THE SOCIETY OF SPECTACLE AND ART AS A COMMODITY.

INTRODUCTION:

From Manet and Degas to Andy Warhol and Jeffrey Koons, from Beethoven to Michael Jackson and Madonna, from Oliver Twist to Harry Potter, from theatre to cinema, from operas to musicals and from ballet to commercial dance. From ritual to folklore and high to popular, art is evolving in relation to the society and all its aspects. Art in every form is inevitably transforming through time. But what are the reasons for this and to what extent they can influence it?

Guy Debord important member of the Situationists International wrote a critique of the contemporary capitalistic society and consumer culture entitled the Society of Spectacle. Key word of his book as well as key concept of the Situationist's theory is the spectacle, which refers to a system of combined capitalism and the mass media. The economy has an integral role in every society and it is important that 'the economy transforms the world, but transforms it only into a world of economy' (Debord, 1994, par.40).

At the same time some of the greatest technological inventions such as television, radio and the internet, collectively known as the mass media, now constitute a large part of the modern western society. These are the media that inform and entertain the mass or the majority of people in every society, however they are also the media that promote and recycle certain ideas, fashions and aesthetic norms.

Following the theory of Karl Marx and the neo-Marxist philosophy of The Frankfurt School, the Critical Theory is established by Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer among others. In his book The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936) W. Benjamin focuses on the technological development that led to uncontrolled mass mechanical reproduction of art works and the results of this on their authenticity. Later on with The Dialectics of Enlightenment (1947) Adorno and Horkheimer coin the term 'culture industry' to criticise the production of standardised cultural goods and present their philosophical ideas on the effects of the capitalistic society on culture.

Based on these works and the theories introduced by the Frankfurt School lots of philosophical discussions and research started to develop around the themes of mass, popular culture and the culture industry, which allowed art, in the modern capitalist society, to be seen in many different perspectives and created a huge still unanswered debate about whether art nowadays should be considered as commodity and why.
FROM CREATION TO RE-PRODUCTION:

'In principle a work of art has always been reproducible. Manmade artifacts could always be imitated by men' (Benjamin, 1999, p. 212) as procedures of technically reproducing works of art seem to exist from the time of Ancient Greece till the Medieval. In the Renaissance art works could not be thought as commodities. During the mid-19th century the artist freed from any feudal ties starts to take advantage of the technological inventions that allowed the reproduction of his artworks in order to ensure the expenses of the fixed capital as well as his own living. Firstly novelists and gradually composers and painters utilised the benefits of mechanical reproduction to transform their artworks into cultural goods and enter the marketplace. Hence 'mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual' (ibid, p. 218) and 'the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility' (ibid p. 218). In addition art shops, commercial galleries and private museums, exhibition collectives, auctions and art fairs replace the church and state institutions as the loci of display and exchange works of art (Brettell, 1999, p. 57).

The new technological development in the field of arts gave the artists the opportunity to earn more money from their creations. 'It is generally assumed that when artists make art are motivated by the highest ideas' (Walker, 1987) nonetheless it is important to remember that they also produce art to make a living. This fact does not mean it is impossible for an artist to have several motives: some primary, some secondary, some idealistic and some mercenary, as such motivations are not always mutually exclusive. Although John A. Walker argues that 'the aesthetic quality of a work is not determined by the motives of its maker' and that 'making art for money is not an indication that the resulting work is of no artistic or intellectual value' (ibid) sometimes it is important to distinguish the pure motivations or ultimate goals of making an artwork. Especially in the modern capitalist system where everything is massively produced and consumed and quality does not always play a significant role artists merely aiming in money and fame, may produce artworks of low artistic value and widely appealing to the public.

FROM UNIQUE TO MASS:

Technological and mechanical reproduction of art not only changed the production but also the consumption and the reaction of public towards art. The Culture Industry refers to 'the production of works for reproduction and mass consumption' (Adorno, 2002, p. 4) following some certain, widely accepted aesthetic standards, which resulted to the appearance of popular culture: a mass-produced, commercial culture, considered to be the opposite of high culture which is why it is also referred to as inferior or 'low' culture. However the basic difference of popular and high culture
seems to be that high culture is 'the result of an individual act of creation' (Storey, 2001, p.7) and is directly linked with the quality while popular culture has a quantitative dimension as it is widely liked and favoured by a considerable amount of people. Therefore the public play a crucial role in defining and determining popular culture, which is why it is also known as mass culture. The mass refers to the majority of people that tend to follow any general fashions and norms dominating in the society and thus constitute a mob, 'prone to the manipulative persuasions of the mass media, submissive to the appeals of buying mass produced commodities and open to the commercial exploitation which motivates mass culture' (Strinati, 1999, p. 12). Benjamin characterises the audience as "the consumers who constitute the market." (Hansen, 2012, p.97), and these consumers constitute also in the degradation of culture (Adorno, 2002, p.17).

Within the borders of culture industry any form of art, low or high, that is produced aims in satisfying the audience and maintaining the spectator or listener as consumer, because without the mass the culture industry would not be able to function. The more the public favours this system the more it becomes part of it and the more power the 'audience-as-producers' (Storey, 2001, p. 175) gain in the cultural economy. Nevertheless, this power is actually ostensible because their personal preferences, likes and needs are vastly influenced and manipulated by the mass media and marketing. As Karl Marx similarly mentioned 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness' (Marx, 1904, pp.11-12).

The mass media are made to 'reflect, express and articulate social reality in a mediated fashion' (Adorno, 2002, p. 20), which is what popular culture takes advantage of to flourish and become even more popular. There are examples of songs and pieces of art that became popular after appearing on the mass media, like the song "Should I stay or should I go" by The Clash in Levi's 501 commercial 'Pool Hall' in 1991 (Walter Goyzueta, 2012). There are also other examples of classic novels such as Tolstoy and music compositions of Beethoven and other great composers that are turned into film scripts and movies' soundtracks and thus took the form of popular culture. Even though mass media usually emphasize and promote popular culture cannot always be used as a factor of marking the difference between mass and high art, mainly because avant garde art and high culture have also been produced, reproduced and circulated by the mass media at several times (Storey, 2003, p.95). Additionally, art works such as William Shakespeare's theatre works, Charles Dickens' novels and film noir, were considered popular culture in the time of their creation and nowadays represent high culture (Storey, 2001, p.7). In all cases above there is a crossing over of the borders that separate popular and high culture, which suggests that both 'bear stigmata of capitalism', and 'both contain elements of change' (Adorno, 2002, p.2)
Another example of the mass reproduction of art and the degradation of artworks is the well-known painting of Leonardo Da Vinci, Mona Lisa. The painting is prominently placed in Louvre’s museum and has been a symbol of high art for many years. Due to its popularity other artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Andy Warhol decided to use this piece of high art and transform it into a completely different piece of art. The famous painting has also been used several times for commercial reasons and became a marketing object.
So, ‘that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art’ (Benjamin, 1999, p.215), ‘its authority and uniqueness, its singularity in time and space’ (Strinati, 1999, p. 82) due to its infinite reproducibility. The result is a mass culture, an industry of constant mass reproduction of cultural goods, and a society based on spectacle and money.

FROM MODERN TO POSTMODERN:

Following modernism and the view of modern art as a 'structured critique of capitalism' (Brettell, 1999, p. 60) avant-garde comes into existence, and according to Dwight MacDonald tries to stay outside the marketplace, maintaining some artistic standards. Some of the artists that represented this concept of modernist avant-garde are Picasso, Joyce, Stravinsky and Rimbaud (Strinati, 1999, p.19) even though their works acquired popularity through time. Two of the many avant-garde art movements:

* Dadaism and surrealism are at once historically related and opposed to each other. [...] Dadaism wanted to suppress art without realizing it; surrealism wanted to realize art without suppressing it. The critical position later elaborated by the Situationists has shown that the suppression and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single supersession of art. (Debord, 1994, par. 191)

Avant-garde movement constituted a passage from Dada through the Situationists to the postmodern artists. During that time avant-garde also became associated to movements concerned with the concept of ‘art for art’s sake’ (l’art pour l’art) a slogan promoted by Théophile Gautier who believed that art should be independent and produced not for the public's sake, but for art's sake (Witcombe). This concept is a reaction to the emergence of capitalist industrialisation, the commercialisation of culture and the threats they posed to the aura of the work of art, that don't seem to preoccupy postmodernism. As Fredrick Jameson explains:

* postmodernism is the cultural dominant of late capitalism. Unlike modernism, postmodern culture rather than resisting replicates and reproduces, reinforces and intensifies the logic of consumer capitalism. Culture is no longer ideological, disguising the economic activities of capitalist society, it is itself an economic activity. (Storey, 2003, p.65)

Even though it's not clarified whether pop art is part of postmodernism, it is undoubtedly a product of the culture industry. Therefore notions of consumerism and capitalism are shared between popular and postmodern art.

It is significant that 'Popular art is not art that has attempted and failed to be ‘real’ art but art which operates within the confines of popular'(ibid, p.102). It has not been created with the purpose of becoming high art, but with that of being widely
recognisable and accepted in the 'society of spectacle'. Andy Warhol, leading figure of the pop art movement, states:

'The Pop artists did images that people walking down Broadway could recognize in a split second-comics, picnic tables, men's trousers, celebrities, shower curtains, refrigerators, Coke bottles-all the great modern things that the Abstract Expressionists tried so hard not to notice at all' (Brettell, 1999, p. 105)

'Andy Warhol is renowned for his prints of famous popular cultural icons like Marlyn Monroe, Elvis Presley as well as everyday consumers items like tins of Campell's soup, Coca-Cola bottles and dollar bills' (Strinati, 1999, p. 226). A good example of postmodernist theory and pop art is the already discussed artwork by Andy Warhol entitled 'Thirty are Better Than One'.

FROM BEING ART TO BEING A COMMODITY:

Despite the attempts of avant-garde and the Sittuationists, culture became an industry obeying the same rules of production as any other producer of commodities and cultural production became an integrated component of the capitalist economy (Adorno, 2002, p.9). 'Culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part' (ibid), including the arts.

According to Marx's definition, a commodity is any good or service offered as a product to be sold on the market. However there are some goods, not originally produced for the market that lose their symbolic essence and are transformed into commodities by being assigned an economic value. An example of the so called commodification is art.

The existence of art in the market may appear to be in complete contradiction with 'its aesthetic, spiritual and transcendent qualities' (Walker, 1987) however art chooses to follow the capitalist system and place itself in the market. Therefore the conjunction of art with money and business cannot be thought as an incongruity and works of art can no longer be described as 'priceless'. Any work of art, paintings and visual arts, music, theatre, film and dance acquire a price and any social and artistic values are replaced by the market values of use and exchange.

According to Marx the use value refers to 'the usefulness of a good to the consumer, its practical value or utility, while the exchange value refers to the money that a commodity can command on the market, the price it can be bought and sold for' (Strinati, 1999, p. 57). Within a capitalist society exchange value will always dominate use value, however they are both intrinsically linked and dependent on each other, because 't is the use that is ultimately exchanged' (Martin, 2007, p. 21) even if it is a use constructed by the pseudo-needs of capitalist society.
Art’s initial use value was its aesthetic properties and its symbolic meaning, open to reflection. When artworks became priced goods able to be exchanged their use value became deteriorated and devalued and lead by the forces of capitalism and consumerism art works took the form of standardised, saleable commodities. Sometimes even the price of a ticket for a music concert or a dance performance can be given a greater importance than the performance itself, which turns the exchange value into use value, underlying the real use value of the artwork (Strinati, 1999, p.58).

For Adorno:

‘autonomous art is both a commodity and not, both destroyed by and a product of capitalism, both its critique and its ideology. The artwork is presented as a contradiction produced by capitalism. Commodification is a condition of possibility of autonomous art as well as a condition of its impossibility. (Martin, 2007, p.17)

Some examples of Pop and Minimalist artworks that can show the antinomy of art being and not being a commodity are the works below:

Andy Warhol, Brillo Boxes

Donald Judd Untitled, 1993

Robert Morris, Mirrored Cubes (1965-71)
Although it may seem easy to distinguish the commodified artwork the fact that just six of D. Judd's Plexiglass boxes are sold for $4.2 million might change our perception. There are plenty of examples of artists that earn huge amounts of money from their artworks not always corresponding to their artistic, use value. Such examples are Luis Gispert and Jeff Koons with some of their works shown below that portray popular culture and resemble cheap commodities.

Luis Gispert, Wraseling girls, 2002

Jeff Koons, The Empire State of Scotch. Dewar's, 1986

Jeff Koons, Infatable Flower and Bunny, 1979

Jeff Koons, Balloon Dog
And here is one of Dan Flavin’s sculptural constructions of neon strip lighting decorating Louis Vuitton shop window, another example of how art can perpetuate consumerism and capitalism, degrading its own value.

All the examples above prove that art is explicitly or implicitly affected by the modern economic system and it is found to be commodified in most of its forms, especially these with a materialistic nature.

CONCLUSION:

Concluding, it is obvious that the debate of art being or not a commodity is huge and almost unanswerable due to the complex nature of art itself. Nevertheless what cannot be doubt is that culture is an integral part of the society as well as the economy and so each one of these can affect and be affected by the others. As a result, the capitalist system on which contemporary Western societies and economies are based has consequential effects on culture and art.

‘Art [...] depends on the quality of the society which produces it.’ (Williams, 1990, p. 153) hence in a materialist society the entanglement of culture and commerce is unavoidable. ‘The implicit argument here is that, within a society in which commodification is dominant, everything that is external to this commodification becomes marginal, liable to be socially irrelevant or merely yet-to-be-commodified’. (Walker, 1987). Following this argument, it is said that ‘anyone who resists can only survive by fitting in’ (Blunden, 2005), which can be related to the concept of ‘the survival of the fittest’ : the one, who adapts faster to the environment survives. In this case art needs to obey the rules of capitalist system and adapt to the ‘society of spectacle’ in order to keep its accessibility and social relevance. This adaptation of art usually implies the degradation of artworks and the deterioration of their artistic value.
However this is not always the case. Stuart Semple’s pop art appears as a contradiction to the preconceptions behind it and a motivation to the audience not to follow the stereotypes of capitalist market. He aims that through his work

'people will gain an idea that popular culture can be utilised by them, that they don’t have to be passive in it…grab bits of it, put them back together and create something new.' (Coghlan, p 33).

Similarly Andy Warhol attempts using low subject matter and consumers’ objects to create art that criticises mass culture and draws the attention of the audience to how reproducibility conceived the art’s world. And he significantly says : 'Art is what you perceive as art' (Storey, 2001, p. 149).

Art has the characteristic that evolves through time following any social, political and economical changes. So, mass culture and pop art may not be recognised as ‘pure’ and valuable but they represent the modern western world, a world of capital, commodities, commercials and marketing, technological innovations, industries, mass media, mass production and mass consumption. A world of ‘Spectacle’. In this world art exists whether as a commodity or not and the responsibility is on the consumers and how they will choose to utilise it.
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