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Displacing as a method: On 'Displacing Caravaggio' and 'Dance of Values'

Two books with very different contents, languages, and structures published between 2018 and 2019 convey through their respective arguments how displacing might serve as a method for investigating new and heterodox forms of remediation and montage. Both books offer the possibility to cross new terrains of interdisciplinary migration, unexpected 'adaptations', and new ways of displacing the founding works of Western thought and art from their original settings to a new destination, one that in these two cases takes the form of an original political, linguistic, and visual project. In the case of Francesco Zucconi's *Displacing Caravaggio* it is the highly controversial arena of humanitarian visual culture; in the case of Elena Vogman's *Dance of Values* the project is Eisenstein's ultimately unachievable 'Notes for a film on Capital'.

Caravaggio's 'The Seven Works of Mercy' was consigned to the Confraternity of Pio Monte della Misericordia in 1607. During the summer of 2014, however, it became the target of controversy and negotiations involving various institutions. The Vatican and Curia of Milan, supported by Italy's Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities and Tourism, asked to borrow the painting so it could be shown in the pavilion of Caritas Internationalis, one of the world's most important NGOs, during the 2015 Universal Expo in Milan. After much debate, the project proved unsuccessful and the painting was left where it hung.

In early 2016, 'The Seven Works of Mercy' was again at the center of heated discussion about the possibility of 'displacing' it. The idea this time was to display it at the Palazzo del Quirinale in Rome for the 'Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy', inaugurated by Pope Francis on 8 December 2015 and concluded on 20 November 2016. A group of art historians, one of which was

Tomaso Montanari, published an open letter in the Corriere del Mez-zogiorno newspaper asking the President of the Republic not to approve the exhibition of Caravaggio's masterpiece.

Fig. 1: Caravaggio, 'The Seven Works of Mercy', 1606-1607, Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples, courtesy of Alamy.

These recent episodes form the backdrop of the highly relevant reflection Francesco Zucconi offers in *Displacing Caravaggio: Art, Media, and Humanitarian Visual Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). At the heart of the controversy Zucconi presents is therefore a heated debate on whether or not Caravaggio's works can be relocated in relation to what is known as the 'European migrant crisis'. Another episode Zucconi uses to reveal these contradictions: on 2 June 2016, President of the Italian Republic Sergio Mattarella inaugurated the ex-

hibition 'Verso il Museo della fiducia e del dialogo per il Mediterraneo' (Towards a Museum of Trust and Dialogue for the Mediterranean), supported by the cities of Lampedusa and Linosa, the group Comitato 3 Ottobre, and the association First Social Life, and set up at Lampedusa's Archaeological Museum of the Pelagie Islands.

The exhibition featured objects recovered from the dramatic shipwrecks of recent years, imcuding the disaster of 3 October 2013, in which 368 migrants died off the Isola dei Conigli. In one room, visitors could gaze on Caravaggio's 'Sleeping Cupid', where it occupied an entire wall. Below it, on the horizontal surface of a blue panel, was a line of paper boats – folded paper boats, the kind usually made by children. This choice emphasised the discrepancy between the 'auratic value' of the framed painting and the fragile context of human precariousness.

Fig. 2: The 'Sleeping Cupid' exposition on Lampedusa (2016).

Zucconi asks, how should we position ourselves in relation to these types of actions? Should we criticise such attempts to bring the artistic heritage of the past (and a specific art historical and cultural past at that) into the present? Or should we oppose such moves that only decontextualise paintings but are also 'impertinent' in the face of the conditions experienced by the people NGOs serve?

Zucconi's choice is to move beyond a binary opposition to instead take advantage of the opportunity to forge a new paradigm, that of a 'displacing', by examining the profound relationship between the most tragic images of

today and the iconographic repertoire of Western art. Zucconi situates his reflection within the vast and mobile space of 'humanitarian visual culture', using Caravaggio as a lens for imagining a possible visual archaeology of this panorama of studies on humanitarianism. Building on Mieke Bal's book *Quoting Caravaggio* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), Zucconi developed his idea of *Displacing Caravaggio*.

Fig. 3: Magnus Wennman, Mahdi, 18 months old, Horgoš/Röszke, Serbian-Hungarian Border, 2016, ©UNHCR/Wennman.

Zucconi thus seeks to formulate the idea of a new naturalism, a direct representation of life, in the corpus of Caravaggio's work. Caravaggio's attention to the surface of bodies, his ability to explore the quality of the epidermis and emphasise its sensitivity or insensitivity, allows Zucconi to focus on the tension between sensitive and insensitive as the key to understanding a certain rhetoric that characterises humanitarian photography (starting from the turn of the twentieth century imaginary, i.e. images still deeply influenced by colonialism and racist ideology). Focusing on the theme of medical injection in the field of medical-surgical assistance, Zucconi analyses the way bodies come into contact with medical devices and explores the possibilities of an

'aesthetic of sensation'. How then, Zucconi asks, is the becoming-animal of Caravaggio's 'Boy Bitten by a Lizard' (1595-1596) different from the becoming-person of humanitarian photography? A thorny question when considered as departing from the very ideas of person and becoming (in contexts in which person-ness is often determined by a politics of an external gaze, a judgement passed by the Other who speaks an already dominant language).

Fig. 4: Caravaggio, 'Boy Bitten by a Lizard', 1595-1596, Roberto Longhi Foundation of Historical Studies, Florence, courtesy of Alamy.

His departure point is thus the idea of displacing as a method for orienting a visual thought based on humanitarian culture so as to describe the process of translating and transferring images from one temporal, historical, geographical, artistic, and economic framework to another. In so doing, Zucconi suggests different ways of interpreting and applying the notion of displacing in

relation to the idea of a humanitarian Caravaggio 'conveying' signs and images, a 'migrant' Caravaggio. This idea becomes the bearer of an unavoidable discussion about the re-mediation and relocation of 'theoretical objects', in this case represented by Caravaggio's paintings themselves. At the heart of this possibility of displacing as relocation lie two additional ideas that focus on Zucconi's method: identity and experience. The most explicit of such references is to *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, as Zucconi makes clear right at the beginning of his book: 'The reference is to the idea of "remediation" introduced by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin to examine ways in which [a medium] appropriates the techniques, forms, and social significance of other media and attempts to rival or refashion them in the name of the real.' (p. 7)

The author lingers on Francesco Casetti's idea of relocation, central to the book *Lumière Galaxy: Seven Key Words for the Cinema to Come* (Columbia University Press, 2015), that fuels parts of Zucconi's own reflection, immediately giving rise to a pressing question: how can an identity preserve its structure over time? How can a work (such as a painting by Caravaggio) remain itself even while migrating between contexts, be these temporal or geographical?

This question naturally leads to another: what identity are we talking about? In the specific context of a discussion on displacing, this is not an identity that remains fixed in a 'same' (idem), in its own substantial characteristics; rather, it is an ipse identity that remains constant over time even while being constantly unsettled and reshaped through contact with the other and otherness. What then are the necessary conditions for a work to maintain its own (ipse) identity or maintain continuity with itself when moving to new places and contexts? In what terms can we speak of the continuity/discontinuity or identity/difference of the aesthetic experience in relation to Zucconi's idea of a displacing move in Caravaggio's work?

Building on the lines of speculation Zucconi suggests, we might answer this two-fold question using the idea of an ipse identity that is constantly exposed to different forms of contamination and change over time. The very notion of experience thus assumes the position of an alternative paradigm based on the need for recontextualisation in which it is precisely the move of chronological and spatial displacement that enables such recontextualisation. Indeed, displacing brings about an aesthetic (and political) collision between two profoundly different contexts. The experience of displacement lies, therefore, in the moment of passage or entre-deux between the context of

belonging and departure (in this case, the work of Caravaggio) and the context of arrival, the place where Caravaggio must land. The result is collision with a completely foreign reality, such as the terrain of migrants and the lands where they are forced to disembark (when they are able to do so).[1]

Can displacing in this sense represent an effective method of iconographic displacement, in the framework of a humanitarian discourse anchored in the idea of visual culture? And from a political point of view, are we authorised to choose a master such as Caravaggio as the starting point for this displacing, given his links to an iconography and history directly connected to Christian iconographic culture and Western cultural history? Reading Caravaggio's paintings as his chosen 'theoretical objects', Zucconi strives to uncover their complex historicity and a series of variable genealogies involving encounters and clashes with profound difference by investing in this displacement from a fixed starting point to a new landing place that produces unprecedented montage effects:

> The assonance that connects 'displacement' to 'display' rings in the ear, provided that the first term is conceived of as a continuous questioning of the methodological and theoretical procedures through which the research develops, the montage takes form, and the installation materializes. Taking the same approach, it therefore appears feasible to conceive of the practice of displacing as a critical and self-critical display of the forms of displacement. (p. 203).

The focus of Zucconi's critique is the ambiguous use of Caravaggio's works in the context of contemporary humanitarian culture and all the contradictions and political ambiguities entailed by such transfer. We might consider displacing as a method of assembling heterogeneous spaces and times, in view of a new encounter that challenges the rash, opportunistic use of this displacement in the humanitarian field. To do so, perhaps we need to think of it in terms of a double displacement or double migration that also implies relocating works that are produced in the context of a humanitarian crisis or a health emergency triggered by such a crisis: displacing could, or should, also mean learning to move, to decolonise, in the sense of making space in our own land for another to enter (making space for another's culture or works).

One step in this direction was Maria Grazia Leonetti Rodinò's 2011 project "The Seven Works of Mercy" in which a series of contemporary artworks[2] were invited to the Confraternity of the Pio Monte della Misericordia in Naples to dialogue with Caravaggio's painting. Such engagement may not be sufficient in the sense outlined about, however. In the extremely historically

and politically delicate field of humanitarian culture, the displacement of works such as Caravaggio's masterpieces could be rethought according to logics extending beyond national heritage and territory to also involve potential encounters and clashes in other domains of works (including contemporary ones) that might act as the bearers of different traditions and alternative histories connected to the critical and as-yet-politically- unresolved migrant crisis in the Mediterranean countries.

Fig. 5: 'The Seven Works of Mercy', Pio Monte della Misericordia church altar (Chiesa Maggiore).

The most important aspect of Zucconi's book is precisely its having raised this issue in relation to recent and specific episodes and used a method of image analysis that harbors the possibility of critically rethinking the controversial logic of contemporary humanitarian culture, including from the inside out.

Fig. 6: Book Cover

Another recent publication explores displacing as a method, i.e. as an act of linguistic, medial, and morphological transposition: Elena Vogman's *Dance of Values: Sergei Eisenstein's Capital Project*. Is it possible to make a political economic critique into a work of art? What tools could be used to carry out such displacing? Will Marx ever be able to speak Joyce's language? Ninety-two years ago, Soviet director Sergei Eisenstein grappled with these questions to offer the global artistic imagination a set of guidelines for cinematically adapting *Das Kapital*.

> 12.X. 1927. We are going to film *Capital*, on Marx's script – the only logical solution.[3]
> 2-3.IV.1928. Night. 'Today I defined the formula for the content of *Capital* (its organization). Teach the worker to think dialectically. Illustrate the dialectic method.
> 8.IV. 1928. '*Capital* will be officially dedicated to the Second International [...]. The formal part will be dedicated to Joyce.[4]

In his 'Notes for a Film on Marx's *Capital*', Eisenstein primarily interrogates how a process, a (dialectical) method, might be shown on film. Bringing *Capital* to the screen did not mean simply displaying the contents of the book; it meant teaching viewers to 'think dialectically.'

The film was to be dedicated to James Joyce. Indeed, the inspiration behind the economic and political digressions of Eistenstein's project is said to come from *Ulysses*, specifically the succession of themes bound by intellectual and 'sensual' association in Lepold Bloom's inner monologue and the way they are combined through montage in a collision of the logical and illogical, starting from the 'banal story' of one man's day.[5]

To succeed, the director's formal concept had to derive from an unhinged, irregular, 'sensual' language capable of transcending the logic and scientific structure of the text. For Eisenstein, the inner monologue of *Ulysses* was the only narrative technique that could effectively dismantle and reassemble *Capital* in a completely new form, Joyce's now-blind eyes the only lens through which the book's contents could be displayed. Like many of Eisenstein's planned projects, the film about *Capital* was never made. It was conceived as a synthetic work of art, not indifferent to either the theory of social conflict as a permanent feature of human history or to the laws of artistic creation capable of giving form to such conflict.

Eighty years after Eisenstein's planned film adaptation of *Capital*, Alexander Kluge's imposing work *Nachrichten aus der ideologischen Antike. Marx – Eisenstein – Das Kapital* (News from Ideological Antiquity: Marx – Eisenstein – Capital) (2008) proposed a new act of displacing: its reassembly of images from heterogeneous contexts (current affairs images, short films, photographs, intertitles with quotations, shots of actors reading passages from Marx's work) for a total length of over nine hours revisits the kind of ambitious image-trading exemplified by Godard that is celebrated in *Histoire(s) du cinéma* and other works more recent and delimited in terms of concept, realization, and overall length, such as *Le Livre d'images*.

As is well known, many other artists and intellectuals have tried to bring *Capital* to the screen over the years, using various techniques and languages: from Guy Debord's *La societé du spectacle* to Mark Lewis' *Two Impossible Films* (1995), and Michaël Blum's *Wandering Marxwards* (1999), Eisenstein's idea has appeared in new and different forms of adaptation with new domains as the grounds of displacement.
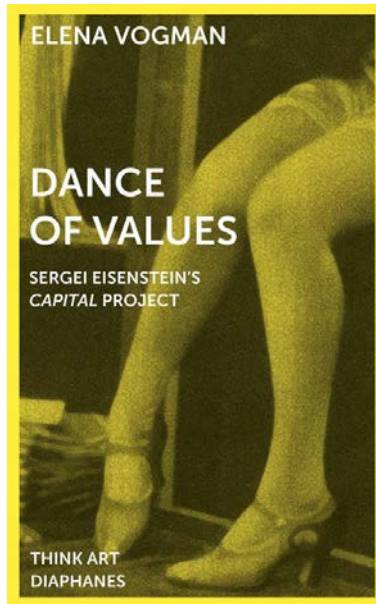
Fig. 7: Cover Elena Vogman, Dance of Values. Eisenstein's Capital Project

In this landscape of rediscovery and adaptation, translation and shifts in time and meaning from one medium to another and from one period to another, from one discipline to another and from one language to another, Vogman's book stands out as one of the most innovative and enlightening studies on Eisenstein's unrealised project. *Dance of Values: Sergei Eisenstein's Capital Project* (Diaphanes, Zurich 2019) is the fruit of extensive archival research Vogman has carried out since her doctoral dissertation on *Method* (the title of the vast project Eisenstein pursued between 1932 and 1948, published for the first time in 2002 in Russian). This dissertation was also the subject of a publication released by Diaphanes in 2018 in German: *Sinnliches Denken. Eisensteins exzentrische Methode* (Sensuous Thinking. Eisenstein's Eccentric Method). Vogman has gained an in-depth knowledge of the *Method* archival materials, texts which are often fragmentary (having neither order nor hierarchy) and made up of drawings, quotations, and notes;[6] it is this extensive reading that constitutes the foundation for her interpretation of Eisenstein's notes for the *Capital* film project.

Between October 1927 and September 1928, Eisenstein transformed his 'working diaries' (as Vogman notes, numbered ironically and not coinci-

dentally as volumes) into an 'editing surface' in which graphic elements, quotations, and images drawn from various sources along with text captions could variously enter into relationships. *Capital* is the result of this complex method of reassembling disparate sources. Dance of Values focuses on three notebooks, each about 150 pages long, accompanied by a large number of newspaper clippings, drawings, and diagrams, today kept at the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art in Moscow.[7] Unlike previous editions of the notes for Eisenstein's adaptation of Marx's *Capital* (mostly dating back to the 1970s and limited to only the text of the notes), Vogman's innovative study involves a careful reading of a selection of archival records and its surprising visual apparatus, paying particular attention to the construction method and materials Eisenstein used to design this 'building-body' of records, namely assembling 'cells' drawn from organically disparate tissues.

Vogman's volume on Eisenstein's Capital presents a series of unpublished materials, and as such it mostly abounds in 'poor' images: apparently marginal cuttings connected by a series of visual and linguistic 'displacements' that were completely overlooked in previous publications of these notes. In this context, certain Marxian notions such as 'value form', 'metamorphosis of commodities', 'social metabolism', and 'hieroglyphic' (p. 9) are invoked, re-animated, and made to dance in Vogman's commentary on the 'plates' (displaying the original pages of the notebooks). As Vogman states, in relocating from one discipline to another:

> These interrelations between the heterogeneous elements involved in Eisenstein's Capital project play a crucial role. Such fragments are consciously involved in its vertiginous montage chains. Their 'heretic' and heterodox character not only stands against the linear reading of contemporary historical materialism, but aims at opening fundamentally new horizons for Eisenstein's political cinema. (p. 26)

The multiple interrelationships between artistic and economic spheres transform ideological manifestations into a way of rethinking cinema, its archaeology, and its present. Vogman notes that this strategy helps us understand the invention of certain terms such as 'intellectual-attraction', 'cine-essais', and 'cine-cubism'. In Vogman's book, the *Capital* project generates a further shift: from a film project to a spherical book, transforming the structure of a 'cine-essai' (Eisenstein's cinematic project on Marx's *Capital*) into a book that presents itself, in a sort of mise en abyme, as a Method for Capital.

THE END
OF TEMPERED
STRUCTURE!

TEMP-   ERED
NOTA   TION.

1928
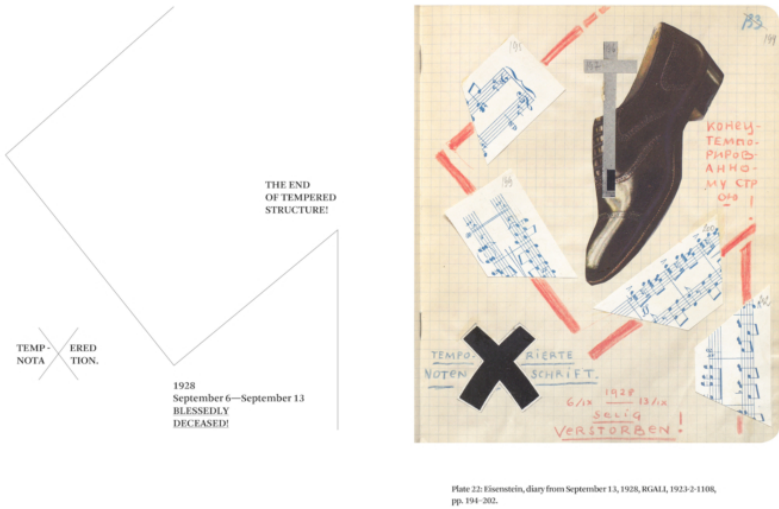September 6—September 13
BLESSEDLY
DECEASED!

Plate 22: Eisenstein, diary from September 13, 1928, RGALI, 1923-2-1108,
pp. 194–202.

Fig. 8: Eisenstein, diary, 13 September 1928, 1923-2-1108, p. 91.

Each chapter of the book is accompanied by an entre-acte of plates of the *Capital* project manuscript pages, accompanied by an English translation (this invaluable layout is the result of Vogman's collaboration with Uliana Bychen-kova). In *Dance of Values*, these plates present an independent visual language of their own. The organisation of these plates, including in a graphic sense, already represents a specific writing technique, a precise way of rethinking the interaction between theoretical text and image. Eisenstein conceived his future film as an open structure of 'non-figurative chapters' or 'miniatures'. An interesting feature of this method can be found in the commentary and layout of a working diary page published by Vogman in *Dance of Values*. For example, one such visual articulation for the *Capital* project appears in an entry dated 23 February 1928. Eisenstein's reasoning builds on three visual components: on the right, we see 'Das Sportgesicht', the masked face of an American baseball player, with the caption 'Miss Catcher'; on the left is an anti-capitalist poster for the Russian group International Red Aid (MOPR); above, Eisenstein included a clipping from the magazine *Soviet Art* about how

the artistic techniques of different historical periods interrelate with their respective ideologies:

> Not by chance did the artists of the renaissance 'experiment' with the human body. Their historical aim was to counter the schematism of Middle Ages with the formal perfection, the vital apotheosis of human-individual. Not by chance did the artists of industrial capitalism work so passionately on landscape, then on still life, on the object, creating the style of the epoch and transforming commodity into fetish. One cannot separate 'formal innovation', the formal ways of producing a new style, from the subject and the ideological content of art.[8] (Plate 1, English translation)

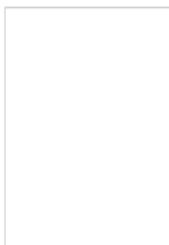Fig. 9: Eisenstein, diary, 23 February 1928, 1923-2-1105, p. 91 (in E. Vogman, Dance of Values, Plate 1).

As Vogman reads it, the baseball player positioned in the foreground appears simultaneously as a star and prisoner, a concrete and direct consequence of mass mediatisation as well as political aphasia and oppression. By displaying the sportsman's face in all its ambivalence, as Vogman points out, Eisenstein echoes the dialectical image of the sportsman evoked by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, referring precisely to 'exhibition value' as opposed to 'cult value'. Eisenstein's argument proceeds not

through conceptual explanation, but by displaying an assemblage of concrete materials: a selection of fragments brought into a constellation.

The plates are the basis of Eisenstein's writing and thinking method; they are the very source of his reflections, not mere illustrations. With their visually and figuratively fragmentary structure, the notebook pages (numbering about 500) constitute the 'condition of impossibility' to realise and bring to filmic life the *Capital* project and the 'condition of possibility' to remain at the level of notes. The project lies beyond a film script and on this side of cinematographic production, in a space of shifts and convergences between image and thought that can only be expressed through Eisenstein's Method of 'sensuous thinking'. The achievement of Vogman's courageous work is having made this impossible project legible through Eisenstein's *Method*.

The idea of displacing as a method presented in the two different cases of *Displacing Caravaggio* and *Dance of Values* charts two different possibilities for reading images: in the case of Zucconi's book, humanitarian visual culture undergoes a displacement in the moment it is subjected to comparison (or perhaps contact without comparison?) with Caravaggio's works; in the case of Vogman's book, the displacement occurs first in the filmic transposition of Marx's *Capital* conceived by Eisenetein, and second in the morphological displacing carried out by Vogman as she reflects on the value of the figurative apparatus accompanying Eisenstein's *Notes for a film on Capital*.

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Notes

[1]   Some of these points were discussed with the author on the occasion of a round table at the symposium 'L'Épreuve de l'étranger: Translation, migration, resistance', 23rd International Symposium in Phenomenology. Roundtable with F. Zucconi, C. Vecchiarelli, and M. Rebecchi: 'On Displacing: From Baroque to Contemporary Humanitarian Culture', organised by E. Alloa, S. Sheikh, and D. Popa. Perugia (7-13 July 2019).

[2]   The 2016 edition artists included: Marisa Albanese, Maria Thereza Alves, Carlos Alberto de Arauio, Francesco Clemente, Douglas Gordon, Candida Höfer, Rachel Howard, Mimmo Jodice, Anish Kapoor, Joseph Kosuth, Jannis Kounellis, Mariangela Levita, Olaf Nicolai, Mimmo Paladino, Giulia Piscitelli, Lorenzo Scotto di Luzio, Franz West, and Gilberto Zorio.

[3]   See Vogman 2018, p. 62 (plate 5).

[4]   The Notes for the *Capital* film project, drafted between 12 October 1927 and 22 April 1928 were published untitled in Russian in *Iskusstvo Kino*, 1973, No. 1. Italian translation: Montani 1973; French translation: Amengual 1980; English translation: Michelson 1989.

[5]   See Amengual 1980, p. 597.

[6]   See Vogman 2018. For a discussion of Vogman's study of Eisenstein's working method, and its anthropological implications, see Rebecchi & Vogman 2018. See also Rebecchi & Vogman 2020, pp. 180-194.

[7]   The second source for her work is Grigori Aleksandrov's forty-page notebook from October 1927 titled *Capital*, which contains quotations and press excerpts. See Vogman 2018, p. 27 (plate 6).

[8]   See Vogman 2018, p. 91 (plate 1) (Eisenstein, diary, 23 February 1928, 1923-2-1105).