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Consumption, Creativity, and Authors around 1800: The Case of E. T. A. Hoffmann

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Specialization, or the division of labour, defined European economies around 1800. The cultural response of German literary writers such as Goethe, Schiller, and the Early German Romantics to the conceptual nexus of consumption and production is well known. But other canonical writers, such as E. T. A. Hoffmann, have been misunderstood in relation to classical-cum-Romantic thought. This essay offers an overview of contemporary authors' attitudes towards specialization, and to consumer culture around 1800 specifically. It then embeds a close reading of Hoffmann's story *Der Sandmann* (1816) into that historical context. Consumerism is the source of Hoffmann's creativity and becomes the subject of his critique. But it is not the counter-concept of his art. Hoffmann's literary works achieve their critique of consumption through an immanent form of irony that is enacted within literature as a self-conscious commodity, without transcendence or some theoretical (Hegelian) overcoming. Thus the final part of this article asks how we might describe Hoffmann's position theoretically, drawing critically upon the twentieth-century thought of Guy Debord.

Short title for running heads: E. T. A. Hoffmann and Consumption around 1800

Keywords: Consumption, Consumerism, German Literature and Thought around 1800, E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Der Sandmann*

Goethe's protagonist in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* (1795–96) voices the perceived middle-class problem of the age. The middle classes at the turn of the century struggled with the process of individuation, or 'personelle Ausbildung', as Wilhelm phrases it. Comprising merchants and the professions (including scholars and literary authors), this growing social group could acquire capital, skills, and even insights, but not the ultimate attribute of 'personality', which remained the preserve of the aristocracy: 'Ein Bürger kann sich Verdienst erwerben und zur höchsten Not seinen Geist ausbilden; seine Persönlichkeit geht aber verloren, er mag sich stellen, wie er will' (MA, V, p. 289). While members of the middle classes presented and asserted themselves materially, not least through immediately recognizable forms of consumption (such as fashionable clothing), the nobility was clothed by an embodied confidence and attitude towards the world (a 'Grazie' or 'Art'), since its status was already a given. Goethe's concern is that a subjective deficit arises in middle-class men as a result, despite their material, societal gains. More specifically, Goethe writes of a loss to the subject rather than merely insufficient subjective growth, because of his anthropological idea of an original, whole self. His 'middle-class problem' is not intended as an accurate historical reflection of the empirical, bygone well-being of the middle classes before (proto-)industrialization, though it is posited as a real phenomenon affecting the present — and therefore as a cultural criticism that should be taken seriously. Indeed, literature around 1800 — not least by Goethe — gave rise to a paradoxical utopian nostalgia that has provided the intellectual basis for cultural theory ever since.

The division of labour was the defining idea of European economies in the eighteenth century. It secured increased production, and with it of course consumption, which for Adam Smith

¹ Professor Michael Perraudin retired from The University of Sheffield in 2017. I would like to thank him, and Professor Henk de Berg, for stimulating discussions, intellectual and political.

was production's 'sole end and purpose'.² Thus 'specialization' stands in, as shorthand, for this nexus of production and consumption that profoundly changed European cultures. At its most basic, specialization in the German context first meant a distinction between agriculture and commerce; but it went on to denote the commercial offering and uptake of services and things — captured in Smith's idealized example for the efficient manufacture of pins. Goethe's answer to such cultural change was a concept of self-cultivation and education of the mind to complement the specialized self, the middle-class producer-consumer. From the perspective of systems theory, Thomas Wegmann understands Wilhelm's character formation in the *Lehrjahre* as both an alternative and equivalent to Werner's accounting eye.³ The *Wirtschaftsbürgertum* and the *Bildungsbürgertum* emerged together around 1800, and each entailed social practices that were constitutive of meaning, and typical of their respective sub-groups of middle-class society. The educated middle classes were more prevalent in German principalities than the well-to-do merchant set, since compared to centralised nations the large number of small states increased the amount of bureaucratic opportunities available. For Wegmann, Wilhelm's process of a disciplined 'taking stock' of himself is the functional equivalent to double-entry bookkeeping for the economically-minded, characterized by Werner.

Schiller went one step further than Goethe, contrasting the social benefits of specialization not only with individual shortcomings, but with subjective fallacy in *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* (1795). The division of labour leads to the rational advancement of man, yet also to the personal detriment of individual men: 'Einseitigkeit in Uebung der Kräfte führt zwar das Individuum unausbleiblich zum Irrthum, aber die Gattung zur

² Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, 2 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977 [1776]), II, p. 179 (Book 4, Chapter 8).

³ Thomas Wegmann, 'Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre, die Arbeit am Selbst und die doppelte Buchführung', in *Goethe und die Arbeit*, ed. by Miriam Albracht, Iuditha Balint, and Frank Weiher (Paderborn: Fink, 2018), pp. 97–119.

Wahrheit.⁴ Schiller agreed with Goethe on the need for *Bildung*, but called for the development of a general social consciousness through aesthetic education. In their combined programme for a cultural complement — or, in Schiller’s stronger terms, a generalized addition or corrective — to social change that was framed economically in (Scottish) Enlightenment thought, Goethe and Schiller shared company with the contemporary German writers Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Wilhelm von Humboldt, as Roy Pascal has shown.⁵

Although these canonical thinkers have gone down in history for their intellectual response to specialization, they were somewhat out of touch with the historical situation of their fellow middle-class countrymen. For the success of specialization, which was surely required for the ‘middle-class problem’ to plausibly take precedence, was less evident in German territories than elsewhere in Europe. In some senses that success was actively restricted by those in power. Such comparative historical fact flies in the face of German authors’ contemporary perception of change. ‘Kein Staat ist mehr als Fabrik verwaltet worden, als Preußen, seit Friedrich Wilhelm des Ersten Tode’, declared Novalis in a famous line that may have been experientially true, but expressed neither economic nor political truth at the time.⁶ Britain began to industrialize in the mid-eighteenth century. While the regional pockets of the Rhineland and Saxony, where Goethe and Schiller were based, were advanced by German standards from the late 1780s onwards, ‘German’ industrialization as a whole still lagged behind Britain, Flanders, France, the Netherlands,

⁴ NA, 9, p. 327 (Letter VI).

⁵ Roy Pascal, “‘Bildung’ and the Division of Labour”, in *German Studies: Presented to Walter Horace Bruford* (London: Harrap, 1962), pp. 14–28.

⁶ Novalis, *Schriften: Die Werke Friedrich von Hardenbergs*, ed. by Paul Kluckhohn and Richard Samuel, 6 vols (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960–98), II: *Das philosophische Werk I*, ed. by Richard Samuel (1965), p. 494.

Switzerland, and Sweden until far into the nineteenth century.⁷ Moreover, German consumption was hampered by comparatively rural principalities with few (and small) urban centres, and by a lack of colonies, which made imports both more expensive and more politically controversial than in, for instance, Britain or the Netherlands. Further, consumption was consciously hindered by a strikingly high number of sumptuary laws in German-speaking central Europe. As Sheilagh Ogilvie notes, ‘at least 1,350 ordinances were issued between 1244 and 1816 regulating clothing alone, which in turn comprised only one aspect of consumption.’⁸ Such regulations were enforced by fines, confiscation, denial of poor relief, and public shaming. Social as well as political discipline was strong, therefore, and stacked against the emergent German consumer. By contrast, there were no sumptuary laws enacted in the Netherlands at all, and none in England after 1604. But a consumer culture emerged in German territories all the same, in spite of obstacles and opposition.⁹ Its success is thus surprising — if still modest from a comparative, European perspective.

A related issue was that there were serious shortcomings in German craftsmanship, as a result of the social environment in German states. Justus Möser remarked of London workshops in 1775: ‘Bey den Goldschmieden ist mehr Silberwerk als alle Fürsten in Deutschland auf ihren Tafeln haben.’¹⁰ Möser thought that both the craft professions and the German nation would benefit if the prestige of craftsmanship increased, and so he wished that more children from moneyed families would embark on apprenticeships. The comparatively lower quality of German consumer products

⁷ See David S. Landes, *Der entfesselte Prometheus: Technologischer Wandel und industrielle Entwicklung in Westeuropa von 1750 bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: Kiepenhauer & Witsch, 1983); Sheilagh Ogilvie, ‘The Beginnings of Industrialization’, in *Germany: A New Social and Economic History, Vol. II: 1630–1800*, ed. by S. Ogilvie (London: Arnold, 1996), pp. 263–308; Sheilagh Ogilvie, ‘The European Economy in the Eighteenth Century’, in *The Short Oxford History of Europe, Vol. XII: The Eighteenth Century: Europe 1688–1815*, ed. by T. W. C. Blanning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 91–130.

⁸ Sheilagh Ogilvie, ‘Consumption, Social Capital and the “Industrious Revolution” in Early Modern Germany’, *Journal of Economic History*, 70 (2010), 287–325 (p. 305).

⁹ On German consumerism around 1800, see Karin Wurst, *Fabricating Pleasure: Fashion, Entertainment, and Consumption in Germany (1780–1830)*. *German Literary Theory and Cultural Studies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), and Michael North, *Genuss und Glück des Lebens: Kulturkonsum im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003).

¹⁰ Justus Möser, *Patriotische Phantasien*, 4 vols (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1775–86), I (1775), p. 27.

was often remarked upon in passing. Karl Philipp Moritz, on writing about his travels in England in 1782 (and first published the following year), describes an English cobbler noticing ‘die schlechte Arbeit’ of a shoe that Moritz had brought with him from Germany.¹¹ Goethe, Schiller, and others in the German intellectual sphere around 1800 too often glossed over the (modest) achievements of specialization and its strong opposition, even in their own provinces; and they were not concerned with how a domestic economics of production and consumption might have been improved or reflected upon in practical terms — in their literary or aesthetic thought, anyway. Their position was oppositional, and they focused instead on the ethical problem of personal expression.

Goethe’s solution was not only *Bildung*, but also another, ethical concept: love. His verse epic *Hermann und Dorothea* (1797) followed the *Lehrjahre*, and as a *Taschenbuch für 1798* (according to the original subtitle) it was most obviously published for the commercial literary market. The apothecary supports marrying for love as an alternative mode of self-betterment to the accumulation of capital. The artefact of consumer culture in the poem is the garden gnome and its grotto, presumably a figurine made of wood or porcelain — and not mass-produced in Germany until the 1880s, by firms such as Philipp Griebel. For Goethe, true love was, and always had been, opposed to consumption. The two should not be confused. In his first novel, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774, revised 1787), the protagonist stands in for the new middle-class man who wants less a specific, professional career than to become a meaningful individual in his own right — such as the aristocrats. Hence Werther’s turbulent sexuality — the text’s sensuousness derives from Rococo, but takes an aggressive, narcissistic turn — and his consumerist self-fashioning. He is defined sartorially, and described as well-acquainted with other notable items of contemporary middle-class consumption: he can tune a piano, and takes up his usual place on a sofa.¹² Despite

¹¹ Carl Philip Moritz, *Reisen eines Deutschen in England im Jahr 1782*, 2nd edn (Berlin: Maurer, 1785), p. 216.

¹² See also K. F. Hilliard, ‘Religious and Secular Poetry and Epic (1700–1780)’, in *The Camden House History of German Literature, Vol. 5: German Literature of the Eighteenth Century: The Enlightenment and Sensibility*, ed. by Barbara Becker-Cantarino (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2005), pp. 105–28 (pp. 110–11).

Werther's professed love for Lotte, and the higher ideals of nature and art, his desire is projected onto a known and widely-read literary name — Klopstock — a popular, pocket edition of Homer, a pet canary, and a ribbon that belonged to Lotte, among other things. Following Marx, we can easily identify Werther's feelings that are displaced onto objects as fetishes for commodities. Since Werther meets a sorry end, the book as a whole can be read as a warning against consumerism.

Ironically, though, *Werther* became commercially successful as such a warning (even if Goethe hardly benefitted from it, and its message was frequently misunderstood by readers). Novalis quipped of Goethe: 'Er hat in der deutschen Literatur das getan, was *Wedgwood* in der englischen Kunstwelt getan hat.'¹³ Quite literally, the writer's story that took the book market by storm inspired popular pottery. Visitors to the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, for instance, can view a Meissen coffee set from circa 1790, adorned with scenes from *Werther* by Johann David Schubert.¹⁴ This artefact is just one of much contemporary *Werther* merchandise.¹⁵ And as a bestseller, *Werther* is an example of a specifically literary commodity *par excellence*. Michael Minden sees in *Werther* 'the triumph of a particular kind of mental pleasure that is the condition of both Romanticism and modern consumerism'.¹⁶ Similarly, the novel is the sole example from German literature for Colin Campbell's sociological thesis that European Romanticism, deriving from Sensibility, is the ethic that actually produced modern consumerism. Campbell's work, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987), complements Max Weber's canonical essay from 1904–05, *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*.¹⁷ Whereas aspects of the protestant ethic of self-denial, thrift, and hard work aided the development

¹³ Novalis, p. 412.

¹⁴ 'Europe 1600–1815', Room 1 at the V&A Museum, case CA13. Museum number: 1328H–1871.

¹⁵ See Bruce Duncan, *Goethe's Werther and the Critics* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005).

¹⁶ Michael Minden, *Modern German Literature* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 14.

¹⁷ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (London: Blackwell, 1987).

of capitalist production, according to Weber, the romantic ethic of feeling, imagination, and individualism provided (and still provides) ethical support, in Campbell's view, for the pleasurable, even hedonistic aspects of consumption. Crucially, however, consumerism for Campbell was not intended by the Romantics, whose philosophy was represented by Fichte and Schelling among thinkers who, like Goethe, aspired to *Bildung*. Rather, the Romantics' desire to understand the world they were in, create everyday meaning in it, and invest affectively in their relationship towards it, unintentionally caused consumerist culture as much as it fuelled conceptual philosophizing. The reception of *Werther* could be called a paradigmatic case in point: it is precisely the ill effects of literature that Goethe sought to counteract for the rest of his career. But Goethe could not stem the consumerist tide.

Goethe grappled with the problem of consumption on a theoretical plane in Weimar. It was here, too, that Friedrich Johann Bertuch — famous for his *Journal des Luxus und der Moden* and his support of British consumer-driven, free-market Enlightenment economics — lived and worked (also, like Goethe, for the duke). Weimar Classicism, as Daniel Purdy rightly argues, was the very counterpoint to Bertuch's ideas for society's progress that sought to bring industrial prowess to German territories via consumer demand. But since Bertuch conceived consumerism as having a civic, pedagogical purpose, Goethe's alternative programme of development shared a common aim with its supposed antithesis.¹⁸ Hence Matt Erlin's 2014 book, *Necessary Luxuries: Books, Literature, and the Culture of Consumption in Germany, 1770–1815*, probes whether there were actually two poles in consumerism debates at all. Erlin's study is the most wide-ranging examination to date of German literature and the culture of consumption around 1800. It is simultaneously compelling in its subtlety, and yet conventional in its stock emphasis on Goethe's achievement.

¹⁸ Daniel Purdy, 'Weimar Classicism and the Origins of Consumer Culture', in *Unwrapping Goethe's Weimar: Essays in Cultural Studies and Local Knowledge*, ed. by Burkard Henke, Susanne Kord, and Simon Richter (Woodbridge: Camden House, 2000), pp. 36–62.

In considering a broad selection of contemporary authors, Novalis and especially Goethe emerge as Erlin's heroes of the hour. Novalis's fragmentary novel written at the turn of the century, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, is, Erlin writes, symptomatic for literature in functioning as a 'crucial means of training desire, and, one should add, harmonizing it with the productivity requirements of an emergent capitalist system'. However, Novalis shows a restrained, 'cautious embrace of the seductions of that system', manifest in his textual self-reflection.¹⁹ Goethe brought such self-reflexivity — here a shorthand for Romantic irony — to a higher level of sophistication still. According to Erlin, Goethe's essay 'Kunst und Handwerk' from around 1800 reveals the author's 'nagging suspicion' that luxury and art might not be diametrically opposed after all.²⁰ His novel *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* (1809) is remarkable for admitting consumption's complexity, and yet it carves out a distinct realm for creativity all the same, via self-reflection. The work turns 'precisely those profane objects of the commodity sphere into repositories of deep and multifaceted symbolic resonance'.²¹ Thus there is a tension in Erlin's thesis: literature and consumerism share a cultural substrate, but they remain oppositional — if only because of literary self-reflection, which elevates the form. Literature is a product, we might say in Luhmannian terms, of second-order observation: it has the capacity to reflect on phenomena, including its own medium, at a point of remove. Consequently, for Erlin art is a 'positive luxury' insofar as 'the ideal artwork would seem to be possessed of the ability to regulate itself' — via irony.²² But such regulation is the discrete added value of art, not a capacity of consumerism or indeed of consumerist culture per se. To borrow the concepts of Wilhelm von Humboldt's essay on Goethe's *Herrmann und Dorothea*, it is the epic poet who can (and should) unify the virtues of both nature and culture — the latter understood in part as

¹⁹ Matt Erlin, *Necessary Luxuries: Books, Literature, and the Culture of Consumption in Germany, 1770–1815* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 201–02.

²⁰ Erlin, p. 51

²¹ Erlin, p. 227.

²² Erlin, p. 238.

material consumption — through complete *Bildung*. Goethe apparently manages to meet Humboldt's tall order for literature, to some extent.²³

Other German writers at the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries adopted broader 'centrist' positions for cultural practice more generally. They developed their thought before the romantic realism of Heinrich Heine, along the way to an age that Georg Büchner declared was 'rein materiell' by 1836.²⁴ That is to say, some German authors acknowledged that consumption had become an integral, unavoidable, if at times still subversive part of cultural life, and that it was important to think more explicitly *with* and *through* consumerism: not against it, nor celebrate it. Literature could be a part of the cultural response, but after the high-tide of Weimar Classicism and Early German Romanticism — Romanticism, in short — literature was itself understood as more thoroughly embedded within consumer culture. Irony, in effect, became at once more intricate and more radical: there was no escaping it.

Most philosophical among such critically consumerist thinkers was Hegel. Influenced by Smith, Hegel's notebooks written in Jena suggest that fashion (including consumer goods such as clothing) is not merely a trivial expression of our identity, but instead a means of realizing our abstract individuality: through the free combination of available forms in the everyday existence we inhabit.²⁵ Hegel's first mature work, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807), arose from this phase of his thought. In its preface, Hegel mocks a circumvention of the process of what he calls

²³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Ueber Göthes Herrmann und Dorothea* (1799), in *Werke in fünf Bänden (Studienausgabe)*, ed. by Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, 5 vols (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2010). II: *Schriften zur Altertumskunde und Ästhetik/Die Vasken*, pp. 339–40.

²⁴ On Heine, see Michael Perraudin, 'Illusions Lost and Found: the Experiential World of Heine's *Buch der Lieder*', in *A Companion to the Works of Heinrich Heine*, ed. by Roger Cook (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2002), pp. 37–53. Georg Büchner, cited in Perraudin, p. 61; see also Büchner, *Werke und Briefe: Münchner Ausgabe*, ed. by Karl Pönbacher et al. (Munich: Hanser, 1988), p. 319.

²⁵ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke, 31 vols (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968–), VIII: *Jenaer Systementwürfe III*, ed. by Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Johann Heinrich Trede (1987), p. 223. See also Henk de Berg, 'Der Mensch in der Industriegesellschaft: Versuch einer Anthropodizee', in *Industriekulturen: Literatur, Kunst und Gesellschaft*, ed. by Marcin Gołaszewski and Kalina Kupczynska (Frankfurt/Main: Lang, 2012), pp. 23–40 (p. 37). More generally, see also Henk de Berg, *Das Ende der Geschichte und der bürgerliche Rechtsstaat: Hegel–Kojève–Fukuyama* (Tübingen: Franke, 2007).

‘Bildung’ (translated, in his own philosophical terms, as any attempt to short-circuit the rigorous route towards the Absolute) by comparing the substitution of proper reflection to drinking chicory in place of coffee.²⁶ The comparison is culturally resonant, and probably political. Frederick the Great famously banned coffee in 1769, in an effort to protect domestic chicory producers; rulers of other German provinces enforced similar regulations, or prohibitive taxes and measures. In Osnabrück in the 1770s, for example, debtors of coffee and sugar could not be taken to court, since their loans — by analogy with gambling credit — were considered immoral, anyway.²⁷ Goethe helped foster German social discipline against such fashionable foreign imports through his critical depiction of the domestic coffee craze in *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*.²⁸ By contrast, Hegel takes consumption as a given, and uses the currency of debates about coffee to polemical, philosophical effect. *Bildung*, for him, can be equated to the consumerist discovery of real taste, so the latter cannot be all bad if the former is declared a necessity — though this line is admittedly an opening joke, employed to induct the reader into his more abstract philosophy.

Hegel returned to his philosophical position on consumption in his last major work, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (1821). Here he acknowledges that consumer needs are created, especially by those in society who seek a profit. But Hegel understands the combination of immediate (or ‘natural’) and mediated (or ‘intellectual’) needs within the realm of representational thought, or *Vorstellung*, as a moment of social liberation. The checks and balances of a consumer culture are their mediation, therefore, on both an individual and a societal level. In this way, Hegel argues for an intermediary position between the optimism of Hume in the 1750s — that a rapid rise in consumption is to society’s advantage — and the pessimism of Rousseau in the 1760s, who saw

²⁶ Hegel, IX: *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*, ed. by Wolfgang Bonsiepen and Reinhard Heede (1980), p. 47.

²⁷ Justus Möser, *Patriotische Phantasien*, III, 2nd edn (1778), p. 166.

²⁸ See also Johannes D. Kaminski, ‘Werner’s Accounting Eye: Circulating Blood and Money in *Wilhelm Meisters theatralische Sendung*’, *PEGS*, 83 (2014), 37–52.

luxury as enslaving citizens to one another.²⁹ And unlike Goethe, Schiller, or the Early German Romantics, for Hegel the answer to the cultural question of specialization does not lie in literature and its self-reflection specifically, but rather in *cultural* self-awareness.

In this sense, E. T. A. Hoffmann has more in common with Hegel than with his literary peers, such as Goethe or, indeed, Novalis. To some extent, Hoffmann's break from his slightly more senior literary contemporaries is unsurprising: as Jürgen Barkhoff, among other scholars, has shown, Hoffmann deconstructs texts by Novalis in particular.³⁰ He is often read as a semi-Biedermeier, semi-Realist author. Like Hegel, Hoffmann is a centrist on the contemporary issue of consumption. He was more attuned than either Goethe or Schiller to the pleasures and liberal, identity-constituting advantages of consumption, as well as to the anxieties, risks, and commodity fetishes that are part and parcel of it. He was more consumerist — though still a critical writer — than most subsequent scholars of German literature and culture have acknowledged. (Indeed, academics remain too influenced by the Weimar duo, who defined the debates of their age.) I have studied the hairdresser and the poodle in Hoffmann's two novels, and suggested that they were stock figures of contemporary consumer culture around 1800; they are satirized in Hoffmann's works, but enable colourful subject formation nonetheless.³¹ Ironically, Hoffmann's conception of (Romantic) artistic autonomy remains rooted within the contingent realm of everyday consumption. It creates itself within, rather than transcends, an economically modern world of things. As such, it

²⁹ Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus, 2nd edn, in 21 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), VII: *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, 348–51. For a succinct summary of Hume and Rousseau, see Frank Trentmann, *Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First* (London: Penguin, 2016), pp. 99–100.

³⁰ Jürgen Barkhoff, 'Vampirismus und Mesmerismus: Parasitär-fluidale Kommunikation im Vergleich', in *Dracula unbound: Kulturwissenschaftliche Lektüren des Vampirs*, ed. by Christian Begemann, Britta Herrmann, and Harald Neumeyer (Freiburg/Breisgau: Rombach, 2008), pp. 75–97.

³¹ Seán M. Williams, 'E. T. A. Hoffmann and the Hairdresser around 1800', *PEGS*, 85 (2016), 54–66, and 'E. T. A. Hoffmann und die Alltagskultur um 1800', *E. T. A. Hoffmann Jahrbuch*, (2017), 7–28.

is more ironic than Hoffmann's predecessors — in what we could call, with Hegel, a *thoroughgoing* fashion. Although for Hoffmann, unlike for Hegel, there is no eventual or ideal overcoming.

To call Hoffmann a consumerist is by itself not a new thesis, albeit still a highly unusual one. Arnd Bohm is an exception among scholars in his analysis of the story *Der goldne Topf* (1814–19) as a consumers' paradise, as well as in his interpretation of Hoffmann's poetological statements as implicitly consumerist. For Bohm, consumerism becomes explicit in Hoffmann's tales. My own work has sought rather to embed Hoffmann's two novels, which concern the growth of self-made characters, within sources about consumption from cultural history, and to read them alongside lesser-known contemporary works of literature and music. In light of this approach, Bohm's earlier conclusions for Hoffmann in general, and for *Der goldne Topf* in particular, are all the more convincing. He writes: 'The story of Anselmus is his education to be a modern consumer. In that role, he will have a modern identity and will enjoy good fortune, participating in the modern economy.'³² Not all of Hoffmann's consumer stories are so positive, though; nor are the negative cases anti-consumerist, wherever the problems of consumption are portrayed.

The idea that Anselm of *Der goldne Topf* 'educates' himself in modern consumerism is significant for two reasons. First, it plays on the concept of *Bildung* and is a version of education that is most thoroughly grounded in everyday life, unlike Goethe's or Schiller's conception, which is instead intellectual, or Hegel's, which implies the interplay between the concrete (trivial) and the abstract (intellectual) spheres. Second, the consumers of German territories around 1800 were the upper middle classes and the nobility. What linked both of these groups, and enabled the upwards transition from the former into the latter, was not only consumption, but also — and relatedly — education. Anselm of *Der goldne Topf* is a student, as well as a self-taught pupil of consumerism, as Bohm points out.

³² Arnd Bohm, 'Consumers' Paradise: E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Der goldne Topf*, *European Romantic Review*, 2 (1991), 1–22 (p. 4).

Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann* (1816) is particularly rich in implications for contemporary consumer culture. In this famous tale, the (proto-)industrialist 'Automaten-fabrikant[]' who produces Olimpia, the object of Nathanel's interpersonal and consumerist desire, is the Professor of physics, Spalanzani.³³ Then, as today, the universities drove the innovation necessary for a consumer economy, though their contribution was and is tempered by public opinion, and is soon sacrificed by an organization in an instance of reputational risk (as is the case with Spalanzani). Universities, too, are and were the cradle of emergent consumerists. In German-speaking states, such an economy around 1800 was enabled despite regulatory resistance, and growing — if still largely 'cottage' — industries. To be sure, Spalanzani is also described as a 'Mechanikus' (p. 46), and the story as a whole bears a more obvious relationship to the contemporary (and much discussed) topic of man as machine, or fears and fantasies about automata. However, the word 'Fabrikant' at that time could both refer to the owner of a workshop and suggest consumer-oriented production. Technology is made, after all, for consumption. Olimpia, as Spalanzani's alleged daughter, is purposefully designed for the consumer setting of sociable, fashionable get-togethers, even if she took twenty years to make by hand (p. 45); she is commodified in the tale; and Spalanzani as a 'Mechanicus' is lexically aligned with the deceitful or at least suspicious salesman, Coppola (p. 35). Factories in our modern sense were in fact scattered throughout German territories around 1800, and the use of heavy machines was at this stage rarely implemented on an industrialized scale. Consumer goods in the sort of contexts in which Olimpia is presented and 'used' were thus the luxury, often bespoke items made by artisans as well as technical wizards, though they were popular. As such, consumer goods were not widely affordable, they were saved for or bought at the expense of necessities, and they were prized upon purchase. Such items were put on display, on and for social occasions. As Frank Trentmann writes, 'the eighteenth century

³³ E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Sämtliche Werke in sechs Bänden*, ed. by Harmut Steinecke et al., 6 vols (Frankfurt/ Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985–2004), III: *Nachtstücke [...]*, ed. by Hartmut Steinecke (1985), p. 46.

prioritized highly visible and immediate forms of consumption — dress, furnishings and tea sets — over hidden pipes, baths and utilities.³⁴ Consequently, must-have objects around 1800 were the source of not only show when it came to subjectivity, but also much fantasy, for good and for ill. In *Der Sandmann*, consumption is depicted with remarkable literary imagination. Consumerism is the source of Hoffmann's creativity, and becomes the subject of his critique. But it is not the counter-concept of his 'art'.

Der Sandmann is most famous for its motif of the eyes, the blurring of vision and dreams, and for its portrayal of an unstable mental state. The narrative perspective, and the worldview of its protagonist, Nathanael, is in both cases early modern capitalism. The story begins with a botched sales scene: the pitch of a 'Wetterglashändler' who unnerves Nathanael, disturbing him to the extent that he says Coppola's visit destroyed his life (p. 11). Citing John O'Neill, Bohm remarks that the modern consumer is produced by 'anxiety-inducing processes';³⁵ in this case, we can say that Nathanael's consumer anxiety initiates the very telling of the tale. It has a physical effect on Nathanael's perspective, for once he banishes his fear and buys binoculars, his literal sight is steered towards Olimpia. And more generally, consumer anxiety has a psychological effect on Nathanael's perception of the world around him. In the opening volume of a revised edition of *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (originally published 1867), Marx explains that the relationship between material objects is not merely physical, but rather assumes a 'phantasmagorische Form' by

³⁴ Trentmann, p. 59.

³⁵ Bohm, p. 7; see also John O'Neill, *Five Bodies: The Human Shape of Modern Society* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 102.

pointing out that the social construction of our relationships with and via commodities is not like the purely physiological sphere of sight.³⁶ Just over fifty years earlier, Hoffmann already undermines this instructive opposition: ideology (*Weltanschauung*) and vision are both conditioned by consumption. Consumer culture can become all-consuming.

Nathanael's consumer anxiety continues throughout *Der Sandmann*. Whereas he at first buys nothing and threatens to push Coppola down the stairs, he later purchases a 'Taschenperspektiv' from him (p. 36). Peter Brandes has emphasized how visual aids became a popular acquisition in Hoffmann's time, not least due to the rapid increase in the reading public (and their awareness of what they could and could not physically see on the page).³⁷ While it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that the industrial mass manufacture of individualized lenses took off, so-called 'Lorgnetten' with a handle became fashionable around 1800 and are offered by Coppola to Nathanael. Coppola's wares are among the must-have technologies of the age. Nathanael's compulsion to purchase a magnifying lens despite his initial unease is because he reassures himself that, rationally, he has nothing to fear after all. He thereby heeds Clara's advice, after he had mistakenly confided in her through a misdirected letter. But his release from superstition gives way to an anxiety that he has been swindled. Nathanael worries that Coppola might laugh at him, 'weil ich ihm das kleine Perspektiv gewiß viel zu teuer bezahlt habe – zu teuer bezahlt!' (p. 36). Nathanael's perspective on the world and real or imagined interactions are framed by both a general, conscious unease about consumption, and an uncritical embrace of commodification. Taken together, these two typical facets of consumerism lead to Nathanael's

³⁶ Karl Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der ökonomischen Ökonomie*, ed. by Friedrich Engels, 4th edn, 3 vols (Hamburg: Meissner, 1890), I: *Der Produktionsprozess des Kapitals*, p. 72 [I.i.iv]. This section, and its concept of commodity fetish, does not appear in the original edition. See the latest *Marx-Engels-Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA), <<http://telota.bbaw.de/mega/>> [accessed 08 March 2018].

³⁷ Peter Brandes, 'Diskursanalyse/Wissenspoetik – optische Täuschungen: Zur Ordnung von Wissen und Nicht-Wissen in *Der Sandmann*', in *Zugänge zur Literaturtheorie: 17 Modellanalysen zu E. T. A. Hoffmanns 'Der Sandmann'*, ed. by Oliver Jahraus (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2016), pp. 123–37.

madness. Or to put it more precisely: his anxious paralysis, then put aside by an unconscious commodification and fetishization of human interactions that is uncanny, unhinges his mind.

At this point in history, there was good reason for a character such as Nathanael to be an anxious consumer. He is engaged to Clara, who is portrayed as helping him overcome his consumer anxiety; but it is also her support for rational consumption that prompts Nathanael's ensuing psychological turmoil. Hoffmann here plays on a relatively new economic microstructure of the state, and thus of the matrix of production and consumption. For Clara, a happy ending is equivalent to 'häusliches Glück', which could be understood as the domestic bliss of a 'fortunate household' (p. 46). Married couples in the Romantic era had to establish an economic unit of production and consumption by themselves: the modern family. This institution came at a financial cost (hence the relatively high percentage of people who remained unwed).³⁸ For Nathanael, marrying Clara would lead to an entity that meant self-regulation of the couple's (and any children's) supply and demand of products and labour. Nathanael's fear could be interpreted, therefore, as expressive of a contemporary, middle-class male cultural anxiety about the new economic burden a fiancée signified, despite the ideal of marrying for love. Perhaps it is acting upon Clara's reassurance — which speaks to the common sense, and Enlightenment economic sense, of the modern capitalist system — that causes Nathanael's distress as much as his interaction, as a consumer, with Coppola. In other words, the spectre of consumerism might be said to have been as alarming as consumerism itself. The act of purchasing became conflated with its phantasmagorical possibilities. Indeed, we learn that since Coppola's first visit, for Nathanael '[a]lles, das ganze Leben war ihm Traum and Ahnung geworden' (p. 29).

38 See especially Jan de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behavior and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

We should also note a further cultural, and less gendered, anxiety about consumption around 1800. The sort of salesman that Nathanael encounters, and who moves from house to house, is called a ‘Händler’ and a ‘Krämer’ in the story. An Italian, Coppola is a foreigner of dubious character: he is repeatedly described as ‘widerwärtig’ (p. 36). A short story by August Gottlieb Meißner from 1796, republished as part of the author’s collected works in 1813 and posited as a source text for Hoffmann’s tale *Ignaz Denner* in the same collection as *Der Sandmann*, capitalizes on the idea that hawkers in the late eighteenth century were fraudsters, brigands, and even murders.³⁹ The distrust of this marginalized social group that often worked in the shadows was widespread. In 1775, Möser criticized peddlers in particular for being not only unscrupulous, but also unpatriotic sorts of salesmen: they went in search of poorer nations where products were cheaper, imported them for resale, and thereby undercut domestic producers. Möser charged such friends of foreign nations (contrasted with good patriots) with depriving German workers of their daily bread. Especially the Italians specialized in glassware, he says, such as barometers and glass figurines.⁴⁰ Coppola — who sells barometers and spectacles — characterizes this cultural (and culturally suspicious) stereotype. Itinerant traders were unregulated throughout the German territories, without the rights and responsibilities of merchants: according to the *Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preußischen Staaten* of 1794, ‘Krämer in Dörfern und Flecken, Hausirer, Trödler, und gemeine Viktualienhändler, haben nicht die Rechte der Kaufleute.’⁴¹ Erlin shows, using complementary evidence, that ‘the opposition between *Kaufmann* and *Krämer* [...] appears to be a

³⁹ August Gottlieb Meißner, *Der Hundssattler und der Leinweber*, in *A. G. Meissners sämtliche Werke*, 36 vols (Vienna: Anton Doll, 1813–14), xv: *Kriminal-Geschichten*, pp. 100–19. See also Carl Georg von Maassen, ‘E. T. A. Hoffmanns Nachtstück *Ignaz Denner* und sein Vorbild’, *Der grundgescheute Antiquarius*, 1 (1922), 179–185.

⁴⁰ Möser (1775), pp. 26–41 (p. 40).

⁴¹ *Allgemeines Landrecht für die Preußischen Staaten, Neue Ausgabe*, 5 vols (Berlin: Nauk, 1804), III, p. 451 (II.8 §486).

fairly common one in the period'.⁴² Little wonder, then, that Coppola is a frightful figure in *Der Sandman*.

Consumerism is not only driven by anxiety. In *The Joyless Economy* (1976), Tibor Scitovsky notes that consumption can make us comfortable, but in doing so it ensures a need for pleasure — an insatiable and recurring desire that creates a permanent cycle of consumerism, boredom, and pleasure-seeking.⁴³ Nathanel's consumer anxiety is soon replaced by uncritical, unconscious commodification, in pursuit of pleasure. The irony of his desire for Olimpia as an alternative to marriage with Clara is that he perceives Olimpia as different from most women, who are conventionally consumerist; but he commodifies her as the non-consumerist ideal, and entrenches consumerism in her social environment all the more. The narrator paints a picture of Olimpia as contrary to consumerist culture and middle-class domesticity in drawing rooms circa 1800: a standard interior for Hoffmann's era, and historicized by Anja Gerigk.⁴⁴

[Sie] stickte und strickte nicht, sie sah nicht durchs Fenster, sie fütterte keinen Vogel, sie spielte mit keinem Schoßhündchen, mit keiner Lieblingkatze, sie drehte keine Papierschnitzchen oder sonst etwas in der Hand, sie durfte kein Gähnen durch einen leisen erzwungenen Husten bezwingen — kurz! — stundenlang sah sie mit starrem Blick unverwandt dem Geliebten ins Auge, ohne sich zu rücken und zu bewegen, und immer glühender, immer lebendiger wurde dieser Blick. (P. 43)

⁴² Erlin, p. 199.

⁴³ Tibor Scitovsky, *The Joyless Economy: An Inquiry into Human Satisfaction and Consumer Dissatisfaction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

⁴⁴ Anja Gerigk, 'New Historicism – Verhandlungen mit Hoffmanns *Sandmann*: Eine Repräsentationsanalyse des Interieurs im 19. Jahrhundert als neuhistorische Praxis', in Jahraus, pp. 138–48.

The norm contested here is also Clara's *milieu*: as mentioned above, we should assume that in the end she finds domestic bliss, without Nathanael (p. 49). What is more, this passage is, ironically, the material setting of the intertextual allusion with which *Der Sandmann* begins, and which introduces Nathanael: Franz impels Daniel to laugh at him in *Die Räuber* (1781), as Nathanael implores Lothar (or Clara, p. 12) — but Franz does so, in Schiller's play, on a 'Sopha'.⁴⁵ And once the scandal emerges that Olimpia in Hoffmann's tale is nothing but a doll, we are told that consumerist habits were promptly re-enforced, in order to ensure that women in polite company were real. Men apparently demanded that their lovers sang out of tune or danced off-beat, knitted while reading, played with their pug, and so on. Thus Nathanael unwittingly bolsters the very middle-class consumer and commodified leisurely lifestyle he yearns to break free of, and his desire for Olimpia is a part of precisely that culture of consumerism, which prompts his anxiety and which he consciously attempts to avoid – in vain. For Nathanael inhabits the comfortable world of 'armchair philosophy': unconsciously, he commodifies through Olimpia the very ideals of authenticity and extreme attention, even devotion, which are set up in the story to be the alternatives to everyday activities in sitting rooms at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Jutta Fortin applies Marx's concept of the 'Fetischcharakter der Ware' to Olimpia as Nathanael's automaton, positing a commodification of love. For Fortin, Hoffmann's tale 'can be viewed in terms of a critique of nineteenth-century society', since it depicts the fetishization of material objects — elevating them to objects of human desire — and the dehumanization of those who are caught up in the process of fetishization, all within capitalism.⁴⁶ Indeed, the fetishization of Olimpia dovetails with the gendered cultural anxiety mentioned above, concerning the family and a male fear of an economic state structure in miniature. But the twist also goes some way towards an

⁴⁵ NA, 3, p. 118 (Act 5, Scene 1).

⁴⁶ Jutta Fortin, 'Brides of the Fantastic: Gautier's *Le Pied De Momie* and Hoffmann's *Der Sandmann*', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 41 (2004), 257–75 (p. 272).

— admittedly very subtle — subversion of the prevailing cultural, gendered stereotype. Olimpia was created without the participation of a woman, of course; and Nathanael’s desire for her is not reproductive. Olimpia is not distracted by pet birds or the latest knitting patterns — she devotes her attention exclusively to Nathanael’s art. She is thereby not only implicitly and ironically commodified in her idealized attentiveness, but more obviously she must also seem to offer the protagonist on a subliminal level, however erroneously, a safe space away from consumerism. This assumption on Nathanael’s part is predicated on a cultural, misogynistic bias that women were usually the avid consumers around 1800, and were raised to be so by their mothers. Jean Paul’s *Friedenspredigt an Deutschland* (1808), for example, distinguishes between luxury that is regulated by the body and the senses (‘Magen-Luxus’) on the one hand, and a negative luxury — an ‘Augen- oder Gesellschafts-Luxus, der scheinende’ — on the other, one which gives a free rein to fantasy and vanity.⁴⁷ The latter sort of consumerism is driven by illusion (or delusion), of the type to which Nathanael is beholden. For Jean Paul, the answer is an urgent, collective appeal to Germany’s mothers. Olimpia ostensibly ensures a slight self-regulation of consumerism, because she cannot procreate. But of course she does not: Nathanael’s consumerism cannot be held in check, and it is he who exacerbates it. And so for Hoffmann, unlike for Jean Paul, being in thrall to consumption turns out not to be a woman’s preserve. In fact, it is more the men’s fault in the story: the case of Olimpia also reveals that the professor and the pedlar are two men in consort as well as conflict with one another, vying for power as producer and intricate labourer versus an opportunistic and unqualified trader within the consumerist economic superstructure of early modern capitalism.

Commodification fetish recurs as a prominent theme throughout the collection of tales that opens with *Der Sandmann*. The initial story of the second volume, *Das öde Haus* (1817), begins with a character who is fascinated by, and fixated on, a hand that appears in a window next to a

⁴⁷ Jean Paul, *Friedens-Predigt an Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Mohr und Zimmer, 1808), p. 38.

cake shop, on a street which sells ‘Waren des Luxus’ and serves as ‘der Sammelplatz des höheren, durch Stand oder Reichtum zum üppigeren Lebensgenuß berechtigten Publikums’ (p. 165). The hand that Theodor desires is wearing a diamond, and so is commodified even further: physical attraction and a glistening, high-value item are combined into one object of the young man’s lust. He gazes up at the mysterious hand above at the window through opera glasses — once again, the paradigmatic object of the consumer around 1800 — and he later buys a small mirror in order to look up at the hand secretly (in an age in which mirrors, and halls of mirrors, were likewise salient, sought-after luxuries). In both this tale and in *Der Sandmann*, therefore, consumption becomes entwined with a worldview and conditions the sense of sight, and the commodification of women occurs via fashionable contemporary objects through or onto which men’s passions are projected. Indeed, Bohm observes that consumerism is driven by a sexualized yearning as well as anxiety in *Der goldne Topf*, and in general.⁴⁸

Although consumer anxiety and the commodification of interpersonal pleasure are disturbing phenomena of consumer culture (and in no way can these be described positively), the global literary effect of the alienation from and instability of the self, and of the dehumanizing commodification fetish in *Der Sandmann*, *Das öde Haus*, or Hoffmann’s writing more broadly, is a spooky, fantastic, enjoyable read. At least, such was the intended effect for the early nineteenth-century commercial literary market, and the texts remain popular today. We are left with an impression of artistic synthesis, too: the initial letters of *Der Sandmann* are to be read, according to the narrator, as a painting to which the editor will add more colour (p. 27). *Der Sandmann* is the opening story of the *Nachtstücke*, a title that plays on a technical term in both music and painting. The aesthetic accomplishment of *Der Sandmann*, in short, is *spectacular*; the story bedazzles, similar to Coppola’s stash of glassware and lenses that glistens and sparkles. It is an overall

⁴⁸ Bohm, p. 7.

impression that might be (mis)taken for a manifesto of anti-specialization – but is one that applies only to the specialized sub-spheres of art, not the system of economics, for instance. What is more, the overriding impression of spectacle conflicts with Fortin’s notion of Hoffmann’s story as cultural criticism. Indeed, to fully apply a Marxist, materialist reading to *Der Sandmann* means understanding precisely Hoffmann’s social critique via (commercial) literature as a form of consumable, aesthetic pleasure. As Bohm contends for *Der goldne Topf*: ‘Hoffmann’s shrewdness lay in his ability to sell for a profit that which was most prevalent: consumerism. *Der goldne Topf* is not just a reflection of the economic situation, it is also an exploitation of the possibilities of that situation.’⁴⁹ Hoffmann’s writing can be criticized in the same terms as the critique of his writing itself.

How might we describe, in theoretical terms, Hoffmann’s critique of early, middle-class consumerism — other than as immanently ironic? I propose that we label it ‘spectacular’ criticism. Theoretically, we can draw inspiration in this endeavour from Guy Debord’s Marxist critique of consumer society, *La société du spectacle* from 1967 (entitled in its English translation *The Society of the Spectacle*), yet subvert it with liberalism all the same. There is a precedent for applying theories from the 60s to Hoffmann’s age. Campbell’s concept of a Romantic consumerist ethic was inspired by what he calls the ‘Romantic’ intellectual work of the 1968 generation, which was in his view born out of the banality of a contemporary consumerist craze, the Swinging Sixties. He writes: ‘if Romanticism did originally make modern hedonism possible, then the spirit of hedonism has

⁴⁹ Jean Paul, p. 6.

subsequently also functioned to give rise to further outbursts of romantic fervour.⁵⁰ It was also the contribution of mid-twentieth-century cultural theory to extend Marx's understanding of production to consumption. As Herbert Marcuse writes in *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (1955): 'the goods and services that the individuals buy control their needs and petrify their faculties. [...] The ideology of today lies in that production and consumption reproduce and justify domination.'⁵¹ However, as Wolfgang Fritz Haug points out, cultural theorists of the 1968 generation were mistaken in characterizing the creation of consumer desire as a unique development of late capitalism specifically.⁵² For it also applies to the era around 1800, as Hegel observed. Hoffmann was moderate on the subject of consumption, despite the traumas of consumerism — at the very least in his framing of the topic. He is not a Romantic anti-consumerist such as Goethe (in the broadest sense of European Romanticism), or indeed Debord.

For Debord, the diffuse spectacle of late capitalism comprises the social relations between people, which are mediated by representations: 'the spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image.'⁵³ It is, moreover, a view of the world that has become actual, objectified, and manifest in things. But this summary could describe early capitalism equally well. Campbell has located his concept of the 'Romantic ethic' in the transformative historical moment of modernity, in which the image of consumerism became the object of arousal and anticipation — instead of an object itself (i.e. that which is actually consumed). We witness this phenomenon at play in *Der Sandmann*: anxieties and pleasures are caused by consumer nightmares and commodification fantasies, not by consumer objects per se. Clara is wrong when she writes to Nathanael, 'daß diese fremden Gestalten nichts über Dich vermögen' (p. 23). In a discursive sense,

⁵⁰ Campbell, p. 216.

⁵¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Sphere, 1970), p. 89.

⁵² Wolfgang Fritz Haug, *Kritik der Warenästhetik* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2009), p. 36.

⁵³ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone, 1994), p. 24 (Section 34).

the image of Coppola and his doubles do both have power over, and economically ‘possess’, the protagonist — just as they do for Clara, too. But it is true that Nathanael is gripped by a belief in the experiential efficacy of this superstructure, while for Clara consumption is merely an everyday phenomenon. Ironically, then, Nathanael could be said to be the ‘hyper-conformist consumer’ of the pair, despite his consciously attempted disavowal of consumption. (And the anxiety attached to the latter in fact fosters his consumerism all the more.) Whereas Clara prosaically makes breakfast and drinks her coffee that she wants to enjoy unspoilt and unspilled — but which she does not extol —, Nathanael desires to turn coffee and conversation into a literary event, even a meaningful aesthetic experience. In doing so, he hardly rejects such morning rituals. Rather, he ritualizes them and commodifies their experiential value all the more — to his peril. Sometimes consumer goods are just that: good for mere consumption.

In the spirit of Debord, we could say that Hoffmann renders such a materialist world artful again, as artistic spectacle. Yet art, in Hoffmann’s world as in late capitalism, can also be understood as a commodity, and so such a procedure of translation could be considered ironic. The irony of Nathanael laying claim to being an artist is that the professed ‘Einwirken irgend eines außer uns selbst liegenden höheren Prinzips’ that supposedly holds the ‘selbsttätige Willkür’ of a writer in check is actually the external yet embodied, i.e. cultural, dynamic of consumption, realized through art — not a metaphysical escape from consumerism (p. 29). Debord acknowledges such a process, albeit without paying explicit attention to irony:

As soon as art — which constituted that former common language of social inaction — establishes itself as independent in the modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate works, it becomes subject, as one

instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. The affirmation of its independence is the beginning of its disintegration.⁵⁴

When art became an autonomous, specialized domain as it did in the German Enlightenment — separated from religious inspiration and political panegyric, and no longer a branch of general learning — it was emboldened by the same superstructure of production and consumption that empowered the middle classes and nobility. Both became subsumed into a capitalist, spectacular circulation of images. The autonomy of art is contingent on consumer capitalism, which defines the modern era. Debord's spectacle is 'the bad dream of modern society in chains',⁵⁵ which sums up Nathanael's predicament — though Hoffmann's spectacle in its effects is no doubt as delightful as it is disturbing to the reader.

Invoking Debord exaggerates an existing interpretation of *Der Sandmann*. As Christian Kirchmeier explains, via Niklas Luhmann and Pierre Bourdieu, Hoffmann's tale is a second-order observation: a text that reflects on the society of which it is a (critical) part.⁵⁶ In that sense, the story is typical for Romantic literature, which had become autonomous yet contingent. In societies that are structurally differentiated (not least thanks to the specialization resulting from the division of labour), autonomous domains such as art reflect on themselves, though, as suggested above, their autonomous self-reflexivity is framed discursively by the emergent capitalist system. In *Der Sandmann*, the shortcomings of both conventional society and Nathanael's subversive (i.e. hypersensitive and thus hyper-conformist) perception of it are made clear. But according to Claudia Liebrand, there is one figure in the tale that does not fail, and is not self-aware: not the consumerist-

⁵⁴ Debord, pp. 132–33 (Section 180).

⁵⁵ Debord, p. 18 (Section 21).

⁵⁶ Christian Kirchmeier, 'Literatursoziologie – Die Literatur der Gesellschaft und die Gesellschaft der Literatur: *Der Sandmann* aus der Sicht der Literatursoziologie nach Bourdieu und Luhmann', in Jahraus, pp. 160–76.

Enlightened social norm, embodied by Clara, nor Nathanel, but rather the narrator of the text.⁵⁷ The narrator may have self-declared pretensions to literary authorship, to artistry just like the protagonist Nathanael — the author belongs, we are told, ‘zu dem wunderlichen Geschlechte der Autoren’ (p. 26) — but the irony is neither admitted, nor resolved. In staging contemporary society without a transcendent ideal, Hoffmann’s narrator paves the way for poetic realism later in the nineteenth century. It is an essentially socially affirmative narrative position that gives a platform to social criticism (of consumerism). Hence the ‘straightforward’ narrative that presents the story does not wholly resist being co-opted by the capitalist, consumer system, and commodified as art. *Der Sandmann* is a second-order observation presented in a more matter-of-fact than self-reflexive frame, despite being shot through with irony. Thereby the observation in its totality becomes, through its purported objectivity, itself objectified as spectacle — and fetishized as (literary) fantasy.

For Elizabeth Wilson, such is in fact the mode of late capitalism. In an Adorno-like turn of phrase, she writes: ‘Postmodernism expresses at one level a horror at the destructive excess of Western consumerist society, yet, in aestheticising this horror, we somehow convert it into a pleasurable object of consumption.’⁵⁸ Cultural critique has become commodity. But this has long been the case, and it is not the purpose of the present essay to criticize Hoffmann in that respect. On the contrary, his original stance on contemporary consumerism to fill the subjective void created by the division of labour, and his departure from Goethe, Schiller, and others — precisely the literary thinkers who influenced Adorno and followers of the Frankfurt School — should be celebrated for its alternative tack, and studied as such. There is no transcendent aspiration in Hoffmann’s work, or indeed Hegelian overcoming. There is only ironic oscillation towards and away from

⁵⁷ Claudia Liebrand, *Aporie des Kunstmythos: Die Texte E. T. A. Hoffmanns* (Freiburg/Breisgau: Rombach, 1996), pp. 85–107.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Wilson, ‘Fashion and the Postmodern Body’, in *Chic Thrills: A Fashion Reader*, ed. by Juliet Ash and Elizabeth Wilson (London: Pandora, 1992), pp. 3–17 (p. 4). Compare Adorno speaking on German television about popular music and Vietnam: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xd7Fhaji8ow>> [accessed 08 March 2018].

transcendence. Such ironic oscillation is so spectacular that its effect might be confused with transcendence. But it is consumable, anxiety-inducing, and pleasurable critique — of consumer anxiety and pleasure.

The spectacular effect of Hoffmann's central — and 'centrist' — ironic operation is in fact similar to Adorno's criticism of Walter Benjamin's interpretation of cinema. Writing to Horkheimer on 21 March 1936, Adorno quipped that Benjamin 'mythisiert die Entmythologisierung, weil er sie anders nicht tragen kann'.⁵⁹ For Debord, this is precisely what constitutes spectacle: the myth of capitalism that obscures oppression. For Debord, as for Adorno, such a procedure is uncritical. Hoffmann draws our attention to the shortcomings of consumerism as he stages it, to be sure, but he is hardly avant-garde. His work revels in spectacle, subverting it in spurts. It does not attempt to be a wholly subversive staging of the spectacular.

Norbert Bolz is a more recent cultural theorist who adopts a pragmatic and Benjaminian stance towards consumerism, compared to critical theory that follows the Frankfurt School. His argument derives from Adorno's critique of Benjamin, in fact, but he uses it in defence of postmodern consumerism as a proxy for religion. Provocatively, Bolz writes, and accepts, that 'Konsum ist die rituelle Handlung, die aus allgemeinen Waren das individuelle Wahre schafft'.⁶⁰ Those of us who desire to read literature, say — as a commodity, which reflects on commodities — and above all literature that reflects on literature, will also tend to ascribe to it a transcendental effect. But for Bolz, such critically engaged consumerism as a secular religion has concrete benefits. It enables social mobility, for instance, and is thus a vehicle for liberalism — not, like actual religion, potential fundamentalism.

⁵⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel*, ed. by Christoph GÖdde and Henri Lonitz, 4 vols (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2003–06), I: 1927–1937 (2003), p. 130.

⁶⁰ Norbert Bolz, *Das konsumistische Manifest* (Munich: Fink, 2002), p. 113.

Consumerism could be understood as the functional equivalent to Hoffmann's religion. It is a way of structuring the world that is both a source of anguish and delight; and it is a source of imagery that wielded new cultural authority, and yet was still controversial around 1800 — especially in the German states. And consumption shaped the individual. In a world without God as a universally accepted authority and the devil as God's antithesis, God and the devil became one in the subjectification of the consumerist individual of everyday life. My previous studies of Hoffmann's characters Belcampo the hairdresser and Ponto the poodle in his novels demonstrate the constitutive forces of consumerism for the modern self-made man, for better and worse. Both representations exemplify man as his own maker; both, too, hint at the devilish potential of an empowered human being. And as much as consumerism may give rise to self-alienation and interpersonal commodification, as evident in *Der Sandmann*, it can lead to a creative (and artistic) process of individuation based on the principles of choice, self-curation, and self-presentation as well. But in Goethe's *Faust*, a stock symbol of that consumerism — the poodle — is presented only as a negative subject: the devil.

Hoffmann's literary works achieve their critique of consumption through an immanent form of irony. Given Hoffmann's acceptance of the consumerist superstructure, I have called his position 'centrist'. The term 'pragmatic' would underplay his creativity. The ironic mode is appropriate for a critical engagement with modern capitalism, because capitalism is itself ironic. Jan de Vries describes Smith's theory — and thereby modern capitalism — as governed by a 'comic irony', because consumerism entails that our efforts and work towards aspirational objects for purchase inevitably fall short for our sense of personhood, since those objects do not bring us the impossible

satisfaction we seek; yet rationally, we are nevertheless economically and socially better off as a result of such material consumption.⁶¹ For Marcuse, the dominance of production and consumption can also be described as ironic, but for him it is a tragic irony: ‘their ideological character does not change the fact that their benefits are real.’⁶²

Goethe and Schiller were not wrong to want to redress the subjective disadvantage of such economic specialization, and thus consumption, through culture – quite the opposite, in fact. But they were fighting a losing battle to keep *Bildung* a distinct means of doing so via self-reflexive literature, and as an ultimately oppositional concept to consumerism. Consumption was increasingly, if – given the circumstances – surprisingly all-pervasive. Goethe and Schiller were the founding fathers of the modern German literary canon, and also of modern German anti-consumerist cultural criticism. Hoffmann’s fiction is radically different in its ironic yet socially assimilative consumerism from the thrust of his Early German Romantic, and above all his Weimar Classicist, contemporaries. His critical sentiments are Romantically inclined. At the same time, however, Hoffmann is all the more self-aware and realistic about, and on occasion he even relishes, the possibilities opened up and circumscribed by consumption. His conception of creativity owed much to the structures of, and the subjects emerging from, consumerism, which gave rise to his critique — but also to its literary spectacle.

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⁶¹ de Vries, p. 23. On the advancement of society thanks to consumer capitalism, see Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018).

⁶² Marcuse, p. 89.

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