

## Illusions of Commodification in Sam Shepard's Angel City

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**Abstract:** *Studies about the role of media in shaping people's minds have recently become popular. "Angel city" is a play written by Sam Shepard dealing with Hollywood movies that shows how art is used in this industry as a commodity at the hands of capitalists. This article is an attempt to explore the ideas of some postmodern critics like Michael Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard to maintain how Hollywood, as a great entertainment industry, is at the service of capitalism; thus by virtue of the knowledge the three magnets of the play have and through manipulating the characters Shepard wants to indicate how their chief goal is to earn money to gain profit.*

**Keywords:** *Commodification, Capitalism, Hollywood*

### Introduction

The notion of art is the prevalent theme in Sam Shepard's Plays. Angel city, a two-act play written in 1976, is about "the artist's imagination, and the danger of "messing with it" by selling it to a capitalist enterprise, like the movie industry, that simply seeks to commodify the artist by turning him into an instrument for producing a product that will generate profit for its owners." (Murphy, 126). This play deals with "the bifurcation of the artist into imagination and craft, and the danger of commodifying the imagination" (Murphy, 131). As Johan Callens states postmodern sublime is "marked by urbanization, commodification, and technology" (199).

During the recent decades Hollywood gained prominence through the movies produced in large quantity. No movie production company has been as flourishing and profitable as this one ever since. Conforming to the imperialist criteria Hollywood entered the lives of multiple people extensively and occupied their mind considerably. They guarantee people submission to their venture through this media. Like the characters in the play people "have allowed themselves to become the voluntary prisoners of an industry which offers them security and wealth, but which seals them off from any contact with "the world out there." (DeRose, 238) The present article attempts to shed light on the discussion of the general philosophy and nature of capitalism in society and the hints that can be traced in Sam Shepard's Angel City (1976). Furthermore, it examines the theories of some postmodern luminaries such as Michael Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard based on the idea of "late capitalism"– suggested by

Jameson – and the so-called postmodern capitalism to see how capitalism played an important role in commodifying people's minds all over the world.

## Discussion

### (I)

As mentioned above Capitalism plays a pivotal role in Angel City. Based on what James Fulcher says "Capitalism is essentially the investment of money in the expectation of making a profit, and huge profits could be made at some considerable risk by long-distance trading ventures of this kind." (Fulcher, 2) Capitalism is a long-lived mode of thinking which tries to gain profit relying on markets that gives services. Lyotard believes that Capitalism "does not constitute a universal history, it is trying to constitute a world market" (1988: 179) (Malps, postmodern, 38).

Capitalism tries its best to use everything to make profit; one of the markets which are among the capitalist's favorites is entertainment industries. "Industrial capitalism not only created work, it also created 'leisure' in the modern sense of the term" ( Fulcher, 8). They realized that leisure activities are more inviting to exert their authority, so they commercialized it. "Leisure was also the creation of capitalism in another sense, through the commercialization of leisure. This no longer meant participation in traditional sports and pastimes. Workers began to pay for leisure activities organized by capitalist enterprises." (Fulcher, 8)

Capitalism and Commercialism are credited to be the underpinning of Hollywood filmmaking industry. Hollywood is one of the main helps to extend the domain of Capitalism through the world "when history and conventions of many Hollywood genres (the western, the thriller, the horror film, the war film, the romance and the family drama) are distilled and intensified to produce a commodity that contains all of the pleasure, all of the pain, and works in as many markets as possible" (Hill and Every, 104)

Based on Hansen Hollywood is "the incarnation of the modern, an aesthetic medium up-to-date with Fordist-Taylorist methods of industrial production and mass consumption, with drastic changes in social, sexual, and gender relations, in the material fabric of everyday life, in the organization of sensory perception and experience." (Constable, 51)

Sam Shepard in Angel city presents how they afflict societies through their booming industry and "bitterly attacks the film industry and indicts Hollywood for living by false, corrupting values, which it imparts to its customers" (Auslander, 104). Sam Shepard is a postmodern dramatist who is prominent for introducing "figures propelled by an inchoate inertia and preoccupied with merely surviving. Movie stars, cowboys, rock musicians, Hollywood agents, military personnel, mobsters, and drifters enact their repressed anxieties and depressed lives amidst the alluvia of a postmodernist set and setting." (Roudane, 3).

This essay is an attempt to analyze the way Hollywoodian movies exert influence on people's mind subliminally through regarding art as commodity. The following shows how they win people's heart by delivering them images which are deemed as real in capitalist Hollywoodian movies. Foucault, Lyotard and Baudrillard's theories are successively deployed to expound the ideas. Before arguing their theories some hints from the play are provided to give a general view of postmodernism and capitalism and furthermore strengthen the discussion.

Angel City (1976) has a simple plot. Rabbit has been called to Hollywood by two movie moguls named Wheeler and Lanx whose initiative is to save a project from collapse. Rabbit is reputed to be a healer. He went to save a failed movie project but ironically, Rabbit who is supposed to be a savior is himself mesmerized by the power of Hollywood and cannot remedy the problems and is corrupted by the desire for money and power.

The emergence of capitalism redefined the goal of art production. "The logic of capital churns up all material, bodies, cultures, and associations in the mechanical search for profit making. This has its analogue in art's weightless sign-swapping. For Virilio, art's creativity, allied to capital, is directed against humanity itself, most obviously in its embrace of the genetic manipulation" (Stallabrass 124). Thus based on capitalist mode of thinking argued by Stallabrass for making profits the creation of new ideas should be regarded as priority. As for capitalists "For the postmodernist, to create is to be critically self-aware to an extent that goes far beyond modernism" (Butler, 78). They try to get rid of the grand narrative of truth so that they can earn power. As the postmodernist Richard Rorty says: "The nature of truth' is an unprofitable topic' " (Hicks, 79). The way that postmodernists exploit creativity owes debt to Fredric Nietzsche who "saw the world as the dance of the destructively creative and creatively destructive god Dionysus-the dance of the Will to Power-and Dionysus was his model of how to act in the chaotic storm of life. Any man who acted in such a way would be a Superman" (Powell, 10). "the urge to create works of art is essentially one of ambition. The ambition behind the urge to create is no different from any other ambition. To kill. To win. To get on top'. (87) is quoted by Miss Scoons to reveals this need for creativity. They strive to be creative because of being "ravenous for power" (Rabbit, 69) Every unreal and imagined concept is desirable for them if it is profitable. They try to destroy reality to create new realities. According to Terry Eagleton: postmodernism may be treated "as a possible rather than an actual world" (The illusion of postmodernism, 20) which "reinvent(ing) its various aspects in purely theoretical spirit until they came to correspond magically with the real thing" (ibid, 20). As LANX says they want "A kind of magician or something" (67), a person who can "dream things up"(67).

Capitalism like postmodernism needs originality at the expense of destruction to make profit. "Capital is money that is invested in order to make more money" (Fulcher 14). In line with what revealed above, evidently the core principles of capitalism is the fact that art should be produced to be sold for money. "Mikhailov's work is about nothing other than the effects of an unrestrained capitalism in which everything is for sale" (Stallabrass 33). They should earn

money out of their work otherwise their venture is fruitless. The triumvirate should form first-hand opinions which their novelty and originality can motivate their sale and profitability. They should create “A disaster on the screen, not in the box office” (70). In a dialogue with Tympany and Miss Scoons we have: “Tympani: You mean like, “...some deep primeval source which she knew not of”? Rabbit: Well, that was a little sticky in that area, but otherwise I thought it was surprisingly original” (75). It shows his awareness that it is through originality and innovating new concepts that power may be I. His imagination is the wellspring of power. As he says to himself: “You are the only one who can solve the mystery. Millions and millions are riding solely on your powers of imagination. There is nobody quite like you on the entire planet” (82,83). These sentences are responses to what Miss Scoons says to him: “You have created more disaster in your time than the whole of Hollywood put together.” (82)

As inferred from what are argued, it is through creativity and original imagination that these magnates want to make profit. Profit is their chief goal. They “organize(s) production for profit rather than for use, which concerns itself with what will sell rather than with what is valuable” (Eagleton, 30). Lanx who needed Rabbit’s help to make the failed movie says: “A booming industry. Self-sufficient. Grossing fifty million in just two weeks...” (64).

The logic of capitalism to control and administer variety of things to make money is also evident in this play. Before the entrance of MISS SCOONS Rabbit insistently wants to leave the industry and consequently TYMPANY says: “Then why don’t you leave? You can walk out easy enough.”, but Rabbit does not live there. It shows the unconscious control on him by industry. The industry also controls all of the workers. As Tympani says “I’ve been here several months now. They take care of me enough. I get everything I need here. It’s not a bad life..... They all like it here, though. We’re well paid. Nobody complains” (72).

Capitalism extended impinging on the imagination of people in every aspect of their life especially, as mentioned above, the ones dealing with their entertainment because this is the best medium through which it can redefine art and acquire its purposes phenomenally. Like other industries Hollywood “exploit(s) and develops the leisure market, which was to become a huge source of consumer demand, employment, and profit” (Capitalism, 9). One of the underpinning philosophy of capitalism is to found a consumer culture. Based on Julian Stallabrass: “consumerism appears to become ever more cultural, as much concerned with selling or merely displaying images, sounds, and words as it is with material things. While the issue of art’s separation from or mergence with commodity culture has a long history, during the 1990s there was an intensification of the forces involved, many of them old features of capitalism, that contributed to the dominance of a triumphant consumer culture not just over art but over all other cultural production” (Stallabrass 51). Conforming to Doyle, capitalism “does not attempt to hide its relationship to consumer society, but rather exploits it to new critical and politicized ends, acknowledging openly the “indissoluble relation between cultural production and its political and social affiliations” (Doyle 1985, 169) ( Hutcheon, 46)

As noted earlier there are millions who are dependent on Rabbit's power of imagination! Whenever Rabbit thinks an appetizing novelty the horde of people become "consumers, mere empty receptacles of desire" (Eagleton, 88). He can manage people unconsciously to think according to what he wishes and enjoy what he has the power to choose, they are the hallmark of capitalist cultural attitudes. They are just consumer of his imagination and he has the power to create new ideas whenever he desires. As an instance about what Miss Scoons concocted in commissary during lunch break Rabbit says: "Well, that was a little sticky in that area, but otherwise I thought it was surprisingly original" (74). Everything saleable is worth imagining by him because its value is measured by the profitability.

Hollywood hypnotizes people in order to achieve its goal of gaining power over all people in the whole world and thereby gaining money by the production of the movies. What we read through Rabbit's monologue clearly shows the objective of the industry. "Rabbit continues "The point is I've smelled something down here. Something sending its sweet claws way up north. Interrupting my campfires. Making me dream at night. Causing me to wonder at the life of a recluse. The vision of a celluloid tape with a series of moving images telling a story to millions. Millions anywhere. Millions seen and unseen. Millions seeing the same story without ever knowing each other. Without even having to be together. Effecting their dreams and actions. Replacing their books. Replacing their families. Replacing religion, politics, art, conversation. Replacing their minds" (69). People are mesmerized through movies which are entered their lives and became implanted in their minds. The moviemakers are powerful when their inventions are stuck in the mind of people. "Wheeler: I'M ESTABLISHED! I'M FIRMLY ESTABLISHED! I'm in the business! I'm in the pictures. I plant pictures in people's heads. I plant them and they grow. They grow more pictures. And the pictures grow like wildfire. People see them in front of their eyes. While they're shopping. While they're driving. While they're making love. Wherever they go I go with them. I spread their disease. "I am that powerful" (109). As Wheeler realizes that he has succeeded in hypnotizing people he recognizes himself as 'that powerful'.

## (II)

The subjects discussed above conform to the capitalism in the modern era but a question may raise. Does capitalism modify its views through the decades to adapt itself to alterations in discourses? Does modern capitalism differ from postmodern capitalism? Hamilton Grant who uses the term "postmodern capitalism" in "postmodernism and politics" points to Lyotard's argument that "profit no longer need be legitimated by reference to a grand narrative of progressive realization of individual liberty through the market, since it is justified immediately by sharing its sole criterion of success with a technology that has become the means of production of knowledge, information and power" (Grant, Postmodernism and Politics, 39). As Grant mentions "Where in modernity knowledge and capital vied for power, now postmodern

capitalist techno-science has turned both into information as the measure of power.” (Grant, Science and technology, 76).

Frederic Jameson is a key figure who discussed about capitalism in postmodern era; about “the penetration of advertising, television and the media generally to a hitherto unparalleled degree throughout society” (Norton, Jameson, 1974). He argues that ‘every position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatisation – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today’ (1991: 3). (The postmodern, 116) and as the title of his book, “Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism” asserts, “postmodernism is not just contemporaneous with this transformation of economic structures into what he calls ‘late capitalism’, it is its ‘cultural logic’.” (Ibid, 116). For Jameson “late capitalism marks a new ‘vision of world capitalism’ in which the systems that governed the West’s economies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries develop and spread throughout the world as borders are broken down and new markets are founded in previously unpenetrated areas.” (ibid, 118). Or somewhere else he says “postmodernism “expresses the inner truth of that newly emergent social order of late capitalism,” sometimes also called consumer, postindustrial, or multinational capitalism, which arose in the immediate aftermath of World War 11 and reached both its fulfillment and a moment of crisis during the 1960s” (Norton, Jameson, 1935).

Hollywood is one of those market which are capable of maintaining capitalist thoughts in order to prevail their authority throughout the world. In contrasting two paintings, which is analogous to the philosophy of Hollywood, Jameson relates postmodernism and depthlessness: “a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense, perhaps the supreme formal feature of all the postmodernisms” (ibid, 119). Reading what Miss Scoons says to Rabbit: “one minute it’s great, the next minute it’s garbage. You have to just go on your your own intuition” (75) testifies to Jameson’s depthlessness of concepts and ideas in postmodernism. They try to assume a “thing” (which) is more a kind of force than anything resembling a character?’ (83) Shepard points to this idea when he puts the words in TYMPANI’s mouth: “Why can’t you get that straight? If they were just looking for a character they’d be going through the casting agancies, they want a phenomenon” (82); it reveals that they just pine for profitable things at the expence of the superficiality of characters, ideas and concepts in this industry.

While Jameson speaks about media and advertisement Foucault argues about “the category of the subject as a means to study the historical discourses of power and knowledge that constitute it” (Norton, Foucault,1617). He says that any state yearns for power to remain solid and stable in the whole world.

Nowadays what we discern from the concept of knowledge differs from what was known before. The alteration to the discourse of modern era changed the concept of knowledge

considerably. As Sara Mills says Foucault argues that “the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as regulated practice that accounts for a number of statements” (qtd. In Mills, *Critical thinkers*, 53) is called discourse, that is, “groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have a coherence and a force to them in common” (Mills, *Discourse*, 7). Discourses are not always the same and they change by the passage of time. Based on Foucault history “Is suspicious of grand narratives and seismic shifts, single causes for historical change and value-laden teleologies of progress. It is a history of the small and multiple changes that lead to alterations in trends of thinking and operating in any given epoch. (Downing, 15). Foucault thinks of discourse (or discourses) in terms of bodies of knowledge. (Grace, 26) Foucault believes that “knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge”. When TYMPANI says that “I’m experimenting with various rhythm structures in the hope of discovering one which will be guaranteed to produce certain trance states in masses of people” (72) the subject of knowledge is being manipulated and experimented to create a new one; to be capable of exerting influence on people.

One of the magisterial theorists among the luminaries who have discussed about the concept of knowledge in postmodern era is Jean Francois Lyotard. He has provided noteworthy body of information to let us understand the postmodern condition and “has set the tone for many recent accounts of postmodernity and postmodernism” (Malpas, 16). In a critical guide to Jean-François Lyotard (2003), Simon Malpas asserts: “Modern systems of thought strive to find universal answers to the questions facing society, and the different answers found by different groups become the bases of political systems and organisations that strive for supremacy” (Malpas, 10). Then he says: “Postmodernity is a challenge to this modern form of social Organization. In contemporary society, postmodern thinkers often argue, the modern ways of organising knowledge and the world have become outmoded and need to be rethought. (ibid 10). What Lanx says: “All I know is that in order to pull this budget out of the whole we’ve got to have something happen that’s never ever happened before. Something unearthly” ( 68) bears witness to Lyotard’s affirmation that “postmodern art disrupts established artistic structures and language games by testifying to the existence of the unrepresentable, not as something missing from the content of a work but as a force that shatters traditional ways of narrating or representing” (Malpas, 49).

According to Lyotard in postmodern worldview the focus is the 'nature' and 'status' of knowledge: “what knowledge is, and how it is generated, organized and employed in contemporary societies” (Malpas, *Critical thinkers* 17). In ‘postmodern condition’ he asserts “who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government” (Lyotard, 9). They need connoisseurs who are “the brain of the city” (78). He claims that the revisions in the meaning of knowledge can even alter our feelings toward different things. “It is not just that we

can store more information on computers, and send messages across the world quickly by post, telephone and now email. It is also that these changes in storage and communication are transforming how we use and value knowledge” (Malpas, Critical thinkers,18). The artists of Shepard need “the one, special, never-before-heard-before rhythm which will drive men crazy” (78). If the rhythm is regarded as that ‘knowledge’ the sentence attests to Lyotard’s belief that the use and value of knowledge has changed.

Based on what Lyotard propounds it is knowledge that has been manipulated recently By capitalist institutions to reach their main aim; that is earning money. “Knowledge in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power is already, and will continue to be, a major—perhaps the major—stake in the worldwide competition for power” (The postmodern Condition, 5). Lyotard argues “These multi-nationals fund vast amounts of research and use the patent laws to claim ownership of the knowledge generated by it, which can then be put to use to make money” (Malpas, 19). What Lanx says in a dialogue with Rabbit is an accurate instance of the production of knowledge by the art industry.

Lanx: I mean you’re not just that are you? You’re not just another ordinary hack. You are supposed to be an artist, right?

Rabbit: Right.

Lanx: A kind of magician or something. Something like that.

Lanx: You dream things up.

Rabbit: Right.

Lanx: Right. So what we need in this case is a three-dimensional invention. Something altogether unheard of before. We have the story, the plot, the stars, the situation, but what’s missing is this uh \_\_ this development. Something awesome and totally new.

Rabbit: I see.

Lanx: It has to somehow transcend the very idea of “character” as we know it today. (67)

As Lanx says in the last sentence they aim to produce another meaning for the notion of character so that it is different from what we know today, therefore they want to transcend the knowledge we have about “character” to generate a new one. In the past sentences we find out that Rabbit is supposed to be a magician and he should “dream things up” (67). Thus the movie they invent becomes so absorbing that Rabbit claims: “The kidnapping has stirred the emotion of millions. Everywhere the voice of outrage is on the people’s lips” (80). Thereby it produces “certain trance states in masses of people.” (72). These are all witnesses revealing that by gaining

the attention of people they produce large amount of money which equates power for capitalism. “The global competition for power is now fought out as a battle for knowledge. Just as it used to be for resources like coal, gas and oil”. Lyotard foresees a time when nations may literally go to war over knowledge, just as they have fought over land and raw materials such as oil in the past” (Malpas, 19). It is based on this notion that rabbit is employed; a ‘Doctor’ who is believed to have the knowledge, and use it as emblem of power, to produce devastation. As he says: Devastation! That’s where the money is! Devastation! (84)

Jean Baudrillard is another well-known postmodern critic whose theories on capitalist hegemony correspond to Shepard’s drama. In “Simulacra and Simulations” he gave his theory about ways of representation. He brought about the concept of Simulacra which invalidates the concept of reality. He believes that what nowadays we see as images ‘are not reality but the representation of reality’. He believes that there are four phases of the image: (1) it is the reflection of the basic reality. (2) it masks and perverts a basic reality. (3) it masks the absence of a basic reality. (4) it bars no relation to any reality whatever: it is its own pure simulacrum (Lodge, 405) and elucidates that In the fourth, it is no longer in the order of the appearance at all, but of simulation (ibid, 405), i.e. the images we see today are all artificial and we should not consider them as real things. “What he means by this is that reality is both made spectacular and distant at the same time: the subject is brought seemingly closer to the world of events, but this world is consumed via signs, which keep the real at a distance” (Lane 71). With reference to Hollywood disaster movies Baudrillard states that “It is pointless to laboriously interpret these films by their relationship with an ‘objective’ social crisis ... The effect of granting precedence to the disaster movie, and other images, is that the real itself becomes film-like. Baudrillard’s analysis of America demonstrates this point in that he views the country through the lens provided by Hollywood cinema. “It is not the least of America’s charms that even outside the movie theatres the whole country is cinematic. The desert you pass through is like the set of a Western, the city a screen of signs and formulas.”<sup>2</sup> It is this sense of a reality that has been completely pervaded by cinema, resulting in the apprehension of the real as film, which is one of the key metaphors for the postmodern” (Postmodernism and film, 43).

Lanx wants to have “some “thing” to make an actual appearance in the middle of (the) movie”(68). They try to make everything “seems abnormally normal in fact.” As TYMPANI talks about Miss SCOONS “She demolishes entire populations with her normalness. She enters an advanced civilization where deranged citizens rule the planets. Her normalness destroys them utterly” (84).they try to produce “something beyond the imagination. Something impossible.” (76). Thus what we see as real is just concocted by adept artists and do not exist in the real world. They know our unfulfilled desires and try their best to create real things out of them. “The media appears to give us abundance when it is actually "empty" of all real content ; it is the site of the playing out of our desires, protecting us at the same time from confronting the everyday

realities of a dangerous and problematic world: "So we live, sheltered by signs , in the denial of the real" (1998b: 34) ( Lane 72).

The statements match Angel City when Lanx replies to Rabbit:

Rabbit: Have you tried holographs or whatever they're called?

Lanx: No, no! You don't get the picture. We're looking for an actual miracle. Nothing technological. The real thing.

Rabbit: A miracle.

Lanx: That's right! Right here in the Culver city.

They try to produce something miraculous which seems to be real, a seemingly real thing which is not in fact real. Lanx needs Rabbit to use his power to create an extraordinary thing which no one can realize the fake. "It is this third level of simulation, where the model comes before the constructed world, that Baudrillard calls the hyperreal" (lane, 30). In Angel city Rabbit tries his best to imagine a "thing" which is exactly similar to the theory of Baudrillard. Rabbit says: "Well, if they can imagine the possibility of it maybe we can imagine the thing itself." (76) Rabbit tries to come up with a character that nobody has ever seen before. Something in flesh and blood. Not just an idea but something so incredible that as soon as they come in contact with it they'd pass out or go into convulsions or something" (76). That's what they're looking for. Yes that's what people are looking for because they enjoy the thrill of this hyperreal situation: "hyperreal because they cannot say that one position is real and another false" (lane 98). The art industries realized that people enjoy hyperreal and took advantage of this situation to manage their mind and turn arts in to commodity.

## Conclusion

Overall the influence of capitalism remains at the center of focus in the interpretation of many literary pieces in the recent decades. As discussed above the concept of reality has changed by postmodern capitalism so that they can achieve their prime goal; that is earning money. Moreover, nowadays capitalist ideas have become so deep-rooted in people's minds that the conceived images have become parts of their lives. The art agents employ their full capacity for manipulating and shaping people's identity through representing everything which is representable. Today they are 'powerful'.

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