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Mukerji: From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism

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context. A former student of the late Frances Yates at the Warburg Institute, Strong follows her lead in relating art and politics, explaining Hilliard's insular and "reactionary" style by the fact that the wars of religion in France and the Netherlands made travel abroad difficult, while the threat of Spanish invasion heightened national consciousness. He adds some perceptive remarks on propaganda by the image. Like the *princeps* Augustus, Queen Elizabeth liked to be portrayed as eternally young, not necessarily from personal vanity alone but to keep the public from thinking about the problem of the succession.

It is a pity that Strong has dulled the force of his arguments by diluting them with a number of virtually gratuitous speculations. There are too many propositions of the "must have been" variety, let alone "there is nothing against the possibility that. . . ." In some cases what is no more than a hypothesis on its first appearance swiftly turns into a certainty and a foundation on which a second hypothetical structure is built, as in the matter of Hilliard's presumed responsibility for the illumination of the royal charter to Emmanuel College, Cambridge (an attribution that was not made under laboratory conditions). There is no discussion of alternative possibilities or of the charter as a genre.

There are other blemishes. This type of study, like the miniature itself, demands close attention to detail, but Strong's execution is sometimes careless. He mistakes a partisan for a "pike" (p. 105) and describes Beccafumi as one of the "latest" painters at a time when he had been in his grave for more than half a century. As for the critical vocabulary employed, the less said about it the better, though the point has to be made that Strong sees the miniatures in terms of photographic realism and appears unaware of the inconsistency between this view and the remarks thrown out from time to time about the conventions of visual communication. To discuss these conventions was not the author's aim and so it would be unfair to criticize him for saying so little about them, but it would be good to see a study of these miniatures, as of other English portraits, which concentrated on the expressions, postures, gestures, and accessories of the sitters as so many signs, so many strategies for the presentation of self—the visual equivalent of Stephen Greenblatt's brilliant book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*.

Chandra Mukerji. From *Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. 368 pp., ill. \$30.00 (cloth), \$12.00 (paper).

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A consistent theme in the critique of capitalism, especially since 1945, has been the attack on consumerism, an attack launched from both right and left at both the popular and the academic level. Consumerism from this perspective is seen as the characteristic central value system of late capitalism within which (1) the efficacy of societies is judged by their level of production of material goods and individual happiness and (2) status is defined in terms of the level of consumption of such goods. For the right this has led to the decay of traditional moral values and the decline of social deference. For the left it has increased human alienation and blinded the exploited classes to the inbuilt inequalities of the capitalist system. Consumption not religion becomes the opiate of the people.

More serious, among the younger radical American social historians (one thinks of the work of Elizabeth and Stuart Ewen) there is now work across a wide front searching for the roots of what can be seen as the characteristic social formation of contemporary capitalism, one in which there is a complex dialectic between, on the one hand, the social fragmentation caused by developments in the division of labor, transport, and communication systems and, on the other, the development of an international mass market for goods and services increasingly consumed on a privatized basis, each act of constantly repeated consumption carrying exchange relations into the very tiniest crevices of our personal lives. This search has focused upon a period of transition lasting in the U.S. from about 1880 to 1920, during which the institutions of mass retailing and advertising, mass communications, and mass politics, which characterize our era, were put into place and the values they incarnate were disputed.

From Graven Images engages with this important set of problems. But Mukerji is one of a group of historians who challenge the view implicit in much of the work in this area that consumerism is the product of a late stage in the development of industrial capitalism. Plumb and his colleagues at Cambridge University, whom Mukerji cites, push the origins of consumerism back to the eighteenth century. Mukerji herself finds its roots in the fifteenth or even fourteenth century,

and her central thesis is that consumerism, or, as she dubs it, a "materialist culture," far from being the result of industrial capitalism is in fact its cause.

She argues that the growth of trade made available in Europe a wide range of consumption goods whose existence in itself presented a challenge to the established cultural order, necessitating the development of an ethic of consumption that could both endow these goods with value and provide criteria for making choices among them. This then started a constantly reinforcing and expanding process by which material satisfactions and functions were split off from spiritual ones. Consumption encouraged and was in turn encouraged by the development of fashion, production by the entrepreneurial response to this demand, and markets were widened and deepened by the process of trade itself. She argues that the supply of goods, the need to handle and evaluate an ever-wider range of goods, taught people to consume, to produce for consumption, and to evaluate the world in scientific terms as itself a material object; and that these three elements of the process were self-reinforcing, leading to the eventual launch of industrial capitalism proper in Great Britain.

Mukerji goes on to illustrate this thesis through the examination of the impact of the first major mass production technology, print. She does this from three aspects: print as a producer of consumption goods, print as a producer of capital goods, and print as a crucial element in the development of science and the scientific worldview. In her analysis she focuses on pictorial prints, maps, and printed calico. Here the first problem with this book arises: printing cannot bear the explanatory weight that is placed upon it. This is amply illustrated by the two chapters Mukerji devotes to the development of the British calico industry, a development which she argues was crucial for the rise of industrial capitalism in Britain. Whether such an explanation is true or false (and in my view it shares a general tendency of the book to exaggerate monocausality), what is clear is that the printing element in the process of calico production (as opposed to spinning and dyeing) does not enter in any serious way into her explanation. We could as well be discussing unprinted cloth except for the historical accident that it was in fact printed calico that was the crucial fashion good.

While Mukerji's discussion of both prints and maps is in itself interesting, it says no more than what is now for all but the most idealist of cultural historians a commonplace, namely, that the form of prints developed in dialectical relationship to the development of a mass market for them and that maps were an important technology in the development of European international trading dominance, thus in the creation of the Wallersteinian "modern world system." Even here, however, her choice of print as an example of her thesis—for reasons that are never adequately ex-

plained—leads her to exaggerate the importance of maps, or at least of printed maps. Her treatment of the relationship between print and science is largely a conventional reworking of the now dominant Lefebvre and Martin and Eisenstein tradition.

So far as her main thesis is concerned, she has to be praised for tackling an important subject. In the desert of contemporary sociology this is not a negligible quality. However, in doing so she is challenging the masters on their chosen ground. If you wish to get into the ring with Marx and Weber, you have to be sure you are in good theoretical and historical training. I am afraid Mukerji looks, in this league, like a George Plimpton. Apparently being unfamiliar with the literature on the feudalism/capitalism transition, she does not seem to realize that she is implicitly repeating the trade-based theory put forward by, among others, Sweezy and Wallerstein, and so she nowhere deals with the major critiques of that theory or provides any explanation of why the development of trade, which she requires as the necessary base for the development of her materialist culture, took place. This uncertainty is reinforced by an ambiguity as to whether she is claiming materialist culture as an explanation of capitalist development or as part of the process internal to that development of the shift from commercial to industrial capitalism. She appears to think that she is putting forward a culturalist corrective to Marxist explanations of capitalist development without showing any signs of having read the extensive debates around culturalist versions of Marxism. She writes, for instance, that "production and trade have a Janus face, that as patterned uses of material culture they necessarily have both economic and cultural meaning," without appearing to realize that the whole problem lies precisely in the interrelationship and lines of force and determination between those two levels or moments.

From Graven Images is valuable in directing attention to a crucial problem and set of issues in historical sociology and in the understanding of contemporary capitalism, namely, how we understand and evaluate our use of and relationship to material objects. It is valuable too if it encourages others to study this question from a historical perspective. But in the last analysis Mukerji does not, unfortunately, meet the major challenge she has set herself.