

SEEING THE ABSTRACT.

Visual Archives and the Reification of Rule

Five Critical Quarries

I.

THE QUARRY OF THE SPECTACLE

As he went about his drawing-based fieldwork in the winter of 1849, Ruskin first envisioned Venetian Gothic as an arcadian society reconciled in spirituality. He did so to gain a historicist justification to criticise the contemporary status of English factory workers and the alienated labour conditions to which they were subjected as an immiseration of free individuality towards its increasing exploitation as a machine-like tool. During this time, he wrote a letter to his father every day to report on the progress of his studies, on many days penning two such notes. He lived in a society that made reference to itself in the medium of written language. Its values and moral binding agents – so utterly formative in his Victorian upbringing and education, resulting in a life long self-destructive attempt to resolve the contradictions between his thinking and the postulates of evangelical fundamentalism – were treated in explicit systems of notation, laid out in writing and presented in great breadth.

That has changed in the society of spectacle. Nowadays the good reasons for participation and contentedness are distributed in iconic form. Non-discursive in nature, they are irrefutable views that draw their authority from

the immediacy of the image, appearing as an im-medial window on reality. The place where societal consensus is ideationally secured is in the field of representation: in the very image that philosophy once took as the *alagon*, as the irrational. Society became illustrated.

In the quarry of the cities, passers-by are targeted and bombarded from all sides by vectors of image acts. The city is pictorialised: the public litter bins, the handles on fuel hoses at petrol stations, the change trays backlit with a flickering LCD display, the exterior and interior panelling of public transport, every available surface is given over to the image and finally – in a grotesque category error – the architecture itself: high-rises that mutate into bearers of signs, their facades draped with billboards. With each physical interface probed for its capacity to serve as a vehicle of imagery, these sights are inescapable. The individual's field of vision is a commodity and property owned by external parties. The criterion for its use is total diffusion.

The things that the city's inhabitants should covet, fear, believe, think and know are signified to them in images. The images are not forcefully imposed, but are images people want to see. This can be understood in the widespread anguish arising from an image void:¹ the absence of illustration that makes

the visually elusive state of affairs appear inapprehensible and unappropriable for the practised worship of images, a societal iconodulism. As a result, a spectacle like the girl's abduction in Austria generates an omnipresent demand for images, a palpably tremulous atmosphere. It seems as though the appetite for the unimaginable aspects of such a sensational tale could only be indulged by gaining a glimpse of the victim's face. As if signs could be found in this face to make an act beyond imagination morally conceivable and thus reconciled. In such an instance of the global desire for pictures, the prevailing fetishism of the image shows itself most clearly.

The process of accommodating the world with oneself thus occurs in effigy. And ensuing from the militant desire to see events like an earthquake – an occurrence that in the case of the great Lisbon earthquake once provided fuel for the Enlightenment and shook the foundations of religious belief in favour of knowledge – the recent case of Haiti even led to the emergence of a new business format of media technology. With the Action News product, the Asian news service Apple Daily has filled the abyss in the demand for images. Should daily media events unfold in the absence of visuals, they are simply constructed in fictionalised animations based on computer-generated imagery.

This fabrication of eyewitness accounts of something with no sensory certainty provides the world with visual evidence that has shed its illusory character. Even while the crude virtualisation was being critically reported in the media, well-reputed public and private news organisations worldwide incorporated the assertions of these virtual images into real film reports without further mentioning the nature of these appearances.²

Beyond such excessive insistence on the image in an iconic concupiscence: for every ideology that serves to stabilise a society, that counters the living with the rule of the object, a visual form will be found that imbues the ideology with graphic qualities and gives it the plausibility of the factual.

The transformation of the parameters that the world of social order places as a condition on the life of the individual, in his independent volition, this feat of ideology, is effected today by means of the image. Ideologies that once had word form and thus offered themselves to the faculty of judgement have become matters of indubitable sight while the word has turned into something unacceptable, at best illustrating the illustration in a picture caption.

At the same time, however, the fact that it is a medium, a means of communicated opinion, is masked by the particular medium of the image. The cer-

tainty of one's own seeing of the world is thus undistinguished from seeing through the window of the image, which happens to be indiscriminately perceived as a sensory impression.

This is what constitutes its efficacy. Undoubted as image acts, the seeing of images is usually thoroughly identical with the shared standpoint of the image act, just as the seeing of the ground underfoot is never called into question when walking and moving in space. It is held to be an immediate certainty.

The investing of ends in an image – first through the identification of an object, an abstracted framing, the depth of field and all other decisions that go into its fabrication – thus takes effect through society's acceptance of a generalised idealistic practice in which the seeing of an image, seeing through the invisible purpose of an absent author, is received just like a sense-perceptible fact, not differentiated from the immediate seeing of a present object. Seeing an object with one's own eyes in the here and now warrants the same immediacy as the viewing of an illustrated representation. This is the crux of an operative form of social cognition independent of any personal will. On the basis of this historically acquired societal episteme, the iconic representation quasi-mechanically engenders an impression which seems beyond doubt.

'A society in which every soul would be as the syllable of a stammerer instead of the word of a speaker, in which every man would walk as in a frightful dream, seeing specters of himself, in everlasting multiplication, gliding helplessly around him in a speechless darkness.'

JOHN RUSKIN
The Elements of Drawing, 1857

¹ I have employed the term 'image void' for the desire to see that gets confused with understanding. This category is encountered in the business model of the news service whose CEO was thus cited by CNN: 'You have a lot of missing images, in the TV, in the news reporting. If this is an image generation or image era that we are in, that is a big gap we are filling.'

² Schweizer Fernsehen, Tagesschau, February 19, 2010.

Yet as an imperative image, it merely bears similarity to its end, not its object.

It is impossible to address the image or any position that accords seeing and pictorial representation a central cognitive value in the becoming of the mind without having every reflection proceed from this contradiction. The adherence to the image as a means of knowledge only works if a reason is given as to why seeing the representation of something seen may be a rational *'argument of the eye'*. This optimism towards the cognitive means of the image was present in the late eighteenth century philosophy of German idealism where it was understood as *'intellectual intuition'*³ and with Hegel in the concept of the *'sensual appearance of the idea'*. It is a position that found one of its most devoted adherents in Ruskin, owing less to a fundamental grasp of the underlying principles and more to the way he put it into practice like no one else.

Shortly after the idea for this project first came about, I met with the American conceptual artist Lewis Baltz in the already empty Rialto market, early one evening in the first warm days of spring to discuss it with him. On the way there, I passed the church of my neighbourhood parrocchia and encountered a beggar sitting out front next to his crutches. The beggar was – as almost always in Venice – a Romanian Roma, yet this was not a boy disguised as a hunched-over old woman, it was an elderly man with a long white beard. Against the background of the medieval church, the figure made for a disconcertingly fictional and historical impression, almost like a pastiche on Ruskin's struggle with the element of the picturesque in poverty. As an accessory figure, the old man would have enhanced the mood of any artist's drawing of the scene, like the once codified presence of windmills on the horizon, though this cannot be had without the cynical dogma of the pattern books of an aesthetic outlook. Ruskin's asser-

tion that this stance had freed itself from the imperative of compassion 'by treating all distress more as picturesque than real'⁴ can be considered an early attestation of his insight into social contradictions, though here it is understood as the immanent flaw of beauty, incapable of arriving at itself without truth in the apprehension of facts.⁵

'For, in a certain sense, the lower picturesque ideal is eminently a heartless one; the lover of it seems to go forth into the world in a temper as merciless as its rocks.... Poverty, and darkness, and guilt, bring in their several contributions to his treasury of pleasant thoughts.'⁶

To all passers-by, the man held out a large-format negative: apparently a CT scan of his leg. As if direct visual inspection of the scene would be insufficient, only the authority of the imaging technique helps him attain absolute evidence. He is apparently well aware of society's visual epistemology. Only the image proves existence.

II.

THE QUARRY OF REIFICATION

The Castello Basso quarter – the off-beat section of one of Venice's big *sestieri*: literally, sixths – is in many ways a restricted area, segregated from the rest of the city. It is cut across and bounded by three organisations of space through power. They hold the autonomous, organic outgrowth that is this finely textured Venezia Minore in a powerful grasp, with consequences that have made themselves felt in the life of the place.

The process of creating larger islands from smaller ones by filling in the surrounding saltmarshes, which form Castello Basso's physical foundation, took place later than the construction of the nucleus of the city, from which the quarter is separated by the institution which gave it its economic raison

d'être: the Arsenal, the secret walled location of the gigantic shipyard which was the basis of the power-political and economic 'hothouse for the strong', as Nietzsche called the city.⁷ It was the largest preindustrial manufacturing installation in the western world,⁸ a machine in constant production, whose teeming host of workers, steaming vats of tar, foundries and red-hot forges Dante made into an emblem of Hell.

This huge concentration of manpower consisted of the *arsenalotti*, the shipyard workers who made up the population of Castello right up to the 20th century. Their significance as the material basis of Venetian imperialism meant that they enjoyed political privileges,⁹ a special status which continues even now to leave its mark on the local dialect and on the folklore of a territorial self-consciousness. The entire shipyard was a closed military zone until its opening for the art biennale,¹⁰ and about a third of it remains so even now.

It drives a wedge into urban space thanks to which Castello Basso, one of Venice's two most populous areas, is still connected to the rest of the city only by a single narrow alley. With its mediaeval *Marinaressa* workers' settlements, Europe's oldest social housing, and its bleak projects of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries known as the *palude* (swamp), the inaccessible residential area north of Via Garibaldi is hidden away behind the rearing fortifications of the Arsenal, which block any direct route to the city centre. This part of Castello forms a segregated working-class township which Ruskin described as the domain of the 'lower orders',¹¹ and is mirrored now by a similarly territorially segregated workers' settlement, Marghera, added on to the industrial installations on the edge of the lagoon.

This last exercise in urban planning originates in the futurist and fascist vision of a modern *Venezia Grande*, which would have destroyed the mediaeval city but supposedly made up for the fact

by giving it new life as the commercial hub of the eastern Mediterranean.

The character of the quarter was marked off from that of the rest of Venice for a second time thanks to the overbearing intervention of the Napoleonic administration after the end of the Republic and the occupation by troops of the revolutionary army in 1797. Napoleon anticipated Italian fascism and its prophet Marinetti in setting out a grand plan for enlarging the Arsenal and thereby developing Venice into an enlightened, rationalist metropolis designed to function as the central industrial port of the Adriatic. Thanks to the regime's secularising ambitions and its desire for prestige, it imposed an imperial masterplan on Castello which, in its head-on collision with the extreme modesty of the area's already existing buildings, is a caricature of Haussmann's monumental axes and green spaces.

By filling in and paving over the central canal, the Rio di Sant'Anna, the mid-point of the residential area was turned into a grandiloquent boulevard – today's Via Garibaldi, by far the widest street in Venice – and from there, at a right angle, a breach was created in the dense closed-off warren of mediaeval streets to make way for an avenue originally envisaged as six lanes wide. An architectural demonstration of power by means of symmetry was thrust into an asymmetrical gothic wilderness, sacrificing a series of churches,¹² cloisters, convents and monasteries which can still be made out on Merian's Prospect of the Topography of Venice (1650) and on Stockdale's¹³ English map put together shortly before the fall of the Republic. Moreover this corridor opened the way to another foreign body, the sixty thousand square metres of green space which make the *Giardini*. At its far end, the rubble of the demolished sacred buildings was piled up to form a hill, a belvedere overlooking the subject city, transmuted now into an empty cultural sign. Constructed according to

a universal model of the public garden as a public health facility which the Napoleonic regime rolled out across the conquered cities of Italy all the way to Apulia, the *Giardini* were conceived as a Venetian Central Park, an expression of a great power's alien urban planning that stands in stark opposition to the internal order of the city.

For unlike the typical fortified mediaeval 'urban container' – Lewis Mumford's term for a walled settlement – Venice's location on water meant that it did not need fortifications, and this made possible the articulation of the city into a multiplicity of self-organising urban quarters. A large number of public campi, market squares, alleys with shops or workshops, *scuole* and parishes gave each *sestiere* full and equal status as a living unit, born of a religiously inspired spirit of cooperation – frequently invoked by Ruskin – and which gave neighbourhood a practical meaning. By decreeing a centralised leisure area designed for all the city's inhabitants, the Napoleonic regime broke with this principle of local differentiation. But because it was realised only in a non-central location from which the locals felt excluded, it was left unused and as a result soon declined and became overgrown, so for all that the area was deprived of its religious gathering places, its relative isolation was left unaltered.

The area's loss of identity, however, can be read in the constant changes in the name of the main street, which followed the changing requirements of political propaganda: once altered into a filled *Rio Terra*, the original Rio di Sant'Anna turned under French rule into the Via Eugenia (after Eugene de Beauharnais, upon whom Napoleon had bestowed the title of Prince of Venice), was rechristened Strada Nuova dei Giardini under the Austrian occupation and finally became Via Garibaldi when Venice joined the Kingdom of Italy in 1866.

*'My entire delight was in observing
without being myself noticed,
– if I could have been invisible,
all the better.'*

JOHN RUSKIN
Praeterita, vol. 1, 1885–1889

3 Ruskin had a familiarity with the German term *Anschauung*, cf. Robert Hewison, *The Argument of the Eye* (Princeton, 1976), p. 211.

4 John Ruskin, in *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents 1845*, ed. H. I. Shapiro (Oxford, 1972), p. 142.

5 Cf. Hewison, 1976, pp. 46ff.

6 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 6. (London, 1904), p. 19.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols* (1888) (Oxford, 1998), p. 65.

8 Up to 30,000 employees worked in the Republic's largest industry, which was characterised by its highly efficient organisation. Cf. Robert C. Davis, *Shipbuilders of the Venetian Arsenal* (Baltimore, 1991). Familiar with Dante's description of the *Arsenale*, it seems as though Ruskin adopted its language in his later evocations of 'plague winds' and 'languid coils of smoke, belched from worse than volcanic fires'. John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 19, p. 293.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 83ff.

10 48. *Biennale di Venezia, 1999*, curator: Harald Szeemann.

11 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 10, p. 303.

12 The religious buildings in the area of the public gardens which were either razed or rededicated. Cf. p. 16, cf. Cesare Zangiroli, *Storia delle chiese, dei monasteri, delle scuole di Venezia rapinate e distrutte da Napoleone Bonaparte* (Venice, 1962).

13 J. Stockdale, *Plan of the City of Venice* (Piccadilly, 1800).

The third far-reaching political appropriation of this available-seeming because secluded area, took place thanks to Mussolini's shoreline esplanade, which added to the existing Napoleonic splendours and even rivalled them in sheer breadth. In 1937 the paved embankment, extended all the way to the *Giardini* and conceived as a parade ground for propaganda purposes, a harbour mole and a promenade, gave the quarter a pompous frontage in precisely the place where its modest rear with its small shipyards and waterfront businesses had once been. It is a frontage facing outwards, that does not belong to Castello and that even now, as a national border secured by temporary fences and patrolled by uniformed guards, can be shut off from Castello, because half of it falls under the jurisdiction of the harbour authority and functions as an international seaport with cruise ships that dwarf the small gothic dwellings.

The shabby recesses of this historic habitation thus bear the stamp of three different incarnations of political power, palpable expressions of relations of political and economic domination. Because abstract principles are expressed in them, they are – to put it in Hegelian terms – real abstractions: visible objects, which nonetheless manifest the abstract logic of the different ways in which society has been historically constituted. Inside the remarkable triangle carved from the ancient, compact urban fabric by the three intersecting lines of Napoleon's filled-in grand boulevard, the avenue off it, and the paving-stones of Italian fascism, and that is held in its turn in the surrounding grasp of the Arsenal, live Alvio Gavagnin and his wife Gabriella.

Many years ago I noticed Alvio Gavagnin as he sold things in the Via Garibaldi market close to his house. Following a crazed but lucid system, displayed on his stall were fragments of an obviously structured but apparently eclectic collection, including a series of

carefully constructed large boxes labelled '*Foto Vere*', and containing many thousands of photographic prints. It was probably this indication that he valued an obsolete medium, which in its historical character had become something true, that caught my attention. My first impression was correct: once upon a time Alvio had learnt to take and to develop photographs from a local newspaper photographer, and had gone on making enlargements of his images, with improvised and partly homemade equipment, over a period of fifteen years and designed to realise a carefully thought-out project piece by piece. He took photography to be a form of representation that, by way of traces left by light on a sensitive surface and the use of chemicals, connects with its object in a special way: a palpable causal chain linking the representation with what it represents. In that, for him, lay its truth. Photography was thus ideally suited to serve him as the means by which to take possession of external and immovable things and absorb them into his unstoppable process of accumulation. The collection, built up by Gavagnin and his wife as a practice of acquainting themselves with their surroundings, fills every inch of their little house with with its innumerable taxonomies of the everyday – its hoards of local death notices, vaporetto tickets, newspaper cuttings with articles about Venice, bits of old packaging, images of saints, guidebooks, record sleeves with views of Venice and so on, boxes and boxes of it all, and the same style of side-by-side arrangement which characterizes the collection he applied to his photographs too. In a sense it was the traces things had left on his images that he added to his acquisitive inventorising and the hope of completeness that goes with it.

The thing that amazed me about these images from the very first time I examined them was the fact that they turned their backs so completely on

the iconic power of the environment which forms their subject matter. The picturesque quality of this city that has become a copy of itself – this excessively photogenic city which, more than any other, converts its physical being into what's already expected, into a fixed representation of what the viewer already brings to it – burns itself inevitably into almost every picture that's made there. From Gavagnin's documents of the city, of its refuse, of its everyday and of its irregularities, this quality is strikingly absent.

The reason for this is Gavagnin's distinctive lack of interest in the formal qualities of his images. What mattered to him was only the represented, never the representation, as if with the image he was taking possession of the physical body it's an image of. Any visible trace of authorship would have marred the presentness of the object itself, which in his role as archivist is all that mattered to him, and this attitude kept him safe from the hazards of aesthetic ambition. He never cared about showing his pictures. Whether in files, in the boxes, in home-made albums or in the lists that he and his wife worked on constantly, simply placing the pictures in the system was his real aim, so he had no concern with presentation, and no deictic gesture directed at the viewer is encoded in his treatment of his subject matter. As notes taken from a standpoint of absolute detachment, the images were spared from enrolment in the pictorialist canon which even now seems to supply amateur photography with its aesthetic rule-book. Originality and tone are the measures of the painterly, whose method is to cover all its creations with the veneer of a pretentious formalism, rendering them interchangeable and uniform.

Propelled by his developing study of Turner and by the emancipation of his own artistic grasp of reality, Ruskin distanced himself from the '*confectionary idealities*'¹⁴ of the then prevailing

mode of the picturesque. The projection into the object of subjectivity characteristic of every conventional form of representation he treated as a pathetic fallacy, which could serve only to express ignorance of the laws of nature. In contrast to the contrived composition of an idealising way of seeing, he regarded his own practice of sketching simply as the 'written notes of certain facts'.¹⁵ Style was for him a way of hanging on to the codified prejudices of second-hand experience, which could only get in the way of the process of drawing and of its result, the picture as a privileged mode of acquaintance with the objective world. A kind of blindness: 'Travelling with sealed eyes'.¹⁶ For him, seeing and the concentrated holding fast of the seen are a form of intellectual appropriation of the world which, for any further form, must furnish the matter only. This idea of the visual gathering up of states of affairs also lies implicit in the way Gavagnin's accumulation of images focuses on the details and minutiae of the city. A devotion to the particular is common to Gavagnin and to Ruskin's work on Venice, which achieves a correspondence between the moral integrity of Gothic craftsmanship and the exactness of the watching intelligence that observes it. Alongside his constant association of beauty and morality, Ruskin assessed every form of visual representation by its truth content. 'Fidelity to a certain order of truth'¹⁷ is for him the reason why ethics and aesthetics are one. 'The word truth, as applied to art, signifies the faithful statement, either to the mind or senses, of a fact of nature.'¹⁸

The neutral registering of facts on the way to seeing is a requirement for any objective mode of thought. Gavagnin's photographs achieve this: they have only literal meaning. Both Ruskin and Gavagnin could say this: 'My entire delight was in observing without being myself noticed. – If I could have been invisible, all the better.'¹⁹

The invisibility of the author behind his visual record, his deliberately distant stance which calls attention only to the object and its laws, goes together with the forswearing of originality. In both sets of pages, Ruskin's and Gavagnin's, any trace of subjectivity and interpretation is effaced. In the meticulous setting down of what is simply there, no finger points back to the author. For this standpoint of pure registering, Ruskin coined the famous and debatable term of the 'innocent eye'.²⁰

Gavagnin has never thought about the uniqueness of what he has done. For him, it was about care and precision, but also about accepting the self-taught and improvised character of his work. That he has undertaken it all in a close and lifelong partnership with his wife Gabriella recalls the Bechers: one must think of them as existing in a state of innocence, when their documenting obsession had not yet received the honorific title 'art'.

Much later, the Gavagnins entrusted the photographic part of their collection – in which no one had otherwise shown any interest – to me. Only gradually, through contemplating its painstaking internal order and raising questions spread over many conversations, did I begin to grasp its background and the history with which it is connected. The Gavagnins pursued their interest in the city with the support of the expertise of a Venetian intellectual, a highly educated mathematician, who had taught herself art history and written a number of books on the architectural history of Venice. Her name was Giannina Piamonte.²¹ However much the chaos-in-order of the Gavagnins' collecting mania may seem to be a sign of arbitrariness in their choice of objects and settings to single out for attention, there was in fact a strictly thought-out plan behind their photographic sorties which gave sense to the idea that the collection might one day be complete: working

14 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 9, p. 45.

15 *Ruskin in Italy: Letters to his Parents 1845*, ed. H.I. Shapiro (Oxford, 1972), p. 189.

16 Cf. Hewison, 1976, pp. 38ff.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

18 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 3, p. 104.

19 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 35, p. 166.

20 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 15, p. 27, annotation.

21 Giannina Piamonte, *Litorali ed isole: Guida della laguna veneta* (Venice, 1975); Giannina Piamonte, *Venezia vista dall'acqua: guida dei rii di Venezia e delle isole* (Venice, 1992).

with Piamonte, the Gavagnins exploited the directories which list the artistic and architectural particulars of the city in a continuously numbered series, house by house, wall by wall, area by area. In many parts of the city these house numbers go over ten thousand. With this information they made lists on their typewriter which they then followed in sequence on their walks, a piece of fieldwork carried out in a group which often included not only Piamonte but the Gavagnins' children as well. Piamonte's name for the collective subject of these city wanderings was 'I Alvi'. As they went on, they kept detailed records of lost or missing sculptures, demolished houses and miscellaneous information about things as they found them. After they had developed the prints from a given expedition, they transferred their notes on to the verso of the photos, that they had stamped 'I Alvi', and then destroyed them. The act of applying the stamp is comparable to Ruskin's repeated 'Done' mark, which serves to mark something off as visually pinned down and thus finished from the wide ocean of the unfinished, as represented by the continuing challenge of his thousands of sketches. The product of this way of proceeding was typically a small or large handmade book, in which a territorial or narrative relationship was marshalled into a photo album. At the origin of this enterprise stood – again as with Ruskin²² – a longing for total coverage and completeness, driven by the need to crystallise for the sense of sight something unstable and transitory in the moment of its vanishing. Faced with what Hegel called the '*fury of disappearance*', the task of bringing to a halt the passing of things fell to the image.

Limitations of time work against the ideal of completeness and inexhaustibility against the concern for the particular, so it was in the nature of things that Gavagnin's plans should remain only partially fulfilled. The survey

of the two sestieri with the highest population density, Cannaregio and Gavagnin's own Castello is, in his opinion, concluded. The columns of figures that go with it have been removed. The surveys of other areas of the city, though substantial, remain fragmentary.

The advent of colour photography, which Gavagnin regarded as of little aesthetic and documentary value, and of comparatively insubstantial transparencies brought the grand plan to an end, and its final outcome is an archive of about five thousand selected photographs. Giannina Piamonte died in 1998.

The impact of the strangeness of these photographs has never left me. Nor has the impact of their meticulous attention to the vernacular and to what has been overlooked which, all that time ago, knocked me sideways because I myself, laboriously and via the intellectualistic byways of the history of photography, had developed a way of looking at the reification of economic crisis in the streets of New York.

In the juxtaposition of the two archives, Gavagnin's and Ruskin's, the shape of a Third Term can be made out, that has connections with the specific depth of both ingredients: in their spreading out across the city, its terrain is represented, because their obsessiveness took on – as it could not help doing – the form of endless movement in the space, in which alongside all the planning and goal-directedness there also lies an element of self-surrender to the city's laws and complexity. The recording archivist becomes a register, and the city's identity inscribes itself in his collection of visual fragments as if it were a subject. This accident was conceptualised in situationism and in Walter Benjamin: as the *flâneur* and the symptomatic author of the *dérive* who wanders, lost, thereby becoming a passive sensor, a piece of apparatus recording the objectified powers of the city to which he succumbs.

In contrast to Gavagnin, Ruskin

was able to identify in an explicitly theoretical way the walls of Venice as a fossilisation of political and economic domination. In the trace elements of past labour – which can only be as a social entity and therefore must contain within itself the organisation of society – he deciphered the political transition from a constitutional monarchy with a broad franchise into the biopolitical hegemony of the hereditary aristocracy, as defined in the *Libro d'Oro* and completed with the *Serrata* – closure – of the *Maggior Consiglio* in 1297.

It was the stonemason's petrified gestures which enabled Ruskin to recognize the architecture of the Renaissance, in contrast to the spirituality of the gothic, as a facade of power based on alienation and the division of labour. '*The Renaissance frosts came, and all perished*'.²³ In hindsight he could have served as a model of what Guy Debord and the situationists imagined as the psychogeography of a city.²⁴

III.

THE QUARRY OF MONEY AND LABOUR

On one of the first pages of the chapter entitled 'The Nature of Gothic'²⁵ in the second volume of his Venice book, repeatedly identified by Ruskin himself as the core of his investigations and critically acclaimed within England's socialist movement, Ruskin makes a noteworthy transition: he examines the nature of architectural ornament with respect to the societal working conditions under which it was first created. He reads this in the characteristic fabrication of the end results of this labour, as if the cut stones were an index to the governing political and economic social structure. Lauded as a high point of English stylistics and art criticism, the essay encompasses the development of a utopian society in the material of an exemplary city in a state of historical innocence.

There he makes a distinction between the servile execution of labour in which the products of a subordinate worker are determined and directed by the intellect of a superior, a mode of production he traces back to the slaveholding societies of the Greeks, Egyptians and Mesopotamians, and the free work in the Christian Middle Ages where the individuality of the worker was respected through the acceptance of a certain necessary imperfection: 'Christianity having recognised, in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognises its value; it confesses its imperfection, in only bestowing dignity upon the acknowledgment of unworthiness.'²⁶

He expresses this productive ideal of Gothic creative genius in a remarkable dialectical shift: only the ability to recognise human imperfection as part of its nature results in a worthiness and dignity that embraces the admission of fallibility and so transcends unworthiness. It is present as a leitmotif throughout the thousands of sheets on which he sketched the observations from his explorations of Venice. It also aids in the further explication of these details for the later manuscript of *The Stones of Venice* in which he frequently returns to the motif of sublimity in the fruits of non-alienated work. What's more: the thought even explains his pietistic work ethic against which everything was rigorously measured – society, the history of art and he himself: 'Do what you can, and confess frankly what you are unable to do; neither let your effort be shortened for fear of failure, nor your confession silenced for fear of shame.'²⁷ It is the resolution of the separation of producer and product that liberates an individual creative act from the fear of failure and its commanding domination by an alien principle, producing a 'stately and unaccusable whole'.²⁸ For Ruskin, beauty and ethos are thereby

melded into one. He develops this ideal of art through an examination of the organisation of work, putting forth an argument rooted in aspects of political economy.

This is particularly true in regard to the third historical formation that he observes in the fabrication of architectural ornament and which he rejects in moral terms. In Renaissance architecture, he sees nothing but the need for mechanical reproduction of a hierarchically commanded plan. The ideal of these plans and specifications leads to a regime of labour, executed solely as an instruction to practise pure and mindless reproduction. In this scheme, individual particularity is necessarily experienced as a limitation and not as a moment of creative expression. Ruskin ascribes this 'form of error'²⁹ – work as the one-sided execution of a foreign will based on the division of labour – to a period he identified in the history of Venice, marked by a shift in the political life of a religiously steeped society under the paternal care³⁰ of a monarch elected by all – the doge – toward the independent political interests of the oligarchy of a hereditary nobility defended by forcible means. But what he is really addressing, and what he makes explicit in an evocation of 'the modern English mind',³¹ is the very same mode of production he had witnessed in the early industrial development of his native England.

At first, he frames his arguments with the coupled terms of imperfection and creative work, materialising in a context of self-confidence and free and independent action. Ruskin further associates its products with beauty and life, while the demeaning societal exploitation of abstract labour power is connected with falsehood and death. 'Great excellences' can only be the products of something better that lies within the capacity of each individual: imagination, emotion and thought. From this conviction, not much more

'Money means everything in the world except itself.'

JOHN RUSKIN

The Political Economy of Art, 1857

²² *'It became necessary for me to examine not only every one of the older palaces, stone by stone, but every fragment throughout the city which afforded any clue to the formation of its styles.'* John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 9, p. 4.

²³ John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 9, p. 278.

²⁴ *It is a paradox that the only ever realised psychogeographical atlas by the Situationists also used Venice as its subject:* Ralph Rumney, *The Leaning Tower of Venice* (Paris, 2002).

²⁵ John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 10, p. 180 ff.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 189 f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁰ *'It is often the best kind of liberty, – liberty from care.'* *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

than a moral attitude here, he derives an initial proposition of how things ought to be, directed at an audience of contemporaries:

‘And this is what we have to do with all our labourers; to look for the thoughtful part of them, and get that out of them, whatever we lose for it, whatever faults and errors we are obliged to take with it. For the best that is in them cannot manifest itself, but in company with much error.’³²

With the acceptance of mistakes and inadequacies in the final work product, the labourer needs to be made human: ‘He was only a machine before, an animated tool.’³³

In the context of a historical mystification and ethical ideal, Ruskin gathers attributes that constitute a comprehensive alternative to what Marx was attempting to formulate at roughly the same time with the category of alienated labour.³⁴

Ruskin goes on to describe the conditions of factory work in the regulations of physical activity, concluding in a thicket of metaphors characteristic of his suggestive rhetoric: with human intelligence lopped off, leaving behind rotting tree stumps, man mutates into a mere yoke for machinery. ‘The animation of her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke.’³⁵

There is an established way of reading Ruskin’s social criticism as a reactionary return to a fictional idyll of the worker, the stonemason of the Gothic period, embedded in a patriarchal feudal structure, a benevolent sovereignty that liberates him from worry and gives him every freedom to unfold his individual creative potential. According to this interpretation, Ruskin was devoted to a medievalistic romanticisation that fit the *zeitgeist* but was far too quixotic to be applied to the serialised industrial production of Manchester capitalism. This critique³⁶ derives an argument from the charge that he ignored the hierarchical com-

mand structure that governed Gothic Medieval construction projects, a hierarchy based on the tectonic knowledge of a designing elite and reliant on the precise execution of the given specifications. Such critiques ignore Ruskin’s assertion, in an instance of *petitio principii*, that the essence of all architecture lies in the detail of the ornamentation and not its volume and structure. They also fail to consider that Ruskin’s apparently ethical assumption of arcadian spiritual cooperation as the prevailing atmosphere of societal production was derived from the religious organisation of the building workers, existing in Venice in the form of the *scuole*, a combination of the corporative union of the masons’ lodge with a religious brotherhood. This was the basis for the absence of competitive phenomena that de-facto gave a social condition to the personality of the creative individual and self-assured craftsman in the architectonic meshwork of the city, as discovered through Ruskin’s practice of ‘close looking’. Up until the *Serrata*, the constitutional act establishing a regime of hereditary nobility, the Venice of the eleventh and twelfth centuries was indeed a metaphysically grounded society in which no difference could be identified in its self-perception between secular and religious power, above and below, artist and artisan. It was a society without exception with in which dissidence and competition yielded to religious consensus.

The fact that – in contrast to his contemporary Marx – Ruskin’s emphasis on a better mode of production drawn from Venice’s early history concerned a political economy based on evangelical moralisms did not keep him from applying a correct critique to the economics of his day or from arriving at two key insights, which remain valid today but are hard to come by and still not particularly widespread. Ruskin shared with Marx the experience of the historical moment when a

mass industrial proletariat emerged, recruited from a wholly uprooted rural population and concentrated in the explosively growing juggernauts of large production centres.

The view that Ruskin, a conservative Tory, held of this development contains two interrelated concepts. Counter to the separation of Ruskin the art critic from Ruskin the social critic, these concepts entered into his image of the city of Venice as a presentiment and emerged as a fully formed thought.

In contrast to the inversion of one man against another from the era of feudalism, when the arbitrary psychology of the ruler determined the relation to his subjects whose relative welfare necessarily lay in his own interest, Ruskin saw the order that controlled the factory smokestacks in his native England, sketched in gloomy terms, as a qualitatively different inversion: that of objective laws which, once established, operate with a self-propelling dynamic and attain absolutist authority over all expressions of life within society.³⁷ Showing that his manic cultural historical *dérives* were driven by the constant desire to fully merge aesthetics in the ethos of a rational social form of unfettered, non-alienated work, these deliberations bring him to the logical conclusion of a concept that accompanied and informed his definition of the world and himself as a subcutaneous guiding theme until the very last: his critique of the societal division of labour. It too is touched on for the first time in ‘The Nature of Gothic’:

‘We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that it divided; but the men: — Divided into mere segments of men — broken into small fragments and crumbs of life.’³⁸

In Ruskin’s Manichaeism and the related images that persistently guided his thinking, the mode of production

based in cooperation again stands for life and that of competition for death.³⁹ Despite these biblical dualisms, it is socio-critical thought that allows him to understand the basic and generic character of the division of labour which he can read from its mode of production: its specific nature lies in the division of the freedom to use labour by those who possess the means to do so, from the necessity of having to put one's own working capacity at the disposal of its use for those who master nothing except their body's own manpower.

Under the system of the law in which society effects this division of labour in the guarantee of private property, both sides are obliged to make use of their property. The labour force must make itself useful for the growth of the property of others, as offering its own consumption is its sole property. In this exchange, the control of the one side grows while the other increasingly wears out its very merchandise, its own body. What is thus made equal in the abstraction of the title of property appears in a practical comparison of these competing possessory titles, means of labour versus labour power, as an unequal entry into an antagonistic relationship of using and being used. Ruskin expresses the insight into the conflict under the rule of the abstract equality of property as an unequivocal but idealistic appeal:

'And whereas it has long been known and declared that the poor have no right to the property of the rich, I wish it also to be known and declared that the rich have no right to the property of the poor.'⁴⁰ Although his use of the term 'right' inverts legality and morality, its conditional subjectification, he suggests that the division of labour from the means necessary for its execution inherent in the notion of property leads to the situation that it is not the physical worker himself who gets recognised by society as the producer and owner of the product, but the one who

assigns the work. Here too, however, this comprehension is only to be found in Ruskin's writing as an affirmative ethical hope: 'Men, and their property, must both be produced together – not one to the loss of the other.'⁴¹

Beyond this notion – and herein lies Ruskin's most important finding – he was not under any illusions about the nature of the societal function that measures the abstract equality which spawns this contradiction: the form of money. He rejected the central ideology of bourgeois economies deeming money a mere instrument of convenience for simplifying exchange and enabling the distribution of goods.

'Money has been inaccurately spoken of as merely a means of exchange. But it is far more than this. It is a documentary expression of legal claim. It is not wealth, but a documentary claim to wealth, being the sign of the relative quantities of it, or of the labour producing it, to which, at a given time, persons, or societies, are entitled.'⁴²

For Ruskin, money is the measure that makes every element of a society's wealth into property, instilling it with exclusory character. For as such, it primarily functions as the opposite of a facilitation of the exchange of things. It lays a barrier between the need and the means of its satisfaction, for other than with money the need cannot be satisfied. A commodity is only available for sale because it cannot be had otherwise. It has its price. Money is thus not a means, but a condition of exchange, acting to determine the ends of society. Money inherently contains a division that gets repeated in every instance of its application and transforms every element of societal wealth into property. With its outcome, the division of labour, it decrees a certain mode of production, one in which labour becomes measurable in money and equal in abstract terms like any other commodity. Yet in this obliteration of individuality and quantitative indifference observed

32 *Ibid.*, p. 191.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 192.

34 Ruskin could not have known about Marx's formulations. *Das Kapital* was not translated into English until 1884 and the famous Paris Manuscripts not until three decades after Ruskin's death. *Economic & Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Mulligan (Moscow, 1959).

35 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 10, p. 193. 'But to smother their souls within them, to blight and hew into rotting pollards the suckling branches of their human intelligence, to make the flesh and skin which, after the worm's work on it, is to see God, into leathern thongs to yoke machinery with, this is to be slave-masters indeed.'

36 John Unrau, 'Ruskin, the Workman and the Savageness of Gothic' in *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison (London 1981), p. 33 ff.

37 Ruskin expressed it as follows: 'For, of old, the separation between the noble and the poor was merely a wall built by law; now it is a veritable difference in level of standing.' *Ibid.*, p. 194.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 196.

39 'The highest and first law of the universe – and the other name of life is, therefore, "help". The other name of death is "separation".' John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 7, p. 207, cf. vol. 17, p. 75.

40 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 17, p. 75.

41 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 19, p. 401.

42 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 17, pp. 157.

by Ruskin, money has power of disposition over those who cannot but supply the commodity of labour power. Money allows a legal claim, providing a 'title deed' to labour. He defines money in a manner unlike any other economist of his day:

'Whereas riches are a power like that of electricity, acting only through inequalities or negations of itself. The force of the guinea you have in your pocket depends wholly on the default of a guinea in your neighbour's pocket.... It has been shown that the chief value and virtue of money consists in its having power over human beings.'⁴³ Having understood the character of money as the power of access to human labour, he not only added a critique of contemporary theory. More significantly, he also elaborated a theory of the objective operating principles of this social object or objectified social relationship – that is, of money – which through an inversion of subject and object, takes command over every kind of human relationship.

'The writings of our vulgar political economists, calling money only a "medium of exchange", blind the foolish public conveniently to all the practical actions of the machinery of the currency. Money is not a medium of exchange, but a token of right.'⁴⁴

This machine possesses its own dynamic, however, for money is an endless end, self-perpetuating in its accumulation.

Ruskin left the city of Venice with the certainty that the brief glimpses of beauty he recorded there had to be consigned to a foreign society and a foreign mode of production. His manic study of the worked stones concluded that such creations could not have originated in a developed money economy of separation, into which the Venice of the Renaissance had already become ossified. Its objective laws do not allow the uniting of play, art and work. They do not recognise subjectivity, but divest

it of its particular nature. For in the city of society, all that remains operative is a self-determined subject. The law of value by which it is governed.

IV.

THE QUARRY OF INTELLECTUAL SIGHT

The history of philosophy is marked by an ongoing split between two intellectual traditions. One mistrusts the object of viewing as an appearance that not only masks the true essence of things, but in fact constitutes its sheer opposite. The other, by contrast, regards seeing as an activity of the mind and not just the mere physical apprehension of sensory data. Seldom entering into discursive contact with one another, these great meta-narratives persisted in a state of incommensurability and, with the opposition generally rooted in mere beliefs of unyielding nature, scant attempts were made at resolution.

Ruskin's lifelong emphasis on the importance of seeing as an overarching aesthetic, moral and theoretical faculty stemmed from the foundations of his religious education and never waned, even during the phases of his multiple 'un-conversions'. In his autobiography, he attributed this personal idiosyncrasy in the sense of sight as follows: 'I had also a sensual faculty of pleasure in sight, as far as I know unparalleled.'⁴⁵ The totalitarian evangelical fundamentalism to which the young Ruskin was subjected in his upbringing and education comprised a unifying nexus, arising from the conviction that while God appears in the world through ubiquitous symbols of his will, the world he created has a physical being, a real existence.⁴⁶ Therein lies the secret of a robust empiricism that must first take cognisance of the finite things before being able to go on and decipher the eternal signs within. 'He was a materialist; for him meaning began in matter, and could only be properly

expressed in matter.'⁴⁷ The category of intuition lay at the core of the evangelical method of *Welthaltigkeit* (relation to the real world) in which objectivity can be experienced intact and undivided as something real and symbolic. In the second volume of *Modern Painters*, his theory of aesthetics based on Turner, Ruskin put forth his three orders of truth as a first derivation of dialectical epistemology developed from pietistic typology. It combines the truth of the factual with the antithetical truth of the symbol to reach the ultimate truth of thinking in which the first two are subsumed in the three-fold sense of *elevare, conservare* and *negare*. The mediation of these ways of encountering objectivity is realised in intelligent seeing, which he initially addresses as 'imagination'. 'The three operations of the imagination. Penetrative, associative, contemplative.'⁴⁸

Although the act of seeing in this third step is already equipped with intellectual capabilities, this viewing by the imagination is still founded on an intuition of truth and not its pure thought.⁴⁹ Discussing all this in regard to his deduction of the arts, whose criterion ultimately lies solely in its character of achieving conceptual truth, Ruskin proceeds in his endeavour to unite the content of seeing with that of thinking. To this end, he created a category whose substantiation – as so often the case with him – is drawn from etymology.

There is a pre-philosophical meaning of the Greek word *θεωρία*, (*theoria*). Just as most of the expressions related to the cognitive experience of the world derive from the sense of vision, even the term farthest removed from the intellect's emergence from the sentient reception of empirical impressions, a term in which the result of thinking appears as the pure correlation of conclusions and judgements – betrays its origins in the organ of the eye. 'The term 'theory' goes back to a sacred

relationship of beholding and examining a celebration in honour of the Greek gods by a traveller. However, from the very beginning this viewing of a foreign spectacle is associated with an activity of the mind and, as such, refers to an intellectual gazing, an examination and consideration of what is seen.⁵⁰ The travelling spectator experiences a gain in understanding through the examination of something unbeknown.

The Aristotelian usage to which Ruskin primarily makes reference, as Neoplatonism, St Augustine and the Orthodox Church had done before him, is a secondary 'secularised' meaning in which looking and recognising are summarised as an integral human faculty.

The term *'theoria'* achieves what Ruskin had set out to accomplish: to constitute a mediation of the merits of the senses with those of thinking. It stands for both: contemplation and comprehension. 'Man is intended to observe with his eyes, and mind.'⁵¹ In doing so, *'theoria'* is first juxtaposed with the one-sided *'aesthesis'*, an isolated sensory perception. Ruskin considered sensory perception alone to be unfit to ascertain a sense of beauty – something that became a central argument in his theory of art – as the perception of beauty can only emerge from a moral capacity in which consciousness relates to its object in a valuative context.

The intertwining of morality and reason as instances of aesthetic truth – Ruskin's characteristic blend – account for his central fallacy. A fundamental holistic error evidenced in his demand that art attain insight and science strive for the good, as well as in the standard of beauty he applies to both. This is due to Ruskin's deep resistance to separating something morally true from the truth of knowledge: nothing less than a purposeful equivocation. Yet at the end of his explications, it is always certain that both must coincide in 'intellectual sight',⁵² the ordering of intelligence and the ordering of vision. His belief in the

necessity of the true picture for the development of reason is encountered as a quality throughout his entire oeuvre up to the material richness of his political-economic writings.

Admittedly, it is this very quality that as well accounts for Ruskin's shortcomings as a thinker. His visible mind surrendered to the power of imagination up to the point where the metaphoric imagery no longer serves the argumentation with an analogising conclusion, but itself takes the place of the argument: the emblematic thinking aims at perfect plausibility.

One of the most insightful critiques levelled at Ruskin's iconoduly was Proust's charge of insincerity, citing the former's argumentations based on the suggestive power of images and the veneration of the symbol for the symbol's sake: 'The doctrines he professed were moral, not aesthetic, yet he chose them for their beauty. And because he did not want to present them formally as things of beauty, but as statements of truth, he was forced to lie to himself about the reasons that had led him to adopt them.'⁵³

This enthusiasm for seeing that overwhelms thought evinces Ruskin's weakness as a theoretician, with the all typical contradictions and untenabilities rooted therein. Vice versa, his strength was to be found in the apprehension of the conditions of accordance between the term and the picture that guarantee Ruskin's realism. The excessive pictorial thinking represented a self-confident trust in the gnosis of his own muddled entanglement of moral, aesthetic and theoretical stances. Robert Hewison saw Ruskin's critique of the societal division of labour methodically expressed in the dissolution of disciplines and their boundaries, a practice he aspired to and imposed on himself. As he sought to meld political economics and art theory, however, he also avoided making distinctions between what should be and what is.⁵⁴

'All our notions of things being ostensibly derived from verbal description, not from sight. Now, I have no doubt that as we grow gradually wiser [...] we shall discover at least that the eye is a nobler organ than the ear; and that through the eye we must, in reality, obtain, or put into form, nearly all the useful information we are to have about this world.'

JOHN RUSKIN
A Joy Forever, 1857.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 44, p. 54.

44 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 28, pp. 134f.

45 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 35, p. 619.

46 cf. Hewison, 1976, pp. 155ff.

47 *Ibid.*, p. 167.

48 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 4, p. 228.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

50 Hannelore Rausch, *Theoria: Von ihrer sakralen zur philosophischen Bedeutung* (Munich, 1982).

51 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 25, p. xvi.

52 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 20, p. 152.

53 Marcel Proust, *On Reading Ruskin*, trans. Jean Autret (New Haven and London, 1987), p. 51.

54 Hewison, 1976, p. 192.

Ruskin's natural theological conviction that the recording of something seen should be considered a language 'invaluable as the vehicle of thought'⁵⁵ was never treated to a comprehensive epistemology, but constituted a life-long practice of precise seeing.

In his school of drawing, this practice took on its most sober form. It was borne by the certitude that cognition must always be seen and taught in the light of a concentrated recording of facts. The concepts he developed to capture reality through drawing – exercised as a pedagogical act of his social policy and, particularly in *The Stones of Venice*, taken as the basis for his own thinking – all went back to a certain moment of enlightenment, a catharsis experienced while drawing an aspen in Fontainebleau in the year 1842. The sketched lines tracing the tree branches seemed to form more than a representation. In the sprouting of his pen strokes, the inner nature of the observed seemed to manifest itself. He was struck by the crucial discovery that close looking revealed more of a truth than any antecedent knowledge. A realisation of something with laws more subtle and refined than all his supposed knowledge of the nature of the tree, which had been shaped more by the inventory of contemporary painterly style than by unbiased and impartial viewing. Recognising the corruption of his own seeing from years of academic teaching, he was compelled to proclaim: 'No one had ever told me to draw what was really there!'⁵⁶

The idea of pictorial knowledge was taken up as a central theme of his primer *The Elements of Drawing*.

He recommends it for a mode of drawing based on the ability to 'to set down clearly, and usefully, records of such things as cannot be described in words, either to assist your own memory of them, or to convey distinct ideas of them to other people.'⁵⁷ In this connection, he puts the emphasis not on me-

chanical skills and methods, but solely on a commitment to patient, concentrated and precise looking that begets drawing based on nature and forms the necessary precondition for all forms of knowledge. 'I believe that the sight is a more important thing than the drawing; and I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love Nature, than teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw.'⁵⁸

Ruskin's attempt to explain the interaction of the mind and the perceiving eye exhibits dialectical features, even though Ruskin never actually read Hegel directly himself, having only picked it up from secondary sources.⁵⁹ But it was Hegel who theoretically resolved the bad opposition between essence and appearance, between sense and reason. He did this in the *Phenomenology of Mind* with his dialectic of sensory certainty where he proved that the intellect cannot stop at the sentient reception of a singular. This without perceiving and relating to it through a conception of universality. The very moment a something is seen, it must be perceived as a 'tree' etc.. There is no holding of an indefinite Something to the percipient mind. For Hegel, seeing is nothing more than a necessary step in the becoming of the mind as it arrives at itself. There is no mute seeing of the indeterminate, nor can there be any seeing without identifying. Every act of seeing inherently contains the transition to cognition.

Although Ruskin's association of pictorial knowledge at times seems to resemble Hegel's deliberations in its eventual conclusion, his achievement lies in another area.

In his *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel first developed the idea of what was later termed the real abstraction (*Realabstraktion*).⁶⁰ In an examination of the form of money, he understood it as an 'existing concept' or as an 'existing universal'. Marx addressed 'objective dependency relations' that appear

'in such a way that individuals are now ruled by abstractions'.

Real abstractions are not a product of thinking – as due to the nature of abstractions – but of a societal organisation that grants the abstract principles of exchange dominion over the concrete. They are the concept for the inversion in which life ceases to exist where rules of the abstract take hold in reality. The result of this *quid pro quo* is the state of alienation in which life desists from itself. The reifying abstract produces the living dead. In money, man reenounters the results of his mode of production as something independent and falls under its domination.⁶⁰

Only when abstraction gains control over the living in a society, when objective relations determine social relations, can the essence of society be directly perceived in objects. Only then is there *prima facie* evidence in the image. For the physical objects of the visible world are objectifications of this essence, consisting of the rule of a principle. Only then can precise observation and its image coincide with insight into the essence of a society.

In his work on Venice and his critique of the Renaissance aesthetic as the embodiment of altered power relations, altered conditions of economic production and an altered money economy, Ruskin derived such a real abstraction from the visual analysis of thousands of details, corresponding to thousands of drawings. No one before or after has ever undertaken such an effort:⁶¹ a vast mosaic completed over long wanderings of observation and recording deduces the form of work as a conceptual whole from the close looking at a myriad of physical particles of materialised labour. In the stones of Venice, Ruskin read the city of society.

It is a society gripping its laws of motion in its own hands as a paper image: that of money.

V.

THE QUARRY OF THE
 UNHAPPY CONSCIOUSNESS

Ruskin's concept of *theoria* is deduced from a three-part progression.

It begins with the class who register the empirical, referred to as 'healthy fact-work', then proceeds to the association of symbolic representations, ascribed to 'men of design', and finally, in the third category, arrives at the ultimate of intellectual seeing, described as possessing the 'intellectual beauty' of his artistic and scientific ideal. *The Stones of Venice* presents a very similar triad.⁶² In his consideration of the Gothic workman, implicitly identified with the figure of the artist, Ruskin again delineates the three great classes of men, distinguishing the ability to perceive facts from the ability of the imagination as well as a third synthesis assimilating both as a higher potency of the active mind in an act of intellectual sight. These three positions are classified, somewhat provisionally, under the terminology of sensualism, purism and naturalism.

In this categorisation, he gives the impression of assigning this third level of authorship – overcoming the one-sidedness of a pure empiricism of the senses and a pure generaliser of representation – not only to Giotto, Tintoretto and Turner, but also to his own stance. It is undoubtedly the stance of the *theoria* and, though Ruskin never regarded his own life's work of drawings and paintings under the attribute of art, here he articulates the standard for his own actions. He does this in high-register tones, meant to form a climax of the argument. The achievement of the third faculty, seeing and rendering reality 'with a kind of divine grasp and government of the whole', is 'infinite as nature' precisely because it permits the contrasts of good and evil, of light and shadow. And then he adds a further enigmatic opposition whose

conflicting sides – 'splendour and sadness' – are within reach of the 'principal men of this class', able to attain both simultaneously in their utmost form.⁶³

The characteristic of 'sadness occasionally reaching the highest degree' that he appears to confer upon himself hits upon the central aspect of Ruskin's inner turmoil, revealing itself in equal measure in his theoretical influence as well as in his biographical despair. There is an identical category in Hegel's derivation of the self-consciousness that affords the key to this contradiction in Ruskin's thinking and life.

It is Hegel's concept of the 'unhappy consciousness' and he deduces it historically from the internal inconsistencies of stoicism and scepticism. Stoic thinking nullifies itself because, although it postulates the freedom of the self-consciousness, this is only realised in a retreat to internalisation and subjectification and thereby remains abstract. Sceptical thinking annuls itself because it can only contest the possibility of positive knowledge from a standpoint of negative omniscience.

The unhappy consciousness is defined by the fact that – unlike its two predecessors – it is aware of its schism and irresolvability. It is the perseverance of a contradiction of thinking in thinking itself.

'Thus we have here that dualizing of self-consciousness within itself, which lies essentially in the notion of mind; but the unity of the two elements is not yet present. Hence the Unhappy Consciousness. The Alienated Soul which is the consciousness of self as a divided nature, a doubled and merely contradictory being.'⁶⁴

The unhappy aspect is created from division and the experience of this division as insurmountable. It is a division in the knowledge of the world we occupy, one of empirical details, and the pure contemplation of a world beyond, one of infinite being, which can only be obtained through moral or religious

'No book of mine had so much influence on contemporary art as the "Stones of Venice"; but this influence has been possessed only by the third part of it, the remaining two-thirds having been absolutely ignored by the British public. (...) I would rather (hear), for my own part, that no architects had ever condescended to adopt one of the views suggested in this book, than that any should have made the partial use of it which has mottled our manufactory chimneys with black and red brick, dignified our banks and drapers' shops with Venetian tracery, and pinched our parish churches into dark and slippery arrangements for the advertisement of ceap coloured glass and pantiles.'

JOHN RUSKIN

The Stones of Venice, 1851

Preface to the Third Edition, 1847

55 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 3, p. 87.

56 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 35, p. 311. Cf. *ibid.* p. 314.

57 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 15, p. 25.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

59 Cf. Hewison, 1976, pp. 204.

60 Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Frühe politische Systeme*, ed. G. Göbler (Berlin, 1974), p. 334; G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie 1818–1831 (Lectures on the Philosophy of Right)*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, 1974), pp. 229ff; Karl Marx, *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie (A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)* (Berlin, 1953), pp. 81ff; Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, transl. by Tom Bottomore and David Frisby, edited by David Frisby, (London, 2004), p. 98.

61 Migropolis attempted such a hubris and moreover dealt with the very same territory. Cf. Wolfgang Scheppe, *Migropolis, Venice/ Atlas of a Global Situation*, (Ostfildern, 2009).

62 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 10., 217

63 *Ibid.*, p. 222.

64 G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (London, 1967), p. 251.

beliefs. The longing for an infinite and the consciousness of the infinite's ultimate unattainability through thinking alienates the consciousness from itself.

Here Hegel discovers a development of consciousness riven between the foundering ancien régime of religious and moral values and an incipient empirical concept of reality standing helpless in the face of the former. Two sides that must fall painfully apart. An instance of paradoxical thinking that knows its truth rests outside itself and yet wishes to continuously assert it as being within. 'For it, both are realities foreign to each other.'⁶⁵ It seeks to grasp the known varied and infinite appearances, taken as the changeable inessential, with the simple and unchangeable essences confronting them as the infinite. This shapes its attempted unity, which, adhering to its contrast, an opposition, is therefore bound to falter. 'Here then, there is a struggle against an enemy, victory over whom really means being worsted, where to have attained one result is really to lose it in the opposite. Consciousness of life, of its existence and action, is merely pain and sorrow over this existence and activity; for therein consciousness finds only consciousness of its opposite as its essence – and of its own nothingness.'⁶⁶

Hegel further remarks that this position of thought is directed against itself: 'It takes up towards its object an attitude which is not that of thought; but rather, it devotes itself to thinking only in a state of Devotion (Andacht).'⁶⁷

Ruskin appears as a truly monumental embodiment of the unhappy consciousness, lending it the dramatically contradictory figure of the preacher as a scientist or of the obsessively recording empiricist as an impassioned moral philosopher. All his life, an impressive number of concrete insights, precisely observed objective contradictions and correct concepts

were accompanied by the only feasible seeming reconciliation in his eyes, one achieved through the insistence on religious or moral principles as the foundation of society, which his findings often downright contemptuously contradicted. As a result, this coexistence likewise accompanied him as a conviction of the nullity of his actions and the feeling of insufficiency. Sin is the category with which such moral self-criticism extinguishes itself while maintaining its own canon of values.

In summarising the perplexities of the unhappy consciousness, Hegel begins to speak in metaphoric imagery with an uncanny similarity to the favoured images repeatedly evoked by Ruskin:

'Its thinking as such is no more than the discordant (gestaltlos) clang of ringing bells, or a cloud of warm incense, a kind of thinking in terms of music, that does not get the length of notions, which would be the sole, immanent, objective mode of thought.'⁶⁸

Ruskin acknowledged this discord of intellect and morality, even proudly confirming the endurance of contradiction as a personal character trait. Thus, in accordance with the principles of the unhappy consciousness, he must necessarily be aware of its divisiveness. The faculty in which he considered himself to have been 'uselessly or affectedly refined' is again characteristically expressed in his motif of *theoria*, of the higher unity of sight and imagination in intellectual intuition: 'Intellectual lens, and moral retina—the lens faithfully and far collecting, the retina faithfully and inwardly receiving. I cannot better the expression.'⁶⁹

Hegel conceives the form of the unhappy consciousness and the steps of self-consciousness that lead to it both in terms of logic and history. The unhappy consciousness conceives a kind of ideological estimation still in widespread currency today, but it is also a historical stage of transformation in

the derivation of the mind as a social consciousness.

He attributes the self-despairing abstraction of a moral world view as a determinate feature to the medieval Christendom of the Renaissance, the very epoch in which Ruskin himself demonstrated the dissolution of society's religious unity in the example of Venice, the unity he longed for.

It is an absurd consequence and a consequent absurdity that Ruskin's unhappy consciousness consists precisely in the wish to commend to his own modern industrial age the very archaic place that historically precedes Hegel's unhappy consciousness as a paradise lost of absolute coherence, as the measure of an instruction, of an abstract 'ought'.

Ruskin's failure at resolving the contradiction of knowledge and morality is indicated in three examples. In all three cases, it takes as its point of departure Ruskin's ideal of a cohesive Venetian Garden of Eden during the Gothic period. His conception of an epoch in which a collectively shared belief also constitutes an identity of ends: cooperation of a community experienced as indivisibility, abidance to the laws of dedication to the whole, deference to an elected political head with whom the people feel united, sharing in a common destiny experienced under the parameters of Christianity.⁷⁰

The first example is the impact of *The Stones of Venice* on the historicism of the Victorian Gothic Revival, to which Ruskin himself contributed in a number of respects. His subsequent disassociations are well-known. Such as this one: 'For Venetian architecture developed out of British moral consciousness I decline to be answerable.'⁷¹ Less well known, however, is the fact that he explicitly and directly propelled the movement from which he later vehemently distanced himself. In a foreword to a later edition of the Venice volumes, he wrote the following,

beginning his argument with the Renaissance and Classicism: 'All the architects who have built in that style have built what was worthless; and therefore the greater part of the architecture which has been built for the last three hundred years, and which we are now building is worthless. We must give up this style totally, despise it and forget it, and build henceforward only in that perfect and Christian style hitherto called Gothic, which is everlasting the best. This is the theorem of these volumes.'⁷²

It is difficult to believe that Ruskin expected an external decree of a formal style, the very thing he had rejected as mechanisation and façadism in the structural programme of the Renaissance, to lead to moral renewal of his society. And yet his involvement in the plan for the Natural History Museum in Oxford, for instance, demonstrates precisely this idealism and its disappointment. Despite having been an influence on the design and decoration, Ruskin withdrew from the project upon witnessing how his hope for spiritual devotion in stonemasonry work performed under normal economic conditions was left unsatisfied by the Irish O'Shea brothers. As if he had not himself earlier derived the aesthetic of the fruits of labour from a societal mode of production, instead of the reverse: stylising an aesthetic principle into a mainspring of culture. A hope that cannot be reconciled with his insight that the existential conditions of Gothic artistry were obliterated by the emergence of a commercial society of competition. If anything, his longing for the preindustrial harmony of an imagined Middle Ages as a form of escapism practised under the conditions of industrialisation arouses suspicion of following a popular sentimentalist tendency of his day: that of Goetzmism, as Ruskin's friend Carlyle called the strain of Victorian Romanticism dedicated to the imagination of a Middle Ages as a

sphere of universal reconciliation, taking its name from Goethe's *Goetz of Berlichingen*.⁷³

Examining the decay of his Garden of Reconciliation in early medieval Venice, Ruskin knew of the political-economic conditions that alone were capable of bringing forth the aesthetic signs of an arcadian unity of production and creation, of art and work, of an object and its individual creator. Owing to his particular methodical moralism, Ruskin maintained that a mere imperative could recreate the results of the lost paradise without the context of its earlier conditions.

This contradiction found its clearest expression in Ruskin's concept of the state. Amounting to a mere exhortation to the state's sense of justice, it could do nothing other than forcibly counter all remembrances of social conflicts and the analysis of their objective nature in the whole his theory.

Ruskin was an unconditional supporter of paternalistic authority. He did not wish to regard it as a political force for the protection of property and the ensuing division of labour between work and capital, following as an inevitable conclusion from his theorem on the power of money and its practical decision-making about use and being used. On the contrary: he viewed it as an instance of the good, pacifying and reconciling this opposition, a benevolent authority dedicating its actions to the values of honour and justice. If considering the nation to be a family, as Ruskin decreed immediately following a thought concerning the societally divisive consequences of a universal consideration of work as a cost factor, 'the condition of unity in that family consisted no less in their having a head, or a father, than in their being faithful and affectionate members, or brothers.'⁷⁴

The French affliction of fraternity seemed futile to him without the accompanying allegiance to an institutional oversight, the 'father' who

65 *Ibid.*, p. 252.

66 *Ibid.*

67 *Ibid.*, p. 257.

68 *Ibid.*

69 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 22, p. 513.

70 Cf. Kenneth Clark, 'A Note on Ruskin's *Writings on Art and Architecture*', in *Ruskin Today* (New York, 1964).

71 *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 March 1873, cf. 'But I have had indirect influence on nearly every cheap villa-builder between this and Bromley; and there is scarcely a public-house near the Crystal Palace but sells its gin and bitters under pseudo-Venetian capitals copied from the Church of the Madonna of Health or of Miracles. And one of my principal notions for leaving my present house is that it is surrounded everywhere by the accursed Frankenstein monsters of, indirectly, my own making.' *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 16 March 1872.

72 John Ruskin, *Works of John Ruskin* (New York, 1888), vol. 6., *The Stones of Venice*, vol. II., pp. 261.

73 Thomas Carlyle, *Sir Walter Scott* (New York, 1909–14), § 47.

74 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 16, p. 24.

provides it with a defined framework of ethical norms. The fact that respect needs to be practically commanded for property and its expression in the value equivalent of money, to get property owners to submit to their freedom of utilisation and being utilised as persons, is fully concealed in his construction of a relation of power that ahistorically presupposes the application of these principles without any reason given.

He continues to insist on his ideal of moral reconciliation through the honesty of political power even if he does not abstain from using the metaphor of war and even if he did not thereby betake himself of any ethical clarity: 'And the guilty Thieves of Europe, the real sources of all deadly war in it, are the Capitalists – that is to say, people who live by percentages on the labour of others.... The Real war in Europe ... is between these and the workman, such as these have made him.'⁷⁵

Ruskin's moral fundamentalism, wielding the self-evidence of ethical judgement as naturally as that of aesthetic judgement, compels him to conceive of the power of money expressed in this relationship absent its guarantor. It is the institution that must forcibly oblige the recognition of its monetary means – for without force, the paper remains a meaningless image – upon which Ruskin bestows all his hopes for the dissolution of the separation, caused and enforced by this very power. A common thread in Ruskin's rhetoric of the state can therefore be identified in the equation of governing and educating:⁷⁶ His interventionist state does not operate through command, but mediates and arbitrates with words and ideational values.

It required complete desistance from his insight into the nature of money and the resultant social division in order to validate a principle of 'ought' entirely detached from this awareness as the end of a state dedicated to the desire for a mode of production based on

ethical standards. Against better judgment, Ruskin envisioned an industry under the care of the state as a haven for the betterment of living conditions whose sole purpose was sited in the production of useful utility values.

For Ruskin, the object of this care included the phenomenon of mass unemployment. On other occasions, he had stipulated this to be an instrument of wealth, making use of the competition of wage labour by an industrial 'reserve army' to lower wages. He nevertheless recommended a form of government that would make ethically based economic actions binding by dedicating itself to the production of utility value of necessary goods at a fair wage, as a state-run employment scheme operating outside the prevailing objective economic laws. Ruskin's realism barely allowed him to admit that such justice could only be had if this socially acceptable mode of production were explicitly established outside the rationality of commerce, profit and economic cycles.⁷⁷

The guiding principle of the good that such a rule would have to sustain against the liberalism of a self-organising economy of competition still bears the mythic traits of the Venetian doge in its spiritually enlightened polity. As idealistic as it may be conceived, this rule seeking a position outside the economy as its overseer and political exploiter possesses characteristics of a fascist form of government.

This contradiction in the conception of the state reveals itself with Ruskin in a third systematic antinomy, which most clearly evinces its rigid constitution as a moral attitude.

Seeking to draw its metaphysical validity from etymology, Ruskin's rhetorical flow leads him to construct dichotomies that require neologisms to come into existence. He opposes the 'goods' with the 'bads' and 'wealth' with 'illth'. Both emanate from the same fallacy: Ruskin only recognises produc-

tion as an ethically acceptable form of a society's metaphoric wealth when oriented to the fabrication of useful and necessary products. Production for 'the mouth'. This excludes luxury goods and all commodities that generate an otherwise non-existent need at the hands of a calculating business interest, craving to create profitable demand. Such goods are 'bads'. For Ruskin, true exploitation rests in laying claim to human labour for the manufacture of such – in his opinion – superfluous commodities. They are a waste of manpower.⁷⁸

Even against the background of his own knowledge of the organisation of production as a transaction benefitting its instigator, this appraisal culminating in Ruskin's theory of utility value⁷⁹ is a self-contradictory plea: commodities only enter the world as a means of doing business. As the sole end of their creation, the aspect of simultaneously being useful emerges as a secondary and arbitrary precondition. By imposing the necessity of paying a price, the monetary form stands between a need and its satisfaction by way of a commodity and thus excludes the need from the object of its satisfaction as a prior necessity. Consequently, the essence of this mode of production manages to negate the character of a commodity as being something useful. It is first and foremost, and as its end, something different: an exchange value.

"There is no wealth but Life!"⁸⁰

In a place where the dead exercises dominion over the living, Ruskin's central political-economic tenet is but a vain hope. Ruskin was aware of the subject-object inversion as an unpent necessity and blind process of the dictate of things over people, yet sought to denounce and heal it as a moral breach: therein lies his tragedy. It is the tragedy of every moral feeling that overtakes thinking.

Wolfgang Scheppe

Seeing_the_Abstract
 Visual_Archives_&_the_Reification_of_Rule
 Five_Critical_Quarries

*'[...] that we might well doubt,
 as we watched her faint reflection in the
 mirage of the lagoon,
 which was the City,
 and which the Shadow.'*

JOHN RUSKIN

The Stones of Venice, vol. 1, 1851

75 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 27, p. 127.

76 'Educate, or govern, they are one and the same word.' John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 18, p. 502.

77 The following argument relates to 'Unto This Last' and 'Fors Clavigera' in John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 17, vol. 27, vol. 28 and vol. 29.

78 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 16, p. 19, pp. 48ff, pp. 123ff, pp. 405.

79 'Consumption is the crown of production; and the wealth of a nation is only to be estimated by what it consumes.' John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 17, p. 101, cf. vol. 17, p. 98. This position on utility value includes Ruskin's antipathy toward the sphere of distribution and, in particular, of financial capital as bad and morally unproductive forms of wealth.

80 John Ruskin, *Library Edition*, vol. 17 p. 105.