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CHAPTER 7

Representing Capital: Mimesis, Realism, and Contemporary Photography

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INTRODUCTION: REPRESENTING CAPITAL

Since the crises of 2008, we can observe a heightened interest in Marxist theory, social-critical thought, and reflections on capitalism, though reactions in mainstream analytic philosophy are very limited. Economic and social crises are not only of interest for economic explanations and social-political thought, but also important for what one might call a phenomenology of capital, insofar as economic crises are changing the mode in and through which a society becomes visible to itself. As Marx demonstrates in many parts of his work, capitalist social relations disappear in their own results and the “thing-like” quality of the commodified relations no longer allow us to see the genesis of their becoming. Put differently, what is fluid, relational, becoming and not fixed appears as something stable, unrelated, being, and fixed. Capital becomes a thing instead of a *process*, labor relations disappear behind the surface of market relations and production “costs,” and the social genesis of money disappears in everyone’s pocket. Economic crises, however, make the invisible synthesis of labor and capital visible, as they let the economic, social, and political agents appear on one level. Imagine that 2008 would have turned into a

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major crisis, which would have meant that most of us would no longer have had access to ATM machines, bank accounts, payment options, and so on. However we imagine such a situation, one thing is clear: it would render the class relations and the underlying wealth production visible, as they could no longer be as easily fetishized behind the veil of money and capital. It is safe to assume though that the official rhetoric would have turned such a crisis into "systemic risk."

The problem of the relation between experience and the imperceptible and invisible is important for critical theory at least in three regards: [1] we find the problem of the visible and the invisible in Marx's genetic theory of social categories and the constitution of social totality, insofar as the genesis of those categories disappears, as he puts it, in their results and behind the surface of commodity exchange; [2] we find the problem of the visible and the invisible in the concept of fetishism, insofar as commodified relations no longer appear as what they are; and [3] we find the problem of the visible and the invisible in the organization and structure of critical theory itself, given that the need and necessity of theory is derived from the inaccessibility of social totality and social categories for immediate grasp. Theory, as Adorno puts it, is necessary because social totality and the essence of social reality is *not* accessible neither in experience nor in empirical approaches to this experience. The transparency of society to itself, that is, what the early Habermas called "reflection," has been approached differently in critical theory: whereas for Marx and the early Lukács, society becomes transparent to itself in and through class struggle, Adorno no longer believed in the possibility that capitalist society reflects itself in class struggle; instead, as he argued, theory has to take the empty place of social transparency.

Independent from these methodological, epistemological, and theoretical problems, however, we find the problematic relation between the socially visible and the socially invisible reflected in (critical) art and aesthetics; in particular, in the critical tradition of art and aesthetics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which includes Brecht, Eisenstein, Kluge, Benjamin, Adorno, and, more recently, Rossler, Farocki, Sekula, and Pagen. We would do well to acknowledge Eisenstein's fascinating idea to make a film about capital (for which we only have a few pages of notes), Brecht's *Kriegsfiel*, which was supposed to make the effects of war visible, Kluge's major nine-hour poetic video puzzle project on Marx and capitalism entitled *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike*, Farocki's film essay reflections on labor, and Sekula's lifelong attempts to reveal and

reflect critically on the disappearing maritime world. All of these projects, and perhaps art as such, is confronted with the problem of visibility and invisibility because art works cannot remain within the conceptual and theoretical realm alone, insofar as they are in need of the sensual presence of meaning. The problem becomes more difficult, however, when artists either explicitly work from a critical and Marxist standpoint (such as Farocki and Sekula do) or implicitly want to address capital, capitalism, globalization, economic issues, and so on in their work. The question, then, is very simple: how can something that is as such socially and really abstract, such as money, capital, exchange, global structures, trade flows, banks, financial speculations, and so on be made perceptible? Put plainly, how can that which is invisible be rendered visible? Even more: how can capital, which as such, is unrepresentable, be taken on in the arts? How would a musician deal with the issue of capital? Can painting be related to it? How can one deal with expansion triggered by capital, which is often invisible in its globalized dimension? Put in the words of Alan Sekula who has worked extensively on artistic issues related to photography, maritime life, and globalization, "in the past, harbor residents were deluded by their senses into thinking that a global economy could be seen and heard and smelled" (Sekula, 1995, p. 4). In a globalized economy, however, as Sekula has shown, maritime economic life disappears behind new phenomena such as containerization. To put his question differently, how can something that does not smell and cannot be touched, such as underlying capital flow, be reflected in a work of art that undeniably needs to exist in sensual form? Again, as Alan Sekula puts it in regard to the globalization of harbors, transportation, shipping, and containerization,

What one sees in a harbor is the concrete movement of goods. This movement can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction. Marx tells us this, even if no one is listening anymore. If the stock market is the site in which the abstract character of money rules, the harbor is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange. Use values slide by in the channel; the Ark is no longer a bestiary but an encyclopedia of trade and industry. This is the reason for the antique mercantile charm of harbors. But the more regularized, literally containerized, the movement of goods in harbors, that is, the more rationalized and automated, the more the harbor comes to resemble the stock market. A crucial phenomenological point here is the suppression of smell. Goods that once reeked—guano, gypsum, steamed tuna, hemp, molasses—now flow or are boxed. (Sekula, 1995, p. 4)

Of course, the development of new media and their art forms during the twenty-first century has enriched the possibilities of dealing with these issues, since photography, film, radio, tv, and digital production can combine the traditional genres such as the fine arts, poetry, prose, music, and theater, in a never-seen-before complexity. It comes of no surprise, then, that some of the most critical artists of our time, such as Sekula, have opted for a "mixed media" approach that includes texts, photography, and film. Accordingly, as I submit, the new development in the arts, in particular in photography and film, are better equipped to take on the all-encompassing nature of capital, its invisibility, and its (possible) representation.

If we look back to Lukács, we should note that even for Lukács, it is impossible to represent capitalism *as such*. He writes:

The practical damage resulting from this confusion can be seen in the great loss of unity and cohesiveness in proletarian praxis when compared to the unity of the objective economic tendencies. The superior strength of true, practical class consciousness lies in the ability to look beyond the divisive symptoms of the economic process to the unity of the total social system underlying it. In the age of capitalism, it is not possible for the total system to become directly visible in external phenomena. For instance, the economic basis of a world crisis is undoubtedly unified and its coherence can be understood. But its actual appearance in time and space will take the form of a disparate succession of events in different countries at different times and even in different branches of industry in a number of countries (Lukács, 1967, p. 74).

What Lukács has in mind is that the totality of capitalist social relations can only be grasped in philosophy, insofar as philosophy, in a classically Hegelian manner, oversteps the representational boundaries of the arts and can grasp the core of everything conceptually. One wonders, though, whether Lukács would have revised his position if faced with the enormous power and sophistication of contemporary media artists and the possibilities that (especially) film as an all-encompassing medium possesses, which can include dialogue, analysis and even conceptual reflection. Be that as it may, for Lukács, the central question of a critical aesthetics focused on the question not only of how to represent the capitalist world (which he saw best treated in Thomas Mann's novels [*Romane*]), but also of whether the underlying *tendency* and political position can be connected to a *future* overcoming of the present. As he has it,

If literature is to render an image of life that is adequate, formally convincing and consistent, the sequence must be reversed. Whereas in life 'whither?' is a consequence of 'whence?', in literature 'whither?' determines the content, selection and proportion of the various elements. The finished work may resemble life in observing a causal sequence; but it would be no more than an arbitrary chronicle if there were not this reversal of direction. It is the perspective, the *terminus ad quem*, that determines the significance of each element in a work of art. (Lukács, 1963, p. 55; 1971, p. 510)

As I will try to demonstrate in what follows, this teleological rendering of the internal consistency of the art work can be well discussed, in regard to contemporary artistic photography and film, after introducing the problem of how to represent capital(ism) and after renewing the concept of mimesis and representation for critical purposes, I will only deal with two contemporary artists, Alan Sekula and Edward Burtynsky. As I will indicate, a critical concept of mimesis and a new realism is needed to further develop critical aesthetics in a Lukácsian spirit; for however one approaches the overall problem that I have introduced so far, the following is clear: without a strong concept of contemporary realism, which is opposed to post-structuralist relativisms, the problem of how to *represent* capital in the arts cannot be tackled.

MIMESIS, REALISM, LUKÁCS

We should not forget that the modern concept of mimesis in the arts is only remotely connected to simple imitation, copying, or reproducing reality. A mimetic image, as I have extensively argued elsewhere (Lotz, 2015), differs from such simplified versions of the concept of mimesis. I will here offer a short version of this argument, as the concept of mimesis is central for a critical concept of aesthetics and realism.

REALISM

The concept of representation has a long history, that is difficult to untangle, not only because epistemological considerations go hand in hand with aesthetic considerations, but also because the different languages handle the term in very different fashions. The conception that I would like to present here is closely connected to the German word for representation. There are two German terms for "representation" in this context: on the one hand, it can mean "Vorstellung," which refers to a mental representation,

and on the other hand, it can mean "Darstellung," which means to present something to someone. Neither has to do with being a copy or imitation nor does it involve mental representations. The confusion is even deeper if we take into account that the German word for mental representations (*Vorstellung*) is also used, for example, for theater presentations. The word "Vorstellung" here means "show" or "presentation." Accordingly, even the term used for mental representations in German has a non-mental aspect, insofar as it has the sense of "to present" and "to show." Moreover, "vorstellen" as a verb can be used to introduce a person to another person. Finally, in the Latin context, the word "representare" did not mean that *something stands in for something else*; rather, the term was used in a legal context and meant that a person herself *shows up as* in the courtroom (accordingly, it comes closer to the German word "vorstellen"). Whereas we often think of representations as a relationship between something and something that it is not, here we can see that representation has the sense of an *internal* relation: something shows *itself as itself*. The problem of mimesis is not primarily whether the image imitates something prior to the image; rather, the problem is that of which the image is an image *of* or that which the work is *about* always constitutes itself as something independent from the active construction—but not, and this is important, as *externally* independent. For example, when a child pretends to be a horse rider, then he/she does not simply imitate something outside his/her play. But how should this be the case, as there is no horse rider present who could be imitated in this moment? For, the pretended horse rider imitates something of its own kind, as the horse riding is not present as long as the child is not really riding a horse. It is not sufficient to point to the imitated as if it would be a sign. Accordingly, the horse rider imitation is a *coming about* of not only the horse rider, but also what a horse rider is (= image). Mimesis, accordingly, is an internal relation, namely, the relation between the performance and what comes into presence throughout the performance. As Adorno points out, we need to think of mimesis as the attempt to *become* the object: "although art is imitation, it is not imitation of an object; rather, through its gesture and its whole attitude, it is the attempt to reconstitute a situation in which the difference between subject and object did not exist" (Adorno, 1997, p. 70). Consequently, mimesis should not be conceived as something static; rather, mimesis is always a process or, as Gadamer has it, a *play(ing)*. That which the representation is about should *become* clearer, become more transparent, and should become *itself* during the mimetic process. Accordingly, the mimetic process is related to

truth, since that which the representation is supposed to imitate should become more familiar and better known. In fact, mimesis, as Gadamer has argued, is "not merely a repetition, a copy, but knowledge of the essence" (Gadamer, 2003, p. 114). As a consequence, we should come to the conclusion that in a mimetic process, the relation between representation and the represented is not a copy or reproduction; rather, what presents itself in the representation is not something static that could be immediately identified; given that it comes into being and remains "fluid" throughout. Thereby, mimesis is a form of insight and *knowledge*.

We can now easily apply the foregoing insights about the concept of mimesis to the concept of realism. Realism, we might say, is not an arbitrary art form; instead, it is a specific way in which a work of art is related to the content that it projects (image). This internal relation can be constructed and put to work in a work of art as a relation of *presenting* that which the work of art is about. Accordingly, a work of art is realistic if it gives us a clear opening toward seeing that to which it is related and its content *better*. Something *shows up* in a realist work of art and should not be obfuscated.

In his critique of modern art, Lukács is primarily arguing that many works are limiting their own access to what they are about by artificially retreating to a position of unclarity, abstractness, and flight from reality. However, this does not touch the concept of realism as a *target* of an artistic practice that is *interested* in presenting something to the audience; instead, it simply formalistically plays with elements or retreats to some supposedly neutral position of art for the sake of art. Realism, we might say with Thomas Metscher, can be understood as the "lively presentation of reality" (Metscher, 2012, p. 91). As such, a realist work of art is always based on interpretation, that is, it is itself presenting that which it is about from a specific perspective and within a temporal horizon. I will come back to this point shortly; for, seen from a *critical* point of view, the specificity of the artwork's perspective should also be laid out as a *political* position.

Once, however, we leave behind the confusion of taking realism to mean naturalism or some form of naïve imitation, we can understand that it is the very goal of realism to work out and present an "essential image" (*Wesensbild*), which, in literature, can be seen in the task of presenting a sensual-intellectual totality of an individual life or a social situation. In a realistic work, character and structure go hand in hand. Accordingly, the goal of realism is *truth*, and seen from the standpoint of a critical aesthetics, truth can only be reached if the work reflects its own viewpoint

within social reality, as according to critical theory, truth does not exist independent from its standpoint in society and praxis. We should be careful, though, to take Jameson's warning into account:

Realism [...] is a hybrid concept, in which an epistemological claim (for knowledge or truth) masquerades as an aesthetic ideal, with fatal consequences for both of these incommensurable dimensions. If it is social truth or knowledge we want from realism, we will soon find that what we get is ideology; if it is beauty or aesthetic satisfaction we are looking for, we will quickly find that we have to do with outdated styles or mere decoration (if not distraction). (Jameson, 2013, p. 6)

According to Lukács and the concept if mimesis introduced so far, we need to see that realism is the base of *every* form of literature (Lukács, 1971, p. 501) and, in my view, of other genres, too. In this vein, the entire debate about the concept of realism between Bloch, Brecht, Lukács, and Adorno is not really about realism or anti-realism, insofar as both camps argue with the same idea, namely, that either artists such as Mann (Lukács' position) or artists such as Kafka (Bloch's position) deal *more* realistically with modern society and the position of the individual within it. Be that as it may, in a truly realist work of art, that is, one that can also be abstract, a model of world emerges that *as a whole* contains the essential and objective properties of the interpreted life through interpretation and the artistic image (Mersch, 2012, p. 101). As Lukács has it, "art is the selection of the essential and subtraction of the inessential" (Lukács, 1963, p. 53; 1971, p. 507). As Lukács further argues, the following principles apply to a transparent relation in a work with its own content: [1] it should display a unity of appearance and essence that is coherent (1971, p. 616); [2] it should be a "closed immediacy" (1971, p. 617), that is, the most perfect works attempt to present what they are about within their own artistic means and levels of sensual materiality. What Lukács means is that the process of understanding the work and of participating in the work does not need abstractions and comparisons on the side of the reader or audience (1971, p. 620); [3] in regard to literature, the unity of individual and typical becomes available to the recipient in the portrayal of human situations that make life as a whole in its process accessible; [4] every work of art produces its *own* world, that is, refers to an identifiable horizon of meaning through which all elements become accessible (Lukács, 1971, p. 617). All principles follow organically from the concept of mimesis as I outlined it at the beginning of this section.

THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF CRITICAL REALISM

Now, the concepts of mimesis and realism would remain uncritical if they would not be based on specific political positions that are reflected in the work itself. Lukács' assumption of a necessary transparency in regard to the political aspect is of course the true reason why his conception of realism did not find many supporters. The basic "hinge" of Lukács' critical attitude and historical judgment, which philosophers such as Adorno rejected as dogmatism, lies in his thesis (which he believes he shares with every Marxist) that the historical development will necessarily lead to a socialist society:

For the Marxist, the road to socialism is identical with the movement of history itself. There is no phenomenon, objective or subjective, that has not its function in furthering, obstructing or deviating this development. A right understanding of such things is vital to the thinking socialist. Thus, *any* accurate account of reality is a contribution – whatever the author's subjective intention – to the Marxist critique of capitalism, and is a blow in the cause of socialism. In this sense, the alliance of socialism with realism may be said to have its roots in the revolutionary movement of the proletariat. (Lukács, 1963, p. 101; 1971, p. 561)

Seen from this point of view, it becomes clear that, according to Lukács, every intentional or unintentional attitude that does not speak from a socialist point of view falls behind historically achieved insights. For Lukács, then, the artist must *always* place herself within the horizon of a permanent revolution and the possibility of *new* developments, which, for Lukács, are either reactionary developments or openings toward a non-capitalist future:

I have raised this more general sociological point in order to show the essential contradictions inherent in any historical development. A writer's negative reaction to a historical phenomenon may have many motives. His reaction may, of course, spring from inability to understand the new phase of social development. But it may also be the justified rejection of a reactionary phenomenon. The two things should not be confused. Admittedly, this kind of rejection and an inability to understand new developments may go together. (Lukács, 1963, p. 111; 1971, p. 572)

In addition, Lukács must interpret every position that remains based on an abstract negation of capitalism as a reactionary step back behind

what he thinks is historically necessary. As a consequence, every artistic position that does not take on a *revolutionary* position, in the eyes of Lukács, remains fetishistic, insofar as the artist and her work takes on a supposedly "neutral" position that does not exist in reality. Even abstract negative attitudes are rejected by Lukács. For example, his critique of Expressionism is based on the thesis that expressionist art or artists only abstractly, that is, unpolitically, negate the existing reality (for more on this, see Lotz, 2016). Supposedly neutral or abstract positions, then, are themselves specific political positions, namely, in the eyes of Lukács, ultimately reactionary positions. As a consequence, Lukács *must* posit the conflict between capitalism and socialism as *the* historical conflict of our times: "In a larger perspective, the struggle between capitalism and socialism may be the formative principle of our age." In line with official East European socialist propaganda, Lukács interprets the world-historical struggle between capitalism and socialism also as a struggle between war and peace (1971, p. 465) and between anti-fascism and fascism:

What determines the style of a given work of art? How does the intention determine the form? (We are concerned here, of course, with the intention realized in the work; it need not coincide with the writer's conscious intention). The distinctions that concern us are not those between stylistic "techniques" in the formalistic sense. It is the view of the world, the ideology or *Weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work, that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes his "intention" and is the formative principle underlying the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather, it is rooted in content; it is the specific form of a specific content. Content determines form. But there is no content of which Man himself is not the focal point. However various the *donnees* of literature (a particular experience, a didactic purpose), the basic question is, and will remain: what is Man? (Lukács, 1963, p. 19; 1971, p. 468)

What Lukács has in mind here is that the political position of the work of art can be translated in how concretely, that is, how materialistically, the artist deals with the human world as a *social* world, and since he assumes that we are living in a reality that should be rejected and historically negated, Lukács, coherently rejects art works that project an image of human beings that are "neutral," idealistic, apolitical, or asocial. As Michael P. Thompson points out:

This means that the key issue here is the cognitive stance to the object where the object is society itself. When Lukács says that non-realist art is the expression of decadence, he means that it is no longer able to communicate the totality to the reader; it no longer has the power to shatter the reification of the social world, and the work of art is left only with the ability to communicate alternative modes of feeling, but no sense of a grasp of the social dynamics that should awaken a sense of critique of the society. Instead, it leads one into the interior, into a world divorced from social and public concerns. (Thompson, 2014, p. 189)

Independent from Adorno's and Bloch's point that it could be *precisely* the retreat to the interior that more realistically displays the overall situation of modern societies, one would need to argue that for Lukács there is only *one* real social concern, namely, the overcoming of capitalism, which leads him to his dualistic and at times very reductive position a la "who is not with us is against us."

Seen from this revolutionary angle, which seemed to be too idealistic and abstract for philosophers working in the critical tradition after World War II, we can at least argue that Lukács is not incoherent, as the retreat to the interior immediately makes sense if we imagine a socially and politically unstable situation. However, even if we can no longer make much sense of Lukács' attacks on modern art, given what I have said about realism, we can at least acknowledge that his position is not totally incoherent. For when Lukács criticizes modernism as being based on the dissolution of the personality, on a projection of a dream-like reality, on creating intransparent images of reality, on loosely associated characteristics, on purely psychological associations, on meaningless destructions of rules for the sake of being destructive, on subjective turns, on escaping into the pathological and the anti-social, on affirming the feeling of arbitrariness, and on falling back onto anxiety as a reaction to reification (1971, p. 506), he criticizes not only the backward-looking political attitude, but also primarily the obfuscation of reality.

FORGETTING

What Lukács does not reflect in his considerations of realism is the fact that the problems of realist art are somehow "echoed" in Marxist theory itself, in the form of the relation between transparency and intransparency, as well as in the form of the relation between visibility and invisibility, both of which are deeply reflected in Marx's theory. The problem of

visibility and invisibility, one could argue, is not only *the* problem of the entire fetishism chapter, but also reappears on every methodological level of Marx's mature theory. For example, think of the problem of commodity circulation and market relations. Marx's entire theory deals with the problem that all social relations, that is, relations contained in production, consumption, and distribution, disappear at the surface of commodity circulation. Put in modern terms, at the surface of the market exchanges and the processes of selling and buying, the *entire* content of political economy and the central functioning of capital and surplus value disappear and are no longer visible. It is as if the act of buying and selling is in itself an active act of *forgetting*, which is a very Nietzschean view of forgetting. It comes as no surprise, then, that the problem of memory and forgetting can be traced throughout all levels of Marx's *Capital*. For example, in the fetishism chapter, Marx states the following:

We have already seen, from the most elementary expression of value, x commodity A = y commodity B, that the object in which the magnitude of the value of another object is represented, appears to have the equivalent form independently of this relation, as a social property given to it by nature. We followed up this false appearance to its final establishment, which is complete as soon as the universal equivalent form becomes identified with the bodily form of a particular commodity, and thus crystallized into the money-form.

What appears to happen is not that gold becomes money, in consequence of all other commodities expressing their values in it, but, on the contrary, that all other commodities universally express their values in gold, because it is money. The intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave no trace behind. Commodities find their own value already completely represented, without any initiative on their part, in another commodity existing in company with them. These objects, gold and silver, just as they come out of the bowels of the earth, are forthwith the direct incarnation of all human labor. Hence the magic of money. (Marx, 1990, p. 187)

What Marx points out here is the process through which the value-form, as he discusses it in the first chapter of *Capital*, becomes invisible in the result of its constitution, that is, in the real existing form of value, which is money. The steps, however, that lead to money as the universal mediator of social reality *vanish* in their result. As Marx puts it in the above quote, *the intermediate steps of the process vanish in the result and leave no trace behind*. When we find commodities on the market, they *already* come with a price tag and the fact that commodities are constituted by their *specific*

social form disappears behind their appearance. Put differently, money stands for a complex relationship between the visible and the invisible, and it is as if the surface in capitalism is like a *symptom*, insofar as that which the symptom is a symptom of is forgotten *in* the symptom.

Similarly, Marx argues that this basic process of forgetting and displacement occurs at every level of money and capital. For example, in regard to commodity circulation, that is, *market* relations, he writes the following—with explicit reference to the process of forgetting:

In present bourgeois society as a whole, this positing of prices and their circulation etc. appears as the surface process, beneath which, however, in the depths, entirely different processes go on, in which this apparent individual equality and liberty disappear. It is forgotten, on one side, that the presupposition of exchange value, as the objective basis of the whole of the system of production, already in itself implies compulsion over the individual, since his immediate product is not a product for him, but only becomes such in the social process, and since it must take on this general but nevertheless external form; and that the individual has an existence only as a producer of exchange value, hence that the whole negation of his natural existence is already implied; that he is therefore entirely determined by society; that this further presupposes a division of labor etc., in which the individual is already posited in relations other than that of mere exchanger, etc. (Marx, 1993, p. 247)

What Marx argues here is well known: at the surface of commodity circulation and everyday market relations, such as buying and selling as well as supply and demand, equal individuals seem to encounter each other as formally free individuals. In fact, market relations are only apparently made of individual transactions between individuals that are socially constituted through their exchange relations. In truth, however, these individuals are constituted by the relations that underlie market relations, but are forgotten and displaced underneath the market. Individuals are already determined as specific individuals and are constituted by the relations of production and consumption as well as by conditions of the relations of production and consumption.

Finally, let us briefly consider how Marx's overall problem of visibility and invisibility makes its way into recent Critical Theory. In his famous essay and lecture *Late Capitalism or Industrial Society*, Adorno treats the problem of abstraction and unification of capitalist social relations in the following way:

previously separated moments of the social process, which living human beings incarnate, are being brought into a kind of overall equivalence. [...] Everything is one. The totality of the process of mediation, in truth that of the exchange-principle, produces a second and deceptive immediacy. It makes it possible for that which is separate and antagonistic to be, against its own appearance, forgotten or to be repressed from consciousness. This consciousness of society is however an illusion, because it represents the consequences of technological and organizational homogenization, but nonetheless fails to see that this homogenization is not truly rational, but remains itself subordinated itself to a blind, irrational nomothetism [*Gesetzmaßigkeit*: lawfulness, juridicality]. No truly total subject of society yet exists. The mere appearance ought to be formulated as follows, that everything socially existent today is so thoroughly mediated, that even the moment of mediation is itself distorted by the totality. (Adorno, 1968, n.p.)

What Adorno has in mind is simply the totalization of Marx's thesis that the process of social constitution gets lost in the (seemingly) fixed results of these processes, given that in capitalist societies, according to Adorno, the *entirety* of capitalist social organization disappears behind the act of forgetting (for more on this, see Lotz, 2014). It is as if capitalist society forgets itself in its reality and becomes totally blind to itself. Consequently, Adorno combines his Freudianism here with basic insights of Marx's social theory. The thesis, however, is very similar: capitalist social relations disappear within or behind themselves.

This conclusion can now bring us back to the task of critical aesthetics and the task of realism. If it is true that we are living in a system that "forgets itself," how could artistic practice, the goal of which is (sensual) visibility, tackle this fact (if we assume that the artists have understood the problem)? As we will see further below, many contemporary artists are aware of this problem and they encounter the problem *in their own praxis*, especially if they are dealing explicitly with social issues. Two of these artists, Edward Burtynsky and Allen Sekula, reflect deeply on the problem of the invisibility of capital and the invisibility of its proper reflection in their works. This is nicely visible in this statement by art critique Buchloh on Sekula:

This apparent "illegibility" of Sekula's work within current artistic practices (which in fact is more the result of cultural elisions) points to several parameters of exclusion. They concern first of all the question regarding the contemporary (im)possibility of an Iconography of labor in a self-declared post-industrial and post-working class society, where large segments of labor

and production are in fact concealed from common view since they are exported to the geo-political "margins." Accordingly, the experience of *production* and the conditions of industrial labor have been banned by a massive representational prohibition from modernist visual culture. (Buchloh in Sekula, 1995, p. 191)

What Buchloh points to in this statement is the relative unpopularity of Sekula within the contemporary art scene. Not only does Sekula deal with the invisibility of capital and production in our social reality; in addition, his praxis of making these issues visible are themselves repressed and forgotten, as the commodified and capitalist art world is unable to deal with what (invisibly) constitutes itself. What we encounter in Sekula's case, so to speak, is a "double bind" problem. In what follows, I will analyze a few selected aspects of Burtynsky's and Sekula's work that are of importance for the questions raised in this essay.

BURTYNSKY

Edward Burtynsky's work has by now achieved a high standing in the art world. Primarily working in photography, over the years, Burtynsky developed several projects related to globalization, environmental destruction, extraction sites, commodity chains, as well as what he properly calls "manufactured landscapes." His recent projects on industrial landscapes and on water have been documented and accompanied by fascinating documentary films that show more closely how Burtynsky works, how carefully he develops his projects, and how sophisticated and professional his entire artistic praxis is. It is important to note that the films make visible important social contexts of his photographs that become invisible in the art gallery or museum. The latter point is important, as this ambivalence leads to an ultimately dissatisfactory way of "representing capital," despite the grandeur of his work.

Burtynsky's works are characterized by their large size, which, often from distance, show landscapes that have been deformed, manipulated, changed, or destroyed by economic processes (check <http://www.edwardburtynsky.com/>). Many of his images linger somewhere between abstraction and concretion. This "in between" status of many of his works is due to the invisibility of the context that underlie the pictures. The viewer encounters Burtynsky's images often without much information about the images, and because his works are primarily shown in art

galleries and museums, they tend to compete with paintings. Most of his photographs are either of stunning beauty or of awe-inspiring sublimity. Burtnytsky removes his pictures from their social and historical backgrounds and this strategy of "decontextualisation and desocialisation" (Toscano & Kinkle, 2014, p. 209) leads the interpreter to go back and forth between the extremely beautiful properties of the images that stem from the formal structures of his photographs, and the often devastating content of the pictures that are related to ecological catastrophes (such as the BP oil spill), ship disassembling in Bangladesh with inhuman labor conditions, or massive industrial projects and landscape changes in China. As other commentators have noted, Burtnytsky "presents us with beautiful moments [...] without any inquiry into the process of their production" (Toscano & Kinkle, 2014, p. 206). Photographs are taken out of their context and serve then for the pleasure of the disinterested spectator, although with some inquiry the viewer can learn and get to know what these pictures are about. This process of reflection, however, cannot be found *in* the artworks and, hence, Burtnytsky's works try to distance themselves from any interpretative view of its content. Expressed in terms that I introduced above, Burtnytsky's images are mimetic, but they are presented in such an extremely formal manner that they internally try to reject the mimetic moment. For the viewer, "the tension between aesthetics and conscience" (Liu, 2014, p. 470) becomes the central moment of the viewing process. On the one hand, the topics of his work invite the viewer to reflect more on what the pictures depict. On the other hand, however, the stunning formal properties and beauty of his work make it almost impossible to build up a reflective position on the side of the viewer. This tendency can be seen most prominently in his recent series entitled *Water*, which consists of many references to romantic depictions of sublime landscape configurations and to the distinction between the mathematical and dynamical sublime. As one commentator has it, "his 30-by-40 inch and 50-by-60 inch prints are almost hypnotic in their hyper reality, providing the viewer with a heightened sense of observation unattainable in the act of viewing the scene itself" (Pauli, 2006, p. 13). In addition, many of his works are characterized by the loss of the moving body and the loss of a fixed body position. Due to their massive proportions and odd framing, it is not clear for the viewer from which angle or position the picture was taken. The spatial dimension tends to disappear in some of his recent pictures taken from the air. There is no perspectival grip, which pushes these photographs toward the realm of abstract paintings.

Moreover, Burtnytsky flattens out three-dimensional aspects, heightens the intensity and depth of colors, or reduces the color tones to an almost monochrome effect.

Given all of these aesthetic factors, it is safe to say that Burtnytsky's images are not "overtly political" (Pauli, 2006, p. 22). Accordingly, most of his works remain neutral toward any judgment and establish a distance toward the devastating content. This neutrality is supported by the removal of human beings or human traces in most images, that is, although we see sites that are deeply connected to industries and to capitalism, one rarely sees laboring individuals or other economic factors, such as machines. As a consequence, the images become extremely "aesthetic" and extremely asocial at the same time. Burtnytsky himself is of course aware of his strategy, but his political position is one of reformism. In an interview he states:

The only thing we can do tomorrow that is different from today is to manage what we are doing in a better way. We happen to be very successful, and that may eventually be our undoing, because we are also very destructive. We must learn to be more conscientious custodians of the resources that we have been given. (Burtnytsky in Pauli, 2006, p. 31)

Further critique of the driving force behind the historical dynamism that he reveals in his images can nowhere be found. Burtnytsky remains also very close to the current stage of capitalism by using the most sophisticated technologies. For example, for the *Water* series, he uses drones and helicopters for achieving an extraordinarily high level of sophistication and professionalism.

Finally, the aesthetic qualities of his work have a "romantic" touch, insofar as they capture particularly in industrial and landscape ruins moments of loss that are the consequence of the destructive dynamism of our times. As the artist himself underlines, "I think that a lot of what I photograph are the ruins of our society, the ruins in the landscapes, the things that are left behind" (Pauli, 2006, p. 48). However, this loss is not reflected in political or social terms; instead, Burtnytsky shifts the critical aspect of his realism to an internal mental space and to memory. Overall, then, we should conclude that Burtnytsky would be a primary object of Lukács' critique, insofar as his attitude toward the social totality that constitutes the topics and issues of his work is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, his entire work is based on a deep understanding (and empathy)

with the destructions that Burtynsky observes all over the globe; on the other hand, however, his aesthetic strategy functions only by covering up the social reality behind the veil of purely aesthetic properties. As a consequence, the aesthetic principle that lies behind Burtynsky's work is a principle of forgetting.

SEKULA

It is safe to say that we should locate Allen Sekula's work on the other side of the artistic spectrum with which I am operating in this essay. Sekula's work is often overlooked by the official art world because his work explicitly rejects the "aestheticization" of art and because he often tries to bring in theoretical and reflexive moments that slow down the reception of his images. In contrast to Burtynsky, Sekula works in a multi-media fashion, that is, his images are often accompanied by texts, books, and, in regard to our topic, by a theoretical outlook that posits the task of representing capital always in connection with labor. In contrast to Burtynsky, Sekula reflects on his own profession, that is, photography, critically and in relation to economic issues (Sekula in Wells, 2002, p. 443). Sekula's projects often circle around the developments of globalization, containerization, the changes to the maritime world and global changes to harbors, labor conditions at sea, and so on. Water, capital, and transportation are deeply intertwined topics in his work, and Sekula is interested in making the disappearance of an entire world, which is related to the sea, visible in his work:

The key technical innovation here is the containerization of cargo movement: an innovation pioneered initially by United States shipping companies in the latter half of the 1950s, evolving into the world standard for general cargo by the end of the 1960s. By reducing loading and unloading time and greatly increasing the volume of cargo in global movement, containerization links peripheries to centers in a novel fashion, making it possible for industries formerly rooted to the center to become restless and nomadic in their search for cheaper labor. Sixteen factories become mobile, ship-like, as ships become increasingly indistinguishable from trucks and trains, and seaways lose their difference with highways. Thus the new fluidity of terrestrial production is based on the routinization and even entrenchment of maritime movement. Nothing is predictable beyond the ceaseless regularity of the shuttle between variable end-points. This historical change reverses the "classical" relationship between the fixity of the land and the fluidity of

the sea. The transition to regularized and predictable maritime flows initiated by steam propulsion was completed a century later by containerization. If steam was the victory of the straight line over the zigzags demanded by the wind, containerization was the victory of the rectangular solid over the messy contingency of the Ark. As we will see, containerization obscures more than the physical heterogeneity of cargoes, but also serves to make ports less visible and more remote from metropolitan consciousness, thus radically altering the relationship between ports and cities. (Sekula, 1995, p. 49)

As we can see, Sekula explicitly works with the visibility/invisibility disjunction, as well as with the problem of how to make the traces of capital movements visible. The disappearance of the harbor in containerization is only one example of how one can address the problem of how to represent capital. Almost all of his careful work has affinities to the question that I discussed earlier in this essay. For example, Sekula writes:

I propose a more provisional funeral. If anything, the appropriate metaphor is found in Marx's notion of the 'dead labor' embedded in commodities. If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowal implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhibited flows, it is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labor-power. And like the table in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, the coffin has learned to dance. (Sekula, 1995, p. 137)

Given his interest in a disappearing world that once was the center of transportation and labor related to the sea, we also find in Sekula an aspect of mourning and loss; but in contrast to Burtynsky, this loss is rarely romanticized and, instead, the social causes of these losses are rendered explicitly visible. Accordingly, one could read Sekula's projects as projects of *aesthetic resistance* to the *real* process of forgetting. As Sekula has it,

the metropolitan gaze no longer falls upon the waterfront, and a cognitive blankness follows. Thus despite increasing international mercantile dependence on ocean transport, and despite advances in oceanography and marine biology, the sea is in many respects less comprehensible to today's elites than it was before 1945, in the nineteenth-century, or *even* during the Enlightenment. This incomprehension is the product of forgetting and disavowal. In this sense elites become incapable of recognizing their own, outside of narrow specialist circles. (Sekula, 1995, p. 54)

It comes as no surprise, then, that Sekula speaks of his own artistic practice as one of critical realism, the consequence of which is that his work operates critically in a field that is dominated by overtly aestheticized work, such as the work of Burtynsky. What Sekula says about the work of Andreas Gursky could equally be said about Burtynsky:

Is Andreas Gursky a realist or is he idealizing late capitalist architecture and making a beautiful spectacle of it ... Gursky's overall project is a variation on Albert Renger Patzsch's *Die Welt ist schön*, tempered perhaps, with a kind of fatalistic cynicism. No doubt there are those for whom Gursky's globetrotting is an attempt to grasp Lukács' totality, but I'm not convinced. (Sekula in Bactens & van Gelder, 2010, p. 123)

CONCLUSION

We can conclude that the categories of a critical aesthetics and its underlying concept of mimesis, as well as the attempt to develop artistic art practices that are based on realist assumptions, are still alive today, and given our ongoing crisis related to capital, globalization, and the fetishisms that constitute our social reality, recent artistic works show that artists today can be deeply concerned in their work with what constitutes the world within which we live. Realism is on the rise and formalisms are becoming less important. Artistic practice today begins to understand that the task of representing capital critically is as urgent as it has been since the inception of the capitalist world.

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