

# Lecture

## Sacralizing Human Production: Commodities, Identity Fetishism, and the Spirit of the Screen Prof. Peter Pels

This presentation builds on an argument developed in my recent *The Spirit of Matter* (2023) about the “time of things”, where I reconsider the theory of commodity fetishism against the background of the observation that Karl Marx, in his famous formulation of commodity fetishism, was as yet not familiar with advertising: he died at around the time that branding emerged and professional advertisers started to appear. I argue that this is a serious lacunae in understanding commodity fetishism: the tendency to fall back on a Marxist dichotomy between use and exchange value obscures the origins and development of identity fetishism, starting with commercial “exhibitionary complexes” and developed by the rise of advertising. Contrary to many interpretations of Marx’s idea of commodities obscuring their origin in social labor, or those of Walter Benjamin as saying that the work of art loses its “aura” by mechanical reproduction, European commercial spectacles developed plastic materials and mechanical techniques to “sacralize” commodities by copying them for World Exhibitions and branding.



This started to undercut the distinction between human manufacture and acheiropoietic (nonhuman) production which, according to Bruno Latour, underpins iconoclasm – but when confused, generates “iconoclash”. Some of the origins of this sacralization of human manufacture lie in a North Atlantic political theology of the nation and its heritage (symbolized by the grandeur of Haussmannian Paris being copied in plaster at the Chicago 1893 World’s Fair). The primary example of auratic commodification that I want to highlight here, however, is the peculiar conjunction of the New Age’s “sacralization of the self” with “cyberspace” as the latter was turned into a source of personal salvation by the late 20th-century “spirits of the screen.”



Peter Pels (PhD, 1993) is Professor of African anthropology at Leiden University since 2003. He edited *Social Anthropology/Anthropologie sociale* (2003-2007), and published on magic, modernity, and material culture. Most recently, he focused on decolonizing methods (in *HAU*, 2014 and *Anthropological Theory*, 2022) and the future (in *Current Anthropology*, 2015), and currently researches transatlantic ‘African heritage’ and (mostly missionary) colonial collections. *The Spirit of Matter: Modernity, Religion, and the Power of Objects* appeared in 2023 with Berghahn, and Routledge will publish *Museum Temporalities: Time, History and the Future of the (Ethnographic) Museum* (edited with Wayne Modest) in 2025.

**February 4, 2025**

**6.15 PM - 7.45 PM**

**Hartmannstr. 14, Building D1, Erlangen**

**Link for virtual attendance: <https://fau.zoom-x.de/j/62556506187>**

