**Totality in a Box: The Shipping Container from Commodity to Allegory**

ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a reading of American photographer Allan Sekula's 1995 essay "Dismal Science" alongside *The Forgotten Space*, an essay film he co-authored with Noël Burch in 2010. These works are still resonant today because they suggest the possibility of picturing the totality of capitalist modernity. Sekula's representations of the shipping container and the subsequent shifts in maritime economy recuperate the prospect of a panoramic, totalising view in an era marked by a prevalence of detail and data over meaningful grand narrative. The totality the container embodies and represents, however, is not the whole of a frictionless and seamless accumulation of capital, but rather a non-synchronous, polemic, and critical totality of struggle and antagonism. Sekula turns the shipping container from a stand-in for a system of commodity circulation to an allegorical sign of the continuing fight between labour and capital. Rather than envisioning this totality of struggle as mere thematic concern, Sekula's compositions eschew commodification on the level of form, by delving into the constitutive tensions of realism and by reintroducing a living context of militancy and resistance into the matter of representation itself.

The shipping container has become a crucial vector for the global expansion of capitalism since the adoption of standardized container shipping in the 1960s. Containerised shipping made possible social, logistical, and financial transformations of the economy, which enabled a qualitative shift in the operations of capital and a restructuring of the concrete realities of the production and circulation of commodities. The adoption of a standard measure for shipping provoked dramatic effects in maritime communities and the global transportation industry. International firms moved towards automation and the relocation of ports to container hubs, which remapped coastal economies. As Deborah Cowen shows, containerisation has facilitated the further militarisation of the supply chain and wide-ranging transformations in commerce and international law, such as the creation of International Recommended Transit Corridors, special zones for regulating maritime traffic.[1] The container, for this reason, is entangled in wider tendencies at the heart of contemporary capitalism: the shift to neoliberal logics of exploitation and extraction, the rise of automation and the fall of labour demand, debates on the subsumption of labour and the continuing relevance of Marx's law of value, crises of overproduction and dispossession, ecological destruction and changes in law and governance that ensure the continuing accumulation of capital.[2] The transformation of production and commerce enabled by the so-called "logistics revolution" has also meant the emergence of new forms of struggle against exploitation. Charmaine Chua notes that those fighting for workers' rights have started to exploit the choke points and networks of the supply chain to forge international webs of solidarity and resistance. [3]

As the container became a central element of the world economy, it also turned from prosaic vessel for the transportation of goods into artistic object; indeed, since the 1960s, artists and video-makers have approached the nondescript box as a source of creative production.[4] However, when the box is relocated and translated into the so-called "white cube," that is, the ideological space of exhibitions, aesthetic discourse and art galleries, some important problems

arise.[5] In his pivotal study on modernism, O'Doherty outlines a historical trajectory in Western art, whereby "context becomes content" and the art "gallery is constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church. The outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light" (O'Doherty 15). The situation of late capitalism has entailed a process of containerisation of art that parallels the turning of the container itself into aesthetic and architectural object. In this history, the container can signify that process of "sealing off" and enclosure of artistic objects implied by the trajectory of modernism, according to O'Doherty. However, it is still an open question whether the shifts between containerisation of art and aestheticization of the container might also entail a critical reconstruction of the impact of capitalism on culture, rather than simply sanctioning art's sealing off into enclosure and commodity. Is it possible to recontextualise the shipping container against the grain of global capitalism? Can artistic practice wrest the container away from the world of commodities and repurpose its figural, symbolic dimension as a tool in the fight against exploitation and inequality?

These questions lie at the heart of Allan Sekula's important 1995 essay "Dismal Science," which anticipated Sekula and Noël Burch's 2010 *The Forgotten Space,* an essay film centred on the tragic consequences of containerised shipping on maritime communities and global labour. Sekula's work is guided by the aim of decoding the container, understood not simply as a material object but rather as a broader historical process, a logistical tool for the accumulation of capital but also, arguably, a possible site of critique and utopia. The problem Sekula's project faces, however, does not merely concern the nature of the object being represented; the form of representation itself is entangled in the system of inequality it aims to denounce. Sekula thoughtfully points this out in an earlier essay on the traffic of photography:

> Perhaps the fundamental question to be asked is whether or not traditional photographic representation, whether symbolist or realist in its dominant formal rhetoric, can transcend the pervasive logic of the commodity form, the exchange abstraction that haunts the culture of capitalism. Despite its origins in a radical refusal of instrumental meaning, symbolism appears to have been absorbed by mass culture, enlisted in the spectacle that gives imaginary flesh to the abstract regime of commodity exchange.[6]

Can the container as representation transcend the commodity form which defines it as historical object? This question captures the double-bind that delimits Sekula's representation of containers, the antinomy between realism and symbolism. On the one hand, a realist poetics cannot be separated from its origins in nineteenth-century innovations in policing and archival science, whereby mimetic representation functioned as a tool of subjugation, identification, and oppression.[7] Realism is animated by the imperative of telling the truth and hence revealing social inequality and human suffering. However, the representational, mimetic capture it entails cannot be detached from the instrumental function of policing and classifying. On the other hand, symbolism – in Sekula's essay a byword for modernism at large – has renounced realism's referential vocation by wholly turning into a self-referential, abstract, and commodified form. In Sekula's analysis, modernism, especially American modernist art and photography, has been unable to resist the logics of late capitalism and hence unable to formulate a real critique of the process of commodification in which it is unavoidably embedded.[8]

Both realism and symbolism seem to be insufficient ways of resisting the commodification of everything. In his 1976 essay "Dismantling Modernism," Sekula remarks how photographic realism has reproduced an ideology of vision as "unimplicated in the world it encounters," while the camera becomes "the generator of a duplicate world of fetishized

appearances."[9] At the opposite end, modernist symbolism entails a reduction of concrete reality to subjectivism, so that even documentary art "is thought to be art when it transcends its reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist."[10] Both realism and symbolism are hence problematic because they risk concealing their properly referential function, their status as a way of reporting and registering the world without turning into either disembodied vision or purely subjective expression. In contrast to this, what I will define as the allegorical motif in Sekula's work is a way of keeping the work of representation grounded in the real world but also openly visible, as Sekula vividly points out in a rephrasing of Walter Benjamin's description of Atget's views of the streets of Paris as if they were scenes of crime. Sekula reformulates Benjamin's metaphor of city streets as crime scenes by noting that a "truly critical social documentary will frame the crime, the trial, and the system of justice and its official myths."[11]

The promise of allegory lies in its ability to point to itself as a figurative form of representation while at the same time pointing beyond itself, by virtue of its open-endedness and polysemic aspect, making manifest the world it depicts and distorts. Allegory neither creates the harmonious and reconciled whole of the symbol nor does it annul itself in the transparency of a disembodied realism. As Steve Edwards sums up in his obituary of Sekula, an important aspect of Sekula's poetics lies in "his refusal to fix photographic meaning at any single point on this semantic horizon, focusing on movement and process, while declining to cast polysemy as liberation."[12] In Sekula's project, the answer to this dilemma seems to be the Benjaminian theme of brushing photography (alongside other forms such cinema and the essay) against the grain.[13] In practical terms, this means opening a space able to eschew, simultaneously, the limits of both realism and symbolism by keeping the possibilities of critique alive. Artistic practice needs to expose the manufactured nature of any fiction and be re-rooted, instead, in the social conflicts it originates from. The technique identified by Sekula

as central to this project would be montage, as he explains in an earlier essay on the photography of mining.

Sekula notes how the archival dimension of photography, akin to the process of subsumption of labour activated by the onset of capitalism, reduces each photograph to a simple element in a chain of equivalences and exchanges. Like the dispossessed workers deprived of everything and hence finally "free" to sell their labour-power to the capitalist, the photograph is "liberated" from the burden of its social origins and therefore deprived of its necessary context. The archival function of photography, linked to its instrumental realism, obscures a central function of the image, which is the reproduction of class antagonism on the level of representation. As Sekula notes:

> . . . in an archive, the difference, the radical antagonism between these looks is eclipsed. Instead we have two carefully made negatives, available for reproduction in a book in which all their similarities and differences could easily be reduced to "purely visual" concerns . . . Within this regime of the sovereign image, the underlying currents of power are hard to detect, except through the shock of montage, when pictures from antagonistic categories are juxtaposed in a polemical and disorienting way.[14]

Sekula's use of montage is not aimed at discarding realism towards a modernist aesthetics, but rather at constructing what Benjamin Buchloh aptly described as a "montage of realism."[15] Sekula's use of montage remains immanent to the social commitments and referential scope of realist representation; this is a reframing of montage as worldly form able to depict historical reality. In this context, montage does not involve detaching the single image or snapshot from its original context, but rather the opposite: montage means reconnecting a single visual element to a wider, totalising, panoramic view of the historical concatenations and the struggles

out of which representations emerge. Contrary to the pacifying and archival function of realism, montage reintroduces the original elements of shock, struggle, and antagonism that are integral to what Fredric Jameson explained as the "constitutive tension" of realism itself, "a peculiarly unstable concept owing to its simultaneous, yet incompatible, aesthetic and epistemological claims, as the two terms of the slogan, 'representation of reality,' suggest."[16] Realism, according to Sekula, needs to be expanded into a polemic, disorienting, and combative expression.

Through shock, Sekula's critical realism reattaches the object of representation to the living, historical context of exploitation and resistance in which communities and environments find themselves in a capitalist world. Sekula's aesthetic project achieves this element of shock and antagonism by refusing, at the same time, to turn the container into either "symbol" of capitalism or simple and unquestioning reproduction of the object as artistic commodity. As Zanny Begg comments in a comparative analysis of Sekula and Andreas Gursky, Sekula's realism is aimed at reconnecting the microscopic and the macroscopic as he "seeks to construct works within concrete life situations in which there are active clashes of interest and representation." [17] Sekula's critical montage of realism achieves this reconnection of meaning because of what Alberto Toscano describes as a double movement, both "unveiling the corporeal suffering and material inertness beneath the veneer of exchange, dragging form down into content, so to speak; but also moving from aesthetic form to social form."[18] Sekula's dialectical interlocking of realism and montage enables a critique of capitalism's abstraction. However, the critique of abstraction, Toscano points out, does not merely result in a representation of sensuous or experienced reality, but it complements the return to the real with a powerful critique of the social construction of this very experiential and tangible reality.

Sekula's creative and critical representations of the shipping container point to possible ways of mapping the totality of capitalism beyond the ideological strictures of both realism and

symbolism. While there is no space outside capitalism today, not even in the supposedly independent realm of art, Sekula's polemic and disorienting poetics can identify a space of critique and of utopia whereby the container, metonymically, points to the totality of the economic system as riddled by antagonism, violence, and the disintegrating logics of neoliberal economies. By simultaneously presenting totality and turning it into shock and struggle, Sekula's representation of the container avoids the traps of instrumental realism and of modernism's self-referentiality. In this essay, I will engage with Sekula's "Dismal Science" and a sequence from Sekula and Burch's *The Forgotten Space.* My reading will attempt to demonstrate how his recourse to a montage of realism points to possible answers to the question of a form of representation able to transcend the commodity form.

## *1. Totality between System and Struggle*

The shipping container might be said to represent the totality of capitalism. But what are the broader implications of such a statement? If, following Sekula, the idea of "representing" should not be taken either symbolically or realistically, how can the container be described as the stand-in for the global economic system? Most importantly, what kind of totality would the container represent? These questions concern the aesthetic, representational level, but also, at the same time, a social and political problem regarding the historicity of capitalism itself.

Historically, the shipping container was a major logistical and technological innovation that allowed for the standardization of trade, hence, to channel the anarchy, multiplicity, and incongruence of the global market into a seemingly synchronised, harmonised totality. This process entailed violent shifts in the way commodities are assembled and transported across the globe, radically reframing the very process of production. Port labour was crushed as

container haulage was automated, maritime commerce hubs were separated from port cities and relocated faraway from urban centres, flags of convenience allowed shipping companies to escape regulations on workers' rights, and the major commodity that began to circulate became what is known as "intermediate goods": half-finished products that are moved across the geographically dispersed sites of a "disintegrated" production.[19] The container, for these reasons, is not solely a "freight technology," Liam Campling, and Alejandro Colás note, but most crucially "a political artefact that facilitated a new international division of labour."[20] The steps in the making of the commodity have been temporally and spatially dislocated, as capital never stops its restless search for cheaper production unhindered by regulations about labour and the environment.[21] This process has also given rise to what Aaron Benanav describes as automation discourse, an escalating celebration of the liberatory potential of digital futures and the decline of labour demand endorsed by the dominant classes and "the jeans-wearing elite of Silicon Valley."[22] Automation discourse, notes Benanav, is rather "a symptom of our era" that arises "when the global economy's failure to create enough jobs causes people to question its fundamental viability."[23] A marker of crisis, inequality, and conflict more than a utopian horizon, the automation of logistics and the transportation industry is where the tensions and crises of capitalism appear in their most vivid and violent form.

In their volume *Cartographies of the Absolute,* Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle suggestively characterise the shipping container as the "exquisitely banal keystone of the subsumption of the planet by trade;" they discuss how it is "both a crucial operator and a symbol of an all-encompassing regime of materialised abstraction."[24] Indeed, Toscano and Kinkle note that the container has been, historically and materially, a "crucial factor in the emergence of capitalist globalisation, as it accelerates the volume, speed, and scope of trade and production."[25] But this role has been accompanied by an aesthetic transformation in the way capitalism is perceived and represented; Toscano and Kinkle observe that from the point

of view of the emerging "social relations of production," the container "also signals the devastation of port and ship-labour, the dislocation of transport and production . . . as well as a kind of radical opacity or invisibility that comes to affect commerce and industry alike."[26] An enigmatic, prosaic, and secretive box, the container obscures as much as it discloses the new regimes of the subsumption of labour in an era of globalisation, illustrating what Philip E. Steinberg qualifies as the obscuring effect of the artefacts of capitalism, superficially "amenable to depiction" while, in truth, they "will inevitably fail to reveal the totality of underlying processes that govern how they are produced, moved and consumed."[27] Entangled in this paradox, artistic forms ranging from installation art to film and photography have framed containers, Toscano and Kinkle observe, as a "narrative emblem and device, as well as an allegory of sorts for the condition of disorientation and lacking knowledge."[28] Toscano and Kinkle hence conclude that the box has been treated as index of the ungraspable nature of capitalist totality: by virtue of this opacity or invisibility, it has been figured an "indifferent, interchangeable materialisation of capital's abstract circulation."[29] The container is simultaneously dull and inscrutable, and as such, it has emerged a sort of *noumenon* or ideal of the constantly multiplying phenomenal appearances of capitalist production.

A compelling study of this process can be found in Sekula's 1995 two-part essay "Dismal Science." In this essay, Sekula offers a thorough analysis of the containerisation of transport, revealing the historical basis of the container's radical opacity. Containers might be said to represent contemporary capitalism only in a very specific and peculiar way. Indeed, I would argue that Sekula deconstructs some of the shared assumptions of our era of globalisation to show that the emergence of the container needs to be placed in a longer temporality of technological and pictorial transformations that have radically altered the way capitalism can be made visible.

Most importantly, Sekula's essay indicates that the container does not simply signal an ontological disorientation and the disabling of the cognitive mapping of global capitalism.[30] In the trajectory described by Sekula as the passage from the panorama to the detail, or from a syntagmatic to a paradigmatic representational regime, the rise of the container has reframed the possibilities for grasping and for mapping the totality of capitalism,[31] even though this kind of mapping reveals the image of a non-linear, uneven historical development wherein historical elements from different age constantly clash and combine.[32] Such critical concept of totality would be governed by what philosopher Ernst Bloch described as a "multispatial and multitemporal dialectics," as Bloch noted:

> The totality must furthermore be *critical* in order that it not fall from its justified antithesis to the capitalist dismemberment of all relations of life into a false similarity to idealistic "totality," which is a mere totality of the system (spinning out from a single idealistic principle and its uninterrupted, panlogical connection), which indeed is a derivative of myth.[33]

Bloch's idea of a non-synchronous totality points to the fact that, at any given historical time, there are temporalities other than the present that remain active, either residual elements from unfinished pasts, or anticipations of futures not-yet fully visible and fully present. This entails the need for a more complex – multi-scalar, multi-temporal – approach to understanding history, a way of grasping the non-chronological interconnections and tensions between different times. While capitalism involves a tendency to synchronise, what it effectively produces is a non-synchronous whole in which surviving elements from pre-capitalist pasts remain active as social forces in the present. Non-synchronism is hence a by-product of the expanding process of capital accumulation; this form of temporality reveals the uneven

historicity whereby past, present, and future can coexist and overlap rather than follow in sequential order. The most valuable aspect of Bloch's notion of non-synchronism lies in its dialectical method, the fact that it neither results in an unquestioning celebration, nor a simple condemnation of the non-synchronous out-of-jointness of the present. Bloch's non-synchronism can be seen as a dialectical unity of conjuncture and disjuncture, continuity and rupture, which can produce either progressive, utopian, revolutionary effects, or, depending on the particular nature of the non-synchronous articulation, can also provoke the return of oppressive ideologies, fascism, and conservative or, in Svletana Boym's phrase, "restorative" nostalgias.[34] The totality captured by the box should not be the idealistic and tautological whole mythologised by the dominant economic system, but rather an embattled, militant, non-contemplative kind of mapping. Any form of expression aiming to represent this critical, non-synchronous totality should hence do justice to existing social antagonisms.

One of the key arguments proposed in "Dismal Science" concerns the historical trajectory of the standard container, a logistical innovation, as Nicholas Anderman notes, that became a global standard in the 1970s and 1980s.[35]

Sekula stresses the violent, "restless" nature of capitalism's search for profit, as he reflects on how, by "reducing loading and unloading time and greatly increasing the volume of cargo in global movement, containerization links peripheries to centers in a novel fashion, making it possible for industries formerly rooted to the center to become restless and nomadic in their search for cheaper labor." [40] However, Sekula's story also challenges the accent on novelty and radical break reiterated in celebratory versions of the history of the box. Indeed, the melancholic, nostalgic tone that permeates "Dismal Science" unearths the deeper historical temporality in which the adoption of standardised shipping should be placed.

The historical (and not simply spatial) totality that the container represents is not reducible to a seamless and pacified present. It needs to be inserted into a wider whole, a *longue durée,*

which began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century with the invention of the steam powered ship. Sekula's reflections, then, do not start in the 1960s, but rather they go back to a vision of Engels's comments on the vibrant life of sailing ships on the docklands along the banks of the Thames in his 1845 *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels captured a vanishing world of maritime labour, which was soon to be displaced by an "accelerated age of steam".[41] According to Sekula, Engels's 1844 trip to London "described a liminal maritime space that was just beginning to be enveloped by the polluted miasma of urban industry."[42] The dialectic between the port and the city was a central element of this historical trajectory, because the "transition to regularized and predictable maritime flows initiated by steam propulsion was completed a century later by containerization. If steam was the victory of the straight line over the zigzags demanded by the wind, containerization was the victory of the rectangular solid over the messy contingency of the Ark."[43] The container does not merely signal radical novelty and a new regime of production, but, rather, follows a longer process of class struggle and of industrialisation of the sea that was already at work for more than a century when the standard measure for shipping was finally adopted worldwide.

## 2. *Figurations of Struggle: The Question of Representation*

The longer history of technical and logistical developments in the maritime industry traced in "Dismal Science" can elucidate the genealogy of capitalism's unrepresentability. Like the fetish of the commodity in Marx, the container hides the concrete social relations that it simultaneously embodies. However, precisely because of its status as fetish of a smooth utopia of capital circulation and accumulation, the container also secretly conveys the traces of the histories of labour and of struggle it simultaneously obfuscates. The key question hence

concerns whether it is possible at all to unravel the cipher of the container, considering that both a simple, instrumental realism and the reduction of the container to symbol are ineffective ways of undoing commodification.

Sekula's essay revolves around a radical insight: new historical tendencies in global capitalism emerged during the mid-twentieth century, but only older representational forms, belonging to a previous era, such as landscape painting, could potentially grasp it in its full historical and social significance, casting the novelty of cargo shipping into a very different light of slow temporalities and *longue durée*. From the point of view of representation, the enigma of the container rests on the historical process described by Sekula as the "collapse of panoramic maritime space."[44] Sekula notes that J.M.W. Turner's painting captured this process precisely at the moment of its occurrence. As he writes:

> This collapse, or blurring, of panoramic maritime space in painting was first grasped by J.M.W. Turner, in works produced coincidentally with first appearances of oceangoing steam-driven ships . . . a painted sky that presumed the wind to be a motive force had a different referential status from one in which steam and smoke were introduced . . . Weather became paramount in painting as its actual power over human movement diminished, and transit times became more predictable.[45]

Turner's techniques and choices of subject reveal a wider shift in social attitudes toward the sea: the romance of older sailing cultures was replaced by the industrialised appropriation of oceanic space through the steam ship. No longer unpredictable and dependent on external factors, the sea becomes a flat background space for the transit of commodities. The collapse of panoramic maritime space entailed a shift in how the sea is perceived. From an element of everyday experience and natural counterpart to an element of transport, the sea can now only

appear, writes Sekula, as "restricted to stories of disaster, war, and exodus . . . the site of intermittent horrors and extraordinary but brief expenditures of energy, quite distinct from the dramas of everyday life."[46] Container shipping detached maritime commerce from cities and communities, tucking coastal spaces away from the centre of social life in anonymous, isolated and dispersed container ports; from meaningful space, the process of industrialisation of the sea led to a situation of "cognitive blankness."[47] This process, however, also signals a central problem for the representation of the totality of capitalism, as suggested by Sekula's passing references to Turner.

Historically, the invention of the steam ship changed radically both maritime space and maritime time. Sekula describes this shift as a passage from panorama to detail, as he observes in the second part of "Dismal Science":

> Modernity entails a maritime victory of the detail over the panorama: these details circulate within the generalized stream of consumption, can be activated in any context. The sea is everywhere and nowhere at the same time, but only in decantable quantities. But under conditions of social crisis . . . the bottle of representation can burst, and the sea again exceeds the limits imposed upon it.[48]

The way industrial and logistical innovations changed perceptions of the sea reveals a wider question about capitalism and representation. Capitalism makes panoramic overviews impossible, turning the expanse of the sea into a "decantable quantity." The possibility of regaining a full view can only appear, in such circumstances, as the effect of shock or disaster. Shipwrecks, oil spills, refugee boats, extreme weather—in these moments the space of the sea is irreducible to static background, commodity, or detail. Most importantly, in the age of containerization, a syntagmatic picture of totality can only appear as a sort of anachronism, as

a temporality that exceeds the endless, 24/7 present enabled by cargo logistics. The sea itself, as object of representation, has become through this process what Sekula describes as a "vast reservoir of anachronisms."[49] These anachronisms are produced by the expansion of capitalism but are also the site in which the space of the sea complicates the ideal of an endless present of accumulation and hence regains presence and visibility.

Sekula notes that "by the beginning of the twentieth century, the panorama, once the most geographically encompassing form of pictorial representation, became inadequate to a world of explosive long-range shells, smoke screens, torpedoes, and above all else, the submarine."[50] This historical shift produced a very peculiar effect: untimely and uncanny forms of representation appeared, in this conjuncture, which attempted to integrate these new technological exploitations of maritime space into the older frame of reference of the panorama. Examples of this process include Jules Verne's 1870 *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, and particularly the book's front cover illustration by Edouard Riou, alongside propagandistic war prints by Japanese artist Kobayashi Kiyochika, which depict the depth of the sea as a transparent, intelligible space of combat and of exploration. These representational forms, notes Sekula, "are all committed to sustaining the prestige of visual empiricism in an age increasingly committed to the positivism of statistics and quantitative abstraction. The theatrical *faux* realism of these images has much to do with the phenomenological impossibility of the point of view they attempt to naturalize."[51]

The point underscored by Sekula, hence, does not concern merely the disappearance of the maritime panorama in favour of abstraction and detail, which coincides with the impossibility of representing totality in a capitalist age. Sekula's point is much more subtle and provocative: the historical process leading to the disappearance of panoramic views – or making such standpoints impossible – produces, as its paradoxical counter-effect, the rise of a new *faux* realism, a non-synchronous form of representation aimed at recoding the cognitive

blankness of the sea within the contours of outmoded frames of signification. This panoramic "*faux* realism" of a capitalist age is bound to fail, as the historical conditions of possibility for depicting the sea as a meaningful totality have disappeared with the onset of steam ships and standard containerisation. Yet, the survival of panoramic views in an age of detail and data – or, as Sekula puts in in structuralist terms, the passage from syntagmatic to paradigmatic orders of discourse – reveals the fundamentally uneven and incomplete nature of capitalist totality as a process fraught with violence and antagonism. In his concluding remarks on these issues, Sekula's analysis shifts from a focus on containers, steam ships and maritime warfare to representations of maritime cultures in twentieth-century American and European photography.

Sekula mobilises Ernst Bloch's concept of "non-synchronism" in the context of his close reading of the photographs of August Sander, especially Sander's 1929 *Antlitz der Zeit* (*Face of our Time).* In this work, the figure of the unemployed sailor appears as anachronistic cipher of vanishing forms of labour, an inoperative remnant of residual times of maritime travel. For this reason, Sekula comments, Sander captures "the abandonment of a premodern taxonomy of labour . . . With the unemployed sailor *Antlitz der Zeit* looks capitalism in the face for the first time."[52] The non-synchronous nature of Sander's photographs of sailors, however, cannot be limited to a nostalgic record of vanishing forms of labour. Drawing on Bloch, Sekula notes "the utopian and revolutionary dimension to this longing for the past", a very ambivalent dimension as this longing was, at the same time, "the precondition for fascism."[53] The non-synchronous element of Sander's photographs is charged with an ambivalent political value, as it points, at the same time, to a utopian critique of a capitalist present while risking turning this critique into a celebration of mythologised pasts. In Sekula's analysis, non-synchronism does not merely pertain to the historical social conditions of the time, but also to the relationship between representation and its object. As Sekula writes:

> Sander's ability to portray this world stemmed from the fact that he himself lived nonsynchronously. This was evident in the odd eclecticism of his method . . . The paradox of Sander's project centred on his attempt to force the fluidity and disruption of Weimar modernity into a formal structure derived from medieval systems of social description.[54]

Sander's reference to older forms such as the sixteenth-century book of trades and pre-Enlightenment physiognomics plays non-synchronously with the modernity of its subject, portraits of workers in early twentieth-century Germany. At this point, Sekula advances a further, conclusive reflection: the false realism of older representational modes seems to be able to capture historical realities of conflict between old and new, rising and vanishing, expanding and contracting social forces. As he expands on the contradiction between outmoded representational modes and modern subjects, Sekula asks cogent questions: "Are there, even today, forms of human agency in maritime environments that seek to build a logical sequence of details, a *synoptic* interpretation of observed events? Is it possible to construct such knowledge from below"?[55] Sekula's concluding thoughts on containers, in the second part of his "Dismal Science," partly respond to these questions.

The ultimate result of the process of disintegration of the panorama leads, in Sekula's analysis of Robert Smithson's 1967 *Monuments of Passaic,* to the appearance of the cargo container as a funereal monument in a depopulated landscape, an enigmatic and silent object deprived of any meaningful links to living subjects and communities. The eclipse of the maritime panoramic space has caused the cognitive blankness of which the container is ultimate cipher. The container, in other words, turns into the very embodiment of the historical process that destroyed panoramic views, as an undecipherable monolith devoid of any meaning or intelligibility. The rise of the box as an artistic, photographic object hence coincided with the

demise of any possibility of a meaningful perception of the totality that it was supposed to represent. But this is not the very end of the story, as Sekula's essay concludes with a much more open-ended, ambivalent tone, as he writes:

> I propose a more provisional funeral. If anything, the appropriate metaphor is found in Marx's notion of the "dead labour" embedded in commodities. If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowal implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhibited flows, is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labour-power. And like the table in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, the coffin has learned to dance.[56]

The container has come to embody the logics of disintegration of a capitalist modernity: the crushing of a seafaring proletariat, the obliteration of port cultures and the restructuring of maritime commerce. However, Sekula also notes how this "funeral" of labour that the container should represent is much more provisional and contested than one might think. The container, as historical object, may indicate the final destruction of maritime labour and the shifts in transportation logistics. But as form of representation, the container is charged with the much more ambivalent and open-ended qualities of a non-synchronous temporality, the possibility of reconstructing a panoramic view in the age of the detail. This feature of the container will be fully explored in Sekula and Noël Burch's subsequent work on containers, their essay film *The Forgotten Space.*

### 3. *Extreme Long Shot: Beyond the Commodity*

In their "Notes for a Film" that accompanies *The Forgotten Space*, Sekula and Burch follow the journeys of cargo across the world, as shipments are unloaded and reloaded in Rotterdam, Los Angeles, Hong Kong and Bilbao. The essay film is composed as a realist montage, through which a voiceover commentary is interspersed with interviews, snapshots of the everyday life of a global working-class, as well as views of cities, ports, and ships.[57] There is nothing of the capitalist optimism and triumphalism of accounts like Levinson's *The Box* here, as Sekula and Burch denounce the dark side of the shipping revolution, as environments are destroyed, communities displaced, and workers disappear from docks.[58]

The film has been critiqued by commentators such as Philip Steinberg and David Harvey for "forgetting" the sea as a material space, as Steinberg notes:

> In the process of directing attention away from the sea as a socio-natural *space*, the filmmakers inadvertently reproduce capitalism's idealised "smoothing" of the ocean as an abstract quantity of distance, devoid of geophysical materiality, which can be annihilated by technologies that enable the compression (or, better yet, the transcendence) of space-time.[59]

These remarks point to important thematic limits of the film, which is indeed focused on a broader context which includes coastlines and hinterlands, while not foregrounding the ecological dimension of the ocean.[60] However, on a formal, stylistic level, the film is much more complicated and, indeed, the melancholic and forgetful tendencies noted by critics can be counterposed by a utopian element, which however does not operate as a thematic content. The utopia of *The Forgotten Space* can be located in the way it reframes the mechanism of representation beyond realism and symbolism and, more specifically, in what I will describe as the allegorical aspect of Sekula and Burch's work.

In the concluding scenes of the film, Sekula and Burch move to Bilbao to reflect on the establishment of the Guggenheim Museum there, a major shift in the geography and the economy of the city. The Guggenheim Bilbao is an extremely significant site because, as Saloni Mathur has shown in her study on museums and globalisation, the establishment of a Guggenheim in Spain epitomised the shifts in the art industry, from the national remit of the late capitalist museum towards a multinational, expansive logic aimed at conquering new markets by physically exporting the museum and its collections across the world. As Mathur notes in her reflections on the impact of Guggenheim director Thomas Krens in initiating these dynamics:

> What *is* new, it seems to me, is not the fact that museums are behaving increasingly like corporations, regardless of their profitability, but that they are, in the case of the Guggenheim, behaving like *multinational* corporations.[61]

In their introduction to a collective volume on the Guggenheim, Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika remark that the museum is today "more interested in strategies linked to its own definition of works of art and its own museification than in the self-referential quality of the artwork itself."[62] In an earlier essay on Guggenheim's architect Frank Gehry, Sekula observed that the "symbolic function of Frank Gehry's architecture is to 'refer' obliquely to the organic unity of . . . maritime older economy while celebrating at the same time its replacement by a new, flexible order of accumulation."[63] The way in which the museum's self-referentiality and self-musealisation acts "symbolically" as a mode of subsumption and erasure of local economies and heritages is further expanded in the film.

In *The Forgotten Space,* Sekula and Burch note how the foundation of the museum in the 1990s coincided with the demise of the port economy of the region. As marker of ultimate

commodification and alienation of the art-world from workers, environments, and communities, the museum is subjected to a sustained critique. The iconic material of which the museum itself is made, Sekula and Burch point out, was bought cheaply from Russia in an exploitative act of appropriation of declining economies. The museum presents itself in sheer opposition against the city: while the city itself shows the signs of transience and decay in its building and infrastructure, the aerospace metal wrapping the art gallery shows no sign of decadence or rusting. The voiceover formulates a point about the different, non-synchronous temporalities which the city and the museum inhabit:

> If there is a building that refuses to be a box, this is it, Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Bilbao, a museum clad in titanium bought cheaply on the Russian market as the former socialist economy was butchered for quick profits. Aerospace metal, a metal that defies time and rust. The museum contributes to a pervasive illusion, only it, and its artistic contents, are contemporary, the city must struggle to keep up with the new fashion. In a way, the contemporary art museum turns the city into an antique shop.[64]

The ideal of unchanging present embodied by the museum is a gesture of contrast directed against the transient historicity of the city. The museum reclaims contemporaneity through the material and the artistic contents it preserves, turning the city into a residual, untimely and decaying periphery subject to a planned and staged obsolescence. In concrete terms, the museum was part of an economic restructuring through which the industrial maritime economy of Bilbao moved towards gentrification and what Sekula and Burch describe as the McDonaldisation of culture. New luxury flats are being built, while local enterprises, such as a factory producing giant metal chains for ships, are relocated to less visible parts of the region; as the voiceover points out, "downriver from the Guggenheim, the industrial past refuses to go

away".[65] The still-present heavy industry is relocated on less central premises and tucked away from the tourist gaze. The contemporary art exhibited in the Guggenheim is utterly detached from anything surrounding the museum, while the people of Bilbao are shown to be indifferent to the gallery.

The voice-over commentary dwells on the artificial permanence of the museum, contrasting it with the supposed obsolescence of actual industrial materials such as chains used to moor ships. The film, however, reverses the false permanence of the Guggenheim: while the tarnished, seemingly rudimental produce of the heavy industry of the region looks obsolete, in fact it is in a way much more contemporary than the museum, as this industry still plays a vital part in the global transportation of goods as supplier of container ships. The narrative, essayistic dimension of *The Forgotten Space* formulates a definitive critique of the Guggenheim and its significance as marker of the demise of port labour and coastal culture. While the Guggenheim refuses to be a box, the museum itself was made possible by the economic and social transformations resulting from the history traced in *Fish Story,* from the steam ship to the cargo container. However, *The Forgotten Space* should not be limited to the cogent discursive critique articulated in the voiceover. Indeed, the narrative element is complemented and complicated by the photographic aspect of the essay film, as visual sequences accompany the development of the arguments. The constructed and heteroglossic dimension of meaning in the film strongly resonates with Sekula's own reflections on technique: as he wrote in an earlier essay, photographic meaning "is always a hybrid construction, the outcome of an interplay of iconic, graphic, and narrative conventions."[66]

In the concluding scenes of *The Forgotten Space,* the discursive critique of the museum is complemented by a particular use of perspective and a key technical feature: the extreme long shot. As the voiceover articulates the critique of the Guggenheim, something quite extraordinary takes place on the level of the image, more specifically in two moments of the

chapter of the film. The first one concerns the visual sequence that takes place as the voiceover comments on the Guggenheim's ideological casting of the city as a forever backward and decaying antique shop. The voiceover emphasises the detachment and disconnection between museum and city: the museum is the embodiment of an American-based transnational capitalism that crushes local economies and aims to wrest the touristic image of Bilbao away from its locally specific industrial heritage. As this critique is formulated in the voiceover, however, the visuals propose a slow-motion, panoramic view of the museum *and* the city from an elevated spot. While the discursive element indicts the disconnection of city, port, and museum, the visual register absolutely reconnects them and integrates them into a seamless and encompassing field of vision. In a single panoramic sequence, everything is captured and comprehended. In contrast to the partial and fragmentary view available at ground level, this panoramic view maps everything together in a totalizing movement. The point of the composition, however, should not be restricted to panoramic view either. The key, non-synchronous aspect of the totality indicated here rather lies in the contrast between vision and discourse: the verbal level captures antagonism and division, while the visual level, dialectically, reconnects the torn halves into a unifying movement. The kind of totality envisaged in this video, for this reason, is absolutely opposed to the capitalist ideal of totality embodied by the Guggenheim. While the latter celebrates the ahistorical ideal of a transnational capitalist class unhindered by labour or locality, the former is a totality of struggle, resistance, and memory, made tangible through combative forms of counter-mapping such as *The Forgotten Space*. Sekula and Burch achieve here the possibility of a concatenation from below: a totalising view that does not eschew, but rather is the product of, resistance and critique.

The second moment in which voiceover and image displace each other and dialectically recombine occurs at the very end of the chapter on Bilbao. The camera travels to the interior of the gallery, following the visitor in the labyrinthine pathways of a sculpture-installation by

an American artist, Richard Serra's 2005 *The Matter of Time*. Once more, the voiceover emphasises the disconnection between the white cube and the surrounding social and environmental context. The interior world of the museum is a monadic totality with no aperture to the outside. The smooth space of art consumption of the museum is starkly opposed to the world of labour and the industrial past and present of Bilbao. As these arguments progress, however, a casual and fleeting comment on Richard Serra acquires a crescendo of relevance in the video sequence. The voice notes, in passing, how Serra himself was a shipyard worker in his youth. This remark is expanded and magnified in the video sequence: through montage, the interior of the art gallery is suddenly flooded by the encroaching sound of the sea, and a fading transition moves from the installation to an image of a ship worker in the interior of a container ship. The fading that concludes the scene, in opposition to the discursive indictment of the museum, uncannily reconnects the art gallery to the world of the sea. In this context, Sekula's engagement with maritime labour plays an important part in the film. As Jonathan Stafford notes in an essay on Sekula's representation of labour:

> The radicality of Sekula's oeuvre is in its inevitably miscarried attempt to depict totality, to grasp the interconnectedness of unemployed Liverpool dockers with Mexican fisherman, the Californian welder with the group who eat at McDonald's in the North-East English coastal town of South Shields . . . it is not just labor he is concerned with, but also the everyday, the impact on and extension into all lives of the global-dynamic world systems of capitalism.[67]

The figure of the worker points to an important element in *The Forgotten Space.* The representation of workers in the film is a key element of its realist and documentary aspect, as the film features interviews with seafarers, truck drivers, engineers, community organises, and

other actors in a globalised transportation industry. In keeping with the non-synchronous poetics of the film, however, the representation of labour is not restricted to the present tense and the prosaic realities of exploitation, unemployment, marginality, struggle, and unionisation that the film documents. The film seems to give a poetic, figurative expression to the category of "labour power" as the container itself is described as a "coffin of remote labour power."[68] The container is the tangible and visible embodiment of labour power, seen as a concrete rather than abstract category, and a vector for the creation of new solidarities and new figures of resistance. In terms of debates on the law of value and the subsumption of labour, *The Forgotten Space* seems to oppose any stark separation of intellectual and manual, or material and immaterial labour, but rather reconnects these forms within the circuits of an uneven process of dispossession and of resistance.

The act of filmmaking is not separate from the manual labour it represents, as it casts the critique of documentary realism as a choke point of the act of figuration in which new forms of resistance might be forged. In its reconnection of different kinds of labour, the film could hence be aligned with perspectives, such as those developed by George Caffentzis, Massimiliano Tomba, and Harry Harootunian, which reinstate the continuing relevance of formal subsumption in the contemporary world, as the expansive logic of capitalism extracts value from an exterior it constantly reproduces.[69] If the appearances of workers in the film point to the social realist commitments of Sekula and Burch, framing the container as the embodiment of remote labour power complicates realism by pointing to allegorical, oblique ways of representing labour power, not as abstraction, but as still surviving concrete utopia in an age of increasing inequality and capitalist violence.

### *4. The Container as Allegory*

The unreconciled aspects of the visual-verbal interplay at work in *The Forgotten Space* can be read as a profoundly allegorical dimension, whereby the container shifts from being the ultimate commodity and coffin of remote labour power to a possible utopia: a new way of narrating and picturing capitalism as an intelligible, changing, and open-ended totality of struggle. In Sekula and Burch's genealogy of contemporary mercantilism, the allegorical emerges through the emphasis not so much on the harmonious functioning of the whole, or the uncritical and contemplative totality of capitalist circulation, but rather through the image of a broken-down, unreconciled totality, a sense that the ideal of a frictionless and smooth system is in truth marked by the contradiction and the dialectic of combined and uneven development. In their study of the question of combined and uneven development in Sekula, Gail Day and Steve Edwards touch upon the allegorical element of Sekula's poetics as they discuss the imagery of the road and of voyage in Sekula's work:

> His 'voyages' *do* take on an allegorical dimension: the road of critical research. But they are more than that too; they are an allegory of the problems of understanding modern capitalism, the difficulties of representing that understanding and of comprehending its representational elisions and paradoxes.[70]

Day and Edwards reveal important aspects of the film. The allegorical dimension does not simply indicate the difficulties of understanding but also the potential of the film itself as creative form. Accordingly, in *The Forgotten Space,* the container becomes allegory of an uneven capitalist totality but also, at the same time, allegory of a form of representation, the essay film itself, which can provide a totalising and panoramic view only as dialectical counterpart to a realist engagement with the tensions and frictions of the global economy. In

her insightful study on capitalism aesthetics and abstraction, Beverley Best observes that the allegorical can be a way of figuring a kind of totality that does not exclude friction and antagonism, enabling what Best describes as a "holistic and historical narrative of the social world—a way of figuring a social interconnectedness that can illuminate the identity of seemingly oppositional positions, points of view, or modes of expression."[71] Sekula and Burch cast the appearance of the shipping container in such a critical, oppositional and totalising light, as they write in their notes:

> Ships are loaded and unloaded in as little as twelve hours, compared to the laborious cargo storage practices of fifty years ago. The old waterfront culture of sailor bars, flophouses, brothels, and ship chandlers gives way either to a depopulated terrain vague or – blessed with the energies of real-estate speculators – to a new artificial maritime space of theme restaurants . . . the memory of mutiny and rebellion, of intense class struggle by dockers, seafarers, fishermen, and shipyard workers – struggles that were fundamental to the formation of the institutions of social democracy and free trade-unionism – fades from public awareness.[72]

Paradoxically, Sekula and Burch's representation of the shipping container opposes this melancholic sense of fading, as there is a subtle but important reversal in the way the box is represented. Rather than vector of logistical innovation, a new international division of labour and ideal of an integrated system, the *representation* of the container becomes, through the visual and verbal poetics of the film essay, the sign of a possible alternative totality, a stubborn residue of a not yet fully defeated global working class. If capitalism utilises the container to ensure a frictionless circulation of capital and goods, this prosaic and instrumental object also indicates the fact that workers of the world are, uncannily and paradoxically, still united

through the unevenness of a global history of exploitation. From this point of view, the film proposes, non-synchronically, a panoramic, totalising representation of the container that does not fall into the pacifying trap of instrumental realism or the abstraction of a symbol. Through the clash of image and word, the container becomes the marker of a subversive, restless and unpacified totality, an allegorical counter-totality of struggle, violence, and resistance torn between commodity and utopia.

The allegorical dimension certainly implies, following Fredric Jameson, the figurability of abstraction, whereby global capitalism can "become figurable – that is to say, visible in the first place, accessible to our imaginations," by staging the shipping container as *character* in a story.[73] But the allegorical does not stop at being a process of figuration. It could also be understood with references to Walter Benjamin, an author who deeply influenced Sekula, and who provided an important analysis of the concept in his study on the German *Trauerspiel*. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Benjamin links allegory to death in a way that deeply resonates with Sekula and Burch's portrayal of the container as a "coffin" of remote labour power. The shift from the container as fetish to its status as allegory, indeed, emphasises this element of death and decay. In the allegorical plane, however, death and decay are prerequisites for the transformation of the actual body into the site of an open-ended historical process. As Martin Jay notes in his comments on the significance of allegory in Benjamin, this trope emerges in specific historical moments in which there is an "artistic will to wholeness" but without "the means to achieve it."[74] Rather than monad and constellation of a harmonious whole, the allegorical points to the impossible unity of idea and thing, body and spirit, part and whole, mundane and transcendental. Allegory is, according to Benjamin, the opposite of symbol, as the symbolic unity of form and content required a non-decadent, pre-modern society in which a vision of the organic unity and access to the divine were still possible. Instead, in the abyss and decadence of a profane, capitalist modernity, totality can only appear through a

poetic form that repeats the disintegration of the productive system, showing its interconnectedness but not resolving it into a contemplative and hypostatised unity. As Benjamin wrote:

> It is not possible to conceive of a starker opposite to the artistic symbol, the plastic symbol, the image of organic totality, than this amorphous fragment which is seen in the form of allegorical script . . . In the field of allegorical intuition the image is a fragment, a rune. Its beauty as a symbol evaporates when the light of divine learning falls upon it. The false appearance of totality is extinguished.[75]

The crux of the matter lies in the fact that the shipping container is, at the same time, the figuration of capitalism as an integrated totality of production and circulation, *and* the allegorical representation of a conflictual reality of destruction, violence, and exploitation. As Christine Buci-Glucksmann remarks in her analysis of the *Ursprung*, "In contrast to medieval symbolism or the beautiful totality of future classicism, allegory anticipates the role of shock, montage and distancing in the twentieth-century avant-garde: it shatters its object and fixes reality by a kind of alienation effect similar to the logic of the unconscious."[76] Walter Benjamin's philosophy is particularly resonant with Sekula's montage of realism because of the tension, throughout Benjamin's writing, between the extremes of fragment and whole, most importantly between the here-and-now of a fixed instant and the chronological whole of history. Rebecca Comay shows that these two polarities coexist in a very unsettled way in Benjamin and cannot be solved by simply equating Benjamin's philosophy to either one or the other. In her illuminating comments, Comay asks whether "the blinding flashes and frozen cut-ups of Benjamin's materialist historiography prolong the fluid historicism they seemingly

interrupt," calling into question "the classic aporia of parts and wholes – fragmentation and totality, negativity and system – that runs through every corpuscle of Benjamin's project."[77] The totality that Benjamin's thought seems to convey, however, is not to be understood so much as an infinite expansion of capitalism, or what could be defined, following Ernst Bloch, as the uncritical and contemplative "totality of the system," but rather, Comay suggests, as "relentless splittings and subdivisions that eventually dissolve the object into the blinding, prismatic indifference of white light," whereby fragmentation is overcome "in being hyperbolically escalated to the point where . . . the total fissuring of appearances becomes indistinguishable from a new totality."[78] As a thinker of the totality of capitalist modernity, Benjamin can provide unsettling resources of thought: rather than opposing the physical, phenomenal appearances of objects to the abstract ideal of the economic system, Benjamin enables a thinking of the totality in the thing itself, as fractal or prismatic refractions of a concrete and contested totality which is materially produced through the continuing struggle between labour and capital.

This unsettled and combative vision of history resonates with Sekula's anti-teleological sense of history. As perceptively noted by Hilde Van Gelder, Sekula approaches photography as "an instrument to construct a visual language upon the ruins of an artistic tradition without having to restore it."[79] The allegorical works by inserting elements of tension in the documentary and realist representation, thus it prevents the formal technique of the film from reproducing the ideal of a disembodied view of the seamless circulation of people and goods. The film does not operate, symbolically, as a tool for harmonising and merging vanishing histories and heritages into a fixed space of conservation. Allegorically, the film disassembles itself by contesting any continuum and by rather opening the space of cinematic representation to a dialectic of conjuncture and disjuncture, a tradition fraught with antagonism. On this aspect, Andrew Witt notes that Sekula articulated "a method of working photographically,

alongside text and audio components, the whole conceived as a distinctive mode of editing and sequencing. Cinematographic methods—mini-sequences, focusing, detail work, panning, crosscutting— were subject to assembly, montage, and construction as well as disassembly, ruination, and wreckage."[80] This creative-destructive method of doing and undoing images illuminates, on the level of form and figuration, the operations and tensions of a global capitalist economy.

Allegorically, Sekula and Burch's representation of the container complicates the ideal of a mythological capitalist whole by reintroducing the element of shock, contradiction, and struggle, which is captured through the montage of realism at the heart of *The Forgotten Space*. The opposition between voiceover and extreme long shot, visual and verbal elements, captures a shift in the significance of the container: the box does not represent, either realistically or symbolically, the totality of capitalism, even if it can provide a powerful figuration of it. But on the level of form, allegory allows it to reproduce and to make visible the living contradictions that continue to constitute a totality of struggle and antagonism. Like shock in the montage of realism of Sekula's photography, *allegory reproduces the social antagonism between labour and capital on the level of representation*, animating realism with unsettled contrasts. *The Forgotten Space* does not simply work at a thematic level, the level of subject-matter. On a formal, stylistic level, it offers yet unthought resources of hope for representing the capitalist totality as a realism of struggle that does not end and is not yet defeated. As Benjamin Buchloh observed in an early essay on Sekula's *Fish Story*:

> The massive effort of the project's research and travel . . . serves first of all as a metonymically detailed account of the general political and economic transformations brought about by the globalization of late capitalist rule. At the same time, the

> paradoxical conflict of the work is that between the scope of a narrative of epic dimensions and an accumulation of often small photographic facts.[81]

As Buchloh notes, the conflict between epic narrative and small photographic fact in Sekula results in "an allegorical (re)construction of the possibility of understanding history in the age of electronic media."[82] The utopian dimension of Sekula and Burch's critique needs to be found in the unsolved, unsettled aspects of their essay film, whereby coastal cultures are replaced by commodified non-places, yet the victory of the commodity on the actual world of labour is never complete. The funeral of labour that the box is supposed to represent is, more than ever, contested, provisional, and undecided.

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[1] Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade.* Juan De Lara traces the class and race politics underlying containerisation in Los Angeles in *Inland Shift: Race, Space, and Capital in Southern California*

[2] Important works that deal with these debates include Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson’s *The Politics of Operations,* Aaron Bananav’s “Automation and the Future of Work,” Harry Harootunian’s *Marx after Marx,* Beverly Best’s *Marx and the Dynamic of Capital Formation,* and Robert Nichols’s *Theft is Property!*

[3] Charmaine Chua, “Organizing Against Amazon Requires Strategizing Across Global Supply Chains,” n.pag.

[4] Important examples include Gerd Winner’s 1969-70 “Container” prints, as well as installations such as Miroslaw Balka’s 2009 “How It Is” in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London. The shipping container also features in films such as Aki Kaurismäki’s 2011 comedy-drama *Le Havre.*

[5] The notion of “white cube” is taken from Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside the White Cube*, where he explores the significance of the art gallery in defining the politics of modernist aesthetics.

[6] Sekula, *Photography against the Grain*, 80. I am grateful to Zachary Hicks and Nicholas Anderman for pointing me to this quote and for their stimulating response to the first stages of this paper. I would also like to thank Kathryn Walchester for her comments.

[7] This is a topic discussed at length in Sekula’s 1986 “The Body and the Archive,” where Sekula traces a genealogy of photographic realism in policing and eugenics through the figures of Bertillon and Galton. This study shows how photographic realism resulted from a combination of optical empiricism and statistical abstraction and was indissolubly linked to projects of social domination.

[8] Sekula’s position on the debate between realism and modernism might parallel, to a certain extent, the trajectory of Georg Lukács, whom Sekula quotes in his introduction to *Photography against the Grain* (xvi). Sekula aimed at dismantling what Lukács described as the “tendency towards disintegration” of modernist ideologies (Lukács, *Contemporary Realism,* 39). However, unlike Lukács, he also questioned the reconciling nature of realism and more specifically realism’s emphasis on typicality.

[9] Sekula, *Photography against the Grain,* 56.

[10] Sekula, *Photography against the Grain,* 58.

[11] Sekula, *Photography against the Grain,* 57.

[12] Steve Edwards, "Socialism and the sea: Allan Sekula (1951-2013),” 63.

[13] Sekula makes constant references to Walter Benjamin throughout his work, most importantly to Benjamin’s theses on the concept of history and his earlier writing on photography. The concept of “brushing history against the grain” comes from Benjamin’s essay on Eduard Fuchs. Building on Benjamin, Sekula defines his project as “an attempt to understand the social character of ‘the traffic in photographs’.” (Sekula, *Photography,* xv).

[14] Sekula, “Photography between Labour and Capital,” 194.

[15] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, “Allan Sekula: Photography between Discourse and Document,” 197.

[16] Fredric Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible,* 217.

[17] Begg, Zanny. “Recasting Subjectivity: Globalisation and the Photography of Andreas Gursky and Allan Sekula,” 635

[18] Alberto Toscano, “The Mirror Of Circulation: Allan Sekula And The Logistical Image,” n.pag.

[19] In this context, “disintegration” means the breaking up of the production process into segments, whereby different companies (often geographically distant) only complete a part of the activities required for producing and packaging goods.

[20] Liam Campling and Alejandro Colás. *Capitalism and the Sea*, 316.

[21] In addition to its function in transportation logistics, today containers have become even more pervasive as building material through the phenomenon described by Craig Martin, in *The Shipping Container,* as “cargotecture.”

[22] Aaron Benanav, “Automation and the Future of Work,” 7.

[23] Aaron Benanav, “Automation and the Future of Work,” 15.

[24] Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle. *Cartographies of the Absolute,* 266, 276.

[25] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies,* 276.

[26] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies,* 276.

[27] Philip E. Steinberg, “Maritime Cargomobilities: The Impossibilities of Representation,” 35.

[28] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies,* 278.

[29] Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies,* 277.

[30] The concept of "cognitive mapping" was elaborated by Fredric Jameson in an influential essay, which he later reworked in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic,* and is also reimagined in Toscano and Kinkle's "attempt to force into being a certain kind of political visibility and thus to counter the objective, material effects of a dominant regime of representation" (Toscano and Kinkle, *Cartographies,* 30).
[31] Syntagmatic and paradigmatic are structuralist terms taken from the early Roland Barthes, especially his *Elements of Semiology.* Sekula's concept of photography as "dismal science" captures the shift from syntagmatic (narrative elements that can form a meaningful narrative) to paradigmatic, which, in Sekula, indicates a set of probabilities and comparisons without a unifying narrative. Sekula, *Fish Story,* 109-110.
[32] In an excellent essay on Sekula and combined and uneven development, Gail Day and Steve Edwards note in passing how, in Sekula, the violent synchronisation of capitalism is also challenged by what they call "a 'materialised anticipation'; that is, not just a utopian anticipation, but a possible future that is already materially here. This could be understood as non-synchronicity with the destinations and destinies projected for us by capital" ("Differential Time and Aesthetic Form" 285). However, the non-synchronous element does not simply reside in the utopian side of Sekula's work, his dialogues with workers and his pointing to international solidarities against capital. Sekula's framing of the container as emblem and allegory points to the dialectical and ambivalent nature of capitalism's non-synchronous effects.
[33] Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics," 38.
[34] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* 41. Bloch's concept of a non-synchronous totality was elaborated as a response to orthodox Marxist theory, especially the idea of totality formulated by Georg Lukács in his influential work *History and Class Consciousness* and Lukács's presentist emphasis on the conflict between capital and proletariat as untroubled by more complex and uneven survivals of the past.
[35] Nicholas Anderman, "Sounding Maritime Metal: On Weathering Steel and Listening to Capitalism at Sea," 134.
[40] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 49
[41] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 45.
[42] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 45.
[43] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 45.
[44] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 45.
[45] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 45.
[46] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 53. In her important work *The Deadly Life of Logistics,* Deborah Cowen analyses how cargo shipping is entangled in histories of violence, war, and disaster.
[47] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 54.
[48] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 107.
[49] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 51.
[50] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 110.
[51] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 111.
[52] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 130.
[53] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 130.
[54] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 131.
[55] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 133.
[56] Sekula, *Fish Story,* 137.
[57] Jennifer VanderBurgh thoughtfully notes that "the voice-over of the film essayist seems to be wondering out loud. In being asked open-ended philosophical questions, viewers are encouraged to make connections between things that initially appear to be unrelated." VanderBurgh, "Explaining the Notion of the 'Essay Film'," 32.
[58] In an important intervention on the debates on cargo shipping Brett Neilson perceptively notes how Levinson's book epitomises how dominant narratives on the container are overwhelmingly "US centred," notwithstanding the crucial readjustments of capitalist geographies towards East Asia. Brett Neilson, "A City that Exports Air," 52.
[59] Steinberg, "Maritime Cargomobilities," 41. Steinberg builds on some points made by David Harvey in his "Remarks at 'Forgotten Spaces' Symposium."
[60] It should be noted, at this point, that this film has also been critiqued for not mentioning the history of slavery. Christina Sharpe has remarked that *The Forgotten Space* "does not address the history of the trade in abducted Africans; does not locate that trade as the key point in the beginning of global capital. Africa, the Caribbean, and the rest of the African diaspora are absent, the forgotten spaces of *The Forgotten Space*." Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake,* 25. On the other hand, Laleh Khalili develops the analysis initiated by Sekula and Burch by looking at the role of the Arabian Peninsula in the history of cargo shipping in *Sinews of War and Trade.*
[61] Saloni Mathur, "Museums and Globalisation," 700.
[62] Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika. "Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim: The Museum as a Cultural Tool," 8.
[63] Allan Sekula, "Frank Gehry: Master and Commander," 215.

[64] Sekula and Burch, *The Forgotten Space,* film.
[65] Sekula and Burch, *The Forgotten Space,* film.
[66] Sekula, *Photography against the Grain,* 81.
[67] Jonathan Stafford, "Breaking Open the Container: The Logistical Image and the Specter of Maritime Labor," 168.
[68] Allan Sekula and Noël Burch. "Notes to a Film," n.pag.
[69] Massimiliano Tomba notes that "formal subsumption should not be understood within the historicist paradigm that portrays formal and real subsumption as historical stages… Instead, formal subsumption defines the form in which the capitalist mode of production works. Moreover, it is the form that capital produces by reconfiguring preexisting temporalities, such as patriarchal, gender, or racial hierarchies on the one hand, and an entire configuration of property relations on the other" ("On the Capitalist and Emancipatory Use of Asynchronies in Formal Subsumption," 288). Harootunian and Caffentzis challenged the idea that capitalism has now moved beyond this supposed "stage" by showing how capitalism could not work without renewing the processes of formal subsumption and primitive accumulation.
[70] Gail Day and Steve Edwards, "Differential time and aesthetic form" 272.
[71] Beverley Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation*, 147.
[72] Sekula and Burch, "Notes for a Film," n.pag.
[73] Jameson, *Signatures of the Visible,* 51.
[74] Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality,* 249.
[75] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* 176.
[76] Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason,* 70.
[77] Rebecca Comay, "Perverse History: Fetishism and Dialectic in Walter Benjamin" 57.
[78] Comay, "Perverse History," 61.
[79] Hilde Van Gelder, "A Matter of Cleaning up: Treating History in the Work of Allan Sekula and Jeff Wall," 79.
[80] Andrew Witt, "Allan Sekula: Photographic Work," 152.
[81] Buchloh, "Between Discourse and Document," 199.
[82] Buchloh, "Between Discourse and Document," 199.