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Symbolic Form and Real Abstraction: Marxism, Modernism, Iconology

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Abstract: This article attempts to sketch the outlines of a materialist theory of artistic symbolization under conditions of generalized commodity exchange, with the aim of advancing a more complex mediation of "form" and "content" in the analysis of artworks. It is here argued that figural processes—in particular, tropes such as prosopopoeia and catachresis—are immanent to capitalist relations because they are implied in the equivalency of unalike things that occurs in the moment of exchange (the phenomenon that Alfred Sohn-Rethel calls real abstraction). The article focuses on three case studies, namely, 1) Immanuel Kant's account of hypotyposis, or the sensuous symbolization of abstract concepts, 2) the migration of semblance (*Schein*, in German) from art to economic forms in modernity, as exemplified in the work of modernist painters such as Paul Cézanne and Piet Mondrian, and 3) the suppression of practice in favor of contemplative interpretation in the art historical lineage known as iconology. It is furthermore proposed that it may be possible to write a new history of modernist autonomy in terms of the relation between real abstraction and "automimesis" (the withdrawal of mimetic processes from the representation of external objects to the tautological organization of forms within artworks).

Keywords: *Abstraction; Alfred Sohn-Rethel; Erwin Panofsky; Iconology; Immanuel Kant; Modernism*

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Concept and Form

Does it make any sense to speak of a Marxist theory of aesthetics, as opposed to a Marxist critique of aesthetics (or even more precisely, a Marxist critique of "the aesthetic" as a category of bourgeois society)? Does Marxist analysis as such—as opposed, for example, to a Marxism-influenced social history of art—have anything to say about the visual or material qualities of a particular work, such as Paul Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* (fig. 1) in the J. Paul Getty Museum: anything about its pervasive icy blue, or the jostling of its round and oval shapes against a strangely faceted wall? And if Marxism as such cannot do this, can it say anything worthwhile about art? I will not be able to answer these questions adequately here. I can, though, suggest ways in which the Marxist critique of the capitalist mode of production might be brought into dialogue with aesthetic events more or less contemporaneous with that mode of production's rise to worldwide dominance. For this, I will focus on three case studies.

The first case study is Immanuel Kant's account of hypotyposis, or the symbolization of abstract concepts, which I compare with the figural aspects of generalized market exchange. The second is the emergence of modernist abstraction, which I compare with the absorption of semblance into capitalist relations. The third is the constitutive melancholy of the art historical method known as iconology, which I compare with the suppression of labor in the commodity fetish. Although these episodes seem distant from each other, all three turn on the relation between kinds of abstraction—conceptual, painterly, allegorical—and the real, practical mechanisms of an economy based on commodity exchange.

1. Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples*, 1893–94. Oil on canvas, 65.4 × 81.6 cm (25 3/4 × 32 1/8 inches). Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

These case studies also turn on the link between concept and form, since modernism severed artworks from the function of encoding determinate messages at the same time as commodity exchange assigned a bare, token-like conceptuality, called value, to its objects. Yet it is clearly wrong to say that modernist works of art lack meanings or concepts altogether. A question that will hang over this article is whether Marxism can provide an adequate account of the conceptuality of artworks, especially modernist ones. The hypothesis proposed here is that the absorption of certain figural mechanisms—namely, prosopopoeia and catachresis—into the basic economic mediation of human life in the capitalist mode of production helps to account for the divergence between the "automimesis" characteristic of modernist art (forms that imitate themselves rather than external objects), on the one hand, and on the other hand the doctrine of "symbolic form" that was expressed in iconology, the dominant art historical method of the first half of the twentieth century.

There is no need to start from scratch. Marxism already possesses an endogenous aesthetic theory in its critique of forms of appearance. *Capital* develops a phenomenology of such forms, from the apparently simple unit of the commodity at the start of Volume I to the "trinity formula" consisting of capital—profit, land—ground rent, and labor—wages in Volume III. Marxist critique demonstrates both the untruth as well as the objective social necessity of these forms. Such categories constitute socially effective abstractions that are distinct from conceptual abstractions since they result from practice rather than from mental reflection (they may determine the latter). Because they mandate certain ways in which essence appears, these categories are inherently aesthetic, albeit in the broad sense of the word that refers to any sensory perception. The commodity fetish, for example, causes social relations to appear as relations between things.

Yet the question remains whether the aesthetic concerns immanent to Marxist critique are transferable to the analysis of works of art, since there would seem to be a different kind of necessity involved in artistic symbolization. All art entails a conjoining of sensuous appearance with spiritual (*geistig*) content, barring the controversial extremes of either an art of "pure" nonconceptual appearance (as is sometimes claimed for types of abstraction, impressionism, or automated indexical mark-making such as photography) or a certain and probably inadequate understanding of dematerialization in conceptual art (the proposition that art can consist of ideas without material support).[1] An artwork's appearance is necessary insofar as the work obeys its immanent law of form. In this sense the non-mimetic convergence of rigorously formalized art with nature is analogous to capitalism's naturalization of historical and social forms of appearance, as in the occlusion of labor in the commodity form.[2]

There is, however, an irreducible contingency to the joining of signifier and signified in the artistic symbol that is unlike the production of "real" abstraction in social practice. Whereas a representation of an anchor may or may not signify hope, depending on the cultural and historical context in which it appears, a coat is really equivalent to twenty yards of linen whenever this exchange occurs. This latter equivalency is not symbolic. It is also far from certain that attempts, such as Alfred Sohn-Rethel's, to derive conceptuality as such, let alone specific stylistic traits in art, from real abstraction are convincing.[3] To some extent, the problem here is the lability of the term "form" itself, which in the above paragraphs has already been applied, at a minimum, to 1) social forms such as the commodity and the wage; 2) the material, morphological configuration of works of art; and 3) the immanent "law" or logic governing such configurations. Mediating between these various senses of "form" is probably an indispensable desideratum of any Marxist approach to aesthetics. Yet this is more easily said than done—especially if we are to avoid the reduction of aesthetic form to social or economic determination; in other words, the collapse of senses two and three of the term with sense number one. To put it simply, there is no conveyor belt from social form to aesthetic form; an account of historically specific modes of formalization or semiosis is needed, and there is no reason to assume that these modes remain constant over time even within capitalist society.

A further, related problem is that of the parallelism of the form/content dynamic in art and in the critique of political economy. In the latter, Marx clearly distinguishes between the "essential relation" or "substratum" and its "phenomenal form." The wage, for example, is the form of appearance of the cost of the reproduction of labor power.[4] Marx also derives the social necessity of specific forms in the capitalist mode of production. Capitalism would not be capitalism if the value of labor did *not* appear as wages. Yet this, too, is not a symbolic relation, even if it is a kind of representation. Since the value of labor cannot appear otherwise than as wages, this coupling of signified to signifier lacks the contingency of artistic symbolization. It is furthermore notoriously difficult to say what exactly the "content" of an artwork is when separated from its form. A major ideological tendency in discourses of modern art has indeed been the valorization of pure semblance (or *Schein*, in German) and consequently a refusal to accept the adequation of form to content as a canon of aesthetic judgment. In this respect, the most glaring contrast is between Hegel, who retains such a canon, and Nietzsche, who rejects it.

In the discipline of art history, the method known as iconography or iconology addresses the relation between sensuous form and conceptual content in art. This topic will return in the final section of my essay. For the sake of terminological clarity, I will henceforth reserve the term "iconology" for the method exemplified

in the work of Erwin Panofsky, Aby Warburg, and likeminded modern scholars of premodern European art, whereas I will use the word "iconography" to refer to the content of iconological analysis (that is, a corpus of "symbolic forms").[5] Critique of the iconological method has arisen from different quarters since the 1960s: George Kubler, in *The Shape of Time*, regretted its neglect of "another definition of art, as a system of formal relations," for instance.[6] In more recent decades, the French scholars Georges Didi-Huberman and Philippe-Alain Michaud have in turn pitted a supposedly Nietzschean, anachronic Warburg against a rationalistic, progressivist, and Neo-Kantian Panofsky, thus splitting the methodology from within.[7] Few scholars avowedly practice iconology today; nonetheless, iconographic interpretation remains an indispensable if only infrequently theorized tool. In many subfields of art history, it would in fact be difficult to say anything of substance without noting the conventional symbolic meaning of a given motif within its originating cultural context.

Iconology has heretofore encountered Marxism most conspicuously in the project of "political iconography," which applies iconographic interpretation to visual representations of politics.[8] Political iconography simply replaces the object of study rather than querying the possibility of a materialist account of symbolization. In this article, I will take a different approach. I begin by considering Kant's theory of hypotyposis, or the sensible presentation of immaterial concepts. I intend to show that hypotyposis can usefully be related to the scission of objecthood from semblance in modernist art that emerged contemporaneously with the development of iconology, but to which iconology had little or no direct response. This topic will return us to Sohn-Rethel's critique of the diremption of intellectual and manual labor. I will conclude with a case study of Panofsky's book on the motif of "Hercules at the Crossroads," published in 1930, by means of which I will argue that iconology allegorizes its methodological belatedness through a recuperation of formerly "proletarian" imagery. Melancholy, the topic of some of iconology's most impressive interpretations, will here emerge as a signature of the suppression of practice.

For all its inadequacies, iconology points to a gap that ought to be filled in materialist aesthetics. Whereas art historical and art critical applications of Sohn-Rethel's idea of real abstraction tend either to expand its remit beyond its proper locus in the practice of exchange or, symmetrically, to derive spiritual forms too mechanically *from* the abstract moment in exchange, iconology by contrast develops the active and subjective side of symbolic construction.[9] Marx, in the "Theses on Feuerbach," similarly observes that idealism, "which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such," nonetheless developed the active, subjective side of reality in contrast to "contemplative materialism," for which "the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not

subjectively." My wager is that the relation of iconology to the materialist study of art might be analogous to that of classical idealist philosophy to historical materialism—though, admittedly, I will not be able to develop this parallel in detail, since it would exceed the scope of my inquiry to survey the literature on Marxism's relation to the thought of Kant and Hegel. We shall begin with Kant, nonetheless.

Hypotyposis

Beverley Best has noted that "a historically particular kind of representational function is the central mechanism of an exchange economy."[10] In capitalism, everyday "economic" phenomena have a figural or rhetorical quality because they enforce objectively false equivalencies, such as that of a given amount of money to a material commodity that has a particular use value. Capitalism is thus a structure of socially effective tropes: tropes actualized in practice. The critique of capitalism in turn mobilizes tropes not as arbitrary figures but rather as analytical abstractions that elucidate real dynamics. This is, for example, the basis upon which Walter Benjamin notes the parallelism between allegory and the commodity form. As commodity exchange voids the qualitative distinctness of things in favor of quantitative equivalency, allegory voids the meaning of existing motifs in order to recombine them into new, arbitrary symbolic constructions.[11]

Best isolates the trope of catachresis, or the use of an improper name or metaphor, by quoting from Paul de Man:

> [Catachreses] are capable of inventing the most fantastic entities by virtue of the positional power inherent in language. They can dismember the texture of reality and reassemble it in the most capricious of ways. Something monstrous lurks in the most innocent of catachresis: […] the word can be said to produce of and by itself the entity it signifies, [one that] has no equivalence in nature. When one speaks of the legs of the table or the face of the mountain […] one begins to perceive a world of potential ghosts and monsters.[12]

Best comments that, "for Marx, bourgeois economy is precisely this world of ghosts and monsters: an exchange economy is haunted by the ghosts of those things, which it cannot name, by such ghosts that are abstracted and erased (exorcised) from its operational and rhetorical perimeters—the ghost of concrete human labor, for instance."[13] Catachresis raises the question of how it might be possible to distinguish a proper from an improper trope in the first place, given that figural language is constitutively "improper." De Man would

in fact suggest that not only the distinction between proper and improper trope (e.g., catachresis as opposed to simile) but that between literal and figural meaning as such is untenable, in which case Marxist critique's reliance on gothic imagery and a rhetoric of perversion may at best be tactically useful rather than theoretically sound.

It is at this point that de Man again turns out to be useful for having drawn attention, in the same essay, to a troublesome passage in the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant here wishes both to admit the epistemological legitimacy of the sensible symbolization of non-sensuous concepts as well as to distinguish between two such forms of symbolization, one possibly more legitimate than the other (as metaphor is conventionally held to be more legitimate than catachresis). Bourgeois aesthetics classically asserts the non-conceptuality of aesthetic judgment. According to Kant, a statement such as "This is beautiful" is not based on concepts. The universality of an aesthetic judgment therefore does not depend on convincing oneself or anybody else that the subsumption of an object under a given concept is valid, since "beauty" is not a concept that is predicated of its objects. There is, however, a notoriously problematic concession to conceptuality in section 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*. Kant here describes what he calls hypotyposis, which "consists in making [a concept] sensible." Hypotyposis is either schematic or symbolic. As Kant writes:

> In schematic hypotyposis there is a concept that the understanding has formed, and the intuition corresponding to it is given a priori. In symbolic hypotyposis there is a concept which only reason can think and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate, and this concept is supplied with an intuition that judgment treats in a way merely analogous to the procedure it follows in schematizing; i.e., the treatment agrees with this procedure merely in the rule followed rather than in terms of the intuition itself, and hence merely in terms of the form of the reflection rather than its content.[14]

That is, concepts amenable to schematic hypotyposis correspond to an adequate a priori mental image. The concept of a triangle, for example, can be defined as that of a geometrical figure consisting of three sides. A mental image of a triangle is not identical with the concept "triangle," since any specific triangle we might imagine will have particular qualities, such as that of being obtuse, equilateral, and so forth, whereas the concept must apply equally to all triangles. Nonetheless, the mental image that we have of a triangle is not incorrect in relation to its concept since that concept does lend itself to sensuous presentation.

Symbolic hypotyposis, however, occurs in relation to concepts to which no intuition can properly correspond. A symbol, therefore, involves transference. Symbolic hypotyposis borrows an intuition as an analogy for a concept of reason. There is something questionable about this borrowing, since it is

precisely because sensuous intuitions are inadequate to such concepts that we have to do this at all:

> Schemata contain direct, symbols indirect, exhibitions of the concept. Schematic exhibition is demonstrative. Symbolic exhibition uses an analogy (for which we use empirical intuitions as well), in which judgment performs a double function: it applies the concept to the object of a sensible intuition; and then it applies the mere rule by which it reflects on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the former object is only the symbol. Thus a monarchy ruled according to its own constitutional laws would be presented as an animate body, but a monarchy ruled by an individual absolute will would be presented as a mere machine (such as a hand mill); but in either case the presentation is only *symbolic*. For though there is no similarity between a despotic state and a hand mill, there certainly is one between the rules by which we reflect on the two and on how they operate.[15]

Kant goes on to note that many quite fundamental words—especially in philosophical language—seem to be deposits of metaphorical transfer:

> Thus the words *foundation* (support, basis), to *depend* (to be held from above), to *flow* (instead of to follow) from something, *substance* (the support of accidents, as Locke puts it), and countless others are not schematic but symbolic hypotyposes; they express concepts not by means of a direct intuition but only according to an analogy with one, i.e., a transfer of our reflection on an object of intuition to an entirely different concept, to which perhaps no intuition can ever directly correspond.[16]

The analogical transference involved in symbolic hypotyposis accordingly threatens to infect concept-formation as such, eroding the difference between proper meaning and trope. The trouble is that schematic and symbolic hypotyposis seem at once unalike as well as awkwardly indistinct. There is obviously no necessity to the figure of the hand mill in the same way as there is to the figure of a triangle. Kant finesses this point by claiming that, although they do not *resemble* each other, the "rules by which we reflect on the two" *are* similar, presumably because we recognize that there is a similarity between the mechanical grinding involved in using a hand mill and the mechanical grinding of an authoritarian state. The likeness between the concept "triangle" and a drawing of a triangle is surely less dubious. Nonetheless, even to define a triangle, we probably must use words that involve symbolic hypotyposis. To start, to say that a triangle has "sides" is to introduce a spatial metaphor borrowed from empirical intuition.

The problem is only exacerbated in Kant's attempt to use hypotyposis to mediate between judgment and practical reason. Section 59 of the *Critique of Judgment* is titled "On Beauty as the Symbol of Morality." This of course involves a perilous leap. As de Man observes, "the figure most closely akin to hypotyposis is that of

prosopopeia" [sic], which, "in its most inclusive and also its etymological sense […] designates the very process of figuration as giving face to what is devoid of it."[17] The hand mill does this for the concept of despotism. But so does a drawing or a mental image of a triangle for the concept "triangle." Catachresis, in turn, simply performs figuration in a way that makes its intrinsic lack of fit more evident: in this trope, "the use and abuse of language cannot be separated from each other."[18]

It hardly needs pointing out that artworks regularly deliver symbolic hypotyposes. We have now entered the domain of iconography, the corpus of visual forms that symbolize concepts—as a pelican plucking its breast to feed its young with drops of blood symbolizes the virtue of charity. This is a kind of reification because it represents an abstract concept, or arguably a social relation, as a concrete thing. The link between sensuous presentation and conceptuality seems particularly important for any aesthetic theory adequate to art made in a capitalist mode of production, however, since, as argued above, capitalism has a distinctively and essentially figural structure: appropriation of the social surplus is here mediated through real abstraction (the equivalency of the non-equivalent). More precisely, capitalists purchase a peculiar commodity, labor power, for the cost of its reproduction, which appears as the wage. The use value of labor power is to produce value in excess of this cost. This is how the wage at once compensates workers "fairly" for their reproduction while at the same time being the mechanism for the extraction of surplus value. Capitalists obligate workers to perform surplus labor time; that is, labor time beyond that which reproduces the value of the commodities needed for the worker's reproduction (unwaged reproductive labor—often "abjected," or expelled from mediation by the wage, along gendered and/or racialized lines—reduces this cost, as does socializing reproduction through state support).[19] The outcomes of this process are, on the one hand, the reproduction of the worker through the wage, which represents the cost of that reproduction, and on the other hand, commodities, which represent the value of constant capital (raw materials, machinery, etc.) and variable capital (expressed in wages) as well as newly produced surplus value. The realization of surplus value then occurs in the exchange of commodities for money, as expressed in price. The wage, the commodity, and the price of commodities are all "accurate" representations of the underlying dynamic at the same time as they essentially distort that which they represent. The concrete bearers of these representational functions—the worker, the commodity, and money—no less essentially appear as ciphers of an exploitation that never appears as such: surplus value appears as a natural outcome of the labor process rather than a measure of exploitation. Equivalence in exchange is therefore founded upon non-equivalence elsewhere. The commodity is a "social hieroglyphic," as Marx puts it in his chapter on fetishism, because it represents the social relation of exploitation in the guise of an inherent property of things.

In this context, catachresis and prosopopoeia are not artistic devices but rather practical moments in the production, exchange, and circulation of commodities. Hence the immanence of aesthetics to capital as well as to its critique. Yet it is striking that specifically aesthetic processes of symbolization—conversions of an image or an object into a bearer of abstract conceptuality—undergo crisis if not terminal decline in modernism. (The once-vaunted return of allegory in postmodernism underlines the contingency of its fusion of signifier to signified and thus, from the present historical distance, seems more like a footnote to the decline of the symbol in modernism rather than a breakthrough to something else.)[20] Though coincidence does not imply causation, we might nonetheless hypothesize that, under the sway of capitalist social relations, figural processes migrate out of art and into the economy—a reified abstraction in its own right—and that this movement accounts at least in part for the crisis of figuration in modernism. If capital appears as an "automatic subject" that posits its own presuppositions, it also functions no less as an automatic representational machine that introjects figural processes into the evidently sterner stuff of production, circulation, and exchange.[21]

Semblance and Mimesis

It will be useful, now, to concretize these issues by paying more attention to art historical particularities. The discrete sensuous phenomenon with which Marx begins *Capital* is the commodity. Commodities are the prosopopoeia of capital, since they incarnate the value-abstraction in their specificity—as does living labor, if one thinks about it rigorously (the human body is the bearer of the commodity called labor power). The commodity, though, is *essentially* an aesthetic form, essentially the appearance of social relations in the guise of a thing, in a way that certain other of Marx's categories are not. Abstract labor, for example, never appears sensuously as such; it must be incarnated in something else and exists in itself only as a methodologically necessary abstraction. This means that, even if the space of capitalist social forms contains ineluctably aesthetic moments, those moments are not evenly distributed. We see commodities; we do not "see" abstract labor. The commodity indeed functions as a privileged aesthetic *point de capiton*, or "quilting point": Jacques Lacan's term for a moment in a signifying chain at which a signifier is attached to a signified.[22] Iconology is the study of moments in art at which such a conjunction of signifier and signified occurs in the production of a symbol.[23]

The conventionality of "symbolic form" is not problematic from iconology's Neo-Kantian perspective because it is precisely the spirituality or sociality of the symbol that Neo-Kantian thought valorizes, in contrast to the romantic

assumption that unmasking a form as historical rather than natural is sufficient to delegitimize it. As spontaneous products of the spirit, in principle the scope of symbolic forms ought to be infinite. Nonetheless, according to Ernst Cassirer, the mutual exclusivity of certain "directions" of "spiritual apprehension" means that any totality of symbolic expression has a structure; as it happens, this is the way in which Cassirer distinguishes metaphorical from proper sense as well as simply mimetic from "allegoric-symbolic" art.[24] Iconology studies changes in worldview through transitions from one structuring of a given "allegoric-symbolic" motif to another. Thus Panofsky, in one of his most beautiful essays, shows how Nicolas Poussin changed the import of the "Et in Arcadia ego" motif from a warning of the inescapability of death to an elegiac reflection on loss.[25] This kind of movement is immanent to the concept's phenomenalization in art; it may reflect or mediate developments elsewhere in society but cannot be derived from them, since the transformation has no substrate other than *in* the aesthetic. But if catachresis and proposopoeia migrate, in capitalist society, to privileged zones of the sensible manifold—the most obvious, to repeat, is that form in which, per Marx, the "wealth of societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production appears";[26] that is, the commodity—then this torsion of the perceptible field ought to leave its mark on processes of artistic representation, since this change shifts the ground of figurability itself. As figural displacements move into the economy, it stands to reason that they may drain out of art, insofar as art in modernity preserves its autonomy largely by differentiating itself from value-mediated production.[27] Curiously, art denies its essence—semblance—as semblance enters "real abstraction." The relation between artistic abstraction and real abstraction is thus not so much a parallelism as a chiasmus: art denies itself semblance the more that semblance becomes objectively and socially necessary.[28] I think it may be appropriate to describe certain concrete particularities in artworks as the scar or trace of the withdrawal of semblance from what has been termed the "picture-world."[29]

Paul Cézanne is a good test of the hypothesis because his work has from the start been felt to mark a crisis in painting's ability to figure a world, or at any rate a shared, social world. Let us return, then, to his *Still Life with Apples* at the Getty, which dates from 1893–94 (fig. 1). T. J. Clark dedicates a chapter of his book *If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present* to this painting. Clark argues that Marx's account of the commodity sheds light on the artist's "sense of the new form of the object-world": "a sense—the Cézanne sense—of being stranded between some kind of simplicity and objectivity proper to the world of still life and something we can't get hold of and can't put a name to."[30] Cézanne's objects—for instance, the two apples nestled between the green and the blue jars, the right one strangely outlined with a hook of black paint that loops down and loses itself in the black-and-blue patterned fabric—are at once intimately close, secure, almost swaddled in their pockets of space, and at the

2. Piet Mondrian, *Still Life with Gingerpot I*, 1911–12.
Oil on canvas, 25 3/4 × 29 1/2 inches (65.5 × 75 cm).
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

same time unplaceably remote. Clark does not claim that these effects indicate that the depicted objects have been subsumed to the commodity form; it is important that Cézanne retains an allegiance to the precapitalist peasant life-world. He does, however, suggest that the dual nature of the commodity (use value and exchange value) has some bearing on the simultaneous concreteness and abstraction of things in the artist's work.

It would be futile either to reproduce Clark's prose at greater length or to paraphrase it. I will concentrate, rather, on an incident in the painting that he does not discuss, although I think my reading of it is not contrary to his sense of what the work as a whole is about. The most overtly illusionistic passage in the canvas is the reflection to left of center on the ginger jar, where it pokes out from a diamond formed by the object's raffia wrapping. Cézanne seems to have rendered this motif with two parallel strokes of white paint tinged with yellow that lie atop darker brushstrokes. There are comparable highlights on the apples in the dish to the right of the painting's center, especially the two middle ones, as well as duller patches of brightened paint on the lip and shoulder of the green jar (Cézanne abruptly overlaps this last highlight with a fingerlike stroke of more saturated color). But the reflection on the ginger jar is more emphatic. It also subtly doubles itself: although we perceive it as a single rectangular form, the fact that it consists of two strokes laid next to each other is evident even at some distance.

This reflection concretizes the translingual echo between the German word *Schein* (semblance) and its English homophone, shine, which in German is not *Schein* but rather *Glanz*. In Freud's essay on fetishism, he conjectures that a German-speaking patient's fixation, a "shine on the nose" (*Glanz auf der Nase*) that was "not perceptible to others," originated during his childhood in an English nursery.[31] The phrase expressing the fetish is thus in reality the English "glance at the nose" and the nose itself, rather than either the shine or the glance, is the real fetish; needless to say, the nose is furthermore a substitute penis. As a consequence of forgetting his childhood language, however, the patient transferred his cathexis from an anatomical feature to an (imaginary) play of light. The fetish object becomes semblance (*Schein*) in becoming shine (*Glanz*). This process dematerializes or, we might say, spiritualizes the fetish via a two-step displacement. The penis (specifically, the penis that the child imagines his mother to possess prior to his discovery of sexual difference) becomes the nose which in turn becomes shine.

In Cézanne's painting, the reflection on the ginger jar is a quilting point that attaches the work's pictorial organization to a mark that functions as an instance and a signifier of, maybe even a substitute for, semblance as such—that is, not the semblance *of* any object in particular, but rather semblance as the totalizing

3. Piet Mondrian, *Still Life with Gingerpot II,* 1911–12. Oil on canvas, 37 1/2 × 47 1/4 inches (91.5 × 120 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

subsumption of the pictorial field to an illusionistic order. The reflection is not a thing, nor does it represent a thing. It rather figures the source of light that illuminates the entire composition. It is a hinge that grounds the picture-world, paradoxically by being the least securely "real" of the phenomena on view. Semblance has contracted here to a moment of utmost contingency that sutures the work to the tradition of Western illusionism (the picture-world), whereas the rest of the painting's "object-world" is newly "stranded between some kind of simplicity and objectivity proper to the world of still life and something we can't get hold of and can't put a name to." Cézanne's *Glanz* is a fetishistic condensation of *Schein*. It seems appropriate, too, that the painting's figure for the doubling of the sensible manifold into objectivity and reflection is itself doubled: Cézanne leaves it undecidable whether the two strokes that make up the squarish reflection correspond to a single or a split source of light (for example, a window divided by a mullion).

Early in the next century, Piet Mondrian made some paintings that feature a very similar blue ginger pot. The object already turns up in a work of his from around 1901.[32] This is too early for Mondrian to have seen *Still Life with Apples*, although it is conceivable he might have seen this painting when it was in the collection of Baron Ferenc Hatvany in 1910 to 1912. At any rate, he would have encountered a related Cézanne *Ginger Pot* from around 1895 at the Moderne Kunstkring exhibition in Amsterdam in 1911.[33] The two ginger pot paintings that Mondrian made in 1911 to 1912, both now in the Guggenheim in New York, are remarkable variations on the Cézannian theme.

It would take a great deal of time to describe everything happening in *Still Life with Gingerpot I* (fig. 2), so I will have to be schematic. We see a crowded tabletop on which the titular pot sits just to the left of the geometrical center of the canvas. There are moments in the painting that are more ostentatiously illusionistic than anything in Cézanne; the collection of glasses and other less identifiable vessels to the left of the large pot are a masterpiece of controlled disorder, for instance. The ginger pot itself is markedly simplified. Its darker blue outlining strokes (the top one curiously drifting away from the body of the pot) have chromatic echoes to left and right, but its dominant cyan is not found anywhere else. Mondrian has shifted Cézanne's white reflection to the very middle of its body. This fixates the eye.

In the larger *Still Life with Gingerpot II* (fig. 3), evidently painted from a very similar arrangement, the artist more drastically snaps the haecceity of things to a network of black lines. These lines echo each other; notice for example the black contour that repeats the left shoulder of the jar, in addition to the many verticals and horizontals which are of course parallel to each other. The jar also now sits higher in the pictorial field and thus seems to dominate other things

(if they are indeed still "things"). The white highlighted reflection sits on a vertical axis that corresponds to the split between the darker and lighter halves of the jar; the axis continues downward through what seem to be the corners of a pair of books that the vessel is sitting upon. As a consequence of this centering, the reflection (the emblem of semblance in all three of the paintings we have been considering) now becomes the organizing principle for a radically abstract mimesis: verticals, horizontals, and curves that imitate themselves, repeat themselves, and thereby order the composition. Although this picture does not yet feature a grid properly speaking, it may not be excessively teleological to say that *Still Life with Gingerpot II* announces a principle of abstract, tautological mimesis that the grid will ultimately realize in its "deductive structure."[34] With the grid, semblance migrates to line's repetition of line, a mimesis without external object.[35] The ginger pot paintings (symptomatically?) order this inchoate automimesis around residual semblance—that is, the reflection. As quilting point, this contingent flash of illusion locks the abstract formal structure into place: residual semblance reifies.

The Melancholy Art

It would be impossible to prove in any scholarly way that capital's absorption of figurality accounts for Mondrian's abstraction. Still, with the above case study I hope at least to have provided the outlines of a more precise articulation of the commodity form with modernist art than can be found in most previous attempts to apply the idea of real abstraction. In the process, however, we seem to have strayed from the issues of the symbol and of conceptuality. Yet the topics may not be so distant.

Aesthetic semblance is the medium of the production of symbols. The power of one signifier to stand for another, or to condense multiple signifieds in a single image, is the machinery of iconographic construction, as it is—differently—of the catachrestic equivalency that the value form imposes on qualitatively distinct objects and instances of concrete labor. The process of abstraction in art is an ascesis that reduces figurality's latitude to subsume real particulars at the same time as it subjects whatever remains of those particulars (the ginger pot in the vise of the ascendant grid) to a newly totalizing discipline, now that mimesis is no longer oriented to an exogenous reality principle but instead becomes a self-organizing, repetitive logic. It is in this sense that artworks become *more* mimetic the more that their order becomes tautological.[36] This automimesis resists semiotic fungibility and by extension real abstraction.[37] In time, it also came to be read, rightly or wrongly, as fetishistic disavowal of the social altogether.[38] But it should be recalled, too, that the classic critique

of allegory—which is to symbolic form what catachresis is to metaphor, one might say—is that it amounts to merely formalistic play with dead signifiers and is thus a kind of abstraction in its own right. This is the basis on which Benjamin correlates baroque allegory with both the ruin and the commodity. In its passage into the value form, the commodity's particularity also dies.

To conclude, then, I will consider a suggestive intersection of formalism with iconology, its methodological other. In 1930, Panofsky published a book entitled *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst*, or "Hercules at the Crossroads and Other Ancient Pictorial Materials in Newer Art."[39] The motif of "Hercules at the Crossroads" has its origin in a fable that Xenophon, in his *Memorabilia*, attributes to the sophist Prodicus.[40] There are no surviving ancient visual representations of the scene, so later artists had to invent its form. This turns out to be easy enough, though, since the fable essentially diagrams itself. We invariably see a male figure alongside or, more often, between two female figures who personify contrasting ways of life. Xenophon describes how, one day as he was reaching the age of maturity, Heracles (to use the Greek spelling) encountered two women at a crossroads. One is strikingly beautiful and offers Heracles a life of ease and pleasure. The other is less appealing but promises rewards in the next life rather than this one. It turns out that the modest woman is Ἀρετὴ, meaning Virtue or Excellence, whereas the temptress is Κακία, or Vice. After considering both offers, Hercules makes the correct choice: he embarks upon the path to rectitude.

"Hercules at the Crossroads" is therefore an allegory of self-control and subjective moral choice. In his book, though, Panofsky demonstrates that later retellings of the story frequently obscure this antique ethical content under medieval sensibilities. In a woodcut from the Latin edition of Sebastian Brant's *Narrenschiff*, or Ship of Fools, published 1497, Hercules is not consciously choosing anything at all but rather lies asleep at the base of a double-peaked hill (fig. 4). The female personifications are apparitions that he sees in a dream. Vice is the naked woman on the left, whose charms are undercut by the skeletal figure peeking out from her rose bower. The message is clear: the wages of sin is death. Virtue, in turn, is no longer the modest but still handsome woman of Xenophon's text but is instead shown as a heavily draped working woman holding a spindle, the emblem of diligent labor. She stands in front of thorny bushes. In fact, it was the tendency of this late medieval northern European culture simply to identify Virtue with the figures of Labor or even of Poverty. Panofsky sums this up in the equation "*Tugend gleich Arbeit gleich Armut*": Virtue equals Work equals Poverty.[41] He goes so far as to describe this incarnation of Virtue as "proletarian" and consonant with the "social-revolutionary character" of literary works such as William Langland's *Piers Plowman* and the *Ackermann aus Böhmen*, composed around 1380 and 1401, respectively.[42] It

4. Woodcut in Sebastian Brant, *Stultifera Navis* (Nuremberg, 1497); also illustrated in Erwin Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (B. G. Teubner, 1930).

is only from the High Renaissance onwards that the genuinely classical form of the scene reappears: Hercules, wide awake now, sits in the middle of a symmetrical composition with the two ways of life neatly distributed to the left and right sides. In what Panofsky describes as the "canonical" version of the theme—a canvas by Annibale Carracci now in the Museo di Capodimonte, Naples (fig. 5)—the rocky path is on the left. Virtue points up to the heights, whereas Vice indicates the downward trajectory induced by pleasures such as music and theater.

Of this version of the motif, note, first, the paradoxical fact that Hercules—the ultimate physical hero—is shown making a choice that is exclusively mental. The drama is now almost entirely "internal," almost entirely a matter of the deliberating intellect, and is signified only by minimal external signs such as the turning of a glance, in ironic contrast to the figure's bulging, unused muscles. One might more speculatively say that it is precisely the internal nature of moral choice that has itself incapacitated Hercules' potential for action. While he thinks, he cannot act. Or more precisely, action has here *become* thinking. This zero-sum game between action and thought parallels Sohn-Rethel's derivation of the split between intellectual and manual labor in the suspension of use value during exchange: "Thus the salient feature of the act of exchange is that its separation from use has assumed the compelling necessity of an objective social law. Wherever commodity exchange takes place, it does so in effective 'abstraction' from use."[43]

The second notable aspect of the scene is the diagrammatic form that the barebones narrative seems to impose. Virtue and Vice are not real individuals but are rather personifications of abstract qualities. This is a textbook example of symbolic hypotyposis. It also marks a passage from myth to allegory. Hercules *is* a narrative protagonist, at least in most other places where we might see him—when he is completing his Twelve Labors, for example. But in this scene of mental choice, he has been extracted from any sequential order of events. Cassirer asserts that "sequencing" occurs not just in myth but in all conceptualizing:

> All formation of concepts, regardless of what domain or material it may take place in, be it "objective" experience or that of merely "subjective" representation, implies a certain principle of combination and "sequencing". It is only by this principle that particular "formations" [*Gebilde*], particular configurations with fixed contours and "properties", can be extracted from the constant flow of impressions.[44]

At this point it is not clear whether Cassirer's "sequencing" is distinct from ordering as such. Later in the same essay, however, he proposes an articulation

5. Annibale Carracci, *The Choice of Hercules*, c. 1596.
Oil on canvas, 65 × 93 inches (166 × 237 cm).
Museo di Capodimonte, Naples.

of structure and myth that anticipates structuralist anthropology: "The myth only resets, in the form of a report or narrative, a determined *consistency* of representation that, as such, is given. Instead of revealing the genesis of this consistency, instead of giving us an explanation for it, the myth provides us only with its explication, its interpretive laying out [*Auseinanderlegung*] in the form of a temporal event."[45]

"Hercules at the Crossroads" is a reversal from mythic narrativization to static, structural antithesis. The Prodicus fable does not occur as part of a larger narrative. As Panofsky notes, whereas the Judgment of Paris—which similarly involves a male figure's choice between multiple women—is "inherently a mythical event, a real action between the mortal and the three divinities that are only reinterpreted ex post facto as allegories of three forms of life," Hercules' decision is "inherently a moral parable, the representation of an inner conflict that is only concretized ex post facto as a contest between living persons."[46] His choice is also implicitly sexual, given the gendering of the scene; in contrast to Paris, however (who picks Aphrodite because she promises him Helen, the most beautiful woman in the world), Hercules favors chastity over pleasure, as is consonant with his bodily mortification.[47] In the Hercules scene, an image of corporeal action congeals into the rigidness of a diagram. That diagram, however, is a figure of human agency, now on the sublimated mental rather than physical plane (intellectual rather than manual labor). The irony is that the Hercules motif, a topos that thematizes human freedom, assumes the ascetic form of a motionless schema, as if the denial of agency that characterizes the late medieval understanding of the anecdote has shifted from content to form. It also happens to be a triangular schema, as unvaryingly tripartite in its concept as is the definition of a triangle itself.[48] "Hercules at the Crossroads" is thus not only an instance of prosopopoeia. The composition also seems to want to become a *schematic* rather than symbolic hypotyposis: a geometric figure of moral choice.

Finally, I would like to suggest—tenuous as the suggestion may be—that Hercules sits at the center of this composition much as does the ginger pot in Mondrian's two paintings in the Guggenheim. Allegorical abstraction and modernist abstraction converge. It is, indeed, precisely the scene's allegorical (figural) as opposed to mythic (narrative) thrust that produces its deadening immobility. Extracted from the flow of his mythic deeds, from a lifeworld, Hercules' transformative practice (manual labor) persists only as a memory for retrospective contemplation (intellectual labor). Again, residual semblance reifies. And it is likely no coincidence that Annibale's Hercules recalls nothing so much as the figure of Melencolia in Dürer's engraving of 1514 (fig. 6), an image that has sustained more iconological commentary than perhaps any other in the history of art, no doubt because it functions as a personification (a hypotyposis)

6. Albrecht Dürer, *Melencolia I*, 1514. Engraving, 9 7/16 × 7 5/16 inches (24 × 18.5 cm). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

of the scholarly enterprise itself. Iconology's melancholy stood under the sign of the redemption of the "children of Saturn" from their boorish perversion in medieval astrology.[49] Having once been the herald of peasant revolt, Saturn returns in the sixteenth century as a patron of artists and philosophers—and, in the twentieth century, of art historians. Interpretive contemplation suspends transformative practice but metabolizes images that have already begun to slip out of semblance into allegorical abstraction, as commodities slip into a catachrestic abstraction of themselves: the value form.

A kind of art like Mondrian's, however, provides no grist for iconology's mill, not because it *is* abstract, per se, but rather because its abstraction more radically bears the scar of its scission from semblance, from the circulation of signs in what remains of a picture-world. Mondrian's abstraction refuses to exchange equivalents other than its own self-resembling marks. Iconology flies like Minerva's owl, promising to redeem the wreckage of Western precapitalist civilization, whereas modernist abstraction promises a new, resistant immanence on the disaster's other side. That iconology had nothing to say about art like Mondrian's may be more than a case of antiquarian indifference to the new, then. Iconology and modernism are torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up.[50]

NOTES

1 On the materiality of the signifier in conceptual art, see Trevor Stark, "Lawrence Weiner's Materialism," *October* 180 (Spring 2022), 105–20.

2 "Aesthetic objectivity, the reflection of the being-in-itself of nature, realizes the subjective teleological element of unity; exclusively thereby do artworks become comparable to nature. […] The necessity of art cannot be propounded *more scientifico* but rather only insofar as a work, by the power of its internal unity, gives evidence of being thus-and-only-thus, as if it absolutely must exist and cannot possibly be thought away. The being-in-itself to which artworks are devoted is not the imitation of something real but rather the anticipation of a being-in-itself that does not yet exist, of an unknown that—by way of the subject—is self-determining." Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Continuum, 2002), 77.

3 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, "The Formal Characteristics of Second Nature," trans. Daniel Spaulding, *Selva: A Journal of the History of Art* (July 20, 2019), https://selvajournal.org/the-formal-characteristics-of-second-nature/.

4 As analyzed in *Capital*, vol. 1, chapter 19.

5 This does not conform to Panofsky's usage. Panofsky rather distinguishes between "pre-iconographical description," "iconographical analysis," and "iconological interpretation," or "iconographical interpretation in a deeper sense." The first three phrases can be found in Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), 40–41; the last occurs in "Introductory," in *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Harper & Rowe, 1962 [1939]), 14–15. An earlier diagram of this three-tiered model of interpretation can be found in Erwin Panofsky, "On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts," trans. Jaś Elsner and Katharina Lorenz, *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (Spring 2012), 482.

6 George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (Yale University Press, 1962), vii.

7 See, especially, Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms; Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016); Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans. John Goodman (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005); Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (Zone Books, 2004). Although I am also critical of Panofsky's Neo-Kantian epistemology, I have developed this critique along distinct (non-Nietzschean) lines. See Daniel Spaulding, "Panofsky's Antinomies," *Journal of Art Historiography* 25 (December 2021), 1–31.

8 Uwe Fleckner, Martin Warnke, and Henrik Ziegler, eds., *Handbuch der politischen Ikonographie*, 2 vols. (Verlag C. H. Beck, 2011).

9 For a collection of essays that make varying uses of Sohn-Rethel, see Gean Moreno, ed., *In the Mind but Not from There: Real Abstraction and Contemporary Art* (Verso, 2019). For a consideration of the Ernst Cassirer / Sohn-Rethel / Panofsky nexus, see Sven Lütticken, *Objections: Forms of Abstraction, vol. 1* (Sternberg Press, 2022), especially chapters 3 and 4. Lütticken notes (at 159) the objection that Sohn-Rethel's theory is "exchange-centric" and fails to account for the historical specificity of the capitalist value form as a mediation of abstract labor. Useful as the notion of real abstraction may be, I am unconvinced that Sohn-Rethel's derivation of Kantian "preformations" of cognition from the suspension of practice and use value in market exchange constitutes an adequate critique of idealist epistemology. It seems to me, rather, that instead of developing a properly materialist dialectic of thought and social existence, Sohn-Rethel remains within the Neo-Kantian orbit by positioning the moment of abstraction in commodity exchange as "quasi-transcendental," as Gillian Rose would have called it. In short, I am worried that Sohn-Rethel Kantianizes Marx more than he Marxifies Kant. Although contrary to Sohn-Rethel's fixation on commodity exchange, the indeterminacy of the quasi-transcendental in turn opens the door to a proliferation of "real abstractions" in the plural, much as Cassirer's "symbolic form" seems to encompass any spiritual (*geistig*) formation whatsoever. Thus, for example, Lütticken argues that "we need to conceive of legal abstraction as a consciously elaborated form of real abstraction"; technoscience, too, is for him a real abstraction (241). I am by contrast unsure of the analytic gain in conceiving the functional differentiation of superstructural spheres and the offloading of cognition to technical media as shapes of a homogeneous real abstraction, however much these processes are both instrumental to and instrumentalized by capital; this would suggest, among other things, that Marx's "general intellect" (socialized knowledge as a force of production) is simply real abstraction by another name.

10 Beverley Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 81.

11 "The devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity." Walter Benjamin, "Central Park," trans. Edmund Jephcott and Howard Eiland, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 4, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Harvard University Press, 2003), 164.

12 Paul De Man, "The Epistemology of Metaphor," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (Fall 1978): 21; cited in Best, *Marx and the Dynamic*, 81.

13 De Man, "Epistemology of Metaphor," 21.

14 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett, 1987), 226.

15 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 227.

16 Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 227–28, emphasis in the original.

17 De Man, "Epistemology of Metaphor," 26.

18 De Man, “Epistemology of Metaphor,” 21. For a good commentary on de Man’s interpretation of section 59, see Rei Terada, “Seeing is Reading,” in *Legacies of Paul de Man*, ed. Marc Redfield (Fordham University Press, 2007), 162–77.

19 Maya Gonzalez and Jeanne Neton, “The Logic of Gender: On the Separation of Spheres and the Process of Abjection,” *Endnotes* 3 (2013), https://endnotes.org.uk/articles/the-logic-of-gender.

20 It has been possible for some time now to historicize the postmodern discourse of allegory. See Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2011), 132–81; David Joselit, “An Allegory of Criticism,” *October* 103 (Winter 2003): 3–13.

21 Marx describes value as an “automatic subject” in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), 255.

22 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993), 258–70.

23 “By ‘symbolic form’, one should understand every energy of spirit by which the content of spiritual signification is linked to a concrete and intrinsically appropriate sensuous sign.” Ernst Cassirer, “The Concept of Symbolic Form in the Construction of the Human Sciences,” in Ernst Cassirer, *The Warburg Years (1919–1933): Essays on Language, Art, Myth, and Technology*, ed. and trans. S. G. Lofts and A. Calcagno (Yale University Press, 2013), 76.

24 Cassirer writes: “We can interpret the concept of the symbolic such that it is understood as a very determined *direction* of spiritual apprehension and configuration that has another, no less determined *opposite direction* standing over against it. Thus, for example, from the whole of language, a determined range of linguistic phenomena that one can designate as ‘metaphorical’ in the strict sense, and that contrast the ‘proper’ sense of the world and language, can be singled out; thus, in art, one can distinguish a form of presentation that simply takes off from the external configuration of the intuitive-sensory contents, a way of presentation that employs allegoric-symbolic means of expression; and in the end, we can also speak of symbolic *thought* as a form of thought that is differentiated from the logical-scientific formation [*Gebilde*] of concepts by very clearly determined and typical characteristics.” Cassirer, *Warburg Years*, 75, emphasis in the original.

25 Panofsky, “*Et in Arcadia ego*: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition,” in *Meaning*, 295–320.

26 Karl Marx, *Capital: Critique of Political Economy*, vol. I, trans. Paul Reitter (Princeton University Press, 2024), 13.

27 The exceptionality of art with respect to standard commodity production has been demonstrated most thoroughly in Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art’s Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical, and Marxist Economics* (Brill, 2015).

28 Adorno defines ideology as “socially necessary illusion” (or semblance: *gesellschaftlich notwendiger Schein*). Theodor Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 6, *Negative Dialektik, Jargon der Eigentlichkeit* (Suhrkamp, 1973), 348. However, I would avoid applying the term “ideology” to the kinds of semblance with which I am concerned in this article, given that the figuration inherent to commodity exchange is precisely not cognitive.

29 “The age of the picture-world can be defined as that phase of Western culture during which images on a two-dimensional surface can claim to correspond to a total sense of embodied reality.” Daniel Spaulding, “Total Art and Mimetic Subsumption: Thoughts after Marina Vishmidt,” *Radical Philosophy* 2, no. 18 (Spring 2025), 55.

30 T. J. Clark, *If These Apples Should Fall: Cézanne and the Present* (Thames & Hudson, 2022), 95, 98–99.

31 Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, vol. 5, *Miscellaneous Papers, 1888–1938*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1956–57), 198–204.

32 Christie’s auction 17155, May 14, 2019, lot 160.

33 This work is now in the Barnes Collection. Provenance for the Getty painting can be found at https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103QT5.

34 Michael Fried develops the notion of “deductive structure” in his essay “Three American Painters,” in Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (University of Chicago Press, 1998), 213–65. Around the same moment as the two ginger pot paintings, Mondrian essayed alternate non-grid versions of abstract, tautological mimesis, as in his tree paintings of 1912 that employ curved rather than straight lines. Arguably the first pure “deductive structure” in modernist art, Robert Delaunay’s *Premier Disque* of 1913, is circular and thus centers the viewer’s vision in a manner comparable to Mondrian’s ginger pot; much later, Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland would essay circular formats, often in tension with rectilinear edges. It may thus be warranted to nominate the centripetal target as an alternate ur-structure of modernist art that prioritizes the centering of attention over the grid’s dehierarchized, allover quality.

35 “The mimesis of artworks is their resemblance to themselves.” Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 104.

36 Mimetic in Adorno’s sense, that is (see note 35). By the 1960s, artists themselves had come to pit tautology against *logos*: “The order is not rationalistic and underlying but is simply order, like that of continuity, one thing after another.” Donald Judd, “Specific Objects,” *Arts Yearbook* 8 (1965), 74–82. In this context I will not be able to address the important point that seriality in modern art is also mimetic of industrial production.

37 As research in Black studies emphasizes, semiotic/aesthetic and economic fungibility are related as well to the fungibility of bodies, the aesthetic signature of which is racialization. Compare Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthesis and the Critique of Form* (Stanford University Press, 2023), especially 100–04.

38 Jaleh Mansoor has recently observed that modernist abstraction (her example happens to be Mondrian's *New York City*, 1942) was "reduced to the very logic of the fetish it wrestled against in its manifest dialectical *resistance* to the reduction of human experience to the extraction of surplus value in the everyday capitalist lifeworld." Jaleh Mansoor, *Universal Prostitution and Modernist Abstraction: A Counterhistory* (Duke University Press, 2025), 4, emphasis in the original.

39 Erwin Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege und andere antike Bildstoffe in der neueren Kunst* (B. G. Teubner, 1930, repr. Gebr. Mann, 1997). The book has been translated into French and Italian but not English. Translations here are my own.

40 Xenophon, *Memorabilia, Oeconomicus, Symposium, Apology* (Loeb Classical Library 168), trans. E. C. Merchant and O. J. Todd (Harvard University Press, 2013), 103–109 (II.I–II.II).

41 Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege*, 57.

42 Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege*, 58.

43 Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Macmillan Press, 1978), 25.

44 Cassirer, "Form of the Concept," in Cassirer, *Warburg Years*, 8.

45 Cassirer, "Form of the Concept," 21, emphasis in the original.

46 Panofsky, *Hercules am Scheidewege*, 62–63.

47 In this context, I must regrettably fail to expand further on Shawon Kinew's suggestion, in response to a paper that I delivered in 2023, that I ought to account for the role of desire in the Hercules motif. This comment has however continued to challenge my thinking on the topic.

48 A more thorough treatment of this material would address Edgar Wind's remarks on Neoplatonic tripartite schemata in his book *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance* (Yale University Press, 1958). See as well Rebecca Zorach, *The Passionate Triangle* (Chicago University Press, 2011).

49 See Aby Warburg, "Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther" (1920), in Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity: Contributions to the Cultural History of the Renaissance*, trans. David Britt (Getty Research Institute, 1999), 597–667. In this connection I ought also to differentiate my approach from other scholars who cover related historiographic territory. For instance, whereas Karen Lang, in her book *Chaos and Cosmos: On the Image in Aesthetics and Art History* (Cornell University Press, 2006), is interested in probing and at times resisting early German art history's sorting of "a jumble or aggregate of sensuous impressions confronting the artist or observer" into "form and system," I understand the systematicity reflected in art historical method as being keyed to bourgeois society's diremption of mental and manual labor. By extension, I interpret the melancholy that Michael Ann Holly identifies as the "central trope of art historical writing," thanks to the art historian's forever-thwarted aim of "recovering what is almost gone," as being instead the signature of a suppression of praxis in favor of contemplation; Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 6. (I have, incidentally, borrowed the title for my fourth subheading from Holly's book.) This movement from praxis to contemplation is very explicitly thematized in both *Hercules am Scheidewege* and "Et in Arcadia Ego," among other of Panofsky's writings.

50 Cf. Theodor Adorno, letter to Walter Benjamin, in Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (NLB, 1977), 123.