

Rasmus Willig

## "Criticism as a weapon"

The artwork *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* consists of 100 class B shares. The art shares are available in various sizes, for example from 40 x 60 to 200 x 300. As the owner of a class B share, you become a shareholder in the company. Kristian von Hornsleth is the managing director, and owns a class A share with the right to control the company. The objects of the company are: 1) to invest in arms production and other war-related industries, including the supply of private armies, etc., via listed companies in the arms industry, 2) to earn profits from these investments and related activities, and 3) to provide funding in the form of investments for idealistic projects, upon application.

*Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* plans to build up its shareholdings in foreign arms manufacturers, but also expects to invest in Danish companies, such as GPV, which produces military supplies. In time, more Danish and Scandinavian companies may join, provided they live up to the charter of *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation*.

### **Sociological perspective**

The now deceased French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, once said, with reference to Karl Marx, that it was his conviction that criticism does not acquire its true strength through 'criticism of weapons', but rather through the use of 'criticism as a weapon'. What Bourdieu meant was that criticism must be well-founded; it should not consist of fragmented sub-analyses with the mere appearance of radical criticism, but should be a form of criticism that involves all parts of an analysis. According to Bourdieu, it is not enough just to give the analysis a radical appearance by

adding "a bit of Freud, a bit of Reich, a bit of Marx – all reinterpreted" – in order to endow the analysis with a critical aura.

At first glance, *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* is neither a criticism of weapons nor criticism used as a weapon, but rather a work in which the criticism is directed at investments in weapons. The critical element consists quite simply in juxtaposing art, which has always been borne by anti-capitalist and anti-militarist claims, alongside the most extreme form of capitalism, namely that capital which, not just in a metaphorical sense, but also quite literally, capitalises on and produces death and destruction.

### **The cultural industry and the arms industry**

The combination of 'artistic capital' and actual 'capitalist capital' is not in itself new, but *Hornsleth's* composition could hardly be more provocative. Many years ago, the famous German critic Walter Benjamin performed a similar trick when, on a theoretical level, he categorised contemporary art as part of the catchy concept of the 'cultural industry'. Prior to this, culture had been considered to be anything but industry. The mere idea that culture could be mass produced seemed deplorable and deeply provocative. Today, the contention is generally accepted, and the industrial production of culture is a part of the experience economy.

With *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation*, Benjamin's postulate has been given renewed relevance, not just as a theoretical concept, but also as a concept of artistic practice. The function of the artist and artworks is to draw attention to criticisable and often entirely perverse social pathological societal relations. *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* is such an artwork.

Generally accepted investment associations, venture capital funds and pension funds regularly invest in the arms industry, and are thereby the direct cause of a far too early death for some people, while others, thanks to these investments, can be secured a long and comfortable old age. No investment associations, venture capital funds or pension funds can claim that they have never at any time undertaken such investments, just as no western citizens

can claim to be unaware of the fact that their savings sometimes lead a peculiarly unethical existence.

### **The investment portfolios of the Western population**

*Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* does only what hundreds of companies do every day, with the knowledge of their customers. The difference, however, is that the investments are not hidden away and wrapped in declarations of *Corporate Social Responsibility* or *Sustainable Growth*. The insulating and blurring 'ethical' layer has been removed, and what remains is the true reflection of the investment portfolios of the western public.

*Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* is a critical masterpiece. As we all know, criticism is belligerent by nature, and in its eagerness to overcome, it often makes use of all conceivable methods. Artistic exaggeration is one such commonly used method. That which is ridiculed or tyrannised by criticism can for example be magnified to an exaggerated degree, thereby clearly underlining its grotesque and illogical aspects. Polemical artistic criticism is eager to fight; it challenges and attacks with all available means.

The critic Walter Benjamin, to whom I referred just now, wrote for example in his article "The Critic's Technique in Thirteen Theses" that "Genuine polemics approach a book as lovingly as a cannibal spices a baby." Genuine polemics are therefore entirely unrestrained. Perhaps this kind of criticism knows no limits. The reason may be that in some cases, criticism is unable or unwilling to subject itself to any rules, norms or customs. It is not in the nature of criticism to allow itself to be shackled. Criticism which is shackled may no longer be criticism at all. *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* is one such piece of unshackled art.

The genre description and method that Benjamin describes is 'immanent criticism', i.e. a kind of criticism which is aimed at the other party's own illogical and inconsistent reasoning. The immanent aspect arises from the fact that the critical weapons used are derived from that which is ridiculed, i.e. from the object of the criticism itself.

## **Hornsleth and the Karate Kid**

When the international political philosopher Michael Hardt, co-author, with Antonio Negri, of the social critical work *Empire*, spoke at the Danish Congress of Sociologists some years ago, he described immanent criticism with the aid of a metaphor derived from martial arts.

In his opinion, immanent criticism is a matter of turning the force of one's opponent against himself. Those with an acquaintance with martial arts will know that this is a fundamental principle in all varieties of such sports. If you conjoin your opponent's blow with your own, you can achieve twice the strength for half the effort. The other person's attack becomes your best defence and attack method.

As a result, those who are slight of build can overcome the muscular. Without the methods of martial arts, film figures such as the *Karate Kid* would be impossible. He moved to a new part of town and was quite randomly and unfairly attacked by the big kids in the neighbourhood, but with the help of an old karate master he learned the techniques of the martial arts, and justice was done in full. The big guys got a beating when they attacked.

It is much the same story in art. That which is the subject of criticism is addressed at the point at which its strength seems to be best established. From here, it is not far to immanent criticism. All that needs to be done is to utilise the inconsistency already inherent in the subject as an attack. The greatest success is usually achieved when the identified fault is magnified and exaggerated, so that it becomes clear to all that something is fundamentally wrong.

## **Farm animals and weapons**

There is something fundamentally immoral about investing in weapons. The idea that increased investment and economic growth are the foundation of social and societal progress collapses when the economic growth is shown to be due to the success of the arms industry.

Kristian von Hornsleth previously did something similar with the Uganda project, in which Ugandans who adopted his surname were given a farm animal. The sometimes grotesque

aspects of certain kinds of trade were thereby coarsely and effectively displayed by being magnified and clarified: when everyone in Africa acquires the surname von Hornsleth, hunger will have been eradicated. The same is the case with *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* – once the company's profits are sufficiently large, the world's relief organisations can seek funding to end all forms of hardship.

### **Criticism is aimed at Hornsleth**

The criticism of the work is directed at a financial and structural level, but it is apparently returned by an indignant public, who for the moment have forgotten their investments and have instead chosen to attack the artist at an individual level. The criticism is thereby deflected from its original level and immediately disarmed. This is a familiar pattern when criticism hits home, and it is especially the case with the works of Kristian von Hornsleth. It is no longer about aspects of the financial system which require ethical revision, but rather about the artist's own amoral lifestyle. It is no longer about the work *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation*, but about the artist Kristian von Hornsleth.

This deflection maintains for a moment the notion that only the work of a single madman is responsible for the weapon industry's easy access to capital. Kristian von Hornsleth is a textbook example of a vulnerable critical artist, because he continually challenges artistic dogmas and, in particular, generally accepted social phenomena.

I am sometimes reminded of the Storm P. caricature, *The Critic*, in connection with Kristian von Hornsleth's works. In this picture we see a happy painter, sitting on a headland and painting the sea. With his gaze fixed on his subject, he fails to notice the bull thundering towards him with lowered horns and steaming nostrils. For Storm P., the painter represents the artist who follows his heart, while the bull is the critical press which reveals its disapproving anger. It is said that Storm P. drew this picture after a negative review, which is why it shows such an asymmetrical relationship between the artist and the critic.

## Toy guns

I naturally do not see Kristian von Hornsleth as the defenceless artist that Storm P. portrayed; it is, rather, his works that are the onrushing bull, trampling time and again on conventional views and dogmas. The question, however, is whether the thundering bull, *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation*, is standing at a crossroads – for can or should the criticism survive, if investments really are made in armaments? Kristian von Hornsleth is the managing director of the company, and owns the single class A share that gives him the right to control its activities. He can listen to proposals to invest in anything other than weapons – but he can also choose to ignore them.

I don't think investment should be made in the arms industry. I think Bourdieu is right to say that true criticism is 'criticism as a weapon', which implies that *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* should not follow its planned route, but should enter into new projects which can contribute to producing new critical perspectives. Perhaps *Hornsleth Arms Investment Corporation* should instead invest in toy guns and give them to the child armies of the world, or bomb dictatorial states with critical books and art? Just imagine if an army was one day forced to withdraw in order to reload its Hornsleth water pistols, or take cover from an air raid in which they were bombarded with critical literature. Dear Kristian – invest it all in toy guns. With criticism as a weapon, not weapons as criticism.

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