even though the human mind could not understand its real basis during thousands of years, actually “[t]he value-form, whose fully developed shape is the money-form, is very simple and slight in content.” (90) Marx regards these forms (“the commodity-form of the product of labour, or the value-form of the commodity”) as the “economic cell-form” and starts his investigations from this point. The overall object of his investigation, on the other hand, is described as “the capitalist mode of production, and the relations of production and forms of intercourse [*Verkehrsverhältnisse*] that correspond to it” (ibid).

Accordingly, he opens *Capital* with the following words: “The wealth of societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an ‘immense collection of commodities’; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form. Our investigation therefore begins with the analysis of the commodity” (125). Before going into the details of this analysis, I dare a rather long quotation of a summary by Pilling in order to have a general road map to follow:

In Volume I is found a development of the basic theoretical concepts which reflect the relations of this specific mode of production. Marx, as we know, begins with the simplest, most fundamental, relation of capitalist society – the exchange of commodities. He at once reveals, in the investigation of a simple commodity, the contradictory nature of this cell-form as a unity of value and use-value. He then shows the contradictory nature of the labour incorporated in the commodity – concrete labour and abstract labour. Marx next reveals that the internal contradiction in the commodity finds the form of its self-movement in the external contradiction which appears as the relationship of the relative and the equivalent form of value, polar opposites indissolubly united with each other. The further development of this antagonistic relationship, which reflects the historical growth of commodity production, goes through three stages – a simple, an expanded and finally a universal form of value. In the last of these stages, the product of labour assumes a double form of the commodity itself and its monetary equivalent. The development of money, in its various functions, being the result of an extension of commodity production and at the same time the condition for the growth of these very same relations, constitutes a development of the initial contradiction. (ibid, part titled ‘The development of Marx’s investigation’)

Marx starts this analysis, “which reasons from the abstract forms to the concrete content” (Saíz and Reilly 1981), with the commodity – “the cell-form” or “the elementary form” of value. “The commodity is the cell-form of bourgeois society because it is the basic relationship of that society.” (Pilling 1980)

### **3.1 Foreplay: The commodity form as the embryonic form of value**

As is very well known in Marxian political economy studies, a commodity is a thing having a use-value and an exchange-value. A commodity has a use-value, because it “satisfies human needs of whatever kind . . . [be it arising] from the stomach, or the imagination” (126). It can have a direct use (“means of subsistence”) or it can be used indirectly for producing other commodities (“means of production”). An article having only use-value is not a commodity, only when it gains exchange-value it becomes so. When it is exchanged with other goods, then it gains an exchange-value. Use value “exists in all forms of society, but in capitalist society, use-value is, in addition, the material depository of exchange-value” (Engels, Synopsis 2000).<sup>11</sup>

While the capitalist mode of production begins with exchange-values, Marx begins his analysis with use-value. As we will see, exchange-value is a form, rather than the content, of value. The use-value, or “usefulness of a thing . . . is independent of the amount of labour required to appropriate its useful qualities.” Use-values, which are “only realized in use or consumption, . . . constitute the material *content* of wealth, whatever its social *form* may be .” (126, my italics)

The passage just quoted is the very first place we encounter with a sort of relation between form and content in *Capital*. The object in question is “wealth” and its content consists of use-values. However, so far not much points had been made about this *relationship* let alone about what might be the forms assumed by the content in question. However, beginning from this point, one must remember that,

Marx does not derive the terms ‘value’ and use-value’, from any ‘division’, Hegelian or otherwise, of the concept of value. He derives both these concepts from an analysis of the commodity. . . . Marx never starts from any ‘concepts’ (including

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<sup>11</sup> While summarizing *Capital*, Engels renders Marx’s term “*Träger*” into English as “depository” while Ben Fowkes translation renders it as “bearer.” Both translations might be useful to understand what is meant.

therefore the value concept). He begins from the simplest form of bourgeois wealth – the commodity. He shows ... that in the commodity far from being ‘completely different things’ use-value and value are inseparably united, are identical, but identical as opposites. (Pilling 1980)

Marx is to continue throughout *Capital* revealing the contradictory nature of the commodity. The basic differentiation between value and use-value is to reappear “in newer and higher forms which grow out of the lower forms as part of an uninterrupted process” (ibid). In other words, simpler forms move towards more complicated ones in each moment of the analysis.

When one sort of use-value is exchanged for another (for example, a coat used for getting warm is exchanged for 20 meters of linen used for making garments) the proportion between quantities of said articles makes exchange-value appear. In other words, a quantity of coat is exchanged with another quantity of linen. But this quantitative relation is not constant at all; it changes with time, place and other factors. “Hence exchange-value appears to be something accidental and purely relative, and consequently an intrinsic value” (126).

This observation might be useful, since it is about the emergence of a form, namely of exchange-value. We learn from here that a form of appearance might be illusory. That a form might be an illusion can be seen when it is considered that “an exchange-value that is inseparably connected with the commodity, inherent in it” is a “a contradiction in terms” since ‘exchange’, by definition and – as it will be elaborated on later – implies a relation (ibid).

A given commodity can be exchanged with different amount of various commodities. This produces two important conclusions:

- 1) “the valid, exchange-values of a particular commodity express something equal,”
- 2) “exchange-value cannot be anything other than the mode of expression, the ‘form of appearance’, of a content distinguishable from it” (127)

That a thing can have more than one expression, all of which are equally valid, indicates that these expressions are forms of a content. In this case, a commodity has various exchange-values, that is to say, there is a content in it which is “expressed”

differently in different contexts. Expression in a form implies there is “something” expressed in a form. That something is content. This will be understood more fully while the analysis unfolds.

The general formula  $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ commodity b}$  indicates that “a common element of identical magnitude exists in two different things” (ibid). Both commodities are equal or reducible to a third thing which Engels denotes with a Latin term; “Exchange-value presupposes a *tertium comparationis* by which it is measured” (Engels, Synopsis 2000).

This common element cannot be a natural property of the commodity, since such properties are what give its use-value to it. When use-values are at stake, the difference between commodities is mainly due to their qualities. If it will not be exchanged on market for a different article, an article is not a commodity and it involves only a use-value. However this does not mean that it does not involve a quantitative aspect, it only means that its distinguishing property is not its quantitative but qualitative aspect. In exchange values, however, difference is due only to quantity. Any article can be exchanged with any other article regardless of what kind of articles they are. In an exchange relation, the important thing is only the value they embrace. This means that exchange values “do not contain an-atom of use-value,” they are independent of it (128).

### **3.2 Labor, the protagonist: “Atoms” of commodities**

If use-value is disregarded for the sake of a fuller understanding of exchange value, which is a form, a question arises: “What is the ingredient of the form exchange-value?” Analysis shows that, the material content of this form is the labor crystallized within the commodity.

However this is not a particular or specific type of labor, since abstraction of exchange-value from use-value means also an abstraction from “material constituents and forms which make it a use-value” (ibid) The “*tertium comparationis*” is thus “labor, the common social substance of exchange-values, to be precise, the *socially necessary labor-time* embodied in them” (Engels, Synopsis 2000)

When all these abstractions are done, what is left from the products of human labor is a “phantom-like objectivity.” The labor content in commodities is, as it were, a

phantom, which exists but is not tangible, and is only seen as a result of an analysis. The products of labor, or commodities

are merely congealed quantities of homogeneous human labour, i.e. of human labour-power expended without regard to the form of its expenditure. All these things now tell us is that human labour-power has been expended to produce them, human labour is accumulated in them. As crystals of this social substance, which is common to them all, they are values – commodity values [*Warenwerte*]. (128)

So far, we have seen that a commodity has two folds, use- and exchange-value. Use-value is defined to be the material depository of exchange-value. Exchange-value is the form of value crystallized in the commodities, which turn is the human labor in the abstract.<sup>12</sup> We get the following figure regarding a commodity:

LABOR (*content of*) → VALUE (*content of*) → EXCHANGE-VALUE, or  
EXCHANGE-VALUE (*form of*) → VALUE (*form of*) → LABOR

Figure 3: Content and form relation between labor, value and exchange-value

As Rubin explains, the problem of value is widely discussed in Marxist literature. Is value *determined* by labor or is it labor itself? One might easily infer that value is labor from the expression that value is “congealed” or “crystallized” labor. However this is wrong. Value is an example of the content which cannot be even seen without assuming a form.

Labor cannot be identified with value. Labor is only the substance of value, and in order to obtain value in the full sense of the word, labor as the substance of value

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<sup>12</sup> Engels explains this abstractness in the following way: “Just as a commodity is something twofold: use-value and exchange-value, so the labour contained in it is two-fold determined: on the one hand, as definite productive activity, weaving labour, tailoring labour, etc. — "useful labour"; on the other, as the simple expenditure of human labour-power, precipitated abstract (general) labour. (Engels, Synopsis 2000) Also see *Capital*, 129.

must be treated in its inseparable connection with the social "value form." (Rubin 1972)

For a moment, leaving aside its "necessary mode of expression, or form of appearance," namely exchange-value, Marx continues his analyzes with its content, namely value. What confers upon a useful article (a use value) its value is the objectified or materialized human labor in it. Labor (equal labor or labor in the abstract) is its "value-forming substance" (129). Its quantity is measured by time, this gives rise to the term 'labor-time.' So the value of an article is determined by "the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production" (ibid).

The value of a commodity, then, remains constant as long as the labor-time required to produce it remains so. However this depends on the productivity of labor. Therefore there is an inverse ratio between the productivity of labor and the labor-time to produce an article. (130-131)

Here it is important to remember that, in order for a thing to be a commodity, it should have not only a use-value but a social use-value. For example, air is useful but it is not a commodity – at least so far!– or a bread made for one's own use or even for, let's say, for the use of a feudal lord is still not a commodity. "In order to become a commodity, the product must be transferred to the other person, for whom it serves as a use-value, through the medium of exchange." (ibid)

To recap, the substance of value is labor and the measure of its magnitude is labor-time. (But "the form, which stamps *value* as *exchange-value*" (ibid) is not fleshed out yet in this analysis.) Analyzing the commodity, so far, we learned the substance of value in it (labor) and the measure of the magnitude of that value (labor-time) and the form it assumed (exchange value.)

### **3.2.1 Two folds of labor**

In the same way as the commodity has a dual character of having use- and exchange-value, labor has a dual character: (1) useful labor "as definite productive activity, weaving labour, tailoring labour, etc.", and (2) (general) labor "as the simple expenditure of human labour-power, precipitated abstract. The former produces use-

value, the latter exchange-value; only the latter is quantitatively comparable.” (Engels, Synopsis of Capital 2000).<sup>13</sup>

Although this dual character of labor is important in understanding Marx’s labor-value theory, it needs less attention in terms of form-content relationship. Still there are certain points to make.

Useful labor is an “abbreviation” for “labour whose utility is represented by the use-value of its product, or by the fact that its product is a use-value” (132). In this context, only the useful effect of the labor is taken into consideration. “Use-values cannot confront each other as commodities unless the useful labour contained in them is qualitatively different in each case” (133). This qualitative difference among use-values gives birth to the social division of labor “[i]n a society whose products generally assume the form of commodities” (ibid).

In one sense, the use-values are the “physical bodies” of commodities and they are composed of two elements, material and labor – former being a product of nature, latter of human beings. If the labor is subtracted from a use-value, what remains is nature. (134)

The qualitative difference between various use-values refers to various forms that can be assumed by human labor. “As values, the coat and the linen have the same substance, they are the objective expressions of homogeneous labour. But tailoring and weaving are qualitatively different forms of labour” (ibid). Also same person can make clothes and weaves in different times according to the needs of labor market, this shows that the form of labor is changeable.

In abstract labor, various forms of labor are counted as “*intensified*, or rather multiplied simple labour,” in other words, various forms of labor are reduced to one homogenous form of labor. For example the labor of a weaver and that of a tailor are considered as a resultant of various amounts of “simple” or “abstract labor.” This abstraction is the same as or at least analogous to the abstraction that counts different use-values as values. Although quality is considered if use-value is at stake, only

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<sup>13</sup> The abstractness of the labor crystallized in a commodity, i.e. “socially necessary labor-time” required to produce it had been elucidated above. Marx emphasizes that he was “the first to point out and examine critically this twofold nature of the labour contained in commodities.” (132)



quantity is considered for value; former is related to the “how” and “what” of value, the latter is to the “how much” of it. Material wealth increases when the quantity of the use-values increases (135-136).

On the one hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power, in the physiological sense, and it is in this quality of being equal, or abstract, human labour that it forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is an expenditure of human labour-power in a particular form and with a definite aim, and it is in this quality of being concrete useful labour that it produces use-values. (137)

Not to lose the thread another summary might be needed. We saw that a commodity is a thing having both use-value and exchange-value. However exchange-value is only one of the forms of value. Use-value is about the usefulness or quality of an article whereas value is about its quantity. Human labor which transforms nature into articles, and here, commodities, has also two aspects. The useful labor produces use-values, which is related to the quality of labor put in it. The abstract labor produces values, and is considered as quantities.

### **3.3 Act I of tale ‘Commodity’: Value-Form**

Marx, under the title ‘The Value-Form, or Exchange-Value’ (138), tells, so to say, the tale of commodity through the forms it assumed throughout its adventure.

He defines his “crucial” task as “revealing the necessary internal connection between the *form*, *substance* and *magnitude* of value.” (qtd. by Rubin 1972) Rubin explains Marx’s dialectical method as follows:

Leaving aside here the quantitative aspect, or the magnitude of value, and limiting ourselves to the qualitative aspect, we can say that value has to be considered in terms of "substance" (content) and "form of value." The obligation to analyze value in terms of both of the factors included within it means an obligation to keep to a genetic (dialectic) method in the analysis. This method contains analysis as well as synthesis. On one hand, Marx takes as his starting-point the analysis of value as the finished form of the product of labor, and by means of analysis he uncovers the content (substance) which is contained in the given form, i.e., labor. . . . Marx wants to show why this content acquires a given social form. Marx does not only move from form to content, but also from content to form. He makes the "form of value"

the subject of his examination, namely value as the social form of the product of labor - the form which the Classical Economists took for granted and thus did not have to explain. (ibid)

Rubin emphasizes that the form of value is one of the “foundation stones” of Marx’s theory of value. This *form*, which is overshadowed by Marx’s analysis of particular *forms* of value (simple, expanded and general forms), is, according to him, an important key to have the grasp of commodity-form. As we will see at the very end of the Chapter I of *Capital*, “The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production” (174). Value-form is a “social-form.”

[A] connection between producers is brought about only by means of the exchange of commodities. In such a "commodity" form of economy, social labor necessary for the production of a given product is not expressed directly in working units, but indirectly, in the "form of value," in the form of other products which are exchanged for the given product. The product of labor is transformed into a commodity; it has use value and the social "form of value." Thus social labor is "reified," it acquires the "form of value," i.e., the form of a property attached to things and which seems to belong to the things themselves. This "reified" labor (and not social labor as such) is precisely what represents value. (Rubin 1972)

Although exchange-value is a form of value, Rubin insists that form of value (*Wertform*) and exchange-value (*Tauschwert*) are different concepts as justified by Marx’s discussing them separately. The social form of product, namely commodity, is divided into two parts: **Form of value** is “the social form of the product which is not yet concretized in determined things, but represents some abstract property of commodities” and **exchange-value** is “the form which already has a concrete and independent form (i.e., exchange value)” (ibid).

I cannot fully agree with Rubin in this point. Indeed, the first edition of *Capital* has a separate appendix titled “The Value-Form.” (Marx, Appendix 1978)<sup>14</sup> After being published in 1867, it had not been reproduced until 1978 (in the journal *Capital and*

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<sup>14</sup> Digital version can be found at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/appendix.htm> (Short URL: <http://goo.gl/9NYQC>)

*Class* with an introduction of translators.) Appendix opens with a quite clear summary:

The analysis of the *commodity* has shown that it is something *twofold*, use-value *and* value. Hence in order for a thing to possess *commodity-form*, it must possess a *twofold form*, the form of a use-value and the form of value. The *form of use-value* is the form of the commodity's *body* itself, iron, linen, etc., its tangible, sensible form of existence. This is the *natural form* (*Naturalform*) of the commodity. As opposed to this the *value-form* (*Wertform*) of the commodity is its *social form*. (ibid, authors' italics).

And in response to the question "Now how is the *value* of a commodity *expressed*? Thus how does it acquire a *form of appearance of its own*?" Marx says, "Through the *relation of different commodities*." Then he continues with simple, expanded and general forms of value describing the simple value-form as where "the *secret of entire value-form*" lies.

Value is already a non-concretized form of labor, to say that form of value represents "some abstract property of commodities" means to put another but a senseless interval step between labor and value.

Let's carry on following Marx's analysis in *Capital*. The plain or natural form of a commodity is its form of use-value. This natural form, however, is not enough to make an article a commodity. It should have a double form: value form in addition to its natural form (use-value). This corresponds to a distinction between the sensuous objectivity of commodities and their objectivity as values. The former is its physicality, the latter is its being value which is, in turn, due to the congealed human labor in it. There is not a trace of its natural form in the value form of a commodity. This points out a cleavage between two forms of a given object. The objectivity of commodities as values is purely social, "it can only appear in the social relation between commodity and commodity." (139)

Marx had started his chain of analyses with exchange-value, since this was the distinguishing character of a commodity from an article which is produced only for its use-value. He showed that exchange-value was a form of appearance of value hidden within a commodity. Now he is to turn back to its form of appearance,

namely exchange-value. This method can be generalized as follows: To understand an object, one is bound to begin with the form of appearance of it; however this is just a beginning for having a grasp of the complete objectivity of the object in question. One must continue with searching what “lay[s] hidden within it.” (139) But this is not way to go one time only, one must many times go between the form of appearance and content of a phenomenon.

The most common and well-known value-form of a commodity, vis-à-vis its natural form (use-value), is money. Marx starts an important journey into the heart of this form.

### **3.4 Act II: Social embodiment of value in exchange relation as equivalent and relative forms**

The journey begins with “the simple, isolated, or accidental form of value” (139). This is based on the equation  $x \text{ commodity A} = y \text{ commodity B}$ . An instantiation might be **20 yards of linen = 1 coat**. Here, worth of one commodity (A, linen) is expressed by another commodity (B, coat). There are two poles in this expression: the relative form and the equivalent form of value. Marx holds, “The whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this simple form” (ibid).

Considering the instantiation of the generic formula with linen and coat, Marx explains how such two commodities play two different roles. Introducing a new dimension to the form-content relation, this point deserves a long quotation:

The linen expresses its value in the coat; the coat serves as the material in which that value is expressed. The first commodity plays an active role, the second a passive one. The value of the first commodity is represented as relative value, in other words the commodity is in the relative form of value. The second commodity fulfils the function of equivalent; in other words it is in the equivalent form.

The relative form of value and the equivalent form are, two inseparable moments, which belong to and mutually condition each other; but, at the same time, they are mutually exclusive or opposed extremes, i.e. poles of the expression of value. They are always divided up between the different commodities brought into relation with each other by that expression (139-140).

Of course as any equation this equation can be inverted, but this inversion does not rule out the mutual exclusivity of the roles played by each side of the equation. In the equation **1 coat = 20 m linen**, this time the coat acts actively as the relative value whereas the linen becomes the equivalent value with a passive role. In each case, the value of only one commodity is expressed; in the first case that of linen, in the second, of coat. The same commodity cannot assume both roles. “These forms rather exclude each other as polar opposites” (140).

In analyzing the value of a commodity, we saw that use-value was the material depository of value while exchange-value was its form of appearance. Use-value was independent from exchange-value and did not include even “an atom” of it. But these two did not have a relative position with regards to each other. They were independent but not exclusive, because they had a content and form relationship. The relative and equivalent values, however, are two forms of value and these forms are in polar opposition to, i.e. exclude, each other. Here we encounter the fact of complementary form and content versus exclusive forms.

The relative form of value and the equivalent form are, two inseparable moments, which belong to and mutually condition each other; but, at the same time, they are mutually exclusive or opposed extremes, i.e. poles of the expression of value. They are always divided up between the different commodities brought into relation with each other by that expression (139-140).

### **3.4.1 Relative form**

But, what is the content these forms express? Marx begins with relative value. “In order to find out how the simple expression of the value of a commodity lies hidden in the value-relation between two commodities,” Marx first considers the value-relation independently of its quantitative aspect” (140). This is to be an analysis of a form of appearance arising in a relation, in one sense, it is analysis of a relational form.

In order to compare the magnitudes of two things quantitatively, there must be a common denominator in them; they must be able to be reduced to the same unit. In its most abstract form, the equation can be read as **A = B** or **linen = coat**. Marx, in a

footnote, emphasizes how important it is not to confuse forms with the objects expressed by those forms. Bourgeois economists

have been unable to arrive at any result firstly because they confuse the form of value with value itself, and secondly because, under the coarse influence of the practical bourgeois, they give their attention from the outset, and exclusively, to the quantitative aspect of the question. (141)

The quantitative aspect of a commodity is its exchange-value, which is the form of appearance of value. Here 'formalism' arises as a bourgeois attitude based on putting the emphasis on the measurable aspects of things.

To turn back to the equation **linen = coat**, one must remember that, here only the value of linen is expressed and it is related to the coat as its 'equivalent' or 'the thing exchangeable' with it (141). Coat, here, is only the form or mode of existence of value; value is embodied in it.

If we say that, as values, commodities are simply congealed quantities of human labour, our analysis reduces them, it is true, to the level of abstract value, but does not give them a form of value distinct from their natural forms. It is otherwise in the value relation of one commodity to another. The first commodity's value character emerges here through its own relation to the second commodity. (141-142)

Here two plays are at stake. The first play is between value and congealed quantities of human labor. The second play is between two commodities. The first one is a form and content relation while the second is a value relation. In the first play, the occurring form of value is not distinct from use value. In the second, however, one of the commodities assumes the role of being just an equivalent, in the same way as, as we will see soon, money.

Equating two different labors (that of weaving and tailoring), which are in fact qualitatively much different from each other, means reducing them to their common: their being human labor. Value creating human labor is not a value unless it assumes objective form, i.e., in its abstract form. Only in this way it can become the common thing in two different commodities.

The problem is already solved.

When it is in the value-relation with the linen, the coat counts qualitatively as the equal of the linen, it counts as a thing of the same nature, because it is a value. Here it is therefore a thing in which value is manifested, or which represents value in its tangible natural form. Yet the coat itself, the physical aspect of the coat-commodity, is purely a use-value. A coat as such no more expresses value than does the first piece of linen we come across. This proves only that, within its value-relation to the linen; the coat signifies more than it does outside it, just as some men count for more when inside a gold-braided uniform than they do otherwise. (142-143)

Coat is a “bearer of value” but you cannot see this however you tear to shreds its texture. Only in its relation with another commodity (here, linen) you see its being “embodied value” or “body of value” [*Wertkörper*] But still this being value is only possible with being use-value. The value of linen is expressed by the use-value, i.e. the physical body, of the coat. While as use-values linen and coat are completely different, as values they are the same but in the second case, their being the same is only revealed in their relation (143).

All that is said so far about the relative and equivalent values can be read as follows: A concrete commodity, having a use-value (content), can assume the role of being a measure of another concrete commodity. But when this role is assumed, the former commodity is still concrete, i.e. with use value, but in this relation it acts as a value. Remembering that value is congealed human labor, that is to say, an expression or form of a content, we can say that, the same thing may act both as content and as form depending on its place in the relation. This points out to the possible relative position of a component in a form and content relation. Whether a component acts as a form or content is fully dependent on its position in the relation. Nevertheless, a component can act as a form only thanks to its being/having content.

In the value relation, articles speak a different “language” than their native language: the “language of commodities.” Using this language,

[i]n order to tell us that labour creates its own value in its abstract quality of being human labour, it says that the coat, in so far as it counts as its equal, i.e. is value, consists of the same labour as it does itself. In order to inform us that its sublime objectivity as a value differs from its stiff and starchy existence as a body, it says

that value has the appearance of a coat, and therefore that in so far as the linen itself is an object of value [*Wertding*], it and the coat are as like as two peas (143-144).

Here a distinction is postulated between the “sublime” and “stiff and starchy” objectivity/existence of an article. In its value form, the coat is abstracted into being the equivalent value of the linen. To my understanding, it is obvious that the use of the adjectives “sublime” vis-à-vis “stiff and starchy” is ironical. Marx ridicules here that attitude of idealism that takes the abstract to be superior to the concrete and form to be superior to content. However, he also recognizes the reality which leads to this misconception. Because “within its value-relation to the linen; the coat signifies more than it does outside it”, people attach more importance as they do a man in “gold-braided uniform” (143). Nevertheless, the first is just a coat and the second is just a man. Something in abstract form might claim more importance than its physical objectivity and there is a reason for this, however, not an enough one to take for granted its superiority.

The following synoptic paragraph sheds more light on this abstraction process in a value relation.

By means of the value-relation, therefore, the natural form of commodity B becomes the value-form of commodity A, in other words the physical body of commodity B becomes a mirror for the value of commodity A. Commodity A, then, in entering into a relation with commodity B as an object of value [*Wertkörper*], as a materialization of human labour, makes the use-value B into the material through which its own value is expressed. The value of commodity A, thus expressed in the use-value of commodity B, has the form of relative value. (144)

To understand this complicated passage we can have recourse to Engels’s synopsis discussing the equation **x commodity A = y commodity B**.<sup>15</sup>

The value of a commodity in the use-value of another is its relative value. The expression of the equivalence of two commodities is the simple form of relative value. In the above equation, y commodity B is the equivalent. In it, x commodity A acquires its value-form in contrast to its (the commodity's) natural form, while y commodity B acquires, at the same time, the property of direct exchangeability, even

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<sup>15</sup> For the sake of uniformity, I capitalized the small letters a and b as used by Engels to conform with Marx’s use.



in its natural form. Exchange-value is impressed upon the use-value of a commodity by definite historical relations. *Hence, the commodity cannot express its exchange-value in its own use-value, but only in the use-value of another commodity.* Only in the equation of two concrete products of labour does the property of the concrete labour contained in both come to light as abstract human labour i.e., a commodity cannot be related to the concrete labour contained in itself, as the mere form of realization of abstract labour, but it can be so related to the concrete labour contained in other kinds of commodities. (Engels, Synopsis 2000, my italics)

Remembering that the subsection, which is being discussed here, bears the title ‘The content of the relative form of value’, we see that the use-value of commodity B acts as the form of expression of the value of commodity A. The content of the relative form (commodity A or linen) is the use-value of the equivalent-form (commodity B or coat). Exchange-value is the form of expression of value which is congealed labor, but this exchange-value can only be expressed by the use-value of another commodity (if the coat would not be useful for anything, it would not have been able to be exchanged for linen.) Without this value-relation, its exchange-value remains unexpressed, i.e. formless.

Hence, form of expression of value only arises in a relation. Marx had said that use-value is the material depository or material bearer of exchange value (126). This expression now gains its meaning more fully: Use-value of a commodity is material bearer of the exchange value of another commodity.

To turn back to the definition: a commodity is a thing having use-value and exchange-value. It has use-value in its natural form; it acquires value in a value-relation. In order to express its value as an exchange-value, it needs another commodity, or rather, the use-value of another commodity. Two use-values are confronted with each-other. While the first one gains its value-form (or expresses its value) only at the expense of its natural form, the second one becomes the form of the first due to its natural form. Form of one content arises only in a relation between two contents – one is the expressing, other is the expressed.

Having already shown that the value of commodity is congealed human labor, Marx adds,

A given quantity of any commodity contains a definite quantity of human labour. Therefore the form of value must not only express value in general, but also quantitatively determined value, i.e. the magnitude of value. (144)

The quantitative aspect of the story is told by changing the terms of the equation  $x$  **commodity A** =  $y$  **commodity B** quantitatively, i.e. by changing the  $x/y$  proportion. Putting aside the niceties of this mathematical reasoning which is not relevant for the topic tackled here, we can pass to the conclusion drawn:

The relative value of a commodity may vary, although its value remains constant. Its relative value may remain constant, although its value varies; and finally, simultaneous variations in the magnitude of its value and in the relative expression of that magnitude do not by any means have to correspond at all points (146).

This point is important, because “[t]he vulgar economists have exploited this lack of congruence between the magnitude of value and its relative expression” (146) Hence, the value of a commodity might not correspond to its exchange-value; there can be many mediators between the magnitude of value – which is expressed by the amount of labor-time congealed in it – and the relative expression of the magnitude of value, i.e. its price. This example demonstrates that there is not a necessary congruence between form and content.

### **3.5 Interlude 1: Marx’s analogies**

One cannot help but notice that the number of analogies used by Marx dramatically increase while elaborating on the two poles (relative and equivalent forms) of value in the value relation between two commodities. Especially, while explaining the content of the relative form of value, he has recourse to analogies and metaphors one after another. So, this stylistic preference deserves a parenthesis here.

The first analogy comes from chemistry. He gives the example of two compounds (butyric acid and propyl formate) having the same elements in the same proportion but with different physical formations. He explains that one might be the form of expression of the other – still different from each other, but comparable. He draws an analogy of the coat’s being the “form of existence” of value or “material embodiment” of value in the linen. (141)

Then comes two analogies of hierarchy. The coat, as the equivalent value of the linen, is more than its use-value. Outside of the value-relation, it is a concrete commodity to use, but within the relation, it expresses the value of another commodity (linen) – of course only thanks to its having use-value outside. Marx compares this with men “count[ing] for more when inside a gold-braided uniform than they do otherwise.” (143) One paragraph later he is to give the example of ‘majesty-ness’ relation between two persons.

... the coat cannot represent value towards the linen unless value, for the latter, simultaneously assumes the *form* of a coat. An individual, A, for instance, cannot be 'your majesty' to another individual, B, unless majesty in B's eyes assumes the *physical shape* of A, and, moreover, changes facial features, hair and many other things, with every new 'father of his people' (ibid, my italics).

Here one must pay attention to the peculiar use of the word ‘form.’ When Marx mentions the “form of a coat” he is actually referring to its “physical shape” which allows it to be a use-value. This use of the term form is different from its use with regards to form and content relation.

A third hierarchical analogy following a few pages later (a king is only king because he has subjects, and subjects are only subjects because they have a king (149)) makes us think that hierarchy might not only be an analogy in considering the form and content relation. The second terms of the analogies (man with uniform, your majesty, king) correspond to the form of value, or exchange value, which will culminate in the universal exchange, money. They are superior, but this superiority is due to not only “a false consciousness” accepting them as superior but also a social convention.

Another analogy is from Christianity and relates to the relative position of commodities in a relation.

As a use-value, the linen is something palpably different from the coat; as value, it is identical with the coat, and therefore looks like the coat. Thus the linen acquires a value-form different from its natural form. Its existence as value is manifested in its equality with the coat, just as the sheep-like nature of the Christian is shown in his resemblance to the Lamb of God. (ibid)

The natural form of linen is its being used as linen, i.e., its use-value. In a value relation, however, it acquires a value-form. This acquisition of a different form in a relation reminds Marx of the Christian metaphor of “Lamb of God.”

Marx, in a footnote, extends this point with the parable of Paul and Peter: The passage, which has obvious allusions to Hegelian master and slave dialectics, clearly involves humor but it is still helpful for understanding the role of relation in recognition of the value of a commodity.

In a certain sense, a man is in the same situation as a commodity. As he neither enters into the world in possession of a mirror, nor as a Fichtean philosopher who can say 'I am I', a man first sees and recognizes himself in another man. Peter only relates to himself as a man through his relation to another man, Paul, in whom he recognizes his likeness. With this, however, Paul also becomes from head to toe, in his physical form as Paul, the form of appearance, of the species man for Peter. (144)

Besides these analogies, the issue of language can also be a key to understand the relationship between form and content. Language is not used as an analogy but as a sign, or maybe a symptom, of reality. The structure of language is frequently pointed out by Marx and Engels in understanding the binary oppositions encountered during analyzing an object. Engels, in a footnote (to fourth German edition), states that the distinction between the words “work” and “labor” in English corresponds to two different aspects of labor; the former to the qualitatively determined action producing use-values, the latter to quantitatively measured action producing values (138). Also Marx, points out the correspondence of the use of Germanic words and Latin words to the concrete and abstract usages of a similar concept.

In English writers of the seventeenth century we still often find the word 'worth' used for use-value and 'value' for exchange-value. This is quite in accordance with the spirit of a language that likes to use a Teutonic word for the ' actual thing, and a Romance word for its reflection. (126)

Another example to this is the comparison between the German word '*Wertsein*' and Romance verb '*valere*' – the latter being more suitable to denote the value relation between commodities (144).

Marx's examples arising as analogies, metaphors or signs is an important possibility to extend what he said about form and content relation with regards to commodities. This does not show at all that what he said can be always generalized for all form and content relations, nevertheless it shows also that it is not limited to only the world of commodities.

### 3.6 Interlude 2: Case of *Woyzeck*: Person and persona

Let's attempt another analogy, but this time from the domain of art. Previously, Marx had referred to a "**form**, which stamps *value* as *exchange-value*" (130, my bold). Later on he speaks of the same operation with the verb "to impress."

[A] commodity A (the linen), by expressing its value in the use-value of a commodity B of a different kind (the coat), **impresses** upon the latter a form of value peculiar to it, namely that of the equivalent. The commodity linen brings to view its own existence as a value through the fact that the coat can be equated with the linen although it has not assumed a form of value distinct from its own physical form (147-148, my bold).

What is at stake here is a form-giving operation. The commodity A expresses its value in the use-value of the commodity B. Thus, A impresses upon B the form of equivalent value. Now B acquires another form thanks to but distinct from its physical form.

Let's consider Georg Büchner's play *Woyzeck* here – any story based on real life can work as well, so the details of the plot is irrelevant. Franz Woyzeck, the main character of the drama, is taken from the true story of Johann Christian Woyzeck. Franz, the *persona*, is not Johann Christian, the *person*.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, they are interdependent in a way comparable to the relation between relative and equivalent values.

Peter Szondi in his *Theory of the Modern Drama* refers to the problem of relation between real life and drama.

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<sup>16</sup> For the sake of analogy, we disregard the fact that Büchner's play can certainly be read or seen, and understood without the knowledge of the true story. Still, a complete comprehension of the phenomenon of the play *Woyzeck* is only possible by understanding the *all* factors played a role in creation of this play – an impossible task but all attempts to accomplish it counts for good in an analysis. The true basis of a story is no doubt of importance.

The Drama is primary. This also explains why historical plays always strike one as “undramatic.” The attempt to stage *Luther the Reformer* requires some reference to history. If it were possible, in the absolute dramatic situation, to show Luther in the process of deciding to reform the faith, the Reformation Drama could be said to exist. (Szondi 1987, 9)

Since “Drama is absolute” and “it must break loose from everything external” (ibid, 8) the “histories” such as historical plays of Shakespeare are always problematic, because history is something which remains always external to the confines of the drama. But still the history of drama is full of references to real life. Actually it can be said that, any persona in drama is a reference to an actual or possible “external” person. Keeping this problematic in mind, we can turn back to Büchner’s play.

Büchner utilizes the true story as a material for his fictional story. Thus, Franz “stamps” or “impresses” the form of “being a material for a fiction” upon J. Christian, who can assume this form only by having a sort of “use-value” as a true person. But as soon as it becomes material for a fiction, insofar as the dramatic work is concerned, it becomes more than its physicality. A certain portion of the “artistic value” of the persona Frank is due to its real life “equivalent” J. Christian. Of course the persona and person have different “use-values” in real life, e.g. the former is watched on the stage, the latter is executed by beheading.

I am well aware of the limitations of the analogy. However, just as the content of the relative form (commodity A) is the use-value of equivalent-form (commodity B), Franz takes its content from the physicality of J. Christian. This relation does not bear a quantitative aspect, but still it exists. As linen expresses its existence as a value in coat (147), Franz expresses its existence as a real life based character on J. Christian.

### **3.7 Act III: Tale of commodity continued**

#### **3.7.1 Equivalent form**

“The equivalent form of a commodity,” explains Marx, “is the form in which it is directly exchangeable with other commodities” (147).

Marx identifies certain peculiarities involved by this form. The first of the peculiarities is that “use-value becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, value.

The natural form of the commodity becomes its value-form” (148). But this arises only in a value-relation between two commodities. A commodity cannot be its own equivalent, its physicality cannot express its own value, so it needs another commodity to express it. Thus, it needs the physicality of another commodity to acquire its value form.

Marx compares this to a sugar loaf whose weight is determined with iron weight units. Weight of sugar loaf is not tangible; however the iron units become the form of appearance of weight. Even though sugar loaf could well act as a weight unit, we need another object to express its weight, so we put it into relation with another heavy object, i.e. iron. Iron measures the weight of sugar loaf “in its pure form, the form of manifestation of weight” (148). However, Marx is well aware of the limits of his analogies:

In the expression of the weight of the sugar-loaf, the iron represents a natural property common to both bodies, their weight; but in the expression of value of the linen the coat represents a supra-natural property: their value, which is something purely social. (149)

Economic and physical domains are different, since the former is directly related to society, and latter is a result of the nature of things. In the relative form, a commodity (e.g. linen) expresses its value in a completely different commodity (coat). The “natural” differences between two commodities can be leveled only by the cylinder of the “social” conventions of exchange. But the equivalent form (coat) expresses the value of relative form in its everyday physical use. Its form of value is directly given by nature, while that of linen was given by society.

Marx immediately warns, “the properties of a thing do not arise from its relations to other things, they are, on the contrary, merely activated by such relations” (149).

Reconsidering our example of Büchner’s *Woyzeck*, we can see that Franz is Franz and J. Christian is J. Christian. But as soon as they are put into relation by Büchner, they acquire some new properties, i.e. former being based on a real person, latter being the source of a fictional character. As is said, the “artistic value” of Franz arises in the “real person value” of J. Christian.

The second peculiarity of the equivalent form pointed out by Marx is that “concrete labour becomes the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labour” (150). This is actually in direct parallel to the first peculiarity, namely use-value’s becoming the form of value. We have seen that concrete labor produces use-values while abstract labor produces value. Since the value of a commodity arises only in relation to another commodity, since the only thing that makes possible to equalize two different commodities is the equal magnitude of abstract human labor congealed in them, and since the use-value of a commodity is the material depository of the value of the other, concrete labor arises as the form of abstract labor.

The third peculiarity adds a third parallel: “private labour takes the form of its opposite, namely labour in its directly social form” (151) Individuals work concretely and qualitatively to create a certain product, or use-value. In an exchange relation, however, their labor is counted only for abstract labor.

The first peculiarity is at the level of *commodities* (use-value vis-à-vis value). The second is at the level of *labor* (concrete labor vis-à-vis abstract labor). The third is at the level of *society* (individual labor vis-à-vis social labor). This is the picture of a *society of commodities* produced by *labor*. We can say for all three levels, in a higher abstraction level, “content arises as form.”

Concrete labor exerted by individuals that produces use-values (i.e. the material of value), becomes the form of that value as coagulated abstract or social labor. J. Christian, the real person who inspired the persona Franz, becomes the form of Franz’s being based on real life. Form and content are completely united while they are completely different. Content can assume a form because it has a content, and form is obliged to have a content to arise.

### **3.7.2 The simple form of value**

When the simple form of value is considered as in the equation **x commodity A = y commodity B**, we saw that,

The value of commodity A is qualitatively expressed by the direct exchangeability of commodity B with commodity A. It is quantitatively expressed by the exchangeability of a specific quantity of commodity B with a given quantity of A. In



other words, the value of a commodity is independently expressed through its presentation [*Darstellung*] as 'exchange-value'. (152)

Here exchange-value is postulated as the *presentation* or *expression* (yet more synonyms to “form”, see

Figure 2) of value and this expression is described as “independent.” Two ways of expression is mentioned: qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative expression of the value of commodity A is in that it can be directly exchanged with another commodity (B). This exchange is bound with a quantitative ratio, and this is the quantitative expression of the value of A. Here we see two different aspects of the same relation which exists simultaneously. The same form (exchange-value) has qualitative and quantitative aspects in it.

In this point Marx makes an amendment to what he had said before. Even though he analyzed the commodity into its components as a use-value and an exchange value, in the strict sense of the word, this was wrong. “A commodity is a use value or object of utility, and a ‘value’” (ibid). Value, however, needs to manifest itself in a form distinct from its natural form (use-value).

This form of manifestation is exchange-value, and the commodity never has this form when looked at in isolation, but only when it is in a value-relation or an exchange relation with a second commodity of a different kind (ibid).

There is an important point here. In the value vs. exchange-value relation value acts as the content of exchange-value, and exchange-value as the form of value. But value (whose content is, in turn, labor) cannot arise as such, it needs a form. Since it is not a natural but social reality, it is bound to acquire form in a social relation, namely exchange relation. Only in this relation, this content can assume a form.

Marx also explains that,

the form of value, that is, the, expression of the value of a commodity, arises from the nature of commodity-value, as opposed to value and its magnitude arising from their mode of expression as exchange-value. (ibid).

Even though both Mercantilists and liberals like Frédéric Bastiat (1801-1850) who positioned themselves against Mercantilism (Marx calls them “the modern pedlars of free trade” (153)) held that value and its magnitude arose from exchange-value,

Marx's analysis aims at showing the opposite: exchange-value arises from the nature of value. The formalist delusion has two manifestations:

As an economical formalism, Mercantilism mainly emphasizes money, the culmination of the equivalent form of the commodity. "Modern pedlars" need to sell their commodities at any price, so they emphasize the relative form. They are interested in value and its magnitude only in an exchange relation. Both mercantilists and "modern pedlars" miss the dialectical nature of the relation, i.e. unity of the differences.

Then Marx depicts how the internal opposition within the commodity comes to surface as an external opposition. This is an important aspect of Marxist dialectics, so it deserves a long quotation.

A close scrutiny of the expression of the value of commodity A contained in the value-relation of A to B has shown that within that relation the natural form of commodity A figures only as the aspect of use-value, while the natural form of B figures only as the form of value, or aspect of value. The internal opposition between use-value and value, hidden within the commodity, is therefore represented on the surface by an external opposition, i.e. by a relation between two commodities such that the one commodity, *whose own* value is supposed to be expressed, counts directly only as a use-value, whereas the other commodity, *in which* that value is to be expressed, counts directly only as exchange-value. Hence, the simple form of value of a commodity is the simple form of appearance of the opposition between use-value and value which is contained within the commodity (ibid).

Any commodity comprises the internal opposition between use-value and value. But in order that this opposition can be embodied or expressed, an exchange-relation between two commodities is needed. This is the point where the content value assumes a form of manifestation, namely exchange-value. To put it with Hegelian terms, the master manifests itself as master only when recognized by the slave; the manifestation of one is only possible with a relation between two.<sup>17</sup>

As Pilling states, Marx presents value in a dialectical manner.

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<sup>17</sup> One must bear in mind that, in Hegel, this relation involves a hierarchy, whereas in Marx, neither relative nor equivalent value risks or fear from 'death'.

For value is an inner relation of the commodity to itself, reversed in outward form through the relation to another commodity. . . . dialectics obliges one always to discover, behind the outward form of a thing's relation to another thing, its own inner nature, its own being. (Pilling 1980)

Let's continue to follow Marx's analysis. Labor, as is said, is "the substance of value" (Rubin 1972). Capitalism is a historical epoch "which presents the labour expended in the production of a useful article as an 'objective' property of that article, i.e. as its value" (153-154). In capitalism, value is not something attached to commodity (as it would be in the case of price tag) but an objective property of it since it is a product of labor.

The simple form of value, i.e. exchangeability of two commodities, is, as name implies, a "simple", embryonic form. It is to undergo a series of transformation to "ripen into" the price form (154). This simple form cannot represent the commodity A's "qualitative equality with all other commodities, and its quantitative proportionality to them" because it isolates A's value from its use-value by putting it in an exchange relation. To close the gaps occurring in the simple form (also called isolated form and accidental form) of commodity arising in the relation between only two commodities, another form of value, "the total or expanded form" is needed (ibid).

Just as the embryo undergoes a series of "metamorphoses" the embryonic form of commodity does the same. Content's acquiring a form is neither a one-way nor a one-time process. As well as the continuous come-and-goes between content and form, the form also develops into other forms.

### **3.8 Interlude 3: *Woyzeck* revisited: Character and characterization, action and actor**

Franz Woyzeck comprises an internal contradiction of being a persona of a play and stemming from a real person. However, only when we put it into a relation with J. Christian Woyzeck, an aspect of its artistic value, namely its being based on a real person, comes to surface.

Let's extend our example, the drama *Woyzeck*, with another form and content relation. There is a content and form relation between character and characterization

(e.g. see Özakman 1998, 133), who formulated this relation in this way.) Although they are well known, a brief definition of the concepts in question might help: Character is defined as “the fictional representation of a person, which is likely to change” (Childs and Fowler 2006, 23) Characterization is defined as the “process of conveying information about characters . . . [presenting them] by means of description, through their actions, speech, or thoughts.” (Wikimedia Foundation 2011) Hence, the content character arises in a drama by means of its form of expression, characterization.

Franz Woyzeck, the main character of the drama is nothing more than a name unless we see him in certain relations throughout the play. He has his internal oppositions, but we see them only in his relation with other persons. The “characteristic” value of a character is embodied in his deeds in relation with other characters. Characterization is character embodied or presented.

This brings us to maybe the most important dialectic working in dramatic structure, namely that between story and character or between action and actor. In this context, story includes subject and plot, and character includes characterization. Human beings are indispensable materials for any dramatic work. Even the works not featuring humans but, for example, animals or space aliens, exploit humans as material, because these personae are inevitably *personifications*. Character without story or actor without action is a contradiction in terms. Actor arises only when s/he acts. Character/actor is the “material bearer” of story/action. However, just as the value of a commodity is expressed in the use-value of another commodity, which acts as equivalent, the characters arise as characters in their relation with other characters. All these webs of relations also constitute the substratum for the action in a story. In other words, they act as, so to say, the “content” of action.

### **3.9 Act IV: The total or expanded form of value and others**

Marx continues his analysis by expanding the equation  $x$  **commodity A** =  $y$  **commodity B**. In this expanded relative form, the value of a commodity is expressed in an endless series of commodities.  $z$  **commodity A** =  $u$  **commodity B** or =  $v$  **commodity C** and so on. Or **20 yards of linen = 1 coat** or = **10 lb tea** etc. (154-155)

Insofar as the value of the commodity is concerned, “the particular form of use-value in which it appears” is irrelevant (155).

Since this series will not come to an end, we need a “general form of value” where all commodities will be equal to a single commodity. E.g. **1 coat and 10 lb. of tea and 40 lb. of coffee** etc. will be all equal to **20 yards of linen** (157). In this general form, “all the different, opposed, commodities (and by extension all the particular concrete types of labour embodied in these commodities) are united in one commodity. The previous ‘deficiency in unity’ of the total form is now overcome.” And the unity in General Form is a dialectical unity, “for in one excluded commodity is represented the ensemble of all commodities, their joint action.” (Pilling 1980)

Now the character of the form of value is changed. Since,

The commodities now present their values to us, (1) in a simple form, because in a single commodity; (2) in a unified form, because in the same commodity each time. Their form of value is simple and common to all, hence general.

The previous forms only worked to express the value of a commodity distinct from its use-value. This isolation was necessary but not sufficient. The form which equates 1 coat and 20 yards of linen, or 10 lb. of tea and 1 ton of iron etc. used to appear in the early stages. The second form, which equates e.g. 1 coat with various commodities, distinguished “the value of commodity from its own use-value more adequately.”

But still there is a need for a form which “expresses the values of the world of commodities through one single kind of commodity set” (e.g. through the linen) and “by this form, commodities are, for the first time, really brought into relation with each other as values, or permitted to appear to each other as exchange values” (158). This is the “general form of value” and emerges when one particular commodity conventionally acts as the equivalent for all other commodities.

General value-form embraces, as it does, the whole world of commodities in their movement, then it must be the abstract epitome, a condensed history of this whole world, or, as Marx says (I, p. 67), the ‘social résumé’ of that world. (Pilling 1980)

The universal equivalent, in the general form of value (let's say, linen) is excluded from the world of commodities and becomes a commodity directly exchangeable with all other commodities.

The physical form of the linen counts as the visible incarnation, the social chrysalis state, of all human labour. Weaving, the private labour which produces linen, acquires as a result a general social form, the form of equality with all other kinds of labour. . . . In this manner the labour objectified in the values of commodities is not just presented negatively, as labour in which abstraction is made from all the concrete forms and useful properties of actual work. Its own positive nature is explicitly brought out, namely the fact that it is the reduction of all kinds of actual labour to their common character of being human labour in general, of being the expenditure of human labour-power (159).

It is not surprising that Marx, who was speaking about various forms of values throughout all these pages, referred back to "labor." Labor is the ever present content underlying all these formal changes, since it is the producer of all kinds and forms of values including use-value and exchange-value.

Marx, here, makes a differentiation between negative and positive presentations of labor. Abstract labor is not only work abstracted from its concrete forms. Weaving, as a concrete labor, is transformed into "the general form of appearance of undifferentiated human labor." (159)

The general value-form, in which all the products of labour are presented as mere congealed quantities of undifferentiated human labour, shows by its very structure that it is the social expression of the world of commodities. In this way it is made plain that within this world the general human character of labour forms its specific social character (160).

The world of commodities is expressed socially in the general value-form. Here abstract and concrete, general and specific is together. As soon as a concrete human work (weaving), which produces a concrete commodity (linen), becomes the general expression of value-form following being abstracted from its concrete characteristics, it appears as abstract labor.

The developments of relative and equivalent forms correspond to each other. However, “the development of the equivalent form is only the expression and the result of the development of the relative form.” (160)

Here Marx introduces, possibly for the first time, a dependence relationship between two forms. As to these forms – relative and equivalent– Marx had previously said that they were “two inseparable moments, which belong to and mutually condition each other; but, at the same time, they are mutually exclusive or opposed extremes, i.e. poles of the expression of value.” (139-140)

Relative- and equivalent-forms of value are two “inseparable moments” but also the development of the latter is the expression of the development of the former. This is another way of saying that the relative form assumes an active role while the equivalent form, which is the expression of the value of the relative form, assumes a passive role. Only due to the “activity” of the commodity, whose value is being expressed, another commodity obtains the capability to express its value.

This embryonic form has undergone a series of changes.

The simple or isolated relative form of value of one commodity converts some other commodity into an isolated equivalent. The expanded form of relative value, that expression of the value of one commodity in terms of all other commodities, imprints those other commodities with the form of particular equivalents of different kinds. Finally, a particular kind of commodity acquires the form of universal equivalent, because all other commodities make it the material embodiment of their uniform and universal form of value. (160)

Marx had previously used the verbs “to stamp” and “to impress” for denoting content’s expressing itself as a form. The verb “to imprint” used here is another synonym for the same operation. Since we are approaching the end of the adventure of forms of values, we can take a closer look to this operation.

In page 131 he refers to “the *form* which **stamps** value as *exchange-value*.” This form is value-form. Later on in page 148 he says, “a commodity A (the linen), by expressing its value in the use-value of a commodity B of a different kind (the coat), **impresses** upon the latter a form of value peculiar to it; namely that of the equivalent.” Relative form of value “impresses” the equivalent form of value to

commodity B. The development of commodity A determines the development of commodity B. And finally in page 160, he says, “[t]he expanded form of relative value . . . **imprints** those other commodities with the form of particular equivalents of different kinds” (my bolds).

Actually, in various pages of Chapter 1, Marx is always speaking about the same operation. There are two forms in relation to each other: relative and equivalent forms. The first form is active, the second form is passive. The development of the first form determines the development of the second form. The first form stamps/impresses/imprints on the second form its form of value.

Since the equivalent form expresses the value of the relative form, we observe also a sort of content and form relation between two forms. The first form acts as the value-content of the second form, in other words, equivalent form expresses the value of the relative form. Therefore the relation between the relative and equivalent forms can be read as a relation between content and form.

But, as is said, there is an antagonism between these two poles. This antagonism can be traced in the development of the value form.

The first form (20 yards of linen = 1 coat) can be reversed so as to change the relative form into equivalent form and vice versa. So the polar opposition is not clear yet. In the second form where 20 yards of linen is equated with various amounts of various commodities, such a reversal cannot be applied, because it would change the whole character of the equation and would transform it from expanded value into general value. The third form, where all commodities are equated with a single commodity, “gives to the world of commodities a general social relative form of value, because, and in so far as, all commodities except one are thereby excluded from the equivalent form” (161). Now the polar opposition between relative and equivalent forms is completely obvious. The universal equivalent does not share in the relative form of value.

Since any commodity can assume the universal equivalent form, a specific kind of commodity is needed for “objective fixedness and general social validity.” This commodity is, of course, money, a “specific kind of commodity with whose natural form the equivalent form is socially interwoven.” (162)



The relative form of value (form A) is followed successively by the expanded form of value (form B), the general form of value (form C) and culminated in the money form of value (form D).

Even though there were fundamental changes at stake in the transition from form A to form B and from form B to form C, the transition from C to D is not that dramatic. Instead of linen, the gold assumed the role of universal equivalent.

Gold confronts the other commodities as money only because it previously confronted them as a commodity. Like all other commodities it also functioned as an equivalent, either as a single equivalent in isolated exchanges or as a particular equivalent alongside other commodity-equivalents. Gradually it began to serve as universal equivalent in narrower or wider fields. As soon as it had won a monopoly of this position in the expression of value for the world of commodities, it became the money commodity, and only then, when it had already become the money commodity, did form D become distinct from form C, and the general form of value come to be transformed into the money form” (162).

Thus Marx completes his analysis which postulates simple commodity form as the germ of all other forms, finally of money-form. This analysis is needed because the movement of the moments of commodity form is not at all obvious, and brings about certain “ideological” illusions. Before following Marx’s analysis of “commodity fetishism” I would like to trace this issue of illusion and ideology in Marxian thought.<sup>18</sup>

### **3.10 Act V: Ideology**

Marx and Engels wrote *The German Ideology* between 1845 and 46 in Brussels. Since they could not find a publisher, this work had to wait for the Bolshevik Revolution to be published in 1924. The Preface to *German Ideology* opens up with an important passage:

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of

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<sup>18</sup> In this part, I will draw upon my graduation thesis titled ‘Ideological Fiction in [Brecht’s] “The Measure Taken” and an Application’ submitted to Ankara University, Faculty of Letters, Department of Theater in 2007 (Yıldırım 2007)

their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* 1968)

However to “liberate [men] from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away”, to teach them “to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; . . . to take up a critical attitude to them; . . . to knock them out of their heads” to overthrow the existing reality is but “innocent and childlike fancies.” (ibid, ‘Preface’)

Marx and Engels is to explain that the struggle against the false conceptions of people about themselves can be successful only by fighting against the material basis of those ideas, namely the living conditions.

“Liberation” is an historical and not a mental act. . . . In reality and for the practical materialist, i.e. the communist, it is a question of revolutionising the existing world, of practically attacking and changing existing things. (ibid, part titled ‘Feurbach: Philosophic, and Real, Liberation’)

But what is the basis of the illusions or misconceptions people have about their living conditions. A much quoted passage from *The German Ideology*, explains this with the metaphor of ‘*camera obscura*.’

Men are the producers of their conceptions, ideas, etc. -- real, active men, as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and of the intercourse [*Verkehr*] corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms. Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process. If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a camera obscura, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process. (ibid, part titled ‘First Premises of Materialist Method.’)

John Mepham explains the concept of ‘camera obscura’ or “appear[ing of ideas] upside down” with the following diagram (Mepham 1979, 145). Mepham’s model is based on *German Ideology*. Before this ‘Act’ on ‘Ideology’ will come to an end, I will provide a revised version of the same diagram, this time, based on the concept ‘commodity fetishism’ in *Capital*.



to Franz Mehring in describing the way of thought of a “philosopher” in opposition to a scientist.

Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker consciously, indeed, but with a *false consciousness*. The real motives impelling him remain unknown to him, otherwise it would not be an ideological process at all. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives. Because it is a process of thought he derives both its form and its content from pure thought, either his own or that of his predecessors. He works with mere thought material which he accepts without examination as the product of thought, he does not investigate further for a more remote process independent of thought; indeed its origin seems obvious to him, because as all action is produced through the medium of thought it also appears to him to be ultimately based upon thought. (Engels, Letters: Marx-Engels Correspondence 1893 2000, my italics)

The false consciousness of “ideology” misses the relation between base and superstructure; this relation is explained by Marx in *Eighteenth Brumaire* as follows:

Upon the several forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, a whole superstructure is reared of various and peculiarly shaped feelings, illusions, habits of thought and conceptions of life. The whole class produces and shapes these out of its material foundation and out of the corresponding social conditions. The individual unit to whom they flow through tradition and education, may fancy that they constitute the true reasons for and premises of his conduct. (Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire* 1907, 24)

The same line of thought is expressed in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* as follows. Since this is a key passage related to Marxist base and superstructure relation and its connection with ideology, and since Marx himself quotes this passage in *Capital* (175) to explain his conception about this relation I risk a long quotation.

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political

and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. (Marx, Contribution 1979, Author's Preface)

The era of social revolution is a result of the changes in the economic base. However one must not confuse between the material transformation in the economic conditions and how people understand it.

In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict existing between the social forces of production and the relations of production (ibid).

All that has been said points out a cleavage between the material conditions of life and our ways of understanding it. These two terms of the complicated equation, which might be denoted by the empty sign of 'life', do not always overlap, and this lack of overlapping produces a false consciousness. But as is stated in *The German Ideology*, this illusion has a reason. The part titled "The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret" aims at revealing the basis of having a mistaken idea of existing relations in the illusory characteristics of commodity.<sup>19</sup>

### **3.10.1 Commodity fetishism**

"A commodity," says Marx, appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties." (163)

When the articles are only use-values, i.e. not commodities, they are obvious things; they are products of human labor. However, when such products enter into market as

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<sup>19</sup> For the purpose of this study, I did not go in details of discussions regarding ideology. Here I consider only one aspect of ideology, namely its illusory character. Actually I don't believe that, even from Marx and Engels, ideology was limited to this character. My graduation thesis discusses the issue of ideology within the range from Marx to Mao. However in Marxian and non-Marxian literature this discussion covers a much broader area.

commodities and interrelate with other commodities they are turned into mysterious objects. They turn into, as it were, Frankenstein's not obeying their master. Commodities become alien to the humans producing them. The relations between humans are invisible, what is seen is only the relations among commodities on the market. Marx calls this "the fetish character" of the commodity (176).<sup>20</sup>

In the following quotation, the description of the table "stand[ing] on its head" clearly resembles *The German Ideology's camera obscura* making the things appear "upside down."

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will. (163-164)

The origin of the mystical character of the products of human labor that assume the form of commodity on the market does not lie in their use-values. It lies in the commodity form.

The equality of the kinds of human labour takes on a physical form in the equal objectivity of the products of labour as values; the measure of the expenditure of human labour-power by its duration takes on the form of the magnitude of the value of the products of labour; and finally the relationships between the producers, within which the social characteristics of their labours are manifested, take on the form of a social relation between the products of labour (164).

The passage refers to three contents "taking on" three physical forms.

- 1) Abstraction of labor having different qualities manifests itself in the exchange of commodities having different use-values.
- 2) Labor-time (measure of labor) manifests itself in the value of commodities.
- 3) Relationship between producers of commodities manifests itself in the social relation between products.

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<sup>20</sup> A fetish is "an object believed to have magical powers" It generally indicates manmade objects having power over other people. (Merriam-Webster 2011)

This final point is the origin of the enigmatic character of commodities.

The mysterious character of the commodity-form consists therefore simply in the fact that the commodity reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products of labour themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things. Hence it also reflects the social relation of the producers to the sum total of labour as a social relation between objects, a relation which exists apart from and outside the producers. Through this substitution, the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time supra-sensible or social. (164-165).

Marx uses the analogy of seeing. Light transmitted from an external object makes an impact on the optic nerve, but this is not perceived as an excitation of a nerve in the eye but as an objective form outside the eye. In contradistinction to the relation between commodities, this relation is a physical relation between physical things. The commodity-form and the value relation between commodities, however, are not connected to the physical nature of them. The mysterious relation between things actually stems from social relation between men. As soon as a product is produced as a commodity, it inevitably brings about the fetishism which creates an illusion about reality.

Being exchanged endows upon the products of labor a “socially uniform objectivity as values, which is distinct from their sensuously varied objectivity as articles of utility.” (Engels, Synopsis) This distinction between value and use-value is connected to the “twofold social character” of labor. It is both a “definite useful kind of” labor and abstract labor which is considered equal of any other useful private labor. Just as “a commodity is a use-value for its non-owner, a non-use-value for its owner” labor is definite for seller of the product of his value and it is abstract for the buyer (*ibid*). The process of exchanging products manifests itself in the brain of the individual producer:

the socially useful character of his private labour is reflected in the form that the product of labour has to be useful to others, and the social character of the equality of the various kinds of labour is reflected in the form of the common character, as values, possessed by these materially different things, the products of labour (166).

But one must not put the cart before horses. The process is not completed in the domain of ideas; individuals do not see the products of their labor as the “integuments” of abstract labor when they go to the marketplace. They place their products on the market, and thus they equate their different kinds of labor without being aware of it. Value is a relation between persons “concealed beneath a material shell.” (166-167) Marx, to explain this operation of concealing, uses the metaphor of hieroglyph:

Value, therefore, does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language (167).

To use the terminology of semiotics, the “signifier” value indicates the “signified” labor. “[P]roducts of labour, in so far as they are values, are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them” (ibid). Hence, the relation between value and labor is a relation of form and content, form arises here as a signifier of content.

To show that the value of a commodity is congealed human labor does not annihilate the illusion (“semblance”) that the social characteristics of labor has objectivity. Drawing upon Marx’s own metaphor; however one might analyze the air, the physical structure of the atmosphere will remain same. Relations of commodity production constitute the atmosphere for those experiencing these relations. They will continue to be concerned with the proportions for exchanging their products.

As soon as these proportions have attained a certain customary stability, they *appear to* result from the nature of the products, so that, for instance, one ton of iron and two ounces of gold *appear to* be equal in value, in the same way as a pound of gold and a pound of iron are equal in weight, despite their different physical and chemical properties. The value character of the products of labour becomes firmly established only when they act as magnitudes of value. These magnitudes vary continually, independently of the will, foreknowledge and actions of the exchangers (167, my italics).



The “false-consciousness” of regarding commodities as having inherent values arises from the reality that commodities are exchanged in the market according to the magnitudes of their values only. The products of human labor, thus, begin to control human beings because the magnitudes of their values appear to be fully independent. In fact, the magnitude of value is determined by labor-time – a fact concealed behind the “apparent movements in the relative values of commodities.” To discover this fact destroys the “semblance” that these magnitudes are not accidental determinations but depend on labor-time. However, “that determination’s material form”, namely the exchange-values remain to appear to be accidental (168).

While approaching to the final pages of the seminal chapter of *Capital*, Marx analyzes the analysis *per se*, which reveals the hidden nature of commodities. The first object of the analysis must be the prices, which is the first thing that would attract the attention of a market-goer.

Let’s assume that, this market-goer is a space alien who just stepped in the World, familiar with our language but not conventions. S/he would first see the price labels attached to each article. “Things have prices.” Being a good follower of terrestrial dictionaries, s/he knows that price means first of all value. But this value is expressed in monetary units.

Just as our alien friend, we began our quest with prices. Then we should wonder how to determine the magnitude of value. The value manifests itself in exchange-value. And this is related to money. To show the value character of commodities, one needs to begin with money, which is the common expression of the values of all commodities. And money-form, “the finished form of the world of commodities”, is the very form “which conceals the social character of private labour and the social relations between the individual workers, by making those relations appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly” (168-169). This is the point where our alien friend gets completely lost, if s/he does not have a good command of Marxist theory which analyzes the forms in order to get behind them.

Reflection on the forms of human life, hence also scientific analysis of those forms, takes a course directly opposite to their real development. Reflection begins *post*

*festum*, and therefore with the results of the process of development ready to hand. The **forms** which **stamp** products as commodities and which are therefore the preliminary requirements for the circulation of commodities, already possess the fixed quality of natural forms of social life before man seeks to give an account, not of their historical character, for in his eyes they are immutable, but of their **content** and **meaning** (168, my bolds).

Hence, we see one more time that Marx's analysis aims at giving the account of the "content and meaning" of the "forms which stamp products as commodities." If one point would be made about Marx's approach to the categories of form and content in *Capital*, this would have to be that he dissects the forms in order to prevent them from hiding the content behind. "Political economy," says Marx,

has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed that particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the product.

So, the second point that can be made about Marx's labor theory of value is that he not only showed the content behind the forms but also explained why this or that particular form is assumed.

To state that linen or gold or money (universal equivalent) is the "universal incarnation of abstract human labor" and this is why there is a relation between it and other commodities, would be absurd. However, as soon as the producers of various commodities exchange their products with the universal equivalent, this absurdity becomes reality itself. "The relation between their own private labour and the collective labour of society appears to them in exactly this absurd form," namely a relation between commodities (169). This is the problem with the categories of bourgeois economics. They consist of forms which give birth to such kind of absurdities.

This illusion arises in capitalism. Despite "commodity-form is the most general and the most undeveloped form of bourgeois production" and because of this reason "it makes its appearance at an early date" this is not as predominant and characteristic as today (176). In feudalism, since relations of personal dependence between serfs and

lords, vassals and suzerains etc. “from the given social foundation, there is no need for labour and its products to assume a fantastic form different from their reality” (170). As Marx will show towards the end of Volume III, these illusions are “*necessary* illusions, forms of appearance which express, always in an inverted form, the social relations of capitalist production.” (Pilling 1980) One must always remember that, with Marx,

appearances are not necessarily simply false or illusory as in religious beliefs. For we cannot wish away wages, profits and prices simply because we recognise them to be the form in which capitalism organises exploitation. In this case, the appearances are part and parcel of reality itself, both representing and concealing more fundamental aspects of capitalism that an appropriate dialectics is designed to reveal. (Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, 4-5)

However, the metaphor of religion can be used to understand the fact, in both cases there is an illusion, and in both cases the illusion has material basis. However, on the side of religion, the material basis is human beings’ search to find answers to the unknown world outside them. On the side of capitalism, the material basis is given economic and social relations under the conditions of capitalism. To tear apart the veil of illusion completely, it is not enough to change ways of thinking, but the mode of production should change into communism.

The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when the practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form. The veil is not removed from the countenance of the social life-process, i.e. the process of material production, until it becomes production by freely associated men, and stands under their conscious and planned control.

Without the material basis of it annihilated, the ‘false consciousness’ cannot be driven away from the brains of those living over that basis.

In a long footnote, Marx explains the reason of that the classical political economy was failed in a complete analysis of the forms of value.

It is one of the chief failings of classical political economy that it has never succeeded, by means of its analysis of commodities, and in particular of their value, in discovering the form of value which in fact turns value into exchange-value. Even

its best representatives, Adam Smith and Ricardo, treat the form of value as something of indifference, something external to the nature of the commodity itself. (174)

They did not fail in finding the relative form of value only because they were too concerned with analyzing the magnitude of value. The reason is much more fundamental.

The value-form of the product of labour is the most abstract, but also the most universal form of the bourgeois mode of production; by that fact it stamps the bourgeois mode of production as a particular kind of social production of a historical and transitory character. If then we make the mistake of treating it as the eternal natural form of social production, we necessarily overlook the specificity of the value-form, and consequently of the commodity form together with its further developments, the money form, the capital form, etc. (ibid)

Bourgeois economists, like theologians, who say that there are only two religions, that of God (read: “theirs”) and others, claim that there are two type of institutions: artificial and natural ones. The latter is, of course, capitalism (175). The brilliant passage, which is quoted above, about the material foundations of intellectual delusions forges the links with the concept of “false consciousness” dating back all the way to *The German Ideology*.

The fetishism of the commodity endows a cognitive basis to the relation between reality and ideology by explaining that reality appears upside down or topsy-turvy in the ideology. Ideology is not something about only somebody’s deceiving others or herself with some fantasies or dreams (of course, this is one of the results of ideology), it is an illusion with a material foundation. Since there are topsy-turvy facts in social life, people see it topsy-turvy. Since the relation between persons is in the form of a relation between commodities, people think that the basic relation in social life is between commodities. And bourgeois economists miss the peculiarity of the value-form, since the transitory characteristics of this form brings about the fact that capitalism and commodity production is not the end of the history of social production.

Ideology as false consciousness stems from the fact that reality is not “transparent.” In more than one place, Marx states that the social relations were much more

transparent in the previous modes of production than capitalism (e.g. 172, 173) Marxist theory of knowledge involves a differentiation between phenomenal forms (appearances) and “real relations”.

[W]hat is true of all **forms of appearance** and their **hidden background** is also true of the **form of appearance** 'value and price of labour', or 'wages', as contrasted with the **essential relation manifested in it**, namely the value and price of labour-power. The **forms of appearance** are reproduced directly and spontaneously, as current and usual modes of thought; the **essential relation** must first be discovered by science. Classical political economy stumbles approximately onto the **true state of affairs**, but without consciously formulating it. (682)

Bearing these in mind, we can slightly alter Mepham’s diagram related to false consciousness under the light of *Capital*.

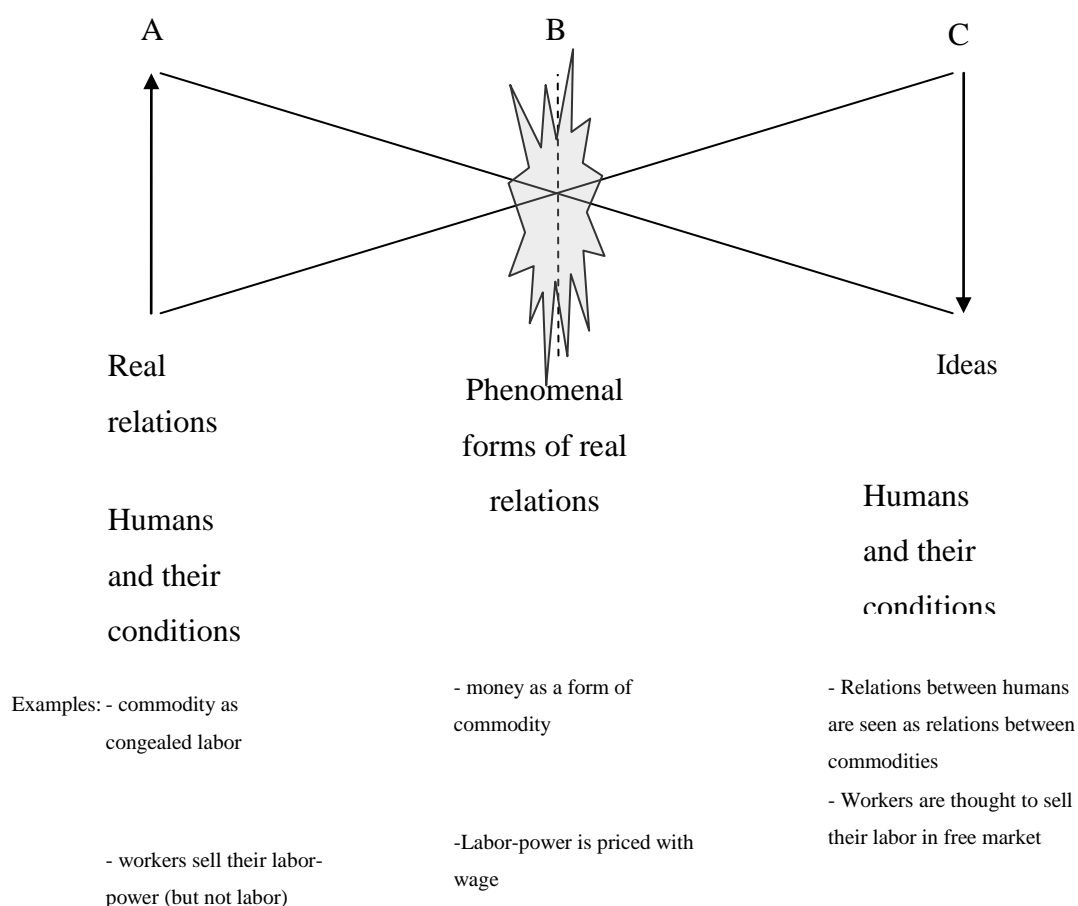


Figure 5: Commodity fetishism (adapted from Mepham)

“If commodities could speak,” says Marx, “they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value.” (176) Exchange-value is not the material content of commodity.

So far no chemist has ever discovered exchange-value either in a pearl or a diamond. The economists who have discovered this chemical substance, and who lay special claim to critical acumen, nevertheless find that the use-value of material objects belongs to them independently of their material properties, while their value, on the other hand, forms a part of them as objects. What confirms them in this view is the peculiar circumstance that the use-value of a thing is realized without exchange, i.e. in the direct relation between the thing and man, while, inversely, its value is realized only in exchange, i.e. in a social process. (ibid)

This closing passage of *Capital*'s first chapter dedicated to analyze the embryonic form of capitalism, namely commodity, treats one more time the relation between two aspects of the commodity. Use-value had been already posited as material bearer or depository of exchange-value. It is “the *substance* of all wealth, with an entirely objective existence.” (Pilling 1980) So, insofar as the commodity form is at stake, use-value falls into the category of content while value falls into the category of form.<sup>21</sup> Value is the form assumed by an article (which is mere a use-value outside the social relation of exchange) within a social relation, here, an exchange-relation.

A passage in the opening pages is especially important in order to understand this.<sup>22</sup>

To be a use-value is evidently a necessary prerequisite of the commodity, but it is immaterial to the use-value whether it is a commodity. Use-value as such, since it is independent of the determinate economic forms, is outside the sphere of investigation of political economy. It belongs to this sphere only when it is a determinate form. Use-value is the immediate physical entity in which a definite economic relationship – exchange-value – is expressed. (Marx, C, I 1975-2005)

Bourgeois economists thought the value to be a material part of a product. Marx's analysis shows that it is only a form assumed by that product in a social relation.

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<sup>21</sup> One must be careful not to confuse the term ‘commodity’ with ‘product’ of human labor. Former is the form assumed by the latter in an exchange relation.

<sup>22</sup> Since it does not exist as such in the translation I have used here, I am quoting from Moore and Aveling translation.

Nevertheless, what makes a product a commodity is the value in it, i.e. the value-form it assumed. In order that an article can become an object of political economy it needs to have a “determinate economic form.” This form is assumed only in the social exchange relation and without this form it cannot be a commodity in the market place but an article for human utility. What endows upon an article the title of ‘commodity’ is its having exchange-value, which is the form of value. Form makes an object what it is. This will be especially important while discussing art, a domain of human labor which is mainly characterized by its form.

## 4. FORM, CONTENT AND FORMALISM

Both parts of the structure of art are complex and **dialectically opposed** constructions, and both have **idiosyncratic structures**.

— M. Kagan<sup>23</sup>

### 4.1 Form and content in aesthetics

Form and content continued to be two of the most pivotal topics in the criticism of artworks and arts, if not the pivot itself. Although, having more focused on the ontological and epistemological status of arts, the theory of arts, or “aesthetics,” if you prefer, draws a lot upon this critical domain.<sup>24</sup>

Having accepted that the categories of form and content are not easy to define in any of the domains, some dictionary entries and descriptions might provide a starting point to form an idea about these concepts.

Form is defined as “what contrasts with ‘paraphrasable content’, as the *way* something is said in contrast to *what* is said” in the *Routledge Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (Childs and Fowler 2006, 91) We can derive the definition of content from here as well: *what* is said in contrast to the *how* it is said.

It is no surprise that these categories are always defined together, but one does not help but notice that this togetherness is almost always rendered under the title of “form” – another support to the principality of formal aspects in the domain of art. *Historical Dictionary of Aesthetics* describes the form and content categories in aesthetics also under the entry ‘Form.’

In a number of areas, aesthetic theory formulates a distinction between form and content. Form consists of those elements of the work of art that determine the

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<sup>23</sup> Kagan 1993, 247.

<sup>24</sup> For the producers of artworks, so called “artists,” as a folk deeply absorbed in arts practice, critique of arts might be much more interesting than more general questions such as “How possible is the aesthetic experience?”



manner and mode of presentation. In the visual arts, form consists principally in such elements as line, spatial arrangement, and **color** insofar as they can be distinguished from content and **depiction**. In the literary arts, form includes structural elements, such as **narrative** voice, and linguistic elements, such as sound and repetition, that can be distinguished from meaning. In **music**, form depends on the musical elements of **harmony** and rhythm. Form provides the shape of the work of art and can be common to a number of different works that have little or nothing in common in their content. (Townsend, *Historical Dictionary of Aesthetics* 2006, 169)

Since “Without form, content cannot be presented, and the idea of pure form without content is an abstraction” the distinction between them is, to a certain extent, artificial. However there might be some works of arts which are mainly dependent on formal properties, but attempts to get rid of “representational content” altogether are but attempts (ibid).

Dabney Townsend allocates a part on this issue in his *An Introduction to Aesthetics* with the title ‘Form and content.’ In the ‘Glossary’ to the book, we see the following general definitions of the terms in question:

**content**In philosophy and the theory of language, that part of a sentence belief, or thought that carries the meaning. Content is distinguished from form, which is understood as the means for making the meaning known. (Townsend, *Introduction* 1997, 226)

**form** The basic order of anything, referred to independently of the specific application. The form of something is common to all instances of it, while other aspects apply only in a limited way. In aesthetics, both form and content may be unique to a work of art, however (ibid, 228).

Following the ‘Glossary’ entries, Townsend begins with a linguistic example: that of a sentence. Grammar of a sentence and “the system of meanings that are attached to each word and to combinations of words in a language,” composes the form of a sentence and “what the sentence is about” is its content (ibid, 57)

It is harder to describe content, because a description of the content of a sentence will have to have a form, and this time, the description of that form will require some other content, and this will go on *ad finitum*. Form and content are bound to occur

and exist together. “Pure form,” if there is any, “has to be the form of something or it will not be form. Content must be given form or there is no content” (ibid).

Language is a good beginning point but cannot be an end point also, because the aesthetic distinction between *form* and *content* is not identical with the linguistic distinction between *structure* and *meaning*.

For the purpose of working in the domain of aesthetics, Townsend provides the example of Gustave Caillebotte’s painting *On the Europe Bridge* (1876-7).<sup>25</sup> He makes a visual description of the image speaking of the form: geometry, disposition of lines, colors, figures etc. The description of form already involved some object existing on the canvas: bridge, black-clad man.

But the content is obviously much more than a picture of three men on a bridge. The geometrical form and the gray and black tones of the painting create a dehumanized industrial image that shows a relation between the formally dressed gentlemen in the foreground and the industrial world that produced this iron bridge. . . . Caillebotte has created a scene that shows both the beauty and the lack of humanity in a monument of the industrial age. The content is an expression of complex admiration and distance that cannot be completely captured by anything but the unique presentation of these forms (ibid, 59)

Another beholder might see different things in the same view, but what is important is that form can be seen without knowing anything about the painter and without describing what the painting is about. “The description of the form leads directly to a description of a content.” While one gradually describes the formal aspects of the painting and the elements on the canvas, “a more complex content than simply ‘three figures on a bridge’” it begins to unfold (ibid, 59-60).

This account can be compared with the method used in *Capital* by Marx, who never shows up in Townsend’s book. We can remember that, Marx began his account with forms (commodity form, form(s) of value, forms of labor) but his analysis revealed the content “concealed” by these forms while unfolding. I can risk a generalization here: Description always is bound to begin with forms of appearance as the term

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<sup>25</sup> Appearance of the said picture in the cover of the book might be interpreted as the pivotal role of the part dedicated to form and content within the book in general.

‘description’ implies. It is no coincidence that ‘describere,’ Latin origin of the word, has reference to the verb ‘to sketch.’ (Harper 2001-2010) Sketching is impossible without shapes or forms.

Townsend derives a series of conclusions from his analysis of form and content.

1. Form depends on the medium and its possibilities. These possibilities vary from one medium to another [e.g. they are not same for sculpture as architecture] . . .
2. The possibilities are shaped by conventions and history. Neither form nor content exists in a vacuum or an idealized space. To appreciate form, one needs to see it in a context. Form is not isolated from history, therefore.
3. Even though form is both specific to a medium and historically situated, formal features can be shared by different art forms. Form is an ordering principle, and similar orders are possible in different media. Temporal order connects poetry and music. Narrative order connects films and novels. Spatial order connects drama and painting.
4. Form is perceived, but it is not itself the object of perception. We need not mechanically identify the rhyme scheme of Wyatt’s sonnet in order to hear it.
5. Finally form and content are two aspects of a single meaning or expression. In effect, our ability to perceive formal elements that are presentations of aesthetic objects is the basis for all of our claims about art and beauty. The evidence for any theory in aesthetics must come from this basic ability to perceive and analyse art and beauty, and that implies that we can perceive and analyse the formal properties of some perceptual objects that we are aware of in some larger aesthetic context. Formal analysis is thus a skill necessary both for full appreciation of the aesthetic and for supplying evidence upon which we can construct well-founded theories (ibid 63-64).

In the fourth and fifth points, Townsend apparently postulates the work of art as object of aesthetic perception and the form as an object of critical analysis. I am far from being convinced in this point. I think Townsend misses the fact that in order to hear a sonnet *as it is* it has to have the particular form *that it has*. With a different form, we would perceive it differently. Townsend’s mistake arises from ignoring a fact which he has already established: that of the unity between form and content.

Blackwell's *A Companion to Aesthetics* locates 'material' vis-à-vis form and makes a distinction between "genre form" and "individual form." The process of production of art defined here as "involving the arrangement of some stuff – stone or paint or words or sounds or bodily motions or images, as may be – by a maker into a form, so that a certain end or effect may be achieved." (Cooper 1996, 158)

What is shared in arrangement of materials by different works of art is called "genre form." What gives birth to distinctions among the members of the same genre in this arrangement is called "individual form." Artists are interested in both of them they ask themselves implicitly in practice "How may I arrange material so as to make a striking, successful, and distinctively individual work that is a lyric or still-life or trio or movie [and so on?]" (ibid, 159).

Another thinker whose ideas about the issue of formalism will be also benefited from in the following pages, Noël Carroll, discusses the issue of form and content within the context of cinema.

One of the most common ways of thinking about artistic form in general and film form in particular is to conceive of form as one half of a couplet—the distinction between form and content. Many try to clarify this contrast by turning it into the distinction between meaning and mode of presentation. . . . But, logically, this approach makes the concept of form wholly dependent upon the film's possession of something that we would be willing to countenance as a meaning. Therefore, if there are films without meanings, properly so called, as there seem to be, then this way of conceptualizing form entails that such films lack form altogether. (Carroll 2003, 134)

However, this is a mistaken way of thinking. "There are films that 'say' nothing, but are simply beautiful or fascinating to look at." Even if one might think that they are all form and there is no content in them, the mistake arises from equating *form* with mode of presentation and *content* with meaning. But one does not necessarily understand content as meaning; there are other ways. If, for example, content is understood as "whatever makes up the film and form as "the way that whatever makes up the film is organized," content and form distinction is transformed into a distinction between *matter* and *manner* (ibid, 135).

But, since what is meant with the term ‘content’ is even more problematic and ambiguous, this approach cannot solve the problem either. What does the content of a visual art without any paraphrasable meaning consist of? If it consists of colors and shapes, or is “about colors and shapes” then where is the form? To postulate that “no form exists without content,” according to Carroll, is an “unsatisfying dilemma.” Croce’s approach that “there is no difference between form and content” does not help either for somebody who wants to analyze that form *per se* (ibid, 136).

Carroll, having followed a series of ways of defining the form and content of a film (or of a work of art) in relation with each other, attempts a “descriptive account” of form only. “Film form,” he says, “consists of relations between parts of an individual film.” This account refers to “*all the webs* of relations that obtain between the elements of the work” (ibid, 138). But what are those elements or parts?

There are various answers given to this question, and Carroll has of course one. In this study, I attempt to derive an account on form and content, to a certain extent, independent of what are considered as formal elements and content elements of works of art. However, Kagan’s *Estetik ve Sanat Dersleri (Lectures on Aesthetic and Arts)* and Pospelov’s *Edebiyat Bilimi (Science of Literature)* might be proper resources to have recourse to since both are based on a Marxist approach towards aesthetic problems.

#### **4.2 A Marxist approach to form and content**

M. Kagan is a Soviet thinker who wanted to give a Marxist account of aesthetic categories. His discussion of form and content categories is, certainly, only one way of looking at these categories in a Marxist framework.

Kagan raises an objection against limiting the understanding of art to the relation between formal and content related characteristics – an approach dates back to Schiller, Schelling and Hegel in Europe and Nadeshdin and Belinskiy in Russia. “The reason for this is the both parts of the structure of art are complex and **dialectically opposed** constructions, and both have **idiosyncratic structures**.” (Kagan 1993, 247; my translations from Turkish translation)

Art should be “investigated as a multiplex, closed totality” but the traditional representations of classical aesthetics is still relevant to a full understanding of art.

Kagan begins by analyzing the internal construction of artistic content, because in arts, “as is in all other domains of absorbing the reality,” this internal construction is the principle aspect. His analysis also reveals what he understands content in art to be.

The **object** of artistic absorption is not different from the object of science. They both have the same object: “nature, human, social life; in short, reality.” However, there is a difference between the structures of artistic and scientific knowing. Knowing of art has a twofold structure – metaphor and reality – while that of science is only one-fold. In art, subjective and objective, natural and social, material and spiritual are together. (ibid, 252) Insofar as the human being is concerned, the principle object of art is not human being as such but the “spiritual/psychic scope of the social existence of humans” (ibid, 254). Even a technical construction can assume an artistic value as a work of architect when it “carries the knowledge of the spiritual life of the society in its material appearance” (ibid, 255).

Science aims at obtaining the knowledge of objective truth – its **knowledge** is objective truth – whereas that of art is again twofold: on the one hand, the relation of the subject to the object is revealed, i.e. “being is recognized as value”; and on the other, the relation of subject to object is revealed, i.e. “the system for the valuation of the being is recognized” (ibid, 255). Knowing of the world and knowing of the artist herself comes together to constitute the knowledge content of art. But this knowledge content is not a mathematical sum of objective and subjective truth so that a scientific content can be replaced with a subjective psychological truth. “Poetic truth” (as Belinskiy calls it) is therefore “objective-subjective truth” (ibid, 257).

Thus, the content of art is composed of two aspects; knowledge as the objective aspect and judgment (or valuation) as subjective aspect. To understand the form of art, on the other hand, one must turn to the process of artistic creation (ibid, 275). This process is what “constructs” the form of an artwork.

Regardless of how we speak of form and content of an artistic work, an artwork is actually a result of a long and complex process involving many contradictions which begets an indivisible unity “*in itself*.” However in order that it may be “*for the critic*”

– i.e. that this indivisible unity might be analyzed in a process of critique – it is divided into formal and content related aspects.<sup>26</sup> (ibid, 427)

During the process of creation, there is no borderline between form and content. In a work of art, everything is content, everything is form. That is to say, an artwork conceals a meaning in the relation between its form and other aspects and within each element of its form (ibid). Content is not “included” in the artwork but it is a product of a series of relations working in the artwork. In the same vein, the content of a work of art is neither the life reflected in that work nor the self-expression of the artist.

Content of a work of art is accommodated within it; it is not somewhere outside, in the external world or in the consciousness of the artist. Content of a work is the meaning of its form; it is the burden of meaning in the system of signs that constitutes the work; and it is the spiritual message accommodated in and emitting from the whole tissue of its appearance (ibid, 428).

Kagan identifies only two elements that compose the structure of the artistic content: **subject** and **theme**: The subject denotes the external action we observe in a work of art. Theme denotes the internal meaning or thought derived from the action even if we do not confront with this thought on a verbal level (ibid, 429). Thus, subject is a specific or particular concept, and theme is a general or universal concept. The whole work of art is fleshed out around the axis of theme, and subject is the ‘flesh’ which runs in alignment with that axis.

Artistic form, on the other hand, consists of internal form and external form. External form is more related to material, internal form is more related to the artistic content. Subject and characters or melody and motif, for example, are parts of internal form as materials of artistic creation. All tools of art for creating images are a part of external form. Kagan does not attempt to provide an exhaustive list of these but states that they exist in all arts. Internal form involves the process of modeling life in artistic ways with the tools of imager. External form involves the material construction of the model produced as the result of this process (ibid, 444-445).

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<sup>26</sup> References to the Hegelian terminology belongs to me.

One can say, in this conception, if a work of art can be divided into form and content for analytic purposes, then the artistic form, in turn, can be divided into internal form and external form where external form stands as content to internal form.

#### 4.3 Elements of form and content

To show the near impossibility of assigning a fixed “content” to the concepts of form and content, since the elements subsumed under the title of such terms are depending on who uses them, I will refer to two books that attempt to give a list of the elements composing form and content: Pospelov’s<sup>27</sup> *Edebiyat Bilimi (Science of Literature)* and Turgut Özakman’s *Oyun ve Senaryo Yazma Tekniği (Technique for Play and Script Writing)*. Both attempt to make such a list within the context of literature.

Pospelov, under the title ‘Thought Content in Works of Literature’ lists the following elements as part of content (the definitions are also provided by Pospelov):

**Thematique:** The entirety of the themes in a work. These are phenomena of life reflected in an expression or an article or in a work of art (Pospelov 1995, 106).

**Problematic aspect:** Intellectual interpretation of social characters presented in the work by the author. Author’s interpretation is based on how the author selects and emphasizes the most important principal qualities, principal aspects and principal relations of the characters to be presented according to her conception of the world (ibid, 112-113).

**Intellectual-Emotional Judgment:** This element of content involves the ideological essence of the literature. Judgment is expressed in images. The view of life presented in the work or its intellectual-emotional judgment is always dependent on the interpretation of the characters (ibid, 121)

**Idea:** Idea of a work of literature is the unity of all aspects constituting its content, namely thematique, problematic aspect and intellectual-emotional judgment. These constitute an organic unity, however, idea and content do not always coincide. There might be cases where content is reduced to the idea, and cases where content is much broader and richer than idea (ibid, 124-125). In addition, the idea might or might not

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<sup>27</sup> Actually this is a book prepared under the direction of Gennadiy N. Pospelov by the following group of writers: V. Y. Jalizev, P. A. Nikolayev, A. Ya. Esalnek, Y. G. Rudnyeva, I. F. Volkov, L. V. Çernets and S. V. Kalaçevaya.



correspond to the historical reality (ibid, 130), as understood from a Marxist perspective.

**Tendency:** Active aspects of the content, namely intellectual interpretation of the characters (the problematic aspect) and intellectual-emotional judgment. Tendency is always expressed in images.

Pospelov provides the following elements of a work as ‘The General Formal Qualities of Epic and Dramatic Works’:

**Characters and system of characters, spiritualization** (the psychological presentation of characters), and **subject** (the actions of characters including the plot).

Özakman provides a clearer list of elements constituting form and content (actually he uses the term ‘essence’ instead of ‘content’, however this might be attributed to an ongoing mistake in the translation of the said terms into Turkish.)

As the constituents of **content** in a theatre play he provides the elements such as *theme* (main idea), *subject* (story/mythos) and *personae*. These content related elements are then translated into **formal** elements such as *characterization, plot, actor or acting, method* (open/Brechtian or closed/Aristotelian form of theatrical presentation), *genre, duration, division* (into acts and scenes), *auditory tools of expression* (effects, music, dialogue), *visual elements* (settings, costume, make-up, accessories, light, projections, props etc.), *mise en scene* (Özakman 1998).

A consensus among different writers on the formal and content related elements of a work seems far from close. Pospelov, Özakman, Kagan, and many others, agree that idea(s) (themes/thematique) should be seen as part of content, however characters is a formal element for Pospelov where it is a part of content of Özakman. Nevertheless, characterization (spiritualization in Pospelov’s terminology) is subsumed under the title of form by both authors. Özakman calls plot what Pospelov calls subject, so they might be considered in agreement on the meaning, but not on the word, placing this aspect of a work under the concept form. However Kagan holds that subject is an element of content. Nevertheless, Kagan’s ‘subject’ might correspond to Özakman’s ‘story,’ then he and Özakman agrees on that it is a part of content. Kagan’s ‘subject’ might also correspond to Özakman’s ‘plot’ and Pospelov’s ‘subject,’ which this time puts him against other two writers.

Of course there are many other writers who have produced different lists of form and content related elements. I discussed three of them for the sake of pointing out that the confusion in the definitions of form and content disseminates over the ‘contents’ of form and content. I would prefer not to be in a position, which Marx would describe as perceiving only the “clouds of dust on the surface” and telling just “this dust is really very important and mysterious” (qtd. by Lukács in Bloch, et al. 1980, 38).

But coming up with a definite and exhaustive list of elements constituting the form and content of a work of art seems to be an impossible task. Despite this impossibility, as it might be seen, I am referring to certain elements as formal and some others as content related elements throughout this study. My references are based on my take on the issue of elements of form and content, which interpretations might or might not correspond to others’ positions. Maybe, with regards to form and content, I had better repeat what had been said by US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart with regards to porn: “I can’t define it, but I know it when I see it!”

#### **4.4 Formalism**

‘Formalism’ is hardly a definite term. It refers to different attitudes in different disciplines such as philosophy, art criticism etc. One purported definition of it may be:

the theory that uniquely aesthetic responses to works of art are the result of the **formal** properties of the work, which act independently of any representational content that may also be present. . . . literary formalists believe that the formal arrangements of the sounds of words and of such elements as plot structure and **narrative** voice are the source of whatever **aesthetic properties** the literary work possesses (Townsend, Historical Dictionary of Aesthetics 2006, 126-127)

Noël Carroll, in his article ‘Formalism’ (Gaut and Lopes 2006, 109-119), attempts to define the main characteristics of formalism in philosophy of art. As I will explain below, what Carroll defines is not *the* formalism but *a* formalism in aesthetical thought. I will call this type of formalism ‘descriptive formalism.’ Among the forerunners of this theory are Eduard Hanslick, Clive Bell and Roger Fry.

The descriptive formalist “alleges that a candidate is an art work only if it possesses significant form; this is a necessary condition” (ibid, 111). Since virtually everything has a form, the ‘common denominator’ of an artwork, which should be shared by every artwork, is not its form but its *significant* form, however this central term is not defined by Eduard Hanslick, who coined this term (ibid, 117). Other things such as symbolic logic theorems or political speeches might have significant form but their primary purpose is not to display their form.

No other human activity, the formalist alleges, has the exhibition of form as its special or peculiar province of value. Its primary preoccupation with the exploration of form demarcates the realm of art from other human practices. Whereas representational content is not irrelevant to political speeches or logical deductions, representation is always, the formalist says, strictly irrelevant for art works (ibid, 113).

Artworks can be concerned with ‘non-artistic’ themes such as politics or religion but their idiosyncratic concern is with “discovering formal structures that are designed to encourage our imaginative interplay with art works.”

I called this version of formalism ‘descriptive formalism’ because it does not rule out the non-artistic components in the work of art, but states that what makes an artwork an artwork is its form. However descriptive formalists tend to a normative position as well.

[R]epresentational properties in art works, whenever they appear in art works, are strictly irrelevant to their status as art and to our appreciation of them as art works. According to formalists, we must appreciate art works in terms of their purely formal relationships, divorced from the claims and concepts of daily life. (ibid, 118)

Another version, which I call ‘normative formalism’ not only specifies form as the main aspect of what makes an artwork an artwork, but also rules out ‘non-artistic’ contents in art.

I divide ‘normative formalism’ into two: Objective formalism and functional formalism. By objective formalism, I mean the attitude of emphasizing only the form of the art object. By functional formalism, I mean the view that the only function of art is developing its formal perfection.

Normative formalism is a rooted tradition dating back to the Romantics, finding its philosophical expression in Kant and culminating in modern and postmodern art theories.

Kant held that the object of beauty should be an object beheld with an entirely “disinterested” satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Pleasure taken from beauty could not be based on any interest but had to be “a disinterested and *free* satisfaction; for no interest, either of sense or of reason” (ibid, 57). Accordingly, Kant argued that

a *pure* judgement of taste cannot be based on pleasures of charm or emotion, nor simply on empirical sensations such as charming colors or pleasing tones, nor on a definite concept, but only on formal properties. (ibid 59-60)

Schopenhauer, as a faithful follower of Kant, so developed this idea that he constructed a hierarchy of arts according to their proximity to pure form and distance to content (what he calls the “matter”, “motif” or “subject” of an artwork). With an objective formalist attitude, he attached the highest rank to music since it was the genre most lacking a readable content and independent of the phenomenal world. “Music is thus by no means like the other arts, the copy of the Ideas, but the *copy of the will itself*, whose objectivity the Ideas are” (Schopenhauer, WWI 1909, 333). And with a functional formalist attitude, he attached the lowest rank to architecture since, although this genre lacked also readable content, it was addressing the worldly needs of human beings.

One passage in his article ‘On Authorship and Style’ is a good expression of normative formalism. Beginning with the analysis “A book can never be anything more than the impression of its author's thoughts. The value of these thoughts lies either in the *matter about which* he has thought, or in the *form* in which he develops his matter—that is to say, *what* he has thought about it.” (Schopenhauer, Essays of Schopenhauer 2004), he concludes that form is the real pillar on which the “peculiar character of a book rests”, because regardless of the author, a book can be important for only that its matter is important.

Formalism, as any ideological position, does not emerge from thin air but is based on a socio-economical foundation. Jameson’s following passage provides a clue to forge

a link between formalism and the economical conditions on which it arose, namely capitalism.

[T]he commodity form conditions all more contemplative and theoretical perceptions of objects, including of course the aesthetic mode of perception. And in a world in which exchange value takes precedence over use value (such is, essentially, the definition of a commodity) it is not surprising that the making of works of art should also be governed by this dominant structure, which reaches down to influence everything in our daily world, our relationships with other people just as much as our relationships with objects. (Jameson 1974, 392)

This passage not only can be read as a criticism of the commodification of works of art into “goods” of art; it also emphasizes the form in the relation between form and content. Use-value had been explained as standing for a content vis-à-vis exchange-value (see p. 66 of this study). Thus, the attitude of letting the formal characteristics of a work of art take complete precedence over its content has a direct connection with our contemporary society which gives precedence exchange-value over use-value.

An example of “formalism debates” in Marxism can be found in *Aesthetics and Politics*, a compilation of exchange of statements on expressionism between the Marxist thinkers immediately before WWII. These statements put together the pivotal aesthetic ideas of said thinkers, namely Georgy Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno.

One of the subtitles of Brecht’s intervention titled ‘Against Georg Lukács’ is ‘On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism.’ Lukács had criticized the expressionists for being formalist. Brecht, criticizes Lukács’ criticism, in turn, for making the same mistake. Brecht claims that Lukács’ realism is not only “exclusively based on the form of a few bourgeois novels of the previous century ... but also exclusively on the particular genre of the *novel*” (Bloch, et al. 1980, 70). This, according to Brecht, is itself a kind of formalism.

If realism is defined as being loyal to the reality of social relations, it should not be defined with the form used by realist artists, but with the content of their works. Brecht starts his discussion of the issue with the warning that “one must define what

one means by *formalism* carefully and practically” because an “artist is constantly occupied with formal matters.”

If one wants to call everything that makes works of art unrealistic *formalism*, then – if there is to be any mutual understanding – one must not construct the concept of formalism in purely aesthetic terms. Formalism on the one side – contentism on the other (ibid, 71).

Brecht finds this sort of a binary opposition primitive and metaphysical. He gives the example of an untrue or irrelevant statement which is made because it rhymes as an example of purely aesthetic conception of formalism. This conception is easy to understand. There are, however, many works which are not ‘realist’ according to Lucács’ understanding of the term but still not formalist.

Brecht’s reasoning works simultaneously, on the one hand, to explain the limitations of Lukácsian understanding of realism and, on the other, to come up with a broad conception of the problem formalism.

Brecht, gives a series of examples from the daily usage of the adverb “formally” in the senses such as “not really”, “not actually” or “on paper only.” E.g. “Formally he is right”, “Formally the task is solved” etc. There are works having realistic form but not corresponding to reality. There are works having “revolutionary” forms but only so in form and reactionary in content. “Whole tracts of literature which seem, judging by their form, to be radical, can be shown to be purely reformist, merely formal efforts which supply solutions *on paper*” (ibid, 72).

For example, some Marxists did not like the content of a petty-bourgeois woman’s interior monologue in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. However, in the course of their criticism, they ended up in the point of declaring the technical method of interior monologue to be altogether *formalistic*. They had problems with the trivial content of this monologue, which was a reflection of the woman’s subconscious, but they put the blame on the method of presenting this content. As it were, if this scene had been presented as a dialogue between the woman and her psychoanalyst, they would have possibly not seen a problem. Brecht does not see a point here or rather he sees a reverse formalism here. Formalism arises here as condemning a form because it was used

with “inappropriate” content. However, thinks Brecht, “the fact that Tolstoy would have done it differently is no reason to reject Joyce’s method” (ibid, 73).

Brecht not only attracts attention to the formalism of conservative Marxist critiques but also to the solely *formal* libertarianism of the formalists.

For many people to recall expressionism is to be reminded of a creed of libertarian sentiments. . . . It was very soon evident that such people had merely freed themselves from grammar, not from capitalism. . . . Today many people are still reluctant to see wholesale assaults on expressionism because they are afraid that acts of liberation are being suppressed for their own sake (ibid, 73-74).

Kagan defines formalism as “putting content below form, spoiling the **natural** relations between form and content by force and damaging the objective **laws** of the artistic absorption of the world”(Kagan 1993, 441). According to him, this attitude is hostile to art for it demolishes the artistic image. It should not be considered as yet another artistic current but as razing the artistic formation to the ground (ibid). Since form and content are indivisible unities, and may be divided solely for critical purposes, an attempt to deprive artistic forms from content leads to a sheer annihilation of image production system of art.

Formalism has such a long journey in the aesthetic and philosophical thought that I cannot cover it here with all its versions. I suppose that these explanations will be adequate for the purpose of explaining the term as I used in this study. However, it might be helpful to bear in mind how Marx defined “formalism” as quoted in the beginning of this thesis: Illusion of formalism arises from when something constitutes itself as a real power and becomes itself its own material content” in a given object. (Marx, CHPR 1970)

#### **4.5 How artists work with form and content**

“The history of the theory of the arts,” says Blackwell’s *Companion*, “is marked, . . . by an alternation between perhaps mutually correcting concentrations on striking individual arrangements of material and on arrangements of material that are common within a genre of art” (Cooper 1996, Entry: Form). The “efforts to *explain* what makes an artistic form, individual or generic, successful” can be summarized as follows (ibid).

Plato alleged that “a successful artistic form must mirror the ideal organization” (qtd. by *ibid*). A successful work of art is a fully integrated, stable and unified one. He finds works that are overpassionate and transgressive unruly even if they are effective.

Aristotle is more interested in the effect to be created in the recipients. If the aim of tragedy is to create the effect of catharsis, then a good tragedy is the one that can give rise to this end. “Successful artistic forms are responsive to the interests and tendencies of their audiences as they stand” (*ibid*).

R.G. Collingwood, who can be considered as the mouthpiece of a third line of explanation, holds that successful artistic forms should discharge specific emotions so as to avoid unbearable psychic burdens. “A successful artistic form ... is a singular organization of a matter, through the generation of which burdensome emotions attendant upon recognitions and thoughts are clarified and discharged” (*ibid*). Emotions to be discharged are bound with culture and language of the ages and societies.

Francis Hutcheson and New Critical doctrine of “the heresy of paraphrase” agree with Plato that successful artistic forms should consist of fully integrated complex parts but they also must be “irreplicably individual instances of perfection.” They are “worth appreciating in itself, rather than for either its embodiment of truth about a subject-matter, or its satisfaction of the needs and interests of audiences or makers.” (*ibid*, We will see in the following pages the origins of this formalistic attitude lie in Kant and his successors.)

The history of the aesthetic theory of successful artistic forms is the history of various mixtures of one or more of [the following] explanatory tendencies with varying degrees of attention either to individual or to genre form. . . . [T]he general tendency is towards the subjectivization and individualization of the conditions of success of artistic forms. (*ibid*, 160-161.)

Aesthetic subjectivism, a culmination of this tendency which can be observed in e.g. post-structuralism, holds that a successful artistic form is an organization of matter liked by any individual regardless of the other individuals or liking of the same individual towards similar forms (*ibid*, 161).



Adorno and Marcuse, as a response to this subjectivism, hold that a successful artistic form is one “negat[ing] the existing society and its intersubstitutable commodities and offer[ing] us instead a glimpse of a freely organized social world in and through a freely created, non-commodity-like but still organized, artistic work.” (ibid)

Kant, one of the first thinkers who reasoned upon the issue of artistic form from philosophical perspective, had developed an aesthetic theory of artistic form considering, on the one hand, the needs and interests of audiences, and on the other, the singularity of works and their relation with the other members of the genre in which they exist. According to Kant,

the successful work of art is required to be both *original* – that is, transgressive and not generatable in accordance only with any known or knowable rules of form, in ways that awaken members of the audience to a sense of their own human autonomy in shaping their lives – and *exemplary* – that is, disciplined against the academic demands of taste ... and admitting of useful, elucidatory comparisons with other works in its genre (ibid)

To this end, artist must aim at, as Kant puts, “making the form adequate to [the] thought without prejudice to the freedom in the play of those powers” (qtd. by ibid). In order for works of art both to have individuality or particularity, and to share common elements within a genre, artists must find forms that accommodate not only “things in the world” but also “our senses of things in the world” (ibid, 161).

Kant was speaking of the “adequacy” of form to the thought. Lukács was also discussing the relation between the artistic form and the content it involves. In his intervention to the expressionism debate in 1938 titled ‘Realism in the Balance’, Lukács discusses how artists put the material of reality into artistic forms. He calls this process ‘abstraction.’ Without abstraction nothing in art can have representative value. For Lukács a proper artist is a realist; however what he says about realists, to some extent, applies to many artists in general.

Every major realist fashions the material given in his own experience, and in so doing makes use of techniques of abstraction, among others. But his goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden,

mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relations that go to make up society. (Bloch, et al. 1980, 38)

However, these relations are not obvious and unhidden. They are, as the term implies, “underlying” relations and “felt in very complex ways and are realized only unevenly, as trends” (ibid, 38-39). So the realist (we can read “artist”) is face to face with both an artistic and intellectual challenge. The characteristics of this challenge are quite illuminating regarding an artist’s activity working the material into artistic forms.

First, he has to discover these relations intellectually and give them artistic shape. Secondly, although in practice the two processes are indivisible, he must artistically conceal the relationships he has just discovered through the process of abstraction – i.e. he has to transcend the process of abstraction. This twofold labour creates a new immediacy, one that is artistically mediated; in it, even though the surface of life is sufficiently transparent to allow the underlying essence to shine through (something which is not true of immediate experience in real life), it nevertheless, manifests itself as immediacy, as life as it actually appears (ibid, 39).

#### **4.6 Dialectics of form and content**

Behind all that had been said is Marx’s division between appearances, phenomena, forms of appearances etc. and essences, substances, material etc.. Lukács calls his version of this division “the artistic dialectic of appearance and essence.” Jameson, in the same vein, defines “the inner form of a literary work as both disguise and revelation of the concrete” (Jameson 1974, 413) So far, for the sake of laying the foundations, we read the term ‘realist’ as ‘artist’. However, we need now to separate these two terms from each another for revealing a Marxist and non-Marxist approach to the form and content relation.

The discussion on realism – ‘realism’ in the sense of embodiment of reality in artistic forms so as to be true to reality –, in itself, involves the relation between content and form. External reality acts as the content which had been embodied in forms created by artist. Realist artist certainly needs to have a grasp of reality surrounding her. Nevertheless, a non-realist artist is also bound to discover the social relations around her. This process of discovery is an intellectual process, but the intellectual attitude of the artist might not necessarily be realistic. But still he absorbs the content (social

reality) in order to work it into artistic works. Secondly, s/he is also bound to “conceal” this content by means of artistic abstraction, but his artistic forms might not necessarily be transparent so as to reveal the underlying reality of social relations.

According to Lukács, “[i]ntellectual and artistic activity must move either towards reality or away from it:

When the surface of life is only experienced immediately, it remains opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and uncomprehended. Since the objective mediation are more or less consciously ignored or passed over, what lies on the surface is frozen and any attempt to see it from a higher intellectual [read “Marxist” – B.Y.] vantage-point has to be abandoned (Bloch, et al. 1980, 39).

A non-correct comprehension of form and content relation (e.g. Naturalism) leads to static images without inner tension. The diversity of images is confined in the prisons of “externals” (ibid). One needs to remember here Marx’s division between internal and external oppositions. “The internal opposition between use-value and value, hidden within the commodity, is ... represented on the surface by an external opposition, i.e. by a relation between two commodities” (153). Just as a bourgeois economist, who is only interested in the exchange relations, namely the external opposition, the “bourgeois” artist, who is only interested in the external oppositions, cannot either comprehend the inner dialectics of things.

Lukács, as a Marxist having a strong Hegelian background, throughout his oeuvre, traced the “conceptual opposition” (Jameson 1974, 163) between form and content, or rather “concrete and the abstract”, which is not the same with the former but has direct connections with it. His first elaboration of these concepts can be found in his first work ‘Theory of the Novel’ as “the form of an opposition between essence (*Wesen*) and life, or in other words, between meaningfulness on the one hand and the events and raw materials of daily existence on the other (ibid, 169-170). Jameson, who also interpreted so-called ‘expressionism debate’ in 1938 with his afterword in *Aesthetics and Politics*, traces Lukács’ aesthetic and literary ideas in a chapter dedicated to the Hungarian thinker in his *Marxism and Form*.

According to Lukács, the relation between life and essence, or “matter and spirit” (ibid, 174), or “form and content” (ibid, 178) passes through three eras in Greek literature; epic, tragic and Platonic. In the epic era of Greek literature, matter and spirit were one and the same. In tragedy, meaning and daily existence were put in opposition to each other until the first time they coincide at the time of tragic crisis, when the tragic hero unites them in his passion. In the third, Platonic, era of Greek art, the raw materials of daily life become completely irrelevant and essence or meaning is limited to the realm of the Ideas (ibid, 170).

The above-mentioned distinction between internal and external oppositions is discussed by Lukács within the context of the genre novel.

[T]he content of the novel was characterized as an opposition between man and the outside world. Even, when the resistance to the hero comes in the shape of other characters, Lukács basically thinks of this resistance in terms of a struggle between man and his environment, between man and the universe, between man and things: the human elements of the conflict are always assimilated to the more general category of the world itself, the Not-I, the being of nature (ibid, 181).

This perspective is a metaphysical one, because it is based on the model of relationship between man and the absolute outside. However, in the course of the history of the genre novel, this metaphysical binary opposition turns into a dialectical opposition. In Goethe and Tolstoy, the second term of the relation is turned into first society, and then, via history, to man himself.

[T]he new tension is not a metaphysical but a historical one, and man’s relationship to his social environment is no longer the static and contemplative one of his metaphysical situation in the universe. For society is an evolving and changing organism, and ... Lukács sees [the hero] not only to contemplate his distance from external reality in a fixed manner, but to *change* it. Now external reality is not alien to him, but of the same substance as himself, for it is history, and the result of the activities of men (ibid).

Thus, the external opposition between man and the world is understood as an internal opposition of the substance “man.” The hero, as a part of this substance, is, so to say, the battleground of the oppositions outside just as the exchange relation between two commodities was a place of realization of the relation between use-value and value

of the commodity in general. In both cases, an internal opposition is materialized in an external opposition.

Having seen this, we can understand better what Lukács calls ‘realism.’ It is to understand an express “in the purely human and social categories”, “what had previously been understood (and expressed) in terms of a conflict between man and destiny or nature” (ibid, 190). Jameson holds that,

the most obvious and immediate method of characterizing what is distinctive in realism lies in an analysis of the content of the realistic works, and in particular of the human motif in them, of the characters themselves (ibid, 191).

Character, as the content of a realist piece of art, or rather, literature, stands for “something larger and more meaningful than themselves . . . They are concrete individualities and yet at the same time maintain a relationship with some more general or collective human substance” (ibid).

This, as Lukács calls it, “typicality,” involves a dialectical relation between type and the social reality for which it stands. Social reality acts as the content of the literary character while it acts as the content of the form element called ‘characterization’ that is worked out by the artist in an artistic form. Remembering our example from Büchner’s *Woyzeck* and under the light of Lukács concept typicality, we can produce a new version of the

Figure 3 on page 26 depicting the form and content relation between labor, value and exchange value.

SOCIAL REALITY ( <i>content of</i> ) → J.C. WOYZECK ( <i>content of</i> )	F. WOYZECK ( <i>content of</i> ) → BÜCHNER'S CHARACTERIZATION
BÜCHNER'S CHARACTERIZATION ( <i>form of</i> ) → F. WOYZECK ( <i>form of</i> )	J.C. WOYZECK ( <i>form of</i> ) → SOCIAL REALITY

Figure 6: Form and content relation between social reality and Woyzecks

There are two dialectics at work here.<sup>28</sup> The gray cell of the (first line of) table corresponds to the domain of real life. The white cell of corresponds to the domain of Büchner's play *Woyzeck*. The form and content relation can be seen not only within both white cell and gray cell but also between white cell and gray cell.

The complexity of the social relations in early 19<sup>th</sup> century's Germany had assumed the form of a real person, namely J.C. Woyzeck. Büchner drew upon this raw material and created the character F. Woyzeck. This character is not visible, until it had been characterized with the tools of dramatic writing in relation with other characters, as the value of a commodity is not visible until it is put into (an exchange) relation with other commodities.

Jameson's distinction between "historical novel" and "ordinary novel" might throw light on our example *Woyzeck*, especially on the 'grey cells' of our table, from a

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<sup>28</sup> Since the lower part of the diagram is a reverse reading of the upper part, let's consider only the upper part (color codes are still valid for both reading.)

different angle. There is a “built-in distinction between form and content” in the historical novel (Jameson 1974, 196).

[T]he ordinary novel gives the illusion of absolutely disengaged reading, of a self-sufficient work which needs no object or model in the outside world, the historical novel is characterized by the manner in which it always holds such a model, such a basic external reality, before our eyes in the very act of reading it. (ibid)

I must note that I do not completely agree with Jameson’s idea that there might be artworks having no references to the external world. Even the most abstract works of art have reference to the world outside; existence of external world appears in the work as the form of absence of this reference. While the “norm” in the history of artistic production is to have that reference, a “deviation” that do not have it becomes a “deviation” by emphasizing the absence of reference to external world. The form and content relation between Franz and J.Christian Woyzeck holds true for also, for example, Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. This time, characters are not shaped from the raw material of a single person (e.g. J.C. Woyzeck) but a series of real life experiences and observations of Beckett. Without the sensual data of outside no artistic creation is possible.

In the case of non-expressive music or abstract expressionism, material content of the outer world is limited to sounds and rhythm or colors and shapes respectively, but not only to these. Absence of a “paraphrasable content” makes also reference to such a context. We cannot have starless night skies without stars in skies!

Actually Jameson himself is well aware of this. He explains how “intrinsically formal considerations suddenly dissolve into problems of content, [how it] is reproduced outside the work in the relationship between the content and its historical context” (ibid, 352). Artistic forms use data of social experience as “raw material.”

Lukács, in his *Estetik (Ästhetik)*, while attempting a description of how aesthetic categories are born from mimesis, quotes one of Lenin’s annotations to Hegel’s Science of Logic: “Form is essential. Essence is formed. In one way or another also in dependence on Essence....” (Lenin, CW38: Philosophical Notebooks 1976, 144) Lenin makes this note to Hegel’s sentence: “The question cannot therefore be asked,

how Form is added to Essence; for Form is only the showing of Essence in itself—it is its own immanent (sic!) Reflection....” (qtd in *ibid*).

According to Lukács, mimesis is a domain where formation of essence manifests itself in a more transparent way. Other domains involve a tension between phenomenon and essence having impacts on the relation between form and content. “Phenomenon, in a mimetic formation, is formed so that it might be directly a carrier of the essence because of its phenomenological characteristics.” (Lukacs 1985, 253, my translation from Turkish) Apparently, the following vague passage affirms one more time not only the precedence of essence over form, but also their interdependence. In mimesis,

[t]he content and form of [the] reflection [that is “equipped with all essential characteristics of objectivity”] realizes the satisfaction as a characteristic of the reflected world. The context, which exists between content and form and which had been explained here, in emphasizing is much clearer. Certainly, this emphasizing is, first of all, a formal factor: Selection of the parts and details, their grouping, intensification, putting them into a proportion etc., all should find its first source in forming. However, since the real form is always connected to essence in a very tight manner, this formal factor is immediately transformed into a factor related to content (*ibid*, 253-254).

Kagan, who can be considered as a holder of a Lukácsian position in Soviet aesthetics, points out certain problems in Marxist theory of art. The war against formalism, an example of which can be seen in the ‘formalism debate’ of 1938, ended up in a neglect of analyzing the artistic form. “Structure of form, laws of the construction of form, relative independence of form from content and characteristic functions of form” remained under-treated in dialectical aesthetics. Some even thought that form was something occurred spontaneously, bowed before and created automatically from content (Kagan 1993, 287).

However, real artistic creations involve the construction of form within them. When a spiritual content is shaped or embodied in an artistic creation a material object which carries this content is created also. Materials of the world come together in work of art. But all material elements should have a “very tight and complete relation” where they all fit to each other (*ibid*).



Form of a work of art, like its content, is a multi-faceted and complicated structure involving internal oppositions. . . . Scientific materialist aesthetics, departing from the theses of dialectical materialist thought, proves that the form is an element, which is first of all **dependent on, located below and serves to** content, as the cases is for all other phenomena . . . . In the concrete existence of all objects, event and processes, form is inseparable from content, it is the **formed existence of that content**. (ibid, 438-439, Kagan's bolds).

Kagan, holds that, according to dialectical materialist philosophy, “form is the **existence of content, its way of development, embodiment and expression.**” Therefore the characteristics of form is determined according to the characteristics of content, form is dependent on and conditioned by content. It is secondary. (ibid, 441) Emphasis on the secondary status of form in comparison to content is not as strong in Marx, and many other Marxian thinkers, as it is in the passage above. Apparently, Kagan's is a descriptive attitude against various formalist currents in the art of the era rather than a normative attempt for encouraging artists to rely more upon content related elements.

So much about the form and content relation in the theoretical domain. But how do artists work with such categories? The analysis based on

Figure 6 featuring Woyzecks is not quite handy because it is limited to the description of the artistic creation process. Artist takes the data of outside reality, works them into characters and renders her characters in relation with the environment visible within his formal characterization process.

What can be said about the artistic choices made while molding a given content into a form? The exchange of letters between Marx, Engels and Ferdinand Lassalle on the third's play *Franz von Sickingen*, and especially Lukács' interpretation on this correspondence can be a clue to understand the normative view on the process of artistic creation.<sup>29</sup>

Marx and Engels found Lassalle's play faulty because it did not reflect the real cause of Sickingen's downfall. Lassalle put it as a moral cause (in accordance with the “tragic flaw” or “*hamartia*” of Greek tragedies) while it was a social one. Since

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<sup>29</sup> I will follow this discussion also from Jameson's *Marxism and Form*.

hero's basic social aim was different from that of revolutionary peasants, he could not receive their support. He was aiming at the "reestablishment of the petty nobility" while the interest of peasants was in the liberation of the land.

Thus for Marx and Engels the tragic situation of Sickingen was an objective one, and had nothing to do with any agonizing moral choices inside his mind . . . the character of Sickingen does not typify the real historical dilemma, the situation of the play does not give a genuine model of the forces at work during the period (Jameson 1974, 193).

Marx and Engels showed how "the formal weaknesses" of the play stemmed from the "inadequacy of the work to its raw material." This criticism clearly reminds Kant's referral to the adequacy of form to the thought. It is also noteworthy that Marx and Engels do not speak of congruence, but adequacy, between form and content. Lukács also shares the same line of reasoning, which is based on

the idea that the form of the work is dependent on some deeper logic of the raw material itself; the word *typical* merely serves as a name for the articulation into individual characters of this basic reality which is the substance or content of the work of art (ibid).

Even though this was the very fault committed by the vulgar Marxist aestheticians, this did not mean to "reduc[e] characters to mere allegories of social forces, of turning 'typical' characters into mere symbols of class" (ibid). For social forces or classes are not unchanging essences but are located in historical situations.

Brecht says, "Anyone who is not a victim of formalistic prejudices knows that the truth can be suppressed in many ways and must be expressed in many ways," (Bloch, et al. 1980, 83). This is, maybe not original but, a pivotal attitude in Marxist critique towards formalism. I call this attitude 'the neutrality of form.' Forms assume a political position (let's say "progressive" vs. "reactionary") according to their unity with content. There might be reactionary works both with radical formal novelties, and with non-original forms. But accepting forms and formal attitudes as neutral also implies that there might be progressive works both with new forms and old forms. This is why "Realists who are willing to learn and look for the practical side of things could learn a great deal from [expressionism]" Nevertheless, the neutrality of forms is not absolute. If forms are chosen so as to conceal not only the artistic

material used but also the reality of things, i.e. as an “ideology”, then they cease to be neutral and become “ideological” in the sense of the term as appeared in *The German Ideology*.

If giving precedence to content over form (Essence is formed,” said Lenin. “In one way or another also in dependence on Essence...” (Lenin, CW38: Philosophical Notebooks 1976, 144)) goes to the metaphysical extreme of “chiseling” away from the importance of form, this can lead to mechanical and unsuccessful works of art with “good” contents. Brecht explains some “questions confronting our [Marxists’] politically engaged literature:” (ibid, 74).

Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The ‘editorial’ was usually ‘inartistically’ conceived – so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked (Bloch, et al. 1980, 75).

This is the question of integrating socialist content (or rather, a component of the content, namely ‘message’ or ‘editorial’) into the work of art. There are ways for integration, e.g. a) dissolving the editorial in the plot, b) dissolving the plot in the editorial and thereby lending an artistic form to the latter, c) shaping both plot and the editorial artistically.

There can be other ways, but in any case these attempts are legitimate. The ‘parabasis’ parts of Aristophanes’ comedies, for example, were the moments when author directly addressed to the audience; the author conveyed his political or ethical opinions by means of the chorus. Brecht states that similar cases exist in Chinese theatre also. However, the problem of political content in artistic form should be “dealt with practically from case to case” (ibid) – an expected conclusion from an artist whose main domain is practical art and who deals with theoretical issues only insofar as they are related to his practical works.

Jameson attempts to come up with a way “towards dialectical criticism” in the final chapter of *Marxism and Form*.

The peculiar difficulty of dialectical writing lies indeed in its holistic, ‘totalizing’ character: as though you could not say any one thing until you had first said everything; as though with each new idea you were bound to recapitulate the entire

system . . . There is no content, for dialectical thought, but total content (Jameson 1974, 306).

The Hegelian “distinction between form and content . . . lends the notion of a subject-object relationship its secret dynamics.” These categories, (as Lifshitz and Jameson states)<sup>30</sup> originating from aesthetics, emerge or are generated “out of each other” (ibid, 327-328). “[C]ontent, through its own inner logic, generates those categories in terms of which it organizes itself in a formal structure.” (ibid, 335). Marx, with his economical analyses, draws on this philosophical background.

[W]hat is relatively transparent and demonstrable in the cultural realm, namely that change is essentially a function of content seeking its adequate expression in form, is precisely what is unclear in the reified world of political, social, and economic realities, where the notion that the underlying social or economic “raw material” develops according to a logic of its own comes with an explosive and liberating effect. History is a product of human labor just like the work of art itself, and obeys analogous dynamics (ibid, 328).

Hegel said that “the insufficiency of the form derive[d] from the insufficiency of the content” (quoted by ibid, 329). This is due to the fact that content is worked out to become form “in the realm of the superstructure” (ibid). In Hegel’s scheme, a form completely adequate to content cannot be realized in the realm of art, until art “transcend[s] itself by becoming theology and philosophy” thus moving closer to Absolute Spirit. Marxism, on the other hand, binds the arise of an adequate correspondence between form and content to the concrete changes in the reality of social life, “so that formal realizations, as well as formal defects, are taken as the signs of some deeper corresponding social and historical configuration” (ibid, 331). It is a task of criticism to explore and reveal this configuration.

Jameson, in the final chapter of his work, gropes the foundations of a Marxist theory of style, plot and character (ibid, 397-398). For example, *well-made* plot (of 19<sup>th</sup> century French writers such as Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou) “has significant things to show us both about how contemporaries saw the social life in which they

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<sup>30</sup> See the discussions in page 1 and following in this thesis.

participated and how they wanted to see it” (ibid 398). His points regarding character and the problem of “otherness” are relevant for our *Woyzeck* example as well.

[A] theory of characters ... would no doubt find itself developing most closely in connection with an analysis of the prevalence of otherness as a category and a judgment in the concrete social life of a period; it would also have something to say about the way in which the very presentation of the other is for the novelist a sign of his acquisition of *knowledge* about his society and about reality (ibid).

Marxism, holds Jameson, considers “the socio-economic translation ... as the ultimate explanatory code for literary and cultural phenomena” (ibid, 402). Justification for this can be found in the form and content relation considered dialectically. As opposed to the Aristotelian notion of form and matter,

the essential characteristic of literary raw material or latent content is precisely that it never really is initially formless, never (unlike the unshaped substances of the other arts) initially contingent, but is rather already meaningful from the outset, being neither more nor less than the very components of our concrete social life itself: words, thoughts, objects, desires, people, places, activities. The work of art does not confer meaning on these elements, but rather transforms their initial meanings into some new and heightened construction of meaning; for that very reason neither the creation nor the interpretation of the work can ever be an arbitrary process (ibid, 402-403).

Jameson emphasizes that he does not imply that realism is the only way of creating a work of art, but “any stylization or abstraction in its form must ultimately express some profound inner logic in its content, and is itself ultimately dependent for its existence on the structures of the social raw materials themselves” (ibid, 403).

Schiller’s idea that “beauty is only the form of a form, and that what is ordinarily called its content must necessarily be thought of as content already formed” is a materialist idea because

the first methodological consequence of the dialectical notion of form and content is that ... either term can be translated into the other: thus every layer of content proves, as Schiller implies, to be but a form in disguise. . . . [I]t is just as true to say that form is really only the projection of content and of the inner logic of the latter. In fact, this essential distinction is useful only on condition that it ultimately re-

abolish itself in the ambiguity of the artistic substance itself, which can be seen alternately as either all content or all form (ibid).

But isn't this reducing the two terms to each other, thereby, actually abolishing both of them? Are we to get lost in "the night in which ... all cows are black" (Hegel 1977, 9). Does this "profundity" only "consist in perceiving the clouds of dust on the surface and then having the presumption that all this dust is really very important and mysterious" as Marx speaks when speaking of Adam Müller (qtd. by Lukács in Bloch, et al. 1980, 38)

I will try to find the answers to these questions while compiling the consequences of my reading of *Capital* rather than launching here a unilateral polemic against Jameson, who himself elaborated on the distinctions between these two categories lengthily until coming up with the abovementioned formula which I find really far away from being clear.

## 5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: AN AESTHETIC READING OF *CAPITAL*

If we wish to have a living and combative literature, which is fully engaged with reality and fully grasps reality, a truly popular literature, we must keep step with the rapid development of reality. The great working masses are already on the move. The industry and brutality of their enemies is proof of it.

— Bertolt Brecht<sup>31</sup>

The first chapter of *Capital*, as we already saw, deals with the development of the value-form of the commodity all the way to the money-form passing through relative and simple, expanded and general forms of value. This development, or “self-movement” is a result of the relative and the equivalent forms of value, where the internal contradiction within a commodity manifests itself as an external contradiction between two commodities.

The basic separation of two aspects or “forms” of the commodity, namely use-value and value, corresponds to a sort of form and content relation with respect to each other. For use-value is the “material depository” or the “material bearer” of value within the context of a commodity in capitalist mode of production. Context is always important, since there are no eternal forms standing in shelves to be filled with content, and the reverse is also true. Form and content is always a form or a content of *an object* and they always stand in relation to each other.

The basic contradiction between value and use-value reappears throughout *Capital* in newer and higher forms, and these higher forms grow out from the lower forms (Pilling 1980). With regards to commodity, use-value and value stand for two

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<sup>31</sup> Bloch, et al. 1980, 85.

different forms of the commodity. The form of use-value is the natural form, form of the physical body, of the commodity. The form of value is social, but not natural, form of a commodity. (Marx, Appendix 1978)

Even though exchange-value might be considered as something inherent to the commodity, this is illusory. In reality, it is both *historical* and *relational*. It is *historical*, because it arises in a certain era of social development, fully, in capitalism. It is *relational*, because it always appears when a commodity is put into relation with another commodity.

The fact that exchange-value is a relational aspect of commodity which cannot arise without being put into relation with other commodities, does not mean that it is an empty form without any content. The concept of “empty form” is actually a contradiction in terms. What makes a commodity exchangeable with other commodities is the fact that it has a value. That value is the congealed abstract labor in a commodity. Thus exchange-value is a form of value, which, in turn, the form of human labor. The same sentence can be read from the other side: Labor is the content of value, which is, in turn, the content of exchange-value (see

Figure 3 on page 26).

Labor in abstract is the substance of value, but it is not value itself. Insofar as value is considered as *form* of labor, it is what makes labor visible as content in the commodity. Insofar as value is considered as *content* of exchange-value, it becomes visible only when it assumes the form of exchange-value. It is like an invisible ghost which becomes visible only when somebody throws a sheet on it. The “sheet” thrown upon the phantom value is the exchange-value and it is thrown through the social relation of exchange.

This relation puts two commodities in relation to each other so that it reveals the internal contradiction in a commodity.  **$x$  commodity A =  $y$  commodity B**: “The whole mystery of the form of value lies hidden in this simple form” (139). Left term of the equation is the relative form, where the right term acts as the equivalent form.

Relative and equivalent forms of value (see p. 32) is an example of a content (here, value) arising in two polar forms which exclude, but cannot exist without, each other. Simple form of value appears in a relation, thus these forms are relational forms.



However, use-value and value have a relation of content and form without existentially depending on each other, i.e. in an article use-value can exist without exchange-value. In the simple form of value, the content of relative form (commodity A) is the use-value of equivalent-form (commodity B).

Equivalent form, in which a commodity is directly exchangeable with other commodities, has important peculiarities. They all involve the convertibility of opposites to each other:

1. “Use-value becomes the form of appearance of its opposite, value” (148).
2. “Concrete labour becomes the form of manifestation of its opposite, abstract human labour” (151).
3. “Private labour takes the form of its opposite, namely labour in its directly social form” (151).

They are all interrelated: The first peculiarity is at the level of *commodities* (use-value vis-à-vis value). The second is at the level of *labor* (concrete labor vis-à-vis abstract labor). The third is at the level of *society* (individual labor vis-à-vis social labor). In all these three levels, content arises as form.

Let's consider the first peculiarity. Here, use-value becomes the form of appearance of value. Remembering that use-value was, on the one hand, material bearer of value, and one of two forms of commodity (natural form), the other being value, this transformation to opposite is important. In a certain relation, i.e. value-relation, a content related aspect acts as a formal aspect. In order to express a commodity as a value, the physicality or use-value of the same commodity is non-functional. There is a need for another commodity, which is the form of expression of the first commodity in its physicality. 20 yards of linen is exchangeable with 1 coat, means not only that 1 coat is the value of 20 yards of linen but also that coat can be eligible to be an equivalent, since it has a use-value of its own. A piece of iron can be used to measure the weight of other objects, but this is only thanks to that it has a weight itself.

All that has been said of the relation between form and content begets certain conclusions that have aesthetic implications.

### **5.1 Forms do exist**

Maybe the first thing to state about the categories of form and content in *Capital* is that, they exist. In the very beginning of this investigation, we have seen the claim that the “divorce between reality (or content or essence) and the way it appears (or form) is a central aspect of Marx’s (dialectical) thought.” (Fine and Saad-Filho 2004, 4) A reading of *Capital* showed that this division does not only exist but also exists at the very basis of an analysis of commodity, which is the embryonic form or cell-form of capitalist production.

### **5.2 Method of analysis: Solving the riddle of sphinx that is called ‘form’**

To arrive at formal and content related properties of an object, one should start from the object itself not from the concept of that object. However we intellectually “touch” objects through their forms. A hand holding an apple senses the shape of apple, but this does not mean that it senses the apple as a whole. To understand what an apple is, one needs to continuously go back and forth between form and content of it continuously: to grasp its form, then to find what is hidden within that form, then to turn back to form to understand why that content assumed that form. “This method contains analysis as well as synthesis. . . . Marx does not only move from form to content, but also from content to form.” (Rubin 1972)

To analyze or “dissect” the forms to reveal the hidden content behind, and to find out the processes whereby the substratum is expressed in these forms constitute the “road to science” (104). Thus Marx’s analysis goes from form to content, from lower forms to higher forms, than back from content to form. Objective of such analysis is to reveal the content concealed by these forms.

### **5.3 Unity of form and content from Hegel to Marxism**

Marx drew a lot upon Hegel’s conception of form and content, but in Hegel, content of the real world, in which we live, was the Idea, and that world was only a form of that content. However, for Marx, the ideal is only “the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought.” (Marx, C, I) Therefore the

content is always the real world itself. And, in a formal parallelism to Hegel, this content is hidden behind certain forms of appearance. Marx's task was to reveal that "hidden substratum." I call this parallelism formal, because the idea of a content hidden by a form does already exist in Hegel, and the "form" of this idea can easily be observed in Marx, who, however, thinks completely different about what falls into the categories of, respectively, form and content. This difference, according to Marx, is due to that Hegel's dialectic stood "on its head" (103).

But, when it comes to the dialectical unity and inseparability of such categories, there is no reason to think that Marx disagrees with Hegel's statement that "the form is the innate development of the concrete content itself." (Hegel 1977, 35) Marx also agrees with Hegel and disagrees with Kant in his consideration of form as something growing out of the content itself rather than adhering to it from the outside (Rubin 1972, see p. 12 of this study). As is seen in the case of use-value and value, form and content are inseparably united, identical, but identical as opposites. (Pilling 1980)

Form and content are completely united while they are completely different. Content can assume a form because it has a content, and form is obliged to have a content to arise.

Therefore, however we analyze an object – a work of art in aesthetic context – so as to have a better understanding of it, at the end of the day, what we are dealing with is the indivisible, integral whole of work of art. Just as that the division between the super-structural and infra-structural aspects of a society actually does no harm to the integrity of the social structure. However we speak of form and content of a work of art or of base and superstructure of society, what we speak is all about structure, all about artwork!

#### **5.4 Form and content as relational categories**

Use-value's being "material bearer" of exchange value shows itself more clearly in the simple form of value. Since commodity B has a use-value it can stand as the equivalent of commodity A, i.e. it can have an exchange-value. However, as soon as it enters into relation with commodity A, it becomes more than its use-value; in this "abstract form", it stands as the value of A.

The opposition between use-value and value of a commodity cannot be rendered visible how profoundly one analyses a commodity in isolation from other commodities. Only when two commodities are put into an exchange relation with each other does the use-value of one commodity act as the material bearer of the value of the other commodity. “Value is an inner relation of the commodity to itself, reversed in outward form through the relation to another commodity” (Pilling 1980).

## **5.5 Dialectic “society” of form and content “and its enemies”**

### **5.5.1 Illusion in arts and in ideology**

Just as a man in a bright uniform is esteemed more than a man without such vestments, a commodity that bears the “uniform” of equivalent value-form makes it something exceeding its use-value. However, as a Turkish proverb goes, “Even if you put a golden saddle on an ass, it is still an ass!” It is important only in a “social” context where golden saddles are held important. The equivalent commodity, in the same way, gains an importance exceeding its use-value where exchange-values are important.

On the other hand, exchange-value of a commodity can be expressed in another commodity, only thanks to that the latter has use-value. Use-value of a commodity is material bearer of the exchange value of another commodity. And without putting two commodities in such a relation, the value in the commodity will remain unexpressed or formless. Form of one content arises only in a relation between two contents – one is the expressing, other is the expressed.

Illusion should not be understood as mere deception. Things are seen upside down in the *camera obscura* of ideologies, only because this illusion has a foundation on reality. Forms are, so to say, the illusory ‘tissue’ embracing the reality. However, to ‘touch’ reality is only possible through this tissue. Act of description is bound to being with forms of appearance. The etymology of the word ‘describere’ already involves sketching, which is drawing shapes or forms.

Art, on the other hand, is a discipline not only involving but exploiting the method of illusion. Artistic forms also create an illusion. For example, in theatre, a box with three sides closed, one side open is conventionally thought to be a house. Poets ask us to believe that “early dawn” is “rose-fingered” (Homer 2007, 26, Book II/Line 1).

The illusion in art, however, might arise in two levels; first in imagery, second in ideology. If artistic form, as a form of communication or expression, seeks to distort reality for “ideological” purposes, then it commits the ‘sin’ of being unrealistic. If it distorts reality in imagery for the purpose of putting, as Marx said, “right side up again” (Marx, C, I, Afterword to Second Edition) the inverted or topsy-turvy image of reality, then it utilizes the ‘weapon’ of being unrealistic.

### **5.5.2 Main emphasis on content**

Marxist thinkers are used to laying the main emphasis on content rather than form. Marx’s treatment of the economical forms in *Capital* also confirms this position. The famous phrase “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness,” (Marx, Contribution 1979) highlights the determinative quality of content within the context of the relation between base and superstructure.

The analogies and metaphors ranging from chemistry to hierarchy used by Marx for explaining his labor theory of value are important for attaining a grasp of the generality of the points he made about a certain relation of form and content. His hierarchical analogies especially need attention. In these, he always gives an example from social hierarchy (a man in uniform, a king, a “your majesty” etc.) and explains that what renders these superiors superior is, on the one hand, their social recognition of superiority, and, on the other, the hierarchical form assumed by their physicality, i.e. their existence as humans. This form endows upon them superiority, but changes nothing in their physicality. Their recognition as superiors is due to social consciousness, or rather, “social false-consciousness.”

In the same way, certain forms of value, especially the money-form, are being sublimed by society. This sublimation has its basis on the relations of commodity. But this does not at all endow an inherent sublimity upon such forms independently from history and society. That is to say, when this era of history which gave rise to a commodified society comes to an end, these forms will lose all false importance they gained in this era.

### **5.5.3 Forms of formalism**

Exchange-value, the distinguishing property of commodity, is a measure of value, thus it is the quantitative aspect of the commodity. In the world of commodities, each and every article is reduced to its exchange-value. An analogy can be drawn between this and the idea of “pure form” in art. As the formal property of the commodity, exchange value takes an absolute precedence over its use value, and in formalist art, the formal properties of the work of art are overemphasized.

To understand an object is only possible with not confusing its forms, and content expressed by these forms. “Bourgeois economists” fall in this error by confusing the form of value with value itself. Since they are too busy with the practical economical matters, which are related to the quantitative aspects, they hold that exchange-value is value rather than being a form of the latter. This ‘formalism’ arises from placing the emphasis upon the measurable aspects of things.

Versions of formalism arise from a non-dialectical comprehension of the relation between form and content either by neglecting one of the terms or putting the emphasis on the wrong side, or in a wrong way. I will discuss some other versions of formalism, and especially the mindset giving rise to them under the title ‘Form-giving operations’ (on p. 106).

## **5.6 Some attempts to solve the riddle**

### **5.6.1 Form-giving operations: filling, stamping or signifying?**

The exchange relation, which manifests the use-value of one commodity as the depository of the exchange-value of the other and which gives rise to equivalent and relative forms (see p. 32 and later), involves a form-giving operation.

Form and content relation is generally associated with a relation between a cup and its ingredient. In this metaphor, the form-giving operation involves an act of ‘filling’ or ‘putting in.’ This metaphor might still be handy (and certainly erroneous, if extended too far) in understanding, for example, the form and content relation between value and labor.

In the case of simple form of value, however, this operation is different. There are two forms, one of which acts as the value-content of the other. Value of the relative

form is expressed in the equivalent form. Thus, relative form gives to the equivalent form its form of value. This form-giving operation is explained by Marx with the metaphors of stamping, impressing or imprinting.

The metaphor of ‘filling’ leads to much more mistakes than metaphor of stamping and the like. The idea that content should find and correspond to the limited set of its appropriate forms, an idea followed by mainstream socialist realists (which I call ‘historical socialist realism’ as will be explained under the following subtitle), can be criticized with taking the metaphor of filling to seriously.

Another metaphor that can describe the relation between form and content is that of ‘expressing’ or ‘signifying.’ For example, the products of labor, as values, “are merely the material expressions of the human labour expended to produce them” (167). The form and content relation between value and labor is expressed here as a relation between signified and signifier. In this context, form signifies the content.

Nevertheless, as with the metaphor of ‘filling’, taking the metaphors of ‘stamping’ or ‘signifying’ too seriously can also lead to versions of formalism. The statement that content impresses itself upon a form can be interpreted as that content absolutely determines, or should absolutely determine, the form. This brings us back to a version of formalism; the one which holds that there is only a limited set of forms that can be assigned to a given content.

If form is the signifier of the signified content, then this signification process can be interpreted to be a self-contained process, where history and social context is neglected. Everything begins and ends within the confinements of the semiotic ‘sign’. However, as the form and content are absolutely interdependent, so are the work of art, and context. Art does not involve solely the operation of giving a form to a given content, but it is a social and historical action where society and history make their respective contribution to both form and content.

Art, I said, is *not only* a form-giving operation, but it is *a* form-giving operation. A commodity cannot have exchange-value without having use-value (in the case of money, “the commodity of commodities”, its use value is in its exchangeability for any other commodity). Nevertheless, what makes an article a commodity is that it has exchange-value. Only when a product of labor assumes this form in the social

relation of exchange, is it endowed upon with the title of ‘commodity.’ In the same vein, form is what makes an object what it is.

This is especially true for art. All attempts to provide an exhaustive definition of art have failed. So that, Gombrich became obliged to say that there was no such thing as art, there were only artists (Gombrich 1997). Despite the lack of consensus on what art is, possibly everybody would agree that the artistic endeavour involves the act of forming materials into a work of art, be such materials human characters, color pigments or whims of subconsciousness. The results of artistic endeavour take to the stage firstly with their forms and they get into relation with their recipients through this ‘outer skin’ of them.

### **5.6.2 Problem of congruence**

This brings us to the problem of congruence between form and content – which we have actually been discussing for a while.

Not only might the form and content of value be confused with each other, but also another confusion might arise from the magnitude of value. Exchange-value, a form of value, does not necessarily correspond to value quantitatively. Form of expression of a given content is subject to many other conditions rather than being a direct reflection of that content.

Lack of a direct relation between a form of value (its magnitude) and its content renders problematic the Lukácsian understanding of dependence of form on content in arts, namely search for appropriate forms for given contents. I believe that this point constituted the ground of discussion between Brecht and Lukács. Certainly Lukács was not in a position to suggest only one form of expression for one given body of content. Nevertheless, his understanding of realism was limiting these expressions to the artistic forms of what I call ‘the historical realism.’

This last term needs an explanation. Peter Bürger, in his perennial work *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, makes a distinction between historical avant-gardes of early 20th century and other avant-garde attitudes in history, such as neo-avant-gardes (Bürger 1984). I think it is necessary to make a similar distinction between historical realist writers, beginning from Balzac and Zola and including socialist realists such as



Gorky, and any realist attitude towards art, in the sense that the work of art corresponds to the reality of the world and society.

I believe that socialist realisms beg a similar division. Historical socialist realists, who followed a line ranging from Lukács to Zhdanov in the theoretical domain, and from Gorky to Sholokhov in artistic production, should be seen as a part of but not whole of socialist realist tradition. The latter includes names such as Mayakovsky, Brecht or Aragon, who sought a loyalty to reality but not to canon of historical realism and historical socialist realism.

Thus, while Lukács asked for a sort of loyalty to historical *realists*, Brecht claimed that there was only one thing to remain loyal in art if one is to be a realist: historical *reality*, i.e. the reality and/or truth of the world and society in a given period of history.

### **5.6.3 Fluency of forms**

In the relation between value and exchange-value, value acts as the content of exchange-value, and exchange-value acts as the form of value. But value (whose content is, in turn, labor) cannot arise as such, it needs a form. Since it is not a natural but social reality, it is bound to acquire form in a social relation, namely exchange relation. Only in this relation can this content assume a form. Value and its magnitude do not arise from exchange-value, on the contrary, exchange-value arises from the nature of value, i.e. its being form of labor, or congealed labor.

Content's acquiring a form is neither a one-way nor a one-time process. Form in one context can act as content in another context. Also one needs to continuously move from form to content, and vice versa, to comprehend the object of analysis more completely. Forms are turned into other forms, and in this transformation they are "filled with" other contents. Or rather, new forms are impressed to new contents.

This richness of forms is an important point to consider within the context of art. Artistic forms are also highly fluent. Fluency of genre form can be easily observed in contemporary art practices where various genres come together in a single work of art. Performance, video art, happenings are examples of new genres arose from

synthesis of genres. Same fluency can also be observed in the individual form.<sup>32</sup> Pastiche, as a form of intertextuality, brings together different styles, even those which are, at the first sight, irreconcilable.

### **5.7 Dialectic(s) of dramatic structure**

An example of a relation between form and content in the domain of art can be found in the relation of a real and/or historical *person* with a *persona* in a dramatic work (see discussion on Büchner's *Woyzeck* in p. 41). (This also applies to all narration based genres, including novel, short story etc.) We can call this relation being based on a true story, which is comparable to the exchange relation between two commodities. Persona stamps the person the form of "being a material for a fiction" while person impresses upon the persona "being based on a true story." Within the context of literary work, neither person nor persona can exist without the other.

Another relation of form and content can be observed in dramatic structure. Characters are the material of characterization in a drama. This material assumes a form only when they are put into relation with other characters.

Maybe the most important dialectic working in dramatic structure is between story and character, or between action and actor. Character/actor is the "material bearer" of story/action. However, just as the value of a commodity is expressed in the use-value of another commodity, which acts as equivalent, the characters arise as characters in their relation with other characters. All these webs of relations also constitute the substratum for the action in a story.

As we have seen, the external opposition between two commodities in an exchange relation is a manifestation of the internal opposition in a commodity, namely the opposition of use-value and value. However, to focus only on the external opposition misses the point that this opposition is a manifestation and form of appearance of the inner dialectic working in the commodity.

The same dialectic works in the relation of character with action. The inner oppositions within a character is made visible by its relations with other characters and thereby the action in the dramatic work. However, if these external oppositions,

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<sup>32</sup> On genre form and individual form, see p. 44 on this study.

which stand as the form of appearance of the ‘internal oppositions’ of a character, do exist for their own sake only, this leads to dramatic ‘figures’ or ‘flat characters’ who are only empty shells carrying action on their fragile physicality. The opposite is also true. If the personality of the character is not treated as the battleground of the oppositions emerging in the external world, this leads to abstract, non-historical, non-social characters, who are isolated from the external conditions which give rise to them.

### **5.8 Towards a socialist realism defined with content rather than form**

The issue of socialist realism is too broad to treat in a study like mine. Here, I only touched briefly and fragmentally upon certain aspects of socialist realism. Still I derived three foundational conclusions from my investigation regarding the issue of socialist realism – these conclusions need much discussion and elaboration but, I believe, they will remain unchanged in terms of their essence:

- Socialist realism should be defined as any artistic attitude, which aims at providing a socialist and realist expression of the world and society with any artistic style and form. Thus, historical socialist realists, who took their artistic tools mainly from historical realists, should be distinguished from socialist realism in general.
- Congruence between form and content is one of the ways that can be taken by a socialist realist expression of the external world. This should be neither done away with altogether nor considered as a norm. Socialist realists can find congruent or incongruent forms for representing the reality in their works. Thus, socialist realism should not be defined by forms but by content, i.e., as the name already implies, by ‘reality.’
- Forms are neutral insofar as they work within the confines of the domain of art. They can become ideological when they serve to conceal the “real relations” in the society. However, utilization of a form for ideological purposes does not render it a “reactionary” form. What is reactionary is still content produced by that form, not the form *per se*.

## 5.9 Limitations: Instead of an Afterword

“No mortal is flawless, love me with my flaws.”

— From an ‘arabesque’  
song<sup>33</sup>

My investigation was bound to be limited to the first chapter of the first volume of *Capital*. However, not only the entirety of all four volumes (including *Theories of Surplus-Value*) but also especially *Grundrisse*, and in general al oeuvre of Karl Marx provide important insights to the issues of form and content. Marxian literature after Marx, which I treated only partially, could present very important data into this discussion. This is the first, and a very important limitation of my study.

Form and content categories are still begging to be defined, at least from a Marxian perspective both in aesthetics and in philosophy in general. This definition, certainly, cannot be the final word in this field of research, but at least, it can be a strong first word.

The conclusions to be derived from the consideration of Marxian literature and aesthetics with regards to form and categories are condemned to be mere scholarly endeavors, thereby “violating” the praxis perspective of Marx, unless they make contributions to practice. The final, and I think the most important, limitation of my investigation is that it, with its three arguments, just attempted a first step towards a new and richer formulation of socialist realism. There is a long way before the most important parts of this journey will be covered. The whole journey is, of course, never meant to be completed.

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<sup>33</sup> Orhan Gencebay, Turkish singer and composer.

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