

The Highlights - Notes From Jessica

Around the time that I began to suspect that I might be a Marxist I became very depressed and spent a lot of time in bed watching television. One thing that I watched and which comforted me was the television series *True Blood*. I identified in particular with the character of Jessica, a young woman who is turned into a vampire against her will. She emerges from her grave terrified and disoriented and is met by an older vampire, her "maker," Bill:

Jessica looked the same but was no longer the same. She had become a reversal of her old self. This transformation was accompanied by an insatiable hunger, an impatience with talk, and a desire for violence. The vampires are depicted as both powerful and disempowered. They are a persecuted minority and are obliged to keep their destructive superhuman power in check. In the same way I felt that my own sudden shift in position was something that I had not asked for. Despite the power of real knowledge that it promised it was in practice alienating. Becoming a Marxist has meant living amongst my friends and family as both my old self and someone who is now less familiar to himself. My desire to understand the implications of this change has taken the form of a hunger which leads me to stay awake at night reading some really strange things and creates an impatience to learn the answers to my new questions. It has provoked in me a deep and unsatisfiable desire to do violence to the current order of things. Of course there are no easy answers right now and that is as it should be. I address these notes to my fellow artists: don't be scared of the unfamiliar, of transformation, of reversals, of death and of endings which give birth to new beginnings. Don't be scared of the night.



As artists we are bombarded by pseudo-Marxist jargon in a variety of flavors. We encounter it in art magazines, in catalogue essays and in press releases. Many artists are apprehensive about Marxism for this reason. For more conventional Americans, probably including your family members, the first thing that comes to mind when you mention Marx is the Soviet Union. This means that should you eventually choose to embrace Marxism you risk embracing something that will set you outside the pale of your society. Living beyond the pale can be very stressful, and this stress may be damaging to your health. For myself when I hear the term "Marxist" the first image that springs to mind is neither the terrifyingly benevolent visage of Stalin nor the beautiful and glamorous young Che Guevara but a sad little old man who I used to see hanging around Zuccotti Park trying to sell copies of the *Socialist Worker* for a dollar. He wore grimy jeans and a battered Greek fisherman's cap that was flecked with dandruff.



Despite all this I am resigned to my new identity. It took me a long time to admit to myself that I had changed. The transformation has been painful and disorienting, and has been accompanied by a range of physical and psychological symptoms, including rashes, hives, eczema, anxiety, depression, panic attacks, insomnia, headaches and diarrhea. I've always been lonely and sickly but Marxism has made me even lonelier and less healthy than I was in the past. I spend Saturday nights alone in bed reading Marx and eating kimchi out of a plastic bucket. My obsessive interest in arcane topics has made me boring and incomprehensible to some my closest friends and family members. I lie awake staring at the ceiling wondering about the nature of things like "directly social labor." One time a girlfriend accused me of thinking about Marxism during sex. Of course I denied it.



Like many modern people I nurture a fantasy that I am *sui generis* and autopoietic (meaning "one-of-a-kind" and "self-created," respectively). These are common fantasies for Americans but are especially prevalent amongst artists. The culture that has grown up around capitalism celebrates fake individualism and fake freedom. I was raised a good liberal progressive which means that although we found capitalism distasteful we felt obliged to support its aims, perhaps because we believed that it was the only way to achieve our goals of progress, human rights and economic and social justice. If you read Marx you will see that while there is certainly some truth in this approach, and that human rights might seem like a worthy cause, the liberal approach by nature can never succeed in delivering economic or social justice. Liberalism is extremely limiting, both for thought and political action, as well as for human development. I think I was always a bit skeptical about the values of the liberal culture in which I grew up. It always seemed to me to have an overweening emphasis on the redemptive power of reusable canvas tote bags. However without a critical method for understanding this phenomenon, and others like it, I was nothing more than a curmudgeon. The year in which my real transformation took place was 2008. This was the year of *True Blood*. More importantly it was also the year that the global economy

entered into what's normally called "the Great Recession." Despite all the specific events in my personal biography, the fact that my transformation coincided with an historic economic downturn made real to me the frightening possibility that I am not simply a creature of my own making. I saw with sudden clarity that my deepest convictions, which constitute what you might call my soul, were pegged to the Wilshire 5000.



I started reading Marx not because I wanted to upend my life by becoming a Marxist, nor because I wanted to understand capitalism or political economy or socialist politics or what drives history, but because I wanted to begin to understand a little bit about this thing called "theory." Theory dominates the field of visual art. In the past only writers philosophized about art, and artists could afford to turn up their noses at this philosophizing. Barnett Newman said, "Aesthetics is for the artist as ornithology is for the birds." It was fashionable in his time to view artists as forces of nature, so it was not by accident that he chose birds for his analogy. When Jackson Pollock was asked if he painted from nature he replied, "I am nature." This was very smart and concise and summed up the philosophy of his generation in only three words. It was an improvement on Barnett Newman's analogy but both were wrong. Artists are nothing like birds and are no closer to nature than anyone else. Nature itself is nothing more than an idea. The resentment that both Newman and Pollock expressed may have been justified but both men were led to the wrong conclusion. A better analogy for art and theory is the relationship between labor and management. Management began as a way for employers to delegate the task of discipline to a new hierarchy of workers. Workers eventually internalize the interests of the bosses and become self-managing. They develop a work ethic. This is analogous to artists who find that in order to succeed they must become writers of theory. Whether we like it or not this is the situation that we are now in and with which we must contend.



Artists are a type of worker. What makes our society different from those that came before is that now, because we are no longer hunter-gatherers or peasant farmers, if we want to eat and pay rent we have to go out and get jobs. What is the job of the artist? You might think that the most important thing that artists produce is artwork. This is not the case. The most important thing that we as artists produce is an image of ourselves. This image must be that of free creative workers who take pleasure in what we do and who gladly work even in the absence of remuneration. This image is very important to our society because no one wants to admit that the only reason we work is because we are threatened with homelessness and starvation. We want to believe that work can be meaningful, creative, fulfilling and self-managed. Artists are essential to perpetuating this myth. That is why, even if you never sell a single artwork, you are still helping our society to reproduce itself.

I recently had a checkout clerk at an electronics store tell me how much he loves his job because the customers ask for his opinion and value his knowledge about electronics. Who would want to take this away from him? Without pleasure and meaning and accolades and creativity work becomes unbearable.



The image we create of ourselves is that of workers for whom meaningful work is its own reward. The measure of meaningful work is that the products of this labor must themselves contain meaning. Because the meaning of art is not always immediately visible, meaning must be guaranteed in writing. In recent years artists have become forced to write "artist's statements." Artists' statements are guarantees of meaning, which we sign at the bottom like contracts. The contract is between the artist (worker) and the dealer, critic, curator or art historian (managers). We are then judged on the merits of our writing by managerial professionals who with every passing year are themselves required to obtain more doctorates and other professional qualifications in order to do what they do, which is simply to allow our work to have social and market value. They stamp our passports. The dealers, critics, curators and art historians must in turn produce more writing as guarantees of meaning for other managers, and eventually collectors and institutions who exist further up the hierarchy. This process has become necessary in allowing the artwork to realize its social and market value. We can say then that artwork nowadays can only be "indirectly social." It requires mediation before it can realize its potential. The image that we produce of ourselves, however, has at least the merit of being potentially directly social. You don't need anyone's permission to live a life of noble penury.



The greatest danger of learning Marxist theory is that you become so entranced with theory and writing and words and with the power that comes with knowledge that you forget that you are an artist. You might decide to make your work more political and that can be okay but don't forget that you are an artist and not merely an illustrator. By subjugating itself to the power of theory, by reducing itself to congealed knowledge, art loses its power. It becomes decoration for text like the illuminations in a medieval bible. Never forget that when you enter the field of writing you are entering enemy territory.



I said at the beginning that becoming a Marxist has not yet made me happy. Quite the opposite. If you want to begin to understand the transformation that the world is now undergoing, that surrounds us and that we are forced to live through, then Marx is the thinker with whom you must contend. Marx can be a very difficult writer but he can also be very clear and full of interesting ideas. If you're like me then you will want to share these interesting ideas with your friends and this will almost certainly become a problem. It was bad enough a few years back when I read *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. I wanted to recite all the interesting facts about grass seed that I had learned to everyone I met. I had bought the book in one of those tiny nightmarish airport bookstores and found that I couldn't put it down. Marx's work is not currently available in airport bookstores as far as I know but you can expect your friends to be equally dismissive. When you mention Marx their eyes will glaze over and they will develop an absent look on their faces. This past Thanksgiving I was confronted by close family members in a scene reminiscent of an intervention. They were concerned that my reading habits were negatively affecting my

health, happiness and well-being. All I could tell them was that their concerns were appreciated and well founded. For me though the choice between the pursuit of understanding and the pursuit of happiness is not really a choice. I freely admit then that becoming a Marxist might not make you popular or well-understood. It won't make you into a sexy vampire. It might very well be a great way to end up sad, lonely, bitter and disappointed. Then again, so is being an artist. So what have you got to lose?