

BOOK REVIEW

Diana Ghinea, PhDc

University of Bucharest, Romania

ARTISTIC CAPITALISM. REVIEW¹

Oana Șerban (2016) *Capitalismul artistic. Consumul operei de artă în patru pași: Marcuse, Baudrillard, Debord și Lipovetsky (Artistic Capitalism. The Consumption of the Work of Art in Four Steps: Marcuse, Baudrillard, Debord and Lipovetsky)*. Pitești: Paralela 45, 277.

Since Schumpeter's *Creative Capitalism* and Bell's analysis on the *Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, philosophy put at stake the role of art in shaping the individual's behaviours and self-governing through the aestheticization of consumption as part of our quotidian lives. These premises went far beyond a simple occasional and interdisciplinary examination of capitalism in the terms of its aesthetic and ethical contents: they consolidated a very specific domain of research, namely «artistic capitalism», largely debated in the pages of Gilles Lipovetsky's and Jean Serroy's last volume, *L'esthétisation du monde. Vivre à l'âge du capitalisme artiste* (2013). The main contribution of this impressive publication was that of concretizing the legitimacy and autonomy of such a domain of research, defining «what we mainly call artistic or creative-transaesthetic capitalism», as an ideological construction «characterised by the increasing importance of different stages of sensibility and process design, through a systematic work of styling goods and commercial spaces, of generalised integration of art, look and affects of the consumerist universe». (Lipovetsky & Serroy 2013, 12). Nevertheless, the challenging approach of Lipovetsky and Serroy, which overcame, at that time, the current state of the art, by synthesizing not only the definitions, values and stages of artistic capitalism, but also its connections with modern individualism and the spectacularly society of consumption, was very reserved in what concerns its genealogy. Artistic capitalism is taken as a rational manner of exploiting the aesthetic, imaginary and sensitive dimensions of art in the interest of stimulating the evolution of different markets and targeting economical profit. It became the core of a generalized life-style for the modern and contemporary society, aiming the «aestheticization of the world». Despite the biographical amount from Lipovetsky's division of his stages of thinking – the Marxist self-criticism period (1965-1983), the post-modern (1983-1991) and the hyper modern period from 1991 on, which might be conclusive for understanding his main chosen criteria for investigating the primary topics of modernity, such as the massive industrialization, the liberation from consumption, globalization or capitalism, in its cultural, economic and social aspects, there is no proper genealogical construction of artistic capitalism. In this framework, in which I tried to sketch the most important references that brought up the artistic capitalism, Oana Șerban offers the final piece of the puzzle, through her last volume, *Artistic Capitalism*, published by Paralela 45 in the first months of 2016. As the subtitle of the book suggests – *The Consumption of the Work of Art in Four Steps: Marcuse, Baudrillard, Debord, Lipovetsky*, her research investigates the necessary and, in the same time, preliminary working hypothesis from the modern and contemporary history of ideas that lead to Lipovetsky's perspective on artistic capitalism as a whole. Methodologically, Oana Șerban prefers for her investigation the model of the critical theory, in order to continue and compensate Boltanski and Chiapello attempts from *The New Spirit of Capitalism* of distinguishing a social critique of capitalism from an artistic one, but on the ground of the Lipovetskyan artistic capitalism (Șerban 2016, 1-29). Succeeding in justifying the correspondences between the four acceptances of Boltanski and Chiapello on capitalism – as source of revealing the inauthenticity of consumption objects and lifestyles, oppression, pauperism or social inequality and selfishness – and the four ages of artistic capitalism, as they were defined by Lipovetsky and

¹ This form represents an improved and well extended form of a previous review, supported by *Revista de filosofie*.

Serroy in the terms of the systematic aestheticization of industries and markets, the pre-eminence of the economical and material utility of an artwork despite its aesthetic qualities, the rise of the creative industries and the substitution of traditional artistic and intercultural hierarchies by recent axiological constructs belonging to the new artistic communities, Serban considers that this synchronism will strengthen, both conceptually and normatively, her focused investigation on artistic capitalism.

Even from the *Introduction*, the author's ideological commitments are explicitly contained in the formula of the principal thesis, which makes this theoretical engagement quite brave and uneasy: she attempts explaining the aestheticization of the world as a unified structure of the representations taken by space, time and individuals. Arguing that she is not attempting to perform a deconstruction of artistic capitalism, Serban reminds that:

Such a thesis, somehow intuited by Lipovetsky, escapes entirely from a direct nomination and a conceptual clarification, but it will find its way as a tool in the reconstruction of the origin and progress of artistic capitalism, in the succession of Marcuse-Baudrillard-Debord, closely following all the conceptual, methodological and thematic correspondences. (Serban 2016, 20).

Throughout the book, Serban never strays too far from Lipovetsky. As a matter of fact, in the attempt of identifying the source of artistic capitalism, she goes back from the French philosopher to the author of *Art and Revolution*, arguing that her option for this inversed chronological order is conceptually determined. Nevertheless, she remains loyal to Luc Ferry's considerations on *Homo Aestheticus* and Rosenberg's project devoted to the *De-definition of art*. She applies in the reconstruction of artistic capitalism the former's thesis that excellence, meritocracy and authenticity influenced the production, distribution and consumption of artistic objects, and the latter's explanation on de-aestheticization (also called de-definition) of art as a modern gesture of isolating the aesthetic qualities of an art object from its artistic characteristics, a step further in the achievement of the autonomy of the art in a privileged conceptual form. In these terms, she gives an overview of artistic capitalism without restricting herself to a specific continental tradition of interpretation, overcoming the particularities of an exclusive French lecture (otherwise highly preferred), by deep connections with the German roots and representatives of the Frankfurt School.

Serban's argument on the aestheticization of world unfolds over five chapters. Their disposal, as well as their conceptual and methodological synergy keeps Lipovetsky's exigencies for a trans-aesthetical and trans-historical research.

The first chapter takes up Lipovetsky's definition of artistic capitalism, following the criteria applied in developing its taxonomy that deals with the four historical stages, previously mentioned. Serban explains that these four phases – easily understood as levels of a genealogical history of artistic capitalism – are based on dichotomies or cultural paradoxes, as Bell would put it, between *artist/artisan*, *culture/industry*, *authenticity/kitsch*, *mass culture/ elite culture*, *high art/ low art*. Their interdependency in the terms of the economic interest for the artworks, the de-definition of art and the hedonist – partially dandiest – life-style brought by the postmodern enchantment for self-constitution allow us to observe a new representative for the transaesthetic individualism: the *homo aestheticus*. Arguing that she performs a «radical critique of the aestheticization of the world», Serban considers that even Lipovetsky would agree with her Foucauldian perspective on this matter that «aestheticization means, at limit, concretizing an aesthetic ideal as a model for identifying the ideal of the good life by images that corporealize multiple sensitive experiences of our quotidian life» (22). The chapter ends with a study-case on the postmodern cinema in the terms of the «new ontology of the seventh art», that brought up Lipovetsky's concept of «Cine-Ego». She considers that the postmodern cinema, shaped by the rationality of consumption, is a symbol of the successful unification of representations that time, space and individuals take in a narrative production of the spectacle, on a «global screen» – an allusion to Lipovetsky's homonym volume. This analysis «enforces, on the one hand, Debord's society of the spectacle and, on the other hand, internalizes (...) phenomena such as globalization, the hyperindividualist culture, the panoptic and seductive control of the individual transposed in the social show, the manipulation that televised shows have in inoculating the norms of private happiness, the values of pleasure and idea of the intimate self-accomplishment through mass culture and consumption» (22-23).

The second chapter deals with the rivalry of two concepts: *spectacular capitalism* and *spectacular socialism*. She investigates the capitalist ideologies that prepared the field for Lipovetsky's artistic capitalism, explaining the connection between the French philosopher's arguments and the perspectives of Debord and Baudrillard on the same matter. As the author claims, «the main premise is that the Wall

Street era opened the reception of capitalism as an ideology of accumulation in everything that concerns objects, the production of desire and the production of goods, both private and publicly, maximizing notions such as virtue, talent and the society of the spectacle, in order to create a moral precedent of these paradigms» (23). An attentive analysis of the differences between socialism, capitalism and anarchism makes from the pages of the second chapter a challenging lecture, assuming the spectacular approach of cultural revolutions, signed by Debord, as a unique path for restoring the symbolic capacities of the postmodern society.

The third chapter frames the history of the Lipovetskyan «hyper-modernity» as a succession of simulacra, engaging Baudrillard's perspectives on the production of reality through art. Artistic capitalism is argued here as an alternative production and reproduction of reality, remarked through the effects of simulation on the social and political power, the personalization of the individual through consumption, the cultural recycling of the individual's values and aesthetic memory entertained by the spread of kitsch, viewed, on its turn, within the same paradigm of simulation. The core of this chapter is the critical inquiry on the artwork as absolute merchandise, treated in the light of Warhol, Benjamin, Danto and Boltanski's arguments on this topic. The end of the chapter includes a study-case «Photography and the consumption of light. The phenomenon Edward Hopper» focusing on the manner in which this artist, to whom Baudrillard dedicated consistent pages of his philosophical essays, surprises the unification of space, time and individual's representation in artworks that put in question the aestheticization of the world, detached from any moral contents. Serban concludes that Baudrillard's alarming diagnostic from the «Complot of Arts», that philosophy disappeared, since something happened after the boom moments, such as Warhol or Duchamp in arts, that – lead us to aestheticized life-styles, as if we would live «in a gigantic museum» (152) is the result of adapting the Marxist perspective on capitalism as ideology of accumulation to the exigencies of Debord's society of the spectacle. We obtain an inflation of symbols and emotions that she deals, in the fourth chapter of the book, under the following thesis: «the spectacle, the capital and the image are interchangeable terms» (157). She considers that Debord's critical inquiries on the capitalism society might be used in arguing that «the proletarians inherited the modern art and changed it», until «they took it to de-definition and de-aestheticization» (160-164), with reference to the cultural changes from the 50s provoked by the avant-garde movement of lettrism. Serban offers quite a bold interpretation of the consequences that Debord's revolutionary motto, «Ne travaillez jamais», has on developing an «aesthetic activism»(175) in artistic capitalism, in the framework created by the boycotted press conference of Chaplin, to which the same Debord contributed among other intellectuals of the time, or by his anti-cinema films.

The fifth chapter discusses Marcuse's influence on Lipovetsky's artistic capitalism, through a common concept, that of the de-sublimation of the work of art under the influences of the mass consumption. Marcuse's essays, *Art and Revolution* and *Society as an Artwork* are considered by Serban destinal writings for Lipovetsky's perspectives on artistic capitalism: proving mutual themes such as the society of abundance, the excessive technologization, the alienation of the individual or the main correspondences between the Marcusean trans-historical and Lipovetsky's trans-aesthetic capitalism make her argument valid. The aestheticization of the world advanced by Marcuse is examined in this chapter in the terms of the aesthetical de-territorialisation, the professionalization of the artist, and the politicization of the artistic expressions through mass ideologies, a very specific part of this research being devoted to the successful attempt of justifying two main periods in Marcuse's thought, one determined by the rigors of the Frankfurt School and another completely reevaluation and detachment of the Frankfurt's spirit.

In her concluding chapter, Serban insists precisely on the genealogical reconstruction of artistic capitalism, in the line of Marcuse, Baudrillard, Debord and Lipovetsky, completed by a study-case of the capitalist realism, performed by Manfred Kuttner, Konrad Lueg, Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter. She explains that politicization of art, the privatization of the creativity, as well as the subjection of the artistic travail to the propagandist agendas of corporations, markets and industries, the effects of mechanization on the art production and the complicity of the postmodern art to the acceleration of consumption should be understood under the premises of the capitalist realism, and in their evolution fulfilled by the artistic capitalism. Sequential analysis on artworks signed by Perez, Richter, Polke, Lueg, Hopper, Hitchcock or LaChappelle are used to support her argument on considering the representational unification of our both private and public space, time and image of the individuals that we are as the origins of artistic capitalism.

At least in what concerns the Western thought, artistic capitalism will represent one of the most focused and challenging topics of the postmodern philosophical writing: it clearly tries to compensate and

overcome the insufficiencies that modernity encapsulated in its most critical phases, mainly in its neo-Marxist turns. The main contribution of this book, which also stands as one of the most accurate and critical receptions of Lipovetsky's last works, is to contrast this already «classical» patterns of interpreting the sources of industrialization, capitalist ascension and consumerist life-styles of our quotidian life with innovative and interdisciplinary angles of critical inquiry, taking artistic capitalism back from Marcuse until today. In addition to the quality of the arguments, I recommend this book for Serban's writing-style: the main chapters of the volume, as well as the study-cases succeed in overcoming a state of comfort provided by the casual and specific lexicon of artistic capitalism. The author's pedigree, from a fictional writer, an essayist and nowadays a philosopher both in the spirit of aesthetics and modern philosophy highly contributed to the plausibility and the convincing arguments of the 277 pages of text. Moreover, it is challenging to see the receptions of Lipovetsky and some contemporary artists (from the beginning in a complicated association) in a puzzle of beliefs that the author advanced as one of the most disciplined and dedicated works signed during her doctoral education, but not far from her very personal convictions. To *Artistic Capitalism* followed different research articles, such as «Why Is the De-Aestheticization of Art a Phenomena Specific to the Artistic Capitalism» (in *IJAPHC*, Vol 1, Issue 1, 2016) and «The Constitution of a Critical Theory of Artistic Capitalism: The Normative Puzzle of the Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism» (in *Critique, Marginality, Cynicism*, eds. C. Iftode and C. Voinea, Bucharest University Press, 2016), shaping, methodologically and conceptually some of the most significant hypothesis of her book. However, Serban's focused interest on this area of expertise brought artistic capitalism closer to the Romanian philosophy, promising critical reflections and continuities of a Lipovetskyan cultural inheritance.