



MILITANT LANDSCAPE

NOTES ON COUNTER-FIGURATION FROM
EARLY MODERN GENRE FORMATION TO
CONTEMPORARY PRACTICES, OR, LANDSCAPE
AFTER THE FAILURE OF REPRESENTATION

JALEH MANSOOR

The British painter Joseph Mallord William Turner presented an oil painting at the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1844, a painting whose subject matter is recognizable only because of the title: *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway*. The figure of the train begins to take shape in a blur of radiance through a visual field of hazy pigment, the speed of the vehicle altering the way in which the landscape is represented in the painting. This was the first landscape painting both to articulate the ontological shifts brought about by new modes of extraction and production and to suggest a concomitant transformation in perception. In that same year, Karl Marx wrote the *Philosophical and Economic Manuscripts*, a masterpiece of dialectical thinking that both explores the collapse of perceiving subject and external objects that was brought on by the capitalist mode of production and suggests the reciprocal relationship of reification.¹

This essay troubles the genre of “landscape” by suggesting, indeed arguing, that this genre be understood as a category of visual militancy. I will locate the intersection between real and aesthetic abstraction at

¹ While the term *reification*, as Georg Simmel later noted, is used in Marx’s *Capital*, it would later be elaborated by Lukács in his pivotal *History and Class Consciousness* of 1923. György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1972).



Joseph Mallord William Turner. *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway*, 1844.
Oil on canvas, 121.9 × 90.8 cm. Turner Bequest, 1856, National Gallery, London, UK.
Public domain image.

the transition from feudal to modern economic relations in the 16th and 17th centuries, as expressed in the tumultuous break with the centralizing institution of the Catholic Church, in what Giovanni Arrighi has called the Dutch cycle of accumulation in his account of the historical development of capitalism from the 15th through 20th centuries.² To this end, I will explore the “iconoclastic” landscapes of the 16th-century Dutch painter Hercules Segers—who, like Turner, might be identified as an early practitioner of abstraction not only as a purely aesthetic phenomenon but, indeed, as a social, political, and economic “second nature”—as well as the works of the 17th-century French painter Nicolas Poussin, who initiated a new form of painterly practice that could be said to have initiated a new genre. Of necessity, the exposition of this genealogy will be abbreviated, and it is intended to offer a historical framework for understanding abstraction in the present and throughout the 20th century in the context of explicitly and militantly political practices. Militant landscape, at the inception and limit of the genre, at once

2 Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994).

avows and mobilizes against its own indexical condition. These formal tactics, aligned with situationally specific radical contexts, constitute a genre I call militant landscape. Militant landscape, nested within aesthetic mediation, confirms the way in which culture operates politically, regardless of explicitly denotative representation. The practices I have traced over a period that runs parallel to the history of the capitalist mode of production are an index of the de- and recomposing modes of perception and cognition founded on a dominion over nature.

To the extent that abstraction can be located in British painting of the early 19th century, rather than in French painting of the latter half of that century, as other narratives might have it, the abstraction discussed here is a function not of aesthetic abstraction but of real, or concrete, abstraction brought to bear on the capitalist mode of production. The latter form of abstraction alters reality itself, becoming “a second nature,” as Alfred Sohn-Rethel has argued after Marx, through the extraction of resources on a hitherto unknown scale, which are then altered by labor capacity that has been extracted from bodies through urbanization and the alchemy of wages. Frankfurt School writers who leaned toward the Kantian pole of German Idealism, such as Theodor W. Adorno and Alfred Sohn-Rethel, theorized this transformation and understood it to be the formation of a second nature.³ Sohn-Rethel describes *second nature* as a new axis of time and space established by the operation of the market over time, regardless of any primary context: “An unchanging price consigns the commodity’s physical constitution to a no less unchanging status. In the sphere of exchange, it is no longer nature but rather property that governs commodities. The time and space that commodities traverse in circulation are the abstract time and space of capital. This is the sphere of ‘second nature.’”⁴ Market abstraction happens behind the backs of men, elsewhere (anywhere but here, anytime but now), insofar as the place of

3 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 188. See also Ray Brassier’s “Wandering Abstraction,” *Mute*, February 13, 2014, <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wandering-abstraction>, and Sohn-Rethel’s “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature,” recently translated into English by Daniel Spaulding in the inaugural issue of the web journal *Selva*, <https://selvajournal.org/the-formal-characteristics-of-second-nature/>. The latter study was first published as “Die Formcharaktere der zweiten Nature,” in *Das Unvermögen der Realität: Beiträge zu einer anderen materialistischen Ästhetik*, ed. Christoph Bezzel (Berlin: Klaus Wiesenbach, 1974), 185–207.

4 Sohn-Rethel, “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature,” 3.

trade and exchange suspends regular, everyday behavior, however much it may also inform it, and is therefore a priori remote from concrete self-presence. The mode of abstraction defined thereby is real abstraction—that which the capitalist mode of production unleashes into the object world and, more significantly, into the field of social relations, rendering motive and manner even more opaque than if they were attributed to mere subjective experience. It is this opacity through which the artists who have contributed to the elaboration of the genre of landscape in a militant vein, from Segers and Turner to the present, have sought to convey the machinations of real abstraction as a function of the shifting dialectical relationships between the perceiving viewer and the object under observation: in this case, forms of landscape that are militant insofar as they address and politicize the radical shift in the ontological relation between man and nature, brought to bear on radical seismic changes in the modes of production and communication.

Second nature is an abstraction that functions as though it were itself inevitable, “the way things are.” It is not that consciousness is false per se, nor that “mankind,” a category that cannot in any case be universalized in the final instance, is “alienated.” Rather, this fully naturalized reality is also a product of the dominant means of value production and a metabolic, mediating nature, however the latter is defined. Abstraction comes to saturate the field of the real and to be mistaken for it. As Sami Khatib has noted in his analysis of value from theory in relation to both aesthetics and a desperately needed new theory of class, “Capitalism’s *physis* produces its own ‘naturally grown’ *metaphysics*. In other words, with generalized commodity production sensuous first nature becomes sensuous-supra-sensuous ‘second nature.’”⁵ Nature is replaced by its commodification and equally naturalized labor expenditure, to the point of the generalized pathologizing of a lumpen proletariat expelled by capitalist overproduction. The totality of this capitalist process, from extracting labor power to expressing it abstractly as value through the value form, or money, is the result of and in turn results in the entrenched division of intellectual and manual labor now internalized as a second nature.⁶ The emergence of this second nature, a simulacral space of apolitical civility in deference to the impersonal

5 Sami Khatib, “‘Sensuous Supra-Sensuous’: The Aesthetics of Real Abstraction,” in *Aesthetic Marx*, ed. Samir Gandesha and Johan Hartle (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 57.

6 Sohn-Rethel, “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature.”

operations of a market anchored only by the price signal—itsself ephemeral—in turn motivates the emergence of militant landscape as such. The genre is born, I argue, from the contradiction internal to the capitalist mode of production and its means of value extraction from “nature,” turned through the metrics of time, labor, and demand or scarcity into value as such, transcending the values set by ideology (god) or politics (crown or demos). Throughout its history, the genre of landscape—from its inception in Dutch separatist movements of the 16th century, through its nuanced elaboration in 19th-century British and French land- and seascape painting, across the 20th century by means of the dialectical entwinement of real and aesthetic abstraction, and into the 21st-century forms of media—has acted as an index of the internal dynamics of capital itself. In other words, Arrighi’s *The Long Twentieth Century*, which traces the cycles of capitalist accumulation from the 15th through the 20th century, across four cycles of accumulation enabled by an antagonistic relationship of the state to the market, might be rewritten as the history of the genre of landscape.

The chapter on “so called primitive accumulation” in Marx’s *Capital* has been a focus of debate regarding Marx’s own position vis-à-vis the importance of the relationship between “nature,” colonization, and labor in determining the development of capitalism.⁷ The chapter, which traces the transition from feudalism to industrialization in England and Europe, takes its place within the much-less-discussed part eight of *Capital*, chapters 25–31, in which Marx acknowledges that the condition for the possibility of Europe’s passage from late feudalism to modernity depends on round after round of extraction from Europe’s colonies spanning the globe. In “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,” Marx notes:

The discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement, and entombment in mines of the indigenous populations of the continent, the beginnings of the conquest and plunder of India, the conversion of Africa into a preserve for the commercial hunting of black skins, are all things that characterize the dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief moments of primitive accumulation. Hard on their heels followed the commercial wars of the European Nations, which has

7 Karl Marx, “The Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,” in *Capital*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 915.

the globe as its battlefield. It begins with the revolt of the Netherlands from Spain, assumes gigantic proportions in England's anti-Jacobin war and is still going on in the shape of the opium wars against China. . . . The different moments of primitive accumulation can be assigned in particular to Spain, Portugal, Holland, France, and England in more or less chronological order.⁸

Besides the fact that Marx here sketches for us the history of the genre of landscape in Western art, from its inception as a mode of articulating economic and political autonomy from the Church to its highest elaboration in British painting, he also offers a brief explanation of its underlying motivations, however elegantly mediated. In the passage, Marx offers an equally cogent explanation of the continued need to overwrite and occlude the continuity of the narrative in a historical moment that deludes itself into believing in democratic civility. To the chronology Marx offers, the financial interests of the United States and China might be added. While much Marxian discourse has skipped over these chapters in *Capital* in the interest of studying the emergence of the proletariat and its struggle, a new generation of writers is currently working through the disastrous results of 20th-century state communism and an overemphasis on the wage relation, with resulting obfuscation of the dispossession and expropriation of land.⁹

It could be argued that the matrix of modern and abstract art is landscape. Along with the new directions afforded by Poussin's work, landscape as a genre bears the burden of meaning, ultimately operating as the index of history itself, as Amy Knight Powell suggests.¹⁰ The landscape genre was forged in the crucible of iconoclasm at the height of

8 Ibid.

9 For a book-length elaboration of Marx's investigation of land dispossession as capital accumulation, see Glen Sean Coulthard's *Red Skins, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). See also Marx's late correspondence, in particular his well-known letter to Vera Zasulich, in which he acknowledges the rural peasantry as a revolutionary force. Karl Marx, "A Letter to Vera Zasulich," in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLelland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 576–80.

As Coulthard notes, this and other pieces of Marx's late correspondence obviate what later ossified into a 20th-century Marxist mythology, said to originate from Marx himself, that only the urban proletariat can be the "subject of history." We might attribute this mythology to any number of sources, from praxis such as Bolshevism to classic discursive positions such as that of György Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*.

10 Amy Knight Powell, "Segers's Iconoclastic Vernacular," *Oxford Art Journal* 38, no. 3 (2015): 343–64.

Europe's civil war between the Spanish Hapsburg empire and the Dutch states' desire for material and ideological autonomy. Through an analysis of 17th-century printmaker Hercules Segers's idiosyncratic and singular oeuvre, Powell argues for a practice that offers anonymity, negativity, and self-reflexive interstitiality as a means to dismantle and overturn the values associated with ideologies (Catholicism and the model of the subjects it produced) that had come to be naturalized over centuries. In particular, Powell notes the opacity of Segers's landscapes, but also the way in which Segers takes advantage of the medium of print to inscribe a figurative trace of prior prints, such that the inscription becomes part of the ground of the ultimate image.

The inscription, in turn, is not authorial. This distinguishes Segers's project from that of Albrecht Dürer. The latter not only designed and fashioned his signature as an iterable logo but also occasioned the first copyright conflict, bringing modern intellectual property law into being. Segers's "radical anonymity" draws on the iconoclast's marks of erasure from the previous century. As such, the grapheme or mark, now emptied of authorial content, becomes an expression of common aspirations. In 16th-century iconoclasm, these common and collective if anonymous "voices" are articulated through negation. The iconoclasts destroyed icons and representations of God. This negative articulation became a way to express collective desires for autonomy from the Church. The negative dialectic implicit in iconoclasm determined landscape as such, in a heretofore overlooked precursor to the avant-gardist insistence on both continual negation and the forging of new, revolutionary realities resulting from purposive negation.¹¹

In keeping with the mimetic inscription of the formal devices he employs, such as opacity, negation of single-point perspective, and exploration of the afterimage of the printmaker's negative inscription on the copper plate—all of which are suggestive of anonymity, discipline, and perfection and suggest that Segers accepted with due humility incidental occurrences such as acid spills and stains, as a form of deference before higher powers, in line with Calvinist values—Segers himself was asocial. He did not believe in national belonging, but he may well have been privately devoted to values intrinsic to Protestantism, such as Calvinism—which Powell explores thoroughly—if not the orthodox institution of the faith itself.

11 *Ibid.*

a moment when that genre had begun to flatter human form in the way that an icon does. The so-called rustic landscapes mass-produced by Segers' peers picture a world perfectly shaped to its human inhabitants.¹⁴

Segers is unique in making work that in hindsight operates as the very index of history itself. Landscape becomes the genre of this index. At the same time, this epistemic shift—from icon to landscape, from the transparency of illusionistic representation to an opacity introduced by layering the matrix of image production within the medium of print-making, from affirmation to procedural negation, and finally, from authorship to anonymity—sets the conditions for the possibility of the avant-garde through the path of militant landscape.

Because they are attentive to the negativity of Segers' attitude towards the ideology of identification that sustains the rustic landscapes of his peers, Fraenger and Einstein get more right about his work than many of his commentators. But they are wrong to understand this negativity as releasing him from history and into the ranks of a perennial, expressionist avant-garde.¹⁵

Having thought about the genre in the *longue durée*, then, and the way in which it affords an articulation of political, economic, ideological, and historical-materialist problems while also informing the inception of the avant-garde, we now turn to 20th-century “militant landscape.”

Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway has been understood as a primary example of Turner's mature work. The black railway ripping over the land is a structural retort to the Western painterly tradition of single-point perspective as an opening onto the transparency of the visual field as an expression of divine order.¹⁶ In Turner's painting, this order is overwritten by a visual cacophony to which the mind can attribute any number of referents: pollution, speed, rain, smoke. Turner also distorts the symmetry afforded by perspective by shifting to the side the axis crossing from background to middle ground and foreground, and by demarcating it with an exaggerated and rather ugly—given the artist's virtuosic mastery of color across his oeuvre—black line.

¹⁴ Ibid., 356.

¹⁵ Ibid., 363.

¹⁶ Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher Wood (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).



Theodor Géricault, *The Raft of the Medusa*, 1819. Oil on canvas, 491 × 716 cm.
Louvre Museum, Paris, France. Public domain image.

The painterly smear with which Turner obfuscates the clarity of the view addresses a radical transformation of both subject and object initiated by the capitalist mode of production. Sohn-Rethel describes this seismic ontological shift thus:

In Marx, the differentiation between first and second nature appears as the opposition of the “natural form” and the “value form” of commodities. “Not an atom of matter enters into the objectivity of commodities as values [*Wertgegenständlichkeit*]; in this it is the direct opposite of the coarsely sensuous objectivity of commodities as physical objects.” The objectivity of value is “purely social.” With commodity production, humanity’s natural environment and social environment stand in precise disjunction to one another. The social context of exchange has a spatiotemporal, historical reality, but indeed only the purely social reality of second nature. Let us first of all establish the full term of its historical efficacy. Marx equates it with the presence of commodity production from its earliest beginnings.¹⁷

17 Sohn-Rethel, “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature,” 3, citing Marx, *Capital*, 138.

Here, the social relations set into motion by the abstraction of exchange, a purely contractual relation independent of the content of the objects exchanged and the interpersonal relationships among those who engage in the exchange, forge a new nature. This new nature, in turn, comes to be fully internalized as “natural” and imposes itself on the cognitive and perceptual framework of humans. Sohn-Rethel then speculates that this is a motivating factor in the changing formal characteristics of cultural production across centuries. “The aim of generating the illusion of the sensuous becoming-one of second and first nature seems to me worth considering as a materialist description of the ideal of art that was valid for the epochs of pre-capitalism and early capitalism, and perhaps even into the 19th century. This would in any case make comprehensible why it is that great artworks from vastly different eras and styles, that is, those that approach this becoming-one, make a similar impression on their beholders.”¹⁸ What Turner is offering is ultimately a realism of only apparent “abstraction”—abstract because it is descriptive of the very real and concrete conditions of the abstract nature of the world in its ontological transformation by the means of production itself.

Scholars have identified the Maidenhead railway bridge that crosses the Thames between Taplow and Maidenhead as the site for the scene in *Rain, Steam, and Speed: The Great Western Railway*.¹⁹ Isambard Kingdom Brunel designed and engineered the railroad to link London to Bristol in order to facilitate industrial growth.²⁰ Primarily, the line lubricated and accelerated the movement of goods to the hitherto unimaginable speed of thirty-three miles per hour.²¹ As Rebecca Solnit has argued in *River of Shadows*, her magisterial book on the rapid transformation of landscape, land that once took weeks to traverse could be crossed in a day, and the experience of moving through the land afforded new forms of vision.²²

Turner channels ambivalence about Brunel's engineering feat by

-
- 18 Sohn-Rethel, “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature,” 19.
 19 I thank my former student Kristian Guttormson for noting this in his seminar paper for my course on abstraction in 2018.
 20 William S. Rodney, *J. M. W. Turner: Romantic Painter of the Industrial Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 140.
 21 John Gage, *Turner: Rain, Steam, and Speed* (New York: Viking, 1972), 27.
 22 Rebecca Solnit, *River of Shadows: Eadweard Muybridge and the Technological Wild West* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2003).

making the bridge—a reminder of classical Roman architecture and engineering—appear vague in contrast with the thick, heavy, garish line designating the railroad. The surrounding paint, in muddy mustard yellows and brown, functions as the ground around both the ancient viaduct-like bridge and the modern gash of rail line and conveys the compromised nature of perception. This mess of pigment that fails to figure a form in any traditional or academically skilled way articulates the visual distortion that a traveler inside a locomotive, unaccustomed to moving at such accelerated speed, might experience. Lady Simon, a British aristocrat, was the subject of one anecdote describing the experience of a passenger on such high-speed trains: “A train was coming in their direction, through the blackness, over one of Brunel’s bridges, and the effect of the locomotive, lit by crimson flame, and seen through driving rain and whirling tempest, gave a peculiar impression of power, speed, and stress.”²³ Simon thereafter recognized Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed* at the Academy as “what she had been called upon to admire out of the window of the coach.”²⁴ While it is improbable that the painting presented, much less represented with any mimetic precision, what Lady Simon recalled having seen on the train on a passage from London to Bristol, her remarks certainly confirm the way in which Turner sought to convey, and succeeded in conveying, the perceptual effect and sensation of being a passenger crossing the industrially changed landscape at high speed.

Although Turner was understood as a canonized painter of British masterpieces only posthumously—in fact, he died destitute in the lodgings of his partner—we might consider his numerous landscapes that trouble reification in an overtly critical, if not nihilistic, way. Turner’s *Slave Ship* of 1840, for example, offers a blazing sun searing onto tumultuous ocean waters, in which closer study reveals a number of bodies seeming to flail for life, clearly drowning and in battle with horrific sea monsters. As is the case with the painting that opened this essay, here only the title offers the viewer an explanatory narrative. As such, the title operates like the caption to a photograph: it locks in an otherwise indeterminate meaning. The painting is “about” slavery, about the middle passage and race relations in the West in the early

23 Gage, *Turner: Rain, Steam, and Speed*, 16, citing A. M. W. Stirling, *The Richmond Papers* (London: Heinemann, 1926), 55.

24 Gage, *Turner: Rain, Steam, and Speed*, 16.

19th century. Turner presents human cargo—reified bodies or bodies handled as so many commodities, so much labor power to use for extracting surplus value from the land through work—cast by other men into the sea and into the violent contingency of “nature.” In short, there is nothing natural about this seascape. It is a passionate condemnation of manmade violence in the midst of a sea at once indifferent to and affected by manmade social relations. As such, the painting suspends agency in the gap between man and nature, in the interstice where man and nature co-determinatively compose history. This fraught question of agency—its location and how it is articulated in relation to the figuring of land—stands at the beginning of modernism in Western art. The question itself might be the problem that motivated the very birth of the movement.

Thus far, through an exegesis of exemplary works of landscape made in the early 17th and early 19th centuries, I have traced the



Joseph Mallord William Turner. *Slave Ship*, 1840. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Public domain image.

entwinement of, on the one hand, aesthetic abstraction, defined as the nonfigurative and nonrepresentational articulation of material form and the elaboration of new concepts to formalize new content, and on the other, real abstraction, defined as either the suspension of historically dynamic social relations or the estranged valorization of labor power in the act of exchange on a market (Sohn-Rethel). The dialectical struggle between these two forms of abstraction traverses modernism from 1888 to the present. Artworks, specifically those I have selected for their lucid presentation of this social ontology, offer a glimpse into the phenomenology of socially determined embodiment and the politics of time. Yet, because the artwork is never in the last instance transparent to social relations, it affords a suspension of time in order to reopen questions and read overlooked signals regarding social relations long foreclosed in the staid narratives of explanation. As Marx notes in the *Grundrisse*, the artwork is a kind of hieroglyph laid bare to those who dare to read: “The difficulty is not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model.”²⁵ Explaining cultural production as the expression of its own time, in other words, simply cannot offer an explanation of why cultural production over time continues to carry an irreducible excess of meaning that suggests the significance of a work to a time that is not its own. The artwork falls out of time, and in so doing, it recovers time. This dialectic is heightened under capitalist manufacture and the total domination of the workday, beyond the technical hours of work.²⁶ Fredric Jameson notes the significance that the artwork,

-
- 25 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 111. See also the Marxists Internet Archive. In this instance, Marx’s Hegelianism is a Hegelianism that has internalized Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and introduced into it both a theory of consciousness as phenomenology and a historicity. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987). Other recent commentaries on contemporary art and beauty can be found in Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Free Press, 2001), and in *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics*, ed. Bill Beckley and David Shapiro (New York: Allworth, 2002). Finally, see Donald Preziosi, “Aesthetics,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), especially the excerpts therein from the *Critique of Judgment*. Finally, although I seek to engage it critically throughout this article, Ray Brassier’s work on the entwinement of real and aesthetic abstraction has been immeasurably helpful; see his “Wondering Abstraction,” published in the online magazine *Mute*, February 13, 2014, <http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/wondering-abstraction>.
- 26 Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

understood across media, has for Adorno.²⁷ But art does not “reflect” anything so much as it mediates or offers a formalization of those “real movements” of history, in advance of their conclusively denotative and discursive articulation or misarticulation. The double mediation of political economy and cultural aesthetics happens in a manner somewhat different from the explanation offered by Jameson in his famous essay “On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act.”²⁸ For Jameson, too, mediation is driven by an absent cause. He argues that this absent cause ultimately remains an aporia.

In 2013 the contemporary artist and filmmaker Zachary Formwalt produced a video entitled *A Projective Geometry* that traces the history of both colonialism and capital to pastures of value extraction that date from the 16th-century colonization of Africa through the 19th-century laying down of railroad tracks, terrain still capable of driving extractive economies long after the putative decline and end of the colonial dynamic in the arena of politics. This video presents a visual field stratified by railways, in nascent homage, not unlike Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed*, to a once-meaningful perspectival organization. Local bodies enter and exit the field of view, appearing as so much surplus detail around the foundational structural organization inscribed by the centuries-old railway. In combination with this visual material, Formwalt reads from chapter 25 of Marx’s *Capital*, on “So-Called Primitive Accumulation.” This voiceover accompanies footage—each shot organized in rigorous single-point perspective—of the railroad, built first by England and then by France and Belgium, that extends from the Ivory Coast to the Cape.

To underscore and concretize the historicity of capitalism inscribed on the land over the centuries, indifferent to the lives of those around it,

27 “Adorno’s conception of the relationship of the work of art to its immediate historical situation, where indeed he appears to bet on all sides at once, simultaneously adopting mutually exclusive alternatives or variations on the basic model. The work of art ‘reflects’ society and is historical to the degree that it refuses the social, and represents the last refuge of individual subjectivity from the historical forces that threaten to crush it. . . . Thus the socio-economic is inscribed in the work, but as concave to convex, as negative to positive.” Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1974), 34–35.

28 Fredric Jameson, “On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act,” in *The Political Unconscious* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981); Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). This problem is the subject of Rancière’s book *The Nights of Labor: The Workers’ Dream in Nineteenth-Century France*, trans. John Drury (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989).



Zachary Formwalt. *A Projective Geometry*, 2013. Video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Formwalt unearthed documents from archives in both the imperialist nation states and their former/present empires. Many of these documents casually mention the now unruly, now obedient, but always “pesky” local African labor whose lives were lost to the enterprise of transporting local extracted resources, a process in which they were utterly disposable. Formwalt’s attention to the landscape itself exposes not only a violent history but also the degree to which the violence continues into the present, when the bulk of the raw resources for any number of dominant industries—from coffee, to chocolate, to diamonds and gold, as well as the mineral ores required for producing electronic devices and other goods—continue to originate in Africa, long after the close of the colonial era, a colonialism achieved by means of market abstraction. The video explores the way in which primitive accumulation as the condition for the possibility of capital accumulation through labor *is* land, and furthermore, the idea that primitive accumulation is far from a merely historical fact, but a present and continual dynamic. Formwalt places the agency for this process in the firms and corporate boardrooms of the Global North. Although there can be no question that the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank are “agents” of ongoing primitive accumulation, the questions they pose about agency may be more complicated. However heated the debate over who, or what, might be the “subject” of revolutionary history, the question of a capitalist subject is equally fraught. The question of agency, in turn, solidifies around the question of landscape and, more

fundamentally, around any understanding of “nature” to which landscape is conventionally understood to refer.

Jacques Rancière offers a theory of the subject within capitalism as both a vehicle for capital’s structural self-replication and as an interruption of a social structure necessary to capitalism: “what determines the connection between the effects . . . is the cause (the social relations of production) in so far as it is absent.”²⁹ Here, Rancière makes a requisite nod to the “hidden abode of production,” as Marx called it. However, he introduces it as an absent cause. This absent cause is not labor as a subject, as such. Rather, it is the nonidentity of abstract labor in relation to concrete labor. “What determines the connection between the effects (the relations between the commodities) is the cause (the social relations of production) in so far as it is absent. This absent cause is not labour as a subject, it is the identity of abstract labour and concrete labour inasmuch as its generalization expresses the structure of a certain mode of production, the capitalist mode of production.”³⁰ In other words, there is no object of analysis. Rather, there is only a set of relations among the worker, his capacity for work, and the work expressed in products he or she takes part in making. There is no particular site or identity in the capitalist mode of production from which capital is generated; surplus capital is instead a function of relations.

Capital itself has a diagrammatic function, a relationship among its terms born of movements and transitions. This gap—among the laborer as person, his or her labor power, and the labor time expended in a commodity—operates as the site of generalization of labor. It is a kind of glitch, a structuring absence that generates social relations with respect to itself. As such, the gap expresses the capitalist mode of production as a structure of absence and difference, of social relations organized around the gap between concrete and abstract labor. This absent cause is not work, but the way in which labor power, objectified and metricized and anonymous, the key to profit, enters the social field disguised as the individual, presented socially in an anthropomorphic register that conflates the bearer of concrete labor with her or his labor-bearing capacity (the source of value). The social field misses the fact

29 Jacques Rancière, “Critique and Science in Capital,” in *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, ed. Louis Althusser, Etienne Balibar, Roger Establet, Pierre Macherey, and Jacques Rancière (London: Verso, 2016), 108.

30 *Ibid.*

that the abstract measure of labor and its point of sale on the market—where it becomes at once abstracted and realized—is not the same thing as the laborer, situated as she or he is in a daily life determined by relations with others. The labor abstracted and exchanged/realized suspends the personal and collective experience of the bearer of labor power, replacing it with a second nature naturalized by the process of exchange itself, in which the experiential is evacuated in the interest of deriving value.³¹ Rancière has explained this glitch in the perception of labor power, caught in an interval where the person or bearer of labor power becomes equated with the profit-bearing capacity of labor power, to the occlusion of the other qualities and trajectory of the human: the inversion of the inner structural determinations appears as a fundamental characteristic of the process.

In other words, the second nature established by the capitalist mode of production constitutes the putative subject in relation to a fundamentally reconstituted “natural environment.” Yet, do not Turner’s late landscapes portend this co-constitutive, mutually determinative relationship between the perceiving viewer and the object of view? This, finally, is the terrain of militant landscape, inscribed from the inception of the genre in 17th-century Dutch landscape, elaborated in Romantic landscape, and coursing through so many afterlives in modern and contemporary art.³²

The inception of the genre of landscape and its historical elaboration run curiously parallel to the origins and extensions of the great cycles of capitalist accumulation, in this case the Dutch and British world financial systems, which relied heavily on the extraction of wealth, indeed plunder, from land in their farthest colonies. Through a form of pre-figurative articulation, we might say that the genre formation curiously grasps, prior to other forms of symbolization, the real movement of capitalist history, inasmuch as that history—of the capitalist world system—relies as much on the development of a new relationship of both dependence on and domination over nature, via the

31 See Sohn-Rethel, “The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature.”

32 It might be argued that the “aporetic braiding” that Yve-Alain Bois sees in Piet Mondrian’s late work is a provisional suspension, a seeming momentary “resolution” to the exploration of the subject-object dialectic motivating the painter’s career, which began in the tradition of romantic landscape painting. Yve-Alain Bois, “Piet Mondrian, *New York City*,” in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990), 157–86.

extraction of natural resources, as it does on the value extracted from labor power in the hidden abode of production. The works I have explored in this essay, of Segers and Turner, operate as indices of the historicity of capitalism, forged historically through primitive accumulation, as defined by Marx in chapters 25–31 of *Capital*, over the *longue durée*. The primitive accumulation that Marx identifies can be seen at once as a prerequisite for proletarianization and as a source of value itself. This relation to natural resources, then, may offer an explanation for the cultural motivation for and collective drive behind the interest in land as a proper subject of representation, and in landscape as such. Furthermore, it might suggest why this genre came to be dominant in the 16th through 20th centuries and into the present. Given this historicity, inscribed into paradigmatic practices such as those of Segers and Turner, the genre of landscape has continued to offer a cultural matrix through which to explore political militancy around how and in what register we might comprehend the natural world; that this should take place in an aesthetic register merely underscores the entwinement of aesthetics and politics in attempting to grasp history itself. As I have argued, both Segers and Turner elaborate and develop the genre of landscape in a *critical* vein. Both artists mobilize the genre for the way it uniquely affords a chance to explore the extent to which nature becomes a “second nature” within the capitalist mode of value extraction and production. Both artists trace the seismic ontological shifts that reconstituted persons as a proletariat, as nothing but bearers of labor power (as in Turner’s *Slave Ship*), whether waged or otherwise. In the same way, these shifts reconstituted the global spatial territory as a source of value extraction conducive to accumulating the wealth necessary to enable the inception of new genres, from landscape painting to video and new media, in a fully secular epoch in which the sources of value itself—land and labor—replaced the mythological and religious iconographies that preceded them.