

# Aesthetics and commodity-labor: Analysis of the Lukacsian aesthetic properties in business magazines – the Exame magazine

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## RESUMO

### Estética e mercadoria-trabalho: Uma incursão pela Revista Exame à luz das categorias estéticas de Georg Lukács

No presente artigo são tratadas as propriedades estéticas da mercadoria-trabalho encontradas na Revista Exame. Primeiramente, é feita a distinção entre a mercadoria e a mercadoria-trabalho. Em seguida, são relacionadas as categorias trabalho e cotidiano e as formas reflexo da ciência e reflexo da arte, de acordo com o livro *Estética I*, de Georg Lukács. Ainda de acordo com essa obra, também são trabalhadas as formas abstratas de reflexo estético: ritmo, simetria e proporção, e ornamentação. Logo após, mostra-se como essas formas abstratas de reflexo estético (ou “propriedades estéticas”) são reconvertidas à mercadoria-trabalho para a valorização dela. Termina-se o artigo com a análise das reportagens contidas na Revista Exame para averiguar como essas categorias se fazem presentes.

**Palavras-chave:** trabalho, mercadoria, estética, Lukács, revista de negócios.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to explore the problem of the **aesthetic properties of “commodity-labor”** – that is, labor power as a commercialized commodity in capitalism – from the analysis of business magazines. For this purpose, we have resorted to the aesthetic categories exposed in the chapter named *Abstract forms of the aesthetic reflection of reality*, part of *Aesthetics I*, by Georg Lukács (1966).

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In that work, while resorting to the ontogenetic method that explains the structure of spiritual activities through its genesis (Tertulian, 2008), the Hungarian Marxist philosopher analyzed the long process of constitution of the properties of rhythm, proportion, symmetry and ornamentation. Such properties originated from human work over nature and became, after many generations, relatively autonomous in their relation to labor to establish their aesthetic sphere (literature, drama, painting, etc.). However, these were later reconverted over labor, mediated by science – which ranges from technological advancements (machinery, tools, chemistry, etc.) to the innovations of social engineering (management theories, scientific management, etc.) – hence becoming a condition for the reproduction of capitalism (Paço-Cunha, 2011). This logic would have existed for a long time in the current mode of production:

“What capital adds is that it increases the surplus labor time of the mass by all the means of art and science, because its wealth consists directly in the appropriation of surplus labor time; since value directly its purpose, not use value” (Marx, [1857-1858] 1987, p. 231).

In spite of the relevance of this discussion, the philosophic works in our language on the problematization by Lukács on labor and aesthetics are rare – in spite of notable exceptions such as the thesis by Patriota (2010) and the paper by Tertulian (2008). Besides, this approach is not present in the debates on aesthetics in the field of Organization Studies (e.g. Davel, Vergara, & Ghadiri, 2007; Flores-Pereira & Cavedon, 2010). In Flores-Pereira and Cavedon (2010), aesthetics is understood as the sensory experience of organization artifacts, having as reference the materiality of such objects. In Davel *et al.* (2007), however, art is understood as a methodological resource in the teaching of Administration, to teach students how to think like an enterprise, in the context of the mere social reproduction and the improvement of management practices. Amending this lack, Paço-Cunha (2011) brought the tradition inaugurated by Marx even closer to the Organization Studies. According to the author, each of the categories present in *Aesthetics I* (Lukács, 1966) has a determined role in organizations, adjusted for capital appreciation. These are the **rhythm**, for the acceleration and increase of labor productivity; the **symmetry** and the **proportion**, for the suitability between the commodity-labor and the production needs; the **ornamentation**, for the vestments, architecture of production, among other elements necessary for the generation of surplus-value (Paço-Cunha, 2011). Based on Paço-Cunha (2011), we discuss again some Lukácsian categories and carry out the visual and discursive analysis of *Exame* magazine from 2008 to 2012.

Having considered our key references, we seek to understand in this paper how the categories above are presented through evidence found in national business magazines. As for

that, the paper’s guiding question is: **is it possible to find in the articles published by such magazines a sort of commodity-labor aesthetics compatible with the current stage of the capitalist mode of production?**

Empirically, this work has sought to analyze *Exame* magazine. For that purpose, a discourse analysis (DA) has been carried out, based on the conjectures of the Bakhtin Circle. We have chosen to resort to DA as our methodological technique. That is because, as Bakhtin ([1963] 2008) himself suggests, it is necessary to resort to Metalinguistics as a discipline, and this would have dialogical relationships as an object, something not taken into consideration by the discipline of Linguistics. Accordingly, we decided to use Bakhtin in the analysis of the magazines, for the Bakhtin Circle distinguishes from Linguistics precisely due to its conjectures and methodological framework. Agreeing with Herrmann (2011, p. 3), we understand Bakhtinian Discourse Analysis as:

the space of the ideological code, of the ideological sign *par excellence*, being impossible to break the unity of the social space and of the immediate social context that constitutes it. (Bakhtin/Voloshinov, [1929] 2006, p.70). Therefore, for this approach, differently from the view of languages as abstract systems of forms, we think of it as being constituted by the social phenomenon of the verbal interaction, carried out through an utterance or utterances (Herrmann, 2011, p. 125).

This paper has six sections, including this introduction. In the next section, we discuss the aesthetic differences between commodity and commodity-labor. In the third section, we discuss how the categories **labor**, **reflection**, and **quotidian** relate in the book *Aesthetics I*, by Georg Lukács (1966). Following, we explain the formation of abstract forms of aesthetic reflection throughout the human history, namely rhythm, symmetry, proportion, and ornamentation. In the fourth section, we see how such abstract forms of aesthetic reflection are reconverted into commodity-labor. In section five, Brazilian business magazine *Exame* is analyzed. Finally, the final thoughts are exposed, aiming at future research on the subject.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. The aesthetic differences between commodity and commodity-labor

Haug (1997) has examined how commodities, that is, non-artistic objects, can provide their owners with aesthetic experiences. Therefore, the “commodity aesthetics” indicates a complex that rises from the appearance of the commodity in question (its form, concreteness, etc.) and the sensory relations

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