

The Art of Capital

Waldenyr Caldas

Abstract

This essay addresses the mercantile relationships between artistic production and capitalist society. From the end of feudalism and the beginning of the Renaissance to the present day, art—as a product that requires creativity and talent from its author—is a creation that enjoys very high prestige as an integral part of capitalist society. The essay's aim is to analyze how both art and capital are situated contemporaneously. In complex societies, as we know, the role of the media is of great significance, due to the decision-makers characteristics. For this reason, art criticism is systematically included in the media. Thus, the media is analyzed for artistic production in its various segments, and also the relationship between artists, galleries, consumers, and media. The background of this analysis focuses on how artwork adopts the position as another commodity in capitalist society. Like any other good, art becomes a product to be traded by artists, gallery owners, art dealers, and consumers who ultimately play the role of people in the business. However, none of this is new, insofar as we can empirically perceive; the logic of Capital is capable of transforming everything into something merchantable—that is, into merchandise.

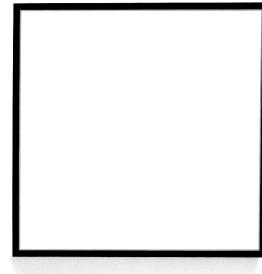
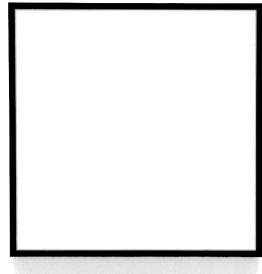
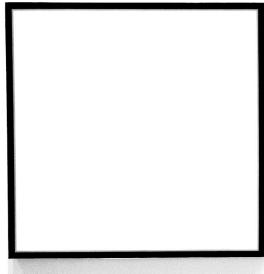
At another point in the essay, I devote myself to the discussion for establishing the aesthetic quality of a work of art. I attempt to interpret the role of the art critic that adopts—almost—the right to establish and make public the quality of some work, where the aesthetic criteria—beauty and quality—are in question. At this point in my discussion, I anticipate the very probable possibility that, in the analysis of art criticism, the values of a class culture prevail and that a critical review or speech reflects the values of mainstream culture, as consumption in capitalist society is stratified.



[Art auction and buyers gathering.](#)
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The concept of image: Art Style Magazine's art direction. Photo: Art Gallery, Pixabay

What is the origin?

It was mainly in the Italian peninsula that the Renaissance reached its greatest moment. At that time, artists like Giotto, Titian, Michelangelo, Botticelli, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Raphael, among others, rescued—as we can call it—Greco-Roman aesthetics, rationalism, and experimentalism. Therefore, it should be noted that this revival was not random or intuitive. These Renaissance masters sought their instruments of redemption to work precisely in the knowledge of a history of ancient Greek art. Thus far, this choice was conventional. However, the above text encourages us to think about an issue, which is at least uncomfortable: we want to know where and how the Greeks developed this idea of beauty that so influenced Renaissance painting, crossed time, and remains to this day in the agenda of academic discussions. To the attentive reader, one question is inevitable: the ideal of beauty for whom? It is quite probable that, historically, this concept would have remained circumscribed to the citizens living in the Acropolis or even to those educated men who frequented the agora (from

Greek, assembly), when they were lecturing there in open air assemblies for the people. *Helots*—in ancient Greece, the *helots* came from the people the Spartans subjugated, and consequently, the *helots* held a status between slave and free men—and slaves would hear long speeches of a theme, which had nothing to do with their reality and their daily life: the ideal of beauty. But what I am doing here is an unpretentious preparation for reaching the main question that encouraged me to write this essay—that is, the relationships between art and capital. In the Renaissance period, for example, patrons, bankers, powerful merchants, and noblemen—among others—bought works of art for social recognition and prestige.

That is a fait accompli. There is unanimity among scholars about it, and therefore there is no need to discuss it here. Even so, it should be noted that art, still in its first stages, was not a product for the economically well-off. Perhaps the best example is the fact that, until the 15th century, artists were considered artisans, although some works already dealt with relevant social issues, such as social inequality, religion, and politics.

Either way, the capitalist system—which only emerged in the 14th century, when feudalism began being dismantled—gave way to various changes in the productive sector and labor relations. It was at this moment, precisely in the face of these transformations, that a new social class emerged in Europe, known as the bourgeoisie. They were people skilled in the negotiation of negotiations, and for this very reason, always objected to profit through commercial activities of the most diverse. Strictly speaking, this class would be formed with the emergence of the commercial Renaissance that would modify the whole economic panorama of the European continent. It was the bourgeoisie, the social class par excellence, who began to worry and invest in their social status. To this end, works of art would become one of the main products for the attribution of status. From this context, very little has changed respect to this day.

In the present, the work of art remains an essential instrument for status assignment. Now, this assignment happens in a very pragmatic way. In the society of Capital, everything becomes a commodity, and art could not be different. Taste, beauty, entertainment, health, culture, and so many other institutions have become the products of relationships of exchange in capitalism. And this pragmatism, in the case of the arts, lies precisely in the confluence of interests between art and the consumer market. First is the artist who produces a work; the mercantile rules of capital make the artwork a commodity. Alternatively,

a segment of the society—almost always cultured and wealthy—buys the work of art as a form of attribution of status, investment and, in some cases, by mere ostentation. In other situations, it may also occur to buy art for the pure pleasure of owning a work that one considers beautiful. We cannot discard this alternative; none of them are despicable. However, they all have no other options and are co-opted by capital. It is clear that this reasoning is the logic of the economic system of Western countries.



[Art auction.](#) Photo by MC Morgan under CC BY-SA 2.0 license.

A question of taste?

In 1988, when I wrote my book entitled *Utopia of taste* (*Utopia do gosto*), also have I mentioned these usual questions to open a debate on the subject. Since then, I have studied and rethought the matter. It has been thoroughly discussed with academics specializing in this subject, but in all discussions, there has not ever been a plausible scientific explanation to accept. All the observations and analyses that have been undertaken have encountered the subjectivity of opinions, or just allowed the prevalence of dominant culture as a parameter to determine the beauty, the ugly, the quality of a work of art or a novel, among many other cultural products. In any case, we continue to seek a more satisfactory result for this issue. When speaking of beauty or aesthetic taste, for example, the opinion and concepts of the learned prevail. It starts from the very questionable premise that educated people are better able to establish what is ugly or beautiful, or good or bad in a play. From these concepts, one determines what is and what is not a work of art. But here, I will not exhaust the reader's patience by entering into such a *déjà-vu* discussion as this one.

Thus, the people who work with art criticism, in terms of the art market, give to some works, and not others, the status of a work of art. In this scenario, here are some questions or reflections that need to be, if not answered, at least considered: Should we accept as fact the opinion of a scholar of art criticism when he names one work as art and another as non-art? In doing so, would it not only be reproducing and further consolidating the eventual prevalence of an aesthetic taste belonging to the educated segments of the economically and culturally dominant class? It is true that there is a recurrent and extremely negative situation in all of this. In the media, for example, professionals of so-called art criticism, with due exceptions, almost always use the most subjective criteria to write about a particular work. At the same time, the reflexes of this criticism soon appear. This professional can either promote this work to the state of a piece of art, or merely isolate it and, along with it, its author. In the first case—promoting the work of art—art criticism gains contours that must be analyzed with caution. In possession of an efficient communication vehicle, one would expect the art critic to make a balanced and equanimous analysis—an impartial reflection, finally, an opinion with equity, providing the reader with the technical, aesthetic, and interpretive elements of the work of art. In this last item, the ideal would be to listen and reproduce the words of the author of the work and artist to avoid wishful thinking, indeed. However, this care rarely happens.

The goal is almost always to give the reader an analysis of that work, as if it were something innovative, of unique quality and rare beauty. To this end, the excessive use of phatic discourse—that is, a way of communicating with the reader without the transmission of any essential messages—is what one sees. It is at this moment that the so-called worship discourse gains the status of an “official” evaluation. Yes, official quotes, because the analysis of the work serves as a basis, persuasive argument to value it even higher in the art market. But it can also, of course, serve as a devaluation of that same work or others. Everything depends on the connective points between art criticism and the eventual presence of an “entourage” that ultimately works to promote the artist, no matter what his or her work may mean. What matters is fulfilling the goal of bringing the artist to celebrity status. And it is well to remember that this process has unfolded and now reaches much more sophisticated levels. A very typical example comes from the 1960s. At the time of the Jovem Guarda Program, the advertising company Magaldi & Maia undertook a work of extreme competence by promoting Roberto Carlos, the main idol of Brazilian youth, who was in charge of the evening performances on Sunday in the Record Television.

We see, therefore, the mercantile character of the arts. What we cannot forget is that works of art, like so many other things, are goods at the disposal of the consumer, and there is nothing wrong with that. Perhaps the mistake is even the artist, who does not accept the rules of the consumer market and tries to change it. For example, artists with proper theoretical training challenge the logic of capitalism, which resists taking their rules. That is legitimate. It is understandable that the artist wants to give much more significant meaning to his or her work than the simple exchange of money for a product—that is, for a commodity. But it is necessary to understand that we are in a society of capital, and therefore, behind the discourse of art criticism is a hidden concept of valorization or devaluation of the work, which almost always has a strong resonance with the consumer market, collectors, merchants, and even speculators, among others. And after all, what is art for in a consumer society? Like everything in a consumer society, art is guided by profit maximization, and we should now think a little more on the commodity character and analysis of art criticism of the speech. Mercantilizing the work of art is perfect, because it meets the logic of capital, where everything becomes a commodity. And precisely because of this mercantilizing, it must generate profit, no matter what this commodity is.



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At that moment, the pragmatic objectivity of capitalism removes the romantic aura of the work of art and the possible excellence it may have, transforming it into a consumer product like any other. In the case of fine arts, for example, the most recent painting produced by the artist, as well as the previous ones, become a salable product available to the consumer like any other commodity. It is natural, then, that this professional set aside an old and worn anachronistic thinking of the public domain, according to which, the artist should only paint their screens when inspired to do so. This argument does not proceed; it is a nonsense, an immaturity without space in the contemporary world. The artist is a professional like thousands of others and has a product to sell. He or she is not only an artist but also a merchant who wants to live on his or her art, and therefore, there is no other way but to put a product to sale. Consequently, the artist can sell directly to the buyer or, if he or she can and should prefer, leave the galleries to act as the intermediary between the author of the work and the consumer. But even so, the artist must negotiate with the gallery owner, among other things, the price of the work and the commission to pay for exposing the artworks to sale. That is what the artist produces it for, and that is what he or she

is prepared for. Capitalism as a whole, and the art market in particular, are not for amateurs. One must keep that in mind. When great collectors, gallerists, and traders of the arts—with very few exceptions—buy a work, they are neither interested nor concerned with the inspiration of the artist. The buyer's goal is always mercantile, and he or she wants to be sure that that work is an investment that will profit well soon. That is the logic of capitalism, and opposing it means professional failure. It is these conditions that the artist must adapt to and respect. Besides, of course, he or she must produce something that meets the trends of the art market. This tendency, in other words, means adapting one's work a little to the aesthetic taste of the market, something that only the professional attentive to changes can perceive. However, the artist does not stop to be innovative as well as those who have the talent for it. It is evident that the already established professional lives a very different reality from the one described above. The prestige of a well-known artist, built up throughout his or her professional career, gives him or her considerable autonomy in this regard. The signature on an empty canvas may have much more value than a picture of another little-known artist.

In all work activities, there are different stages in the profession. My analyses here are more directed to those artists who live in an intermediate situation between well established and anonymity. There are many—that is, they do not yet have their work consolidated in the art market, but neither are they beginners, much fewer amateurs. Almost always the relation of buying and selling these artworks passes through tax situations on the part of the buyers. By galleries, the investment is much more considerable. The gallery owners know that they can impose conditions that are very favorable to them and very unsatisfactory to the artist. All these advantages favor the businessperson, who—for the most part—uses the law of supply and demand to their advantage. A work to buy must be known and offered to the public interested in the arts. It cannot be confined in the artist's studio; it must be seen and visited to find a buyer, finally.

Beyond the existing commodity character on the art market—and it is essential for the development of this commercial activity—it should be mentioned in some situations, a kind of vicious circle involving all interested parties—i.e., the gallery owners, art dealers, artists, art critics, curators, museums or cultural institutions, and collectors. It is almost impossible to keep this activity only restricted to the gallery owners or other professionals in the field, and we should stick to this aspect of the art market relationship. As a matter of market interest, this vicious

circle is as follows: the gallerist understands that a specific artist may interest the market more than his or her colleagues and competitors. From that moment on, the artwork and artist are systematically worked out by the art critic's review in a complementary manner that we show later. The artist and artworks are followed by criticism from art critics and curators, and so the artist becomes known (and some, of course, recognized). This system of art involves market projections, advantages, and the greater interest of collectors, and cultural institutions; finally, the whole structure of the art market increases significantly.

Throughout this journey, the review of art critic plays a decisive role in promoting the nominated artist by the gallerist. The critic continues to work on his or her subjects in the fine arts with a hyperbolic discourse filled with complementary qualifying adjectives. It turns out that this text, almost always unintelligible, gains contours of a phatic discourse in a skillful play of words, but that notoriously reduces itself only to reproduce the technique of logomachy. The difference between this professional and the television program presenters is that the professional uses a more refined logomachy, also notable for using the vernacular in his or her review as nothing else. One might even think that the art critic finally decided to use linguistic skills about the technical socio-inherent in the fine arts system, and for that reason, he or she elaborated a worshiped discourse for well-read people. No, but that is not it, and it stays that way. People read the skillful logomachy review and understand very little, but enough to know a few words—that it is the matter of the work.

The artistic métier (with some exceptions) come to respect the work of that artist and attribute to him or her a level of quality based on this logomachy criticism in its essence, but favorable, without reflecting on the notoriously mercantile character of the message with the seal of a person seen in the universe of the arts as a specialist. As the opinions of art critics are almost always a kind of "thermometer" for evaluation of the artwork, the way is now open for the professional success of that artist. The credibility gained from the review of the art critic is the mark of quality achieved by the artist and gallerist—a condition that ultimately remains subjective—which are the aesthetic criteria of an analysis of the artwork. And here I return briefly to the most sensitive point of this essay: it does not seem reasonable that a professional, more experienced and skilled in his or her work, can determine the good, average, or bad quality of work, especially in the arts, something extremely subjective. What criteria or elements would the critic have used to reach conclusions? If one takes advantage of this scholarship, it is the art critic, with an eventual vast culture in the arts. Yet we

should accept his or her opinions with some reservations. Because in it is contained all the cultural repertoire acquired in the academy, in the experience of the critic's work environment and even in other situations. Also, we can say: the critic's opinions are only reflecting the culture of the social class to which he or she belongs. It is quite likely that the critic is reproducing only the patterns of the aesthetic taste of his or her social class. It is precisely here that subjectivity resides. The opinion of this art critic cannot and should not serve as a parameter to evaluate and consolidate an aesthetic appreciation of a piece of art. The vast culture and experience in the art métier do not credit one to a degree of this importance. No one has the authority to do so. If so, we would be allowing the learned scholars to determine what is good and what is not good taste, what is fair or poor in various artistic manifestations. Moreover, common sense tells us that we should not allow anyone to determine our taste, our aesthetic appreciation. Now, when the art critic evaluates a work of art, he or she is using all repertoire and knowledge on the subject. But ultimately, the greater weight of his or her analysis at this time is undoubtedly guided by class culture, by cultural values to the universe to which he or she belongs. It is natural for the critic to reproduce them in his or her work, just as people in other social classes do. It is not by chance that in the society of capital, the production and consumption of objects are stratified.

Author Biography

Waldenyr Caldas is a full professor in Sociology of Communication and Culture at the University São Paulo. He was a visiting professor at University La Sapienza di Roma and the Joseph Fourier University in Grenoble, France. Professor Caldas has been a professor since 1996 as well as the vice-director (1997-2001) and Director (2001-2005) of ECA - School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo. In his academic career, he obtained all academic titles until the highest level as a full professor at the University of São Paulo. Currently, he is a representative of the University of São Paulo, together with the Franco-Brazilian Committee of the Agreement "Lévi-Strauss Chairs," and a member of the International Relations Committee of the University of São Paulo. Its scientific production records many books published and several essays published in magazines and national and international collections.