

“Who Do We Shoot?”: Capitalism and the Problem of Its Image

Pietro Bianchi

Abstract: How does capital appear and manifest itself? What is its image? According to Marx, capital is a contradictory object: it is founded on a structural dissymmetry at the level of production, but it appears in the realm of circulation as governed by a system of equivalences. This paper presents the argument that cinema, as a science of appearances, can be a mean to reflect on this particular self-effacing form of appearance, where the antagonism of class struggle is erased and transubstantiated in the one-dimensionality of the image.

Among the many examples there is Sergei Eisenstein who worked on a project for a film on Marx’s *Capital* and who wanted to inquiry the apparent “sensuous” immediacy of the commodity form opening it up to its hidden “extrasensory properties”: the social and economic mediations that made it possible but remain invisible. On the other, contemporary visual sensibility infused of big data and drone-aesthetics, critically analyzed by Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, relies on cartographical means and views from above to figuratively imagine capitalist social relations as a global all-encompassing image.

But, as Michael Henrich and the theorists of the value-form, as well as Riccardo Bellofiore, have shown, value – capital’s *raison d’être* is not localizable: it is a spectral entity that, while governing the entirety of the process of accumulation, is empirically nowhere to be found. Cinema should not be therefore a way to grasp the secret of value and bring it to visibility but a way to reflect on the structural reasons of its effacement in the regime of appearance.

Keywords: Cinema, Marx, Appearance, Image, Eisenstein, Value-Form, Jameson

There is a famous sequence at the beginning of *Grapes of Wrath*, John Ford 1940s film based on Steinbeck’s novel, in which we see Tom Joad who, after being released from prison, returns to his family farm in Salinas, Oklahoma and finds it empty, destroyed and abandoned.¹ The land was confiscated by the banks and his family had to move to California to find jobs to make ends meet. But how is it possible—one wonders—that someone could take over the land where the Joads had lived and worked for more than fifty years? How could it happen? Muley—a man who had camped in the ruins of the abandoned Joad house and refused to flee to California—reveals who is responsible for what occurred to Tom’s family. In a three-minutes flashback John Ford not only shows, through the words

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¹ Some of the arguments of this article have been discussed in the seminar “Marxism and Ideology” taught at the English Department of the University of Florida in Spring 2020. I would like to thank the participants of the seminar Julia Burgin, Suvendu Ghatak, Jacob Hawk, Danielle Jordan, Ryan Kerr, Tyler Klatt, Claudia Mitchell, John Robison, Amanda Rose and F Stewart-Taylor for having shared with me their perceptive observations and for the discussions we had throughout the semester.

of Muley, a detailed representation of a confiscation of land in Oklahoma during the Great Depression, but also implicitly raises one of the most enigmatic and complex questions of capitalist modernity: how does capitalism manifest itself? What is its face when it appears in our lives with a traumatic event (such as a house eviction)? What is its image?

The flashback takes us to the day when an emissary from the land-owners who rented the fields where Muley used to work came to deliver an eviction notice to the tenant farmers. The man explains how the sharecropping system is no longer profitable: the company does not have a sufficient return for its investment anymore because now a man alone with his tractor is able to take care of 12 or 14 of those fields. It is more convenient to just pay him with a salary and take all the harvest. Muley complains that it is already difficult for them to live off what they earn right now: children are hungry and dressed in rags. But the man cuts him short and tell him that he is not the responsible for all this: he only carries out orders on behalf of the company. “So, whose fault is it?” a worker asks. “You know who owns the lands. It’s the Shawnee Land and Cattle Company,” replies the man. “And who are they?” replies the farmer. “Nobody. It’s a company.” Then the farmer, starting to get impatient, asks who should they talk to, perhaps with a rifle. But with a regression to infinity, responsibilities move continuously away: shouldn’t there be a president of that company? But they are told it is not even him who is to blame, because the bank told him what to do. And even in the bank, decisions are made by a manager, who is “half-crazy trying to keep up with his orders”. “Then, who do we shoot?” one of the farmers asks, now absolutely furious; to which the man finally replies: “Brother, I don’t know. If I did, I’d tell you. I just don’t know who’s to blame.”

This is the question that haunts the farmers: who is to blame for their despair and injustice? The banks? The man who brings the eviction notice? Or even their neighborhood friend, who is just as desperate as they are, and drives the tractor that is going to destroy their house for three dollars a day? Which of them is the true face of capitalism and responsible for their condition? What is the cause and reason for this process that seems so abstract and opaque? Who is to blame? This question still today represents a political quandary of great significance, especially in an era in which the value chain and the capitalist production network has become so stratified and complex that decision-making centers seem to have become invisible.² If everyone, from small entrepreneur to CEO of multinational financial groups, are only emissaries (or *Träger*, as Marx said) of capital, and execute orders taken elsewhere—just like the businessman from *Grapes of Wrath*—who is responsible for these orders? Where is the agency located? The question, even for a political agenda that wants to transform capitalism, remains today the same that haunted the workers of the Dust Bowl: who do we shoot? Who should we point the gun at?

2 Among the many possible accounts of the complexity of the different contemporary operations of capital see Mezzadra, Neilson 2019.

“...so that the humble worker or peasant could understand Marx’s *Capital*”

This problem forces us to reflect on the nature of the *image* of capitalism and of its modes of sensible appearance: how is it possible to see the capitalist mode of production in the midst of the confused and opaque multiplicity of reality? How does capitalism manifest itself in experience given that, as the example of *Grapes of Wrath* shows, most of the time we only see its effects but not its hidden causes? Or—as someone might legitimately ask—does capitalism exist in the first place, given that in our experience it is nowhere to be found?

The question guided Sergei Eisenstein when between 1927 and 1928 he started to work on a project for a film on Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*: a project based on the idea that it was effectively possible to create images that would render capitalism visible. These were years when Eisenstein was at the peak of his fame, just after the most important commission of his life: a celebration of the tenth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution with *October*. The latter turned out to be one of the most expensive blockbusters in the history of Soviet Cinema: whereas an average Soviet production cost 30,000–40,000 rubles, for *October* more than 800,000 rubles were spent.³ It might have been because of this ecstatic sense of grandeur⁴ and provisional trust that the Soviet state gave him during those years (that rapidly changed during the 30s), that he thought that such an ambitious and challenging endeavor would have been possible.

As we can see from the scattered and not always coherent information (filled with cut-and-paste images and collages, as it now has been revealed by Elena Vogman⁵) left in his notebooks and diaries, Eisenstein wanted to construct a didactical project aimed at explaining not so much the conceptual passages of *Das Kapital* but the dialectical method of Marx (“to teach the worker to think dialectically. To show the method of dialectics”⁶). A couple of years later he would have synthesized his approach during a talk he gave at the Sorbonne in Paris:

My new conception of the film is based on the idea that the intellectual and emotional processes which so far have been conceived of as existing independently of each other—art versus science—and forming an antithesis heretofore never united, can be brought together to form a synthesis on the basis of cinedialectic, a process that only the cinema can achieve. A spectator can be made to feel-

3 Interview with Oksana Bulgakova from Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity*.

4 Eisenstein during those weeks was “nearly blind, overworked, and living on stimulants in order to finish the film on time”: cf. Vogman 2019, p. 21.

5 Vogman 2019.

6 Eisenstein 1976, p. 10.

and-think what he sees on the screen. The scientific formula can be given the emotional quality of a poem. And whether my ideas on this matter are right or wrong, I am at present working in this direction. I will attempt to film *Capital* so that the humble worker or peasant can understand it.⁷

So, how would this project concretely look and how would it possibly make an illiterate worker to understand with images the conceptual intricacies of Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* that usually require years of sophisticated intellectual training? The examples imagined by Eisenstein were numerous, eclectic, and ingenious. For instance in order to visualize the problem of the relationship between workers and the mechanization of production—between the “textile machines and machine-wreckers” or luddites, as he put it, i.e., the unemployment derived from technological changes in production—he thought of showing an “electric streetcar in Shangai and thousands of coolies thereby deprived of bread, lying down on the tracks—to die”.⁸ To represent financial capital his plan was not to show the stock exchange or the typical images that we associate with finance, but rather “thousands of ‘tiny details’” like in *L'argent* by Zola: a concierge who works as a “broker” on the side and lends money to all residents of the building.⁹ But it seems that Eisenstein's approach was closer to Marx when he emphasized the contradictions and antagonisms that coexists within a commodity (almost alluding to a potential reflection on the commodity form): like with the example of “silk stockings” where “the fight for the centimeter of silk stocking” placed one against the other artists and moralists, silk manufacturers and textile masters for long skirts, ending with “Indian women forced to incubate the silk cocoon by carrying them in their armpits”.¹⁰ Or regarding a scene where Eisenstein seemed to have in mind a concrete plan of what he would have eventually shot, he writes,

Throughout the entire picture the wife cooks soup for her returning husband. NB Could be two themes intercut for association: the soup-cooking wife and the home-returning husband. Completely idiotic (all right in the first stages of a working hypothesis): in the third part (for instance), association moves from the pepper with which she seasons food. Pepper, Cayenne, Devil's Island. Dreyfus.

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⁷The quote is taken from Samuel Brody's enthusiastic account of Sergei Eisenstein's lecture titled “Principles of the New Russian Cinema”, which was delivered at the Paris Sorbonne University on 17 February 1930 (Brody 1930)

⁸ Eisenstein 1976, p. 8.

⁹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹⁰ Eisenstein's diaries from April 7, 1928 (RGALI, 1923-2-1107, pp. 26, 27) quoted in Vogman 2019, p. 238; Eisenstein 1976, p. 10, 17 and 25.

French chauvinism. Figaro in Krupp's hand. War. Ships sunk in the port. (Obviously not in such quantity!!) nb Good in its non-banal-ity—transition: pepper-Dreyfus-Figaro. It would be good to cover the sunken English ships (according to Kushner, 103 days abroad) with the lid of a saucepan. It could even be not pepper—but kerosene for a stove and transition into oil.¹¹

The soup that the wife prepared for her returning husband should have been the symbol of the minimal relief that calms down a need for social uprising—“the ‘house-wifely virtues’ of a German worker's wife constitute the greatest evil, the strongest obstacle to a revolutionary uprising”,¹² Eisenstein wrote. From that image, a whole series of connections emerged: the worker puts the pepper in the soup, but where does the pepper come from? From “Cayenne” in the “French Guyana”; and it was precisely in Guyana, in the “Devil's Island” just outside Cayenne, where “Dreyfus” was sent in a forced-labor camp after being convicted in 1894 for the famous affaire where all “the French chauvinism” emerged, promoted by “Figaro”. But who funded Figaro? Krupp, the famous steel factories that did not only support the newspaper but were also one of the biggest armament industrialists in the world; the latter brings to the “sunken English ships” that “it would be good to cover [...] with the lid of a saucepan”, exactly as if they were pepper grains in a pan...

In this crazy scene, an object is analyzed and interrogated, and reveals a complex network of unexpected associations: from a simple soup an entire system of relations is discovered and at the end it is almost as if the “sunken English ships” were really inside of the saucepan, given that effectively it was because of them that pepper was on that table in the first place (at least according to Eisenstein eclectic logic). Adopting this method, which at first may seem unorthodox, Eisenstein seemed to be aware that the Marxian process of “opening up” the social implications implied in a commodity is similar to a regression to infinity: from the concrete immediacy of an apparently simple object standing in front of our eyes in *Capital* we are brought to discover what are its invisible social mediations. From the immediacy of perception of its objectuality (“a commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing”¹³) we are led to find out its “sensuous extrasensory properties,”¹⁴ i.e., its *non-immediate* properties. Even today a mildly technological product is made possible by a complex network of logistics systems of transportation,

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¹¹ Eisenstein 1976, p. 17.

¹² Ibid., p. 16.

¹³ Marx 1976, p. 163.

¹⁴ As noted in Henrich 2012, p. 72, this would be right translation and not “transcends sensuousness” as is translated in the Penguin edition of Volume 1 (Marx 1976, p. 163).

raw material extraction, semi-finished products, manufacturing plants as well as engineers, software developers, system administrators (and also janitors, delivery men, cafeteria cooks, etc.) that are nowhere to be found if we just look at it. If we open what is “inside” of a commodity, we find an entire world of social spheres that are completely invisible to its immediate appearance, but at the same time essential to it. The social “cause” that brought that particular commodity in front of us is absolutely opaque.

In Alexander Kluge’s *News from Ideological Antiquity*—a 9-hours essay-film that recently went back to reflect on Eisenstein project of filming *Capital*—there is a short feature that exemplifies this logic of “opening up” the immediacy of an object in order to reveal its hidden social mediations. Realized by Tom Tykwer, it is titled *The Inside of Things* and almost literally reenacts Eisenstein’s method of regression to infinity to analyze the commodity form. In this short feature, we see a woman running in front of a building and after a few seconds the frame suddenly freezes and for about ten minutes a voice-over isolates one by one the different elements that compose the shot: a door phone, the lock of the door, the house number, the leather shoes of the woman, her purse, and so on. All these objects are analyzed in detail, from a historical and technological point of view: where were they made, in which historical period were they invented, when did they start to be produced, where are they fabricated, etc.? The objects that compose that particularly frame—but we could say: almost *any* object that inhabits our world—are none other than commodities: which means that they imply a world market, a certain organization of production, and all those causal nexuses that are the base of the world capitalist economy. Every object that composes this image (but we could say, *every* image) is “opened up” to its multiple implications. What is interesting is the sudden feeling of immediate distance that separates the world as an “immense accumulation of commodities” and its immediate and spontaneous impression that we have in front of our eyes in our own experience. “Opening up” a commodity means to show the route it travelled before it was sold, the workers who produced it, the people who conceived it and designed it, the money invested in order to produce it, the bankers and the stock market that enabled the investment, etc. The social conditions that made possible the perceivability of that image are erased and excluded from perception.

In order to transition “from a bowl of soup to the British vessels sunk by England”,¹⁵ Eisenstein referred to a section of Joyce’s *Ulysses*: namely the chapter called “Ithaca”, which is constructed in the form of a rigidly organized scholastic catechism of 309 questions and answers (“questions are asked and answers given”¹⁶). The continuous back and forth which goes on for the entire chapter, gives the impression of a

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15 Eisenstein 1976, p. 15.

16 Ibid., p. 7.

scientific never-ending search that at every step goes deeper and deeper into a topic, fully investigating all its possible ramifications, as random and loosely associated as they might be. Every question leads to another question then to another question, then to another one, and so on. As Fredric Jameson perceptively claimed, Eisenstein had in mind,

[...] something like a Marxian version of Freudian free association—the chain of hidden links that leads us from the surface of everyday life and experience to the very sources of production itself. As in Freud, this is a vertical plunge downward into the ontological abyss, what he called ‘the navel of the dream’; it interrupts the banal horizontal narrative and stages an associative cluster charged with affect.¹⁷

Even though Eisenstein seem to have a didactic preoccupation—how to translate dialectic in simple visual formulas—what is implicit in his notes is an awareness of the epistemological problem that the commodity form poses us. In capitalism, perception is turned upside down: what appears as immediate and objective is in fact the result of a complex mediation of social practices that are invisible. Such an insight is particularly interesting coming from someone who works specifically on the manipulation of images. It is as if the absence upon which the capitalist image is predicated on cannot appear in the imaginary (the Lacanian term for our spontaneous-ideological perception) but has to be unpacked and searched for beyond the imaginary: deconstructing the immediate appearance, and reconstruing the chain of hidden links that leads to production. While Marx searched for this dimension of invisibility (which we will see, is called “value”) in the “hidden abode of production”, Eisenstein attempted to make it palpable or perceivable through the means of montage, which is not merely the juxtaposition of a series of images, but according to him something much more theoretical.

A Figurative Understanding of *Capital*

In his *Memoirs*, in what is certainly a fictional ex-post invention of childhood memories, Eisenstein recalls what marked his premature affinity toward cinema and figurative arts: “the incomparable compositions” of Degas; a close-up in a short story by Edgar Allan Poe; a white lilac swaying above his cot just after his birth. And among them he lists the novels of Pushkin as well, which for the first time gave him the awareness of a profound figurative link between literature and painting. It is from a figurative interpretation of Pushkin’s writing that he saw how literature was capable of expressing an image even better than visual art:

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17 Jameson 2009, p. 113.

[I]n Pushkin we find a description of an actual event or phenomenon done with such absolute strictness and precision that it is almost possible to recreate in its entirety the visual image that struck him so concretely. And I do mean 'struck', which applies to the dynamic of a literary description, whereas an immobile canvas inevitably fails. Hence it was only with the advent of cinema that the moving picture of Pushkin's constructions could begin to be sensed so acutely.¹⁸

Pushkin has such an intense sensibility for visual representation that according to Eisenstein it was possible to "arrange a passage by Pushkin for editing as a sequence of shots [...] because each step shows how the poet saw and logically showed this or that event."¹⁹ Cinema would thus be able to *extract* images that were already present in the words of Pushkin and bring them to the surface. We can see here one of the many passages of his theoretical work where Eisenstein's understanding of the image has nothing to do with a representation or reduplication of something that exist in reality: an image is not a blueprint of a portion of reality but an expression of something virtually present even though not perceivable in the register of spontaneous experience. Images can only surface through the mediation of montage, given that only montage is able to create in the mind of the viewer what exists but is not immediately perceivable as such in a single point of view. That is why the "immobile canvas" can only deal with the immediately visible: an indefinite reproduction of "what is there". In order to go *beyond* the imaginary, it is essential to go beyond the visibility of "what is there" and rely on a conflicting clash between what Eisenstein already in 1923, when he was still a theater director, calls *attractions*:

An attraction (in our diagnosis of theatre) is any aggressive moment in theatre, i.e., any element of it that subjects the audience to emotional or psychological influence, verified by experience and mathematically calculated to produce specific emotional shocks in the spectator in their proper order within the whole. These shocks provide the only opportunity of perceiving the ideological aspect of what is being shown, the final ideological conclusion.²⁰

The image is therefore a direct stimulation and a shock produced in the mind of the spectator: far from being the copy of something, it is rather created from sensible visual attractions in order to emerge as a bodily evidence in the experience of the viewer. The image is not that, which

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18 Eisenstein 1995, p. 464.

19 Ibid., p. 464.

20 Eisenstein 1988, p. 34.

when put into a sequence can produce a signification (as if, borrowing from linguistic terminology, we could consider the image a word, and the montage of several of them a sentence): the image is a corporeal shock; a *resultant* force emerging from the clash of different visual attractions. It is the *production* of a conflict and not the static foundational element upon which a sequence can be constructed. To clarify this point in 1929, in his essay "Beyond the Shot", Eisenstein compares montage to Japanese hieroglyphs, where in one graphic sign two elements coexist:

The combination of two hieroglyphs of the simplest series is regarded not as their sum total but as their product, i.e., as a value of another dimension, another degree: each taken separately corresponds to an object but their combination corresponds to a concept. The combination of two 'representable' objects achieves the representation of something that cannot be graphically represented.²¹

We should not be deceived by the term "product"—what Eisenstein means is that the relation between the two hieroglyphs is not of the order of accumulation, but of *difference*. A montage of attractions is a clash between two elements: or, in other words, what is left when the two constituting elements (we should not call them images) are arranged in a relation of opposition. There is a clear resonance here with what just a handful of years before Saussure was developing in the field of linguistic: like language, which is a system based on pure differences without positive terms, also the visual articulation of frames is based on a purely negative relation. There is in Eisenstein an awareness that something productive and constructive can effectively emerge from an act of pure negativity: an image emerges from a gesture of withdrawal from "what is there"; from a subtraction from the positivity of the imaginary, that according to Lacan *is* the realm of positivity par excellence. Against an understanding of the visual field based on presence and empirical perception, Eisenstein seems here to go in a completely other direction, where images are constituted as a shock in the mind of the viewer resultant from a suspension of the imaginary. That is why the Eisensteinian theoretical reflection will always be characterized by the oscillation between a conflictual dialectic predicated on a radical idea of negativity and an organicist translation of this "conflict of attractions" into a bodily synthesis (which starting from the Mexican years will progressively assume the connotation of a synthesis of primordial archetypes). As brilliantly articulated by Luka Arsjenuk,

The Eisensteinian dialectic of montage is [...] characterized not merely by a historically original recognition of the disintegrative

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21 Ibid., p. 139.

force of nonrelation and negativity (Eisenstein's insistence on the primacy of the cut and conflict), the corrosive and critical power montage carries into the domain of form, but also by the constant attempts to invent the countertendency of a new type of form invoked by the disintegrative tendency of montage. Eisenstein is as much a filmmaker of montage as he is a thinker of new ways to be done with montage, as much an experimenter with the potentially endless disintegration of form as he is an inventor of new ends for montage's corrosive force.²²

The years of *Capital*, which are also the years of one of his most theoretical films, *The General Line*, are the years when Eisenstein had faith in the possibility of reconciling these two sides: an understanding of the visual as purely subtractive and based on negativity, and a faith in the creation of a new regime of vision emerging positively from the conflicts of montage. It is as if at the peak of negativity (when an image would be nothing other than the pure subtraction between the two different constituting elements), something positively synthetic could emerge. The film on *Capital* in its utopia of bringing together the height of negativity—i.e., abstract thought—with the sensibility of visual images, was exemplary of this theoretical audaciousness. Despite the project ending up being set aside (after *The General Line*, Eisenstein and his two collaborators Aleksandrov and Tissè started a trip around the world in order to study sound cinema), Eisenstein's insights on the nature of capital appearance, as being at the same time sensible—because manifested in experience—but also extrasensory—because of its social mediations continuously disappearing—surprisingly demonstrates their timeliness. We cannot imagine how Eisenstein's *Capital* would have looked like as a film, but it seems that the most unrealistic and eccentric idea of his notebooks—i.e., a possible reconciliation between art and science, between sensation and abstraction—will paradoxically be the core of what the post-Adornian theorists of the value-form will develop from the late 1960s onwards. What is “value” if not an abstraction that exists only in a sensory form outside of any subjective representation? What are the *perverted [verrückte] forms*²³ of capitalist reality theorized by Hans-Georg Backhaus if not the deceiving erasure of social mediation enacted by the imaginary?

22 Arsenjuk 2018, p. 174.

23 We refer here in particular to Riccardo Bellofiore and Tommaso Redolfi Riva's interpretation of Hans-Georg Backhaus (Bellofiore, Redolfi Riva 2018).

The Opaque Image of Capitalism

Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle recently came back to reflect on capitalism's peculiar regime of appearance and visual representation. If Eisenstein is right and the commodity form, beyond the fetishism of immediacy, could be grasped in montage only through the negative differences of its social mediations (financial capital, productive capital, merchant capital, etc.)—or, if we want to put it in more appropriate and less Eisensteinian terms, if the only possible image of a commodity is *a non-relation between all its social instances*, and therefore a paradoxical “non-imaginary image”²⁴—the question of the appearance of capitalism becomes rather problematic. Capitalism is based on a fundamental unbalance: there is a dissymmetry between the antagonism pertaining to the different moments of the production process, where surplus-value is extracted through the activity of labor-power, and the system of equivalences of the sphere of the market, where commodities are already fully constituted and exchanged with money. The movement from production to circulation is a movement of self-erasure of value's and capital's genetic formation: it is in fact a cancellation of labor exploitation and ultimately of class struggle. The commodity form contains, but at the same time also dissimulates, all these mediations. That is why in Eisenstein the question regarding how to look at capitalism becomes very soon a question regarding how to look at a commodity: “opening up” its hidden social mediations, as in the sequence of the worker's soup. If Marx's *Das Kapital* aimed at unpacking all the different stages of the process of accumulation, a cinematographic reflection on capitalism cannot but begin with the immediacy of commodities in front of our eyes. How is it possible to see them as embodiments of value and products of exploitation, and not as self-sufficient objects? Or to put it in another way: how is it possible to see commodities for how do they not appear from a non-imaginary point of view? Or even better, how is it possible *to see appearance itself*?

Primarily, we can say that there could be two different strategies: on the one hand the unpacking of a commodity as a single instance of the process of accumulation—where does it come from? How it has been made? etc. as Tom Tykwer's short feature shows very well; on the other the widening of our perspective on the world market, considering the global implications of capitalism in the largest possible way and analyzing the relations between different branches of capital: for example, today, how the manufacturing sector in East Asia is connected with the industry of the raw materials in South America and how in order to understand capitalist relations of production is important to keep these two phenomenon (along with many other) together.²⁵ Toscano and Kinkle cleverly open their

24 We do not have the opportunity here to develop further this point, but a non-imaginary image is what Lacan refers to as the manifestation of the object (a) in the realm of visibility, or gaze. Cf Bianchi 2017.

25 Cf Mezzadra, Neilson 2018.

book²⁶ with a reference to a short film that could constitute an allegory of the two approaches: Charles and Ray Eames's *Powers of Ten* (1968 and then 1977²⁷) is based on the idea of representing the universe first expanding out from the Earth until the entire universe is looked at, and then turning inward until a single atom and its quarks are observed. The film begins with a view of a man and woman having a picnic in a park in Chicago. The camera then slowly zooms out to a view ten meters across and continues at a rate of a power of ten every 10 seconds: first at 100 meters (10² m), then 1 kilometer (10³ m) (where we see the entirety of Chicago), until arriving at 10²⁴ meters where we can see the size of the entire observable universe. Then the camera goes back to the picnic and zooms in into the man's hand, to views of negative powers of ten: 10⁻¹ m (10 centimeters), 10⁻² m... until we see the quarks in a proton of a carbon atom at 10⁻¹⁶ meter. Which point of view should we adopt? How should we look at capitalist relations: from the point of view of the inside of a single commodity or from a God's eye-view of the entire world of global capital?

Already Marx envisioned that in order to grasp the capitalist specificity of the process of accumulation (and its profound, structural instability) it was necessary to keep these two *scales* of analysis together; *Das Kapital* in fact opens with a description of the appearance of a single commodity and then arrives at the end of Volume 3 to incorporate the total social capital, the world market and the banking and financial system. The relation between the two levels though is not based on the idea that the general is a mere sum of particulars, but that each of them can be found inside of the other: the particular is inside the general because for instance world market instabilities mirror the instability and the duality that harbors at the core of every commodity; but also the other way around is true, because a commodity is like a monad containing the universality of global capital—for example the rate of profit of a single commodity and of a particular branch of industrial capital is determined by the different allocations of investment of the total social capital in different branches of production, which makes the determination of the price of a single commodity directly depended on every other commodity.²⁸ Diagnosing a ten-

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26 Toscano, Kinkle 2015.

27 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ww4gYNrOkkg> (last access: 30 April 2020)

28 "If different branches offer different rates of profit, then capitalists will try to pull their capital out of branches with low rates of profit and invest their capital in branches with higher rates of profit. If the movement of capital between branches is possible (and not, for example, impeded by legal restrictions), then more and more capital will flow into branches with high rates of profit and out of branches with lower rates of profit. This leads to the amount of available commodities increasing in branches with high rates of profit and decreasing in branches with low rates of profit. Due to the competition between capitalists, the increasing supply in the branches with initially high rates of profit will on the one hand lead to decreasing sales prices and ultimately declining profit rates, whereas on the other hand the declining supply in the branches with initially low rates of profit leads to a rise in prices and ultimately increasing rates of profit. The different rates of profit equalize into an average or general rate of profit" (Heinrich 2012, pp. 146–147).

dency in contemporary aesthetic to rely on a God's eye-view to envision the complexity of capitalist relations, Toscano and Kinkle detect a general reluctance to assume the radicality of the concept of capital: which is not a "thing" composed of a myriad of parts whose place have to be meticulously reconstructed, but a social relation whose dynamism is directly consequential to its structural dissymmetry and antagonism. Capital's ability to valorize and increase its magnitude *is* a consequence of its inner antagonism and contradiction, and its impossibility to be reduced to an object is precisely what makes its image so difficult to grasp, and its appearance so deceiving.

While it might seem that in the age of Google Earth and Big Data the reconstruction of the nexuses and relations that define the global economy would be more easily representable, still this passion for a verticalized view from above is not without problems. As it has been claimed by Hito Steyerl "the view from above is a perfect metonymy for a more general verticalization of class relations in the context of an intensified class war from above"²⁹ and the idea of relying on drone-like technologies to map the complexity of the social sphere risks overlooking the structurally antagonistic nature of capital's relation. In other terms, if the problem of the opacity of capital were only due to the multiplicity and complexity of its various actors, an improvement in data recording made possible by AI and Big Data technologies would be sufficient to produce a faithful image of it. The increase in the use of drones and satellite images in contemporary visual arts and cinema demonstrates how the view from above is increasingly becoming the privileged ideological way to figuratively imagine social relations. Still, at the very peak of this alleged transparency it becomes all the more evident how the social crack at the core of capitalist accumulation is nowhere to be found in that image. That is because the visual model of the view from above still relies on the register of the imaginary: it can only detect "what is there". But what if the secret of capitalist self-valorization does not belong to the sphere of the imaginary?

Articulating this problem Toscano and Kinkle construct their argument on the mode of appearance of contemporary capitalism around the Jamesonian concept of "cognitive mapping".³⁰ Developed at the intersection between Althusser's notion of ideology and the urbanist Kevin Lynch's concept of "The Image of the City", "cognitive mapping" is a term through which Fredric Jameson articulates the particular relationship that subjects entertain with capitalist relations, which on the one hand determine their position but at the same time remain deeply opaque to them. There is therefore a separation between the way in which social relationships are organized and the way in which they are subjectivized (or imagined, or better "imagarized") by the actors involved. Through

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29 Steyerl 2012, p. 26.

30 Jameson 1988, pp. 347-360.

“cognitive mapping” a subject tries, albeit always uncertainly and provisionally, to figuratively imagine a relationship between their own particular situatedness and global capitalist relations (or what Jameson usually calls, in Lukacsian way, a “totality”). Jameson made clear though that “cognitive mapping will be a matter of form”, and not so much a question of rendering fully intelligible the entirety of capital’s social relations, as if they were on object waiting to be reconstituted and represented. The problem would be rather to determine what is the impossibility around which this form will constitute itself. What prevent the totality of social relations to become fully visible, even when we have at our disposal satellites, drones and data-driven platforms? What is missing in the imaginary picture of capitalism? Why, even when capital seemed to have reached the peak of its transparency, it still remains elusive and opaque?

Excursus: The Problem of the Localization of Value

To answer this question, we have to abandon the perspective of the God’s eye-view and the illusion that the totality of capitalist relations is an imaginary object ready to be appropriated and visually grasped, and we have to turn our analysis to that particular element that crooks (but also makes possible) the process of accumulation and whose localization is always problematic. (Surplus-)value, or abstract labor,³¹ is the name of that element, and its process of constitution in capital’s self-valorization is what will help us to determine the impossibility around which the imaginary appearance of capitalism is formed.

For instance, the value of a capitalistically produced commodity can be looked at from two different and incompatible points of view: profit and surplus-value.³² When the factors of production—means of production and labor-power—are assembled in the production process, their different role is not immediately apparent and seems to be comparable. According to the capitalist, they are on the same level: it was him who bought the machinery and the labor-power (i.e., he “buys” the labor expenditure of the worker) on the market, and what comes out from their encounter, if everything goes well and commodities are sold, is an increase in respect to what he spent. For him there is no difference between the contributions of the two types of capital, constant capital and variable capital: both are essential to the production, and therefore the surplus that is originated must come from both. If the quantity of money that a capitalist receives when a commodity is sold on the market is *more* than what he previously spent when he bought the factors of production: that “more” is called profit. The problem is that this argument, according to

³¹ We rely here on a processual and dynamic understanding of the constitution of abstract labor in the process accumulation as developed by Bellofiore 2018b.

³² Heinrich 2012, p. 143–144.

Marx, mystifies the essential contribution of living labor:

In surplus-value, the relationship between capital and labor is laid bare. In the relationship between capital and profit, i.e., between capital and surplus-value as it appears on the one hand as an excess over the cost price of commodity realized in the circulation process and on the other hand as an excess determined more precisely by its relationship to the total capital, *capital* appears as a *relationship to itself*, a relationship in which it is distinguished, as an original sum of value, from another new value that it posits. It is in consciousness that capital generates this new value in the course of its movement through the production and circulation processes. But how this happens is now mystified, and seems to derive from hidden qualities that are inherent in capital itself.³³

The mystification is double: on the one hand there is the illusion that both factors of production can equally contribute to the creation of a “surplus”, while in fact the entire value of constant capital is transferred to the value of the newly produced commodity, and therefore the surplus must have been generated somewhere else (i.e., from the living labor of labor-power); on the other there is the presumption that wage would be a fair compensation for the living labor extracted in the production process. But there is effectively no compensation for having used the creativity and human potentiality of the workers for the self-valorization of capital.³⁴ So, would it just be a matter of deconstructing the illusion and reaffirming how things effectively are?

The answer is no. The perspective illusion which makes the capitalist look at this process from the point of view of profit, and the labor-power (when organized in a struggle) from the point of view of the extraction of surplus-value, cannot be sorted out with rights and wrongs. Marx’s argument is not that the perspective of the working class is right and that of the capitalist is wrong: each of them is right according to their own logic. Their two points of view are both correct, but they are absolutely incommensurable. The antagonism does not pertain to different points of view that look simultaneously but differently at the same object: *the antagonism pertains to the object itself*. Borrowing a Lacanian concept, we can say that the antagonism is in the Real of the gaze, not in the eye of

³³ Marx 1991, p. 144.

³⁴ As beautifully affirmed in the opening paragraph of Alexander Kluge and Oskar Negt’s *History and Obstinacy*: “‘Labor’ is the human ability to change matter purposefully. [...] It not only consists of commodity production, but also engender social relations and develops community. It possesses OBSTINACY. Its product is HISTORY.” (Kluge, Negt 2014, p. 73). What capitalism takes from the workers is not only a quantity of wealth, but also (and maybe even more) the purpose of one’s own activities in the world and the form of the labor activity: what do we do with our labor—its qualitative dimension—how do we want to use it, to which end? For a discussion on the notion of purpose in Marx see Bianchi 2010.

the beholder. Surplus-value is not a substantial object that a positivistic science, such as political economy, can faithfully represent in an unquestionable manner: *surplus-value is nothing but the unbalance of the entire structure of accumulation*. There is no ultimate economic objective reality that can support the claims of the working class (or of the capitalists). Surplus-value nominates the ultimate insurmountability of class struggle and social antagonism. There is no last objectivity: the Althusserian “last instance” is nothing but the Real of the unsurpassable antagonism upon which the structure is based. That is why Marx did not develop a theory of political economy, but a *critique* of the categories of political economy,³⁵ knowing that a Marxian science could only be a non-positivistic science that posits class struggle as a foundation of capitalist totality.

It was merit of the research within the *Neue Marx-Lektüre* (Helmut Reichelt,³⁶ Michael Heinrich, Hans-Georg Backhaus,³⁷ which will be amended here with the interpretation of their work given by Riccardo Bellofiore³⁸) to have articulated this problem of localization of value and abstract labor in a systematic way. First, they criticized a substantialist approach to value, according to which value would be fully constituted in the sphere of production in a single commodity and then only represented, measured, and transformed into money in the sphere of circulation. Such a position would still be indebted to a positivistic understanding of accumulation that would reduce it to a secret to be unveiled in the realm of production. On the contrary Reichelt, Heinrich, and Backhaus elaborated a processual and dynamic understanding of value, where what is crucial is not so much the *quantity* of units of labor-time that are transformed in prices in the circulation, but the *social form* that they acquire in the process of valorization. Value is like a phantasm that takes possession of different bodies in the cycle of accumulation: it can take the *form* of a commodity as much as the *form* of money. Its status is that of a “purely fantastic objectivity”: even though Marx uses also the term “spectral” or “ghostly”, to give the idea of a peculiar form of objectivity that is not empirical but rather *phantasmatic*.³⁹ Not differently than a sensuous extra-sensory commodity, value is *objectively phantasmatic*.

Already at the beginning (if such a thing would be effectively thinkable) of the process of valorization, commodities are internally split between a concrete labor that created them, and a ghostly “abstract” one

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35 Cf Redolfi Riva 2018 but the same point has been developed often by Bellofiore as well (lately in Bellofiore 2020, p.143.).

36 Reichelt

37 Backhaus 2016.

38 Bellofiore 2018a.

39 Here the resonances between Marx and Lacan become more evident: for a similar analysis, even though developed on different themes, see Tomši 2013.

that eventually, under certain conditions, will morph into value. We have to understand abstract labor here as only half-constituted: at the stage of the commodity-before-it-is-sold, its abstractness is only a wager of something that can eventually emerge from its body in the event of a successful exchange with money in the sphere of circulation.

The transformation of abstract-labor-in-potential into abstract-labor-as-money is crucial: contrary to a plan economy where society organizes the production from the beginning of the cycle, capitalism is the first societal organization where labor is organized privately. This means that private entrepreneurs can freely decide what to produce, how to produce, and in which quantity, without knowing whether society will effectively need their products. The fact that a particular labor expenditure will be recognized as “useful” by society, meeting the needs and the purchasing power of someone, remains uncertain until an exchange with money is effectively made. In the event of an economic crisis for example, we see that this moment of socialization fails, with detrimental consequences. That is why capitalism is a society where social validation of labor occurs only through the market: valorization is not only the phenomenon through which money “magically” emerged from the body of a commodity (the abstract is generated from the concrete), it is also the moment of recognition of the “mediated sociality” of a particular private expenditure of labor (the concrete is recognized *après-coup* as abstract).

The spectral presence of value is therefore already present at the beginning of the production process: when a capitalist goes to the market buying the machinery and the labor-power in order to organize a production in the hope that it will eventually be profitable, he acts on the basis of the future metamorphoses of commodities into money (and he therefore plan all his action with such an outcome in mind). No matter if he is aware of it or not, what guides his actions is value-in-potential. The “sensuous extrasensory properties” that Marx believed were “fetishistically” projected into commodities are not a deceit (*schein*) that have to be deconstructed; they are the organizational principle underlying the capitalist world. As Hans-Georg Backhaus said, “when we speak of the commodity [...] we are also obliged to think about the absurd condition according to which a supersensible quality inheres in sensuous things, so that, it is reasonable to talk about an economic dimension like the natural dimensions of distance, weight, temperature, etc.”⁴⁰ The problem is that when we look at the commodities, those supersensible qualities are nowhere to be found: which leads to the paradox that despite how value orchestrates almost everything of our world, if we look at the objects surrounding us, there seem to be no trace of it.

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40 Backhaus 2016, pp. 343–404.

The Appearance of Cinema

Capitalism seems to be based on a profound contradiction: founded on a structural dissymmetry at the level of production—where the potentiality of historical transformation of the labor-power is hijacked by the capitalists in order to increase the magnitude of their capital—it appears in the realm of circulation as governed by a system of equivalences. As in the case of the incommensurability of profit and surplus-value, capital seems, according to the logic of the former, to be governed by a self-propelled act of self-valorization, and at the same time, if considered by the point of view of the latter, to be parasitically dependent on the living labor of the working-class. These two points of view are at the same time both right and incompatible. That is because the antagonism lies *in the object itself*: it is not a matter of adopting an objective God's eye-view perspective according to which it would be possible to grant the capitalist and the labor-power their fair share of surplus. At the core of the capitalist reality there is the Real of social antagonism. That is why value is a spectral entity that, while governing the entirety of the process of accumulation, is empirically nowhere to be found. That is why, even if we search for the secret of a commodity in the multiple social mediations that made it possible, we will be unable to go beyond a logic of the anecdote (the de-anecdotalization pursued by Eisenstein is impossible if we remain at the level of a single commodity).

It was merit of Isaak Illich Rubin⁴¹ in the 1920s to underline how this process of mystification and fetishistic inversion was not a cultural superstructure inessential to represent the functioning of the capitalist mode of production, but a crucial pillar to understand Marx's theory of value. The fact that the extraction of surplus-value is transposed into an objective state of things is not part of a deceit, but is a necessary condition of manifestation of the capitalist exploitation. In Lacanian terms, the fetishism of commodity—i.e., the translation of the relations of domination, from being personal and visible, to being objective (*sachlich*) and naturalized—is the process of *imaginarization* of the capitalist relations. The way through which capitalism appears is the way through which its system of exploitation founded on a social antagonism *necessarily* manifests itself in the realm of sensibility: that is the way through which capitalism is transposed into an image.

The question that we should ask is therefore not how cinema could represent the antagonism of the capitalist mode of production or how could it discover the enigma of the formation of value beyond the commodity form, but *how it could reflect on the necessity of this transfiguration into the imaginary*: cinema as a way to think *appearance itself*; as a science of appearance. So, to go back to the problem that was haunting Muley, it will not be so much a matter of asking ourselves who do we shoot, who

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41 Rubin 1973.

is to blame, or what is a faithful image of capitalism, but why we were already part of that image in the first place; why, so to speak, capitalism was already shooting at us.

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