

The Dialectic and Its Undoing: Lukács, Benjamin, and Nietzsche on Capitalist Ideology

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Abstract: This essay investigates the tension between dialectical critique and its undoing in contemporary interpretations of capitalist Ideology. The presentation begins with György Lukács' concept of reification, looking at how capitalist society distorts consciousness and converts human relationships into objectified systems. Furthermore, Walter Benjamin's research reinforces this criticism by highlighting how spectacle and myth contribute to the aestheticization of ideology. Additionally, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulation proposes that Ideology creates an independent system of signs by replacing reality rather than hiding it. Alexander Gungov's notion of real semblance is introduced to articulate how modern subjectivity is constituted by this order of images rather than obscured by it. Finally, Friedrich Nietzsche's perspectivism reinterprets illusion not as distortion, but as a generating horizon for transformative contact with the world. By comparing these thinkers, this study suggests that the collapse of dialectical critique under postmodern conditions does not represent a theoretical defeat, but rather a shift in the ontology of appearance. The tension between critique and semblance, subjectivity and self-overcoming, remains central to any philosophical attempt to grasp ideology in late capitalism.

Keywords: ideology, dialectical critique, late capitalism, reification, spectacle and myth, perspectivism

Introduction

In modern philosophy, the connection between capitalism and Ideology is one of the most important issues. Does capitalism deliberately create myths that influence how we see time, history, and identity, or does it merely obscure truth and mystify the social institutions that control our lives? For thinkers like György Lukács, capitalism is a system of reifica-

tion in which human relations are objectified and presented as immutable economic laws. For Walter Benjamin, capitalism survives not by hiding reality but by producing an alternative one through spectacle and myth. More radically, Friedrich Nietzsche (as interpreted by Vanessa Freerks) challenges the very premise of critique: perhaps there is no hidden truth beneath capitalism's illusions, only a plurality of interpretations competing for dominance. As capitalism evolves into symbolic and speculative forms, this debate becomes urgent: is critique a path to demystification, or is it entangled in the ideological web?

The title *The Dialectic and Its Undoing*, which alludes to two movements, revolves around this tension. In the first place, it shows how capitalism is progressively absorbing and neutralizing dialectical critique, turning revolutionary concepts like spectacle or reification into forms that support structural stability. It also demonstrates Nietzsche's general dislike of dialectics. While Lukács and Benjamin assume that ideology conceals a truth that critique can unmask, Nietzsche (via Freerks) argues that all knowledge is perspectival, lacking any access to final truth. The "undoing" thus refers both to capitalism's ideological adaptability and to Nietzsche's perspectival critique of metaphysical foundations.

To address this problem, we must bring together four key perspectives. First, Lukács presents capitalism as reification: social relations take on the appearance of natural economic facts, alienating individuals from the human basis of life. Second, Benjamin shows how capitalism produces mythologies by substituting history with spectacle. Both thinkers emphasize how capitalism manipulates perception, economically for Lukács and symbolically for Benjamin; thus, for them, the Hegelian dialectic remains a key intellectual tool. Lukács adapts Hegel's logic of contradiction into a Marxist method to reveal reified relations and recover human essence. Benjamin reworks the dialectic through temporality and memory, aiming to interrupt historical continuity via messianic rupture. In both, the dialectic retains a critical telos: unveiling illusion and transforming subjectivity.

Third, contemporary theorists Alexander Gungov and Haralambi Panicidis show how reification and myth converge in post-consumerist capitalism. Capitalism no longer hides its contradictions but aestheticizes them. Gungov's "real semblance" and Panicidis' critique of capitalism's conceptual adaptability show that even critique itself can become a converted form. Fourth, Nietzsche (through Freerks) suggests

that the very distinction between illusion and reality is metaphysical. All critique is interpretation.

Contemporary capitalism eludes comprehensive theoretical explanation. Rather, it operates through dual mechanisms: economic reification (Lukács) and symbolic spectacle (Benjamin). Gungov and Panicidis show how these dynamics converge in post-consumerist capitalism. Nietzsche complicates further the picture by questioning whether critique can ever escape ideology. Modern capitalism combines reification and myth, but Nietzsche forces us to ask whether critique discloses truth or simply re-inscribes illusion.

There are five sections in the essay. The first discusses Lukács' concept of reification. The second looks at Benjamin's view of spectacle and myth. In the third, these views are coupled with the work of Panicidis and Gungov. The fourth part examines Nietzsche's perspectivism as interpreted by Freerks. The last section examines whether critique can transcend ideology or must remain creatively within its parameters. Whether critical thinking can reinforce or weaken illusions is examined in the conclusion.

Lukács: Capitalism as Reification

Commodification is not a local economic problem but the universal structure of capitalist life, affecting law, knowledge, politics, emotion, and even how we see ourselves and others. *In Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat*, Lukács provides a foundational critique of the power of capitalist ideology. He claims that the defining feature of capitalist society is reification which means the transformation of human relations into relations between things. As labor becomes commodified and inserted into an exchange system, social interactions and institutions appear as autonomous, objective structures rather than historically produced human practices. This process, Lukács writes, gives rise to a world where "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a phantom objectivity (the social relation appears not as something shaped by people, but as an autonomous structure, untouchable and unquestioned)."¹ The world of commodities thus mystifies its origins, and individuals see economic laws and institutions not as social constructs but as immutable facts (commodity fetishism).

This condition ultimately leads to alienation. According to Lukács,

¹ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 83.

reification is not merely an illusion, but it structures perception, knowledge, and even legal and bureaucratic systems. Under capitalism, individuals experience society not as a human project but as an external, abstract mechanism. Lukács notes that law becomes a “formal calculus through which the legal consequences of particular actions can be determined as exactly as possible”.² This exemplifies how capitalism devoids social life of meaning, reducing it to quantitative standards divorced from ethical or civic considerations. The individual is cut off from labor and social totality, unable to recognize its historical roots or human mediation.

One key aspect of Lukács’ theory is that reification influences consciousness. The bourgeois subject, split by the division of labor and mediated by abstract categories, is unable to see past appearances. Knowledge becomes fragmented, mirroring the structure of capitalist production: “The formalistic conceptualization of the special sciences becomes for philosophy an immutably given substratum ... and this signals the final and despairing renunciation of every attempt to cast light on the reification that lies at the root of this formalism”.³ Thus, Ideology in Lukács is not merely false consciousness but a structure of perception embedded in everyday life and reinforced by scientific, legal, and administrative norms.

The proletariat can overcome reification since it experiences the totality of capitalist alienation. Moreover, it can move from a passive, reified consciousness to an active, dialectical one, through revolutionary praxis. The transformation involves recognizing that capitalist structures are not natural but contingent and thus changeable. For Lukács, the goal of critique is not simply to interpret ideology but to unmask it and transform it.⁴

The analysis of Lukács finds powerful contemporary extensions in Alexander Gungov’s article “Real Semblance Flourishing in Post-Consumerist Society”. “Real semblance” in the aesthetic tradition is the concept that artistic form can express profound or essential truths, though not literal reality. The appearance resonates with truth, not by imitating the real, but by revealing its essence through the form. In the article, the term “real semblance” no longer refers to a semblance that reveals the truth but to a semblance that appears to be real (yet is an

² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 108.

³ Ibid., 110

⁴ Ibid., 145-9.

even deeper form of illusion). Gungov argues that reification has evolved into a second-order illusion in post-consumerist capitalism, where ideological forms appear autonomous and self-generating. He describes the logic of “converted forms” as a process by which capitalist contradictions are absorbed and aestheticized, producing an illusion of flexibility and renewal even amid structural crises.⁵ Much like Lukács’ analysis of how law and economics become self-legitimizing systems, Gungov shows how post-consumer capitalism creates quasi-objects, ideologically saturated but ontologically hollow forms.

Moreover, Gungov’s concept of “real semblance” underscores the evolution of reification into a spectacular illusion that feeds on contradictions.⁶ For instance, the financialization of capital creates wealth not by producing value but by manipulating appearance, through speculation, futures markets, and symbolic valuation. This corresponds to Lukács’ claim that capitalist society becomes increasingly abstract and irrational, governed not by reason but by a “contemplative stance” that masks its contradictions.⁷ Gungov extends this by showing how even critical categories can be reabsorbed into the system, turning critique into a marketable image.

Haralambi Panacidis also reinforces Lukács’ analysis by emphasizing the dialectical role of reification in the history of capitalism. In “Marx’s Capital: A Philosophy of Capitalist Society”, he maintains that the basic logic underpinning capitalist reproduction is reification, not merely mystification. Reified forms represent how capitalism connects individuals and also the restrictions that hinder them from understanding beyond this relationship.⁸ Thus, reification is structurally necessary; it is the medium through which social life is organized. It is also a form of systemic blindness, enabling capitalism to function while hiding its contradictions.

Panacidis describes also how capitalism, through its inherent structures and dynamics, generates its theoretical frameworks, making previ-

⁵ Alexander Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing in Post-Consumerist Society,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 7, no. 2 (2013), 96-7.

⁶ Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 96, 101.

⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 98-100.

⁸ Haralambi Panacidis, “Marx’s Capital: A Philosophy of Capitalist Society,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 11, no. 1 (2018), 108-110.

ous societal theories less applicable.⁹ This idea is similar to Lukács's in that the bourgeois worldview interprets itself as complete and closed, incapable of recognizing its historicity. Panicedis argues that this closure is not accidental: it is formatted. Capitalist thought evolves to neutralize dialectical reflection and ensure ideological stability and reproduction. This interpretation offers a crucial theoretical bridge to Benjamin, who will argue that capitalism constructs economic illusion and symbolic and historical myth.

Both Gungov and Panicedis extend Lukács' concept of reification into the twenty-first century. Gungov shows how reification operates through illusion and semiotic adaptation, while Panicedis shows how it functions as an epistemological trap, a system that organizes knowledge around false totalities. Their work confirms this essay's view that modern capitalism cannot be understood through economic critique alone but must be seen as a hybrid of structural and symbolic strategies. Lukács provides the economic logic, the transformation of social relations into things, while Gungov and Panicedis demonstrate how that logic mutates into ideological resilience and mythic coherence: "Interest-bearing capital is the consummate *automatic fetish*, the self-expanding value, the moneymaking money, and in this form it no longer bears any trace of its origin. Social relations are consummated as a relationship between things (money, commodities) and themselves: "Mamardashvili calls the converted form of reality, which is different from genuine existence, a "quasi-object" within a certain system. It does not apply only to capitalist production and distribution; it is true for the structure of the sub-conscious and its appearance on the surface, for mythical thinking, and for the way language functions."¹⁰

Lukács offers the foundational theory that capitalism hides reality by presenting historically constructed forms as natural and inevitable. Gungov and Panicedis reveal how this logic now includes converted forms and cognitive normalization, allowing capitalism to survive even as its economic contradictions deepen. In the next section, Benjamin will extend this analysis from economic concealment to symbolic construction, showing how capitalism no longer merely reifies but mythologizes.

Panicedis argues in "Marx's Capital: A Philosophy of Capitalist Society", that capitalism sustains itself through repression by converting

⁹ Panicedis, "Marx's Capital," 21-23.

¹⁰ Gungov, "Real Semblance Flourishing," 99.

social relations into objective forms that appear natural and autonomous; the system internalizes critique, presenting even alienation as a productive dynamic. This supports the view of capitalism as a “self-model structure”, not a term he uses explicitly, but one that captures his analysis of how Ideology evolves from within reified relations.¹¹ Gungov too, warns that critique risks becoming a *converted form*, aestheticized into surface-level dissent (the image of Che Guevara functions as a *real semblance*, as a symbol of revolution widely used on T-shirts, posters, bags and merchandise, stripped of its historical and political content thereby illustrating how dissent is transformed into aestheticized commodity, stripped of subversive content).¹² From a Nietzschean perspective, as we will see later, these analyses highlight the impossibility of escaping interpretation: even disruption is assimilated by the system’s semiotic logic.

Lukács and Althusser on the Formation of Consciousness: From Reification to Ideological Interpellation

Lukács’ theory of reification provides a compelling description of how capitalist structures conceal their origins and fracture consciousness; it also assumes the possibility of a dialectical awakening grounded in historical action. However, structuralist thinkers have strongly contested this vision of revolutionary consciousness, arguing that is based on a humanist understanding of subjectivity. Louis Althusser, for example, takes a quite different approach to the creation of consciousness. Rather than considering ideology as a veil that may be lifted, Althusser sees it as a structural process that constitutes the very person who will struggle to reject it. The following part explores Althusser’s theory of ideological interpellation that functions as a counterpoint to Lukács. It shows how the shift from historical phenomenology to structuralist materialism reframes the question of ideology, subjectivity, and political possibility.

Lukács and Althusser both agree that the formation of consciousness under capitalism is a fundamental issue; however, their methodologies differ significantly. Lukács, writing in the early twentieth century within the Marxist humanist tradition, focuses on the experiential and

¹¹ Panicidis, “Marx’s Capital,” 22.

¹² Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 96–97.

historical dimensions of class consciousness. Althusser, on the other hand, in his structuralist intervention of the late 1960s and early 1970s, focuses on how Ideology functions to reproduce the conditions of production by constituting subjects. Both theorists are concerned with how people absorb capitalist institutions; however, their conceptual frameworks differ dramatically, particularly in how they conceive subjectivity, ideology, and the possibility of revolutionary transformation.

According to Lukács, the idea of reification is essential to comprehending how consciousness is shaped by capitalist society. In “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat”, he argues that in a capitalist mode of production, social relations between people appear as relations between things. He refers to this “phantom objectivity” as obscuring the historical and human roots of social structures. Reification permeates all facets of society, including law, science, and day-to-day existence; it is not just an economic activity. It cultivates an abstracted, fragmented consciousness that is cut off from the entirety of social relationships.

This type of consciousness, as Lukács argues, is historically produced rather than naturally occurring. It results from the commodity form and division of labor, which reduces human work to measurable, exchangeable units. The worker is alienated not only from the outcome of their labor, but also from the social whole and even from their ability for critical reflection. However, Lukács maintains that this condition is not immutable.

The proletariat, by virtue of its position in the production process, has the potential to overcome reification through the development of class consciousness. This consciousness is imputed (*zugerechnet*) in the sense that it represents the standpoint that the proletariat could attain once it apprehends its historical role. According to Lukács, class awareness is dialectical. It is a transformative process that allows the individual to understand all social interactions, not only being conscious of one’s social rank. By organizing and disseminating the class’s underlying historical potential, the political party contributes to facilitating this process. Reification can be broken not through empirical knowledge alone, but through a dialectical awakening that allows the subject to see capitalist social forms as historically contingent and therefore alterable.

Whereas Lukács foregrounds the dialectical consciousness of the proletariat, Althusser approaches the problem from a fundamentally dif-

ferent angle. In his essay “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” (1970), he abandons the phenomenological and historical vocabulary of alienation and consciousness in favor of a structuralist analysis. For Althusser, ideology is not a distorted representation of reality but a material structure that constitutes individuals as subjects. Ideology “interpellates” individuals, hailing them into pre-given social roles and thus ensuring the reproduction of the relations of production.¹³

Whereas Lukács sees consciousness as potentially liberating, Althusser views it as always already structured by ideology. There is no “outside” to ideology in Althusser’s account.¹⁴ Every subject is born into ideological systems that influence and form them. The family, school, church, and media serve as Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs), instilling in people the behaviors and beliefs required to sustain capitalism¹⁵. In this theory, the subject is the result of ideological processes rather than the source of meaning.

This condition has a substantial impact on our understanding of awareness and agency. Althusser is frequently criticized for prioritizing structure over agency. Because subjects are constantly interpellated, the possibility of breaking free from ideology appears limited, if not impossible. However, Althusser does allow for a degree of struggle within the ISAs, suggesting that ideology is a terrain of class conflict.¹⁶ Still, the path to transformation is less clear than in Lukács, where the dialectical process and the role of the party offer a roadmap for revolutionary consciousness.

The differences between Lukács and Althusser thus hinge on their respective views of subjectivity and the role of ideology. For Lukács, the subject has the capacity for self-reflection and historical understanding, even if that capacity is obscured by reification. Consciousness can be elevated through dialectical education and collective praxis. For Althusser, by contrast, the subject is an effect of ideology and lacks an autonomous standpoint from which to critique it. According to this perspective, consciousness is not a place of emancipation but rather a

¹³ Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127–128.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143–145.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146–147.

mechanism of servitude.

There are various examples of convergence in spite of these differences. Both thinkers agree that capitalism conceals its reproduction conditions in a methodical manner. Lukács locates this in the fetishism of commodities and the rationalization of life, while Althusser finds it in the naturalization of ideology. Both also recognize that the task of critique is to reveal the historical and constructed nature of what appears as natural and given.

In contemporary terms, we might say that Lukács is concerned with how capitalism shapes perception and experience, while Althusser focuses on how it shapes identity and subject formation. Lukács gives us tools to think about consciousness as a site of resistance, while Althusser reminds us of the depth and pervasiveness of ideological control. The tension between these views remains productive. It reflects the dual character of ideology: it both distorts and constitutes; it both mystifies and enables.

Understanding this tension is crucial for any attempt to theorize political subjectivity under capitalism. While Lukács provides a picture of historical agency based on dialectical consciousness, Althusser warns us about the structural constraints that such agency must face. Lukács' perspective offers optimism for revolutionary transformation, whilst Althusser's serves as a reminder of how firmly embedded capitalism ideology is in society. In an environment that is reified and ideologically saturated, the two of them offer complementary viewpoints on the development of awareness and the challenges of emancipation.

Walter Benjamin: Capitalism as Myth and Spectacle

Unlike the conventional Marxist emphasis on economic structure, Walter Benjamin's critique of capitalism emphasizes myth, imagery, and symbolic domination. In addition to being an economic system, Benjamin sees capitalism as a religious and creative phenomenon that rewrites reality itself. In his paper "Capitalism as Religion", Benjamin proposes that capitalism is "a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed, one that is not expiatory but guilt-producing and celebrates

no specific weekday, but every day is a feast day.”¹⁷ This means that capitalism does not merely conceal reality, as Lukács argues; it produces a symbolic order that structures desire, guilt, and belief. Importantly, Benjamin leaves no way out from this cultic religion: “even God takes on the entire burden of guilt.”¹⁸ Every gesture—compliance, critique, escape—is still within the system.

As Walter Benjamin claims, capitalism constructs its mythology through the objects, spectacles, and experiences of consumer life. Later theorists such as Alexander Gungov have extended this idea to the post-consumerist era. Money becomes metaphysical, and capitalist culture replaces historical memory with commodified symbols. Benjamin’s essay “Experience and Poverty” highlights how modernity erodes collective memory. In this work, Benjamin laments that traditional, cumulative experience (*Erfahrung*) has been replaced by fleeting, personal impressions (*Erlebnis*), especially in the aftermath of war and the rise of technological modernity. Bora Erdağı emphasizes that this undermines revolutionary consciousness, as politics becomes an affective spectacle rather than a historical struggle.¹⁹ Fashion, for example, exemplifies this dream logic, appropriating fragments of the past as empty forms rather than historical memory: “Fashion prescribes the ritual according to which the commodity fetish demands to be worshiped.”²⁰

Benjamin’s “dreamworld”—where fashion, commodity, and spectacle recycle the past in mythic form—finds a contemporary echo in Gungov’s theory of *real semblance*, where ideological forms gain autonomy through self-referential image cycles. Also, Gungov’s post-consumerist surfaces no longer refer to hidden structures but reproduce meaning through circulation itself.²¹

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 288–291.

¹⁸ Benjamin, “Experience and Poverty,” 298–291.

¹⁹ Bora Erdağı, “Walter Benjamin and Political Philosophy,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 7, no. 2 (2013), 40–42.

²⁰ Elisabeth Genter-Montevocchio and Kendall DeBoer, “Introduction/ Issue 35: Accessing/Assessing Fashion,” *InVisible Culture*, May 2, 2023, <https://www.invisibleculturejournal.com/pub/introduction-issue-35-accessing-assessing-fashion/release/2> (accessed July 25, 2025).

²¹ Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 19.

In “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, Benjamin critiques the bourgeois myth of progress by urging the historical materialist to “brush history against the grain” and seize messianic time in moments of danger.²² In contrast, the spectacle and its ideological adaptations function to preserve systemic legitimacy.²³ However, as Freerks’ reading of Nietzsche suggests, it remains open to question whether Benjamin’s redemptive hopes fully escape the grip of myth.

Benjamin demonstrates how capitalism persists through repression and charm by utilizing spectacle and desire to create reality, thereby shifting the critique from demystification to symbolic interpretation. By revealing capitalism’s mythopoetic function—not only to conceal reality but to create it—his work broadens Lukács’s focus on economic alienation.

Walter Benjamin and the Aesthetic Construction of Ideology. From reification to Ideology

While Benjamin’s critique of capitalism as a mythic structure reveals how history, ritual, and religion are absorbed into the logic of commodity fetishism, his analysis of the image and the aesthetic dimension of modern life opens an entirely new pathway for understanding ideology. In his famous essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, Benjamin argues that the technological reproduction of images alters not only the status of art but the conditions under which consciousness engages with the world. The loss of the “aura”—the unique presence of the work of art in time and space—signals the entry of aesthetic forms into the realm of mass culture and mechanical reproducibility. Ideology, in this context, is no longer primarily a system of ideas or doctrines, but a structure of perception and affect shaped by images, repetition, and spectacle.

Where Lukács emphasizes the objectification of human relations through the commodity form, and Althusser highlights the material reproduction of ideology through institutions, Benjamin directs our attention to the visual and sensory apparatuses of modern capitalism. According to Benjamin, consciousness is no longer only distorted by abstract

²² Richard Kearney, ed., *The Continental Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 212.

²³ Panichidis, “Marx’s Capital,” Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,”

structures or interpellated by ideological institutions; rather, it is captured and finally changed by the spectacular presentation of reality. The subject becomes a spectator, and social reality is presented as a managed and aestheticized set of representations.

This development anticipates Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, but even more profoundly, it aligns with Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulacra and simulation. For Baudrillard, the real is no longer concealed or distorted by ideology—it is replaced. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard describes a condition where signs no longer refer to any objective referent but only to other signs, forming a closed circuit of meaning that is indifferent to reality. The commodity becomes pure appearance: a logo, a mood, a lifestyle.²⁴ This resonates deeply with Benjamin's insight that capitalism aestheticizes itself to such a degree that the boundary between real and representation collapses.

In this light, Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics takes on urgent significance. He warned that fascism gives the masses the illusion of participation while preserving the existing structures of power, by aestheticizing political life through rallies, uniforms, and symbols. In late capitalism, this aestheticization persists in a more diffuse and commercialized form. Politics is packaged as media content; protest becomes a brand; resistance is aestheticized into imagery devoid of subversive substance. The ideological function of spectacle is not merely to deceive, but to absorb dissent into a structure of images that both captivate and neutralize.

Synthesis: Lukács and Benjamin on Capitalism's Dual Logic

While Lukács and Benjamin approach capitalism from different vantage points—economic alienation in the case of Lukács, and symbolic myth-making in the case of Benjamin—their critiques are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are complementary viewpoints that, when taken as a whole, offer a more thorough understanding of how contemporary capitalism operates. Social interactions are reified in capitalist society by being presented as unchangeable, natural, and objective. Also, Benjamin reveals how capitalism creates mythic realities that stifle critical memory and mold historical experience.

²⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. By Sheila Faria Glaser. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6–7.

A strong framework for comprehending how capitalism masks the social nature of economic connections is provided by Lukács' reification theory. Lukács illustrates how economic, legal, and administrative institutions appear to be independent entities, supporting the idea that capitalist relationships are unchangeable and essential. This makes critique difficult because reification affects not just social structures but the very consciousness of the subject. However, Lukács assumes that beneath the surface of reified appearances lies a reality to be recovered: the historical truth of class struggle and social construction. Thus, his critique depends on a dialectical model in which illusion can be unmasked and overturned. For Benjamin, capitalism does not merely obscure history; it manufactures it. The production of myth, spectacle, and aestheticized politics makes capitalism not a system of deception but a total symbolic regime.

Benjamin shows how capitalism eliminates resistance by transforming everything into a commodity and an image. He further demonstrates how spectacle reproduces belief in the system through enchantment, whereas Lukács stresses economic estrangement. Together, these observations demonstrate how capitalism dominates symbolic imagination and material structure. Panichidis and Gungov support this synthesis. Panichidis demonstrates how capitalism changes to maintain ideological control by incorporating critique, while Gungov's "real semblance" emphasizes how capitalism aestheticizes conflict into marketable forms. Both academics agree that modern capitalism is fueled by hybridity, being both symbolically mythologized and materially reified.

The dual logic of alienation and enchantment explains the resilience of capitalist ideology. Capitalism renders its domination natural (Lukács) and desirable (Benjamin). If Lukács and Benjamin offer dialectical critiques of structure and spectacle, Gungov and Panichidis show how these strategies collapse into one another in post-consumerist capitalism. Lukács' and Benjamin's insights form a bridge to Nietzsche's perspectivism: the distinction between critique and commodity becomes increasingly blurred as the system develops, raising the question of whether even our most radical analyses are themselves part of capitalism's interpretive machinery.

Benjamin's critique of spectacle as a modern myth leads us to reconsider how ideological images no longer merely obscure reality but come to replace it. At this point, Alexander Gungov's theory of *semblance* offers a decisive deepening of this problem. In his analysis of post-

consumerist society, Gungov argues that contemporary ideology does not function by concealment, as in classical Marxism, but by the production of an autonomous order of images that are experienced as reality itself. *Semblance*, in this context, is not a false shell hiding the truth; it is a generative structure that constitutes our very experience of the world. Ideology is no longer a veil—it is the fabric of our phenomenological encounter with reality. As Gungov writes, “semblance flourishes where the distinction between appearance and essence collapses, and the subject lives within the glow of its own projections”.²⁵ This diagnosis finds a striking parallel in Jean Baudrillard’s theory of simulation. In *Simulacra and Simulation*, Baudrillard contends that we have entered a phase where signs no longer refer to any external referent but instead circulate in a closed system of self-reference. As he puts it, “it is the map that precedes the territory”, and what we experience is “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.”²⁶ The commodity becomes a pure signifier—its value no longer tied to utility or labor, but to symbolic codes, mood, and lifestyle. Ideology thus shifts from a structure of distortion to one of production, aligning closely with Gungov’s notion of semblance as an ontological condition. Both thinkers reveal how capitalist logic no longer hides reality—it generates a substitute so pervasive that it becomes indistinguishable from reality itself. This shift prepares the ground for Nietzsche’s radical rethinking of illusion, not as a distortion to be unmasked, but as a horizon for creative transformation.

Nietzsche’s Challenge via Freerks: Is There Any Reality to Uncover?

While Lukács and Benjamin offer powerful tools for analyzing capitalism, Lukács through the lens of economic reification and Benjamin through myth and spectacle, Nietzsche, as interpreted by Vanessa Freerks, disrupts the very grounds on which their critiques rest. In “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum”, Freerks outlines how Nietzsche does not merely critique ideology but questions whether there is any “truth” beyond illusion. His perspectivism reverses the Platonic metaphysical structure that presumes a hidden, more real world behind appearances. Thus, Nietzsche challenges the idea that

²⁵ Gungov, “Real Semblance Flourishing,” 96-97.

²⁶ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, 1-2.

capitalism hides or constructs myths about reality. Instead, he suggests that “reality” may be an interpretative fiction, no more true than the illusions it claims to expose.

Freerks draws on Deleuze’s reading of Nietzsche to argue that Nietzsche’s philosophy undermines the Platonic opposition between the real and the apparent. The simulacrum, what Nietzsche calls “the mask” is not a false copy of a more authentic original but rather something that exposes the absence of any original. Nietzsche’s reversal of Platonism, Freerks explains, undermines the distinction between the original and the copy by challenging the hierarchy of truth and appearance.²⁷

All truth claims, including those found in Marxist or critical theory, are shown as interpretive acts rather than factual revelations under this paradigm. This perspective significantly influenced Lukács and Benjamin. Lukács argues that capitalism reifies human beings by transforming social relations into objectified economic categories that appear natural and timeless. He asserts that capitalism reifies human relations by transforming them into objectified economic categories that appear natural and eternal. According to Lukács, the crucial goal is to break through this delusion and expose the social and historical processes that underlie it. According to Freerks, Nietzsche’s reversal of Platonism undermines any claim to a “truer” underlying structure underneath appearances. The concept of reification, which implies a warped social relation, assumes that a more real relation formerly existed. However, Nietzsche sees this as a metaphysical assumption based on Platonic thought rather than an ontological truth. Moreover, as Gungov puts it: “A simulacrum is not simply a false ideology that can easily be criticized, unmasked, and abolished forever. [...] We live comfortably in a world organized by several prevailing codes, usually not suspecting this and being content with what we have available at hand.”²⁸

A similar destabilization occurs concerning Benjamin’s view. Benjamin sees capitalism not merely as a system of exploitation but as a quasi-religious structure that survives through myth and spectacle. Benjamin describes capitalism as a cultic structure with no redemption (capitalism as religion), producing mythologies that mold historical consciousness. However, as Freerks notes, Nietzsche would challenge the

²⁷ Vanessa Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism and the Simulacrum,” *Sofia Philosophical Review* 12, no. 2 (2019), 35-38.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

presumption that these myths are “false” in contrast to a “true” historical account. For Nietzsche, all histories are mythologies; even critical histories, such as those proposed by historical materialism, are forms of ideological storytelling that mask their perspectival character. As Freerks argues, Nietzsche’s critique ultimately turns back on the critique itself, revealing how even the will to unmask ideological illusion relies on hidden metaphysical assumptions about truth and representation.²⁹ In this light, Nietzsche’s perspectivism complicates the frameworks provided by both Lukács and Benjamin, not by refuting them empirically but by undercutting their metaphysical presuppositions. Freerks explains that for Nietzsche, the production of truth is an illusory process rooted in language and forgetting. “Truths”, Nietzsche claims, “are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions.” Freerks connects this to a broader claim that knowledge is performative, a fiction that conceals its fictionality.³⁰ Where Lukács calls for a return to social totality, and Benjamin hopes for revolutionary interruption, Nietzsche remains skeptical of all such appeals to epistemic or ethical foundations.

This kind of skepticism is not nihilistic in the conventional sense. Nietzsche does not deny the validity of critique; however, he challenges its authority. For the German philosopher, critique is a creative interpretation rather than a means of determining the truth. According to Freerks, this elevates critique into the realm of art rather than science: “The simulacrum, in Nietzsche’s hands, becomes a productive force; it multiplies perspectives rather than unifying them under a single truth.”³¹ Thus, the purpose is not to disclose capitalism’s inner nature, but to interact critically and imaginatively with its various surfaces.

Nietzsche would argue that even such adaptive theoretical strategies remain embedded within specific interpretive horizons. Nevertheless, the syntheses proposed by Gungov and Panicidis—Gungov through his notion of capitalism’s “converted forms” and Panicidis through capitalism’s capacity to reabsorb critique—enrich the dialectical frameworks of Lukács and Benjamin by showing how ideology evolves under post-consumerist conditions. In other words, what we call “crisis”, “adaptation”, or even “capitalism” are all already framed by historically and philosophically contingent worldviews. As Freerks makes clear,

²⁹ Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism,” 54-60.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 38-40.

³¹ Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism,” 54-63.

Nietzsche does not ask whether capitalism hides the truth but whether the category of “truth” itself is an ideological construct.³² Nietzsche would view “capitalism”, “crisis”, and “adaptation” as historically conditioned interpretations rather than as neutral terms. According to him, capitalism is a regime of meaning triggered by the will to power rather than a system that conceals reality. Crisis is a narrative imposed on change, rather than an objective break. Capitalism uses adaptation to present disruption as continuity. In the end, Nietzsche challenges the notion that the “truth” underlying ideology is an intellectual creation in and of itself.

Nietzsche’s perspectivism, as developed by Freerks, represents a radical challenge to the frameworks of both Lukács and Benjamin. While Lukács sees ideology as concealing reality and Benjamin sees capitalism as fabricating myths, Nietzsche sees both moves as predicated on a deeper metaphysical illusion: the belief that something “behind” ideology is waiting to be revealed. Against this, Nietzsche proposes a model of critical engagement rooted not in unveiling but in the transformation of thought, values, and interpretation. This is not a retreat from critique but a reorientation of its aims. As Freerks puts it, “Nietzsche does not seek to unmask ideology to reveal truth; he seeks to transform the will to truth itself”.³³ Thus, he forces us to reconsider critique in an age where capitalism may no longer need to deceive because all that remains is the spectacle and its endless interpretations.

Nietzsche’s impact on this interpretation of ideology is critical. In *On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense*, Nietzsche claims that truth is “a mobile army of metaphors”, implying that what we consider to be stable meaning is a historically situational network of signs. His critique of metaphysics and his emphasis on interpretation anticipate the collapse of referentiality in Baudrillard and the symbolic economy of the spectacle in Benjamin. Additionally, the Nietzschean concept of the will to power, the drive not just to live but also to generate meaning, is represented in the development of ideological forms that impose a worldview through aesthetic seduction.

In the convergence of Benjamin, Baudrillard, and Nietzsche, ideology emerges not as a false set of beliefs or a material system of reproduction, but as an immersive environment of signs, images, and affects.

³² Ibid., 54–65.

³³ Freerks, “Nietzsche’s Reversal of Platonism,” 54–67.

The subject does not merely believe ideology—it lives inside it, consumes it, performs it. This marks a shift from the “veil” metaphor of ideology (as something to be lifted or pierced) to the idea of ideology as simulation: a world so saturated with representation that the very distinction between truth and illusion becomes meaningless.

Thus, while Lukács identifies the roots of ideological mystification in the commodity-form and reification, and Althusser explains its reproduction through structural apparatuses, Benjamin—especially when extended through Baudrillard and Nietzsche—reveals how ideology functions today through aestheticization, spectacular mediation, and semiotic proliferation. The formation of consciousness under capitalism is no longer a matter of misrecognition alone, but of desire, fascination, and immersion in appearances.

Conclusion

Between Reification, Myth, and Interpretation: The Limits of Critique

This essay has explored the multifaceted nature of modern capitalism through the intersecting lenses of economic reification (Lukács), mythological spectacle (Benjamin), and perspectival interpretation (Nietzsche, via Freerks). Each philosopher presents a different but related perspective on how capitalism continues to control not just material production but also subjectivity, meaning, and memory.

György Lukács demonstrates that capitalism alienates individuals by turning social relations into autonomous, object-like structures. Because of the reification mechanism, economic rules, bureaucratic procedures, and legal conventions look neutral and unavoidable. The strength of Lukács’ theory stems from its clarity: capitalism conceals reality by naturalizing the historical. However, Lukács also believes that underneath these illusions is a recoverable truth, a historical completeness that analysis can reveal.

Walter Benjamin, in contrast, suggests that capitalism does not merely distort or hide reality; it produces symbolic worlds. In its post-religious form, capitalism survives by manufacturing desires, memories, and mythologies. Through repetition, commodification, and the destruction of aura, experience becomes fragmented, historical consciousness is displaced, and critique itself risks becoming part of the spectacle. Ben-

jamin's brilliance lies in showing that capitalism sustains itself through enchantment as much as through repression.

Gungov's and Panicidis' arguments enrich this analysis by showing how capitalism absorbs critique through ideological flexibility. Gungov's "converted forms" and "real semblance" illustrate how capitalism reanimates even its contradictions as surfaces of coherence. Panicidis focuses on how capitalism reframes its conceptual categories to maintain structural legitimacy. Both show that capitalism's dual structure, as both an intellectual illusion and a reified material order, strengthens it from within.

Nietzsche, as interpreted by Vanessa Freerks, introduces a rupture. He accepts critique but challenges its metaphysical assumptions. If there is no underlying truth to uncover, if all knowledge is perspectival, then even Lukács' and Benjamin's frameworks must be seen as interpretive constructs. Nietzsche reframes critique not as an unveiling but as value creation. What we call ideology, reality, or myth are all competing simulations without an original. This raises a profound and unresolved question: Can capitalism ever be "unmasked", or are we always interpreting from within its field of illusions? In other words, is ideology a veil to be lifted (as in Lukács)? Is it a myth to be ruptured (as in Benjamin)? Or is it a world of masks with no underlying face (as in Nietzsche)?

The present essay has argued that modern capitalism cannot be understood through a single critical lens. It functions simultaneously as a system of economic alienation and symbolic myth-making. Reification and spectacle are not opposing logic but are complementary mechanisms of control. Lukács and Benjamin offer tools to analyze these dual strategies, while Gungov and Panicidis show how these strategies are fused in a post-consumerist society. However, Nietzsche forces us to consider whether all critique, even of illusion, is itself illusory.

This, then, is the lesson of Freerks' Nietzsche: not to abandon critique but to practice it as an act of creation, not revelation - to confront capitalism not with the certainty of truth but with the force of interpretive courage. Such a stance does not resolve ideology's contradictions, but it may allow us to live and think differently within them.