

THE HIDDEN GOD OF FULFILMENT

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The deculturation of religion occurs when culture becomes separated from or substitutes religious norms, religious practice and the concept of salvation (Roy).

More often than not, aesthetic forms are left behind that are subsequently exploited to the ends of entertainment, marketing and identity production. However, it is not religion as such that is decultured, but rather the notion of religious practice as defined by convention. By merely attempting to negate metaphysics, efforts to enlighten have attained very little. Ultimately, it seems that the principle of capitalism is parasitically dependent on Christianity. In order to comprehend capitalism as religion, it is helpful to remember that paganism in its original form did not define religion as a higher, but rather as an immediate, practical concern – just as much as capitalism today is unconscious of its transcendental nature (Benjamin). The god of capitalism, according to Benjamin, must be kept secret until indebtedness reaches its zenith. Why?

And who is this god? Does this god manifest its presence as a value, as a currency or as capital? Does it operate as a fetishistic principle, which, although having been abolished in the form of a transcendental god, has now truly come into its own as a result of capitalism's intrinsic effects on society? The dominion of this immanent god is in our midst and within us. Its rituals are incessant cultic worship and debt. Redemption is not the aim, and reformation no alternative either. And yet, capitalism, hoping for world-immanent happiness, in practice becomes transcendental again precisely through this hope. The general awareness of the presence of this god, characterised by the miracle of added value and the revelation of irredeemable debt will become one with total ruin. Until that occurs, all will be postponed pending discontinuous increments and their ultimately exploding effect (Benjamin). The image of perpetual human self-aggrandisement, the legendary forging of one's own fortune culminates in the figure of the *Übermensch*, the one who streaked through the heavens – historical man. Yet there, in the cosmos of self-fulfilment, he finds neither the happiness promised to him, nor any god whatsoever – nor even his own self.

When Aristide Boucicaut became an associate of the Parisian department store Le Bon Marché in 1852, it was still but a small establishment. Only twenty years later, the pioneering retailer had managed to expand it into the largest department store in the world – a veritable “cathedral of commerce”, according to Emile Zola. Key features of such department stores are their dazzling, temple-like buildings, imposing facades, halls and architectural features, large foyers, lavish lighting, shrine-like interiors and magical sound and water installations.

These wish-fulfilment apparatuses or structures can be seen to take over urban centres and social life, in general, in the same manner as sacred buildings formerly did – thus becoming veritable landmarks. In line with the satisfaction of needs constantly fed by consumerism, they lay exhaustive claim to the time and insatiable desires of their clientele. They are the most visible shrines of a universal cult that takes shape in the delirium of consumerism. Inconsiderate in their greed, the masses naturally crowd together to redeem their sacrifice (Zola). In these establishments, fountains – which are often found in the centre of shopping malls – act like sacred foamy or frothed-up allegories of paradise: a river flows out of Eden to water the garden (Genesis 2, 10).

Bertram Haude's video *THE HIDDEN GOD OF FULFILMENT* shows a viewpoint that falls from the middle of the glass dome in the atrium of a department store vertically down to the fountain below – a "divine" perspective unattainable for visitors and staff. In short sequences, the camera angle shows the fountain that can be admired every hour – a curative spring akin to an oracle. This mystery or miracle play is rounded off with a soundscape, both dramatic and kitsch. Capitalism is the celebration of the cult *sans (t)rêve et sans merci* (without truce/dream or grace). It knows no weekday, no day that would not be a holiday in the fearful sense of exhibiting all its sacral pomp – the extreme exertion of worship, as Walter Benjamin wrote in his unfinished fragment "Capitalism as Religion" from 1921. Inscribed into the architecture of the department store is this genre of religious cult that can only justifiably be understood as capitalism. Its inculturation takes place as a religious norm.

Bertram Haude, 2012

Walter Benjamin, *Kapitalismus als Religion*, 1921, in: *Gesammelte Schriften*, 1985
(*Capitalism as Religion*, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 1, ed. M.W. Jennings, 2004)

Olivier Roy, *La Sainte Ignorance*, 2008
(*Holy Ignorance. When Religion and Culture Part Ways*, trans. R. Schwartz, 2010)

Jörg Ulrich, *Gott in Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2005
(*God in the Company of Society*, no English translation currently available)

Emile Zola, *Au bonheur des dames*, 1883
(*The Ladies' Paradise*, trans. B. Nelson, 1995)

