

*The Seeds of Ambition* and Commodified Illustration

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Illustration is a form of art that greatly reflects the culture it was created in, whether it has been created to support or oppose its society's status quo. However, especially towards the turn of the century and the rise of capitalism, illustration has become increasingly commodified and used as a method of advertising products and ideas. *The Seeds of Ambition* by Charles Dana Gibson represents the mass production based on capitalism post-Industrial Revolution that created a commodification of the arts, alienating artists from their work and creating work that's meant to be sold rather than to exist in its own right. This piece displays how illustration can support culture industries that give into a capitalistic system that creates a hegemonic inequality between classes and dehumanizes the working artist.

The illustration by Charles Dana Gibson, *The Seeds of Ambition* (Figure 1) is a piece that represents the era of Post-Industrialization incredibly well, especially when looked at through Karl Marx's gaze. The Industrial Revolution greatly changed the way the western world worked; a rapid urbanization changed how cities were built and how they functioned, and the increase of factories that made products more available and cheap with industrialized labor that changed the way people worked, lived, and thought. This change was analyzed by Marx when talking about Modes of Production. He saw how factories alienated people—especially of the working class—from communication, community, and interpersonal relationships. Consumption also becomes a major part of relationships, especially when considering the effect of advertising. Towards the turn of the century, advertising begins to target people in different methods. While the ideas of advertising a “lifestyle” don't fully arise towards the 1950s-1970s, in the early 1900s many advertisers believed that human instincts and social scrutiny could be targeted and harnessed into the desire to purchase commodities.<sup>1</sup> This can be seen in Gibson's piece, as the posters of the glamorous woman on the wall are selling an idea

1. Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness...*, Pg. 80

of a lifestyle just as much as it may be selling tickets to a performance. As with the social effects, mass production alienated the creator from their own creation, as the creation was just a product made to be consumed.<sup>2</sup> From this, laborers didn't have ownership of the product or the means of production, and the only way for them to make a living was to sell their labor for a wage or salary. Labor became a tool and product to be sold, not a thing to sustain either physically or spiritually.<sup>3</sup> This ties in directly to the arts, as the push towards reaching the masses brought along more assembly lines, alienating artists from the full product they were completing and completely commodifying the work that was made. Marx also noted how this capitalistic worldview created an unequal society—where those who are wealthy continue to profit further while the working class do not—furthering the gap between classes.<sup>4</sup> This class disparity is especially seen in *The Seeds of Ambition*, where you see a young woman shown to be of lower class gazing at the wealth that's on display in the posters surrounding her. The large displays of wealth in these posters show the widening gap between the wealthy and the working class. While the title *The Seeds of Ambition* may seem to insinuate the idea that these posters have planted the idea in the young woman's head to work hard towards a goal, it does not show the systematic check points that have been put in place to make such ambitions nearly unattainable.

Those ambitions are not so unattainable because of the individual's work efforts or desire, but rather because this capitalistic society supports a deeply hegemonic structure. Cultural hegemony, defined by Antonio Gramsci, is brought on with a leadership or dominance that exists through certain groups of people being held above others.<sup>5</sup> These hegemonic structures are present in the social classes of the western world; the classes are observed by Marx are the upper class and lower class, wealthy and the working class, or more distinctly the bourgeois and the proletariats. One tool used to empower cultural hegemony is symbolic annihilation, which

2. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Pg. 26
3. Kordela, "Marx's Update of Cultural Theory."
4. Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Pg. 28
5. Doyle, *History of Illustration*, Pg. 80

is the misrepresentation or underrepresentation of a group of people in order to maintain social inequality. In symbolic annihilation certain members of society are made invisible through explicit lack of representation in media. Gibson isn't necessarily participating in symbolic annihilation of social classes in *The Seeds of Ambition*, as he represents the young woman of a lower class as the main focus of the piece. However, this piece becomes a commentary on his own creation. The Gibson Girl was a reappearing figure in Gibson's illustrations. She is a map of contradictions, both displayed as empowered but also tied to specific ideals that upheld society's idea of what a woman was meant to be.

In the early 1900s, the idea of the "New Woman" was created. This woman of the century was a symbol of the first wave feminism movement, as she was a woman who could vote, have opinions, and work. While the "New Woman" did support many of the gender roles of the time, as the support for her to vote and work centered around her relationship with her family, the ideology was still threatening to patriarchal consumer capitalism. The image of the Gibson Girl co-opted and marketed those aspects of the "New Woman," however her image was not there to promote working for political change, but rather to produce children.<sup>6</sup> While the commercial success of the Gibson Girl relied on the ideology of "The New Woman," it was only meant to capitalize on a new idea without really promoting anything new. On top of that, similar to the Gibson Girl-esque figure in the posters of *The Seeds of Ambition*, the Gibson Girl itself was an unattainable goal, an unrealized ideal that evoked consumers' and viewers' "anxieties of inadequacy which purchasing her image was supposed to assuage."<sup>7</sup> The Gibson Girl displayed only one kind of woman and promoted one kind of lifestyle that viewers are meant to desire, but it's one that is impossible to attain due to the hegemonic structures in the patriarchal capitalistic society it was built around.

6. Patterson, "Survival of the Best Fitted."

7. Ibid.

The culture industry, as described by Theodor Adorno, is a contradiction between human culture and a mechanical industry. To define it simply, the culture industry is that of popular culture, which produces media similar to how a factory produces standardized goods. In this concept art itself is the sole commodity and the consumer is the object—described as “an appendage of the machinery.”<sup>8</sup> The more dehumanized the process of creation and the content of the products, the more successful the product is at manipulating mass society. The culture industry continues to distance the artist from their art, similar to how Marx noted the alienation of industrial laborers from their work. Creations made in the culture industry are made with a façade of newness that just reuse old ideas, stagnating culture and placating the masses that consumer it. Adorno looks towards Walter Benjamin’s ideas of aura in artwork, which is an integral quality of unique existence in art which cannot be replicated through mechanical reproduction.<sup>9</sup> During this era, the use of assembly lines in illustration production has begun to rise in the west, splitting the duties of sketching, etching, inking, coloring, and so forth to separate artists, distancing and alienating each individual artist from the creations, as the process has become so mechanical it allows them no true claim over the full product of the work. However, the culture industry preserves the decaying appearance of a present aura in art; it preserves something that no longer is there, something that is just a ghost of what it once was. The danger with the culture industry is that it cultivates the fake necessity out of its products, creating a satisfaction that depends on — and is brought to the consumer through — capitalism.<sup>10</sup> The products of the culture industry are posed to be new enough to be interesting, and easy to digest without questions, rendering people docile and content despite the financial disadvantages of the consumers these products are targeted towards. As seen in *The Seeds of Ambition*, the young woman walking past the posters is being presented an idea of success and beauty by

8. Adorno, “Culture Industry Reconsidered.”

9. Tret’iakov, “Art in the Revolution and the Revolution in Art...”

10. Ibid.

the standards of her culture, and it is posed that the woman illustrated in the posters is the picture of success. The culture industry also further strengthens cultural hegemony, as its products are meant to be easy pleasures that don't give the viewers anything to question. It empowers the class disparity, creating a reliance on the ideas being fed through the culture industry, as their needs are posed to only be met by the products of capitalism. Hegemony relies on the culture industry to constantly feed viewers the same ideas and standards of hegemonic culture while still giving them the feeling of change in order to maintain the status quo.

Through the eyes of Marx, Gramsci, and Adorno, images like *The Seeds of Ambition* show the systematic cultural issues of the capitalistic society it represents. The commodification of labor in all fields—including art—created a class imbalance that was supported by a capitalistic culture. The Gibson Girl and the poster of the glamorous actor presented in *The Seeds of Ambition* are presented to be a new idea of women in society, but they do nothing but sustain the hegemonic structure of patriarchal capitalism by presenting women the same consistent standards and expectations and threatening them with social scrutiny and guilt for not being able to meet them. A dependence on the same products that supported the status quo which oppressed women of lower classes was advertised to them by the culture industry, creating a continuous cycle of reliance that empowered the same system that abused their labor and consumption.



**Figure 1.** *The Seeds of Ambition*, Charles Dana Gibson, 1903

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