

Can Bodies Understand the Logic of Capital: A Reading of Ben Lerner's *10:04*

In a striking passage in Ben Lerner's 2014 novel *10:04*, its narrator—Ben—has a bodily reaction vis-à-vis a particular commodity—a container of instant coffee—that makes him “viscerally aware of both the miracle and insanity of the mundane economy” (Ben Lerner, *10:04* [New York: Faber and Faber, Inc., 2014], 19). In short, this “alteration” of his “vision” (18) that has a corporeal origin makes him question the “murderous stupidity” (19) of the fact that coffee and, by implication, all kinds of goods are shipped all over the world. It seems, then, that the novel suggests that a critical perspective on global capitalism can have the fact that “we are bodily situated in the world” (as the Call for Papers puts it) as a starting point. And, indeed, as the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu shows, the pre-reflexive and, hence, very much corporeal ways of approaching the objects of the social world can go a long way in helping us to analyze the mechanisms through which class differences are reproduced. At the same time, *10:04* seems to suggest certain limits to a critical perspective that proceeds from the relationship body-commodity. After all, Ben's visceral reaction does not ultimately lead to a questioning of the fact that products of labor (say, instant coffee) assume the form of commodities (that can be exchanged for money). In other words, the outcome of his bodily reaction to the “murderous stupidity” of global commodity chains is the decision to buy local rather than to end commodity production. Later, however, the novel introduces a relation not between body and object, but between two objects (in this case, works of art) in order to imagine the possibility of “material things” losing their “magical power” when they are no longer equipped with a “monetizable signature”—that is to say, when they are “liberated” from the “logic” of capital (133). Marx was aware of the fact that he had to proceed not from the perspective of the individual—and her body—but from that of the commodity or, more precisely, the relation of exchange between two commodities in order to understand the logic of the capitalist mode of production on the most abstract level. At the same time it is necessary to keep in mind that Marx's categorical critique *is* situated at this abstract, conceptual level and is, thus, unable to explain a host of mechanisms of reproduction which are taking place at a more empirically concrete level. The point of my talk would, thus, not be to reject the role of “embodied perception” and to defend a merely conceptual critique but to argue for awareness of the different levels of analysis that both approaches represent.

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