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# Widok. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

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Introduction to the issue on image economies

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# Image Economies

In the late 1960s, Guy Debord wrote in *The Society of the Spectacle* that "spectacle is *capital* to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image."[1] With these words, he opened a generative space for reflection on the relations between visuality and capitalist economy. These relations, he claimed, take on a personal form in which the image does not become capital, but vice versa. Or are they perhaps merely two sides of the same coin? This we might deduce from Gilles Deleuze's note in *Cinema*, that "[m]oney is the obverse of all the images that the cinema shows and sets in place [...]."[2] We are faced, then, with two possible paths of analysis for the relation between economy and visuality: the first entails laying bare the game of contingency and equivalence characteristic of commodity exchange and latent within each image, while the second concerns how the exchange itself, together with the social relations it produces, finds its fullest articulation in images, where it becomes visible. These are the basic (but not exclusive) premises of what Peter Szendy later deemed the "iconomy" (the economy of the visible) in his book *The Supermarket of the Visible*.[3] Here, Szendy writes of the "double iconomic equivalence," according to which "not only is currency made in the image of the image, but the image, in turn, is made in the image of money."[4] This logic, of course, is not limited to images as objects, but rather, and by equal measure, concerns the experience: "how we perceive – see, hear, feel – is said to be the product of reflection of underlying economic and social relations."[5] In this way, the whole sphere of the visible, in all its layers and aspects, is firmly entrenched in the current

Martin Parr, *Ireland, Dublin, Crazy Prices Supermarket*, 1986

moment's economic conditions. As Debord noted, "[t]he relation to the commodity is not only visible, but one no longer sees anything but it: the world one sees is its world."[6]

The film *Wall Street: Money Never Sleeps* (2010), sequel to its classic predecessor from 1987, tells the story of young stockbroker Jake Moore (Shia LaBeouf), who at one point puts a question to powerful investment banker Bretton James (Josh Brolin): "what's your number?" He is asking about the amount of money James would need in order to quit the rat race, walk away from his career, and simply revel in life (and his fortune). James's response is telling. With a glint in his eye, he answers: "more!" This same keyword is surely a guiding premise for today's visual culture, in which the multitude of images circulating in various spheres has reached an unfathomable volume. Even the personal archives of images that accumulate, hardly noticed, on our phones and computers day by day, have become so immense that no individual would realistically be able to put them to use. Yet the imperative for "more!" has also infiltrated images' very cores, for within them lurks the mandate to have ever-increased value and ever-enhanced quality. We live at the end of the age of the universal touch-up: today's counterpart to "mechanical reproduction," from the time when mass access to visual resources had only just begun. Today, each self-portrait can be processed via technical procedures which were once the proprietary tools of professionals. One can even, in real time, make images "vintage" and thereby raise their symbolic – or affective – value. Ultimately, nostalgia itself, including that which has as its object archaic visual aesthetics, has become a commodity. Images have become collateral assets; subject to ceaseless speculation, their purported "value" is forever ratcheted up in the context of neoliberal capitalism. We are all speculators. Whether or not we are aware of it, we deal in images, and through them our identities, experiences, reflections, memories, plans, and even disorders, imperfections, and

tragedies.

Perhaps, alongside Szendy's metaphor of the great supermarket of the visible, we also need the metaphor of the stock exchange: the place where images and their reception undergo constant appraisal, currency conversion, and inflation or deflation of value. Images service the market rather effectively as literal investment objects. At the same time, visuality itself has become a currency through which each person strives to multiply their own symbolic assets. The currency reserve of the visible comprises innumerable treasuries of stock images, accumulated each day and used to illustrate online resources with no copyright liability. The fate of stock images furnishes proof that the ordinary and stereotypical have, too, become capital, as our daily use of social media also suggests. All this is strictly bound up with the laws of the market, and only in this market finds its justification. The metaphor thus designates not only the stock exchange itself, but also the universal exchange of the quotidian governed by the rule of permanent speculation.

At least since the time of Michelangelo Antonioni's *The Eclipse* (1962), film has portrayed the stock exchange as a site of ecstatic fetish and transgressive vitality in which humanity shrugs off its age-old constraints. In the bodies of stockbrokers and their clients, and in the frenetic pace of buying and selling, one spies the excess Marx theorized as surplus value. Yet, if Antonioni depicted the modern stock exchange – abuzz with ringing telephones signaling relentless trade between far-flung parts of the world – as a new, enigmatic, unsettling entity with distinctly religious valences, then films like Oliver Stone's *Wall Street* assert the same site as the new model of reality. For it is here that new ideological slogans are propagated, and here that new habits take root, as the market forges a universal image of all possible aspirations. Stockbrokers finagling myriad transactions in haste, quoting from Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*, affixed to their phones as if they are relays in a new energy

circuit, have become heroes of the new era, whose guiding principle finds obvious articulation in Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" from the first *Wall Street*, while the limit of existential possibilities is drawn by Bretton James in the number pronounced in its sequel.

The stock exchange, however, is not only the center of the new world, but also the basis by which its inconsistency is regulated; it is a corrective for its own mechanisms of operation. Stone tries, still, to register at least the presence of traditional mechanisms that once limited capitalist speculation (trade unions; state institutions). Bud Fox (Charlie Sheen), seduced into the world of rapid gains, eventually learns to revere the honesty of his union-representative father, and even helps him evade Gekko's push to take over his company. Still, to do so, he must rely on the instruments of speculative finance, and after manipulating the plot toward its happy resolution, he triumphantly declares: "There is justice in the world." The same message resounds with even greater clarity in John Landis's comedy *Trading Places* (1983), whose dramatic material is, quite literally, speculation on human life pursued by two finance tycoons, the Duke brothers. The Dukes are able reduce a prosperous executive (Dan Aykroyd) to a pauper and, in turn, elevate a street hustler (Eddie Murphy) into a skilled denizen of the new elite, just to settle a one-dollar bet. In the film's closing scene, the brothers' victims combine forces. Resorting to the same tricks by which their tormentors accrued their wealth, they amass their own fortune and even topple the Dukes from their seat of power. The happy ending only confirms that the model of wealth-based happiness has no escape route. The film projects an image of the stock exchange as a tool for leveling the playing field and for empowering the lower classes, thus promulgating one of neoliberalism's most prevalent and persuasive ideological traps.

In issue 34 of *View*, we turn a critical gaze toward these same mechanisms. At the same time, however, we do not wield

criticality as a top-down condemnation. but use it to make visible the limits of the logic of iconomy by taking stock of its cultural, aesthetic, and political effects. To this end, in the **Close-Up** section we publish Peter Szendy's article that eventually became a seed for his later book. In it, Szendy analyzes the notion of "innervation" as it appears in the writings of Walter Benjamin in order to lay bare the deep mechanisms governing our current iconomy. Elsewhere in this section, texts by Marcin Krawczyk, Feliks Tuszko, and Mikołaj Lewicki explore emergent tools by which the economy fulfills its own logic: tokens and economic data visualizations. One cannot, however, analyze capitalism's current logic (nor its counterpart: the logic of the circulation and utilization of images) without recognizing iconomy's *longue durée*, as essays by Elżbieta Kowalska and Marta Olesik prompt us to do. In the former, Kowalska offers a rigorous analysis of the Canada Geographic Information System: a new digital tool for generating territorial maps. The author reveals the tool's many entanglements with historical processes of exclusion and injustice. Olesik meanwhile delivers an incisive analysis of the paintings of Frank Bowling, and works to decode deep linkages between the history of slavery, the capitalist system, and visual aesthetics. In close dialog with this text are the contents of **Viewpoint**, where we present abstract paintings by Agata Bogacka from her series *Inequality*, accompanied by Paweł Mościcki's commentary.

The essays in **Panorama** also speak to this issue's main theme. Emilia Jeziorowska shows how protests by Occupy Museums sought to interrogate the capitalist approach to art (and to culture more broadly) and to question its limits. Jerzy Stachowicz meanwhile discusses the salient aspects and concepts that together organize our current visual culture into an economic site governed by the capitalism of surveillance and dataism. Maciej Frąckowiak, in turn, reflects on the function of contemporary photographic collections and their embedded

mechanisms of categorization, storage, recovery, reproducibility, conservation, description, and safeguarding, while also tracing their relation to market mechanisms. Topping off the issue are three reviews in the **Snapshots** section. Two tell of processes related to the genealogy of contemporary iconomy in our region. Ewa Klekot's book on folk culture is reviewed by Tomasz Rawski, while Karolina Łabowicz-Dymanus discusses Octavian Esanu's book on the institutionalization of art practices after 1989. Matylda Szewczyk reviews Sophie Lewis's *Abolish the Family*, in which the author critiques the basic social cell and root economic form: *oikos*, meaning family, home.

Slightly apart from economy, though closely bound to our grim times, is a text by Izabela Zawadzka analyzing Public Movement's performance marking the 86th anniversary of the assassination of Gabriel Narutowicz.

Several months ago, **Régis Durand** passed away. He was a leading critic of photography and contemporary art in recent decades, and a devoted friend of *View*, having served as a guest speaker in the *Narration: Points of View* series that we co-organized with MoMA Warsaw in 2013. There is no forgetting Durand's unique ability to combine intellectual scrutiny with a rare level of openness and undiscriminating generosity. Without fail, he listened attentively, asked questions, and keenly shared his own fascinations. We dedicate this issue to his memory.

Have a great read!
*Editorial Team*

1 Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 34, trans. uncredited (Detroit: Black & Red, 1970).

2 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 77.

3 Peter Szendy, *The Supermarket of the Visible: Toward a General Economy of Images*, trans. Jan Plug (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

4 Ibid, 7.

5 Ibid, 5.

6 Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, thesis 42.