



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI PADOVA

Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Triennale Interclasse in
Lingue, Letterature e Mediazione culturale (LTLLM)
Classe LT-12

Tesina di Laurea

The Arts as Commodities: a historical-economic analysis

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n° matr.1232033 / LTLLM

Anno Accademico 2021 / 2022

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Introduction

This paper examines the relationships between economics – namely, capitalism – and the arts to shed a light on the market functioning and its impact on creative work.

Adopting a historical-economic perspective, the paper analyses said relationship to unpack the dynamics of the creative industries, and what are the entailments of such dynamics, by distinguishing three main artistic fields of interest. These are examined extensively in each dedicated chapter. The first artistic field is the domain of the “visual arts”, which are to be intended as those artworks in their most widespread and well-known connotation – painting, sculptures, architecture especially. The second is the field of the “multimedia arts”, which comprehends disciplines such as photography, cinema, and music. Finally, the last area of research gives an outlook to the “literary arts”, by resting specifically on the issue of the novel, which stands out among other literary genres throughout the rise of capitalist societies. With such a distinction being made, the paper aims to acknowledge art in its broadest nature, thus structuring the research throughout multiple realms of creative production which are all segmented in the market accordingly. It is thanks to this approach that the paper looks forwards to give an insightful contribution to the discipline of Cultural Economics by comparing different artistic disciplines which are, indeed, considered all to be equally “artistic” – thus disregarding common prejudices which often ranks more ancient forms of art higher than others in terms of prestige. Because the subject matter is so vast and multifaceted, the chosen material is as interdisciplinary and miscellaneous. Consequently, the research does not focus on a single artwork serving as a case-study or as a general example for the functioning of the art market, but rather works with a corpus of selected articles and essays. However, there will be a few artists – from painters to novelists – being mentioned in the study, although the research questions will not revolve specifically around those single cases.

Because the discipline of Economic History necessarily involves more than mere Economic Theory, the bibliography that was built for the study implies a high grade of interdisciplinarity. Therefore, a great contribution was brought from fields such as Critical and Cultural Theory, Cultural Economics, Sociology and Philosophy among the others, as well as scientific studies conducted by experts in the fields of interest which share a statistical methodology. Some of the most notable contributions have been

brought by Walter Benjamin, author of *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, David Throsby, and Theodor Adorno, who are all classic authors in the field of Cultural Economics. Selected essays and articles by various authors were chosen from other key sources, which are the dedicated scientific journals, such as the *Journal of Cultural Economics*. The result is a bibliography including both classics and timeless works written in the early 1900s serving as a solid framework, and more recent and updated researchers to provide with contextualized information contributing to the final outcomes of this paper.

The area of investigation regards the commodification process of art from the rise of the industry up until nowadays; for this reason, much emphasis has been placed upon mechanical reproduction first discussed by Benjamin, and the logic of chain production. Starting from the assumption that cultural and artistic goods had been given an industrial asset, the outcomes of this revolution affect the work of art itself and its relationships with its enjoyers – that have now become consumers. It is a well-established fact that capitalism has an intrinsic bourgeoisie connotation, as it verges on the rise of the so-called middle class and its overwhelming influence at the expenses of the aristocracy. It goes without saying, then, that the enjoyment of art will be greatly affected by the advent of mass society, as well as with the development of new technologies responsible for both the production and the reproduction processes. As for the cases of music and literature, authorship becomes a means of exchangeability, and thus a marketable issue influenced by legislation aspects. Overall, the research question carried throughout the entire research revolves around the commodification practices and the relationships between creative labor and the market, in all the declinations provided by each chapter. What are the variables in the pricing of a painting, to what extent can a major discographic company control the work of a musician, and why has the genre of the novel outshined the *ars poetica* over the last couple of centuries, are some of the questions this paper dwells upon.

To answer them each chapter starts by summarizing and discussing the reading materials mentioned above while supporting the main points and ideas with proper examples according to the artistic branch which is referred to. Over the course of the three paragraphs constituting the text, each chapter interprets different aspects of the subject matter and delves into few of them with respect to the given length constraints. As explained earlier, empirical data provided by experimental studies and philosophical

perspectives both concurs to the support of the thesis in a constructive and critical dialogue.

More specifically, all chapters have a quick outline to introduce the contents expressed in every paragraph; the first one, by means of example, starts the first paragraph by addressing the issue of the value of art, which will return in the last paragraph under a different viewpoint. After reporting the main theories of artistic – or cultural – value, the focus inevitably shifts on its economic translation, which leads to the second paragraph dedicated to the pricing in the art market. Such paragraph examines a study about auction sales while reconnecting it to the theoretical notions introduced in the previous one. Finally, the last paragraph of chapter one returns on the issue of value adopting a philosophical approach which introduces the thought of Walter Benjamin. The chapter concludes by summarizing the main points and anticipating some of the next one.

The second chapter exceeds in length both the first and the last one, as it deals with three forms of artistic expressions previously labelled as “multimedia arts”. The tripartite structure of the chapter follows the order of photography being the first paragraph, cinema being the second, and music being the last. In particular, photography serves as a borderline case as its history is to be found in the middle between art, especially the art of painting, and cinematography – which are the previous and following themes in the analysis. For this reason, the approach to photography is of comparative nature and resumes from the reading of Benjamin concluding chapter one. The analysis thus moves on to cinema, by looking at the history of its industry, and then to its functioning. The last focus is spent on music, with a distinction between a “before” and an “after” in the history of its industry, in which the advent of recorded music plays as a turning point. Similarly, the establishment of copyright laws are also discussed and recognized as a revolution for the marketing of musical pieces.

The last chapter covers the realm of literature, with major emphasis being stressed on the novel. Much like the previous chapters, a historical analysis is carried in order to understand the dynamics leading to the genre popularization which begun in the 19th century. With this regard, the role of the press and other modern technologies are widely acknowledged. It is also at this point that consumerism is directly addressed as a phenomenon – although similar references to the “democratization of tastes” can be traced back to the first chapter. Besides recalling the issue of property rights and making

a brief excursus on plagiarism in literature, the reflection continues by examining the standpoints of some of the great authors of modern literature with respect to the socio-economic reality they lived in. Almost in a specular way, the last chapter indulges on postmodernism - like the first one did in its last paragraph -, which is a field offering interesting assumptions and reflections about the condition of art, in its most general sense, in late capitalist societies.

Chapter One

Capitalism and the Visual Arts

Under the expression “visual arts” multiple art forms, including photography and filmmaking, are ascribed. However, we shall make a further distinction between “traditional” forms of art – painting, sculptures, architecture – and multimedia ones, which indicate relatively modern artistic expressions such as photography and cinema (see Chapter Two).

This chapter aims to give insights on the art market by looking at artistic consumptions at auctions and sales, while also discussing significant intellectual perspectives regarding the commodification of the arts. The notion of value will play a key role as it will be discussed in its alleged correlation with prices attributed to artworks.

1.1 Art Economics and the value of art

As explained earlier, this chapter will focus on traditional “fine arts”, thus disregarding photography and filmmaking which will be discussed in the next chapter. According to Frateschi and Mistri, we should be able to tell between *visual* and *performative* arts as well - the latter including music, dance, theater, and opera - because these two categories feature different types of consumers and different organizational modalities. They further discuss that the reason for this academic categorization is partly economic: “Performing arts, and in the same way visual arts manifest some difficulties arising on the services production side, meaning that consumes of such activities must necessarily take place where they are produced. This means that it is not easy to broaden the market by increasing the production, whereby it is not possible to reach scale economies [...] the deficit tends to be covered with public subsidies or private sponsors, as well as through the augmentation of tickets costs”¹. Anyhow, both *performative* and *visual* arts constitute what Frateschi and Mistri call “cultural goods”. Cultural goods like art detain, intuitively, cultural value; but what about economic value? Under capitalism everything is labelled a price, hence an expression of economic value; but where does the price come from? On the one hand, Mariana Mazzucato writes: “If value is defined by

¹ C. Frateschi, M. Mistri, I valori dell’arte. Economia e psicologia della cultura, Carocci, Roma, 2006, p. 15

price [...] then each activity which has (legally) a price is seen as creator of value”; on the other, she reports “the dominant opinion” according to which “prices are determined by demand and offer”². This apparently simple statement will lead us to consider how does this demand-and-offer-dynamic works in the art market specifically: indeed, the “demand for art” rooted in the consumer is quite an abstract and difficult-to-frame concept. Needless to say, establishing a proper methodology to attribute artworks a price and a value is a controversial issue which requires to analyze and compare multiple perspectives and scholar’s positions. A seminal contribution in the relatively modern discipline of Cultural Economics was brought by David Throsby, who published several studies in the field. Among those, his *Economics and Culture* stands out. After approaching different theories of value (i.e., Adam Smith and neoclassical economists) he concludes by observing that: “at best prices are an indicator of value but not necessarily a direct measure of value, and that price theory elaborates on, but it not a replacement for, a theory of value in economics”³. As he rephrased: “The completed work exists in an embodied form (as is the case of a painting) or as property rights (as in the case of a piece of music). The work itself, or the rights to it, can be traded. The work can be copyrighted and doing so is a means of declaring that the work has economic worth”⁴, and yet its market price is not necessarily the best possible indicator. In his attempt to describe what constitutes the cultural value of a work of art, Throsby identify: *Aesthetic value* (i.e., beauty, harmony, form, etc.), *Spiritual value* (i.e., cultural significance for members of a particular faith), *Social value* (i.e., the sense of connection with others), *Historical value* (i.e., the sense of continuity with the past), *Symbolic value* (the meaning that is to be conveyed and extracted from the artwork) and *Authenticity value* (characteristics of originality and uniqueness of the artwork)⁵. At this point Throsby wonders whether economic value could encompass cultural value, suggesting that according to how everyone would rate an artwork based on cultural (i.e., aesthetic) value, her or his “willingness to pay” for such artwork will consequently increase or decrease. Likewise, multiple social experiments adopted the “contingent valuation method” – one of the

² Mariana Mazzucato, *Il valore di tutto*, Laterza, Bari, 2018, p.

³ David Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 23

⁴ *Ibid*, p 103

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 28-29

economists' tool - to estimate the willingness to pay for "non-market goods"⁶, including the social experiment applied to cultural goods conducted by Del Missier, Rumiati and Bonini. However, these methodologies received widespread criticism for many reasons; above all, the constant overrating of "asserted" willingness to pay during a social experiment compared to the actual one, which co-occurs with multiple other cognitive biases in the interviewee. Thus, as Throsby admitted the correlation between economic and cultural value is much more complicated and problematic.

A related interesting component is artistic taste. Once again, the consumer's taste corresponds to the marginal valuation associated to the quality of an artistic good, and it is considered a decisive parameter coming into play during sales or auctions.⁷ However, sales and auctions can often exchange fakes to unaware or non-expert buyers, and this is most likely to happen, unsurprisingly, when an artist or an artistic movement is successful and "easy and cheap to imitate"⁸. Fakes are not to be confused with copies; as Elisabetta Lazzaro explains "fakes are copies which, consequently to the lack of perfect information in the art market (from which demand would be affected in particular), generates a misleading behavior in the offer"⁹. Copies, on the other hand, constitute positive benefits with respect to diffusion, rare offer compensation or limited budget compensation. As Lazzaro puts it: "the measurements supposed to limit these informative asymmetries highlights the central role played by experts. Nevertheless, there is no precise definition for this professional category (historic or critic of art, commercial intermediary, artist's relative?), and several conflicts of interests follows, especially when an expert acts also as a merchant, museum curator, tribunal expert etc."¹⁰. Interestingly enough, paradoxes like these are also due to the long-lasting reluctance to recognize the art industry as, in fact, an industry. To quote, once again, Throsby: "Many creative artists resent the thought that their activities form part of an industry. Such a proposition, they believe, emphasizes the commercial aspects of artistic production and subjugates the pure creative impulse to the demands of the market place. [...] The heavy-footed economist, brandishing words such as 'market structure', 'concentration ratios', 'labor demand' and 'value-added', must

⁶ C. Frateschi, M. Mistri, *I valori dell'arte. Economia e psicologia della cultura*, Carocci, Roma, 2006, p. 129

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 79

⁸ *Ibid*

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 78

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 83

indeed seem insensitive to the finer purposes of art”¹¹. Yet the industrial asset of artistic production is already part of the economy and has been further segmented into specific groupings of activities corresponding to the different types of artistic expressions. Therefore, we have subgroups like the “art” industry, or the “music” industry, the “film” industry, the “editorial” industry, which all contribute to the making of the “Cultural Industry”. Of course, nomenclatures for the industries may vary, as other scholars and professors have referred to the Cultural Industry with the term “Creative” Industry, for example, but the meaning remains overall unchanged.

1.2 On prices in the art market

As “prices in the fine art market [...] are continually monitored, and the aggregate value of sales in any period is taken as an indicator of the economic size of the market”¹², numerous studies have followed - be they referred to the pricing of single art works and art exhibitions or even museums management. As previously mentioned, the concept of “value” in artistic and cultural matters has always been subject of academic discussion and debate, but it is widely acknowledged how the ownerships of art pieces is an evident wealth index. With this respect, Throsby argued how “demand is more price elastic for popular cultural forms than for the higher arts; in the latter case quality characteristics of the good or service provided do tend to outweigh price in influencing consumption decisions. Income elasticities, in turn, are found to be relatively higher for the arts than for many other commodities, because of the luxury nature and leisure content of some arts consumption, and also because of the association of tastes with education and hence (at one remove) with income.”¹³. Similarly, this concerns the artist’s sphere and the production process with its economic costs as well; as Throsby puts it: “The history of art is replete with accounts of how important money has been to many artists, from painters of the Florentine Renaissance, through Mozart, Beethoven and Stravinsky, to any number of writers, visual artists and musicians working today”¹⁴, as they necessarily “incur expenses in the pursuit of their work; the costs of materials, the rent of studio space, and so on are often significant.”¹⁵. By means of example, colors and pigments have played a

¹¹ David Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p.

¹² *Ibid* p. 24

¹³ *Ibid*

¹⁴ *Ibid*, p.98

¹⁵ *Ibid*

central role throughout the history of art for their ever-evolving symbolism, but this cultural value is strictly intertwined with the monetary value associated to each pigment (because some of them were more difficult to get hold of, especially if they were traded overseas). An exemplificative case in recent history is Anish Kapoor's. Contemporary Art-enthusiasts are much likely to be familiar with this name: conventionally defined as an exponent of conceptual art, Kapoor is well known for his installations and sculptures. However, he also gained worldwide attention and his colleagues' antipathy after the Vantablack controversy. Vantablack is regarded as the world's blackest black, an extremely expensive lab-made shade of color which immediately attracted tons of painters, sculptors, and the like – until Kapoor decided to buy the exclusive artistic rights to it. This made him the only human being who is legally allowed to use Vantablack and, more importantly, the world's most hated artist alive.

Kapoor, who appeared in *The Sunday Times* "Rich List" in 2019 together with Damien Hirst, is widely recognized as the embodiment of elitism and privilege in the art world. While other artists are more likely to deal with income as a constraint, which means acknowledging that "the domain of the decision variables is affected by economic circumstance."¹⁶ Kapoor has no necessity to fit in a budget when shopping for art materials (which has been most definitely made clear at this point). Even critically acclaimed painters like Edgar Degas had to find compromises with the market as they dealt with less fortunate family backgrounds to secure their relatives', not to mention their own's, finances: as Throsby recounts, Degas "painted A Cotton Office in New Orleans in 1873 because he believed (wrongly) that it would appeal to a particular client in England, and he even changed his style to suit what he thought the market would like"¹⁷. These anecdotes once again prove the role of economics and its common dynamics in artistic matters. But let us go back to the issue of artistic consumption, rather than its production and behind-the-scenes intricacies.

In a paper published in 2012, Luc Renneboog and Christophe Spaenjers investigated the prices determinants and investment performance of art by applying a hedonic regression analysis to the data collected between 1982 and 2007.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 99

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 106

As clearly stated by the authors at the beginning of the study, their main finding made clear that “artist reputation, attribution, signs of authenticity, medium, size, topic, and the timing and location of the sale are significantly correlated with price levels”.¹⁸ More specifically, they listed a series of variables called “exogenous reputational measures”; these are: *textbook dummy* (the artist whose work has been sold was featured in a history of art textbook, namely the *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*), *exhibition dummy* (the artist has been represented at the prestigious *Documenta* exhibition in Kassel), *dead artist dummy* (the sale occurred subsequent to the artist’s death), *attribution dummy* (i.e. the artwork is attributed to an artist, or is “in style of” an artist), *authenticity dummy* (the artwork is signed or dated), *medium dummies* (the artwork is an oil, a watercolor or a drawing), *size* (height and width), *topic dummies* (the artwork has a subject matter, i.e. landscape, nude, portrait, etc.), *month dummies* (the sale took place during a busy month, i.e. May, June, November or December) and *auction house dummies* (the sale took place in an important location, i.e. Sotheby’s and Christie’s).¹⁹ By applying these variables to the examined sales, Renneboog and Spaenjers documented correlated price variations: “[...] works are on average priced 13.5% higher after the inclusion of the artist in an important art history reference. Also, the strength of the attribution has an important effect on the price of an art object. Whenever an attribution dummy comes into play, the price level drops by more than 50%. Not surprisingly, larger discounts are recorded for works that are “in the style of” or “after” a master than for “attributed” or “studio” works.”²⁰ Moreover, it emerged that “signed and dated works carry higher prices: a signature increases the price by as much as 31% on average, and a date adds almost 19% in value.”²¹ This empirical evidence strongly validates the notion of “Authenticity value” conceptualized by Throsby when discussing cultural value. Furthermore, it should be noted that “the price of a particular artwork realized in the marketplace could be expected to be influenced partly by the buyer’s desire to have the piece on display for the pleasure it provides, and partly by the expectation that on resale it may provide a handsome capital windfall. Studies of art prices have imputed the

¹⁸ Renneboog e Spaenjers, *Buying beauty: on prices and returns in the art market*, “Management Science”, Vol. 59, no. 1, 2013, p. 36

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 40-42

²⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 42-43

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 43

observed spread between average rates of return on artworks and returns on other financial assets of comparable riskiness as measuring the consumption value of the art.”²².

To add further interesting insight about art consumption, a different study carried by Morgane Lindenberg and Kim Oosterlinck is worth mentioning. As Martorella and Wu argued: “Since the 1980s, financial institutions have been viewed as the most active corporate buyers of art”²³. To investigate the phenomenon, Lindenberg and Oosterlinck circumscribed their research to the Belgian financial sector to focus on corporate art collections and the purchasing of art by banking institutions. As the title of this 2011 article suggests, this in vogue practice is “a strategy tool”. Although the reasons for the purchasing and development of (private) art collections are not purely of marketing nature, it did emerge an interest towards investments diversification and financial gain. This is the case of AXA Belgium, one of the institutions taken into consideration and interviewed for the study: “For AXA, art enhances the work environment but also allows the firm to diversify its investments. Although investment objectives were seldom mentioned, one cannot say that institutions do not consider the option; the investment motivation may well and truly exist, even if not stated. For example, while Cera and ING [Belgium] never explicitly mentioned investment objectives, they did say that their selection and purchasing philosophies are based on such strict criteria that their acquisitions have led to financial gain”²⁴. The artistic curator who spoke on behalf of AXA Belgium added that the collection was an investment because it enabled risk diversification. Undoubtedly, this goes alongside with multiple other benefits that are not directly “profit-oriented”, like the “visual well-being” of the employees or the so called “corporate philanthropy”. It was also remarked by the authors themselves how these banking institutions had no lucrative intentions but rather treated their artworks “on the balance sheet as fixed assets, confirming the intention to keep them within the establishment”²⁵. Anyhow, it goes without saying that the selection of artworks and art collections is far from casual: for this practice being essentially a marketing strategy associated with the brand image of the institution, each bank will choose its art pieces

²² David Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 123

²³ Martorella, R. 1990. *Corporate Art*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press; Wu, C.T. 2003. *Privatising Culture: Corporate Art Interventions Since the 1980s*. London: Verso

²⁴ Kim Oosterlinck, Morgane Lindenberg, *Art Collections as a Strategy Tool: A Typology Based on the Belgian Financial Sector*, *International Journal of Arts Management*, Vol. 13, No. 3, p. 10

²⁵ *Ibid*

accordingly. Therefore, Lindenberg and Oosterlinck track down two essential typologies of bank, one being interested in conveying a sense of exclusiveness and luxury, and the other being more sensitive towards matters of social responsibility. Another fundamental difference between the two is the attempt of communication about what we have previously mentioned as “brand image”. In the first case the levels of communication are almost nonexistent and purposefully lacking, which is the reason why Lindenberg and Oosterlinck have named this group as “The Secret Art-Lovers”.²⁶ Conversely, the second group outperforms the first one by means of both communication and *patronage*, which is defined by the authors as “the extent to which the firm wishes to appear socially responsible”²⁷; hence they are called “The State’s Heirs”²⁸ because of their effort in “promoting the country’s heritage”²⁹ by building their collections with pieces by Belgian artists.

1.3 Philosophical Perspectives

When introducing the relationship between art and economics in the preceding paragraphs, a couple of examples about the concrete impact on the final work of art were brought, as for the case of Impressionist painter Edgar Degas. Earlier on, the theory of (cultural) value was also considered, but because it was not relevant until now, the “crisis of value”, strictly related with postmodernism, was overlooked. This paragraph adopts a philosophical perspective to amply important issues in cultural theory and better investigate the impact of economics, namely capitalism, on art and on its consumers.

Many cultural criticism analyses start by looking at one of the most influential essay in the field, that is to say, Walter Benjamin’s *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. By referring to the modern age as the one of “mechanical reproduction”, Benjamin splits human history in a “before” and “after” the arrival of the industry: before the industry, as Benjamin recalls in the first chapter, the work of art *was* technically reproduced, but not to nowadays extent and not with today’s outcomes. By contrast: “around 1900 technological reproduction had reached a standard at which it had not merely begun to take the totality of traditional artworks as its province, imposing the

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 11

²⁷ *Ibid*

²⁸ *Ibid*

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 14

most profound changes on the impact of such works; it had even gained a place for itself among artistic modes of procedure”³⁰. For Benjamin the prior case studies of mechanical reproduction are the newborn branches of photography and cinema which will be examined in the following chapter. For now, it suffices to understand the grounds of his thought as to why is mechanical reproduction such a historical turning point. The reason, according to Benjamin, is the loss of aura: “the here and now of the work of art – its unique existence in the place where it is at this moment”³¹. Basically, as the “unique” artworks is reproduced in thousands of copies, its aesthetic authenticity inexorably suffers; much alike, the decontextualization of a work of art – especially religious art – from its original location to a museum completely annuls its cultic value for the sake of “exhibition” or “display” value (mass consumption), until all artworks will be progressively and precisely “designed for reproducibility”³², which will be a significant perspective expanded in Chapter Two. As the artwork enters the market, it arrives as a commodity which is attributed a value in the ways presented above. From a Marxist perspective the only property of such commodity, like all others, it’s the “exchangeability”. Indeed, in Marx’s analysis of early capitalist society “exchange precedes use”³³, which means, firstly, that commodities and services are proven useful once they are sold and, secondly, that the very purpose of a given commodity is subordinated to exchangeability. As Nicholas Brown explains, whatever commodity we are producing, our primal concern will be the possibility to exchange it, which presupposes a demand: “That demand, and therefore all of the concrete attributes that factor into that demand, are decided elsewhere—namely, on the market.”³⁴. This is why Brown argues that “the specific problem confronting the work of art under capitalism is not the production process—this a problem but not one specific to art—but the market. Markets preexist capitalism, as does the commodity”³⁵. If, for example, we think about classic art we are confronted with a reality of auctions and privileged – or privatized - consumption: in an article addressing the marketing success at Christie’s in 2015, Amy

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Penguin, Londra, 2008

³¹ *Ibid*

³² *Ibid*

³³ Nick Brown, *Autonomy: the social ontology of art under capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019, p. 5

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 7

³⁵ *Ibid*, p. 16

Finnerty argues that: “art buying is driven by both profit and emotion. Art is portable and pretty, and today a startling number of the world's treasures are concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy collectors”³⁶. Besides, as Throsby remembers, “because art works can be resold, and their prices may rise over time, they have the characteristics of financial assets, and as such may be sought as a hedge against inflation, as a store of wealth or as a source of speculative capital gain”³⁷, which is entirely different from buying art because it’s “portable” or “pretty”. Throsby moves on by describing the stratified nature of the art market as a set of three main layers: the “primary”, often decentralized, market made up by single artists selling their works to local fairs, art galleries and small dealers; the “secondary level” where “established” artist enter the city-based market where art is located; and finally, the highest international level to which auctions houses belong.³⁸ This particular structure, according to Throsby, implies that “at the lowest level, competition is widespread. Universally there are more artists and would-be artists than there are buyers interested in acquiring their work, so prices are low”³⁹, which is a far from encouraging scenario. The tripartite division of the market seems to suggest a hierarchical structure where well-established and top-tiers artists can profit from billionaires’ impressive transactions, while emerging and younger ones at the bottom of the pyramid face a radically different reality.

But what happen, on the other hand, when art merges with the masses? Applied to cultural production, this logic of artwork-as-a-commodity results, in Michael Fried’s words, in the “distinction between art and objecthood”. To summarize: “everything Fried finds objectionable in the pseudo-art “object”—its pandering appeal to the spectator, its refusal of the category of internal coherence, its infinite iterability subject to drift rather than development—is, however, perfectly legitimate for a certain class of objects with which we are already familiar, namely commodities”⁴⁰. The understanding of his discrimination between art and “nonart” leads us to the problem of postmodernism, the historical period which spawned at the end of the 20th Century, and what Throsby

³⁶ Ed Johnson, *The Art Market*, Foreign Policy, Slate Group, LLC, 2015, p. 27

³⁷ David Throsby, *The Production and Consumption of the Arts: A View of Cultural Economics*, *Journal of Economic Literature*, Mar., 1994, Vol. 32, No. 1, 1994, p. 4

³⁸ *Ibid*, p. 5

³⁹ *Ibid*

⁴⁰ Nick Brown, *Autonomy: the social ontology of art under capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019 p. 20

identified as the crisis of value: “In the postmodern period of the last two or three decades, powerful new methodologies from sociology, linguistics, psychoanalysis and elsewhere have challenged and displaced the traditional ideals that harmony and regularity are at the core of cultural value, re-processing these ideas into an expanded, shifting and heterogeneous interpretation of value in which relativism replaces absolutism”⁴¹. This approach appears in stark contrast with the modernist notion of “the true value of a work of art [...] as lying in intrinsic qualities of aesthetic, artistic or broader cultural worth which it possesses.”⁴². Taking a further step, Brown argues that: “If artworks can now make use of all the old styles (or become objects), it is not clear why one would call them artworks at all, since the honest old art commodity, precisely because it was more interested in the appeal to a market (the effect on an audience) than on formal problems, was able to make use of the old styles (or be an object) all along. In other words, there is nothing new in unabashedly borrowing indiscriminately from the great gallery of dead forms, or in appealing theatrically to consumers’ desires”⁴³. Other scholars like Jim McGuigan see in postmodernism the collapse of hierarchies and the blurring of cultural forms which later culminated in the “democratization of taste”: the mixing of high and low cultures, the rise of “middle-ground arts”, crossovers and convergence of forms are all a result of postmodernism culture advocated by the *petite bourgeoisie*⁴⁴.

Parallel to this historical background, artistic avant-garde movements like Dada began to emerge mainly in Europe to challenge the capitalist and bourgeois society. As Benjamin observes: “they sought to achieve that non-marketability, that unrealizable quality, not least by fundamentally disparaging their material. Their poems are ‘word-salad’, containing obscene expressions and all manner of linguistic detritus. Likewise their paintings, onto which they glued buttons or bus tickets. What they achieve by such means is the ruthless destruction of the aura of their output, which they use the means of production to stamp as ‘reproduction’.”⁴⁵.

⁴¹ David Throsby, *Economics and Culture*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 27

⁴² *Ibid*

⁴³ Nick Brown, *Autonomy: the social ontology of art under capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019, p. 20

⁴⁴ Jim McGuigan, *Cool Capitalism*, Pluto Press, Londra, 2009, p. 91

⁴⁵ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*,

Chapter Two

Capitalism and the Multimedia Arts

In this chapter, as previously foreshadowed, I am going to examine the multimedia arts: photography, cinema, and music. Each dedicated paragraph will provide an outlook of the industry history and its economic functioning as well as philosophical perspectives to serve as basic context.

2.1 Between Art and Cinema: Photography

Photography is regarded as the heir of lithography, an ancient technique of printing invented in the late 18th Century. With lithography a certain, although not unlimited, number of copies can be obtained by the artist himself (thus maintaining a certain level of authenticity), which is inversely proportionate to the final value of the piece: the fewer the copies, the higher the value. Although lithography can still turn out useful for fine art printmaking, photography replaced it with little to no effort as soon as it was invented, thus modifying the artistic processes, and enabling the development of cinematography.⁴⁶

2.1.1 Walter Benjamin on photography

The theory of mechanical reproducibility becomes crucial at this point, as photography is the first means of reproduction that Benjamin identifies as truly revolutionary.

The conceptualization of “cultic” and “display” value explained in Chapter one becomes useful when examining photography. According to Benjamin: “In photography, display value starts to drive cultic value back along the whole line. However, cultic value doesn’t give ground without resistance. It occupies one last ditch, and that is the human face. It is no accident, not at all, that the portrait forms the centerpiece of early photography. In the cult of recalling absent or dead loved ones, the cultic value of the image finds its last refuge”⁴⁷.

⁴⁶ W. Benjamin, *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*, Penguin London, 2008

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, display value has surpassed the cultic value in terms of importance, so that “the work of art is becoming an image with entirely new functions”⁴⁸ – hence the rise of photography as well as film which we have arrived at. For Benjamin, whether photography was an art or not (a question that will affect cinema as well) was a secondary matter, as he was more interested in wondering “whether with the invention of photography, the very nature of art had undergone a change”⁴⁹. It is because of technological reproducibility that, Benjamin argues, the work of art loses its autonomy forever. Therefore, Benjamin looks at photography as one of the main reasons why painting suffered a crisis during the 19th Century, alongside with mass attention – something that Benjamin perceives as detrimental because of the nature of intimacy that painting needs to establish: “A painting always had an excellent claim to being looked at by one person or a small number”⁵⁰.

2.1.2 The fine art photography market

Photography is, with no doubt, an industry revolving around imperatives such as “the procurement of raw materials and the development of an artisanal, later industrial production of chemical components, glass plates, negative films, paper, and cameras”⁵¹ which makes it, intuitively, much similar to the film industry. The photographic technique has ancient roots: the camera obscura, used – among the others – by Aristotle to observe eclipses, was the first tool contributing to the origin of the very *idea* of photography⁵², which literally means “writing with light”. At the base of photographic technique, we find the intuition of merging the studies regarding the camera obscura to the ones regarding photochemistry, as well as optical science. The development of photography required, therefore, scientific researchers – with its due costs and fundings – and the procurement of materials shared with the industry. An example of such materials is carbon: carbon paper was one of the first printing tools to develop early photograms prior to the invention of the snap-shot⁵³.

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ C. Caraffa, J. Bärnighausen, Photography, Art, Market and the production of value, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, Vol. 62, no. 1, 2020, pp. 3-9

⁵² Italo Zannier, *Storia e tecnica della fotografia*, Editori Laterza, Roma, 1984

⁵³ Ibid, p. 69

Benjamin was not the only intellectual who recognized it as a revolutionary means of reproducibility: among the others, philosophers like Karl Marx were quick to acknowledge it as an emerging and new form of production. For this reason, if photography constitutes an industry, it is also “inseparable”⁵⁴ with its own market. As investigated in a paper published in 2020 we can find an entire branch of such market dedicated to the fine art photography. As the author of the study states, this sub-market “is based on the economic and symbolic value of art photographs as collectors’ items, progressively and laboriously acquired over a century and a half”⁵⁵. The object of the study is the entrepreneurship of the Alinari brothers who worked at Luigi Bardi print shop in Florence in the 19th Century. On the one hand, Leopoldo, Giuseppe and Romualdo Alinari were art editors who specialized in photographic reproduction. On the other, Luigi Bardi was a painter and lithographer “who encouraged and supported the young Leopoldo Alinari (1832–1865) to set up an adjacent laboratory for photography in 1853”⁵⁶ in his print shop. As the author recalls, at that time “technology evolved rapidly in the years leading up to the unification of Italy. In 1865, Florence took center stage when it became the capital, thus acquiring tremendous economic, political, and cultural momentum. Here, photographs would record art and monuments, carefully staged portraits of the elite, and function as internationally exchanged surrogates for objects on the art market”⁵⁷.

While Bardini would take care of the sales of his artworks at international auctions – which were already popular in the 1800s with the commodification of fine and decorative art – photographs would be just as necessary to produce catalogues with the items on stock. Needless to say, over the course of the following century photography and its industry will develop as creative and independent forms of expression, rather than marketing tools subjugated to the fine arts.

2.1.3 Photography and cinema

Photography is related to art – especially painting – as much as it is related to cinema – especially under a technical and professional viewpoint. Consequently, some

⁵⁴ C. Caraffa, J. Bärnighausen, *Photography, Art, Market and the production of value*, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, Vol. 62, no. 1, 2020, pp. 3-9

⁵⁵ *Ibid*

⁵⁶ C. Caraffa, J. Bärnighausen, *Photography, Art, Market and the production of value*, *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz*, Vol. 62, no.1, 2020, pp. 69-91

⁵⁷ *Ibid*

photographers have both an artistic/pictorial background and a cinematic one. This is the case of photographer Jeff Wall, who initially studied history of art, as many of his works recreating celebrated paintings from the 19th Century can witness. *The Destroyed Room* (1978) is regarded as one of his first success and the first picture to open his catalogue raisonné. With respect to it Wall says: “The picture was planned in reference to the patterns of meaning identified with . . . movie and theater sets, and intended to articulate disturbing social imagery in terms of the fascination generated by the beautiful objects or commodities positioned within those carefully regulated modes of representation”⁵⁸. Another interesting declaration made by Wall and reported by Brown is an insight on photography history and its market: “It is almost astonishing to remember that important art-photographs could be purchased for under \$100 not only in 1950 but in 1960. This suggests that, despite the internal complexity of the aesthetic structure of art-photography, its moment of recognition as art in capitalist societies had not yet occurred”⁵⁹. In fact, according to Wall the 1960s were for photography its prehistory as an art and as a commodity, which comes to an end during the early 1970s. As paraphrased by Brown, Wall meant that “in a society whose social metabolism takes place solely by means of the exchange of commodities, any social recognition of value is immediately its recognition as exchange value”⁶⁰ and therefore that he “takes the nonrecognition of art photographs as commodities to index their nonrecognition as art”⁶¹. To make it clear, once a picture gains scholarly or academic artistic prestige, or is included in an institution of art (aesthetic value), commodification will take place. This process, however, does not and cannot go the other way around, even if it can appear almost simultaneous⁶².

As recalled by Brown, the forementioned philosopher Michael Fried famously “distinguishes pictorial from theatrical logic”⁶³ in the essay “Art and Objecthood”. As Brown puts it, theatricality produces an experience, a notion that will be crucial in film studies as well, while pictorial logic “requires that we find the work itself compelling or not”⁶⁴, therefore demanding interpretation skills alongside – something that does not

⁵⁸ N. Brown, *Autonomy: the social ontology of art under capitalism*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019, p. 56

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, p. 67

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, pp. 67-68

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 68

⁶² *Ibid*

⁶³ *Ibid*, p. 48

⁶⁴ *Ibid*

apply to theatricality according to Fried. Another difference is that the experience “is immediately a use value, and therefore in a society such as ours immediately entails the logic of the commodity, the dynamic of uninterpretability”⁶⁵. We will delve into this particular aspect in paragraph 2.2.1.

2.2 The Film Industry

Filmmaking processes are structured in what has been defined throughout the 20th Century as the production chain, which marks them as strictly industrial processes. This industry consists of three phases essentially: production, distribution, and exercise of each film. The first step in the film industry is rooted in the creative process of film writing, which will materialize itself as a film *prototype*. The second step is about producing its copies and marketing them. Finally, the last step coincides with the arrival of the film at the cinema. The path of a film, from its idealization to its commodification, has undergone little variations over time; however, terms like distribution and exercise ascribed to the supply chain logic are now being replaced by more specific taxonomies like *circulation* and *consumption* respectively. These broader definitions intend to acknowledge the multiple emerging markets and aim to result more appropriate in the present context.⁶⁶

2.2.1 Walter Benjamin on film

When briefly outlining the artistic and philosophical debate about the consideration of photography as an art earlier, cinema – now undoubtedly considered an art as well as photography – was not mentioned. Now it seems most appropriate to resume from that point. Benjamin uses no implicitness when stating that: “the problems that photography had presented for traditional aesthetics were child’s play compared to what film had in store. Hence the blind violence that marked the beginnings of film criticism”⁶⁷. At its dawn, cinema was considered a form of poor entertainment for lower attention-spanned masses. Furthermore, critics looked with concern at the lack of “cult” (or “cultic elements”) strictly correlated with the previously stated element of inattention, which prevented most of them to annex film to the category of “art”.

⁶⁵ Ibid, p. 49

⁶⁶ M. Cucco, *Economia del film: industria, politiche, mercati*, Carocci, Roma, 2020, p.18

⁶⁷ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Penguin, Londra, 2008

Just like photography, cinema was subjected to the comparison with painting. Benjamin places great focus on the role of the camera, which ultimately serves as the first and only medium of identification for the inattentive audience. The first difference with painting is that while “the painter, while working, observes a natural distance from the subject; the cameraman, on the other hand, penetrates deep into the subject’s tissue”⁶⁸. Hence, according to Benjamin, the audience uses the camera to penetrate reality. However, the reality captured by the camera is in a constant state of movement and change: “Compare, if you will, the screen on which the film unrolls to the canvas that carries the painting. The latter invites the viewer to contemplate; he is able, in front of it, to give himself up to his chain of associations. Watching a film, he can not do this. Scarcely has he set eyes on it before it is already different”⁶⁹. This is why the issue of distraction, opposed to complete immersion, is so crucial here: “The person who stands in contemplation before a work of art immerses himself in it; he enters that work [...] The distracted mass, on the other hand, absorbs the work of art into itself”⁷⁰.

Another interdisciplinary comparison which makes as much sense is the one with literature and theater. After all, film scripts are an evolution of theatrical scripts, just like films are an evolution of theatrical performances. Griffith-inspired film director Abel Gance once stated: “Shakespeare, Rembrandt, Beethoven will make films [...] All legends, all mythologies and all myths, all founders of religions – all religions, indeed [...] await their filmed resurrection and the heroes are pressing at the gates”⁷¹. It is no accident that most of the first films to be ever produced used to be adaptations from literary works. For example, Rembrandt released his *Midsummer Night’s Dream* cinematic version in 1935. His Shakespearean adaptation, however, was received by Werfel as an “undoubtedly sterile imitation of the external world”⁷². What the writer meant by that is that “film has not yet attained its real meaning or seized its true potential [...]. These consist in its unique ability to give voice, using natural means in an incomparably persuasive manner, to the fairy-like, the miraculous, the supernatural”⁷³. As cinema cultists are well aware of, the issue of mere reality reproduction or imitation

⁶⁸ Ibid

⁶⁹ Ibid

⁷⁰ Ibid

⁷¹ Ibid

⁷² Ibid

⁷³ Ibid

will be a definitively surpassed fashion by the time Italian Neorealism reached fame and critical acclaim. One of the most interesting devices of the movement that was able to influence global cinema, was employing regular people, or masses, as actors who portrayed themselves. This was also the case of Russian films. As Benjamin noticed, the film industry had every interest in adopting this practice⁷⁴, a usage that took over only within a decade. Benjamin compared this phenomenon to the massification of literature, which lived its post-World War II decades in an overwhelming popularization of writing aspirations. While this shift took hundreds of years to occur (see Chapter 3), cinema was on an entirely different level of diffusion and popular impact. Our analysis of cinematic acting, however, does not stop here. Again, a crucial point in the understanding of filmic tradition is made by contrasting it from theatrical tradition. By analyzing the technique of montage, Benjamin writes: “An actor working in the theatre enters a part. Very often the screen actor is not allowed to. The latter’s performance is not a single entity; it consists of many individual performances. Along with such incidental considerations as studio hire, availability of partners, setting and so on, basic mechanical requirements break the screen actor’s performance down into a series of episodes that can be assembled”⁷⁵. In his view, this constraint typical of film production can be considered as what leads, as a response, to the “artificial inflation of ‘personality’ outside the studio. The cult of stardom promoted by film capital preserves the magic of personality that for years has lain solely in the rancid magic of its commodity character”⁷⁶. We will return on the issue of cult stardom in the next paragraph, as well as discussing a quite similar pattern in the music industry.

2.2.2 History of the Film Industry

The history of cinema is marked by two disastrous global conflicts and their economic repercussions. It is no accident, therefore, that film history is grouped by Bächlin into a first phase that emerged between 1896 and 1914 (the pre-World War I era), a second phase going from 1914 and 1929, a third phase covering the years 1929-1945 (not a bright one), and the post-World War II era with its economic resurrection. What

⁷⁴ Ibid

⁷⁵ Ibid

⁷⁶ Ibid

happened during the previous Century contributed to the shaping of the Film Industry and its economic functioning, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

In its early years, film originated in the context of fairs and itinerant exhibitions. 1896 marks an important turning point as the first projection devices began to be launched on the market, hence enabling the enjoyment of films. However, due to the scarcity of raw material, film catalogues between 1896 and 1914 were not impressive. The first companies to approach the new branch of cinema were Pathé and Gaumont in France, Edison, Biograph and Vitagraph in America, and Messter in Germany. Most of them were either precision mechanics companies or had been created accordingly with those. Banking institutions also played a crucial role in helping these companies at controlling the projection devices market, but they took no immediate interest in them as cinema was associated with unserious forms of spectacle and roaming circuses⁷⁷. The demand for more films started to increase with the building of cinematographic theaters in big cities, which followed the success and public acclaim of itinerant shows, therefore settling in those same cities. These first cinemas were relatively small (200-300 seats) and sold cheap tickets for short programs which imply that the chances of profit relied on a solid number of daily shows. As a result, programs had to change often, which contributed to the increase of demand. Parallel to it, film marketing was also kickstarted by the necessity to organize the distribution of films, where the renter played as a mediator between local cities-based producers and decentralized retailers⁷⁸. In other cases, a few big production companies ensured they would take care of the distribution processes as well, to achieve the market supremacy: an instance can be provided by Pathé.

Alongside the increase of demand, the length of films drastically improved between 1907 and 1910⁷⁹. By that time, the asset of film production was equal to that of any other kind of industrial product, to which Fordism was applied. To maximize the profits and minimize the costs of production, the biggest American companies decided to merge into the 1908-founded Motion Picture Patents Company, that would annihilate competitors. Obviously, the American trust had to face the opposition of independent filmmakers, distributors and merchants who resisted the logic of standardized production. Independent films offered relatively long films and introduced the star-system by

⁷⁷ P. Bächlin, *Il cinema come industria: storia economica del film*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2008, p. 11

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p. 13

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 17

revealing the names of the actors⁸⁰. The rivalry between indies and trust majors will eventually harm the latter, which ultimately cracked with the 1917 antitrust prosecution, when Motion Picture was found guilty of violating the first and second commas of the 1890-approved Sherman Act. Anyhow, the USA kept their leadership position in the market with the outbreak of World War I, which caused huge capital losses in France and subdued other countries such as Germany, which will develop later in the Thirties, to USA hegemony. It is in this context that Hollywood was born, so that producers could make up for the higher standards of newly established full-length films with avant-garde tools⁸¹. The first postwar period, on the other hand, was shocked by recession and economic crisis that would slow down hegemonic expansions of American colossuses. Despite the dramatic outcomes of the crisis, the film industry would not be undermined before 1930. Prior to this year, counter-intuitively enough, the industry benefitted from the crisis, as the lower tiers of the population would massively seek distraction and evasion at the cinemas⁸². The crisis will peak only in 1933 – four years after the New York Stock Market crack. Yet, this period also featured groundbreaking innovations, with the first one being sound film and the second one being color film.

On the one hand, sound film is the innovation which most dramatically altered the entire industry, which legitimizes the first reactions of reluctance towards it. It can be traced back to 1926, when Warner Bros first designed a “speaker” with the “Vitaphone” system to dodge the financial downgrade threatening the firm⁸³. Sound film implied substituting all the voiceless devices and installing new expensive ones in each establishment – not to mention building new acoustically isolated studios. However, as Benjamin recalls: “sound films brought the masses back to the cinema, and they also created a fresh solidarity between new capital from the electrical industry and film capital”⁸⁴. When that appeared clear to producers, all of them rushed through the acquisition of its license – hence the bond with the electric industry.

Roughly ten years later, in 1935, color film appeared. This change resulted in a further increase of production costs; more specifically, it targeted raw material, development and print works and the filming system.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 20

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 24

⁸² Ibid, p. 50

⁸³ Ibid, pp. 39-40

⁸⁴ W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Penguin, Londra, 2008

Finally, the second postwar period overlaps with the economic boom of the Fifties and the Sixties. However, economic prosperity allowed and encouraged many families to own all sorts of electric appliances including television. The TV will be cinema's long-lasting competitor which was rivalled with the development of wider and bigger screens and of the cinemascope (the panoramic screen).

2.2.3 Film Economics

Following the logic of production-distribution-exercise, most of the economic resources are absorbed by the production phase. As a result: "films have very high fixed costs (namely the ones whose amounts are independent of the quantity produced), and very low variable costs (those whose amounts are strictly related to the quantity produced)"⁸⁵. Cucco identifies two types of resources; the first ones are made up of actors, screenwriters, and directors, who contributed to the overall quality of the film the most. Being resources of intrinsic creative and artistic nature, they are not automatable. He names them *above the line* resources, which are growing more and more expensive over time. The second ones are made up of set designers, costume designers, make-up artists, etc., who are easier to schedule. These are considered more technical resources and are therefore called *below the line*.⁸⁶

The production phase can be further analyzed as a set of three subprocesses known as pre-production, production, and post-production. The pre-production subphase revolves around funding choices and actors casting. Depending on the geographic localization of the studio, the financing of its film will have different scenarios; "In the USA, for instance, film production is a mere profit-oriented industrial activity. Consequently, production is funded solely by private resources". In Europe, on the other hand, loans can derive from public institutions and/or local governments⁸⁷. The next step, the actual production phase, is the level of filming. It is "the most expensive one because it requires the simultaneous operation of multiple professional figures/units, the rent of dedicated studios and potential transfers with all their related costs and extra fees implied"⁸⁸. Once all the scenes are filmed and the actors are home from the set, the post-

⁸⁵ M. Cucco, *Economia del film: industria, politiche, mercati*, Carocci, Roma, 2020, p. 19

⁸⁶ *Ibid*

⁸⁷ *Ibid*, p. 23-24

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p. 28

production phase can begin. It is the phase in which the montage operations take place; usually there is a *first cut* – the one realized by the editor – the *director's cut*, and a *final cut* – the one approved by the producer.

The distribution begins once the distributor purchases the rights to the marketing of the film from the producer. The distributor will then provide the copies and add subtitles or the dubbing when necessary. Promoting and/or merchandising the film is also up to the distributor. From the early years of cinemas two distribution practices, or strategies, have been employed: *screens saturation* and *limited distribution*⁸⁹. The first one consists of launching the film at the highest possible numbers of cinema for its debut. The aim is to achieve scale economies by exploiting the relatively low costs of duplication and profit from the higher number of copies circulating. This practice becomes useful at concentrating the advertising expenses, but – most importantly – it anticipates any debate about the quality of the film (because no critic had a chance to see it yet). Limited distribution is the exact opposite: the film debuting is called a *sleeper* because it performs in few cinemas to look for a positive buzz marketing. Unlike the former strategy, the *sleeper* purposefully looks for a debate about its actual quality.

We can now look at the exercise phase. As the author puts it “to analyze the cinematographic market of one country, limiting to its cinemas network, there are four basic indicators to consider: the takings, the admissions, the pro capita frequency and the market share”⁹⁰. The takings are defined as the gross earnings of the cinemas of a given market within a specific time frame. However, because “as time goes by [...] the price of tickets increases” it goes without saying that “a potential increase of the takings does not necessarily equal to a major audience tendency to go to the cinema”⁹¹. That is why other criteria are used alongside. The admissions, for example, consist of the number of tickets sold in a given market within a given time frame; all types of tickets are counted as equal, which means that both adult and children tickets, for example, are considered from the quantitative point of view. It should be noted that when comparing different international markets by applying the admissions factor, demographically dense countries are obviously more likely to score higher assessments. Another factor is annual pro capita frequency: how many times a year does a specific nation citizen go to the cinema on

⁸⁹ Ibid, p. 77

⁹⁰ Ibid, p. 109

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 110

average. Furthermore, market share is another useful value. It corresponds to the sale percentage of a product or of a product category with respect to the total sales in a given reference market. “United States and Europe have been the core of the cinematographic market in terms of generated takings for a long time, but today they are starting to be confronted by other geographical realities”⁹². In fact, the European Audiovisual Observatory in 2019 reported that: “comparing data from 2007 to data from 2018 it also emerges how the European Union is a stagnant market, while the American one is in its recessive phase. Contrary, there are strongly expanding markets like the Chinese, South Korean and Mexican”⁹³ and that while “the United States, in fact, hold a 92,9% share of their own domestic market and a 63,2% share of the European one”⁹⁴, “some countries (i.e., Brazil, Russia, India and China – the BRICs) are living, or have recently lived, a phase of important economic development which improved the life conditions of a part of a population, thus favoring its consumptions”⁹⁵. After looking at the data Cucco concludes that: “in this scenario, the United States keep being central in terms of production, not for the quantity of films produced but for their ability of distributing them successfully in their domestic market as well as in the international one”⁹⁶.

2.3 The Music Industry

The history of the music market can begin with the practice of music transcription: “A first entry of orders in the editorial compartment relied on transcriptions: on the one hand the rent of original scores of theatrical or symphonic works addressed to professional use or generally excluded by sale [...]; on the other, on private consumption supporting the amatorial praxis developed in the bourgeoisie costume”⁹⁷, with the piano becoming the bourgeois status symbol.

“The second revenue order of publishing houses, which gained huge relevance in different times according to the context, consisted of the remuneration for authorizing the performance to a paying audience of compositions whose rights were acquired”⁹⁸, which

⁹² Ibid, p. 113

⁹³ Ibid, p. 115

⁹⁴ Ibid

⁹⁵ Ibid, p. 117

⁹⁶ Ibid, p. 118

⁹⁷ F. D’Amato, *Musica e Industria*, Carocci, Roma, 2009, p. 63

⁹⁸ Ibid, pp. 71-72

will spark the first business practices. This centuries-long development that will lead to today's music industry will be discussed on paragraph 2.3.2 and 2.3.3.

2.3.1 Theodor Adorno on music

Theodor W. Adorno is one of the most frequently mentioned philosophers and sociologists when discussing and problematizing late capitalism; furthermore, he brought seminal contributions in the field of musicology.

According to D'Amato's reading of Adorno's thought, the first point to make clear is the understanding of the cultural industry as a singular – and not plural – entity: “no aspect of society can be understood if isolated from the others, as between the parts and the whole there is constant exchange and co-dependency. Disregarding this, means fetishizing single elements of the social system”⁹⁹. From Adorno and Horkheimer's, who he wrote the “Dialectic of Enlightenment” with, viewpoints each sector of a system is not only co-dependent, but also “reciprocally harmonized based on strategic and economic goals”¹⁰⁰, which is why each branch on the cultural industry is applied the same techniques and production processes of industrial asset.

Their critique of the industry is deep enough to assert that “because the procedures of the cultural industry carry an operation of contents framing, the result consists in the homologation and univocity of the output”¹⁰¹. Such industry would then adopt specific strategies to foster consumptions such as “pseudo-individualization”. This strategy consists of “variations on the technical or stylistic side” and “stylistic personalization” as well as the “promotion and cultivation of cult phenomenon” in which a star is celebrated and worshipped¹⁰². With the meanings of production of cultural objects, the meanings of diffusion add up in determining its significance and, secondly, the modes of reception and final use. For Adorno, an example of consumption choice-predetermination is *plugging*, the non-stop re-offering of songs in any listening context which creates an “illusion of popularity”¹⁰³.

However, as D'Amato puts it “considering a system of production in terms of co-dependence relationship does not necessarily imply that such relationships are harmonic

⁹⁹ Ibid, p. 19

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p.20

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 21

or perfectly functional to the – possibly not shared – goals of the parts of interest”¹⁰⁴. Furthermore, he argues: “cultural consumption consists of experiences of active comprehension and elaboration of reality, of practices of sense production for which cultural outputs make conditioning and resources”¹⁰⁵. This paraphrase and, for some aspects, revision of Adorno’s researches suggest that his critique of the cultural industry is a pivotal standpoint, but it should be observed as one of the many possible frameworks to make progresses in this relatively new disciplinary field.

2.3.2 Music before recorded music

Music transcription revolved around the printing of musical and non-musical opera works. They pledged to the privileged authority of a given nation which granted the exclusive faculty of printing, reproducing, and marketing one or more works to one or more printers. “Privileges constituted a device to control and manage the diffusion of new ideas by the power and to secure pressmen’s investments and profits, banning the printing of those same works by others”¹⁰⁶.

Opera started to develop around the 17th Century. This new form of entertainment relied on new professionals responsible for the staging, starting from the manager. The manager would profit not only from each single-entry ticket to the opera, but also from the stage subscription purchased by the wealthiest citizens and noblemen. This would encourage him to invest in multiple productions, which turned him into some sort of *ante litteram* project manager. As a result, the opera market had grown a resources network run by the manager made of composers, singers, musicians, librettists, dancers, costume designers, set designers, and in some cases, even artisans. Up until the 18th Century, praxis saw musicians handing their manuscripts for publication and exchanging them with a single payment – normally by the editor or the nobleman himself. This praxis, however, meant that the musician had no say and, practically speaking, no economic right regarding its future marketing. If we look at the countries with the biggest creative production, such as Italy and Germany, we observe a different pattern: “In those territories where the political system was fractioned in a myriad of small formations competing with one another, courts and town halls, musicians enjoyed major opportunities of professional

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p. 63

mobility and generally of major creative freedom”¹⁰⁷. Anyhow, the 18th and 19th Century will bring major advances in copyright legislation: “In 1710 the first copyright law was passed in England, the Statute of Anne. The statute established that authors, and those who had purchased the manuscript, benefitted from the exclusive right to publish the work for fourteen years, renewable for other fourteen; once such period was expired the work became of public domain and it could be published by anyone”¹⁰⁸. Although music was not originally included within the Statute contents, more and more composers started to refer to it in their disputes: “as a result, around 1777 music compositions started to be recognized as publications protected against non-authorized copies proliferation”¹⁰⁹. In 1790, the Copyright Act was approved in the USA, while in the UK the same law was passed in 1842.

The turning point in the industry arrives with the phonographic compact, invented by Edison in 1877. To this, the graphophone, invented by Bell, follows in 1886, while the gramophone made by Berliner arrives circa ten years later, in 1897. Consequently, by 1889-1890 recorded music was for the first time available – with the first jukebox produced by the Pacific Phonograph Company. With recorded music, other companies replaced their business models with one that would promote the rent of devices to listen to music: this is the case of Columbia Phonograph Company which will be the first phonographic label (Columbia).

Singers and musicians, on the other hand, began to be a solid component in the industry mirroring the star-system surrounding actors in the cinema industry: “at the dawn of VIP behaviors, stars enjoyed specific opportunities to monetize their own ability to reach the audience, and were paid to push their music and feed the economies related to it”¹¹⁰. This led swing big bands to profit from radio and film starring, while also selling vinyl and performing live or touring. In this case, “swing bands were more independent from composers and editors, as the repertoires of the exhibitions normally offered band leaders-rearranged standards or new compositions by them”¹¹¹. Therefore, innovation lied on the sound and arrangement side rather than the compositive structure: this is what empowered these bands and granted them autonomy, including an economic one.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, p. 66

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, p. 67

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, p. 68

¹¹⁰ Ibid, p. 86

¹¹¹ Ibid, pp. 86-87

2.3.3 On rock 'n' roll

Similarly to the film industry, the second postwar economic boom increased both production and consumption; consequently, the music market enlarged itself. More specifically, the industry was split between major and independent labels, where mainstream repertoires were produced by majors and niche genres were produced by indies.

However, the industry was suddenly shocked by the boom of independent companies which paved the way for artists with the most diverse music backgrounds. Parallel to this, the contact among proletarians with different ethnicities contributed to the rise of a new genre: rock 'n' roll.

Needless to say, as D'Amato makes clear: "the sudden boom of independent companies which produced and promoted new repertoires did not depend much on a noble interest towards cultural innovation as such, but rather on the identification of new profit opportunities for small businessmen who improvised themselves as producers, agents, managers, ready to exploit artists as much as big companies, if not more"¹¹².

It becomes even clearer how music and musicians were exploited if considered the shortage of the life span of a song: "the development of rack-jobbing (since 1952) on the distribution side and the introduction of 'top 40' formats on the radios (since 1953) concurred to the shortening of songs life-cycle, making space for the constant publication of successful artists' new singles"¹¹³. To compensate the ever-shortening life cycle of a music product, labels started to assimilate the editorial business during the Sixties "opening their own publishing societies, purchasing catalogues or licensing big editors to the rights" which increased the relevance of the editors who were "no longer busy in song plugging activities to sell compositions to artists and phonographic produces, but rather in the administration of rights which earned them enormous entries"¹¹⁴. Needless to say, this was worth it only when such products "became huge hits or 'classics'"¹¹⁵.

According to D'Amato, that is why "it became appealing to labels to romanticize rock rhetoric, to emphasize the authorships and artistic auras and to promote the value of expressive authenticity informing rock culture and worshipping"¹¹⁶. In the case of rock,

¹¹² Ibid, pp. 92-93

¹¹³ Ibid, p. 93

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 95

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Ibid

there is one more element playing a huge role in the shaping of each bands image: the album. In the rock industry, the album tends to outweigh the single and concurs, together with extensive tours and shows, to the increase of visibility and popularity: “for rock, the album, more than single tracks, became functional to the development of individual styles and artistic paths, to the constitution of wider narrative units concerning the artistic identity, the brand”¹¹⁷. Yet, other scholars believe that not only was rock music influenced by the industry, but that the opposite statement was equally true: “Keith Negus highlights how the coincidence between rock primacy and the phonographic compact growth contributed to the entry of new professionals sharing the same values and culture of this genre. Basically, according to Negus, the parallel explosion of the discographic industry implied a progressive merging of rock culture with production cultures, orienting their frameworks, judgment criteria and work modalities”¹¹⁸. Under these circumstances the market continued to grow and expand in an increasingly competitive context influenced by the new globalization: “Since the late Sixties and over the course of the Seventies a new differentiated oligopoly came back solidified”¹¹⁹. Hence, it appears that the contamination of genres and styles that marked the Seventies was not only a symptom of the rock culture but also a consequence of globalization. However, scholars – especially north American ones - have debated largely about what were the real effects of the oligopoly. Musicologist Simon Frith stated: “the problem is not art versus market, but ‘the big business’ versus ‘the small business’”¹²⁰, or, to put it in another way, the problem occurs when a company controls the vast majority of the means of production.

Anyhow, oligopolies are not immune to sudden shift in the market; sudden changes in the environment can destabilize major firms and spur short periods of vivid competition and unrestrained creativity which altern themselves to the forementioned periods of growth and cultural output homogeneity. This is a phenomenon of inverse relationship between the concentration of the phonographic compact – resulting in music standardization – and its differentiation. Such relationship was investigated by Peterson and Berger, who conceptualized what they call “the symbolic production cycles” between 1948 and 1973¹²¹. In other words, “once the mainstream market is saturated, competition

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p. 97

¹¹⁸ Ibid, p. 103

¹¹⁹ Ibid, p. 104

¹²⁰ Ibid, p. 24

¹²¹ Ibid, p. 51

between cultural enterprises intensified the differentiation of the offer, to aim at new market segments”¹²².

Unsurprisingly, the differentiated oligopoly will face its crisis in 1979, when “sales nosedived worldwide. The crisis, the worst since the second world war, lasted until 1983, with the rise of the cd”¹²³. The *compact disc*, or CD, brought major changes to the market: in fact, while producing a vinyl was obviously more expensive than it is to produce a cd, the purchasing of one at the record store was also an equally important issue. Consumers would pay much more attention than they do now to the music they consumed, as it was an investment at all effects. Shopping for music was, therefore, a practice which demanded its buyers to be selective at least to some extent - unless they were wealthy enough to afford a potentially never-ending assortment of LPs. This selection made both by labels and by final consumers would ultimately reward the artists who were considered worth the economic expenses. And if CDs are on average cheap – or at least cheaper than vinyls – the modern market and its monthly streaming subscriptions are even more accessible. Because of streaming services, consumers can make their choices much more light-heartedly while adding infinite new songs and albums to their Spotify libraries. Similarly, musicians-wannabe are enabled to record, edit, and publish their songs with much more nonchalance than ever. By the time the digital market made its way through, many wondered whether the music industry, as well as musicians them, actually benefitted from it or not. The answer is, as usual, nuanced; Samuel Cameron seems not too pessimistic when arguing that “what the digital economy and the Internet seems to take away from musicians with one hand, it seems it may offer back with the other. The live music sector and especially festivals have expanded rapidly during the phase of intense concern over copyright infringement-induced revenue loss. This can be due to a number of things, two of which seem to stand out. One is that the Internet enables much easier low-cost transmission of promotional information for live music. In this instance, unauthorized shared recordings of gigs may be complements rather than substitutes for the actual gigging of the artist. The second factor is income effects. Those who breach copyright save on spending and within a household production

¹²² Ibid, p. 22

¹²³ Ibid, p. 105

model (see Cameron 2015) create substitution effects towards live music as an input in their home musical production function.”¹²⁴.

¹²⁴ Samuel Cameron, *Past, present and future: music economics at the crossroads*, Journal of Cultural Economics, Vol. 40, No. 1, Special Issue: Economics of Music, Springer, 2016, p. 6

Chapter Three

Capitalism and Literature

This chapter aims to give further analysis on a different form of art such as literature. Focusing primarily on the novel, I will introduce this literary genre by contextualizing it parallel to the history of capitalism. Furthermore, I will remark the same assumptions about intellectual property and copyright discussed with regard to the music industry analysis. Finally, I will conclude by looking at how is capitalism mirrored in Italian literature, while also investigating how does capitalism affect the production of such literature.

3.1 The Rise of the Novel

The novel is a literary genre with an undoubtedly centuries-long history; scholars track its origins back to the age of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, without dismissing the chivalric romances of the Middle Ages or the Renaissance novellas. For the record, Murasaki Shikibu's *Tale of Genji*, written between the 10th and 11th century, cannot go unmentioned as it is unanimously regarded as the first example of modern novel: it displays most of the genre features, especially those labelled to the psychological subgenre which became popular around the 19th and 20th century. After acknowledging its legacy and historic tradition, a turning point which marked the production and diffusion of the novel should be stressed, and that is the invention of the printing press: in other words, the closest notion to that of mechanical reproduction. While the press arrived in Europe around the 15th Century, enabling the circulation of classic western masterpieces such as Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1605), it increased in productivity towards the end of the 18th century. It is no surprise then that historians like Ian Watt see in the 1800s what he calls "the rise of the novel"¹²⁵: not only did the press encourage the distribution of books and newspapers, but Western societies were also shocked by the cultural and economic revolutions, starting with the rise of industrial capitalism and of the bourgeoisie. At the dawn of modernity, the cultural framework was split between the myth of progress and development (eulogized by liberals and embedded

¹²⁵ Ian Watt's, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1957

in the culture of Positivism), and the anxiety towards the crisis of values and classical models. This tension was perfectly captured and capturable by the genre of the novel, which easily recorded the changes in society and became, with the realist movement, the audience's favorite. During the second half of the century, popular literature, or consumption literature¹²⁶, became the new and easily profitable trend to provide the lower layers of the population with a new form of entertainment. Needless to say, popular literature was encouraged by the advances of the printing press and the disposition of cheap paper, which is why such low-quality products appeared monthly or weekly in newspapers' dedicated columns. This is how the editorial market quickly grew saturated not only in terms of products, but also in terms of "producers". As Benjamin recalls: "for centuries the situation in literature was such that a small number of writers faced many thousands of times the number of readers. Then, towards the end of the last century, there came a change. As the press grew in volume, making ever-increasing numbers of new political, religious, scientific, professional and local organs available to its readership, larger and larger sections of that readership (gradually, at first) turned into writers"¹²⁷. The fading distinction between readership and authorships was a trend intensifying in the postwar years as well, when the genre of the novel experienced an unprecedented boom. Unsurprisingly, it was right after the economic boom – or miracle – following the second world war that consumerism started to impose itself after circulating as a trend since the Industrial Revolution¹²⁸. From this moment, behavioral studies such as consumer choice became a branch of microeconomics to shed a light on what are the mechanisms behind consumer culture.

In the case of literature and the editorial market, an interesting standpoint to examine consumer culture is looking at the influence of literary prizes on book sales. The Italian Strega Prize can serve as an example. A study carried in 2015 and published in the *Journal of Cultural Economics* proved how the award is easy to affect the bestselling lists and improve the economic success of its winners. Although the intrinsic quality of a book can hardly be calculated, this study assumes the votes the winners received are a proxy for quality since they are assigned by "a jury of experts". Following this logic, the

¹²⁶ C. Bordoni, F. Fossati, "Dal feuilleton al fumetto - Generi e scrittori della letteratura popolare" Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1985

¹²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*,

¹²⁸ Kerry Higgs, *Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2016

researchers adopt a sharp regression discontinuity design, a quasi-experimental technique which confronts pre-test and post-test phases. Another consideration is brought by the fact that the books nominated for the Prize are already available on the market before the final winner is awarded, which is how the researchers observed the different performances before and after the prize by adopting a difference-in-differences model, another statistical techniques used in econometrics. The first outcomes of the study signal that the sales of the shortlisted books inflate during the first weeks subsequent to the announcement of the winner – proving the high level of reception and response of the audience, but also, one might argue, the volatility of this type of fame and popularity. Another interesting finding is that “the awarded books appear on the bestseller list for about 8.93 weeks before winning”¹²⁹, which implies that “the Prize is typically conferred on more successful books”¹³⁰. Although the winners are showed to be already popular and well-performing, the success gained by the victory is significant nonetheless; indeed, one of the most important outcomes shows that “winning the Strega Prize hugely increases (by about 500 %) the cumulated sales of a book”¹³¹. However, these sales are concentrated in a few weeks, after which the immediate impact inexorably slows down and decreases, much like many song contests winner or film contests winners experience once the competition is over. Therefore, the trend in today’s consumption society seems to encourage “disposable” artistic products, with a life cycle marked by an outstanding economic performance at first, but a general waning interest of the audience towards it as soon as something new and attention-getting is ready to replace it. One last conclusion drawn by the study is that “consumers tend to trust experts”¹³², who in this case are represented by the jury of experts. Despite the solid ground on which theories such as consumer sovereignty rely – according to which consumers are the ones orienting the market – considering how often the same consumers are uneducated as they face a market with imperfect information, the Strega Prize represents a guarantee in effectively discovering, selecting and, finally, broadcasting a product of alleged quality.

3.2 Intellectual Property and Plagiarism

¹²⁹ M. Ponzio, V. Scoppa, *Experts’ awards and economic success: evidence from an Italian literary prize*, “Journal of Cultural Economics”, Vol. 39, No. 4, 2015, p. 359

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 359

¹³¹ Ibid, p. 364

¹³² Ibid, p. 364

As Joel Mokyr writes: “Capitalism depends on well-defined and enforced property rights”¹³³, which is a statement that should sound familiar to anyone with some knowledge of basic economic theory. The issue of private property is generally discussed when referring to concrete objects like lands and machines, or other means of production that capitalists and factories owners cared much about. Nowadays, these assets tend to be more and more abstract, as well as more easily reproducible. To own data, or information, or ideas is a less simple economic scenario to approach. “Intellectual property rights have been with us for centuries, but they have been a controversial area of economics, and for good reason”, confirms Mokyr. As he puts it: “their main *raison d'être* has always been to create sufficient incentives for "creative" people to invent new gadgets and write novels, yet it has never been very clear how good patents and copyrights are at doing this”¹³⁴. Much of these reflections share the same grounds with the issue of music copyrights, as songs or compositions are the product of a writing process just as novels or poems are. And music, as much as literature and other any form or art, used to be a form of entertainment addressed to the aristocracy alone – which, as we have seen already, was likely to own the original manuscripts handed by composers. Now, on the other hand, “modern technology, driven by demand in a market economy, has made the enjoyment of leisure far easier and cheaper”¹³⁵. Furthermore, it should be noted that art was not a mere form of entertainment for the noble classes, nor it was an additional luxury: it was part of any wealthy individual’s education, which required “a fair investment of human capital”¹³⁶ in the shaping of artistic taste, as well as the improvement of such skills required to fully enjoy and understand art. The first novels published on newspapers, targeting the average citizen with no access to higher stages of education, verged on mediocrity both on the linguistic or stylistic aspect, and on the one regarding the contents. These books would therefore, on the one hand, exploit poor vocabulary and basic language structure and, on the other, attempt to appeal the audience with superficial moralism and intricated plot lines. Extensive storylines, besides feeding the hype of the novel, were also the opportunity to publish a higher number of chapters, thus increasing monetary earnings. Finally, with weekly (or monthly) newspaper

¹³³ Joel Mokyr, *Capitalism reinvents itself*, “Current History”, Vol. 112, No. 757, 2013, p. 295

¹³⁴ Ibid, p. 295

¹³⁵ Ibid, p. 297

¹³⁶ Ibid, p. 297

instalments literature became closely intertwined with consumer culture¹³⁷, as novelists would often collect feedback from the audience to fulfil their readers' expectations at best; again, this was the choice providing the most lucrative profits.

Another issue as interesting as the one of intellectual property is plagiarism. Literary plagiarism can be sometimes more difficult to identify and depends much on what is intended as the aim of a good piece of literature: indeed, "if the aim of a literary text relied on achieving a final result, the didactic commentary and causal explanation would count more than style, form, verbal and structural invention, the essence of poetic creation"¹³⁸. This is why there is enough controversy about plagiarism in literature, as it could be intended as stylistic emulation – something that is, and always has been, inevitable – as well as literal quotation – which is equally debatable since the praxis of quoting is both timelessly established and legitimate. Moreover, plagiarism acquired different connotations throughout history: "In the Middle Ages, for example, you could insert in a new text a page or even chapters of previous works with no scandal"¹³⁹, while today is easy to read a philosophical paper "in which the abuse of inverted commas delimitating a quote [...] makes its originality dubious"¹⁴⁰. Postmodernism, on which I will return later, actually exploited the controversy around plagiarism by turning it into means of poetic and artistic creation: it is the case of *pastiche*, of bricolage, or simply of contamination. These practices can correspond to the cases of "stylistic virtuosity", often resulting snob and pretentious, but are rooted in the ever-lasting debate about the possibility for a truly authentic and original literary work. This issue will be expanded in the next paragraph.¹⁴¹

3.3 Literature on Capitalism and Capitalism on Literature

¹³⁷ See, for instance, Dickens' approach to literature and journalism: Peter Gurney, "The Age of Veneer": Charles Dickens and the antinomies of Victorian consumer culture, *Dickens Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2015, pp. 229-246

¹³⁸ Francesco Magris, *Tornaconti: economia, letteratura e paradossi quotidiani nell'era del mercato globale*, Società Editrice Italiana, Torino, 2006, p. 69

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69

¹⁴¹ Julie C. Van Camp, *Originality in Postmodern Appropriation Art*, *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, Vol. 36, Issue 4, pp. 247-258, 2010

In the preface of his *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman compares and contrasts the two forefathers of the modern dystopian novel – George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. From his reading of these authors, Postman sums up that Huxley prophesizes a society in which people will pledge themselves to machines and modern technology – instead of being oppressed by them; will dismiss leisure of those books of which Orwell feared the burning at the stake; will be overwhelmed and overloaded with information (a phenomenon recognized by marketing experts as “noise”) and will, ultimately, share a culture of shallowness. These are the ideas behind *Brave New World* (1932) – the book he is most well-known for and which he published prior to Orwell’s more famous *1984* – but he was able to voice them in different occasions as well. Indeed, he returned on the critique to technology and the subsequent “vulgarity” in a book written two years after *Brave New World*, titled *Beyond the Mexique Bay*. The points advanced in the previous paragraphs return reinforced in his harsh criticism stating that “process reproduction and the rotary press have made possible the indefinite multiplication of writing and pictures”¹⁴² and that “a great industry has been called into existence in order to supply these commodities”¹⁴³. Therefore, Huxley agrees, firstly, that literary authority and talent has become a rarity, and secondly, that the “proportion of trash in the total artistic output”¹⁴⁴ was outweighing the number of bad writers existed throughout the history of literature up until the moment he was writing, because of the surplus of both emerging pseudo-novelists and of readers-consumers.

Neil Postman argues that Huxley’s viewpoints and perspectives foreseen in his masterpiece represent nowadays reality better than Orwell’s, and postmodern sociologists seem to agree with him in the conceptualization of “second modernity” theory, a notion according to which the shift between industrial society and network, or information, society occurs - much similarly to what both Huxley predicts in his novels and what Mockyr states in his essay *Capitalism Reinvents Itself* (“there clearly is a danger of information overload, as anyone struggling with an e-mail inbox knows all too well. The one fixed factor in the information equation is the capability of human minds to process data, which obviously is bounded, though the exact limits are yet unknown and depend

¹⁴² Aldous Huxley, *Beyond the Mexique Bay*, 1934

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Ibid

on the tasks and challenges at hand”¹⁴⁵). As a consequence, massive overproduction (of both tangible and less tangible goods) is now surpassing consumer demands in late capitalist societies. Under the cultural and artistic standpoint, postmodernism is the movement best reflecting this social and economic environment. Jameson defined it as “the cultural logic of late capitalism” or a culture dominated by *pastiche* and revival. What postmodernists argue is that there is, in fact, no such thing as originality in art, as it is always quoting itself and re-using existing material, which is even a bolder statement compared to Huxley’s or many others’ complaints about mere scarcity of such. For this reason, Borges’ *Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote* is considered a precursor in the postmodernist movement, as it reflects upon the relationship between a pre-existing literary work and a new one. The book, written as a literary review of the Quixote signed by French writer Pierre Menard, recount the translation process of the protagonist who eventually ends up re-creating an identical version as the result of his full dedication and penetration in the original one. The story serves as a reflection around topics such as authorship and originality. Another insightful short story is *The Library of Babel*, in which Borges imagines the diminishing effects of mechanical reproduction on books. In this scenario, Borges describes this huge library where all existing books are reproduced thanks to a pattern which is able to randomly replicate all possible combinations of letters. However, because the resulting books are the product of mechanical and random procedures, intrinsic meaning of such works given by human action is lacking.

Leaving postmodernism aside, we should take a few steps back to the 19th and 20th century to observe closer the advent of early capitalism and mass society, to acknowledge the conditions leading to postmodernism (and postmodernity). The followings are a few perspectives expressed by some of the most significant authors of Italian literature. While the novel was quick to spread itself around other European countries, such as “the first mover” England, homeland of Dickens, or the more recently industrialized Germany, Italy welcomed with reluctance the new genre and any other foreign trend (the lively debate started by Madame de Staël, who suggested Italian intellectuals and writers to be less resistant towards the influence of foreign literatures¹⁴⁶, proves this fact). However, once the novel – with both its highbrow and lowbrow variants – finally arrived in Italy,

¹⁴⁵ Joel Mogyr, *Capitalism Reinvents Itself*, “Current History”, Vol. 112, No. 757, 2013, p. 295

¹⁴⁶ See Madame de Staël’s *De l’Esprit des traductions*, 1816

new masterpieces were added to its literary heritage. By acknowledging the legacy of Italian novels, we will inevitably recognize the positions of its authors towards capitalism – although they lived in a country with a level of industrialization did not match that same level that a Charles Dickens or a Thomas Mann could witness, but that was still a capitalist country, nonetheless.

Gian Franco Venè identified Alessandro Manzoni, author of *The Betrothed*, to be one of the first authors discussing the “contradictions that are implicit in the capitalist structure or bourgeois society”¹⁴⁷, although the book is not set in the period Manzoni was writing it. The book displays a strong emphasis on classism and social injustice. The novel is questing to identify moral and inherent virtues in its characters, which is a research that, according to Venè, will have results being “as dramatic, and pessimistic, as much as capitalism is advanced”¹⁴⁸. Because Manzoni writes and lives in an early phase of capitalism, he ends up finding these human virtues in Christian values, but religious faith will provide a solution less and less. Critiques to society and the economic systems will intensify always more as years go by; Giacomo Leopardi is yet another signature rebelling against modernity. As Venè writes: “there is not a single moment in which Leopardi, while criticizing industrialism and trust in technique, does not perceive that danger lies in the social structure in which it is conceived”¹⁴⁹, or in other words, in the empowerment of the ruling class given by the machines they own and with which they subjugate the individuals below them. But one of the most violent and harsh attacks towards the bourgeoisie does not come from Leopardi, but from Giosuè Carducci, the poet of *Giambi ed Epodi*. By the time he was writing, literature had fully become a commodity, and a bad one, which was what led Carducci to express all his criticism.¹⁵⁰

The machines are the means of commodification, and in Luigi Pirandello’s *The Notebooks of Serafino Gubbio* they become the primal object of investigation. According to Venè not only does the main character in this story work with, and for, a machine, but his job as a cinema operator is deeply metaphorical, as he “feeds the machine with a fiction of life”¹⁵¹. Therefore, in Pirandello’s narrative is the man who is serving the machines, instead of the opposite, as well as renouncing to the “superfluous” awareness

¹⁴⁷ Gian Franco Venè, *Capitale e Letteratura*, Garzanti, Milano, 1974, p. 90

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 90

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 137

¹⁵⁰ Ibid

¹⁵¹ Ibid, p. 344

about his state of alienation. Additionally, such element of “superfluous” obviously coincides with the exercise of art. While society does not exactly ignore this “superfluous”, it does try to “translate it in shape, in something manageable, profitable: today we might say in a consumption good, in a commodity”¹⁵². Although referring to a different novel – namely Balzac’s *Lost Illusions* – literary critic György Lukács similarly denounces the capitalization of humanities “from art to national sentiment, from literature to glory. Everything is reduced or reducible to a commodity, everything acquires economic worth, and everything is produced in industrial chain”¹⁵³. As we have seen so far, the novel is most suited, therefore benefiting, format and genre among all literary commodities, at the expenses of other forms of expression such as poetry. According to Marxist critic and writer Christopher Caudwell, the poet is undoubtedly the most skilled man of letters as he is required the mastering of a series of technical abilities. However, “it is precisely this technical skill that is not searched by the vast majority of the population in an advanced stage of capitalist development... as the virtual proletarianization of modern virtual reality, human work conditions, deprived of any spontaneity, pushes more and more men to demand for a low-style art, chain produced, with a flatness and superficiality needed to adapt them to their non-free condition”¹⁵⁴. This is the reason why poetry lost its ascendant on mass culture, turning the condition of the poet who lives in a reality that has become one with industrial progress, according to Leopardi, unbearable. Some of them attempted to rebel against this condition through the means of escapism and isolation as a way to refuse their bourgeois legacy: it is the case of the aesthetic movement which praised art for art’s sake. And yet, Caudwell doubts this attempt is any revolutionary as they actually concur to the production of commodities through extreme self-seclusion. After all, “capitalist realism is even capable of contemplating a certain amount of anticapitalism”¹⁵⁵, which means that capitalism opponents are eventually absorbed and swallowed by capitalism itself. In addition, Venè precises that “prior to the development of capitalism and of the industry, art for art’s sake would be spent in formalism. It is completely useless, it seems, to discuss if even past

¹⁵² Ibid, p. 345

¹⁵³ Ibid, p. 98

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 106

¹⁵⁵ Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, Zero Books, 2009, p.43

formalism was or was not affected by that commodification process which, in capitalist age, is so quick and extensive”¹⁵⁶.

This is one of the many contradictions emerging from capitalism which are not especially hard to identify and to denounce, at least until proper action is to be taken. As already mentioned, anticapitalism can be easily appropriated by the same capitalism, but another technique which capitalists exploit to tackle and dismiss any dissident’s stance is what Lukács call the “indirect apologetics”. The indirect apologetics is the assumption according to which the evils of capitalist bourgeoisie social system is rooted and intrinsic to human nature itself, which, according to its theorizers, should serve as a valid argument to legitimize and accept capitalism even at its worst. An example could be that greed is a common feeling experienced by all men, which is to say that the dramatic effects of billionaire corporations are not capitalism’s fault, but human nature’s fault – and that there is nothing much to do about it. According to this claim, any kind of injustice or oppression the individual is dealing with is therefore “attributed to a natural tragedy”¹⁵⁷. However, it is often forgotten that the very idea of “human nature” has been relativistic throughout history, and it was a notion spent exactly to justify and defend the economic regime of each era. For instance, Greek philosopher Aristotle believed that it was part of the “human nature” of some individuals to be slaves, thus the practice of slavery in vogue around Europe at the time was legitimate and in no way wicked or oppressive. Similarly, in feudal Europe, it was argued that strict and autocratic hierarchies were “human nature”, while today the same notion is adapting to capitalism by stating that individualism, greed, and extreme competition are part of it. Therefore, the “human nature” argument is not only a social construct – it is also an economic one. With this precision being made, we can conclude this analysis by approaching yet another correlation between literature and economics, and that is the theory of the crisis of the novel. With the crisis of positivistic culture, the novel experienced a crisis of its own which ultimately led it to deconstruct some of its features and traditional tropes – such as narrative techniques, characters psychology, stylistic devices etc. If considering mature postmodernist literature, one of the most influential novel to be written which reflects on the evolution of capitalism is David Foster Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*. Set in an indefinite future (critics suggest early

¹⁵⁶ Gian Franco Venè, *Capitale e Letteratura*, Garzanti, Milano, 1974, p. 184

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 291

2000s), the most blatant and striking allusion to consumption society is the subsidizing of each year by a corporation sponsoring for tax returns; in this scenario, instead of having, say, year 2011, we have “Year of the Whopper”. But besides materialistic consumption, the novel widely focuses in the consumption of entertainment services such as cinema; in an interview, Wallace claims: “If the book's about anything, it's about the question of why am I watching so much shit? It's not about the shit. It's about me: Why am I doing it? The original title was *A Failed Entertainment*, and the book is structured as an entertainment that doesn't work.”¹⁵⁸. But this is not the extent of crisis which we are interested in. In a paper published in 2015, Suman Gupta questions whether “it is simply fortuitous that the ongoing crisis of the novel (the end of the genre as a novelistic trope) is being pondered amidst worldly concerns about a (recent or ongoing, depending where one is) financial crisis—the so-called 2007-08 financial crisis—and its results— austerity policies”¹⁵⁹. The 2007-08 crisis is one of the most crucial events defining late, or financial, capitalism, and equally “one of the most intensively narrativized and verbally mediated ‘events’ in this age of information and communication”¹⁶⁰. It is at this point that scholars start speaking about, not only “crisis of the novel”, but also of “novel of the crisis” – a trend that widely encompasses the inglorious financial crisis-related theme: “The prevailing political economy of texts, of books, automatically suggests this question: the novel, like all areas of cultural production, is hostage to market drives. Superlative production of news narratives about an ‘event’ spurs book production alluding to that ‘event’—it makes good market sense, and producers of novels could be expected to capitalize on it. It is as natural to anticipate the ‘financial crisis novel’ as to anticipate the ‘9/11 novel,’ the ‘Iraq invasion novel,’ or the ‘Arab Spring novel.’ The answer to the above question is, interestingly, that the novel has made indifferent inroads into print productions about the financial crisis”¹⁶¹. Much similarly, beforementioned *Infinite Jest* is, partially, a novel about Quebec separatism, but many other examples could be made. The point the author of the paper advances in listing many of such examples is, essentially, that “the very practice of writing and reading, the very structures of production and circulation, the very themes and issues that can be identified as of-this-

¹⁵⁸ David Lipsky, *The Lost Years & Last Days of David Foster Wallace*, Rolling Stone, 2008, p. 6

¹⁵⁹ Suman Gupta, Crisis of the Novel and Novel of the Crisis, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 2015, p. 459

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid*, p. 459

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*, p. 460-461

world in novels are within the embrace of neoliberalism—and the novel is found within or against its grain.”¹⁶². By referring to a “matrix of the neoliberal lifeworld”¹⁶³, Gupta argues that the novel is a valid and cleverly insightful gauge to observe the crisis of the society we live in, and the economics which affect our lives.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Ibid, p. 465

¹⁶³ Ibid, p. 465

¹⁶⁴ Ibid

Conclusion

To conclude our analysis, it is safe to say that the artistic realms has always been, and always will be, affected by the economics. Capitalism brought, among its many features, technological revolutions – the categorization of Schumpeterian innovation results useful from this standpoint - which have most definitely changed the way we create and interact with art. Although the effects on the quality of modern artistic products with respect to capitalist influence is, by nature, difficult to assess, what we have seen so far is a standardization of production which allowed capitalism to kickstart mass production of basic consumption goods. Easily reproducible products are easily marketable products, no matter whether they are tins of tuna or artworks. An artwork, however, imply some sort of value – cultural and economic – which should be able to differentiate it from other ordinary commodities. The analysis carried to shed a light on this issue returns us with a long list of definitions and attempts to establish what is value and how is it measured. Value is, therefore, a concept which is – at least theoretically – linked with demand. Yet the prices of different works of art should not be read as infallible calculators of such value, as an exact mathematical correspondence between economic and cultural value based on some mysterious equation: prices are considerably subjected to change over time and their destiny depend on the audience's taste. This last statement fully resonates with the insight about auction sales, where buyers appear to be sensitive and appreciative of specific attributes they look for in works of art: authenticity, for instance, is one of those values which most appeal to buyers – and unsurprisingly so. In fact, the circulation of fakes in the art market seems to be a common reality targeting especially works by popular and beloved artists who are highly demanded for. This is why the sole presence of a signature in the artwork is able to increase the price dramatically. With all this being said, it should be evident that the world of auction houses is ruled by complex dynamics as it deals with top-tier art pieces at an international level. Other realities in which lower-profile artists and art dealers operate daily, are used to deal with entirely different consumers and gain - needless to say – not as conspicuous earnings. That capitalism brings innovation is an assumption we are used to listen often in the liberal discourse; however, the very structure of the market observed hitherto seems to suggest that emerging artists are confronted with a much more challenging scenario, if

compared to their already established colleagues. Towards the conclusion of the chapter a final focus shifts to the Dada movement: this was one of the first avant-garde waves challenging capitalist logics and provoking the *petite bourgeoisie* sensibility, although multiple other examples (one being the Situationist International) could have been equally valid.

In Chapter Two we leave the visual arts aside to embrace artistic forms of expression with a marked technological, therefore modern, component. Photography, and to the same extent cinema – as these two traditions share much of the same technical ground – developed itself in symbiosis with the modern industry. As a result, photography thrived on a solid relationship with scientific research and materials industry, while cinema was able to develop sound film partially thanks to the bond with the electric industry. Both photography and cinema catalyzed the attention and the interest of the masses, which is one of the reasons why they were frowned upon by art experts at their early stages. Consequently, photographers attempted to use their art in a way to pay a tribute to the painters they were inspired by. This is the case of “art-photographs”, which used to be labelled a relatively low price around the 1950s and the 1960s, as to denote a “nonrecognition” in the art market. Similarly, the first tickets to be sold at cinematographic theaters were not expensive either, which required a higher number of daily shows. Scarce resources and raw materials equaled fewer films, but the increasing demand urged a systematized production and at the same time an organization in terms of distribution. From that moment the film industry grew substantially, although not immune to major historic and economic events. One of the most fascinating effects of economic history on cinema is the impact of the first postwar recession which spread from the USA to Europe with disastrous outcomes – while cinema seemed to be indifferent to it, at least until 1933. What initially sounds like nonsense is a social phenomenon, as for which even the humblest classes of the population would *demand* for entertainment. Something similar happened to the music industry. During the second postwar, the market enlarged itself, paving the way for the emerging genre of rock music and a correlated boom of independent companies which were quick to take advantage of its popularity. Although these labels were, and are, known as “indies” the *modus operandi* was essentially mainstream, as they would exploit their musicians without much hesitation. Overproduction and mass production of music, unsurprisingly, led to the

saturation of the market; at that point, the industry would target a different and unexplored segment and the process would repeat. This is best known as the “differentiated oligopoly” system, which collapsed with the 1979 crisis, to recover only in 1983. By that time, the *compact disc* entered the market and brought obvious changes, similarly to what the digital revolution has done up until now. To summarize, filmic and musical industry resemble each other in their eternal “film trusts vs. independent filmmakers” and “major labels vs. independent labels” rivalry, and in the saturation of the market resulting from this non-stop feud. To add a new reflection upon these considerations, one might consider biggest cinema trusts or the mainstream labels (although indies are not absolved by this reflection), and will very likely find products such as *reboots*, *remakes*, *live actions* on the one hand, or *remixes*, *remasters*, or *re-interpretations* on the other. This is no way of saying that free interpretation and transcreation of pre-existing material is any wrong: to this end, the last chapter briefly discusses the legitimacy of quoting previously written literary works as an inevitable phase of the creative process. However, the creative industries are beginning to offer a decreasing number of original works in favor of self-referential products, an index of the clear incapability of never-ending production of goods and services.

An analogous issue is revoked, as anticipated, in Chapter Three. After introducing the genre of the novel and its revitalization from the 1800s, especially thanks to the mechanical reproduction processes enabled by the printing press, the matter of intellectual property is opened. Complementary and useful to this investigation is the matter of plagiarism: by observing the simple fact that quoting extensively from different books was a recurrent practice in the Middle Ages (when copyright was not even a concern) it is fair to ask how originality is defined. One of the fundamental assumptions is that stylistic emulation is inevitable, and it has been a practice since the Middle Ages. As a result, plagiarism and copyrights infringements become increasingly thorny interrogatives, but also an opportunity for artists and writers to create new art, such as pastiche and bricolage, by adopting the perspective that it is simply impossible to make something entirely new and entirely authentic.

Before arriving to pastiche and bricolage, however, literature lives an intense history throughout the 19th and 20th century in which, as it has been made clear since the beginning, the novel becomes the protagonist. Favored by newspapers as one of the

available means of diffusion, the novel easily surpassed other genres such as poetry, which demanded reading skills that the modern reader lacked. Although it is fair to assume that the novel benefitted (economically) from capitalism, not all novelists showed enthusiastic expectations for the socio-economic horizon that they so insightfully depicted with their words. The critique of the bourgeoisie, the relationships between man and machine and social injustices are some of the recurrent patterns portrayed in literature, including by *art for art's sakes* advocates who poorly attempted to rebel against capitalist society by isolating themselves.

Hence, we can find a reflection of capitalistic history by closely looking at the literature produced in parallel to it. The ultimate correspondence found is the virtual manifestation of the 21st century financial crisis in the so-called “novel(s) of the crisis”. Sparing extensive lists of titles, the last paragraph of this paper concludes by looking at the field of novels dealing with social, economic, and political crises that have characterized recent history.

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Ringraziamenti

Il ringraziamento più sentito va al Prof. Bertilorenzi, per il supporto e la disponibilità, nonché i suggerimenti e gli spunti di riflessioni indispensabili per indirizzare il lavoro di ricerca di questi ultimi mesi.

Ringrazio i miei genitori per avermi incoraggiato e aver mostrato un sincero interesse nel percorso di studi da me scelto: spero di aver restituito la soddisfazione necessaria quantomeno a dimenticare le bollette dell'elettricità che in parte ho contribuito ad inflazionare. Ringrazio mia sorella Chiara: non so per cosa di preciso, ma grazie.

Ringrazio l'Università di Padova, per l'esperienza didattica ma soprattutto extracurricolare che mi ha permesso di vivere, attraverso progetti e attività che sono grata di aver portato avanti.

Ringrazio infine gli amici, i compagni e i colleghi che mi sono stati accanto in questi tre anni, poco importa se costantemente o sporadicamente. Le persone che ho conosciuto, tutte e ognuna a modo suo, mi hanno fatto crescere. Molte di loro hanno condiviso con me questo percorso di laurea; con alcune di loro continuerò un percorso inedito alla Magistrale, nella speranza che il rapporto di complicità e sostegno cresca ancor più. Altre, invece, non hanno condiviso con me un percorso di studi; con alcune di loro non condivido neppure lo stesso Ateneo. Nonostante ciò, tutte loro hanno portato un contributo e un valore aggiuntivo a questa esperienza universitaria, e a prescindere dal fatto che possano essere presenti qui oggi, io le ringrazio.