

Finding Symbols and Signs: Losing Use-Values and Referents

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Abstract

Baudrillard refers to the commodity today as a “radically new form” as its value as a use has been annihilated by its exchange value. He thus proposes a new semiotic structure of the commodity, as an autonomous sign, from a referent. I will be beginning this investigation with an analysis of the symbol, and thus translating the epistemological formations embedded in it, into an examination of the origins of Western culture’s preoccupation with names and identities, or the classification system. Once I have established the originating episteme of the symbol, I will be next analyzing the value and concept of money to reveal the economic foundations of the commodity as a use-value, and thus revealing the origins of its founding as a referent in a signifying structure. Finally, I will be losing both the commodity’s use-value as well as its sign’s semiotic structure, through the employment of this established episteme within its application and function in the industrial economy revealing its loss.

I. Introduction: Mission Statement

In the Mirror of Production, Baudrillard states “a revolution has put an end to this “classical” economics of value, a revolution of value itself, which carries value beyond its commodity form into its radical form. This new “radical form”^{1 2} of the commodity by which Baudrillard theorizes, is a transformation of the commodity from a conventional Marxian “use-value,” to a commodity entirely predicated on the circulation of money, and its value in exchange. Thus, Baudrillard proposes a new semiotic translation to the commodity’s new form, describing its structure as both liberated from a use-value, and hence autonomous from its founding “reference” or referent. The value of the commodity can now be defined as an independent constellation from its former reference once located in a use-value, this is what he defines as “the death of the reference.”³ Baudrillard continues stating, “from now on, signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real.”⁴ The loss of the use-value is a loss of a “real” value, establishing this new value on money-values, and locating the “real” within the very abstraction by which created it. It is here, amidst all these abstractions and losses, an investigation commences to uncover where amongst these abstractions this semiotic structure of the “radical form” of the commodity locates its origins, and what exactly allows the use-value to be as Baudrillard describes “annihilated.”⁵ I will be beginning this investigation with an analysis of the symbol, and thus translating the epistemological formations embedded in it, into an examination of the origins of Western culture’s preoccupation with names and identities, or the classification system. Once I have established the originating episteme of the symbol,

¹ Baudrillard, Jean *The Mirror of Production*. Trans. Mark Poster. The Telos Press: New York. 1975 30

² Berardi, Bifo. *The Uprising: On Poetry and Finance*. Semiotext: Los Angeles. 2012 138

³ Baudrillard, Jean. *Symbolic Exchange and Death*. Trans. Iain Hamilton Grant. Sage Productions: London.1993. 6

⁴ Baudrillard. *Ibid.* 7

⁵ *Ibid.* Berardi.138

I will be next analyzing the value and concept of money to reveal the economic foundations of the commodity as a use-value, and thus revealing the origins of its founding as a referent in a signifying structure. Finally, I will be losing both the commodity's use-value as well as its sign's semiotic structure, through the employment of this established episteme within its application and function in the industrial economy revealing its loss. I will conclude with a full night's sleep.

II. Finding The Referent

A. Classifying: An Episteme of Symbols

In *Symbol to Sign* Julia Kristeva theorizes on the transformation of the symbol, establishing some central characteristics of its iconic perceptual methods of understanding, it is within these central characteristics by which the grounds to an episteme of classifications may be noted in its similar form. Establishing first the central value of the symbol, Kristeva defines its discourse as one pertaining to a visual representation of a symbolized concept by which denotes an "unrepresentable" entity. Within the classification system this concept of the "unrepresentable" is central to what Michel Foucault defines in *The Order of Things* as the primary motivation behind the methodologies of "order" originating in the Enlightenment era. Here within the classification system a whole episteme pertaining to the mysteries of the unknown within a format of the identifiable, or the genus and the species is established.⁶ In this system, the entity to be named and ordered, was subjected to the same principles of the symbol's symbolized concept, as objective and descriptive characteristics, allowed for the institution of a generalized knowledge, and thus an easily accessible conduit to the unknown.⁷ As Foucault contends

⁶ Ibid. Foucault. 127

⁷ Ibid. Foucault. 127

these descriptions, stripped away “all commentary,”⁸ or as Kristeva describes on the symbol, creates an “association of general ideas.”⁹ Charles Sanders Peirce’s describes a same principle methodology to the symbol, describing it as a discourse understood through a virtue of a convention, or “general signs, which have become associated with their meanings by usage.”¹⁰ The result, leads to what Foucault contends as a discourse enabling the “possibility of seeing what one will be able to say, but what one could not say subsequently,”¹¹ opening up a “space in representation.”¹² Hence, by utilizing a symbol methodology, the classification system enabled the institution of a discourse in a tangible, and direct manner. By its very virtue as an objectivity, and its authority in names, this episteme creates a symbolic methodology in understanding, predicated on the immediacy of the name, to access perception.

B. Coinage: A Transitioning Episteme

At the dawn of the “classical” era, another symbolic relationship is noted in the “order” and episteme of coinage. Foucault contends coinage within this period was “based in two functions (measures and substitutions) on the double nature of its intrinsic *character* (fact that it was precious).”¹³ Thus coinage established itself on a symbol system, instituting both a visual identifier, or a “representation” in its coin format, as well as a definite and insoluble value as a precious metal. The basis to the coin’s symbol structure is established upon the very application of classifying episteme, as a series of measurements or values, all pertaining to a specific quality placed in a generalized order. There are

⁸ Ibid. Foucault. 130

⁹ Julia Kristeva. *The Kristeva Reader*. Ed. Toril Moi. Columbia University Press: New York. 1986. 67

¹⁰ Peirce, Charles Sanders “What Is a Sign?” Philosophy Archive: Marxist.org.

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/peirce1.htm>

¹¹ Michel Foucault. *The Order of Things*. Translation of *Les Mots et les choses*. Vintage Books: New York. 1994. 184

¹² Ibid. Foucault. 127

¹³ Ibid. Foucault 174

rationalizations of mineral substances, through the application of measurements in order to create a money-value as well as a whole series of systems based in part on those values. The resulting episteme established its central value on a series of identities, pertaining to that money-value's order, thus endowing the measured mineral with a concurring name pertaining to its allocated value, such as, a "pound," a "pence," a "shilling." "Georg Simmel In the Philosophy of Money describes the nature of money as it pertains to its origins in its mineral form.

The order in which things are placed as natural entities is based on the proposition that the whole variety of their qualities rests upon a uniform law of existence. Their equity before the law of nature, the constant sum matter into energy, the convertibility of the most diverse phenomenon into another, transforms the differences that are apparent at first sight into a general affinity, a universal equality.¹⁴

This "general affinity," "uniformity" and "universal equality" by which Simmel describes, is key to coinage's establishment as a money-value as these attributes found it on a universal objectivity, crucial to its configuration's goals as an easily communicable value and thus an easily accepted and recognizable economic identity.¹⁵ This new set of criteria, establishes coinage on a truly identifiable system of values, employing a universality, a rule and a law to access its identity. This is a symbol-system of communicating applying the same methodology central to the classification system, through the employment of money-values, within specific identities of a general and pre-established order. The money-value, upon its implementation in an identity, allows it to establish this same episteme of classifications in an economic format pertaining to a function of its name, rather than a mere description of it. This is central to the establishing origins of the value of money, as its

¹⁴ Simmel, Georg. *The Philosophy of Money*. Trans. David Frisby. Forward. Charles Lemert. Routledge: New York and London. 2004. 61

¹⁵ Foucault. *Ibid.* 174

very objectivity in its measurable and neutral precious metal form generates a direct conduit, as well as an association, or a *reference* to its material value. It is within this relationship of the material and the infallibility of its name by which the symbol allows coinage to transcend its material value to become an accepted value, as a name, rather than just a precious metal. Once this reference is established and fixed in society, it's symbolizing identity, alone can satisfy its use, it may just *represent*, rather than be a representation.

C. A Symbolizing Value: A Referent

Once the success of the symbolizing value of money is established, it can situate this value within a whole new economic methodology; this is a new semiotic system, based in part on the application of an episteme of classifications, this is founding of our referent. According to Foucault the transformation of coinage from a doubly functioning value, where as it functioned both as a substantive value as well as one of exchange, occurs in the seventeenth century by which the analysis of "value" is turned "upside down." Upon this reversal, the "exchanging function" of coinage could now serve as the "foundation for the other two characters (its ability to measure and its capacity to receive a price thus appearing as qualities deriving from a function);"¹⁶ the exchanging function aligned with its infallible identity as a money-value, now provided coinage with a usefulness, which surpassed its representation as just a money-value. Coinage is now a value in and of itself; its function surpassed a concretized value. As a function, and as a naturalized perceptible symbolizer, fostered the realization of its identity, outside of itself, through an *interpretation* of its "usefulness" in its exchanging value. Kristeva contends, "once the relations between the signifying unit and the idea has been weakened, the signifying unit

¹⁶ Foucault. Ibid 174

became more and more 'material' until it forgot its origins."¹⁷ Coinage, in its semiotic episteme of names and measured objectivities, liberates itself from the very ideas supporting its transition into an icon, thus lifting its "material hegemony," and permitting it now to symbolize outside of its structure. This transformation is crucial in the history of capitalism as this very simple change from coinage as a describing-identity to a function in itself establishes a whole new state of existence. As the symbolizer signals outside of its coin, a mercantile economic system appears, and a new relationship with money predicated on *values*, rather than *wealth* is established. As Marx states:

The religious reflections of the real world can, in any case, vanish only when practical relations of everyday life between man and man, and man and nature, generally present themselves to him in a transparent and rational form....this however requires society possess a material foundation, or a series of material conditions of existence."¹⁸

The transformation of coinage to money-values, establishes what Marx refers to as the "material conditions" of a new era in production, as the "material foundations" by which Marx refers in their "transparent and rational form" describe the very nature of the uses of coinage. Coinage no longer needs to either represent or create a representation of wealth, it is no longer historic, religious or familial, it is a realized and realizing value. Thus coinage establishes a sign system based upon these realizing value, in a use-value, or as Marx describes the mercantile economic value of money aimed at converting money into a commodity to "serve(s) as a use-value; it has therefore been spent once and for all"¹⁹(C-M-C). Thus, this realizing value of money to perceive itself outside of its own materiality, establishes our use-value, or referent, as one originating as a potentiality of money, in its

¹⁷ Kristeva. Ibid 70

¹⁸ Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto and Other Writings*. Ed. George Stade. Intro. Martin Puchner. Barnes and Noble Classic: New York. 2005. 174

¹⁹ Marx. Ibid. 248

use-value form. Thus the symbolizer once placed in a realizing value, loses its attachment to past values, and hence situates itself in a sign structure, allowing it to assume a future tense, as a reference, to a signified interpretation of its money-value. This potentiality of money, establishes the commodity's referent in a mercantile society, as a ratified objectivity, a specific identity, a reference establishing its function upon its very nature as a representation. The referent's value pertains to something that signals outside of itself, this is the nature of the referent in the sign, as well as the nature of realizing money-values as uses.

III. Losing The Referent

A. Productive "Values"

Upon the success of money-values as realized uses, the mercantile economy yields to an industrial economy, introducing "new-values" for the referent, as a realizing value in capital, as thus establishing the referent in a mixed system of "values." As Foucault states, in an industrial systems of production "the mode of being of economics is no longer linked to simultaneous space of differences and identities, but to the time of successive productions."²⁰ These "successive productions" refer to what Marx describes as the predominance of exchange-values, within a new precipitating economic force, situating the function of money over the commodity form. As Marx states:

If we disregard the material content of the circulation of commodities, i.e. the exchange of the various use-values, and consider only the economic forms bought into being by this process, we find that its ultimate product is money. This ultimate product of commodity circulation is the first form of appearance of capital.²¹

²⁰ Foucault. Ibid. 274

²¹ Marx. Ibid. 248

Money-values gravitate towards a purpose, they insinuate the “bigger,” the “better” a realized value; they signify an additional referential value of money within a productive force. Hence as Marx refers, “material relations” or now “commodity relations” establish a network of values, utilizing use-value as a means to perpetuate the function of money, in circulation, and exchange. As Marx describes, money-values are the first form of capital, they are the origins of commodity culture, and as realized use values of the referent, their locale in a productive economy situate their “values” in a rather precarious position (M-C-M). As Pierce states, “Symbols grow. They come into being by development out of other signs, particularly from likenesses or from mixed signs partaking of the nature of likenesses and symbols.”²² The referent, as a potentiality of a “value” within an industrial economy establishes itself on a paradox of values, as both realizing values in uses within consumption, as well as realizing values in production. Thus, the referent begins its plight within an industrial economy as a duality, and thus a volatile foundation as a use-value. The symbol of coinage’s very episteme will yield to the mixing of signifieds, as well as new signs from symbols.

B. Standards: Referents and Signified(s)

The referent, on the productive side of money-values, establishes its nature as a use-value predicated on the institution of measured identities and values, thus reconfiguring the use-value of a commodity into a generalized classified episteme of standards. The referent as described by Pierce is defined as an “Object,” situated in the base of the signifying system of the sign which acts as a “reference” enabling a broad array of possible “interpretants.” In the productive potentialities of money within an industrial economy, the referent begins its signing structure, in a money-value, or an investment, Marx defines this

²² Marxist.org. Ibid. online

as the both the division of labor and the advent of the manufacturing of use-values.²³ As a referent in this production process, money-values, alone satisfy a symbol system as a simple representation of money, money is a specific but generalized identity. Once placed within a sign structure, the nature of this generalized identity is subject to a more specific and thus a more functional interpretation of its application. As Simmel contends money is a “formless,” medium containing not ‘the slightest suggestion of a rising and falling of the contents of life...it lacks and accepts without any internal limits and accepts without resistance external limits.’²⁴ A money-value as a referent is a realizing entity, a canvas of opportunities, its possibilities are blank and formless, money-values require a function to create “new-values,” within a productive economy they need a signifying tool, this is the commodity. In order to realize a signified of a money-value, the signifier’s potentiality as a value in itself, must come first before a “form” of money can be created. Thus the commodity or the signifier, within its productive form, is both the tool, and the determinant of the signified value of money, thus the referent upon its interpretation by industry must be “reduced” of its generalities to a specific “internal limit.” Thus “external limits” are placed onto it, specific standards of production guaranteeing a specific form of money in capital.²⁵ Hence a standard of industry must be established within the realizing values of money, or the referent, and thus the use-value, as a means to form money-values into capital, must be standardized. It is here where the standardization of use-values commences, and thus a dislocation of uses from subjective applications in need, to socially objective standards of use. The standard is a method to reduce the values of money, into a concrete form in production, to realize a specific sort of signified value, an exchange value, to enable the

²³ Marx. *Ibid.* 457-460, 165-167.

²⁴ Simmel. *Ibid.* 574

²⁵ Simmel. *Ibid.* 537

formation of capital.²⁶ As Marx contends, “objects of utility become commodities only because they are the products of the labor of private individuals,”²⁷ thus the whole basis of the system of use-values are predicated on the tenants of capitalism, the realization of exchange, and its growing identities and values as capital, and as money alone as a value. Hence, the referent, or the former use-value, within its productive form is assimilated, as a use for the formation of capital, it is entrenched in a money-value, locating only one of its potentialities outside of a growing perceptibility of money as a use in itself. Use-value in their standardized types become as Kristeva contends “reified universals,”²⁸ product of our lives, values of a progressively encroaching system of functioning-signifying representations.

C. Losing the Referent: Specialization, Finitudes and Reductions

As a standard the commodity as a consumptive value or signifier of a use-value maintains a specialized identity, this is the replacement of the use-value, as it is now reduced to a symbol formation, by which signifies. In Kristeva account of the sign, she alludes to the problematic notions of its formation, denoting both the limited values of the signified’s vertical axis, as well as its very nature as one founded in an objectivity.²⁹ Here this very objectivity enables the signified to produce what Kristeva defines as an infinite chain of “metaphors” or signs. Within this formation of the commodity’s signifier, these are all specialized versions of standards, the application of the use-value into a specific context, creating a style, or a brand. In other words, a “Lazy-Boy” recliner, is a signifier of a standardized use-value of sitting, by which through its very objectivity as a standard concept of use, need not solicit itself, it may rather just refer to a context of that use. This

²⁶ Marx. Ibid. 256-265

²⁷ Marx. Ibid. 165

²⁸ Kristeva.Ibud. 70

²⁹ Kristeva. Ibid. 71

perceptual approach to the commodity allows it to signify a distinguishing feature of a style or brand to the consumer through its identity alone, rather than its value as a use. Here the recognition of the commodity through its sign's approach alone, locates its methodology in the name, and thus predates this system to its ancestor in the classifying system, as its characteristics or its representation, establish its value, rather than its function. Similar to the coin upon the advent of capitalism, relinquishing its a money-value upon the simple application of objective descriptions, hence the system of production employs this same rationale on the logic of its own signifier in the name of the commodity, or brand. Thus, as we have seen with the standard's ability to create a measure from a use, it thus now creates a measure from its perceptibility, employing "classical techniques, to institute an iconography from a name, and hence a reinstatement of a symbolic discourse. The brand, creates an immediate perceptibility upon the very knowledge its name invokes, while simultaneously obliterating its signified value, through a mere acceptance of a word, or band as a symbol of understanding. Our use-value is lost, to a reductionist's application of thought. As Henri Lefebvre in the *Production of Space* contends, "reductionist are unstinting in their praise for basic scientific method, but they transform this method first into a mere posture and then, in the name of the 'science of science' (epistemology), into a supposed absolute knowledge."³⁰ An absolute knowledge of brands, and names, replaces conventional functional uses into mere representations of functions participating in a larger value of uses, exchange. As Foucault states, "representation should at last be related to one corporeal gaze...particular arrangement of episteme that justifies it, the new relation that is established between words, things, and their order-all this can now be clarified."³¹

³⁰ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson Smith. Blackwell Publishing: New York and London. 1991. 107

³¹ Foucault. *Ibid.* 312

We have lost the referent through its very representation within the signified (money-value standards) and signifier (money-value name); the commodity's sign is a fallacy of the symbol, it is a useless as an icon, as it is.

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“All That Is Solid Melts Into Air”
The Ethics of Reality (Signs)

- “it is nothing but the definite social relations between men themselves which assumes here, for the, the fantastic form of relations between things.” (Marx 165)

Defining C.F. through Marx's equations

- C-M-C/M-C-M
- Equations facilitating life: Two reciprocating binaries M, C
- C=commodity relationships-social material (objects, people)
- M=money relationships-pure social (circulation, exchange)

- bourgeois (M)-C-M:
- (M)= capital + employment of (C), in (C)-M-C
- (M)=Buy labor/with “surplus values”/produce commodities
- (M)=Buy labor/with “surplus values”/produce commodities
- (C)=commodities to sell
- (M)=Money in exchange=circulation

- The Proletariat: C-M-C
- (C)=commodity or “labor-power”
- (M)=payment/wages
- (C)=Commodity purchased
- “labor power and payment (C-M) all exist within industry 1ST (M)

- $(M)=(C-M)$ on the capitalist side and $(C-M)=(M)$
- Money is the expressive conduit in relations
- -“objects become commodities only because they are the products of the labor of private individuals who work independently from each other. The sum of total of the labor of all these private individuals forms the aggregate of society. Since producers do not come in contact until they exchange products of their own labor”(Marx165)

“Natural” Concept of Work/Referent



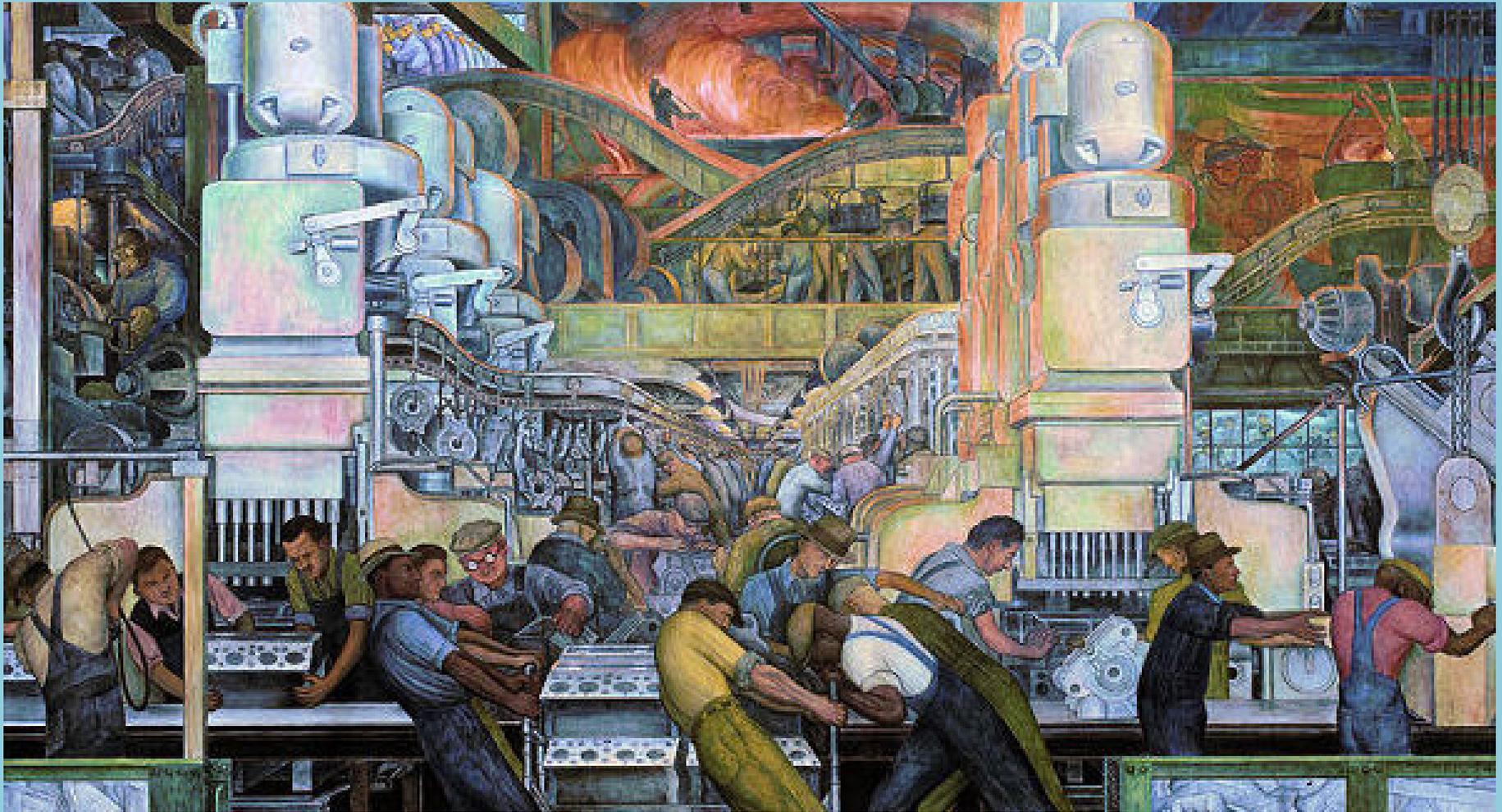
Jean, Millet. Shepherdess With Her Flock

(C) The Verticality of the Signified
(commodities/object)(noun)
New Concepts of Work



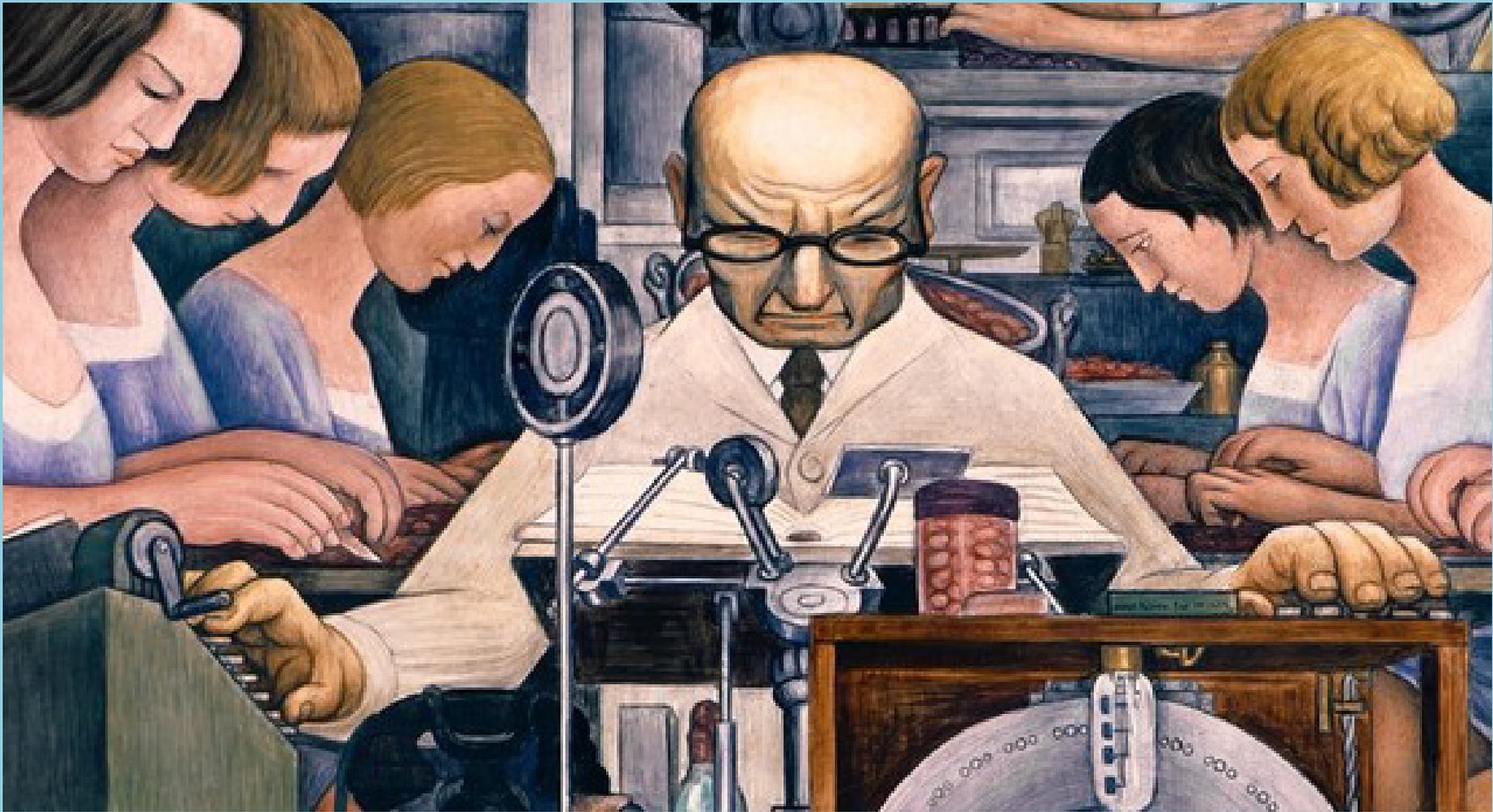
Pellizza da Volpedo ~ Il Quarto Stato /The Fourth Estate

C(M) The Horizontality of Sign: “Signs” of Work (work-*ing*)(verb)



Diego Rivera. Detroit Industry

C(M)Horizontality: Hallow Ontologies (work-ing)



Diego Rivera. Detroit Industry

-(use-values)/(bodies) (tasks)/(subjectivities)-central contradiction

Manipulations of the Sign/Contradictions (*work-ing*)



Charles Ebbets. New York Construction Workers Lunching on a Crossbeam

Individuality becomes commoditized, so the *material (body) becomes the concept of work*, sign of work in body becomes signified (concept of work, commodities/objectification)
body as work becomes a use-value for the concept of work/ payment of wages, and the present and future values of work

- Do you identify yourself within the identity of what you *do*, rather than *who* you are?

(M) Verticality of the Signified, Productive Concepts of Money (wages) (static/past-values)

MONEY VALUES



= 4 quarters
= 10 dimes
= 20 nickels
= 100 pennies

1 dollar = 100 cents



Quarter
25 cents

Dime
10 cents

Nickle
5 cents

Penny
1 cent

= 5 nickels
= 25 pennies
= 2 dimes + 1 nickel
= 1 dime + 3 nickels

= 2 nickels
= 10 pennies

= 5 pennies

= 1 penny

© Jennifer R. Hartwig

The objectivity of numbers in money values, become concretized signified value

Objectified concept in the strongest sense of the word

-past and a present **set**-value

C(M) Horizontality of the Sign, Productive Ontologies: Signs-industry in body (productive applications)



paycheck is **a sign for the objectivity of money** in a specific value, **it signifies** what it is not, (difference) and **what is not can be** in new **physical, concrete** identities of that money's application. This It is a negative realized **in present and future** value, of differences. It is a sign creating an immaterial value manifest in concrete applications. Objectivity in numbers signals new physical applications of money to create an identity in it.

- Do you ever fantasize about winning big in the lottery? Does this fantasy involve the potentialities of your new fortune? can you separate these applications of money from your identity?

(M C Verticality of The Sign, Consumptive Concepts of Money (money))



the sign of money-is a sign of action, it is simply a future tense, it **purely signifies** consumption, it signified objectivity of money-values melts into its future objectivities in numerical parings and applications of its use. It is **pure flux**.

hyper signifier, restless transformation, constant flux of consumption



future values of *money replaces present and the past values*, it *erases* the *material* existence of life upon its *very materiality* as a sign. The individual is lost into the sociality of circulation and exchange, their individuality signifies.

“Signs of Life-(!?)”



Spectacular Inversions



C-M-C ends its cycle in the capitalist C of M-(C)-M
-Circulation/Exchange values (M) 'trumps' the signified realities of life,
it abs acts, it distorts by *simply signifying*

- Does it ever bother you when the news or other media outlets refer to Americans as consumers rather than citizens or individuals?
- Are we actually more like consumers than citizens? Would you say the current elections reflect this?