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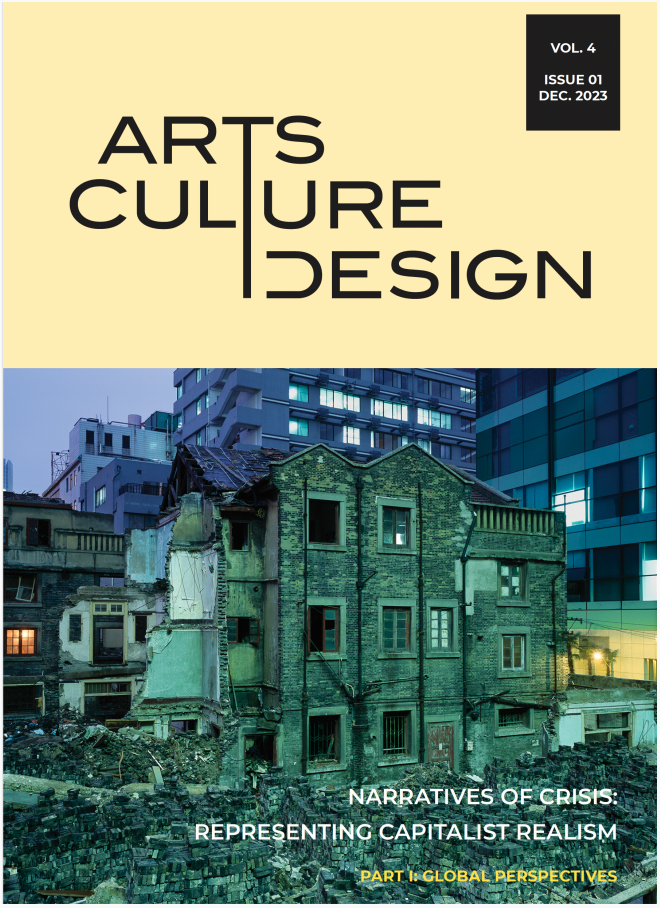
Narratives of Crisis: Representing Capitalist Realism



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CAPITALISM AND THE CAMERA: ESSAYS ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXTRACTION

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ABSTRACT

A review of *Capitalism and the Camera: Essays on Photography and Extraction* (Verso, 2021), edited by Kevin Coleman and Daniel James..

PENELOPE PETSINI is a Doctor of Philosophy in Arts and Humanities, specialized in photography. Her recent publications include: *Sites of Memory: Photography, Collective Memory and History* (Athens: Hellenic Center of Photography & NEON Foundation, 2016); *Capitalist Realism: Future Perfect | Past Continuous* (University of Macedonia Press, 2018); the collective readers *Censorship in Greece* (Athens: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 2016) and *Companion of Censorship in Greece: Weak Democracy, Dictatorship, Metapolitefsi* (Athens: Kastaniotis, 2018) co-edited with Dimitris Christopoulos; as well as *Photography and collective identities: Greek Photography Studies I* (Athens: Koukkida 2021)and *Photography and the anthropological turn: Greek Photography Studies II* (Athens: Koukkida 2023) co-edited with John Stathatos.

Figure 1: Chemnitz, Stadt mit Kopfchen, Das Karl-Marx-Monument.

K. COLEMAN & DANIEL JAMES (EDS.), CAPITALISM AND THE CAMERA: ESSAYS ON PHOTOGRAPHY AND EXTRACTION, VERSO, 2021

Is it possible that capitalism and photography share more than just a historical timeline, but also an inherent connection in their modes of operation? Does a comprehensive understanding of the origins of photography necessitate an exploration of the imperial violence and rights that underlie its inception? To what extent can photography, a medium often intertwined with capitalism's alluring influence, be effectively employed to conceptualize and construct alternative image-worlds? Can it serve as a catalyst for inspiring movements aimed at fostering greater freedom and equality across societal boundaries? In transcending its conventional role as a mere recording tool, can the camera assume a transformative role in expanding freedom and equality within society? These are among the critical inquiries posed by this thought-provoking book, compelling readers to engage in a discerning examination of the intricate connections between image production, economic systems, and societal metamorphosis.

Verso's collective volume "Capitalism and the Camera" is about the intricate interplay between capitalism and photography, examining how these two realms interact, shaping and influencing each other in ways that often go unnoticed. The book examines how these two entities evolved in tandem during a critical period in history, between Adam Smith's "The Wealth of Nations" and Marx and Engels' "The Communist Manifesto", highlighting the emergence of both philosophical and practical aspects: one being the conceptualization of economy as a new analytical object and the other the development of photography as a means to capture images through light. In this perspective, they suggest the camera frame and the framework of capitalist hegemony share an inherent symbiotic connection, one intertwining itself within a "cultural ecosystem of images". Through a series of essays, the contributors unveil the multifaceted ways in which capitalism and photography are entwined, while also highlighting the potential for photography to critically engage with capitalist structures and envision alternative possibilities. In this sense, the book poses crucial questions about the intersections between capitalist accumulation and photography, as well as the potential for photography to challenge capitalism's encroachments on human freedom and the environment.

Drawing from Western Marxist traditions, "Capitalism and the Camera" challenges the notion of a teleological argument by highlighting the non-linear and symbiotic relationship between photography and capitalism. Indeed, the development of these two entities over time has been intertwined, influencing each other's growth: while photography's evolution wasn't solely driven by capitalism, the logic of exchange and value production in capitalism aligns with photographic replication. Throughout the volume,

the contributors provide novel insights into the intricate relationship between photography and capitalism, challenging Bertolt Brecht's skeptical perspective on the medium's capacity to encapsulate the essence of capitalism. They underscore that, notwithstanding its inherent limitations, photography possesses the potential to engage in a critical dialogue with capitalism, unveiling its underlying structures and facilitating the envisioning of alternative trajectories. The notion that photography can counteract the abstraction inherent in global capitalism by tangibly representing its intricate flows aligns with a well-established trajectory within concerned photography. Pioneers in this domain, such as Allan Sekula, have notably demonstrated this potential through iconic explorations like his profound investigation into the shipping industry (fig.2).

Figure 2: Allan Sekula, Panorama. Mid-Atlantic, November 1993 (1993). From Fish Story, 1989–1995. The Getty Research Institute, 2016.M.22.

POLITICAL ECONOMY AND PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNOLOGY

In their Introduction, Coleman and James put forth three central arguments. Firstly, they assert the inherent connection between capitalism and the camera, examining the logics of accumulation and replication within constrained historical and ecological contexts. To do so, they examine the diverse realm of images, considering their role in cultural ecosystems and the infrastructures that lend them value. Secondly, they propose that photography, or the camera, can provide insight into capitalist production relations, the construction of social worlds, and the emotions that mobilize collective actions. Thirdly, they emphasize the camera's role in shaping publics – collective subjects that can transcend boundaries and work towards democratic expansion of freedom and equality. Photography, they argue, can serve as a tool for this struggle.

The book itself is divided into three main sections, each focusing on a distinct aspect of the relationship between capitalism and photography. The first section, "Accumulation—Imperial Image Worlds", examines the origins of photography and its connection to capitalism's destructive impact on lifeworlds. Overall, the essays expose the complexities of photography's relationship with capitalism, its potential for challenging dominant narratives, and the possibilities of building alternative communities through image-making. Siobhan Angus traces the importance of silver mining to photography's development and draws parallels between the metallurgist and the photographer; Ariella Aïsha Azoulay provocatively suggests 1492 as photography's birth year, highlighting the intersection of colonialism and image-making; Kajri Jain challenges medium-specific notions of photography, emphasizing its varied contexts and universalizing discourses.

Azoulay's essay redefines the concept

of photography's origins, challenging traditional narratives perpetuated by inventors, capitalists, and colonial powers. Instead of viewing photography's inception solely through the lens of technological invention, this viewpoint posits that the roots of photography can be traced back to the year 1492. The key idea is that photography, as we know it, didn't emerge in isolation but was intertwined with the imperial practices and ideologies prevalent during colonization. Rather than being seen as an isolated practice centered around the camera and the individual photographer, photography is understood as a product of imperial violence, dispossession, and the reconfiguration of worlds.

The act of imposing a "new world" through colonization necessitated the destruction of existing social fabrics, replacing them with new classifications, technologies, and meanings. Photography's association with documenting and recording, often from an assumed external viewpoint, is seen as an extension of this imperial ideology. The act of capturing images is framed as capturing what's already shaped by imperial influence, reinforcing the very processes of colonization. Thus, this perspective asserts that photography grew out of imperialism, embodying its values and practices. To acknowledge this alternative origin of photography, Azoulay calls us to unlearn conventional knowledge about its history and to explore it within the broader context of the imperial world. The decolonization of photography, she argues, is intricately tied to the larger goal of decolonizing the world itself and dismantling imperial practices.

In a similar vein, Kajri Jain's essay "Go Away Closer: Photography, Intermediality, Unevenness" challenges the idea of a postcolonial form of photographic practice that exists separately from other traditions. Instead, it asserts that photography, regardless of its context, inherently involves a mixture of media and traditions, rejecting notions of medium specificity. This rejection parallels the way capitalism tells its own story, emphasizing progress and universality while appropriating external elements for its functioning. Focusing on the bazaar and its mercantile ethos, Jain explores the lateral circulation of images beyond capitalism's borders, emphasizing the foundation of barter as a significant aspect.

Examining contemporary Indian devotional icons, she illustrates how photography mediates their aura, intertwining devotional imprints with popular consumer goods. The bazaar's visual grammar, as analyzed here, intersects with consumer culture at an oblique angle, creating an "unevenness" that defies crude valuation and capitalist transactions. Jain's discussions with artist Dayanita Singh exemplify this perspective, showcasing Singh's works that lateralize and scramble museum hierarchies, embracing the bazaar's ethos of humility and hospitality in her innovative practice. Jain's argument prompts a reevaluation of the need to see the whole, suggesting a nuanced understanding of the history of capital accumulation, its principles, and its various cultural and historical contexts — an inquiry which involves understanding the diverse aspects that capitalism subsumes and those it leaves outside.

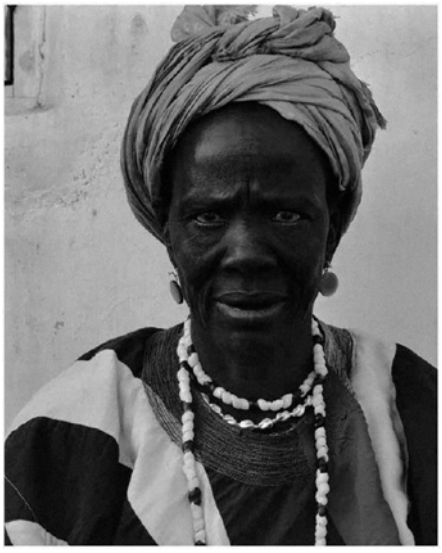

Figure 3, 4: Left: Paul Cézanne, Portrait de Madame Cézanne (1885-90)
Right: Paul Strand, Asenah Wara, Leader of the Women's Party (Wa, Ghana, 1964)

In "Mining the History of Photography," Siobhan Angus traces the metaphorical "alloys" of photographic reproduction, connecting silver mining in Cobalt, Ontario, to Eastman Kodak's technological consolidation. She argues that considering the materiality of photography through mining and metallurgy reveals it as both industry and labor. The essay unveils three "shadow histories" of photographic labor: the mine, the lab, and the darkroom, emphasizing Eastman Kodak's dematerialization of labor. Angus explores the erasure of extractive labor in Kodak's dominance, highlighting a postcard of striking mine workers as a counter-critique, showcasing the resistance and artisanal traces embedded in the silvered imprint.

Whilst the first section challenges conventional narratives of photography's development and offers a nuanced perspective on its historical emergence, in the second section, entitled "Critique—Images without Capitalism", contributors examine structures and fault lines within contemporary capitalism. Walter Benn Michaels examines how photographic form and artistic intent can make social class visible and inspire alternative imaginings; T. J. Clark explores the potential failures of the consumer capitalist image-world, while John Paul Ricco contemplates photography's limits in the face of ecological crises. The authors explore how capitalism's drive for consumption contributes to environmental crises, and how the proliferation of images fuels this consumption-driven cycle. They also emphasize the power of imagery in shaping desires and activism, noting that photography can both incite consumerism and encourage change through awareness. This exploration gives rise to new ways of thinking about photography's capacity to represent capitalism and its potential to envision alternative worlds. In essence, this section examines how photography can serve as a means of critique within capitalist societies, exploring the power dynamics embedded in photographic representation, the potential for photographic form to reveal class structures, and the role of photography in shaping public deliberation. These essays underscore photography's ability to illuminate the underlying forces at play within capitalism, simultaneously critiquing and deconstructing its mechanisms.

In this context, T. J. Clark's essay "Capitalism without Images" explores the dynamics of contemporary consumer society, accentuating the pivotal role of the image-world in shaping desires and propelling consumption. The essay initiates with a poignant anecdote involving a credit card adorned with Karl Marx's statue, thereby eliciting inquiries into the ironic utilization of Marxist symbolism within a post-Stalinist urban milieu. Clark then systematically probes the vulnerabilities inherent in the image-centric framework of capitalism, conjecturing on the repercussions should the image-world forfeit its persuasive efficacy. To do so, he engages in a critical examination of the surreal aspects of the modern image-world, querying its susceptibility to attrition and the resultant consequences for capitalist paradigms. Clark introduces the conceptualization of the "un-elated looter" to dissect occurrences such as the 2011 London riots, positing a crisis in the image-world manifesting as consumerism turns inward upon itself. He also provocatively posits that "consumption" may function as a euphemism for commodified addiction, with "modernity" encapsulating an essence of irony. Nevertheless, the essay leaves its readers in contemplation, pondering the trajectory of consumerism's evolution and the plausible emergence of the image itself as a malevolent force within a dystopian narrative.

Echoing Mark Fisher's concept of Capitalist Realism, where the dominant ideology forecloses alternatives and naturalizes existing social structures, in "Anti-Capitalism and the Camera," Walter Benn Michaels explores the parallel emergence of art photography since the late 1970s and neoliberalism, both marked by a subjective positioning that displaces class conflict for a discriminatory politics. Michaels analyzes Jeff Wall's "Mimic" (1982) to illustrate how art photography transmits a relational aesthetic, wherein intersectional politics of race and gender supersede class in influence. LaToya Ruby Frazier's "The Notion of Family" (2015) is examined as a bookend to this era, with Michaels delving into exploring the complexities of Frazier's self-portrait staging and its exclusionary impact, suggesting an affective depth charge against capitalism. In a similar spirit, in "Moths to the Flame: Photography and Extinction," John Paul Ricco provocatively challenges the normative human-centric perspective, suggesting that embracing absence and extinction in

Figure 5:
Hans Haacke, Shapolsky et al. Manhattan Real Estate Holdings, a Real-Time Social System, as of May 1, 1971.

photography allows for a resistance against the destructive forces of capitalist hegemony. Ricco examines the profound relationship between photography and extinction, exploring the implications of absence and darkness in this context. His examination of non-human lifeforms, such as moths, silkworms, and bacteria, serves as a prelude to reconceptualizing photography as a "poor" medium, devoid of the values imposed by capital.

The final section, "State—Image of the People in Crisis", further investigates how photography influences social dynamics and the construction of citizenship, analyzing photography's role in shaping collective identity, from its use in state propaganda to its potential to foster public engagement and resistance: Blake Stimson considers the intrinsic privateness of photography and its potential to foster public deliberation; Christopher Stolarski's chapter on Soviet press photography demonstrates the co-optation of radical photographic practices for state propaganda; Tong Lam reflects on the role of cameras in mobilizing resistance to urban industrialization in China. Overall, the essays here provide insights into how photography operates within the broader context of the state and its influence on societal narratives.

In "Public Photography", for example, Blake Stimson explores the evolution of photography's role in society, focusing on the distinction between public and private photography and its connection to freedom within a capitalist framework. Stimson discusses the transformation of photography from a medium of democratic representation to a tool co-opted by propaganda, advertising, and surveillance within state capitalism. The essay scrutinizes photography's inherent nature, the impact of market and state dynamics, and its deviation from its initial promise as a public communication tool, emphasizing the commodification of personal experiences for capitalist interests. Drawing from John Berger's perspective, Stimson delves into the tension between private contracts and personal connections within capitalism, highlighting their potential to perpetuate unfreedom. He explores the prospect of authentic public photography that transcends capitalist influences, promoting genuine communication and connection. Stimson contends that photography, while often mythologizing privatized social interaction, can counteract this trend through reflexivity, historical context, and spatial-temporal orientation, ultimately contributing to the public good. He introduces the concept of "aesthetic distance" to achieve this abstraction and counteract photography's privatizing nature. Contrasting Greenberg's artistic perspective with Marxist materialism, Stimson argues that

materialist aesthetic distance arises from collective self-consciousness and political subjecthood. Ultimately, the essay highlights photography's potential to become a public good, transcending immediate capitalist influences and preparing individuals for active citizenship.

In "Marketing the Socialist Experiment: Soviet Photo-Reportage between the World Wars", on the other hand, Christopher Stolarski delineates the trajectory of Soviet photo-reportage in the consolidation of agencies like Souizfoto and influential publications such as SSSR na stroike, marking a transition wherein socialism assumed a performative image calibrated for both domestic and international consumption. Stolarski's meticulous historical examination illuminates a pivotal juncture in Soviet history, unraveling the complex interplay between modernist aesthetics and their subsequent instrumentalization for propagandistic purposes, thereby enriching our nuanced comprehension of engagement and critique within the

Figure 6, 7: Left: Aleksandr Rodchenko, layout (Novyi LEF, 1928). Right: "How Not to Photograph for the Competition 'At Work'" (Sovetskoe foto, 1927). Intentionally distinguishing itself from classical Tsarist poses, the sequence asserts its aesthetic uniqueness. In its endeavor to transparently depict the workforce, the editorial strategy consciously prioritized a "lively representation," giving precedence to candid and dynamic shots.

from its radical pursuit of social and economic transparency during the 1920s to its subsequent repurposing as an instrument of Stalinist administration and marketing in the 1930s. Stolarski discerns a critical dichotomy between conscious transparency, dedicated to presenting the entirety of Soviet infrastructure, and legibility, an expedient conveyance of bureaucratic values.

The 1920s witnessed the ascendancy of avant-garde photographers, notably exemplified by Aleksandr Rodchenko, who leveraged innovative techniques like film montage to champion the cause of transparency. However, Stolarski observes a discernible trend towards centralization within photo periodicals and agencies, leading to a stylistic shift favoring a centrist aesthetic aligned with Stalin's state managerial objectives. The culmination of this evolution is evident realm of Soviet photo-reportage.

Concluding this section, Tong Lam provides a firsthand narrative of the "politics of attention" within Xian Village, a Guangzhou slum facing capitalist demolition. Lam engages in undercover docu-installation efforts, navigating the tensions between capitalist hyper-development, active resistance by long-term villagers, and the precarious position of migrant workers. He explores the evolving counter-aesthetic among the resisting coalition, noting the nuanced "politics of looking" within the villagers who desire visibility but also assert "the right not to be looked at" in compromising circumstances. Lam's critique advocates for an alternative documentary approach to reveal the complex dynamics of the shifting village slums and challenges capitalism's objective bias in favor of a more resonant expression of class and

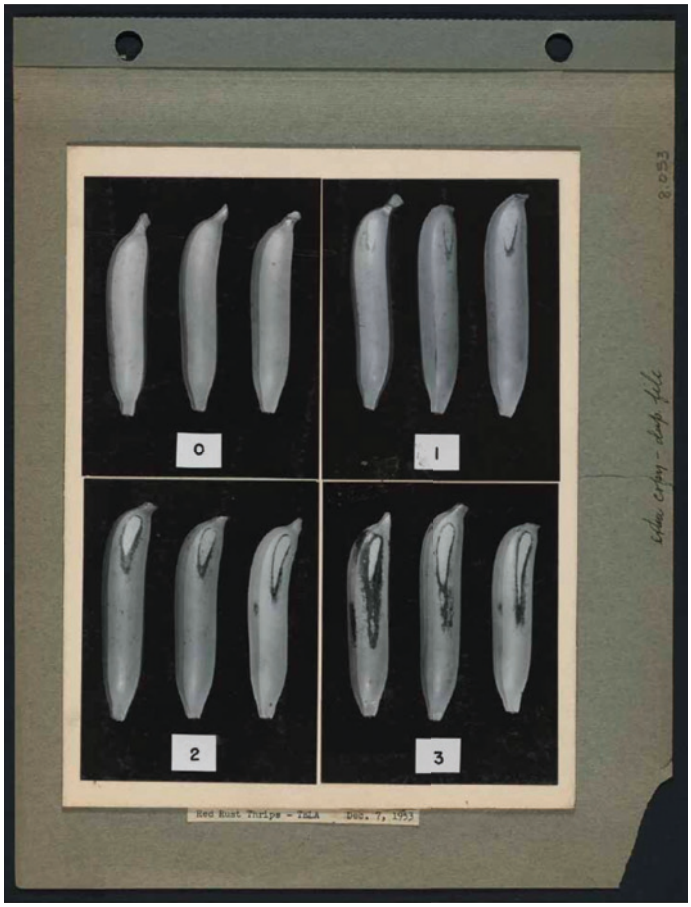

Figure 8:
United Fruit Company Photograph Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School

social dynamics.

The book's epilogue, written by Jacob Emery, reflects on photography's unique ability to represent the edge between a legible scene and the larger world from which it is extracted. Emery explores the borders of photographs, questioning what is excluded and whether capital's extractions are evident within the frame. Citing examples from William Wordsworth to Sebastião Salgado, he scrutinizes the interplay between labor and artistic practice; he also discusses the redefinition of labor as non-hierarchical artistic activity and its challenges in the face of neoliberalism recalling the work of Joseph Beuys.

Throughout the book, a common thread emerges: the recognition that while capitalism exerts significant control over photography, the medium itself possesses the potential to disrupt and challenge capitalist paradigms. By examining the intricate relationships between capitalism, photography, and social dynamics, the book encourages readers to reconsider the role of images in our world. It emphasizes that photography is not a passive medium but a tool that can be harnessed to reflect, critique, and reimagine the structures that shape our lives.

Arguably, "Capitalism and the Camera" redefines the discourse on photography's role within capitalism, challenging tradi-tional notions and offering new insights. As such, the book is a significant contribution to understanding the intertwined narratives of capitalism, imagery, and social change, a book that prompts readers to reevaluate their perceptions of both photography and capitalist systems and inspires critical reflection on their collective impacts. In essence, "Capitalism and the Camera" opens up avenues for understanding how photography, despite its entanglement with capitalism, can serve as a tool for critical reflection, revealing the complexities of our contemporary world and offering glimpses of potential transformation. By engaging with the essays in this volume, readers gain a deeper understanding of the ways in which images can not only influence our perception of the world but also inspire us to envision more just and equitable societies. An invaluable task in itself.