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Everyday Life and Essence

By
W. Rains Browning

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Preceptor: David Cantor-Echols

The capitalist demon is a machine: ever watchful, its mechanical claws waiting to take limbs, bright furnaces howling for the opportunity to burn the eyebrows from the weakened and tired laborer. The demon-machine does not strive to take the laborer's life, only to torture them and keep watch like a ghastly shadow. The essence of the machine is monstrous. Theodor Adorno aptly articulated that capitalism transfigures an object's essence by superimposing capitalist logics into the last remaining realm of freedom: the ordinary and the everyday. Whereas culture had the potential to give essence to people's lives, it is now a vehicle to degrade any sense of self that exists outside of a particular set of logics that are established by a narrow class that maintains the means of production. Karl Marx gives less attention to the everyday than he does to labor. In some passages in *The Grundrisse*, however, he designates the realm of non-work as a space free of capitalist alienation. Michel de Certeau follows Marx's original line, arguing that the everyday is a space for potential liberation from capitalist oppression. The principal task of this work is to put de Certeau and Adorno in conversation with one another, with Marx as an adhesive that binds their thought together. Their contrasting views on capitalism's effect on the everyday presents a more fundamental philosophical question: what is essence? Or, what does essence mean in a Marxist framework? Proceeding from these questions, my argument is as follows. First, de Certeau's method leads to conceptualizations of the plurality of both the subject and the object in relation to systems of domination, whereas Adorno's negative dialectics asserts the totalizing power of the system of domination, thereby reducing the plurality of relations between subject and object. In attempt to resolve this tension, we can look to Marx discussion of machines in *Capital Vol. 1* to understand the essence of the object-subject relation. For Marx, the essence of an object and subject is a constitutive relationship that has a static and dynamic dialectical moment. The static relates to humans' contingency with nature-

they cannot exist without it; whereas the dynamic is human activity in creating their world- their relation with the world is always changing according to their activity upon it. Analyzing an object and subject requires the establishment of the static moment, and an explication of the dynamic moment. This might appear to further confuse de Certeau and Adorno's vantage points on the everyday. What it reveals, however, is that de Certeau was correct to emphasize the dynamic relation of the object-subject, and Adorno was apt in his pessimism as to the liberatory potential of culture. The everyday has an abstract potential for liberation in its dynamic dialectical moment, but as Marx reveals, the static dialectical moment – capitalism – makes liberation impossible without revolution. As such, my methodology is to explore the everyday and essence in a dialectical form, at least viewing the two in contingency with one another. This work will only illuminate the ever-present clouds that shroud the sun. For the question remains: is the everyday another concentric circle of capitalist hell, or a means to explore and liberate oneself from damnation?

We will begin in the cave, chained to the floor looking upon the shadows on the rock, finding our route out through an exploration of essence. Understanding de Certeau and Adorno's diverging methodologies is necessary before we can explore everyday activities themselves. After exploring negative dialectics and the investigative-expansive mode, we will discuss a few everyday activities that the two scholars wrote about. The resulting discourse reveals a more fundamental question as to the subject-object relationship under capitalism. While Marx abandoned the usage of "essence" in his early writings, it makes an unexpected appearance in Chapter 15 of *Capital Vol. I* which discusses machines. We will explore its usage by tracking its appearance throughout the chapter, and conclude by applying this definition to a emerging

technology that will affect our everyday lives. And without any further delay, let's begin our decent into the caverns of the everyday.

Methodology

Theodor Adorno's concern with the culture industry and Michel de Certeau's concern with the everyday evaluates the same mountain from different vantage points. From the base of the mountain, de Certeau finds liberatory power in commodities, whereas Adorno sees their totalizing power. Their shared methodological commitment to critique puts them in general agreement as to the nature of the structure they are evaluating. Marx shines through; each of their work presents a super-structure of capitalist production that enforces particular logics on the masses. Logics are a set of rules of usage that enforce a gaze upon the subject, a conformity that influences themselves and others towards particular types of consumption. These logics are found in commodities and everyday activities, however, the actions of an individual with a commodity, or performing an everyday activity had been largely neglected as a meaningful locus for political insights. Both Adorno and de Certeau's methodology expand the unit of analysis in political theory through critique. Despite this shared expansion, their analysis of the potential of commodities and everyday activities diverge, especially in their understandings of the relationship between object and subject. Adorno sees the gaze of the producer as embedded within the object itself, its essence is its duplication and reference to other objects. De Certeau believes that the dominant system has become so large that it does not have the ability to constantly keep watch over "the weak". The weak use tactics to create tricks that push against the power structure. The products aesthetic qualities is not only found in its production, but is generated through the interaction of the subject with the object. The question then is: how does Adorno's methodology of negative dialectics, and de Certeau's of integrative-expansive mode

lead to a similar critique of structures of domination, while revealing differences in their understanding of commodities and everyday life? For both, the object is the unit of analysis to further understand the capitalist subject. However, what the object is, or its essence, varies radically. First, I will draw on secondary literature to describe each scholar's methodology. Then, I will provide a deep investigation into de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* and Adorno's *The Culture Industry*. My argument asserts that their methodological departures explain their varying interpretations, however, this should not shun the possibility of reconciling the two to create a more coherent understanding of the everyday.

Michel de Certeau might fit canonically with the thinkers of his time, but the methodology employed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* has many distinctive critical qualities. Some would categorize his method as being based in cultural studies, while others believe it was based in a resistance to post-structuralism.¹ Mark Poster argues that de Certeau's methodology was heavily influenced by post-structuralist thought, however, his understanding of the power of the everyday to liberate the subject is responsible for his divergence. Poster believes that we should view de Certeau as a cultural theorist for his interdisciplinary method, especially his commitment to intellectual history. While this is useful to parse out de Certeau's differences with the thinkers of his time, we can identify a more specific method that is unique to his writings. Bryan Reynolds and Joseph Fitzpatrick provide a clear analysis of de Certeau's methodology in "The Transversality of Michel De Certeau". They outline two methodologies: investigative-expansive mode and dissective-cohesive mode. The dissective-cohesive mode evaluates the subject in each of its parts to understand a unified whole.² De Certeau's methodology is the

¹ Mark Poster. "The Question of Agency: Michel de Certeau and the History of Consumerism." *Diacritics* 22, no. 2 (1992): 94, 95.

² Bryan Reynolds and Joseph Fitzpatrick. "The Transversality of Michel de Certeau: Foucault's Panoptic Discourse and the Cartographic Impulse." *Diacritics* 29, no. 3 (1999): 65.

investigative-expansive mode, which divides the subject according to the analysis of the philosopher without a constant reference to the unified whole. The parameters and categorizations of parts of the subject are constantly being re-categorized and re-understood, either internally to the object itself, or externally to the object's interaction with an external power. De Certeau's methodology is rooted in the plurality of relationships between the subject and object.³ As Wim Weymans argues, de Certeau's method was developed specifically so philosophy could conceptualize the role of everyday activities.⁴ This methodology investigates subjectivity in capitalist society by expanding the philosopher's gaze to include the everyday and ordinary. Political theorists' questions and methodology present everyday activity as a mere background activity that is not worthy of our attention. De Certeau does not want a methodology based entirely on individuals, but one that studies the plurality of relations between the individual and a power structure.⁵ The methodological focus on plurality reveals a clear difference between *The Practice of Everyday Life* and *The Culture Industry*.

Given his association with the Frankfurt School, we can broadly categorize Adorno's methodology as within the canon of critical theory. This method transfigured Marxism into a way of thought that is centered on dialectical critique on society.⁶ As Susan Buck-Morss observes in *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, critical theory was a set of practices that differentiated the school from traditional theory, but scholars in the Frankfurt School were different in their methodologies and philosophy.⁷ Negative dialectics, a method characterized by Walter Benjamin's method of microscopic analysis, is a better characterization of Adorno's

³ Reynolds and Fitzpatrick "The Transversality of Michel de Certeau", 78.

⁴ Wim Weymans. "Michel de Certeau and the Limits of Historical Representation." *History and Theory* 43, no. 2 (2004): 162.

⁵ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), xi.

⁶ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press Limited, 1977), ix .

⁷ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press Limited, 1977), 65.

method.⁸ Microscopic analysis finds the general structure within the particular. The particular is not just a part of the universal, but a contingent element that composed a general structure. Given the object did not perfectly reflect the universal, what any object is cannot be fixed, as it is historically contingent on the structure in which it exists.⁹ Negative dialectics centers on nonidentity in both the subject and the object.¹⁰ Nonidentity means that there is not an essence to the object that is fixed in its contemporary moment, rather, the object must be understood historically.¹¹ The singular objective of such a method can be obscured by the confusion of negative dialectic's commitment to nonconformity.

What is so appealing about this method, however, is what it reveals when two opposites clash. Buck-Morss writes "... what gave his models logical coherence was his identification of the point of convergence between opposites: in every case it was the structure of domination."¹² Posing two opposites is a part of negative dialectics commitment to building constellations, an idea that was expressed by Walter Benjamin and co-opted by Adorno. It uses microscopic analysis to create meaning in a phenomenon through an elevation of its parts. This is often an analysis of a social phenomenon where the parts that create its meaning are historical.¹³ The analysis of each part creates a constellation which represents a version of the phenomenon in its totality.¹⁴ What, then, explains Adornos universalizing understanding of structures of domination? This method is a negative self-reflection on both society and the philosophy itself to avoid reifying the same reality that the theorist attempts to describe.¹⁵ This negativity is

⁸ Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (Sussex, UK: The Harvester Press Limited, 1977), 75.

⁹ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 76.

¹⁰ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 77.

¹¹ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 100.

¹² Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 186.

¹³ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 96.

¹⁴ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 97

¹⁵ Buck-Morss, *The Origins of Negative Dialectics*, 189.

grounded in Adorno's turning away from elements of Marxist methodology. Adorno did not see the potential for capitalist production to be separate from capitalist relations, rather, that the two would further replicate one another through commodities.¹⁶ Adorno's methodology rests on his understanding of the Enlightenment and capitalism as forming a universal system where the capacity to see anything other than the system is destroyed.¹⁷ Any analysis of the plurality of particular commodities will be done in view of the structure of domination that disseminates it to the people.

Everyday Activities

De Certeau and Adorno's methodologies are best captured by understanding how they view the subject and object relationship in everyday activities and commodities. Adorno's methodology leads to a skepticism that the realm of the everyday exists at all. Chapter two of *The Culture Industry* is a direct engagement with everyday life, aesthetics and art. Everyday life is not a place of productive resistance because it does not exist. The commercialization of all aspects of culture has universalized the particular boundaries that categorize our lives.¹⁸ The object of analysis for philosophers was "aesthetic semblance" which has lost its character by being subsumed by the logics of the market. Aesthetics and art have been commodified by industry for the reification of particular consumer behaviors. Art is not reflecting, or operating aside reality, but is creating a reality based on ideology.¹⁹ The image of a commodity becomes reality. Aesthetics are critical in degrading differences by creating particular images that always mirror the universal. The persistence of images that reinforce the universal makes imagination

¹⁶ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991) 3.

¹⁷ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 10.

¹⁸ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 53.

¹⁹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 55.

impossible. How a commodity is used is predetermined through its aesthetic qualities. The object represents the universal, its essence is only to replicate the universal and reinforce a reality based on ideology.²⁰ The negative-dialectical approach presents objects not as a part of a universal, but a contingent element that enforces the universal. Adorno's seeming pessimism regarding the potentiality of objects as liberatory is more of a reflection of his commitment to method. The object under the negative dialectical approach cannot supersede the structure—the object is the structure. In other words, the essence of the object is determined at the point of creation.

The limitations of objects liberating the subject from a system of domination lies in predetermination. Adorno writes “certainly every finished work of art is already predestined in some way but art strives to overcome its own oppressive weight as an artefact through the force of its very construction. Mass culture on the other hand simply identifies with the curse of predetermination and joyfully fulfills it”.²¹ The creation of art is the locus of its essence to inspire reflection on culture. There is no such potential if the process of creation is clearly determined by particular ends that meet the manufactured needs of the masses. The predetermination that creates art predetermines an interaction for the consumer. De Certeau, on the other hand, believes that everyday activities and commodities do not necessarily take on the predetermined usage as intended by the object's creation. Our everyday lives are a war of the weak, against power. Adorno and de Certeau seemingly align in their understanding of the potential universalizing nature of mass culture and commodities. But there is a weakness in the armor of mass culture that de Certeau exposes. Power on a large scale is less able to mobilize its

²⁰ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991) 56.

²¹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 62.

parts for a specific goal. De Certeau writes “Power is bound by its very visibility”.²² Everyday activities present a temporal and spatial area where power can be subverted.

The temporal and spatial areas of subversion are a part of the aesthetic quality of an object. There is an artform of the everyday which is “making do”.²³ Chapter 3 of de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* establishes an operational scheme to view what is done with commodities in everyday activities.²⁴ Understanding this operational structure is crucial to delineate de Certeau’s methods. Ways of operating describe what we do in everyday activities in accordance with the logics intended by producers and in resistance to these logics. Most scholars have analyzed how everyday activities and commodities work within the system, but de Certeau is concerned with the art of making do. Explicit reference is made to North African immigrants in Paris, or to Indigenous people’s oppression at the hands of Spain as examples of people who took agency against their oppressors, despite living under an oppressive structure.²⁵ Consumers are not mindless cogs in a machine that are in a constant state of subjection. Rather, “making do” takes the products of the oppressive system and reconfigures them as forms of resistance.²⁶ The nature of the commodity or activity can go through a change in essence through strategies and tactics. A strategy is “... the calculation (or manipulation) of power relationships that becomes possible as soon as a subject with will and power (a business, an army, a city, a scientific institution) can be isolated”.²⁷ The oppressed and the power-holders are separated by place, however, they maintain constant tension with one another. They are separate, but a strategy is constitutive of its close interactions with oppressive structures. De Certeau alludes to war as a

²² Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 37.

²³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 29.

²⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 30.

²⁵ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 31.

²⁶ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 32.

²⁷ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 36.

metaphor for strategy, one where the warring sides are separated at times, clashing at others, and eventually retreating again. The warring sides' knowledge is always referential to the other's power. Knowledge is disseminated from those who hold power, as it does for Adorno, but has transformative qualities through the act of usage. A tactic "... is a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus".²⁸ The flow of action that takes place with a strategy is absent with tactics. Tactics always take place within the territory of power with no predetermined knowledge of particular outcomes. Tactics are artistic in their nature through their spontaneous action.²⁹ While taking place in the territory of power, tactics are determined by an absence of power, whereas a strategy is relational to power.³⁰ Strategies and tactics allow de Certeau to maximize his focus on plurality in the meaning created through the interaction of subject and object. De Certeau looks deeply into the mundane, a space where resistance is not expected but ever-present.

While being in accord regarding the wide net cast by oppressive capitalist structures, de Certeau sees an escape where Adorno finds another net. Both analyze different forms of leisure activities, or hobbies, to discuss either oppression or resistance in our everyday lives. Adorno discusses free time, or the space that is not-work, as yet another extension of a particular set of logics meant to promote sameness for the benefit of industry. For Adorno, activities that compose the notion of free time all share the same industrialized aesthetic, whereas de Certeau believes they hold the potential for subversion. Adorno charges that free time is "work-less time", a notion that is created by a realm of unfreedom to give an appearance of freedom, while expanding industry to the realm of the non-work. Hobbies are the perfect language to monetize

²⁸ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 36, 37.

²⁹ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

³⁰ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 38.

the non-work space and make the consumer feel as if they are not working even while they are. A hobby suggests something less attention-oriented than one's work. The prerequisite for a hobby is found behind a series of transactions that allows one to engage in a semi-autonomous act.³¹ Camping has a long expressed interest by humans, something to do with leaving home for freedom and exploration. The culture industry profits from any true desire for freedom by necessitating commodities before one can engage in the activity.³² Once again we see a concern with the essence of an activity. There is something *to* camping, but what that *to* is has been degraded. Adorno writes "...there is something vacuous (Hegel would have said abstract) about the notion of free time".³³ Free time and the consumption of cultural commodities obfuscates true human desire. The totalizing nature of the culture industry is found in its persistence, its imposition of sameness, and its relentless commodification of life. Adorno writes "The reason why people can actually do so little with their free time is that the truncation of their imagination deprives them of the faculty which made the state of freedom pleasurable in the first place."³⁴ Imagination is a fundamental element of de Certeau's concept of tactics, providing the most clear point of divergence between him and Adorno.

De Certeau was deeply troubled by conceptualizations of the everyday that are totalizing. His trouble is rooted in his methodological commitment to the potential of the relationship between the subject and the object in opposition, or outside of, the gaze of the producer. De Certeau writes "The only freedom supposed to be left to the masses is that of grazing on the ration of simulacra the system distributes to each individual. That is precisely the idea I oppose:

³¹ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 164.

³² Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 165.

³³ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 165.

³⁴ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 167.

such an image of consumers is unacceptable".³⁵ In discussing the everyday activity of reading, de Certeau resists Adorno's tendency to pose the consumer as passive, instead presenting consumption as a form of production.³⁶ Reading as an everyday activity provides the subject a plurality of ways of creating meaning through the engagement with an ordinary object. Reading is a space of imagination to diverge from the intentions of the author, to create a space entirely its own. The object creates a new space within the mind of the subject.³⁷ The object is dependent on the subject for its essence, as it means nothing without the reader's interpretation.³⁸ Despite this liberatory view of reading, de Certeau is aware of the ways that power, or more specifically-hierarchy - can corrupt the essence of a text. Reading is constituted by specific class relationships and authorial authority, where a meaning is supposed to be found in the text.³⁹ While Adorno and de Certeau align here, their different methodologies highlight a key difference. De Certeau's stress on plurality and change of an object through its interactions with the subject means that the form of reading imposed by the elite is merely one condition in a series of possible conditions for the act of reading. The type of reading imposed by the elite does not compose the entire essence of a book or the act of reading. Adorno's analysis of hobbies indicates that the essence of the object is predetermined by its creation. The object degrades the subject, and while this can happen for de Certeau, it is far from the only possibility.

In the spirit of Adorno's methodology, it will be useful to evaluate the two scholars' methodological application on different topics which are television (Adorno) and walking in the city (de Certeau). Adorno employs negative dialectics to avoid a discussion of television that

³⁵ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 166.

³⁶ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 167.

³⁷ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 169.

³⁸ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 170.

³⁹ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 172.

evaluates the medium based on self-referential standards. It is not a question of whether TV is good or bad, rather, how the content of the medium affects the subject. These effects, of course, are mostly negative. Adorno is not concerned with the plurality of effects that television has, rather, to view all these effects as contingent parts of a whole phenomenon.⁴⁰ The negative dialectical method allows Adorno to build a constellation of meaning for television to understand the medium as its own constitutive element of mass media. At the surface, it seems that Adorno writes disparate thoughts about novels, stereotypes, and multilayered structures.⁴¹ In view of the negative dialectical method, Adorno is creating a constellation of meaning to build an understanding of television as a medium that operates for a system of domination. This constellation shows that television gives the false sense of being an exact reflection of reality.⁴² Viewing television is always referential to shows that have been seen before, not referential to one's real-world experience.⁴³ We are presented with various stereotypes that are very marginally connected to the real world, but substantially connected to other stereotypes perpetuated by mass culture.⁴⁴

Walking is an everyday experience that is very much opposed to watching television. De Certeau's method of investigative-expansive mode, or a deep analysis of the modes of operation within a particular activity, are clear in his analysis of traversing through, or looking down at a city. This method allows for de Certeau to present his own experience of moving through New York City.⁴⁵ He charges that those who walk through a city form ways of operating that are often not seen, but a knowledge possessed by the walker. The liberation of walking through a city is

⁴⁰ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 136.

⁴¹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 141,147

⁴² Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 136.

⁴³ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 146.

⁴⁴ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 149

⁴⁵ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 92

that there is no singular creator or power that dictates how individuals navigate. Rather, a way of operating is created through the collective, individual experiences of a city-goer; walking generates a knowledge unique to each subject through their interaction with the city. De Certeau believes that modes of operation form a spatial relationship that make the space of the everyday liberating. The essence of the everyday act of walking through a city cannot be captured by a totalizing understanding of the “geometry” of a space. The investigative-expansive mode is present throughout the chapter, as de Certeau does an intense investigation of the act of walking through an analysis of speech acts, symbols, and metaphors of spaces.⁴⁶ Through an evaluation of different aspects of an everyday activity, it seems that Adorno and de Certeau’s methodologies are dedicated to the relationship of subject and object through in-depth analysis. However, Adorno’s negative dialectical method leads to a more restrained interpretation of the liberating potential of everyday acts, in addition to a commitment to understanding the everyday act as a part of a series of constellations of meaning that are referential to a structure of domination. De Certeau’s investigative-expansive mode does address these structures, but often focuses on in-depth analysis of the mode of operation created through an everyday activity.

To begin rounding out the juxtaposition of these two methods, we should take a step back from particular everyday activities to the idea of popular culture. Adorno wrote extensively on popular culture, while De Certeau devotes a chapter to the subject in *The Practice of Everyday Life*. De Certeau presents popular culture as a phenomenon that differs between localities in a country.⁴⁷ Aside from a couple of specific comments on the United States, Adorno does not identify a particular country to study popular culture in the chapter “The Culture Industry Reconsidered.” By discussing the masses and the role of history, we might infer that Adorno

⁴⁶ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 97, 103

⁴⁷ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 15.

understands popular culture as a national phenomenon.⁴⁸ We can be certain that Adorno was not concerned with popular culture as a highly localized system. As such, popular culture is a top-down phenomenon where commodities are created for the value within the market.⁴⁹ It would be wrong, however, to assert that popular culture reflects the true desires of the masses. Rather, cultural commodities are used to generate particular desires among the masses that become popular culture.⁵⁰ The concept itself is counterintuitive, as a popular culture necessitates the deatomization of subjects so that false interests can be generated for the benefit of the market.⁵¹ In stark contrast, de Certeau analyzes localities in Brazil to understand how popular culture represents particular ways of acting in the face of oppressive structures.⁵² Popular culture is defined by its unwillingness to assimilate to a set of norms that are imposed by those who hold power. The popular culture of a locality becomes a necessity for the common person; it is a way of operating that creates networks and spaces for survival.⁵³ De Certeau discusses “peasants” from Pernambuco’s use of language as generating a particular popular culture that allows for survival within a system of domination. Religion was used in everyday context to share stories of a “utopia”. This allowed the people of Pernambuco to operate outside of a system of power, one that constantly tried to impose that the conditions the “peasants” found themselves in were the only possible reality. These stories, on the other hand, made possible a new space that generated a particular popular culture.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Theodor Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 85.

⁴⁹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 86.

⁵⁰ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 89

⁵¹ Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 92

⁵² Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 15.

⁵³ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 18.

⁵⁴ De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 16.

Popular culture is a broad concept, especially in view of both their analysis of particular commodities and everyday activities. And yet, this is the most clear point of divergence between their methodologies. Adorno operates so broadly that he does not make any specific reference to a particular location when discussing popular culture. De Certeau is so specific that he looks to a locality in Brazil to understand popular culture as a localized phenomenon. Adorno not only universalizes the experiences of the masses, but systems of domination are understood in relatively universal form by avoiding discussion of its particularity. De Certeau views systems of domination less broadly, instead, as structures that are constitutive of their local environments. Further, de Certeau displays a deep commitment to understanding the subject and objects' constitutive relationship as transfiguring each other. The religious story of utopia is not a tangible object, and yet it becomes one through the tactical use of language in the everyday by ordinary people. The object is generated by the subject for the purpose of resistance to oppressive structures. There is not a singular essence to an object like a story—whatever it *is* is constantly in a state of change according to the actions of the subject. This is a fundamental difference from Adorno, whereby the object very narrowly shapes the subject to meet the ends of the system of domination.

The differences between these two scholars becomes evident in their analysis of everyday activities and commodities. These differences are surprising given the general similarities in their methodologies and their analysis of non-traditional objects of political inquiry. I hope to have shown that this difference lies in their contrasting view of the relationship between subject and object. The negative dialectical method leads Adorno to build a constellation of objects that is always viewed in light of structures of domination. The essence of an object is inscribed at its point of creation, leaving little room for subjects to meaningfully engage with them. The object

does transform the subject, but only to a particular end that is dictated by the culture industry. We should not mistake Adorno's writing with simple pessimism, but the result of his continued commitment to the negative dialectical method. De Certeau sees liberatory power in the everyday given the constitutive relationship between the subject and object. They transform one another according to their relationship with a system of domination, which is a profound departure from Adorno's view. The investigative-expansive mode leads to a deep engagement with the modes of operation that are generated by the subject's usage of an object. The essence of the object can be changed, especially through tactics that operate outside of the gaze of the producer. Juxtaposing these two scholars is useful to mediate a new methodology that can evaluate everyday activities. A methodology that is constantly referring back to systems of domination, but that evaluates everyday activities and commodities as having the potential for liberation would generate a more holistic understanding of the everyday. Having explored the subject-object relation in everyday activities, we must undo the chains that bind us to the floor of the cave and see the source of the shadows: essence.

Essence

The clicks of the keyboard are the screeches of the demon, the howl of the furnace is the call of the werewolf. The demon-machine does not wish to take the laborer's life, only to torture it and keep watch like a ghastly shadow crawling up the dark walls. The essence of the machine is monstrous. In Chapter 15 of *Capital Vol. 1: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry*, Karl Marx employs the imagery of the monster, and surfaces his long-neglected understanding of essence. The two appear seemingly suddenly, finding little usage in other sections of the text. Why? Sarah Vitale believes that Marx stopped using words "like 'essence' and 'human nature'" because of

their meaning to Young Hegelians. Essence was to them a purely philosophical word, bearing no mind to the real material conditions, only referring to an imagined sense of nature in its highest form.⁵⁵ So the appearance of essence in Chapter 15 is jarring, as most foundational concepts are explored at great length within the text, but essence is summoned out of the void. The puzzle becomes more fascinating when we realize, many years before the publication of *Capital Vol. 1*, Marx briefly discusses essence in *The German Ideology*, referencing machinery in the same breath. Perhaps a matter of chance, but more likely a display of the congruence of Marx's thought. Machines seem to motivate a conversation about essence. To understand Marx usage of essence in Chapter 15, I will look back to *The German Ideology* and engage with Marxist scholars to build a constellation of meaning to understand essence. Then, I will attempt to describe what surplus-value means in *Capital*. This is crucial, as the aim of machinery is to produce the maximum amount of surplus-value.⁵⁶ With a handle on essence and surplus-value, I will investigate each concept's usage in Chapter 15. Finally, we will consider essence in relation to contemporary machines, those being artificial intelligence and automation. This section is meant to illuminate Marx's understanding of essence, then employ it to conceptualize the role of the machine in a capitalist orientation of the economy. My argument is that the essence of the machine is to maximize surplus-value; it is constituted only by its capacity to produce surplus-value. Further, essence demonstrates how the machine transfigures the essence of labor itself, changing the division of labor to make the machine the *subject* of labor, opposed to the human. The essence of the machine is: alienation, the maximization of surplus value, and to invert the relation of laborer to tool, that is, to make the laborer a tool of the machine. In eternal insult to

⁵⁵ Sarah Vitale. "Beyond 'Homo Laborans': Marx's Dialectical Account of Human Essence." *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 3 (2020): 642.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 644.

the Young-Hegelians who understood essence as a high-level philosophical term that referenced nature, Marx uses essence to demonstrate how something is constituted in an unnatural form. Reading Chapter 15 as such improves our understanding of Marx's conceptualization of the relationship between subject and object, providing clarity to the tensions described in the methodological section. It also illuminates the current status of machines that appear in nearly every area of our everyday and working lives. The essence of a machine is an attack on nature, on our bodies, and on our mind. Inscribed on each machine, overhead each factory - "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here".

Many scholars have taken up human essence as the first steps in understanding Marx articulation of alienation. Sarah Vitale counters scholars who argue that Marx differentiates humans from animals through production. To do so, Vitale explores human essence in Marx's early work. The basis for the strictly material view of humanity is based in Marx's early writing that poses human alienation as the detachment of one experience from the means of production and the objects of production. It is deduced that human essence is based in production given that alienation is experienced in labor.⁵⁷ Vitale believes that these interpretations miss the forest for the trees, ignoring what is the "early version of his dialectical account of essence". As will be discussed in greater detail in my analysis of *The German Ideology*, Marx may borrow from Feuerbach, but promptly diverges from his thought. Generally, these divergences are based on Marx's contention that Feuerbach relegates liberation to the realm of philosophy and to the mind, not to the practical and material conditions that constitute humanness.⁵⁸ Marx interprets Feuerbach's notion of species-being to be how a human practically relates to the world, how a

⁵⁷ Sarah Vitale. "Beyond 'Homo Laborans': Marx's Dialectical Account of Human Essence." *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 3 (2020): 641.

⁵⁸ Vitale. "Beyond 'Homo Laboronas', 642.

species creates their being in a certain set of material conditions. Vitale observes that Marx is building a notion of human essence that is constructed by humans themselves. In his debates with Young Hegelians, Marx was taking aim at static understandings of essence. Further, for the Young Hegelian, human essence is an idea that exists atop a mountain looking down upon the people to which it applies. People do not need to physically climb the mountain to reach their essence, but to imagine they are climbing it by becoming self-conscious. In contrast, Vitale observes that Marx sought a “non-essentialist view”. This is not against the notion of essence, but against deterministic ones that were based in idealized visions of nature. In Vitale’s view, Marx allows for both a static and dynamic understanding of essence. The static relates to humans’ contingency with nature- they cannot exist without it; whereas the dynamic is human activity in creating their world- their relation with the world is always changing according to their activity upon it.⁵⁹ The dynamic is completely missing among the Young-Hegelians, most noticeably in their ignorance of history in the formation of human essence.⁶⁰ Vitale brilliantly highlights the dialectics of essence through a counter-argument to an often cited passage that seems to affirm strictly material readings of Marx.⁶¹ A superficial reading would indicate that Marx admits that it is consciousness, much like the Young-Hegelian view, that separates humans from the rest of the objects of the world. Vitale charges that Marx makes the stylistic choice to be dismissive of the first clause, an indication that this is the static moment, but highlights the second clause, the dynamic process by which humans are constantly transfiguring their world,

⁵⁹ Vitale. “Beyond ‘Homo Laborans’, 644.

⁶⁰ Sarah Vitale. “Beyond ‘Homo Laborans’: Marx’s Dialectical Account of Human Essence.” *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 3 (2020): 645.

⁶¹ Karl Marx, Engels, Friedrich. Ed. Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NY: 1978) 150.

and as such, their essence.⁶² It is still not clear, however, whether or not an object can be constituted in-and-of itself.

Philip J. Karin begins from a similar premise as Vitale, observing that Marx has been viewed as a social subjectivist, whereby the subject and the object are understood constitutively through their historical interaction. Neither an object or a subject can be understood in-and-of itself. Karin intervenes by evaluating essence, as scholars' misinterpretation of this word has led to confusion about whether Marx believes an object or subject can be understood "in-themselves".⁶³ Essence in Marx's early writing is constitutive of his notion of nature, although essence only exists in theory, whereas nature exists in reality. Karin claims that Aristotle and Marx began from similar premises, reaching different conclusions as to the development of essence. That is, Aristotle understands essence as an object at its most pure form, and only fluctuates in the process of fulfillment, reaching an end that is fixed and unchanged. While Marx and Aristotle might have some alignment in this premise, what exactly is meant by pure form, or maximum potentially is unclear. Furthermore, how can essence be fixed, when essence is exhibited in the "process of development"? Marx understands essence as a change in an object in history. Necessity as a process that constitutes nature is the force that binds essence to reality. Need is a natural process that puts objects and subjects in relation to one another in order to perpetuate their existence. While Karin does not proceed in clear terms, I believe we can begin to understand essence as the realization of an object or subject's existence through need, which itself is based on the relationship of an object and subject.⁶⁴ This process places us in murky

⁶² Sarah Vitale. "Beyond 'Homo Laborans': Marx's Dialectical Account of Human Essence." *Social Theory and Practice* 46, no. 3 (2020): 646.

⁶³ Philip J. Kain "History, Knowledge, and Essence in the Early Marx." *Studies in Soviet Thought* 25, no. 4 (1983): 261.

⁶⁴ Philip J. Kain "History, Knowledge, and Essence in the Early Marx." *Studies in Soviet Thought* 25, no. 4 (1983): 262.

waters. Essence can only be known through the observation of the process of an object's development towards "its true nature".⁶⁵ This is as far as Karin is willing to traverse in an effort to define essence. This definition is itself abstract, but it has profound impacts on Marx's understanding on the relationship of human to nature. Human's, who are constituted by consciousness realize themselves through objects that exist in nature because of necessity. Nature is the medium whereby humans reproduce nature to constitute their reality. Humans and nature are bound in a dialectical process whereby their essence is realized in the Other. This is important, as it establishes that essence is not the gama of human and nature, but a mediating force between them.⁶⁶

To build our constellation of essence out further I will look to *The German Ideology*. Marx's understanding of essence is established through his contention with Bruno Bauer, Max Stirner, and Ludwig Feuerbach. German philosophers, says Marx, only account for Germany and ignore the rest of the world. This view exemplifies a larger issue: Bruno, Max and Feuerbach do not understand existing reality. Feuerbach's philosophy is merely concerned with raising people to a fact that they already know, that people need one another.⁶⁷ Marx believes that this is not a useful designation, while shifting attention away from the revolutionary aim of communism.⁶⁸ They cast aside pragmatism for philosophizing. This shift is not only un-pragmatic, but leads to problems within the logic of their philosophy. Feuerbach believes that an object or subject's existence is identical to its essence, that all conditions and modes of life are identical with the person or animal. Existence and essence are not differentiated. And yet, the conditions of

⁶⁵ Philip J. Kain "History, Knowledge, and Essence in the Early Marx." *Studies in Soviet Thought* 25, no. 4 (1983): 264.

⁶⁶ Kain "History, Knowledge, and Essence in the Early Marx" 268.

⁶⁷ Karl Marx, Engels, Fredrich. Ed. Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NY: 1978) 167.

⁶⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 168.

existence do not align with human desire, and if existence and essence are identical, then this moment of non-alignment is not criticized but made to be normal. Marx believes that the basis for proletarian revolution is that essence and existence are supposed to align, but a capitalist orientation of the economy prevents them from being so, and actively separates them. The basis for revolution is the alignment of essence and existence. It is not to make them identical, but to bring them “into harmony”. Marx asserts that the essence of something is constituted by its existence, existence being the medium in which the object or subject persists. He charges that the essence of a fish is the “water of the river”. What Feuerbach does not consider is that when the water is changed, when it is destroyed by industry, existence stops for the fish, it has been removed from its essence.⁶⁹ Essence and existence are not identical, but they have a constitutive relationship, which is why the separation of the two necessitates revolution. Put simply, the philosophers that Marx attacks believe that liberation is a mental act that is a matter of achieving a higher level of “self-consciousness”. No, says Marx, liberation is contingent upon the material conditions, it is one that is always historical.⁷⁰ Feuerbach presents an absolute sense of nature, nature's true essence, where self-consciousness attempts to realize and align with this essence. Marx observes that in each epoch of history, nature has been transfigured by and to the will of humans. He points to the cherry tree grown in Germany as an example. It may appear natural, grow from the ground in an indistinguishable form from any other trees, but it is not “natural” to the region, the tree does not exist in its absolute essence; and as the cherry tree, neither do any other objects or subjects.⁷¹ Philosophical questions are important to Marx, but they find their resolve in materiality, not in a separate sphere, and not resolvable by thought itself.

⁶⁹ Karl Marx, Engels, Fredrich. Ed. Robert C. Tucker, *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NY: 1978) 168.

⁷⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 169.

⁷¹ Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 170.

Using the secondary literature and the discussion above, the following will be my understanding of essence in Marx. Essence is a process whereby an object is realized through necessity in nature, or through its usage for necessity by a subject. Karin still holds that essence is a process, but there is a fixed conceptualization of an object-in-itself, in its most abstract and universal form. This view holds that essence is a concept that mediates the dialectical process of human to nature. Vitale believes that Marx is engaging in dialectics with human essence, posing nature as the static moment, whereas historical production is the dynamic moment. These conceptualizations provide a solid basis to claim that Marx diverges from philosophers like Aristotle, or Young Hegelians who have a fixed notion of essence. While there is a static moment within the dialectical process that constitutes essence, there is also a dynamic one. The essence of an object or a subject can only be understood through an analysis of both moments. This will be immensely useful for understanding Marx usage of the word in *The Germany Ideology* and *Capital Vol. 1*. At times, it will seem that Marx is referencing a fixed idea of an object or subject, that he is referencing the natural or ideal potential. These are the static moments, but they do not reflect the dynamic moment.

Surplus-Value

Before we can examine Marx' use of essence in Chapter 15, we must understand why Marx pays such attention to machines. The essence of the machine in its dynamic moment is surplus-value. Surplus-value is one of the primary locomotives of alienation of labor, if not the central one. Marx paints a picture whereby the machine is involved in a series of historical developments to maximize surplus-value. At times, the machine reduces surplus-value, however, the capitalist quickly develops transfigurations to re-assert its role in the valorization process.

First, I will look to specific passages that describe surplus-value, especially as it pertains to machines. The entire production process resets on the valorization of capital, to use labor to embed more value in the object than the object is actually worth as defined by its use or constitutive parts.⁷² Capital is composed of the money required, the means of production (c) and the wages paid to the laborer (v).⁷³ The surplus-value is added in this process, (s) which leads to a formula to determine the value of capital - $(c+v) + s$. A change has taken place, whereby the value derived from the relation of (c) and (v) is changed through (s), leading to capital being presented as C' .⁷⁴ Marx continues developing this formula, which has some use, but is not necessary for our understanding here. This formula shows that surplus-value is derived from a change in v , to the labor power. The creation of surplus-value casts aside constant value, putting it in constant motion.⁷⁵ Surplus-value should appear unnecessary to the reproduction of the worker. One portion of their day is spent creating a commodity that has equal value to the laborers means of subsistence, which Marx often approximates as 6 hours. Their means of subsistence is represented by a value in the form of wages, a value that is also represented in a commodity. Marx charges that the non-capitalist laborer and the capitalist labor will work for relatively equal hours in the fulfillment of their means of subsistence.⁷⁶ This time is called necessary labor time, as it is required for the laborer to live, and the capitalist to exploit laborers.⁷⁷ Non- necessary labor time does not produce anything for the laborer, as it is not represented in (v). Surplus-labor time is the life-force of the capitalist, it generates value out of a

⁷² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 287

⁷³ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 320.

⁷⁴ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 321.

⁷⁵ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 322.

⁷⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 324.

⁷⁷ Marx greatly expands on this idea in his discussion of relative and surplus value. It certainly has some bearing on this conversation, but not so much so that it warrants a full discussion. What is most important is to differentiate between necessary labor time, and the production of surplus value.

void and vacuum. The capitalist develops tools and methods to extract the maximum surplus-value from the worker, which Marx details in Chapter 10: The Working Day, and Chapter 15: Machinery and Large-Scale Industry.⁷⁸

Surplus-value is to the capitalist what blood is to the vampire: a thirst that only becomes stronger the more elixir is consumed.⁷⁹ From our broad understanding of surplus-value, we must look to the working day to understand the role of machines in maximizing surplus-value from the laborer. Again, Marx starts from the premise that the working day can equal 6 hours to produce one's means of subsistence. Whether or not this is true is less important than having some numerical starting point to represent how the production of surplus-value is removed from the physical needs of the laborer. Marx uses a basic graphic to represent the working day: A (start) - - - - - B (end) *necessary labor time; A - - - - - B - - - (C) (surplus-labor). Marx used two other notations to describe surplus-value, but this is meant to show how the capitalist manipulates BC to create more surplus-value.⁸⁰ Marx stresses the variable nature of the working day because of surplus-value, but this variability meets constraints by physiological factors. Those being: the time required for the laborer to reproduce themselves, nighttime, or the “physical limits” of the worker themselves.⁸¹ The capitalist is constantly trying to change the limits of the working day to extend BC to maximize surplus-value.⁸² Marx demonstrates these efforts through an analysis of changes to the working day whereby BC was extended well beyond 12 hours.⁸³ The Factory Act is the basis for the normal working day “in modern industry”.⁸⁴ Marx's views on this legislation

⁷⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 340, 492.

⁷⁹ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 342

⁸⁰ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 340.

⁸¹ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 341.

⁸² Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 344.

⁸³ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1* 343-389.

⁸⁴ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 390.

is nuanced, understanding it as a positive mechanism to blunt some exploitation, but simultaneously affirming the exploitation of workers, just within a new set of constraints.

In view of surplus-value and its relation to the working day, we arrive at the machine. While initially generating a large amount of profits, it steadily decreases surplus-value as it becomes valorized.⁸⁵ This is because the machine, leaving behind a great number of workers, becomes constant capital instead of variable capital. If we recall the discussion above, surplus-value can only be created by constant and variable capital. But the capitalist will not stand for this loss of surplus-value, although they are not aware of what is happening; they only observe a loss of profit. Marx argues that the capitalist prolongs the working day and increases the intensity of labor through the machine to regain the lost surplus-value.⁸⁶ This phenomenon is referred to as “a dialectical inversion”. The machine has the potential to greatly reduce the working day, but it leads to the most egregious extension of it.⁸⁷ But if the extension of the working day led to The Factory Act which placed constraints on it, how does the capital derive surplus-value?

The intensity of the working day is named the “extensive magnitude” whereas the length in is the “intensive magnitude”.⁸⁸ Given the decrease of surplus-value because of machines in their initial stage and restrictions on the working day, capitalists maintain the production of surplus-value by intensifying labor. This is done through the “condensation of labor”, or the ability to cast more labor into production because the labor-time is shortened. In labor that is less reliant on machines, this is done through regularity and uniformity.⁸⁹ In industries reliant on machines, intensity is increased in two forms: “the speed of the machines is increased, and the

⁸⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 530.

⁸⁶ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 531.

⁸⁷ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 532.

⁸⁸ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 533.

⁸⁹ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 535.

same worker receives a greater quantity of machinery to supervise or operate”.⁹⁰ The capitalist generates creative ways to increase production, like modifying machines so that those who attend to them must work more quickly.⁹¹ And as the machines are made to operate more quickly, they have more parts that must be attended to and repaired. Marx cites comments from manufactures in England that say the speed of production had increased incredibly within two decades.⁹² The 1840’s in England saw manufactures engaged in vast experimentation with the speed at which machines could operate, as running them too fast could lead to them breaking and the lessening productivity of workers. Marx argues that the shortening of the work day had, relative to a concern with the care of the worker, an inverse effect whereby machines were vastly improved and labor was intensified only because the working day had been made shorter.⁹³ Marx makes the prediction that the intensity of labor will become so great that the working day will be reduced again, and the intensity of labor and the working day will constantly modify one another to maximize surplus-value.⁹⁴ The productive potentials of the machine demanded more upon the worker. The capitalist who is in pursuit of the maximum amount of profits never understood the machine as a way to make the working day-less intense. It was not to be able to produce shirts in a form that was easier on the work- it was to produce more shirts.

Marx devotes a substantial amount of time discussing the differences between surplus-value and absolute-value.⁹⁵ For our purposes, we should proceed from the understanding of surplus-value set out in Chapter 9. Surplus-value is the product of the transfiguration of the labor power that constitutes capital.⁹⁶ It transfigures labor time by extending the working day past that

⁹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 536.

⁹¹ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 536.

⁹² Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 537.

⁹³ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 540.

⁹⁴ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 542.

⁹⁵ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 643-654.

⁹⁶ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 322.

which is necessary for the reproduction of the means of subsistence, or for the production of a commodity whose value is equal to the means of subsistence.⁹⁷ This may feel unsatisfactory, but Marx means to make surplus-value difficult to grab onto, like grasping a handful of fog. Surplus-value is not so much constituted by what it is, but what it does. It creates value out of thin air through the prolongation of the working day, through the shortening of the necessary labor time.⁹⁸ Not only does surplus-value, as will be demonstrated below, play an integral role in the development of machines, but it is central to capitalism itself. Marx writes “Capitalist production is not merely the production of commodities, it is, by its very essence, the production of surplus-value”.⁹⁹ It is my view that the static moment in the essence of capital is surplus-value. What, then, is the essence of the machine?

Essence and Machines in Chapter 15 of *Capital Vol. 1*

Essence appears three paragraphs into Chapter 15 in the form of “essential”. Marx charges that experts on mechanics “... see no essential difference between them, and even give the name of machine to a simple mechanical aids such as the lever, the inclined plane, the screw, the wedge, etc.”.¹⁰⁰ Here Marx is discussing the difference between two categories of objects, that is tool and machine. For the capitalist, there is no substantial difference between the objects as-such, or in their uses, that differentiates them enough to be a separate set of objects. They are only different in so far as they have different levels of complexity. Marx goes on to write “All fully developed machinery consists of three essentially different parts, the motor mechanism, the

⁹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 325.

⁹⁸ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 645.

⁹⁹ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 644.

¹⁰⁰ Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, 492.

transmitting mechanism and finally the tool or working machine”.¹⁰¹ The essential differences of a machine lay in the essential differences of their parts. Each part is constituted in itself as an object, the static embodiment of essence, while their usage as a total object, is the dynamic essence where the object is constituted by its usage. Why does Marx draw attention to the capitalist’s inability to see essential differences between machines and the objects that constitute the machine? The capitalist inscribes a singular essence in the machine through its creation: to increase surplus-value. The difference between the parts and the whole is negligible, the machine is meant to extract more value out of a commodity and to increase the efficiency of the laborer. If the essence of a machine is to extract surplus-value, and surplus-value is contingent on exploitation and alienation of the worker from the means of production, then the essence of the machine is exploitation, its dynamic moment is exploitation. Just as with the division of labor, capital reduces the real material differences between the parts of the machine.

Marx paints a picture of the machine as a monster, an amalgamation of parts that becomes the objective *subject* of labor. The machine is a “a mechanical monster” with “demonic power”.¹⁰² Its non-monstrous form is a tool within non-capitalist orientations and is used by the laborer as an object of labor. The complex machine, which is constituted by simple tools, becomes the *subject* of labor through divisions of labor that arise because of the machine itself. Divisions of labor are not established in accordance with the skills of the laborer or their experiences, but to the functions of the machine. Marx articulates this new division as an “essential difference”.¹⁰³ Essence is not referring here to the machine or the human, but to the division of labor. The static essence is the natural relation of human to nature whereby divisions

¹⁰¹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 494.

¹⁰² Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 503.

¹⁰³ Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 501.

arise because the human is the *subject* that acts out of necessity, whereas the dynamic process of the development of a machine has transfigured the essence of the static, making the new essence of the division of labor one that is based on the machine as *subject* and person as object. Let us say we have three people responsible for making dinner on a desert island. One goes to hunt the food, the second collects wood for the fire, the third fashions a flint and steel. The essence of the division between them is the necessity to procure their means of subsistence. Let us place these same three peoples in a factory. One is assigned to pull the levers, the second to repair the machine, the third to supervise the two. What is the essence of the division between their labor? It is not, as we saw on the desert island the procurement of their means of subsistence, but the maximization of surplus-value. The machine, after all, has an essence that is the production of surplus-value. On the island, the essence of the division of labor in both its static and dynamic moment aligns with the nature of the individual – that is, continuing life. The tools they use to gather their food have essential difference, as do the parts that constitute the whole tool. A bow and arrow is made of wood, string, feathers, and flint. The laborer can and must observe the different essential parts of the tool. This same laborer would be totally incapable of observing the essential differences in a large machine.

One example of the incomprehensible tool is the Cyclopean machine. This is the machine that can produce another machine. It allows the machine to “stand on its own”, to lose its reliance on past industries and dawn a new one, the industry for and by machines. The Cyclopean machine arises from transportation. Marx asserts “The most essential condition for the production of machines by machines was a prime mover capable of exerting any amount of force, while retaining perfect control”.¹⁰⁴ The static moment is the necessity of the movement of

¹⁰⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 506.

objects to create other objects, the dynamic is the creation of large objects capable of the expenditure of massive amounts of energy to move other large objects. But Marx is not referring to the essence of the prime mover, but the essential conditions of the production of machines by machines, which is the prime mover. The prime mover is constituted by the construction of larger machines, and the machine's essence is the maximization of surplus-value, and the essence of surplus-value is modifications to labor-time. While the essential condition for the production of machines by machines is the prime mover, it is also the exploitation of the laborer. We see two operative themes: the essence of machines is unnatural; the essence of the machine is to be the *subject* of labor. The machine makes itself the subject of labor by casting aside the human through the increase in its scale and size as to be reliant on other machines. The machine, says Marx, is just the larger version of a simple tool. The Cyclopes, huge in stature, is an apt metaphor for the machine. Marx goes as far to say "... and the steam-hammer works with an ordinary hammer head, but of such weight that even Thor himself could not wield it."¹⁰⁵ This is such a monster that not even a god could wield the means of production. So perhaps instead of a monster, machines-by-machines have become demons.

Let us return to the desert island. The person on the island is tasked with building a shelter, however, they find too much time being taken up by transporting logs from the forest to the beach. Using logs, rope and stone, they fashion a cart that can carry many logs at once. The essence of the machine is the transportation of materials for the building of a shelter. The essence of the object that is the shelter is the sustaining of the laborer's life. Both the cart and the shelter maintain their essence in the dynamic moment of usage. Take this same person and have them be apart of a team that is building a train. The workers only build one part of the train, as it has so

¹⁰⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 507.

many complex parts that one individual could not labor to produce it themselves. The train is built to carry large machinery that builds cars. The essence of the train in both its static and dynamic moment is to produce surplus-value by transporting the means to build items that themselves have an essence of the production of surplus-value. There is a harmony between the static and dynamic moment of a cart used to transport logs that is not present in the construction of a train.

The metaphors and usage of essence falls to the background as Marx delves into empirical observations about machines, only to find their way back in his conversation about the factory.¹⁰⁶ The factory operates as the machine does, it transfigures the essence of the division of labor and removes the necessity of skill for most laborers.¹⁰⁷ Marx argues that the division of labor had previously been based on differences in skill and technical understanding between laborers. These differences now lay between the machines themselves. The factory demonstrates how changes to the division of labor change the organizational structure of labor as-such. The factory organizes its workers nearly equally and identically, presenting only a difference between the leader of the factory and all those others who work with the machines themselves. Marx writes “The essential division is that between workers who are actually employed on the machines (among whom are included a few who look after the engine) and those who merely attend them *almost exclusively children)”.¹⁰⁸ This is a strange statement, as there does not appear to be a substantive difference between one who attends to the machine and one who is employed to it, especially in view of Marx comments just a paragraph before. What is the essential division if most workers are made to be identical? Essential is used to demonstrate the

¹⁰⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 507-544.

¹⁰⁷ The exception is laborers who repair the machines

¹⁰⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 545.

completely arbitrary nature of the division of labor within the factory. The factory owner poses the division between these two laborers as essential, they become essential to the maintenance of the factory. It feels nonsensical because it is. If all divisions of labor are found in the machines themselves, why is there any designation between workers themselves? With the exception of the person who repairs the machine, all labor within the factory is interchangeable. These roles are interchangeable because there is no individuated skill between different forms of labor. Marx charges that the “essential character” of industry makes itself clear in the exploitation of children. He writes “It appears, for example, in the frightful fact that a great part of the children employed in modern factories and manufacturers are from their earliest years riveted to the most simple manipulations, and exploited for years, without being taught a single kind of skill that would afterwards make them of use, even in the same factory”.¹⁰⁹ The static moment is that industry produces items as an aggregate of multiple laborers, the dynamic is that it does so by destroying the division of labor in favor of the mundane task that does not necessitate skill.

Certainly one could read Marx's use of essence as posing industry and machines as unnatural, which I have done myself. In concluding the chapter, though, Marx draws our attention to both its unnatural and contradictory nature. One such statement is “Its technical basis is therefore revolutionary, whereas all earlier modes of production were essentially conservative”.¹¹⁰ I believe the word revolutionizes can be viewed similarly to transfiguring, as when I have referred to something's essence being transfigured. Marx writes “At the same time, it thereby also revolutionizes the division of labor within society, and incessantly throws masses of capital and of workers from one branch of production to another”.¹¹¹ It is important that

¹⁰⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 615.

¹¹⁰ Marx, *Capital Vol.1* 617.

¹¹¹ Marx, *Capital Vol.1* 617.

objects and subjects are revolutionized, maintaining some character of the old system and casting it anew. This is what allows for the contradictory nature of the essence of the division of labor. But all these contradictions, in my view, rest on a reorientation of the essence of human-nature, which is why Marx employs the word in this chapter. We are given a hint as to what Marx believes is true human-essence, and from the above discussion, have a clear idea of what the essence of machinery is. Marx writes “This possibility of varying labour must become a general law of social production, and the existing relations must be adapted to permit its realization in practice. That monstrosity, the disposable working population held in reserve, in misery, for the changing requirements of capitalist exploitation, must be replaced by the individual man who is absolutely available for the different kinds of labor required of him”.¹¹² The essence of the individual person is the exact opposite of the de-individualized human. Marx uses essence and the metaphor of the monster to demonstrate how the machine degrades the labor in general terms, but we should not ignore his more specific comments on this degradation.

The general effect of the machine and the factory is exploitation. To be clear, the essence of a tool is not exploitation, it is an expansion of the human to assist in their production. The machine inverts the relationship of human to tool - the human becomes the tool of the machine. Marx emphasizes how the factory degrades the human “In manufacture the workers are the parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism which is independent of the workers, who are incorporated into it as its living appendages”.¹¹³ The reproduction of life is cast aside for the production of surplus-value, and as such, the human becomes but a tool to realize this goal. More specifically, the factory breaks the workers body and mind by casting aside their freedom to participate in creative and intellectual activity. Marx questions whether or not we can

¹¹² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 618.

¹¹³ Marx, *Capital Vol. I* 548.

call labor in the factory “work”, as the content, or might we say the essence of work has been transfigured for the machine. This inversion, while having some resonance in the early capitalist epoch, truly takes shape with the factory. Marx writes “However, it is only with the coming of machinery that this inversion first acquires a technical and palpable reality”.¹¹⁴ As machines developed the capability to automatically produce some elements of commodities, the laborer does not work with raw materials to create an object, but laborers over “the shape of capital”.¹¹⁵ The worker confronts this labor with no special skill or meaning but only as a tool.¹¹⁶ Marx's discussion of the most practical effects of the machine present a more extreme vision of the essence of the machine: the essence of the machine is to become the *subject* of labor by making machines of humans.

Finally, Marx draws our attention to how machinery affects the laborers wages. In earlier chapters Marx argues that capitalism is founded on the workers' sale of their labor power for a wage through the production of a commodity. Early stages of capitalism specialize the worker to particular labor through their capacity to use tools, which is later taken over by the machine. Marx charges that the machine unearths this foundation when it runs the machine instead of the human, and as such, the “exchange value” of the worker's labor disappears. Marx writes regarding these workers “...no longer directly necessary for the self–valorization of capital”.¹¹⁷ These laborers are then thrust into the “easily accessible branches of industry” that become so saturated that the wages given for labor-power fall far below their value. As such, the worker and the machine are in an unequal competition because one valorizes capital, and the other is

¹¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990), 548.

¹¹⁵ Marx, *Capital Vol. I* 548.

¹¹⁶ Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 549.

¹¹⁷ Marx, *Capital Vol. I*, 557.

unnecessary to the process. The human is now a machine, the machine is now the *subject* - the laborer made entirely unnecessary.

Essence, Automation, and *Blade Runner 2049*

The everyday is constituted by machines. Soon enough, both the everyday and labor will be occupied by automated machines. Automation, then, is fitting way to round out our discussion of essence, the subject-object relationship and de Certeau and Adorno. The automation-harpies in the media, spanning from Tucker Carlson, Andrew Yang and Sam Harris, have no doubt relentlessly preached about the impending doom of an automated society. Aaron Benanav's piece *Automation and the Future of Work — I* rightly observes the temporal cycle of these concerns.¹¹⁸ The authors worry in this article is the substance of claims that pose automation as a significant threat to employment. Benanav outlines four propositions on which these conversations rest. One: Workers are being replaced by ever-improving machines. Two: If this continues, our society will become fully automated relative to labor. Three: Labor is the only way to fulfill one's means of subsistence, but automation removes the person from labor, resulting in crisis. Four: Universal Basic Income (UBI) solves the crisis.¹¹⁹ These are the propositions that Benanav proceeds to question and critique. Of note, automation theorists span politically from the right to the left, all concluding that some version of UBI will eliminate the impending doom of automation. Most important, all their views rest on a premise that is based on a prediction; and a prediction that is no less based on a trajectory. Benanav charges that the concern with automation indicates a problem, but it does not indicate that automation is that problem. The persistent, but sporadic concern with automation is inextricably tied to concerns

¹¹⁸ Aaron Benanav, "Automation and the Future of Work-I ." *New Left Review* 119 (2019)

¹¹⁹ Benanav, "Automation and the Future of Work"

with employment. There is a globally low demand for labor that attacks the laborers capacity to negotiate their position within the economy – on that automation theorist and Benanav would agree. Benanav argues that the low demand for labor is due to persistent technological development in the context of economic stagnation.¹²⁰ This strong argument is heavily entrenched in an economic commentary to which I can bring nothing to bear. I want to contribute to this works critique of techno-optimism by engaging it with the previous conversation of essence.

If the essence of a machine is the maximization of surplus-value, it should follow that as machines become more advanced technologically, their capacity to produce surplus-value does as-well. As I argued, the machine's essence is the maximization of surplus-value in both its static and dynamic moment: the machine exists only for surplus-value in its inception and its usage. The automation-crowd who speak about the potential of automation have it wrong. Unlike Benanav, I am not concerned with their analysis being based on predictions or wrongly reading the current state of the economy. Afterall, Benanav suffers from the same criticism that they launch against the automation-crowd: neither analysis can say much about what the impact of these technologies *will* be. The second paragraph of *Automation and the Future of Work- I* is entirely irrelevant - self-driving cars will soon require no human intervention, grocery store employment is under constant attack from the self-checkout aisle, and wages for fast food employees are declining horrendously because of automation. The point being - there is something within the current computerized automation that is having real and predictably poor effects on workers. While I cannot and refuse to speak to the economic intricacies of this

¹²⁰ Benanav, "Automation and the Future of Work"

phenomenon, I would like to address the essence of the automated machine to provide a theoretical basis for the robust economic discussions.

That automation will have an effect on the future is an uncontroversial claim. The controversy lies in what the state-apparatuses does in view of technological change. Moishe Postone writes in *Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism* "... socialism is considered as a social form of the organization of distribution more adequate to the industrial mode of production".¹²¹ There is an apparent contradiction within Marxism. That the mode of production that characterizes capitalism is contingent for a historical transition to socialism, and while Marxist claim to be concerned with the mode of production, the transition to socialism is a question of the mode of distribution.¹²² Marxists understand industrial production as having the capacity of being independent of capitalism. The dynamic moment of the industrial mode of production is capitalism, not its static moment. This is what allows for the industrial mode of production to persist beside its real historical essence that is tied directly to capital. Postone believes that socialism, then, is a part of a linear history where the mode of production does not change, but the method of distribution does.¹²³ Most troubling is how the traditional Marxist view is not able to critique the means of production itself when the mode of production changes. Even if the means of production were distributed differently, would their capacity for oppression not remain? This question may never be asked under the traditional Marxist schematic under a socialist society, or so Postone charges.¹²⁴ Marxism appears inadequate as a means for immanent critique and for understanding technological

¹²¹ Moishe Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism." *Social Research* (1978) 740.

¹²² Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 740.

¹²³ Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 741.

¹²⁴ Moishe Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism." *Social Research* (1978) 742.

development.¹²⁵ Postone still places immense value in the traditional Marxist approach, so long as its focus is on production instead of distribution.

Postone reads *The Grundrisse* to emphasize Marx's concern with the form of production.¹²⁶ Embedded within capitalism is the connection between value and the wage, one that is not consequential to the distribution of capital but the production of it by a laborer. Marx charges that to transcend capitalism is to eradicate social wealth that is based in labor time as value.¹²⁷ To overcome capitalism is to overcome its mode of production. Postone is taking direct aim at a reading of Marx that likely occupied the mind of many 20th century Marxists, some of whom ruled the most powerful nations the world has ever seen. His beef is with those who believe that the means of production could have its essence transfigured so that it serves the proletariat. Marxists who believe that private property can be co-opted to serve the proletariat have misunderstood materialist philosophy.¹²⁸ Such a reading of Marx places the end of history in the redistribution of the mode of production. What Marx was actually advocating for was a use of the mode of production against the mode of production itself. At some level Postone admits a redistributive view, but one that is explicitly against the thing that is being redistributed.¹²⁹

The static moment of capitalism is the mode of production that is built on the connection between labor time as value and social wealth. The dynamic moment, which traditional Marxist hold is the static moment, is the form of distribution of the mode of production. Given that the essence of something in its dynamic moment always extends from the static moment, changing

¹²⁵ Moishe Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism." *Social Research* (1978) 743.

¹²⁶ Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 746.

¹²⁷ Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 748

¹²⁸ Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 749.

¹²⁹ Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 749.

the form of distribution will be inadequate in separating the mode of production from its exploitative form. The dynamic moment, then, must be the destruction of the static moment, to use the means of production against itself. What really must be destroyed in this process is a society that is based on the masses producing a surplus through wages, enslavement, or otherwise. The social production of surplus binds together Marx's four historical epochs.¹³⁰

Postone advocates for the social individual where their labor is in alignment with the fulfillment of the social whole. Society will not confront them as Other, but in sameness according to the fulfillment of the self and the fulfillment of the society. Such a society will be realized when human labor that produces a surplus is eradicated in favor of humans who labor over machines that produce the surplus themselves. To this point, we might see a hint as to how this connects with machines or automation. Postone writes "People must be able to step out of the direct labor process in which they had previously labored as parts and control it from above".¹³¹ Surplus will be created, and it might be the basis for a utopian-socialist society, but it will not be produced by human-labor. This implies that surplus will be created at a large enough scale to fulfill the needs of the people without the people laboring in the creation of this surplus. It must, in my view, be automated machines that are producing this surplus. Postone poses this as a contradiction within capitalism. The real labor under capitalism is in tension with the potentiality of labor if the mode of production was turned against itself.¹³²

No doubt Benanav and Postone are writing in very different styles, one being heavily economic and the other philosophical, but they are charging towards the same point. The new left and traditional Marxist both over-emphasize distribution so that they do not properly

¹³⁰ Moishe Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time: A Reinterpretation of the Marxian Critique of Capitalism." *Social Research* (1978) 750.

¹³¹ Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 753.

¹³² Postone. "Necessity, Labor, and Time" 758.

understand the nature of technological change within capitalism. Benanav underwrites the potentiality of automation under capitalism because of their skepticism of the capacity to make predictive statements about technology and the economy. Postone, without saying it in any explicit form, opens the door to a truly liberating version of automation that is built on a revolution against the means of production itself. I am skeptical of Postone's discussion if we are to apply my understanding of essence to machines. Even if the means of production were turned against themselves, can the static moment of an object's essence be radically transferred by its dynamic moment? In the epistemological view, I completely agree with Postone's vision of a society where surplus is created solely by machines. But, as he admits, a radical and disruptive force must be imposed on the mode of production for such a machine to be liberatory. In our previous discussion, I argue that the essence of the machine in both its static and dynamic moment is the maximization of surplus-value. I believe Marx gives us no other choice but to view machines in this fashion. Again, Postone does not themselves make the claim that automated machines are the vehicle to their liberatory view of the future, but it is implied by their assertions regarding the creation of surplus by means other than humans. I do not believe we even have a conceptual framework to understand what a machine is that was created without the sole purpose of the maximization of surplus-value. Neither can I imagine a way that machines designed solely for that purpose could be transfigured to serve liberation from a capitalist system. A transfiguration of a machine of capital, even with the purposes of destroying the capitalist mode of production, will maintain the essence transcribed under capitalism. We have no such example, so I would like to turn to a movie to illustrate my own view of machines that is based on these two works and our previous discussion of Marx.

A most unlikely film has awakened my critical view of capitalism. *Blade Runner 2049* was certainly not produced to cultivate an awakening to the terrors of our economic system - and yet, I believe it speaks most pointedly to the ills of our crises. It would seem unlikely as a critical film given it was a major Hollywood project, likely greenlit solely on the success of its foremother - *Bladerunner*. I understand both films, but *Blade Runner 2049* especially, as an allegory as to the fundamental antagonism between human and capital. It presents a vision of the human where the thing that constitutes the self is also the thing we face as exploiting us - our labor, even in the most advanced society, is both life-force and exploiter. I hope to use this fictional story to ground the philosophical conversation above and provide insights into the current state of advanced machines.

In the film, replicants are an artificial intelligence created by the Tyrell Corporation. They are designed to act similarly and closely to humans in order to perform human labor that is capable of complex problem solving and critical thinking. Such a success, some models are sent to do grueling work off-planet. These replicants begin to revolt with the explicit purpose of meeting their creator on Earth. Their revolution is grounded in their emerging sense that their memories and actions are their own. Replicants are implanted with memories that are created by a human to cultivate a particular type of laborer. Blade Runners are tasked with hunting down and executing the replicants that have revolted. In *Blade Runner 2049*, the Wallace Cooperation has extended the work of the Tyrell Corporation by making replicants that will not revolt. Through constant upgrades to the replicants they are able to construct AI that is nearly indistinguishable from a human. New models do not revolt because they are made aware that their memories are not their own. *Blade Runner 2049* follows a Bladerunner who is also a replicant through their journey of self-hood.

Before delving into essence, the style of this film supports an important Marxist view. Marx charged that it was consciousness relation to a mode of production that gave humans their distinction from animals. It is not just that humans can reflect on actions, but that labor is creatively performed. Every character in *Blade Runner 2049* is depicted in their labor without exception. We only know who these characters are for the work they perform. Officer K's labor is violent. He is tasked with the execution of the rebelling replicants and investigative work. We see him brawling with a large, hulking replicant in the opening scene, eventually shooting them twice in the chest. He fights off desolate humans living in the wastelands outside of LA, killing multiple people to show his capabilities. At times we see clever problem solving and attentiveness, finding clues and picking up on subtle signals. All we know about Officer K, for the first half of the film, is his excellence in labor. After concluding the execution of one replicant, Officer K examines a dead tree. On the base of one of the dead tree is a date inscribed on the wood. We are then given insight into one of Officer K's implanted memories, to which he also has a physical object to provide it with permanence. The small object is a wooden horse with a birthday transcribed at its base. Officer K's memory is of holding onto the horse while a group of children chase him through the foundries of a factory. In recalling the memory, K says if the children found him, then they would take it - so he hid it and confronted the children. The children proceeded to beat him. This memory is crucial for K's labor. He owes his unabashed allegiance to the object, to protect and hide it at all costs. If the cost is being beaten, then K must pay it.

Having recalled the memory, K looks at the bottom of the horse and finds the same date inscribed on its base as the one on the tree. To summarize the plot quickly, K begins to wonder whether his memory was actually his own. Through an investigation of the site where the

birthday was transcribed, it is revealed that two people were born here to a replicant mother. This is a world-changing discovery, as replicants are supposedly not able to reproduce. K begins to wonder if he is that child, if he is a real human. The film proceeds with K's exploration of this discovery, only to find that, after-all, he was not human-born, his memories were not his own, and he was nothing other than his labor. *Blade Runner 2049* is a dark representation of the reality of machines created under capital. Officer K has every quality of a human - he is conscious, he has memories, and he is constituted by labor. But his essence, in the static and dynamic moment, is the production of surplus-value. Both his memories and his actions are always confined to the static essence, that is, the qualities inscribed in the creation of the replicant. Even while K has a conscious altering revelation, he can only explore the potential that he is human through the qualities of labor. That is, K was constructed to kill and problem-solve, he has no essence outside of these two qualities. To be sure, K has been altered in the dynamic moment through the possibility of not being a replicant, but the power of the static moment restrains him from any possibility of truly being anything but the producer of surplus-value. This is represented by the film's melancholy-end. K lays flat on a set of stairs, badly injured, looking upon the snowy sky. K gives up. And yet, Officer K is unable to realize that it should have been the process of resisting the Wallace Cooperation, of fighting against the state, of asserting actions that were not for the purpose of surplus-value where his humanity lies. K became a human through his resistance. He could not see this, however, because he was created with the purpose of producing surplus-value. The dynamic moment could not be strong enough to overcome the will that was inscribed to K at his creation. Because, after-all, *Blade Runner 2049* is doing far more than fear-mongering about the future of AI. The film encourages us to have sympathy for the human characters and to implicitly justify the exploitation of the replicants. Non-humans can be treated

differently because they are not human. As we have seen, however, there is no significant difference between a human and a replicant. The film is questioning the very basis for any system that is built on the creation of surplus-value. It is not saying that stories like this will emerge, but that they are already happening. We are all Officer-K, born into a system that has interpolated us as subjects that will produce surplus-value.

What I have attempted to demonstrate through a conversation about film is how essence can be applied to modern and future machines. This demonstrates how we can use static essence and dynamic essence to understand what an object is both of-itself and in-usage. *Blade Runner 2049* expresses my skepticism that machines created under capitalism could be used to harken in a post-work utopia. As Postone observed, machines that were co-opted by 20th-century communist states had very similar functions to their usage under capitalism. They maintained an essence of exploitation. I find this less of an issue with communism-itself, and more emblematic of the power of capitalism. Even in a different distributive model, the essence of the machine cannot be changed in its dynamic moment.

Conclusion

What are we to do, then, about these Werewolves, Vampires, Demons, and Cyclops described in *Capital Vol. I*? Marx writes "... robs the worker of the conditions most essential to his labour...".¹³³ Workers toil in dark, cramped spaces, confronting their labor, and the tools of their labor not only as alien, but as a monster. *Capital Vol. I* could rightly be read as Marx's declaration that this orientation of the economy is unnatural, and his use of monstrous language in Chapter 15 is one exemplary example. But something else is going on, too. Despite having

¹³³ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I* (Penguin Books, London, UK: 1990) 591.

abandoned essence likely due to his beef with the Saints of the Young Hegelians, he employs it multiple times when discussing machines. Essence is both static and dynamic, it is the process by which an object is realized within its material conditions. The static moment is often the object's relation to nature or how it is constituted by nature, whereas the dynamic moment is how the object changes in its relation to other objects or subjects through history. The machine has a static moment that is related to nature, but its dynamic moment reveals its hideous nature. The essence of the machine is unnatural, it is the exploitation of the laborer through the extraction of the maximum amount of surplus-value. The essence of the machine is surplus-value, it is alienation of the worker. While Marx might elsewhere argue that machines will play a pivotal role in revolution, his statements regarding the machine in *Capital Vol. I* is a set of historical and empirical observations. He does not speak to the potential of the machine, but to the machine as it was.

If for nothing else, this analysis points to an interesting congruence between Marx's early writing and *Capital Vol. I*. It is important, though, on both philosophical and empirical grounds. In the abstract, tracking Marx usage of essence improves our understanding of the relationship of object to subject in Marxist scholarship. It addresses the metaphysical questions we all face: what am I? What constitutes me? Am I essentially different today than I was many years ago? In practical terms, Marx's observation that the essence of the machine is the extraction of the maximum amount of surplus-value has profound impacts on our current capitalist epoch. This is because machines themselves, and the things machines produce, have moved far outside the realm of labor. Our conversation about *Capital Vol. I* only discusses machines in labor. I don't think it would be hyperbolic to claim that nearly every facet of labor and everyday life is constituted by complex machines. From cars to buses, computers and thermostats, we have in

our pockets the type of machine that Marx found so menacing. As technology develops into an automated sphere of self-driving cars and critically thinking AI, it is important to keep Marx materialist analysis in mind. The excitement and fear regarding automation can distract from the very simple question we should always ask: what was this machine made to do? More specifically, *essence* tackles the tension between de Certeau and Adorno identified in the methodological section. This does not prescribe either a liberatory or oppressive view, rather, presents a conceptual framework to study individual everyday activities. Just as I analyzed machines in *Capital Vol. 1*, everyday and ordinary activities can be understood through *essence* to understand their potential in politics. In almost every case under capitalism, that is the production of surplus-value. One of the final scenes of *Blade Runner 2049* devastates me to this day. Officer K, beaten and bruised from his journey, having realized that he was not human born, looks up at a giant, naked hologram of JOI. JOI was essentially a partner one could buy, and had become a legitimate lover to K. The holographic advertisement leans over and says “you look like a good joe”. K realizes that every facet of his life was producing a surplus, it was serving the market, even in his most intimate moments. We all must engage in our own cyberpunk journey to find the truth. This is a horrid and terrifying process, it is to bring our head from underneath the covers and look upon the demon that stalks us, haunts us - torment us.

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