Money and Excrement

The Psychology of Capital and the Marketplace in Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 'Dulle Griet'

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (c.1525-1569) is beyond doubt the best-known Flemish painter of the sixteenth century. Little is known about his life, but from signatures and dates it is to some extent possible to survey his extensive oeuvre of paintings, drawings and engravings. Bruegel received his training in Antwerp in the husband-and-wife workshop of Pieter Coecke van Aelst and Mayeken Verhulst Bessemers. In 1551 he was accepted into the Guild of St Luke as a master. After this he travelled via France to Italy, returning to Antwerp about 1556.

Bruegel's paintings included religious subjects (e.g. *The Slaughter of the Innocents)* as well as genre scenes and landscapes. In this last category especially he proved himself an outstanding artist, for instance in his famous *The Fall of Icarus,* which centuries later provided W.H. Auden with the subject for his poem 'Musée des Beaux-Arts'. Bruegel's landscape drawings would be regarded as models of their kind long after the sixteenth century. His genre pieces, which earned him the name 'Peasant-Bruegel', often depict peasants dancing or brawling at fairs, wedding-feasts and other exuberant celebrations. With these works, of which his *Peasant Wedding* is probably the best known, he laid the foundations of a tradition which was to be continued in the first half of the seventeenth century by such Flemish painters as David Teniers the Younger and Adriaen Brouwer.

Bruegel achieved a fusion in his art of the new Italian models and the older traditions of Low Countries painting. He was particularly fascinated by the strange imagery of Hieronymus Bosch, which he extended and updated. Bruegel's themes, drawn to a great extent from literature, the theatre and from proverbs, always have an allegorical significance. Like Bosch, he cast light on the dark and hidden aspects of the human mind. The finest examples of this are his series of engravings, such as the *Seven Deadly Sins.* The painting *The Triumph of Death,* too, with all its horrors, displays close links with Bosch's iconography.

(Tr. Tanis Guest)

Pieter Bruegel the Elder started his career in Antwerp in 1551 as a master in the Guild of St Luke, where he quickly made a name for himself as a 'Second Bosch.'[1] Sometime in the early 1560s, he designed his most Bosch-like painting, the *Dulle Griet.* This surreal masterpiece transforms images from city life and folklore to represent a contemporary psychological hell. To understand it we must start with Antwerp, for the city at this time was '*a trading centre such as the world had never seen before or since, for never since has there been a market concentrating the trade of all commercial*

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Dulle Griet*. c.1562. Museum Mayer van den Bergh, Antwerp.

nations.'[2] The Antwerp stock exchange, the Bourse, controlled the wealth of Europe, and in mid-century it was at the height of a boom. This boom was founded on new forms of credit, necessary to finance the high risks of sea-trading. The shift to credit allowed merchants to defer and interweave the consequences of their ventures, and citizens became used to the psychology of gambling on future profits. Like modern trading-floors, the Bourse was no sober club. Incidents of violence were not unknown and the building itself (new in 1531) was plagued by vandalism and graffiti. It was a centre for gossip and scandal of all kinds. '*He that will believe every nue that is blasted in Flanders among merchants shall have a mad head*,' commented the English spy Stephen Vaughan to Thomas Cromwell in a dispatch of 1535.

The boom produced an extraordinary atmosphere at the Bourse, where exchange activities were dominated by betting and chance. The validity of a contract from 1534 depended on the buyer marrying a nun or the daughter of a nun. Life-insurance fraud was common. A particularly macabre case in 1566 involved a bet on the specific cause of a death (poison). Against this background, the notorious bond in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, where Antonio stakes a pound of his own flesh against the success of a shipping venture, no longer appears so bizarre.[3]

Bruegel's working life was naturally affected by these developments. Private individuals, as well as guilds and corporations, now bought almost everything on credit, and the fortune of Bruegel's Guild rode on that of the

Bourse. In 1540, St Luke's moved their headquarters to the new building; by 1560, they had incorporated many luxury crafts supplying the marketplace: mirror-makers, goldbeaters, embroiderers, organ builders.

What sorts of images were available to the artist to depict these changes in society and the status of money? For Bruegel, as for Rabelais and Shakespeare, firsthand acquaintance with the old folk world of ghosts, transformations and witchcraft went hand in hand with the new urban experience. At this cross-roads also sits the *Dulle Griet*, wherein a hell-mouth, two giants and a ship are set in a sinister mixture of town and landscape. Let us single out one of the strangest motifs: the giant scooping coins out of his eggshell rear. How is this image linked to the novel economic culture of sixteenth-century Antwerp?

Bizarre imagery was not itself unusual in Bruegel's *milieu*, where printmakers, painters and playwrights found a sophisticated city-wide audience for complex visual fantasies. Thus a Reformation broadsheet invents a surreal supernatural kitchen, while, at the other end of the market, an artist such as Joris Hoefnagel creates a sheet of visual puns about Bruegel's friend the geographer Ortelius. The '*rederijkers*', the theatre groups of the guilds, drew huge audiences for their displays of riddling flamboyance leavened with farce.[4]

As in the broadsheets and farces, the *Griet*'s dominant images come from the fracturing world of folk culture. Echoes of sinister tales can be heard in the earliest description (1600) of the painting: '*A Dulle Griet, who robs in front of hell, wears a vacant stare and is (cruel, or) strangely and weirdly dressed.*' The proverb, '*to rob in front of hell*', referred to women who feared neither death nor the devil, and 'Dulle Griet' was by extension a folk synonym for 'virago' or 'bitch.' The fluid image of Griet could be woven

Joris Hoefnagel, *Emblematic Composition in honour of Abraham Ortelius*. 1593. © Historische Musea / Stedelijk Prentenkabinet, Antwerp

Anonymous, *The Battle of the Breeches*. c.1550. (from M. de Meyer, *De Volks- en Kinderprent...* , 1942).

into a joke about the wife wearing the breeches, but in other, darker stories, she became a witch.[5]

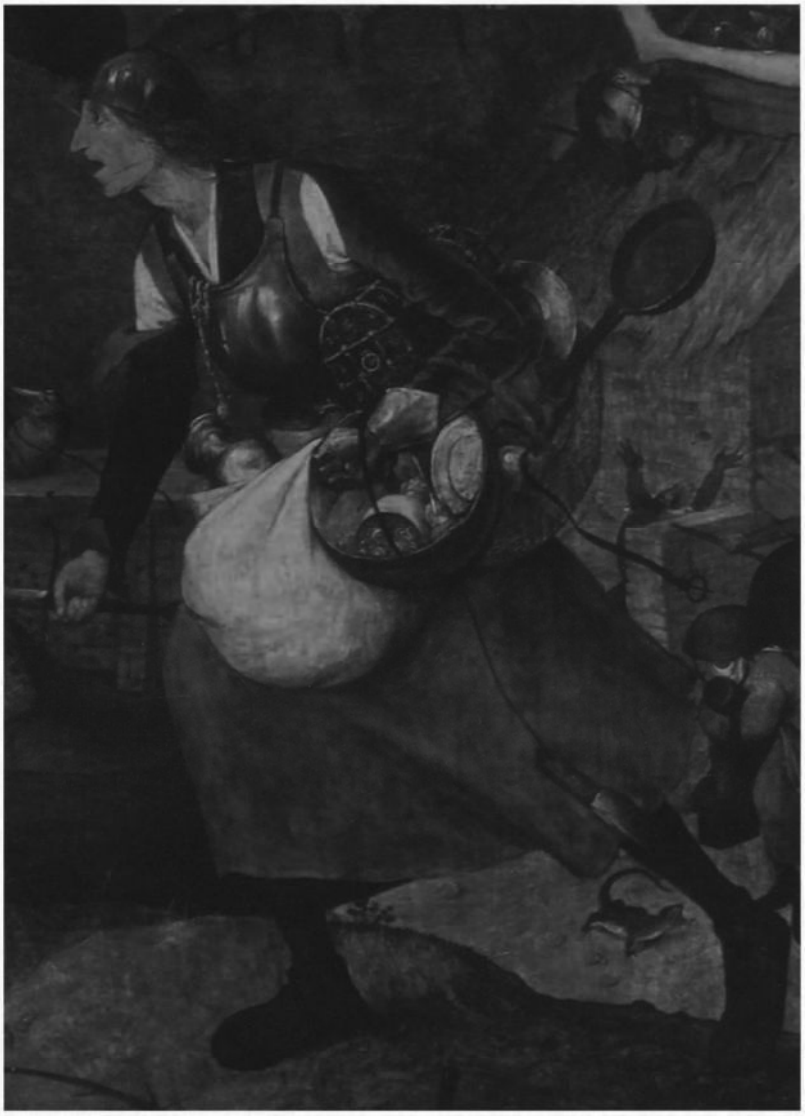
The *Dulle Griet* also resembles the ornate dramas of Bruegel's '*rederijker*' colleagues, in that it invents allegorical characters to dramatise the big issues of the day. The painting could be both a rhetorical elaboration of the Griet folk-figure, and a sort of caricature on the state of Antwerp, to be captioned perhaps with a version of the proverb: '*Lady Antwerp Loots before Hell.*' The protagonists have been identified as figures from Antwerp's civic pageantry: the Maid of Antwerp, who wore red sleeves; and the Antwerp Giant, in helmet and breastplate (designed in 1534 by Bruegel's master Pieter Coecke).[6] These two appeared together in a festival tableau in 1561. Renaissance city governments often used giant figures, drawn from legends, in civic processions, to cow and impress the citizens. The Elizabethan George Puttenham described '*these midsommer pageants in London, where to make the people wonder, are set forth great and vglie Gyants, marching as if they were alive, and armed at all points.*'[7]

In Bruegel's painting, then, the Maid is satirised as a Dulle Griet, clutching her frying pan and treasure. The city's Giant is a monstrous '*Dukatenscheisser*', an excretor of ducats, dressed as a witch and burdened with signs representing money-madness. The hell-mouth and cauldron flanking them recall the punishment for avarice in Antwerp Hell-paintings; also that, according to Antwerp law, coiners of false money were boiled in oil or water. This parodic money-giant appears to function as a kind of town sign embodying a deformation in the life of the town.

These strange images broadly evoke Avarice; more precisely, they create visual poetry out of a complex of ideas and experiences to do with money, excrement, fraud and the bizarreries of consumption. In treating these themes, the *Dulle Griet* goes beyond satire. The play between real and unreal in the picture raises issues hotly contested at this time, in a lull between bitter religious wars and the witch-hunts which followed. Is a hell-mouth real? Is a *Dukatenscheisser*? Is a witch?

So what does Bruegel's *Dukatenscheisser* mean? Why represent it in this way? It seems that the key way in which Bruegel made the image contem-

The '*Dulle Griet*' (detail from *Dulle Griet*)



porary was by unfolding and enhancing a surrealism already inherent in his folk material. Thus, Griet and the Giant are cross-dressers. In rural magic, this signifies that they are uncanny. In city-caricature, it is a shorthand for 'the-world-turned-upside-down'. It is also a mark of carnival-time. The giant's cross-dressing further identifies him as a kind of '*hagazussa*' (witch), a boundary-figure who 'sits on the fence' between village and wilderness.[8] On the burning roof, by the giant's foot, a small man scrapes a kettle with a knife; he exemplifies a Flemish expression for 'scraping the bottom of the barrel' (*'hij wil altijd het onderste uit de kan halen'*). The proverb-illustration locks into a more complicated circle of dripping and dousing actions around the Giant. A woman steals from the huge purse; a hand douses her from a jug. The Giant spoons coins onto a woman who catches them in a bowl, the silver coins of Flanders (now tarnished black). As in Hoefnagel's rebus, these cameos help us understand the contexts of

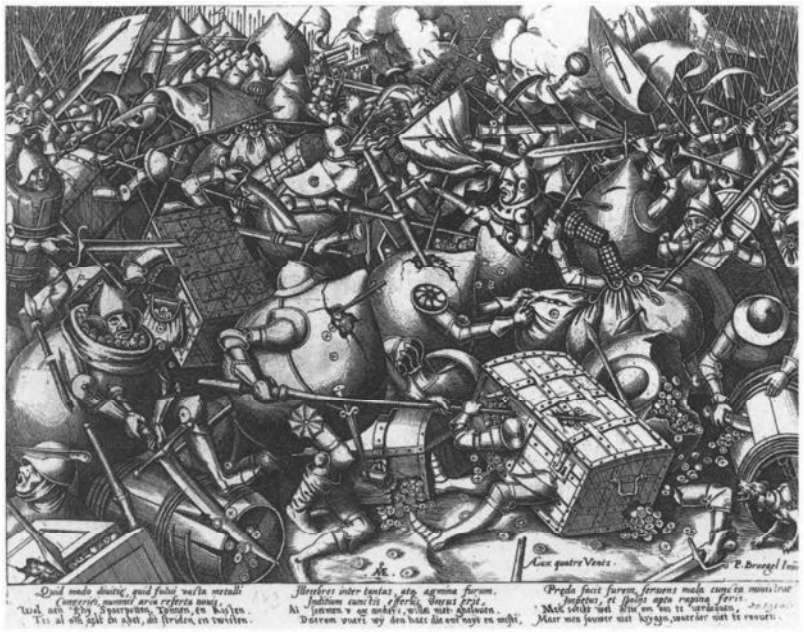
The *Dukatenscheisser* (detail from *Dulle Griet*).

Pieter Bruegel the Elder (workshop), *The Man with the Sack of Gold and his Flatterers*. 1568. engraving. From R. van Bastelaer, *Les Estampes de Bruegel l'Ancien* (1904).

theft and weird displacement of bodily functions that Bruegel intends for his Giant.

The idea of a *Dukatenscheisser* was probably not new; it is known in seventeenth-century folklore, and chocolate ones are still made in Germany. Tracts and allegories on the evils of money were also common in the 1550s. But when Bruegel animated these abstractions, he made the surrealism part of the meaning. Followers of Bosch had made similar images at Antwerp a few decades before, wherein huge hellish noses dribble money onto a cauldron of the damned. A print from Bruegel's atelier attacks those obsessed with money in the most directly scatological way. *The Man with the Sack of Gold and his Flatterers* (c.1568) is captioned: '*Why crawl up his hole when he opens his purse?*'. Much more subtly, in Bruegel's own *Battle between the Money-Banks and the Strong-Boxes*, coins are the body contents of the soldiers. His Money-Bank-men and Strong-Box-men may be interpreted as dehumanised men whose bodies have become constipated carapaces of wealth.

The forms of these fantasies are rooted in early modern psychology. Country people had customarily combined supernatural causes with everyday images to describe their unconscious lives, although they did not, naturally, think of it in these terms. They regarded dreams as a gate to the spirit world, the territory of ghosts, sleepers and the devil. The *Dukatenscheisser*'s coins – and Griet's treasure – appear also in this world. Freud commented that, '*in dreams in folklore, gold is seen in the most unambiguous way to be a symbol of faeces. If the sleeper feels the need to defecate, he dreams of gold, of treasure.*'[9] In dream-tales from many different regions, the connection between treasure and excrement is recognised in a comic punchline, when the dreamer wakes up. A fifteenth-century story is typical: '*My neighbour once dreamt that the devil had led him to a field to dig for gold, but he found none. The devil said, "It is there for sure, only you*



Pieter van der Heyden (after Pieter Bruegel the Elder), *The Battle Between the Money-Banks and Strong-Boxes*. c.1558. Koninklijke Bibliotheek Albert I, Prentenkabinet, Brussels.

cannot dig it up now...” The man asked that the place should be marked. The devil suggested, “Just shit on it ... it will not occur to anyone that gold lies hidden here, and you will recognise the exact place.” The man did so, then immediately awoke and felt that he had done a great heap in his bed ... Thus his dream-gold was turned to filth.’ (Poggio, *Facetiae*)

The folk-treasure-dream formula is recognisably the seed of Bruegel’s *Dukatenscheisser*, but such tales are relatively free of anxiety, whereas in the *Griet* anxiety is king. The simple coarse humour of the original idea has altered considerably. To understand why this should be so, we need the help of both the psychoanalysts and the historians of money.

Freud found that, for the very young infant, faecal matter is a prized substance. As the child is socialised, this valuation is suppressed and ‘*the child’s interest in faeces is transferred in the adult onto another material which he learns to set above almost everything else – gold or precious metals.*’[10] When he is an adult, he will learn to value money as others do, and act accordingly. However, as the economy changes, similar expenditure may appear profligate in one generation and generous in the next. Georg Simmel explained how historical circumstance affects an individual’s relationship to money: ‘*If the character of money as an ultimate purpose oversteps that intensity for an individual in which it is the appropriate expression of the economic culture of his circle, then greed and avarice emerge. I emphasise the dependence of these concepts on the current specific economic conditions, because the same degree of passion in acquiring and holding onto money may be quite normal in one context but may belong to the hypertrophied categories in another...*’[11]

Greed, avarice and other kinds of money-passions change in character and virulence, because changes in the economy alter the commonsense view of what is inappropriate and abnormal. The changing relationship between money inside and outside of the mind may turn on the ways in which money ceases to supply the same satisfactions as its infantile equivalent. Kovel argues that people compensate for the increasing abstractness of their money systems by making their unconscious configurations of money more sensuously real. ‘Money diseases’ evolve as money ceases to be material and becomes instead an invisible medium of credit, present in the world less as sensual heavy treasure than as a series of digits.

The position of money in the unconscious mind has indeed changed over the course of our economic history. The hermit Peter Damian (c.1007-1072) suffered a nightmare which reveals the clash between an older gift economy and a new commercial perception of precious metals as money. Peter received a gift of silver and found that his inner self regarded it as money: ‘*At night, when he was trying to recite psalms, his head felt dizzy and his intestines seemed to undulate with a swarm of vermin*’.[12] By the thirteenth century, the identification of body-contents with money was commonplace. Pope Innocent III compared the avaricious man to Hell, ‘*because both eat but do not digest, both receive but do not give back.*’ Dante described Master Adam, a notorious false-coiner burned in 1281, as ‘*shaped like a lute, if only he had been cut short at the groin, from the part where a man is forked. The heavy dropsy which dispairs the members by ill disposal of the humors, so that the face does not answer to the belly, made him hold his lips apart*’. (*Inferno*, XXX, 49-56)

The skinny limbs and inflated belly are caused by a disease of the digestion, dropsy. Dropsy was a good metaphor for Master Adam's particular fraud: since (according to Aristotle) the body's digestion 'cooks' food, false coining was like bad digestion. So Dante makes counterfeiting a disease of the body politic's digestive system.[13]

The notions of digestion gone wrong, of evil cooking, and of fraud as demonic disorder were thus readily to hand in Bruegel's culture. To these, as an Antwerp man, he may have added a novel appreciation of money's endlessly deferred satisfactions. Money splits the original exchange of goods into two 'mutually indifferent acts,' so the conclusion (or consummation) of the transaction can be deferred almost indefinitely. The historian Agnew argues that this resulted in the wide-scale adoption, in the sixteenth century, of a modern speculative mercantile attitude towards the world: '*(in) the expanded commerce of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ... the desire for liquidity ... suggested a simultaneous readiness and reluctance to transact – a threshold moment of indecision in the cycle of exchange, a moment frozen in the money form itself.*'[14]

This attitude appeared in its most extreme form in the culture of the Antwerp Bourse. In this frame of mind, inherited associations of money-as-body-contents could be developed into convoluted and perverse images. For the first time then, Bruegel's *Griet* shows money, excrement, body-deformation and demons as connected in our dreams. That this configuration is still present in our culture is clear from Kovel's description of the neurosis of a late twentieth-century New York banker: '*Though he was unable to enjoy commodities.. he was fiendishly interested in money for its own sake, i.e. as part of himself... In sessions when Curtis talked of money.. sensations in his groin or neck or rectum – stabbing pains or moments of flushing – would occur. Sometimes he felt as if a warm fluid were incontinently running down his legs, (or) as though his insides would rise through his gorge and choke him. To say that Curtis was fiendishly interested in money is not an idle comment. (In) analysis.. we learned that for him, to be declining in wealth was to open the portals of his body, especially his anus, to demons. These were variously described, usually as powerful men who resembled people in real life; at times they had a purely fantastic aspect. They would come for him, nail him to a rack, pull his insides out to extract the precious stuff.*'[15]

Evidently, any system of money is an abstraction invented by human minds. Such a system itself operates upon the minds of people living in it and with it. As a money system grows in complexity and reaches higher levels of abstraction, so too the position of money in men's minds and in their dreams becomes increasingly complicated. The bizarre phenomenon of the Antwerp credit boom can be seen as a staging post in the long transformation of money into abstraction. So too, the money-excrement relations in Bruegel's image mark a sea-change in the way we dream about money. From the unproblematic peasant dreams of treasure to the nightmares of the twentieth century. The gigantic *Dukatenscheisser* – both comic and uncanny – makes visible a watershed in the history of dreams.

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1. On Bruegel's career and works, see MARIJNISSEN, R. H. and M. SEIDEL, *Bruegel*. New York, 1984; on his relationship with Boschian themes, see MILNE, L. S., *Dreams and Popular Beliefs in the Imagery of Pieter Bruegel the Elder*. PhD diss., Boston University (1990).

2. The quotation is from EHRENBERG, R., *Capital and Finance in the Age of the Renaissance*. London, 1928, p. 234. On the merchants and their economy, see VAN DER WEE, H., *The Growth of the Antwerp Market and the European Economy (fourteenth-sixteenth centuries)*, 3V. The Hague, 1963; 'Anvers et les innovations de la technique financière aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles', *Annales: Economies, Sociétés, Civilisations* XXII (1967), pp. 1067-1089. Two colourful accounts of Antwerp at this period are J. Wegg's *Antwerp, 1477-1559* (London, 1916), and *The Decline of Antwerp Under Phillip of Spain* (London, 1924).

3. Prior to the mid-century boom, the financial structure of Antwerp was relatively primitive. In 1543, Charles V approved the practice of lending at interest – the main activity of the Bourse by the 1560s. On bizarre clauses in contracts see JEANNIN, PIERRE (a.k.a. Jean-Paul Clébert), *Les Marchands au XVIe siècle*. Paris, 1957.

4. See GIBSON, W., 'Artists and *Rederijkers* in the Age of Bruegel', *Art Bulletin* LXIII / 3 (September, 1981), pp. 426-446.

5. MILNE, L. S., 'Dreams and Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Dulle Griet*'. In: SHETTER, W.Z. and I. VAN DER CRUYSSE (ed.), *Contemporary Explorations in the Culture of the Low Countries*. Lanham (MD), 1996, pp. 207-230.

6. SULLIVAN, M., 'Madness and Folly: Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Dulle Griet*', *Art Bulletin* LIX (1) (1977), pp. 55-66.

7. Writing in his *Art of English Poesie*: '*...but within they are stuffed full of brown paper and tow, which the shrewd boys underpeering do guilefully discover and turne to a great derision.*'

8. DUERR, H.P., *Dreamtime: Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilisation* (Tr. F. Goodman). Oxford, 1985, p. 46.

9. FREUD, S. and D.E. OPPENHEIM, *Dreams in Folklore* (Tr. from the M.S. of 1911 by B.L. Pacella). New York, 1958.

10. FREUD and OPPENHEIM, p. 37. The classic statement of this transference and its effects is Freud's 1908 essay 'Character and Anal Eroticism', in his *Collected Papers*, v.2. New York, 1959, pp. 45-50. Cf. also JONES, E., 'Anal-Erotic Character Traits'. In: *Papers on Psychoanalysis*. Boston, 1961, pp. 413-437; and the remarks in FREUD, S., *The Interpretation of Dreams* (The Standard Edition, ed. J. Strachey *et al.*, IV). London, 1953, p. 200; for bibliography up to 1977, see LITTLE, L. K., *Religious Poverty and the Profit Economy in Medieval Europe*. Ithaca, 1978, pp. 227-228, n. 86.

11. SIMMEL, G., *The Philosophy of Money* (Tr. T. Bottomore and D. Frisby). London / Boston, 1978, p. 238.

12. LITTLE, p. 73, 235-6, n. 11. For full references see MILNE (1990), pp. 158-184.

13. For this argument see DURLING, R., 'Deceit and Digestion in the Belly of Hell'. In: GREENBLATT, S. (ed.), *Allegory and Representation*. Baltimore / London, 1981, pp. 61-93.

14. AGNEW, J-C., *Worlds Apart. The Market and the Theatre 1550-1750*. Cambridge, 1986, p. 43-44. The original insight is in MARX, K., *Grundrisse* (Tr. M. Nicolaus). New York, 1973, pp. 148-49. For a non-Marxist critique coming to very nearly the same analysis of the displacement function in money, see SHACKLE, G.L.S., *Epistemics and Economics: A Critique of Economic Doctrines*. Cambridge, 1972, pp. 359-61.

15. KOVEL, J., *The Age of Desire*. New York, 1981, pp. 43-44.