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Renouncing the Single Image: Photography and the Realism of Abstraction

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Photography and the Realism of Abstraction

Perhaps the fundamental question to be asked is this: can traditional photographic representation, whether symbolist or realist in its dominant formal rhetoric, transcend the pervasive logic of the commodity form, the exchange abstraction that haunts the culture of capitalism?

Allan Sekula

I need to have some bridge between experience and abstraction and some way of beckoning people along to a similar understanding …

Martha Rosler

Once asked a somewhat facile question concerning what he might 'propose as an ideologically correct use of the photographic medium', the late Allan Sekula, while noting his refusal of the questioner's own terms, went on, nevertheless, to identify some 'models for work' through which one might 're-examine how we constitute photography as an object of critical speculation'. Specifically: 'I tend to be sympathetic to work which … renounces what I think is the fetish of the single image, and bases itself on the principles of montage, either relational sets of images, or

images and text or images and gesture' (2004: 156). As he articulates the point at rather greater length in an earlier text:

> Still photographers have tended to believe naively in the power and efficacy of the single image. Of course, the museological handling of photographs encourages this belief, as does the allure of the high-art commodity market. But even photojournalists like to imagine that a good photograph can punch through, overcome its caption and story, on the power of vision alone. (1978: 869)

Such 'renunciation' is scarcely unique to Sekula. It 'seems fortunate', suggests John Berger, for example, 'that few museums have had sufficient initiative to open photographic departments, for it means that few photographs have been preserved in sacred isolation' (Berger 2013: 17). Instead, Berger writes, a critical photographic practice should takes it as its aim 'to construct a context for a photograph, to construct it with words, to construct it with other photographs, to construct it by its place in an ongoing text of photographs and images.' (59). In his recent *Photography and its Violations*, John Roberts similarly suggests that to recover photography's relationship to the 'claims of realism' would require a resistance to any transformation of 'the sequential, "scripted", internally "narrated" content of photography into highlighted, unique moments of public consumption' so as 'to privilege discrete works from a given sequence of images or research program as evidence of the singularity of the photographer's vision' (55). Championing, in particular, the form of the 'photo-book', in which 'the event is brought into extended discursive life' (116), the possibility of a 'new realist practice' is dependent, Roberts argues, on 'channeling' the photograph away from 'the confines of a singular, aestheticizing authorship' and towards 'a space of systematic relationality for the reinscription of the photograph' (56, 115). Finally,

to take one further example, in his 2006 book devoted to studies of such systematic relational forms in Edward Steichen's *The Family of Man*, Robert Frank's *The Americans* and the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, Blake Stimson forcefully affirms seriality as 'a primary photographic form' precisely by virtue of its 'devaluation of individual pictures'. As he cites Alan Trachtenberg on Walker Evans: 'What the pictures say, they say in and through the texture of relations that unfold – continuities, doublings, reversals, climaxes, and resolutions' (Stimson, 2006: 30, 27, 33). Or, as Stimson puts it himself of *The Americans*, the force of such epic, 'comprehensive' work lies in 'the relations between pictures and between spaces', not in the singular or decisive 'moments called up by particular photographs or particularly iconic representations' (117-118).[1]

Generally, as these citations suggest, a renunciation of the single image is understood, then, to be rooted in a resistance, first of all, to attempts to restore an 'aura' to photography as a condition of its 'high art' status (see Sekula 1978: 860). If John Szarkowski's 1967 MoMA *New Documents* exhibition is often understood in these terms as the most influential model for such aestheticization of the individual work, it is by contrast then that Sekula affirms, in exemplary fashion, the work of those 'contemporary photographers' whose 'pictures are often located within an extended narrative context', rather than as 'solitary, sparely captioned photograph[s] on the gallery wall' (1978: 860).[2]

Nonetheless, as important as this anti-auratic impulse is to the renunciation of the single image, I want to suggest, in the essay that follows, that it is also connected, just as crucially (and in part through this), to what might be best described as a problem of *abstraction*. Generally speaking, of course, if abstraction as understood to be a concern for photography it is in terms of the ways in which specific images are

said to seek to abstract photography from its apparently definitive, even 'ontological', tasks to figure or represent things – and its consequent ties to the 'concrete' and 'particular' – in order (usually on the model of modernist painting) to free itself from its traditional representational functions, more often than not in the name of becoming 'art'. Conversely, the critique of such work would, then, appear as part of a broader questioning of the privilege accorded to the single image, since such 'abstraction' (as a specific break with figuration) would then be understood as one extreme endpoint of a more general tendency to sever – or, precisely, abstract - the 'subject' of a photograph from, say, its 'historical context', so rendering it 'independent of social commentary' (Dyer 2012: 126); an abstraction that is reinforced by a conception of photography itself as that which exists, above all, 'in order to deal "with the immediate present, and with only one moment of that present"' (Edward Weston, cited in Dyer 2012: 126).

Unsurprisingly, one especially privileged *locus classicus* for the critique of such abstraction is provided in this regard by Walter Benjamin's writings of the 1930s, and, in particular, his critique of the *Neue Sachlichkeit*, in which 'photography is unable to convey anything about a power station or a cable factory other than, "What a beautiful world!"' (Benjamin 1999: 775).[3] Benjamin's celebration of Heartfield's 'overtly constructed' images, as an 'attempt to go beyond the phenomenal and ideological surface of the social realm' (Sekula 1978: 864), is understood to oppose, in this sense, not only processes of aestheticization but also what George Baker describes as photography's conceptualization 'as a profoundly un- or a-relational medium', one that 'enacts an operation of visual isolation' through a 'photographic logic of division through which our world has developed into so many atomized bits and pieces' (Baker 2013).

The obvious conclusion would, then, seem to be that the renunciation of the single image would best be understood as an opposition to photography's 'abstraction' per se. Yet it is already possible to observe a certain tension, or even paradox, here. For if the problem with the fetishization of the single image resides in the degree to which, without 'construction' or 'combination', photography becomes too 'abstract', abstracting the 'subject' of the photograph *from* 'historical context', rendering it 'independent of social commentary', in Dyer's words (2012: 126), at the same time, it is also, in another sense, too 'concrete', on this account, since, in identifying its core representational possibilities *with* the sheer particular 'This' of the 'immediate present', it displays a faith in the sensuously and aesthetically particular that can ultimately say nothing more than, '"What a beautiful world!"' (Benjamin 1999: 775). To renounce the single image would thus, seemingly paradoxically, require that one counter photography's abstraction from the historical, social relations of which it is (concretely) a part by overcoming, at some level, the very concreteness that would apparently define its 'essential' relation to an 'immediate present'. In this sense, and as Benjamin's influential objection to the New Objectivity's inability to *convey* implies, the problem of the 'fetish of the single image' also opens up onto a rather larger set of questions – what *would* it mean for photography to be able to convey 'something' about a power station or a cable factory, if its conventional representational capacities are somehow inadequate to this task? – including what, therefore, we might mean by a concept like 'realism' itself.

Of course, across the recent history of photography, it is precisely this kind of opposition that has often found itself manifested in a broad division between, on the one hand, photography as autonomous pictorial art or 'tableau' - exemplified by the conventions of large-scale formats, colour prints and limited editions - and

photography as documentary, for which the image is 'an analytic, critical inscription of a reality it aspires to fathom', often realised through extended serial or discursive forms (see Van Gelder 2012). Indeed, Sekula's own writings have played a crucial part in the articulation of this opposition, as well as of the Benjaminian critique of an aestheticised 'voyeurism' in photography that contributes 'little to the critical understanding of the social world' (Sekula 1978: 864). Yet, if the task of a critical practice is thus to counter the single image's abstraction from the 'context' of this social world, in order to renew its 'concrete' relations to that world, the conditions of such renewal apparently cannot be found in the concreteness of the image's *own* intrinsic, individual connection to that world, but instead must, in some sense, be 'abstracted' from this.

Among other things, it is worth noting that one consequence of this is thus the opening up of a particularly crucial distance between, on the one hand, the claims of photographic 'realism', as a capacity to represent the social world (in something like the sense that Sekula often attributes to the nineteenth-century novel), and, on the other, that 'essential realism', as Sekula calls it (1978: 862), associated with Piercean or Barthesian indexicality: that is, the 'literality of its relation to the world outside itself' (Benn Michaels 2015: 9). Indeed, if, as Roberts puts it, 'indexicality is meaningful [*only*] insofar as it is subject to an interpretative process of truth-disclosure, to the claims *of* realism, so to speak' (2014: 31), such meaningfulness in some sense *require*s a renunciation of the self-sufficiency of the single image as a condition of any photographic 'realism' as such, given the essential limitations placed upon the capacity of the individual image's 'literal' or concrete relation to the 'real' to contribute to any genuinely 'critical understanding of the social world' (Sekula 1978: 864).

Historically, this is a point that is perhaps most famously exemplified in a famous passage in Bertolt Brecht's account of 'The Threepenny Opera Trial' that is itself cited by Sekula on a number of occasions:

> The situation becomes so complicated [today] because less than at any time does a simple 'reproduction of reality' tell us anything about reality. A photograph of the Krupp factories or the AEG provides virtually no information about these institutions. True reality has slipped over into functional reality. The reification of human relations, the factory, let's say, no longer reveals these human relations to us. Therefore, something has actually to be *constructed*, something set up. (cited in Adorno 1991: 128)[4]

Yet, it is worth noting that Brecht also adds a further dimension in this passage to the problem of the relationship between realism and abstraction, since, here, the general inadequacy of photography's 'essential realism' to grasp 'true reality' equally reflects a representational dilemma that stems from, so to speak, the peculiar nature of the social reality of *capitalism* as such. As Adorno puts it, commenting on this passage, 'If the world is to be seen *through*, it can no longer be looked *at*'. In capitalist modernity, the '*ens realissimum* consists of processes, not immediate facts, and they cannot be depicted' (128). Hence, the paradoxical attempt, via 'construction' or narration, to 'conjure up in perceptible form' a society that has, as Adorno puts it, with 'the irresistible ascendancy of the exchange principle', *itself* 'become abstract' (123-24). As I cited Sekula at the beginning of this essay, if the problem is one of how photographic representation can 'transcend the pervasive logic of the commodity form, the exchange abstraction that haunts the culture of capitalism' (Sekula 1984: 80), this is a question that is itself necessarily framed by a problem of realism – not so much as a question of how to escape from abstraction altogether (as it might

conventionally be understood), but of what would be the appropriate forms of relationality through which to 'capture' and thus 'fathom' a world that is itself intrinsically 'haunted' by such *social* forms of 'abstraction' themselves. For the very condition *of* a photographic realism would lie, in this light, in its capacity to offer 'critical understanding' of a larger (social-economic) problem of abstraction as an *objective reality* in a wider sense – that abstraction, as Adorno puts it elsewhere, which 'is the fault not of fantastic, wilful thinking … but of the objective abstraction to which the social process of life is subject – the exchange relation' (Adorno, 2003: 120; translation modified).

A Phenomenological Point

What then does this mean for the 'realism' of the photographic image? A useful starting point is provided by the beginning of one of Sekula's own works. 'Growing up in a harbour predisposes one to retain quaint ideas about matter and thought', writes Sekula in the opening lines of the published, photo-book version of *Fish Story* (1995; second edition 2002: 12). Appearing after an initial sequence of two photographs captioned as 'Boy looking at his mother. Staten Island Ferry. New York harbour. February 1990' (although, in fact, the boy appears only in the second picture; the first being of a coin-operated tower viewer looking out to sea, which in the subsequent picture the boy is grasping), Sekula returns in this first page to the autobiographical particularities of his own childhood, but only so as to outline what he defines as the typicality of the harbour's 'common culture': an 'insistence on the primacy of material forces', a 'crude materialism'. As he continues: 'In the past, harbour residents were deluded by their senses into thinking that a global economy

could be seen and heard and smelled. The wealth of nations would slide by in the channel' (12).

If this is indeed consigned to modernity's past, a now 'shattered' common culture rendered 'quaint' or even delusional in its faith in the immediately visible and the primacy of material forces, it is then precisely, *Fish Story* suggests, because it fails, like Brecht's hypothetical photograph of 'the Krupp factories or the AEG', to register the inevitable *disconnect* between what 'one sees' and what would be necessary, in the global capitalist modernity of today, to 'explain' this. 'What one sees in the harbour is the concrete movement of goods'. But this 'movement' itself 'can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction', that is, through a reference to what *cannot* be seen, or, obviously, photographed. ('Marx tells us this', Sekula notes, 'even if no one is listening anymore'.[5]) While, therefore, the harbour as 'the site in which material goods appear in bulk' may *appear* to be opposed, in the geography of global capitalism, to the disembodied forms of 'the stock market [as] the site in which the abstract character of money rules', the fact that it is the abstraction of the 'very flux of exchange' that determines 'the concrete movement of goods' themselves implies an obvious complication. Indeed, the 'more regularized, literally containerized, the movement of goods in harbours' becomes, Sekula suggest, 'the more the harbour comes to resemble the stock market' (2002: 12) in its effective *actualization* of a forms of capitalist abstraction in the material world.

If this is most evident, as *Fish Story* constructs it, in the transformation of the harbour into what is less a particular, local 'site' – the possible subject of, say, a picturesque photograph - than a mere *node*, an 'accelerated turning-basin' in the vast global distribution systems of international container transport – the book's first page of text is followed by a sequence of photographs that include images of a crane

unloading containers from Asia in Los Angeles Harbour and the automated ECT/Sea-Land cargo terminal in Rotterdam – then its consequences are most directly graspable in what Sekula terms a 'crucial phenomenological point':

> Goods that once reeked – guano, gypsum, steamed tuna, hemp, molasses – now flow or are boxed. The boxes, viewed in vertical elevation, have the proportions of slightly elongated banknotes. The contents anonymous: electronic components, the worldly belongings of military dependents, cocaine, scrap paper (who could know?) hidden behind the corrugated sheet steel walls emblazoned with the logos of the global shipping corporations.
>
> (2002: 12)

Nowhere on Sekula's opening page, or, indeed, anywhere much else in the various texts included in *Fish Story*, is a connection between this 'phenomenological point' and the photographic image itself directly mentioned. Still, it is not hard, I think, on the basis of the above, to see an analogy implied in *Fish Story* therefore between the 'crude materialism' of the harbour inhabitant, on the one hand, and that of a certain photographic 'realism', on the other. In fact, although its stress is slightly different, this is clearly one dimension of what Sekula describes elsewhere as a 'paradox' at the very heart of photographic discourses more generally: that 'a medium that is seen as subtly responsive to the minutest details of time and place delivers these details through an unacknowledged, naturalized, epistemological grid', or, that is, through what is a mode of abstraction:

> Photography would seem to be a way of *knowing* the world directly – this is the scientistic aspect of our faith in the powers of the photographic image. But photography would also seem to be a way of *feeling* the world directly, with a

kind of prelinguistic, affective openness of the visual sense – this is the

aestheticist aspect of our faith in the medium. (Sekula 2004: 143)

If the latter 'affective openness of the visual sense' would seem to be a central

function of the individual image's own potential for aestheticization (whether in

pictorialism or in a certain 'aesthetic' appropriation of 'painterly' abstraction itself[6]),

what Sekula describes as those scientistic 'features of photography that are inherently

tied to a logic of domination – and a logic of a kind of conflation of abstraction and

representation' (2004: 155) – evidently take the form of an opposing '*instrumental

realism*' devoted to the attempt to 'attempt to link optical empiricism with abstract,

statistical truth' (Sekula 2004: 124-125; see also Berger 2013: 69-73). But it is, more

generally, this 'conflation of abstraction and representation', and its complex

relationship *to* forms of (artistic) realism, that is then, perhaps, most germane to the

discussion here.

Certainly, there can be little doubt that it is such a historical 'conflation of

abstraction and representation' that underlies, for example, Sekula's *critique*

elsewhere of the 'echoes of scientistic notions of photographic truth' at stake in the

relational forms of a photographer like August Sander's 'liberal, enlightened, and

even socially critical pedagogy', with its enthusiasm for an idea of photography as a

'universal language' (Sekula 2004: 131),[7] where it is the very formal organization of

the relational images - 'a neatly arranged chessboard', or grid, as Sekula describes it

(136) – which entails that, '[d]espite its class *realism*', *Antlitz der Zeit* 'is one of the

most truly abstract bodies of work in the history of photography' (Sontag 1979: 61;

emphasis added). At the same time, however, it is in the context of what Sekula

describes as an attempt to 'locate universal language claims for photography *within*

the historical context of universalized commodity exchange' (2002: 22; emphasis

added) that, for example, *Fish Story*'s own fixation on the shipping container as exemplary symbol and agent of abstraction – the 'very emblem of capitalist disavowal' (Sekula 1999: 248) – also takes on a representational significance. For, as the German media theorist Alexander Klose puts it in his study *The Container Principle*, the emergence of container transport as a dominant technology of global trade 'itself effected major abstractions and created signs' (2015: 103). In so far as the container 'concentrates a complex technical and social process into *one* mediating and integrating thing that both executes and represents this process', it becomes, as Klose suggests, 'not only an icon but a pictogram of globalization' (79) - not least, of course, for what we might term the epic form of *Fish Story* itself, which attempts thus to represent, through its own *critical* 'conflation and abstraction and representation', the (abstract) capitalist relations constitutive of globalization by tracing, both photographically and textually, the (concrete) movement of goods in container transportation at a planetary scale (see Cunningham 2010).

A project conceived in the early 1980s and completed towards the end of the following decade, *Fish Story*'s representational focus on the sea as a forgotten space of global capitalist flows embodies its renunciation of the single image in combining 'long edited sequences of still photographs', characteristic of a photodocumentary practice (and centred, in particular, on the 'forgotten' labour of those employed in maritime trade), with 'lengthy novelistic texts' and essayistic meditations on the form of the panorama and on the sea and harbour as objects of art history (see Sekula 1978: 879). Consequently, it is indeed less the accumulation of individual images themselves that is foregrounded – images that can often seem deliberately minimal in their 'aesthetic' or affective force ('he is no Salgado', as one commentator puts it (Edwards 2015: 39)) – but, rather, the meaning of their *organisation*, of their

connective shape and chains of contiguity, as a 'constructive' practice inextricably tied to the relational forms constitutive of capitalist relations themselves, and as the condition of a 'realist' engagement *with* 'abstraction' that is necessary to grasping 'in its totality' what is seen (or is, indeed, photographable) in the 'concrete movement of goods' itself. If *Fish Story* is thus marked by what, say, Stefan Jonsson describes as an epic attempt to 'bring human life in the global system into the field of representation' through the synecdoche of maritime commerce, its renunciation of the single image not only seeks 'to connect the small details and individual lives of the present' with 'the larger circulation of values' that constitute that 'global system' – something like a definition of the modern epic - but seeks to render 'visible as though for the same time' the very forms of abstraction which animate that system itself (Jonsson 2010: 121; see Cunningham 2010).

Narration and Description

Nonetheless, Jonsson's admirable description of *Fish Story*'s 'immense ambition' leaves us with an obvious dilemma. For, if such ambition is located in this rendering *visible* of that 'larger circulation of values' to which, in renouncing the single image, the 'detail' or individual photograph must be 'connected', how exactly is this process of visualization to be understood, given the fundamental *invisibility* of that 'larger circulation of values' itself, the systematic relationality of which is 'located' in 'the abstract character of money' and the 'very flux of exchange'?

In *Fish Story*, of course, at the centre of this question is the reality of that 'very strange thing', the commodity (Marx, 1976: 163), at once 'perceptible and imperceptible by the senses', as one translation of *Capital* puts it.[8] Formed precisely via exchange's abstraction from the substance of use value (so as to make different

'things' exchangeable), and so assuming primacy over those physical 'concrete goods' that exchange is initially supposed to mediate, value effectively 'takes possession' of its own material conditions, which thus become subordinated as 'moments' within its self-movement. Yet if, then, as Marx writes, 'the products of labour become commodities, sensuous things which are at the same time suprasensible' (1976: 165) - *sinnlich übersinnliche*: 'sensory super-sensory' - as commodity *form*, the commodity is, in this sense, itself *absolutely* abstract: 'Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects' (Marx, 1976: 138). And this is not, crucially, because its 'reality' is straightforwardly *hidden* behind what is available to vision, in something like a 'false consciousness', but because it is, in its very essence, non-perceptible: a *real* abstraction, as Alfred Sohn-Rethel famously terms it.

In a short essay on Balzac, published in the early 1960s, and from which his own citation of Brecht's comments on the representational dilemma of the photograph derives, it is the consequences of this for an understanding of (literary) 'realism' that Adorno, for one, seeks to engage. Balzac's significance as a realist, Adorno argues, lay in the fact that he 'brought society as totality … down from the airy realm of ideas to the sphere of sensory evidence' (1991: 133). However, in doing so, Balzac had also to reproduce such a totality 'by no means only [as] an extensive totality … the physiology of life as a whole in its various branches', but also as an 'intensive totality' in the form of a 'functional complex' (122): 'A dynamic rages in it: society reproduces itself only as a whole, in and through the system, and to do so it needs every last man as a customer' (133). As this final point suggests, the principal means of this self-reproduction is above all the real abstraction of *money*, which, on the one

hand, patterns the lives of all the characters in *La Comédie humaine*, and connects them together (as it does, at an even more epic scale, the global maritime trade that is *Fish Story*'s subject), but which, on the other, since it is not itself a part of 'the sphere of sensory evidence', constituted a 'veil' that Balzac was unable to 'penetrate'. This is, then, what Adorno terms Balzac's paradoxical struggle to 'conjure up in perceptible form' a society that has, with 'the irresistible ascendancy of the exchange principle', itself 'become abstract' (123-24), and in which Balzac's own 'ardour' for concreteness already risks, like the 'crude materialism' of Sekula's harbour dwellers, masking a 'crisis' in the 'reality' of concreteness itself (cited in Adorno 1991: 128).

Adorno's argument here can be read as a response, in part at least, to some of those problems surrounding 'realism' in the novel raised by Georg Lukács' pivotal writings of the 1930s, and, especially, the essay 'Narrate or Describe?', in which it is the 'abstraction' of both naturalism and modernism, as opposed to the authentic realism of Balzac, that precisely, for Lukács, marks its submission to 'capitalist prose'. But before coming directly to this, it may help to elucidate something of what is thus at stake in these debates by turning first to a comparison between *Fish Story* and the concerns of a photographer to which his own have often been related: Andreas Gursky.

In her recent book *Forgetting the Art World*, Pamela Lee begins her chapter entitled 'Gursky's Ether' with a picture by the German photographer that seems deliberately placed for its contrast with Sekula's work: Gursky's 1990 photograph *Salerno* of a southern Italian port. The substance of Lee's argument is worth quoting at length:

> [No] matter just where things are plotted relative to the standard coordinates of
>
> foreground, middle ground, and background, nearly everything seems

available to the same inexhaustible visuality [in Gursky's image] … as if everything was equalized by some invisible and ambient wash. No focal points structure our response to the picture, because the resolution is everywhere the same. … It's as if some alien presence, collecting all the visual data its unearthly prospect affords, could only fail to discriminate among the miscellany down there. (Lee 2012: 72)

Lee is unpacking here a number of distinctive aspects of Gursky's large-scale chromogenic images that have been frequently enumerated in commentaries on his work: the affective force of their sheer size when exhibited (a 'scale akin to a history painting' (73)), which has often been interpreted in relation to a tradition of the sublime; their intriguing topographical form, and the 'impossible' perspective views that they evoke; their striking intensity of detail; their 'smooth, near liquid spatiality' and a kind of 'depthless horizontality' that derives, in part, from Gursky's use of digital manipulation (76, 83); and, finally, what we might term their unusually exhaustive 'alloverness' as pictorial, even 'painterly' images. ('Visually', Gursky himself has commented of his photographs of swimming pools, they 'reminded me of hard-edge paintings, and I found it exciting that this could be achieved by photography' (cited in Hentschel: 32).) More interesting, however, is the ways in which Lee here interprets this 'picturesque detailism' as itself analogous to, or a kind of index of, global capitalism's own apparent 'everywhereness', 'unmoored from both the territorial and material', and, hence, what she calls an 'ethereal' imagining of capital that is then imagined to 'bathe all *social* relations in an ambient and allover wash' (89; emphasis added). Lee's analogy comes from Marx's *Grundrisse*, where he defines a mode of production as that 'particular *ether* which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it' (cited Lee 2012: 87), as well

as from what she identifies as the 'strange reappearance' of ethereal imagery in 'the occasionally converging realms of mysticism and cyberspace' (78). Gursky's 'highly qualified' realism thus projects, she argues, 'a world in which the availability of everything for visual consumption tallies with the *seeming* availability of communications and the market', organised through an 'invisible connective tissue that binds all of his details together' and 'equalizes all it contains' (77). Assisted by the use of the computer, the 'essential realism' of the photograph's indexical relation to the particular 'This' is not, then, so much negated in this instance, as it is effectively 'dislocated' and 'disembedded' – *abstracted* – from any 'real-world coordinates' or specific 'site' (86) in a way that mirrors the 'de-materializations' of contemporary capitalism itself. 'Fashioned of clustered geometries and topographies as closed as stage sets', a resulting picture like *Salerno*, writes Lee, is, unlike Sekula's images of labour, 'strangely pristine, tamed of the bustle and noise you might expect of a harbour setting' (70). As Lee suggests, it is here that 'Allan Sekula's work provides a counterpoint to Gursky's ethereal sensibilities' (37).

Lee's contrast between Gursky's and Sekula's respective projects can easily be understood, then, to conform to a now standard opposition between photography's pictorial and documentary modes, between the singular 'auratic' image and the 'analytic, critical inscription of a reality', of the type that I have already detailed (see Van Gelder 2012). But, significantly, it also touches upon what can be regarded as a set of antinomies intrinsic to broader discussions of 'realism' more generally. In particular, and most importantly, Lee's critique of the ways in which Gursky's images 'equalize', in an inexhaustible visuality, the 'coordinates of foreground, middle ground, and background', and hence exhibit a failure to 'discriminate', recall a set of distinctions that are perhaps most canonically articulated in the essay by Lukács I

referred to a moment ago, 'Narrate or Describe?', in which, writing of the nineteenth-century novel, he suggests a fundamental distinction between a 'naturalist' such as Emile Zola's 'obsession with monographic detail' – in which the representation of reality 'has lost its capacity to depict the dynamics of life' - and the capacity of Balzac's novels to make us 'experience events which are inherently significant … because of the general social significance emerging in the unfolding of the characters' lives' (Lukács 1970: 147, 116).[9] 'In such an *abstract* view', Lukács writes, 'life appears as a constant, even-tenored stream or as a monotonous plain sprawling without contours' (122; emphasis added). 'Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels' (127).

It is this distinction that is reiterated, too, in, for example, Fredric Jameson's recent *Antinomies of Realism*, where it appears as an opposition between the two interwoven forms of the 'story' (or narration) and what he calls, variously, the 'descriptive', the 'affective', or the 'scenic' (or showing) in the realist novel. If, once again, the 'descriptive impulse' is thus what constitutes 'the most inveterate alternative to narrative' (Jameson 2013: 8), it is, Jameson writes, because it 'always seems to single out a painterly moment in which the onward drive of narrative is checked if not suspended altogether' (8). An 'excess of the sensory becomes autonomous, that is to say, it begins to have enough weight of its own to counterbalance the plot' (50).

Like Lukács himself, Jameson makes no explicit link between such facets of literary realism and the emergence of photography (see Armstrong 1999: 5; Cunningham 2014: 31-32). Nonetheless, as Francois Brunet notes, such an association of photography with the descriptive mode has become a pretty familiar one in both literary and art history at least since 'Paul Valery's 1939 "parallel" between the

advent of photography and that of the "descriptive genre"' in the novel proposed in his essay 'The Centenary of Photography' (2009: 113-114). Moreover, as Steve Edwards, for example, has emphasised, one of the most important problems faced by early claims for photography's 'art' status were associated with its placing within a 'history of images' for which the 'descriptive and realistic', associated with a 'superabundance of detail', was understood as inferior to an educated stress on 'broad or general effects and idealized forms'. The claim to intelligibility as 'art' had, then, necessarily to be constituted, *against* its 'essential realism', through photography's possible distance from the particular or contingent 'features of the world' (and thus in favour of a certain 'abstraction' as idealization or generalization from the particular); a distancing that, it could be argued, is itself repeated in a different form in later twentieth-century attempts to yoke photography to modes of formal(ist) abstraction largely derived from modern painting (Edwards 2006: 14-15).

In essence, this would seem to be the central thrust of Lee's critical reading of what she calls Gursky's 'detailism, [his] peculiar "reality effect"':

When the phrase *l'effet du reel* first appeared in literary criticism in 1968, courtesy of Roland Barthes, it described the reality-making strategies of the nineteenth-century novel, in which an accumulation of detail did less to advance any ostensible plot than to produce a kind of narrative ambience, an atmosphere. For his part, Gursky indulges a surfeit of descriptive possibility, excess piled on excess … [in which] everything in his pictures is visually available. (Lee 2012:73-76).

What is interesting in Lee's account of this general visual availability, then, is the ways in which what appears, for Lee, from one perspective, as the problem of Gursky's *abstraction* – the 'ethereality' of his images, and their disembedding of any

indexical relation from a particular site or concrete lifeworld – is, at the same time, and seemingly paradoxically, a problem of too much *detail*, a 'surfeit' of 'concrete' particulars which, in their endless exchangeability or 'equivalence', render everything perceptible, without 'proportion' or 'plot'.

'Highly qualified' as Gursky's 'realism' may be, on Lee's account, if this is a critique of abstraction, therefore, it is one that cannot be reduced to a critique of any straightforward 'negation of outward reality' as such (Lukács 1962: 25), since the 'detailism' of its 'peculiar "reality effect"' would – like, say, Zola in the novel - be obviously at odds with any negation of representational functions per se. However, it is at this point that Lukács himself performs a kind of inversion whereby the seemingly all-too-concrete prose of description is said, unlike narration, to mask what is actually a more fundamental *abstraction* inherent to it. As he puts it: 'Because it is the ultimate in uniqueness, as Hegel recognised, the "here and now" is absolutely abstract. … [T]he craze for the fleeting moment and for a factitious concreteness of twentieth-century European literature results in abstraction' (1970: 171). By reducing 'detail to the level of mere particularity', both modernism and naturalism, Lukács claims, replace, in this fashion, 'concrete typicality with abstract particularity', in which '[e]very person, every object, every relationship can stand for something else' (1962: 43, 42).

Tellingly, it is this conception of a relationality in which each image or thing 'can stand for something else' within a general structure of indifference and equivalence – and which, for Lee, is reflected in Gursky's lack of 'discrimination' or 'plotting' - that returns us, by a circuitous route, to what Sekula himself identifies as the 'paradox' at the very heart of photographic discourses more generally: that 'a medium that is seen as subtly responsive to the minutest details of time and place

delivers these details through an unacknowledged, naturalized, epistemological grid' (2004: 143). Indeed, it is precisely such a formal connection between photography and a specifically capitalist abstraction that famously guides Sekula's fascination with an 1859 essay by Oliver Wendell Holmes in which he finds already an explicit analogy between photographic technology and the capitalist exchange process grounded in the ways in which photography functions to produce a global encyclopaedic *economy* of images governed by 'a comprehensive system of exchanges', or what he calls the development of 'a universal currency'. If this is constituted on the basis of photography's own distinctive power of abstraction instantiated in its ability to divorce a 'form' from the 'matter' of the real world so as to make it indifferently 'visually available', as Sekula summarises: 'For Holmes, photographs stand as the "universal equivalent", capable of denoting the quantitative exchangeability of all sights … reduc[ing] all sights to a relation of formal equivalence' (Sekula 2004: 147, 148).[10]

It is in this sense, paradoxically, that the endlessly particular, concrete attentiveness of the photograph to 'the minutest details of time and place' may thus, on Sekula's account, also be understood to risk leading to a more fundamental *abstraction* in precisely Lukácsian terms. For insofar as it denotes 'the quantitative exchangeability of all sights' associated with that lack of any 'natural' or intrinsic limit on *what* the photographic image might depict or incorporate, it also becomes the formal expression of an abstraction which here mirrors a parallel lack with regard to what can be concretely exchanged in the universalization of the exchange value form. To return to the world 'represented' in *Fish Story*, if, as Klose suggests then, both 'containers and currency' are, for example, 'metaoperators of circulation that smooth differences, create connections amid separation, and treat unequal things identically'

(2015: 99-100) – defined by a 'constitutive emptiness, or evacuability, which makes the container a universal receptacle' (66) – this is, when it is read through Holmes' essay, no less true of the potentially 'containerizing' qualities of the photographic form also (1983: 195).

In this sense, part of what the history of *both* photography and the novel's theorizations have confronted in the problem of 'realism', and of the antinomies of description and narration, is precisely, one might say, the irreducible *actuality of abstraction* within the very concrete everydayness of modern life as a whole, and hence the ways in which capitalist forms come to structure the problem of 'reality' as an object of representation for any 'realism' itself. Indeed, arguably, it is in this way that *all* 'realism' can be said to be intrinsically 'haunted' by a certain spectre of the invisible: by what Marx termed that 'self-moving substance which is Subject', in the 'shape of money', or of capital itself (Marx, 1976: 255-6).

Series and Narration

In a conversation with Benjamin Buchloh, Martha Rosler offers a comparison between the work of Ed Ruscha, on the one hand, and the photo-narratives of Walker Evans and Robert Frank, on the other, to the degree that *both* effect a renunciation of the single image:

> [B]oth have structural elements in common: the structured image itself and the sequencing. Yet they are opposites. In *Twenty-Six Gasoline Stations* that sequence is one plus one plus one, and it is a simple accretion that makes the point. In Evans and Frank, it is one plus two plus three plus four, so the actual sequence and the content makes a difference. Yet they both depend on seriality, something that the photo world did not permit. (Buchloh 1998: 37)

Rosler's comparison between Evans and Ruscha is not necessarily a critical one, but it does serve to throw some productive light upon not only the contrast between Sekula's and Gursky's projects, as Lee presents these, but on the divergent *forms* that a renunciation of the single image may consequently take in the face of the representational dilemmas posed by contemporary capitalism.

It is significant, in this light, that if Lee herself largely focuses on Gursky's photographs as *single* images (which is indeed their usual conditions of display in a gallery or museum context), there is another sense in which these individual images only themselves really acquire their full meaning when considered in their effective serial organisation across the German photographer's ongoing project as a whole. That is to say, as one component in the 'sum total effect' provided by what Lee herself calls a 'visual primer of the world market' (73), an individual image like *Salerno* is less a simple auratic work to be contemplated in its splendid isolation (although it may also be this), than it is what Gursky refers to as a 'piece in the puzzle'; part of an open series synecdochically 'mapping' a visual 'landscape' of globalizing capitalism. The forms of repetition (both internal *and* external to the single image) characteristic of Gursky's work – what Rosler terms a 'one plus one plus one' of accretion - function, in this sense, to *gesture towards* 'totality', constituting something like an accumulative 'survey' of contemporary spatial forms, technologies and architectures. Or, in other words, if what is often described as 'panoramic' in Gursky's images is as much a question of their relational form, of the repetitions *between* images, it is in this that they are readable as a peculiarly contemporary reworking of a certain modernist impulse to extract abstraction from the social world so as to reflect upon it *as form*.

While not seeking to dilute Lee's criticisms, my point is not simply, then, that, placed alongside Sekula, Gursky 'has no comparable aspiration towards documentary' (Johsson 2010: 121) – although this is also true – but that the essentially anti-narrative, descriptive mode of his work engages the *reality* of abstraction in a quite different fashion, through the ways in which the repetition of forms across the (open) series effectively mimes the repetition and inexhaustibly of capitalism's own actualization of abstraction in the 'social world'. (As with Ruscha or Warhol, whether this "miming" of capitalist forms of repetition is, in any meaningful sense, *critical* of such abstraction is, of course, a different question.) By contrast, what Sekula terms his own '"*paraliterary*" revision of documentary photography' - which explicitly privileges the novelistic and cinematic over the pictorial or painterly - is manifested in its correlation with realist narrative, as a mediation of – so to speak – photography's (irreducible) descriptive mode, in which narrative sequence – or story - re-presents a kind of temporal set of relations (rather than a 'one plus one plus one') and, hence, holds out the promise of a kind of critical *understanding* of, through giving narrative shape to, certain processes of capitalist abstraction.

As various commentators have noted, as a 'constructive practice', then, the overcoming of the fetish of the single image in Sekula has, by evident contrast to Gursky's work, the specifically narrative purpose to 'recover *connections* elided by capitalism', or 'causal connections that have been severed or weakened', in a situation in which actual 'huge distances separate products from the labour processes that produce them' (Day 2015: 58, 60; emphasis added). Understood as an extended, realist documentary project, *Fish Story* certainly conforms in this light to a broader definition of the latter's task as one of 'bringing into vision new characters occluded from the neoliberal media' (Edwards 2015: 41), via a spatial reordering of the image

that through photography (as well as text) renders visible what is otherwise invisible, hidden or anonymous. As Sekula puts it in his short introduction to a film made with Noel Burch, *The Forgotten Space* – against the 'myths' of what he calls a de-materialised 'post-industrial society' – narration and the photographic image combine to *make* visible the otherwise hidden 'fact' that sea trade remains 'an integral component of the world-industrial system' – populated by '*invisible* workers on the other side of the globe' (Sekula and Burch, 2011: 78-79; emphasis added).

From this perspective, the critique of the fetishism of the single image is also, practically, a working against the fetishism of commodities themselves, insofar as it is precisely the concrete forms of labour required to produce commodities, and the social relations of cooperation intrinsic to them, that are rendered *invisible* in the commodity's 'fetish-like' character by making them 'appear as relations between material objects, instead of revealing them plainly' (Marx, 1976: 169). As Klose rightly claims in the context of containerization, the 'modern myth of immaterial technology fantasizes about immateriality and eternal, almost lossless readiness, where it is actually *an abstraction*' (234; emphasis added). As a kind of 'social hieroglyph', this would then seem open to decoding, at one level at least, in a way that would appear to privilege narration itself as the means by which to track the commodity back to the sphere of production and so render visible what lies behind it.

If Gursky's images are vulnerable to the charge that they offer only to repeat a social reality 'evident on the surface of things' (Sekula 2004: 135), unable to say anything other than, 'What a beautiful world', because they fail to make 'connections' other than those of 'abstract' formal repetition, it is tempting as such to understand a work like *Fish Story* as that which renounces the single image, by contrast, in the name of a renunciation of abstraction itself. This is certainly implied in Pamela Lee's

own stark opposition of Gursky's 'ethereal' images to what she presents as Sekula's bringing of 'consciousness down to earth', restoring 'the heaviness of material relations [that] resist sublimation into the ether' (Lee 2012: 98). Referring to what she calls Marx's 'literary nods to the mystical', from which his metaphor of the 'ethereal' derives, as capturing 'the psychology, superstitiousness, and, more to the point, false consciousness of the subject of capital' that underlies the 'irrational nature of commodity fetishism', by implication it is the re-materialization effected by Sekula's work that constitutes its realism in dispelling such 'false consciousness' itself (88).

Yet, one should remember here Sekula's own 'phenomenological point' at the outset of *Fish Story*, for if photodocumentary might well place itself, like 'sailors and dockers', in a 'position to see the global patterns of intrigue hidden in the mundane details of commerce' – bringing back to the shores of visibility what has been hidden by the fetishism of the commodity – the contrary danger is that of a '*crude materialism*', the 'delusion' that 'a global economy could be seen and heard and smelled' as such (Sekula 2002: 12). For the 'irrational nature' of the fetish-like character of the commodity form is precisely *not* merely a question of psychology, or even 'false consciousness', but of the *objective* reality of abstraction itself. The 'fault', in other words, lies not straightforwardly in 'consciousness', but lies, as Chris Arthur puts it, *out there*, and 'moves within the object itself' (2001: 41).

There are, in other words, and to put it crudely, two different forms of abstraction and invisibility at stake here: that invisibility of labour and production that can, in principle, be partly rectified in the image, and that *essential* invisibility which just is intrinsic to the real abstraction of capital as such, and lies inherently 'outside' the image *tout court*. If, as Sekula suggests, a dynamics of realism as a rendering visible of what is hidden is thus already complex - '*A crate breaks, spilling its*

contents. But that's too easy an image of sudden disclosure, at once archaic and cinematic, given that sailors rarely see the thrice-packaged cargo they carry nowadays' (1997: 32) – this relates not only to the difficulty of opening or seeing inside the container (as if that itself would 'show' us capital), but the problem of the representational dilemma posed by the fact that one cannot actually *show* the abstract form of exchangeability that propels the social system 'in the first place'. Instead, one can only render the abstract itself visible *as* invisible within the narrative structure of the 'work'.

In this sense, the renunciation of the single image as the condition of a 'claim to realism' is necessitated here, in part, because capital itself 'appears' only in the peculiar nature of the *relations* between images and things that it establishes (i.e. in the abstract and 'invisible' form of that relation itself). While the images that are organised into narrative in *Fish Story* to produce a 'critical understanding' of our social world may, of necessity, be focused on the all-too-material and visible, what, equally necessarily, propels its 'plotting' is that which can never be shown *in* any image itself. If there is a final paradox of realism it lies perhaps there.

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Notes

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[1] One limitation of Stimson's own focus on serial form is, however, the ways in which its 'vision of photography as a medium of sociality', and a 'new form of political subjectivity', is ultimately restricted to a now *lost* mode of collectivity: that is, the Nation (2006: 169). See Roberts 2014: 33-35. Although, then, Stimson recognises the crucial sense in which 'nationalism' itself is a 'form of abstraction' (169), as well as, for example, in his account of Riis (and defence of the latter's 'bourgeois abstraction'), referring to serialism's capacity to give expression to 'the underlying essential economic relations in the form of class conflict, whether it wanted to or not', this is not extended to any detailed consideration of the social relations constituted through *real* abstraction (in the value form) as themselves constituting a certain mode of collectivity, if a profoundly 'inhuman' one. As I will suggest, this is key to understanding what would make the serial forms of, say, Sekula (or, in another fashion, Andreas Gursky) different perhaps from those covered in Stimson's book.

[2] If one historical manifestation of the 'renunciation of the single image' has, then,

been centred on the specific sequential form of the photo-book, and thus (as Sekula often suggests) to the novel (particularly in its more 'epic' dimensions), this, of course, raises the question of its relation to not only literature but cinema also. 'I have found that I have looked more to cinema for models', suggests Sekula (2004: 156), while in 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary' he argues that 'the most developed critiques of the illusory facticity of photographic media have been cinematic, stemming from outside the tradition of still photography' (1978: 869). (By contrast, and significantly, Barthes described his motivation for writing *Camera Lucida* as one directed '*against* film'.) Indeed, as Roberts notes in *Photography and its Violations*, arguably the formation of a radical conception of photographic realism in the twentieth century emerged in some sense through its very subordination to cinema, and thus 'its need to transform its functions into a filmic or protofilmic language'. As he concludes: 'There is no realism of the contingent and no sequential photo practice in Alexander Rodchenko and El Lissitsky, Walker Evans and James Agee, without Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov' (2014: 41). Some of the complexities contained in this relationship between photography and cinema are identifiable in comparing this with Stimson's celebration, by contrast, of photographic serialism *over* film, which, he argues, collapses 'the analytical, atemporal space opened up the *abstraction* of serial photography back into a false synthetic naturalism of time' (2006: 37; emphasis added). I leave such specific complexities of this relationship aside here for another occasion however.

[3] Benjamin's reference is to Renger-Patzsch's anthology *The World is Beautiful* published in 1928.

[4] This famous passage from Brecht reappears across Sekula's oeuvre, including in the early 'Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary', where, for example, he criticizes Lewis Baltz's new topographic 'photographs of enigmatic factories' precisely because they 'fail to tell us anything about them, to recall Brecht's remarks about a hypothetical photograph of the Krupp works' (1978: 870).

[5] The same point is made elsewhere in a more theoretical register, drawing on Marx's *Grundrisse*: 'Reified social relations are in a sense invisible … [and] can only be understood through recourse to abstraction, or … through the movement upwards from the concrete to the abstract, and back down to the concrete' (Sekula, 1997: 49).

[6] In the latter case, a specifically 'artistic abstraction' can certainly be conceived, in

J.M. Bernstein's words, as combating a 'societal abstraction' (or the 'scientistic') by asserting an affective and sensuous particularity to be found precisely within the materiality of the aesthetic object itself (Bernstein, 2006: 151-152; see also Cunningham 2013), just as, from a rather different direction, it is, one might say, the snapshot's very particular connection to specific biographies and everyday lives – its 'concreteness' of reference – that has, in a contrary fashion, made it exemplary of a specifically *anti*-aestheticist resistance to the abstractions of an interchangeability of images characteristic of mass media.

[7] Sekula here prefigures the more extended discussion in his essay 'The Body and the Archive' (1986) of the systematising impulse in the uses of photography by the likes of Bertillon and Francis Galton that links early social uses of the photograph to criminology and eugenics, as well as pseudo-sciences like phrenology. Crucial to this is the ways in which, on Sekula's partly Foucaultian account, the apparently democratic and egalitarian dimensions of photography were, more or less from its beginnings, tied up with systems of 'classification' that in fact constructed new modes of class, gender or racial distinction.

[8] See http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4

[9] One could compare here the broadly Lukácsian distinction implied, for example, *against* photography's reduction to the descriptive mode, in Dyer's critical contrast of Garry Winogrand with Dorothea Lange: 'Lange was faithful to George Steiner's comment on Balzac: that if he "describes a hat, he does so because a man is wearing". The photographers of the new generation will describe a hat just because it happens to be somewhere' (Dyer 2012: 148).

[10] Conversely, Emerson, for example, writing in the 1840s, identifies the *danger* in literary language that 'a paper currency is employed when there is no bullion in the vaults', demanding of the poet that he (or she) 'pierce these rotten dictions and fasten words again to visible things… [to become] a commanding certificate, or fully underwritten currency' (cited in Armstrong 1999: 291).