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Cultural and Aesthetic Agency at the Intersection of Art and Economics

Robert Edward Gordon

College of Fine Arts, University of Arizona, Tucson AZ 85719, USA

ABSTRACT

An important element in understanding human life and history is how market forces and economic development relate to the creation and distribution of the significant artifacts of culture. The relationship between art and economics is important because commercial activity is a primary means by which humans sustain life amid the vicissitudes and dangers of the natural world. Understanding art and economics together sheds light on humanity's need to establish norms of behavior, formulate rituals of cultural importance, and create institutions that help us work together in order to survive. This essay examines the relationship between economic life and cultural works found in both present-day and historical contexts. It investigates the extent to which aesthetic decisions are at the heart of economic life. Drawing upon Austrian-school economic thought, this article argues that the subjectivity of human agency is the connective idea linking the two spheres of human activity. In contemporary life, it has become clear that creativity is just as essential in business as it is in art. Historically, the artistic goal of creating beauty has had significant economic and commercial implications. Philosophically, concepts such as value and choice can have economic, aesthetic, and moral connotations. This article explores this network of economy, creativity, commerce, aesthetics, and morality with respect to some important artifacts from the art historical record.

Keywords: Art; Economics; Spirituality; Agency

*CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Robert Edward Gordon, College of Fine Arts, University of Arizona, Tucson AZ 85719, USA; Email: regordo1@arizona.edu

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1. Introduction

This article explores the intersection between economic life and artifacts of culture. It stems from a broader interdisciplinary desire to understand the practical aspects of the arts and humanities. In many ways, this inquiry is an offshoot of the well-known "crisis of the humanities," which raises questions about the field's real-world practicality due to declining funding, shrinking enrollments, waning prestige, and limited career prospects [1,2]. Philosophically, the issue is akin to John Dewey's observation in *Art as Experience* of a separation between the institutional art world (museums and galleries) and daily life, and his goal of "recovering the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" [3] (p. 10).

The separation Dewey observed at the time in some ways still exists today. Indeed, for many in the so-called "real world" the arts and humanities do seem to be a purely academic concern disconnected from everyday life: Rembrandts may be nice and Socrates may be interesting, but such cultural concerns do not appear to practically relate to one's life and well-being (employment stability, financial concerns, professional achievement, child rearing, and medical conditions). Moreover, the exorbitant cost associated with contemporary art—whose challenging aesthetic experience and opaque artistic goals are often lost on the common viewer—adds to the art world's apparent inaccessibility and distance from the "normal processes of living." Michael Cattelan's recent "artwork" of a banana duct taped to a wall (entitled *Comedian*, 2019) that sold for over six million dollars exemplifies the point [4].

Yet, Dewey's ambition to bridge the gap between the two domains continues to be worthwhile for the same reason he points to: any perceived disconnect "deeply affects the practice of living, driving away esthetic perceptions that are necessary ingredients of happiness, or reducing them to the level of compensating transient pleasurable excitations" [3] (p. 10). So like Dewey, this essay maintains that there is no fixed separation between aesthetic experience and daily living. I explore the intersection between art and economics to help demonstrate why this is the case. For we live our everyday lives in a market economy, with all of its benefits and drawbacks. Our jobs, food, clothes, housing, and other aspects of life are all tied to economic conditions in one way or another. And so, it is plausible to think that reflecting on art and culture in relation to economic thought will give us insight into what aesthetic decisions have to do with practical living.

Some economists believe there is an intuitive connection between culture and economic life [5]. However, less understood is how art, as a nearly synonymous subset of culture, relates to the experiences and meanings we attach to our economic judgments. My position is that aesthetic considerations, like those most acutely found in art, play a substantive role in our personal (micro) economic decisions, and therefore impact macroeconomic activity as well. I utilize both artistic examples and observations from my experience in the commercial art world to help unpack the cultural aspects of this aesthetic role. In addition, I investigate what economic ideas can contribute to our understanding of aesthetic experience. Focusing on Austrian-school economic thought, my argument here adheres to a fundamental humanistic proposition at work in daily life: that economic and aesthetic experience are meaningfully interconnected as a function of one's inner agentic, and even spiritual, drives.

Also like Dewey, I choose not to focus on the "alchemy" of the art market, as James Panero [6] frames it, or how socio-economic conditions shape aesthetic and cultural judgements, as Pierre Bourdieu [7] argues. Neither do I explore how commercial success can raise an artist's socio-economic circumstances, how many artists problematize certain economic models through their work, or how art's aesthetic impact can alter the economic character of a neighborhood (e.g., Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project in Detroit). Rather, I address the topic from a humanistic disposition that privileges the importance of human agency in both economic and aesthetic judgments. Such a perspective presupposes art's qualitative relationship to the everyday world as it frames the positivist sensibilities of economic discourse within the ambient sphere of artistic invention.

2. Methodology

The "intersection" of art and economics, as I have framed the discussion, brings together a number of interconnected academic disciplines. The topic not only includes art history and political economy, but also ideas

from philosophy, anthropology, and even religion. Consequently, I employ an interdisciplinary methodology to engage my arguments from multiple perspectives. Such a diverse range of fields and the inherently broad humanistic scale of the subject matter make it necessary to be selective in the use of supportive examples and references. "Humanistic" here refers adjectivally to the field of the humanities, as distinct from the sciences and their methods, as well as anthropologically—our distinctly human ability to construct symbols and meanings of cultural significance [8]. Yet importantly, while today the "dismal science" of economics relies heavily on mathematical models, I am not suggesting such methods are somehow *un*-humanistic. Renaissance humanism, for instance, helped lay the groundwork for modern science via its focus on rationality and critical inquiry [9], where the visual arts provided a potent aesthetic role.

With respect to the interdisciplinary intersection between political economy and cultural output, from anthropology, we find that art is a major element in the earliest records of human prehistoric activity. We learn that trade ("exchange networks") among humans, which included aesthetic objects like adornments, has existed from at least the Upper Paleolithic [10]. In fact, the art historical and anthropological records confirm that economic conditions play a direct—and perhaps even causal—role in the artistic output of a culture [11]. The *Stele of Hammurabi* (18th century BCE) is a particularly important cultural artifact in that respect. The aesthetic and religious monument includes a carved relief of the Babylonian ruler accepting a law code of 282 decrees from a god, many of which deal with economic activity. Decree 102 states, "If a merchant entrusts money to an agent (broker) for some investment, and the broker suffers a loss in the place to which he goes, he shall make good the capital to the merchant" [12]. The modern economic and commercial concepts expressed in the artistic decree, as well as its sacral underpinnings, reinforce the interdisciplinary scope of this discussion [13].

3. Austrian-School Economics

Engagement with art and culture has a long history within economic thought [14]. The influential Austrian-school economist Ludwig von Mises believed that economic knowledge is a vital component in the organization and achievements of human civilization as a whole, whether ancient or modern-industrial, moral, intellectual, or techno-scientific. Humankind's refusal to utilize economic knowledge, according to Mises, "will stamp out society and the human race" [15] (p. 881). While perhaps overstated and fatalistic, he draws stark attention to the social centrality and humanistic aspects of economic life.

Art is found in our homes and in virtually all of our commercial and institutional environments that maintain and sustain our daily lives. Paintings, sculptures, and music are present in hotels, office spaces, health care facilities, retail establishments, airports, apartment complexes, educational institutions, religious structures, and government buildings. The architecture of many of these buildings itself falls within the fine art tradition. In short, aesthetic artifacts with cultural meaning can be found anywhere humans either reside or visit, from the deepest caves to the lunar surface. So how can there really be a separation between daily life and aesthetic judgments? The answer is that they blend together—a fact that Theodor Adorno and Jacques Rancière also notice and address in their own particular ways [16,17].

The field of social science says something quite comparable from the economic perspective. The Nobel awarding-winning experimental economist Vernon Smith, drawing upon Austrian-school economist F.A. Hayek and Adam Smith, asserts that we live in two "humanomic" worlds or "rule systems" in everyday life: a personal one of social relations and an impersonal one of economic activity. Smith and co-author Bart Wilson argue that these worlds synthesize in daily economic settings: human beings integrate socio-personal sympathies and sentiments with detached mathematical judgments of maximum utility during market transactions [18].

In my view, this blended human-centered approach to economic life is instinctive, since purely scientific analyses only make sense when compared against the circumstantial or personal experiences of life. Austrian-school economic thought eschews a purely mathematical approach to the subject, instead foregrounding the subjective, purposive, action-oriented forces of individual preferences (praxeology) [19]. While not completely dismissing the role of statistical data, subject-oriented economic thinkers believe

that financial decisions are more so governed by values and choices; that subjective or emotional valuations often guide what we spend our money on in a given market. This "subjective value theory" does not deny the collective context of commercial society, but asserts that economic value "is deduced from its utility for the final consumer, directly in the case of consumption goods and indirectly in the case of production goods" [20] (p. 281).

Situating economic discourses within the framework of su`bjectivity in human preferences bears a natural affinity with aesthetic experience and artistic activity. Yet, philosophers of art are careful to distinguish between various types of value in addition to subjective value: artistic, aesthetic, cognitive, exchange, and use or utility; and that these various axiological categories compete and do not always "align neatly" with each other [21] (p. 165). Moreover, formal economists have not delved into the experiential relationship between economic and artistic judgments. Yet, Austrian economists like Robert P. Murphy use phrases like "value is in the eye of the beholder" when explaining subjective-value theory [22], hinting that they are aware of the economic and aesthetic relationships I explore in this article.

4. The Aesthetics of Daily Life

My professional experience in the commercial art world agrees with the Austrian perspective. While working in art galleries, I acquired a tangible sense of what people tend to find in visual art that compels them to actually spend money to obtain it. I learned that people want to be connected to high-value and beautiful things. I found that art's intrinsic preciousness and social value—much like a piece of jewelry, high fashion, or a new car—can have an irresistible attraction. In dealing with clients, it became clear to me that beautiful things can make someone feel beautiful; that valuable things can make people feel valuable. In the process, their identities and daily lives become purposefully intertwined with society and the economic values it espouses. We see this socio-economic value association take place in fashion most intimately, in my opinion, as when low-income people pay high prices to wear the trendy clothes. This subjective connection can be so meaningful that the agentic drive to purchase such items often borders on the urgency of necessity. Evidence of this can be seen at the major auction houses (Sotheby's, Christie's, and Phillips), where collectors anxiously spend thousands, even millions, of dollars to collect historical paintings or the most in-vogue or challenging works of contemporary art (like a banana taped to a wall).

What is behind this purposive and animated desire to own things of value? In my view, aesthetic considerations lie behind a great many of our economic decisions. Upon reflection, it turns out to be quite difficult to remove aesthetic value from what motivates our various commercial choices. It seems to me that when people consider their economic circumstances, they often conjure a *vision* of themselves in the world humans have created, an aesthetic vision. People pour themselves into what they like or want when making economic decisions. They see themselves with a certain item or in a certain situation and attach a great deal of personal and social weight to that image. An anecdote from Roger Fry, an associate of the famous British economist John Maynard Keyes and the Bloomsbury Group artist collective [23], helps illustrate this contention:

> I once knew an old gentleman who had retired from his city office to a country house—a fussy, feeble little being who had cut no great figure in life. He had built himself a house which was preternaturally hideous; his taste was deplorable and his manners indifferent, but he had a dream, the dream of himself as an exquisite and refined intellectual dandy living in a society of elegant frivolity. To realise this dream, he had spent large sums in buying up every scrap of eighteenth-century French furniture which he could lay his hands on. These he stored in an immense upper floor in his house, which was always locked except when he went up to indulge in his dream and to become for a time a courtier at Versailles, doing homage to the du Barry. For this old gentleman, as for many an American millionaire, art was merely a help to an imagined dream life [24] (p. 1).

The term "aesthetic" derives from the ancient Greek *aisthētikós*, "pertaining to sense perception." Today, aesthetics is the philosophical study of beauty and art; it takes the value of what we experience in the world as a serious academic matter. In the aesthetics of daily life, we gen-

erally want to live in attractive environments (a home or neighborhood), since we tend to feel unsafe or disconsolate if our surroundings are dilapidated. We generally prefer to wear clothes that look good or are fashionable, and feel embarrassed or bad about ourselves if our personal hygiene is unclean or unkempt. Our appearance and homes are profound monikers of our private and public identities. They tell others and ourselves something significant about who we are, where we came from, and what we might believe. Certainly, utilitarian objects and devices must function properly, but we even take their aesthetic qualities into account when selecting them. Old and dirty ones are less desirable than new and sleeker ones. The same applies to the foods we choose to eat for survival: we reject produce or products that appear damaged, soiled, or outdated, perceiving them as dangerous or objectionable.

We bring these basic human sensory powers to bear when beholding an artwork, just as artists and patrons are aware of these aesthetic sensibilities when fashioning and commissioning works of art. This is because art's main function is communicative. It is created explicitly or implicitly to convince or even compel someone to feel, think, or believe something. This is true even with contemporary art and installations, which often use scale and unusual objects to shock viewers out of conventional norms or urge them to feel the ideas they are constructed to convey [25]. Moreover, since most actions are predicated on some feeling, thought, or belief, ultimately the arts engage the human intellect in terms of both knowledge and morality. It is not surprising, then, that artworks are among the most valuable things we seek to possess. They are snapshots of moral, economic, and aesthetic value that—through their symbolic and metaphoric powers—imbue their owners with social rank and personal worth.

Still, in my analysis, the elevating and spiritual effect of beautiful or high-value things is at the heart of the matter. Expensive and valuable things help us see ourselves in an uplifting way. Their cultural effect is to align one with money and success, with a higher state of being. Thorstein Veblens's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) is an important interdisciplinary work that combines economics, anthropology, and sociology. He argued that for people who want to be seen as figures of taste and society, fashionableness and reputation are more important than usefulness in the commercial value of apparel: "What is inexpensive is unworthy. 'A cheap coat makes a cheap man.'" In fact, Veblen observed, "the need of dress is eminently a 'higher' or spiritual need" [26] (pp. 168–169).

High fashion today is closely aligned with fine art. Expense (or price point) marks the transition between the socially quotidian and the aesthetically elevated in this realm. The cultural elite, and those who aspire to be, wear the names of important personages to signal their status: Christian Dior, Tom Ford, Coco Chanel. Even the smallest items of these brands cost a fortune. The money spent on these items is thereby transformed into cultural currency. Indeed, their names are stamped onto products like coins. Wearing expensive high fashion apparel instead of cheap no-name clothes in effect transports one psychically, socially, almost transcendentally, to a place over and above the physical reality of the garment. As with the artworks in auction houses and fine art galleries, they confer an economic honor and esteem onto their owner through the cultural power of aesthetic value.

Now, this dynamic clearly posits that things of aesthetic value have economic value, and therefore cultural value. We certainly see this take place with minerals like gold and diamonds. The aesthetic beauty of these substances bears a direct relationship to their market desirability and hence their social worth and financial cost. My ideas, however, stand in contrast to Adorno's Marxian-inspired views on the commodification of art, whose notion of aesthetic value is tied to art's truth content: its ability to resist "the logic of" capitalist consumerism. For Adorno, while art is embedded in daily life, it can be autonomous to the extent that its aesthetic effect contests (or "negates") market commodification [16]. He instead advocated for the challenging aesthetics of avant-garde art and atonal music in contrast to the art of mass consumption, even as he acknowledged that avant-garde art can be bought and sold.

One wonders what Adorno would think about Cattelan's *Comedian* in that respect. Would he say that the banana and duct tape—practical objects embedded in daily life—are a metaphorical demonstration of art's ability to resist everyday capitalist commodification (the "culture industry)? Perhaps, since most everyday people tend to react

negatively to conceptual work and resist the idea that such work is worthy of the economic value it garners.

5. Agency in Aesthetics and Economics

On a more fundamental level, the existence of art within the broad array of social settings suggests that humans have an innate desire to create it. Why this is so is the underlying question of this inquiry. Something intrinsic to human life and living compels us, as sentient beings, to generate artifacts of aesthetic value. At the heart of this cultural "something," I argue, are the invisible and agentic forces of the human will and spirit. A short review of some of the research in these realms helps to underwrite this position.

In *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell argues that, anthropologically, art is "a system of action, intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. It is preoccupied with the practical mediatory role of art objects in the social process" [27] (p. 6). Gell's pragmatic, transformative, and agentic claim seems accurate, even if his dismissal of art's aesthetic and symbolic qualities is misplaced. As I have argued elsewhere, art and architecture have aided in the creation and legitimization of governments and social relations throughout human history. Visual art and music have also contributed to the development of institutions that create the civil order needed for large cohabiting populations to survive in a practical sense [28,29].

With respect to human agency in economics, Mises says, "Economics does not assume or postulate that men aim only or first of all at what is called material well-being. Economics, as a branch of the more general theory of human action, deals with *all* human action, i.e., with man's purposive aiming at the attainment of ends chosen, whatever these ends may be" [15] (p. 880). And indeed, it is not illogical to assume that the humanistic drive toward our material well-being springs from the same force that seeks the end of inner well-being: the human will and its desire to act—its agency (from the Latin *agere* "to do; act"). As Mises says, "We may say that action is the manifestation of a man's will." [15] (p. 13). Such that, "What distinguishes our conditions from those of our ancestors who lived one thousand or twenty thousand years ago is not something material, but something spiritual. The material changes are the outcome of the spiritual changes" [15] (p. 141).

In *Understanding the Culture of Markets*, the Austrian-school economist Virgil Storr argues that "Every market is animated by multiple economic spirits. These spirits shape economic behavior and, in so doing, affect economic outcomes. These spirits are also cultural phenomena" [30] (p. 111). The types of spirits to which he refers—such as "the spirit of enterprise" or "a spirit of hard work and independence"—speak to the agentic forces behind, or that motivate, economic activity. For this essay, such spirits "get at the meanings that individuals attach to their actions and, so, at the spirits that animate their behavior" [30] (p. 112). They are symbolic or figurative, and therefore mental and immaterial. They vivify the inner world of need and desire toward the larger material context of particular cultures or communities.

Storr's work is a fruitful perspective within which to think about the intersection of art and economics. Heavily informed by Max Weber's emphasis on dominant spirits (like the "Protestant ethic"), Storr is one of the few contemporary economic thinkers to truly embrace the role of culture in understanding how economic activity takes place. Unlike David Landes, who famously wrote "culture makes all the difference" in economic development [31] (p. 516), in arguing that cultural values, dispositions, and attitudes affect economic outcomes, Storr's research places the agentic force of the human spirit front and center.

Here, then, lies a compelling qualitative intersection between art and economics. Like Storr's cultural spirits that access the meanings and actions of economic life, the agentic and animating forces of art are explicitly employed to create meaningful artifacts. Artistic creations are the product of ideas. And while, to some extent, everything fashioned by human hands conveys ideational content, it so happens that expressing meaningful ideas is the primary charge of artistic modes of communication and activity.

In *The Economics of Art and Culture*, Heilbrun and Gray claim that "No matter how highly we may value them, art and culture are produced by individuals and institutions working within the general economy, and therefore cannot escape the constraints of that material world" [32] (p. 3). On the other hand, in my view, the history of art is the history of the human spirit. The concept of culture unites

these two worlds. For "culture" has to do with shared values and beliefs and the physical activities and artifacts that represent these immaterial aspects of human life [33]. It involves the customs, knowledge, and histories that constitute the "pattern of meanings" people identify with, even unconsciously, within everyday living [8]. And the core of culture—which I assert we also intuit as intimately connected to economics—is art and human agency.

6. Economic and Aesthetic Activity

Focusing on the shared role of human spirit and agency in art and economic life tells us something practical about the blended relationship between the two spheres. In my opinion, it confirms the intimate subjective relationship between everyday aesthetic and economic judgments. How so? Well, the common conceptual link between artistic and economic life articulated above is that of "activity." In economics, a core measure of a given policy's effectiveness is its ability to generate commercial activity. The flow of money, goods, and services via exchange is the lifeblood of economic growth. GDP, trade balances, industrial production, retail sales, productivity, employment rates, inflation, and profits are all indicators of activity, of human action in a commercial society. They reflect the complex network of cooperation needed for a community to succeed economically [34] (p. 155).

Analogously, the activity at work in the aesthetic environment of a cultural artifact is best understood synonymously as "movement," or in other words, how an artwork "moves" an individual intellectually or emotionally. For instance, artists use the formal element of line (to one degree or another) to move a viewer's visual perception across a work of art, whether it be a sculpture, painting, or other visual object. Such pictorial movement creates a dynamic aesthetic experience. In music, melodic lines shape and contour sound in a way that can move one's aesthetic sensibilities toward a dynamic aural experience. Symphonies are organized in "movements" that help listeners navigate the multifaceted emotions that such complex compositions engender. Ballets, court dances, and other kinesthetic artworks likewise rely on aesthetically composed physical activity to create their artistic experiences. In the arts, this aesthetic movement is meant to produce a concomitant emotional and/or intellectual response or movement within the viewer's mind and (ideally) soul. The success or failure of an artwork is generally assessed by the level at which it facilitates such spiritual engagement.

Importantly, there is a relationship between the inner movement inherent in an artwork's experience and the economic activity it engenders with respect to the concept of exchange. For the most desirable works of art are bought and sold precisely because their aesthetic experience, as outlined just above, is deemed valuable to some great extent. In other words, it is in this material to spiritual exchange, mediated so ingeniously by the artist or composer's blending of form and content, that this economic activity of art takes root. It is this cultural economy based on aesthetic experience that is ultimately at work in the history of human artistic creativity, bound as it is so closely to the most basic need to create objects of cultural meaning.

This cultural need for meaning is so essential to human life that some cultural works actually transcend economic forces. Artworks like Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, for instance, are considered "priceless" due to their aesthetic or historical value. In some countries, culturally significant works are rendered legally "inalienable" and cannot be lawfully sold or traded when designated as such. The notion that an artwork can be "priceless" underscores the spiritual center of econo-aesthetic activity. Namely, the history of art shows us that we need such objects deeply and profoundly as we order ourselves socially, just as we do an economy to sustain us, physical buildings to shelter us, or a religion to arbitrate our material existence with the divine.

The intersection of economic and aesthetic judgments assumes that individuals make personal determinations as to what they need or desire—or like or dislike—within some social environment, like a market. The synergy in this intersection is found in the agentic force of the human spirit. Both aesthetic and economic life draw upon the human will's desire to act on its own behalf, whether rationally, as Kantians hold [35], or through the passions, as Hume argues (*A Treatise of Human Nature* Bk. II, Part III, Section III) [36]. Such activity or action is as much cultural as it is individual or personal. When Storr claims that cultural spirits give rise to economic spirits, he argues that our economic drives are humanistic drives, suggesting that

something collective and immaterial (i.e., "spirits") is at work in our quest to survive individually within a community. We act on our own behalf within an environment, but the milieu of cultural cooperation represents a force multiplier of human agency whose movement is inherently spiritual.

In an example touched upon earlier, planting the U.S. flag—an aesthetic and cultural artifact with representational, symbolic, and humanistic meaning—on the moon is a high relief example of the relationship between human agency and its aesthetic drives. It was one of the purest manifestations of the agentic force of the human spirit, practically entrepreneurial in its civilizational ambition. Distinct from the colonial impetus to claim newly discovered lands for a particular country, its cosmic sensibilities attribute its symbolic significance to humanity in general. The time, money, governmental organization, and social solidity needed to achieve the goal speak to the economic success of human societies, while the quest to achieve an extraterrestrial presence was a spiritual act of will, desire, imagination, and wonder.

7. In Real Life

I have argued that economics and art are collectively shared expressions of culture and action, and that the crux of the aesthetics of economic life is located in the agency of the individual human spirit. I have highlighted fashion as an everyday aesthetic and exchange situation to illustrate this intersection of art and economics. In everyday life, aesthetics is related to the commonplace conception of beauty. But for many in the "real world" (outside of the art world), contemporary art seems to have abandoned beauty.

Moreover, in common culture, monetary motivations like those I have outlined are often associated negatively with financial materialism. The 1980s cinematic aphorism "greed is good" is still invoked by those critical of free-market capitalism, for example. Adam Smith, the putative founder of modern economics, was well aware of the social implications of his ideas and thought deeply about the moral obligations of a market society, especially within the religious sensibilities of his time and throughout human history [37].

Some commercial businesses are aware of these econo-aesthetic concerns, and have sought to conduct their enterprises in relation to ethics, art, and beauty. For instance, the high fashion designer and entrepreneur Brunello Cucinelli has latched onto Kant's claim in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) that "the Beautiful is the symbol of the morally Good" (§59) [38]. In his epistemological and ethical system, beauty relates to moral judgments by analogy; it tells us that there is a rational correlation between our aesthetic sensibilities and our duty-bound moral actions. Recall that the Austrian school emphasizes that economic life is primarily about values and choices. Brunello Cucinelli chose to value the aesthetic and ethical in his commercial worldview.

Framing his organization around art and philosophy, Cucinelli's business model of "Humanistic Capitalism" promotes dignified and sustainable relationships between his employees, his clientele, and the environment, as well as fostering discussions on the "soul of economics" and the "harmony of place and spirit." The brand is an exemplar of what is called "quiet luxury" (unassuming stylishness, high-quality materials, and tasteful emblems). Its fashion, found in many everyday malls, seeks to communicate a moral sensibility in an artistic and economic manner, narrating beauty via its visual appeal.

Now, many people are inherently skeptical about the notion of a "humanistic" capitalism. From a Marxist perspective, as exemplified by the closing sentence of John Berger's famous *Ways of Seeing* (1972), "Capitalism survives by forcing the majority, whom it exploits, by imposing a false standard of what is and what is not desirable" [39] (p. 154). Peter Fuller characterizes Berger's observations as "practical criticism" as he contests many of Berger's views [40]. But I do think it is fair to question traditional artistic values and norms through an economic lens, as Berger does, particularly with his notion of "publicity." He writes, "Publicity is effective precisely because it feeds upon the real. Clothes, food, cars, cosmetics, baths, and sunshine are real things to be enjoyed in themselves. Publicity is always about the future buyer. It offers him an image of himself made glamorous by the product or opportunity it is trying to sell. The image then makes him envious of himself as he might be. Yet what makes this self-which-he-might-be enviable? The envy of others" [39] (p. 132).

Thus, this view both supports my earlier claims on the dynamics of personal econo-aesthetic choices, but also challenges my high fashion examples, since Berger claims that such aesthetic choices, based on capitalist consumption, ultimately reflect a desire to feel superior to others, which I do not state or consider. However, whether commodified art promotes an aesthetic of exploitation, or envy, or false standards (or conformity to the "culture industry," per Adorno) is not finally my point. It arguably does or does not. Cucinelli is evidently aware that it *could* or *has*, and so hopes to counter such unfavorable connotations by placing art and Kant's ethical notion of beauty front and center in his capitalist enterprise. My only goal in utilizing the examples I do is to demonstrate—whether good or bad, or rightly or wrongly—that subjective aesthetic considerations play a larger motivating or agentic role in our personal economic decisions than is generally acknowledged.

8. Conclusion

To close, in my view, the notion of transformation is the biggest takeaway from this inquiry into the intersection of art and economics. Both fields tap into the human ability to change and grow, to move beyond one circumstance—whether financial, aesthetic, or spiritual—toward a more elevated state of being. Indeed, Heidegger's theory of art and being notably distinguishes between the materiality of a human work (Earth) and the meaningful cultural context it fashions or opens (World) [41]. The strife between the two, in some sense, transforms the materiality of things as it discloses their larger, meaningful context.

If, in my example, wearing or owning high-value objects makes one feel as if they are valuable, as I have argued, then something over and above the physical takes place in this transformational dynamic. Something almost *meta*physical seems to occur (like a transubstantiation) when the value of one thing gets numinously bequeathed upon a person when sociologically and aesthetically aligned with it. If, as I assert, the history of art is the history of the human spirit, then the econo-aesthetic activity at work in such transformations must lie in the agentic force inherent in the cultural movement it animates.

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