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Studying Theory/Theories at Art School?

On the Cultural and Social Analysis of Cognitive Capitalism

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Taking the current theory boom as its point of departure, this article discusses various uses of theory and the question of what a concept of culture needs to entail in order to correspond with cognitive capitalism. This leads to an explanation of the conception of the theory study course at the Zurich University of Arts (ZHdK), which concludes the article.

Theory is thriving in the field of art. It's generally *en vogue*, and especially in the so-called creative industry, and serves as a means to secure one's own position and significance within social conflicts. However, if, within various cultural fields theory is mainly ascribed the function of representing symbolic capital—as in Louis Althusser's *savoir-faire* (know-how-to-do)—it becomes a weapon in an entirely different way than Karl Marx had in mind (see below).

In *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée de savants* from 1967, Althusser outlines a way of looking at the appropriation, use and

application of theory, which Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel systematically unfurled during the same era with regards to the pleasure of art.[1]

"The relation between literary disciplines and their object (literature properly speaking, the fine arts, history, logic, philosophy, ethics, religion) has as its *dominant* function not so much the knowledge of this object but rather the definition and inculcation of rules, norms and practices designed to establish 'cultural' relations between the 'literate' and these objects. Above all: to know how to handle these objects in order to consume them 'properly'. To know how to 'read'—that is, 'taste', 'appreciate'—a classical text, to know how 'to apply the lessons' of history, to know how to apply the right method to think 'well' (logic), to know how to look to correct ideas (philosophy) in order to know where we stand in relation to the great questions of human existence, science, ethics, religion, etc. Through their particular relations, the arts or humanities thus impart a certain *knowledge* [*savoir*]: not a scientific knowledge of their object, and not a scientific knowledge of the mechanism of their object, but—in addition to the particular erudition needed for familiarity—a *savoir-faire* or, to be more accurate, a *know-how-to-do* to appreciate-judge, and enjoy-consume-utilize this object which is properly 'culture': a knowledge invested in a knowing how to do in order to [...] For in this couple, what is secondary (and, although not negligible, superficial, formal) is *knowledge* ;
what matters is the *knowing how to do in order to* [...] Basically, the arts were therefore the pedagogical site *par excellence*, or, in other words, a site for cultural training: learning to think properly, to judge properly, to enjoy properly, and to behave properly towards all the cultural objects involved in human existence. Their goal? The well-bred gentleman, the man of culture."[2]

Regarding the "man of culture," the availability of symbolic goods, "the distinctions in the manner of using these goods (economic or symbolic)"[3] and the value of distinction associated with them, Bourdieu and Darbel note that he "is separated from the vulgar 'by a character of elegance, nobility and good form'—the privileged classes of bourgeois society replace the difference between two cultures, products of history reproduced by education, with the basic differences between two natures, one nature naturally cultivated, and another nature naturally natural."[4]

Analogously, we are currently witnessing that theory is being used as a basis for social action and less as a tool for acquiring knowledge. Using theory in this manner actually contributes to a certain habitus of virtuosity, where the pride in what one has read and in the knowledge one has accumulated serves to further consolidate an artist habitus.

The phenomenon of such a habitual use of theory is not restricted to the field of art, it is also found in those areas of the cultural field once criticized as a "cultural industry" and that have more recently been described as the "creative economy."

Rather than using theory and critique as tools for analysis (and critique) of social relations, in the sense of Marx's Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right[5], its use here is quite the opposite: they either serve as a means of distinction or they transform and become an event or spectacle themselves.

In comparison, Marx had a radical understanding of theory; for him, it had to be capable of transforming praxis: "The weapon of criticism cannot replace the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses. Theory is capable of seizing

the masses once it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* once it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp matters at the root."[6]

Marx is not interested in theory for theory's sake. Rather, "theoretical thinking [...] only makes sense when it is 'really' put under the conditions externally placed upon it through praxis. In this way, theory and praxis must be 'unified'."[7] He pursued theory for completely practical reasons—that is, in order to change society.

This leads to the question regarding the contents of theory/ theories necessary in order to (further) analyze current socio-cultural transformations and changes in capitalist modes of production. The hypothesis of cognitive capitalism identifies an increase in the market-oriented commoditization of creativity, subjectivity and cooperation.[8] This economization of culture is certainly nothing new; it is however expanding to incorporate evermore aspects of life choices, ways of life and lifestyles.

"It would be missing the mark, however, if this were to be seen merely as the laws of the market expanding into the realm of culture or the political economy encroaching upon the last recesses of private life and on the sanctuary of creation. Questions pertaining to the creation of value and unitary property rights do indeed cause the political economy and its laws to totter."[9]

Here, the increased economic significance of the so-called cultural and creative economy or a more diversified value chain within the production process is less crucial to this trend than the socio-cultural process that gives greater economic meaning to this sector's work and lifestyles (e.g. blurring the boundaries between work and life, changes in communication and action patterns)

norms and practices. This aspect is far more important than an increase in the stake in the creation of value. On the whole, there has been a massive increase in the significance ascribed to services, immaterial labor, knowledge and interactive processes of social cooperation. This trend has been described as the culturalization of the economy (Angela McRobbie)[10] and as the culturalization of politics (Boris Buden).[11]

The increased significance of aesthetic practices is characteristic for this change, not only within the production process, but also within the everyday lives of more and more people. The exploitation of these practices for economic innovation is accompanied by attempts to invoke and evoke aspects of an artistic lifestyle (self-realization, creativity, flexibility, self-organization, independence, freelancing) in order to make working and living conditions more market-oriented.

However, this trend cannot be solely understood as a technique of domination.
Taking a closer look reveals the ways in which this present dual subjectification is enacted within the overarching process of the "subjectification of work."[12] What this means is that this development is also an expression of a specific need of the workers and that this process cannot be narrowly understood as a strategy of domination. It is important to bear in mind that the workers are also the ones who are driving, demanding or desiring this process. In the wake of education reform(s), the remodeling of qualification structures etc., the ambivalence of the changes currently in progress can be analyzed with the term immaterial labor[13] (or perhaps more precisely: mental labor[14]).

This ambivalence poses both a theoretical and practical challenge. On a theoretical level, it raises the question of how social criticism

must be conceived in order for it to remain aware of this mechanism without becoming one-sided, tenaciously holding onto a cheap (although painstakingly biographically acquired) critique of ideology or vice versa—mistaking each minute spent on Facebook during work hours for subversion.

This socio-cultural transformation is related to a rising number of demands placed on incorporately considerion d to a nalysiert marketOr am I being too sensitive?social analysis. An example of this is an increased concern with semiotics due to the heightened global employment of signs and symbols in producing images (in terms of representations), texts and sounds. Language, symbols, knowledge and communication have become key elements within a process now known as cognitive capitalism. It is not only a determining factor for artistic praxis and for the use of media, it is also a crucial backdrop for formulating appropriate theories.

Excursus: Which concept of culture is necessary for an analysis of cognitive capitalism?

Following the hypothesis of the culturalization of the economy, establishing an idea or a concept of culture appears to be necessary for social analysis itself. Otherwise, we risk treating culture as a black box or as a quasi "floating signifier", only to end up with senseless culturalism.[15]

A key term here is contextualization, because at present it is essential to refrain from analyzing cultural artifacts and practices in isolation from one another, according to the traditions of the humanities and philology, in order to derive a kind of social "authenticity" or "absoluteness" from them. In fact, what is necessary is an understanding of historicity through which the

present can be analyzed as emerging through history (and therefore as capable of change).

At the same time, such an approach aims to avoid theoretical short circuits or short cuts such as semantic analyses that conclude the existence of "true" uses of cultural artifacts or a "real" (usually: "false") consciousness.

Thus, it's important to recall an understanding of cultural analysis where the objects of analysis (texts, images, representations) obtain their specific meaning once they are viewed as elements of a whole way of life. This idea can be traced back to Raymond Williams who redefined the concept of culture as "taking the theory of culture as a theory of relations between elements in a whole way of life."[16] Within this concept, the image, novel, poem or opera is analyzed in relation to the social groups whose lives are reflected therein. [17]

It's also important to recall that the idea of "culture and way of life" within Marxist cultural theory, which is closely related to the idea above, also seeks to connect peoples' material conditions for existence (production and reproduction) with their way of life. If culture is understood as another side of the social, i.e. as a certain way of life, as a method for coping with and organizing one's life under the given circumstances, then it can also be understood as a particular form of the structure/action relation.

This concept formation process is rooted in cultural studies and is not only linked to Raymond Williams, but also to Edward P. Thompson, the mentor of the British New Left. From a socio-historical perspective and against the backdrop of historically verifiable and divergent interests, experiences, traditions and living conditions, Thompson argued that it was necessary to include the

conflicts between the ways of life of different classes within an understanding of culture and way of life. Therefore, Thompson speaks of culture as "a whole way of struggle"[18] in contrast to Williams's "whole way of life." By applying a historical perspective, he aims to put the main differences and ways of life shaped through history in relation to one another. Through viewing them more precisely as relationships and struggles, he is able to analyze them as an "active process".[19]

"The success of Thompson's critique of Williams is largely due to the fact that he criticizes him on the experiential level. Thompson showed that experiences are not made within a 'whole way of life' but in concretely different life realities and ways of life that necessarily stand in conflict with others. He also demonstrates that experiences appear differently when viewed from different perspectives on a structural level, and—this is crucial to his argument—that both subjective experiences and social structures are tied to one another in a complex and conflicting manner."[20]

Following this critique, Williams distances himself from analyzing culture as a "common whole way of life." He develops an understanding of culture that is capable of differentially problematizing notions of a "common culture" and making social conflicts and singular interests comprehensible within the cultural analysis.

What is interesting here in terms of considering the purpose of culture within cognitive capitalism, is that both Williams's and Thompson's perspectives on cultural analysis show that life realities and ways of life differ, that they are not merely stand-alone concepts, but that they exist in contention with one another. Insofar as subjective experiences and social structures are complexly

conflicting, the “problem of mediation” becomes the “main construction site” for developing theory.[21]

Studying Theory at Art School?

This sketch of the problems of both cognitive capitalism and of culturalization clearly show why it is not so far fetched to raise these questions within the context of studying theory at an art school. Traditionally, the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK) places great value on theory. It thus seems fitting to pay close attention to the tangible increase in the significance of the cultural and the aesthetic in social transformation processes within such a space. For some time now at the Department of Art and Media at ZHdK, within the immediate surroundings of fine art, photography and media art, it is possible to take part in a theory study course that not only aims to theorize artistic praxis but, to a much greater extent, to focus on the connection between culture and society in general. Both the field of art and everyday culture are equally taken into consideration equally within the study course. It is necessary that the content and methods correspond with the demands placed on aesthetic procedures and the critical cultural and social analyses as they emerge from the current social transformation.

The content and personnel for this theory study course have recently been restructured in the process of creating a new bachelor’s study course for “media and art.” The study course is now systematically structured and focuses on aesthetics, cultural and social theory and media and communication theory.[22] It is also possible to work on a theory-based project in the subsequent Fine Arts Master’s program. With two research institutes, this field

is also excellently equipped in terms of the research conducted at ZHdK.

This theory study course spans the developments and updates of the currently relevant trends in aesthetics, political theories and cultural studies oriented towards social theory (including empirical cultural sciences etc.) and focuses on artistic praxis, popular and everyday culture, media, which includes reflecting upon their social and political dimensions.

The study course gives a broad overview of these subjects in order to provide a background that makes it possible to delve deeper into specific examples. In this sense, the study course "intensifying theory" (*Vertiefung Theorie)*[23] focuses on the role of the aesthetic within the social realm by taking a closer look at it within the context of aesthetic-political practices and specifically as a critical art praxis. It is principally geared towards engaging with concepts of aesthetic praxis and the political, and aims to lay the groundwork for creating a critical and theoretically well-versed authorship by way of appropriating and applying theory/theories. This is also why half of the study course consists of praxis modules where training in theory is provided in order to carry out concrete projects in the form of seminars and mentorships. This structure is not solely a reflection of art school custom; it also represents an understanding of theory as social praxis.

Based on the broad concept of culture as praxis-theory and as an aspect of society, as outlined above, the students are encouraged to experiment with different forms of cultural grammar. At ZHdK, the study of theory offers a set of instruments for examining, analyzing and transforming cultural practices.

The process of capitalism becoming cognitive, as described above, goes hand in hand with an increased economic desire for knowledge production and creativity. The students and teachers are part of this process and do not stand outside of it. This makes it even more crucial to be able to reflect upon this development. It is thus necessary to seek out the symbolic levels that encourage action and to discuss which aesthetic-political practices can be applied to the current social situation. Therefore, the topics covered in this study course explicitly entail the political dimension of cultural practices—their potential to expand the political imagination, to forge new alignments, new struggles, new worlds.

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[1] Within this context, Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel maintain that they do "not intend to refute Kant's phrase that 'the beautiful is that which pleases without concept.' " Instead, they are interested in the social conditions that "make possible both this experience and the people for whom it is possible (art lovers or 'people of taste') and thence to determine the limits within which it can exist." They empirically substantiate for the art lover what Althusser had analyzed as *savoir-faire*, which is that "the things which please are the things whose concept is understood, or, more precisely, that it is only things whose concept is understood which can give pleasure. [... And] that this pleasure, an artificial product of art and artifice, which exists or is meant to exist as if it were entirely natural, is in reality a cultivated pleasure." Bourdieu, Pierre/ Darbel, Alain: *The Love of Art. European Art Museums and Their Public.* Trans. Dominique Schnapper. Cambridge: Stanford University Press, 1990 (1969), p. 110.

[2] Louis Althusser, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée de savants*, cited in Dušan Grlja / Jelena Vesić, Prelom kolektiv: The Neoliberal Institution of Culture and the Critique of Culturalization. In: Transversal 11/2007. Online publication: http://transform.eipcp.net/transversal/0208/prelom/en [Accessed: 4 November 2010].

[3] Bourdieu/Darbel, p. 111.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Marx, Karl. Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right. Introduction (1844)

[6] Ibid. [Oakley, Allen: Marx's Critique Of Political Economy: Intellectual Sources And Evolution, Vol. 1. London: Routledge, 1984, p. 9.]

[7] Macherey, Pierre: Theorie. In: Kritisches Wörterbuch des Marxismus. Hamburg 2000, pp. 1292-1299

[8] Moulier Boutang, Yann: Neue Grenzziehungen in der politischen Ökonomie. In: Marion von Osten (ed.) Norm der Abweichung. Zürich 2003, pp. 251-280.

[9] Ibid.

[10] McRobbie, Angela. Kunst, Mode und Musik in der Kulturgesellschaft. In: Hoffmann, Justin/Marion von Osten (eds.) Das Phantom sucht seinen Mörder. Ein Reader zur Kulturalisierung der Ökjonomie, Berlin 1999, pp. 15-42.

[11] Cf.: Buden, Boris: The Pit of Babel. or: The Society that Mistook Culture for Politics. In: Translate.eipcp.net, 14.02. 2005.

Online publication http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/01/buden-strands01en [Accessed: 4 November 2010].

[12] It's important to note here that the term "subjectification of work" refers to a trend within socio-cultural change; it is also part of a transformed paradigm of labor and, in a Foucauldian sense, the term "subjectification" also refers to a general technology of power. Cf. Schönberger, Klaus: Widerständigkeit der Biografie. Zu den Grenzen der Entgrenzung neuer Konzepte alltäglicher Lebensführung im Übergang vom fordistischen zum postfordistischen Arbeitsparadigma. In: Seifert, Manfred/Götz, Irene/Huber, Birgit (eds.): Flexible Biographien. Horizonte und Brüche im Arbeitsleben der Gegenwart. Frankfurt, 2007, pp. 63-97. Available online at: http://www.kultur.uni-hamburg.de/technikforschung/download/Schoenberger_Widerstaendigkeit_der_Biographie.pdf [4 November 2010].

[13] Lazzarato, Maurizio: Immaterielle Arbeit. Gesellschaftliche Tätigkeit unter den Bedingungen des Postfordismus. In: Negri, Toni/Lazzarato, Maurizio/Virno, Paolo: Umherschweifende Produzenten. Immaterielle Arbeit und Subversion, Berlin 1998, pp. 39–52.

[14] Berardi, Franco „Bifo": Mentale Arbeit in der Globalisierung. In: com.une.farce 1/1998. Available online at: http://www.copyriot.com/unefarce//no1/artikel/forza.htm [4 November 2010].

[15] Kaschuba, Wolfgang: Kulturalismus: Vom Verschwinden des Sozialen im gesellschaftlichen Diskurs. In: Zeitschrift für Volkskunde 91 (1995), pp. 27-46.

[16] Williams, Raymond: Culture and Society 1780-1950. Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books, 1963 (1958), p. 11-12.

[17] Hall, Stuart. Über die Arbeit des Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (Birmingham). Ein Gespräch mit H. Gustav Klaus. In: Gulliver. Deutsch-englische Jahrbücher/German-English Yearbooks, Vol. 2. (1977), p. 55.

[18] Thompson, Edward P.: Kritik an Raymond Williams' ‚The Long Revolution'. In: Bromley, Roger/Göttlich, Udo/Winter, Carsten (eds.): Cultural Studies. Grundlagentexte zur Einführung. Lüneburg 1999 (1961), S. 75-91, p. 91.

[19] Ibid, p. 90

[20] Winter, Carsten: Raymond Williams (1921-1988). Medien und Kommunikationsforschung für die Demokratisierung von Kultur und Gesellschaft. In: Medien- & Kommunikationswissenschaft (M&K) 55 (2007) 2, pp. 247-268, p. 259.

[21] Ibid, p. 254

[22] Vertiefung Theorie: Webseite for the intensification of theory. http://www.zhdk.ch/?vth [4 November 2010]

[23] Translator's note: In the English translation of a related text by Gerald Raunig "Intensifying Theory Production. The School of the Missing Teacher" translator Aileen Derieg notes that the "German word "Vertiefung" means intensification, intensifying, but also – in a technical sense – specialization within a BA course."