



Sell Everything, Buy Everything, Kill Everything

Anja Kirschner, David Panos

¹ *A Narrative of all the Robberies, Escapes &C. of Jack Sheppard: Giving an Exact Description of the Manner of his wonderful Escape from the Castle*, attributed to Daniel Defoe, first published in 1724.

25 March 2011, Palatine Hill, Rome

While walking on the Palatine Hill we are transfixed by a discrete spectacle – almost a choreography. Archeology students are scattered across the terrain, measuring the dimensions of buildings, which presumably once existed, there are remaining outlines of walls in the grass and they are referring to plans. Insulated by their i-pods against boredom and onlookers, measuring equipment in hand, they pace purposefully through the ruins as someone else would through a house.

At this point we realised that whenever we had dealt with history it had been primarily through images and texts. It seemed unnecessary, absurd and esoteric even, to go to an actual site, and take or deduce information directly from its material remains without any mediation by written and pictorial representation. What kind of imagination would be necessary for this? A “material imagination”?

16 November 1724, Tyburn, London

Jack Sheppard, a carpenter’s apprentice turned thief, who achieved unprecedented celebrity through his frequent and skillful prison escapes, is about to be hanged on the gallows. A third of the city’s population has come to watch the execution and now finds itself listening to Sheppard himself, who uses his last breath to advertise his supposed autobiographical *Narrative*¹, handing it to its publisher, Applebee, in plain sight of all, before being “turned off”.

fig. 1 (opposite page)
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
The Last Days of Jack Sheppard,
2009, production still, HDV video,
56 min.

² Benedict Seymour, "Notes on the Last Days of Jacques Sheppard: Capital Crimes and Paper Claims", www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/notes-last-days-jack-sheppard-capital-crimes-and-paper-claims (last accessed 1.5.2014).

³ Excerpt from the voiceover of "An Exchange for Fire" (Kirschner and Panos, 2013) by Clinical Wasteman.

⁴ Plato, *Republic* (London: Wordsworth Editions, 1997) pp. xiv–xvi.

In an article on our film *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* (2009, [fig. 1–6](#)), which deals with the construction of said *Narrative* and its ghost writers, Benedict Seymour observes: "There is something rather 'aesthetic' about this final instant, then. To quote one of the newspapers of the day, Sheppard was hung up and 'dangled in the Sheriff's picture frame' for 15 minutes. 'The sheriff's picture frame' makes clear the tacit connections between artistic and literary representation and the State's repressive apparatus. Beyond any Warholian undertones, the link between execution and celebrity is not just via the struggles over the body of the malefactor, the crowd's identification with the victim or the ballad sellers' narration of their life and times. In fact, the gallows are aesthetic insofar as it constitutes a crude means for communicating a message to those that can read Jack's broken body."²

Who is the readership of the body, who of the *Narrative*?

413 BC, Lavrio, Attika

"20,000 slaves at Lavrio, diggers of the silver that bought the city state of Athens its warships, fled the mines for the enemy Spartan camp. The course of the Peloponnesian war turned when the jail-break choked the money supply. Deprived of labour to extract more silver, Slaveholder Democracy paid for its navy by spoiling its own currency, coining new Tetrachms with a silver coating on a core of bronze. These were soon called 'cunning coppers': cheap tokens with the face value of solid silver coins, bearing the same stamped image of Athena's owl."³

As the coins pass from hand to hand, the silver-coating wears off, evidencing not only the increased abstraction of monetary value, but also the slaves' mass flight from the mines. But while both movements continue to coexist the former increasingly extends its domination over the latter.

In Plato's *Analogy of the Cave* (written 360 B.C.) the image of captives discerning only the shadows of objects by the light of underground fires is appropriated as a metaphor for our limited capacity to distinguish between a "false" world apprehended through the senses and a "true" abstract world apprehended by the eternal soul through the intellect.

According to Plato, to the captives "the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images."⁴



fig. 2–4
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
The Last Days of Jack Sheppard,
2009, videostills, HDV video,
56 min.



⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital, Vol. I* (London: Penguin/NLR, 1976) e.g. chapter 26. Unfortunately the addition of “so-called” in the German original was dropped in the English translation of Marx text.

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften. V, Das Passagenwerk*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), p. 273.

2013, Literally nothing but...

Think of the archaeology students on the Palatine Hill, Jack on the gallows at Tyburn and the slaves in the silvermines of Lavrio, as three scenes, three instances when both immateriality and materiality encroach on each other, intertwining and wrestling with each other, producing new dynamics and fresh kills.

Our films to date have in very different ways looked at the dynamic relationship between the “material” domain of production and the “immaterial” domain of representation in the context of moments of systemic crisis. We have constantly returned to the relationship between the economic, cultural production and culture’s relation to class power.

We have tried to ground the immaterial in the material, without reducing either to the other, tracing shifts in the fantasies, fictions, myths and ideologies produced in moments of crisis, when interdependencies and ruptures reach their greatest visibility.

At the same time we have repeatedly referred to instances of what Karl Marx named “so-called primitive accumulation”.⁵ Moments in which capitalism plunders resources produced outside of itself, absorbing these ‘free inputs’ to create new property and class relations, for example in the context of the enclosures of common lands and British colonial expansion in the 17th and 18th century, or in the conquest of the American West. But these historical moments become precursors to what we could still conceive as “primitive accumulation” in the present.

Whenever we have drawn on historical material in our films, we have done so in order to open up a long-term perspective on the present and to reassert historical thinking, while at the same time stressing historical specificity and distancing ourselves from romantic visions of the past. Walter Benjamin’s concept of “Aktualisierung” (*actualisation*)⁶ has been at the basis of our understanding of the



relationship between the past and the present as the sites of ongoing contestations.

2009, fiction and crisis

Made in 2009, *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* is set in the wake of the 'South Sea Bubble' of 1720, a speculative frenzy in the trade of stocks and shares that culminated in an unprecedented financial crisis that nearly destroyed the British economy and unleashed a wave of state violence aimed at disciplining the emerging working class. The film revolves around the inferred encounter between Jack Sheppard, and the author and economic essayist Daniel Defoe, who allegedly ghost-wrote Sheppard's autobiographical *Narrative*.

Defoe operated at the intersection between literature and finance. He is more or less credited with inventing the novel but he was also active as an investor and economic writer involved in opening up debates about early financialisation. That Defoe engaged in fiction and in fictitious capital, was by no means accidental. The value of a joint stock company was linked to how believable its particular story was, and how convincingly its speculative claims on some future value could be relayed to the public. Of course, that is a system in which we are, even more firmly entrapped today, to the extent that it can appear that the facts of our existence are entirely dominated by financial fictions.

2012, real abstraction

Ultimate Substance (2012, [fig. 7-12](#)), returns to some of the questions posed in *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* at a more fundamental level as it departed from the hypothesis that the introduction of coinage in the ancient Greek world effected a profound cognitive shift that was key to the emergence of western philosophic, scientific and dramatic traditions. Political theorists like Alfred Sohn-Rethel and the British classicists George Thompson and Richard Seaford all maintain that the experience of the "real abstraction" of money created a division

fig. 5-6
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
The Last Days of Jack Sheppard,
2009, vitrine with archival material,
installation shot.
Badischer Kunstverein Karlsruhe.

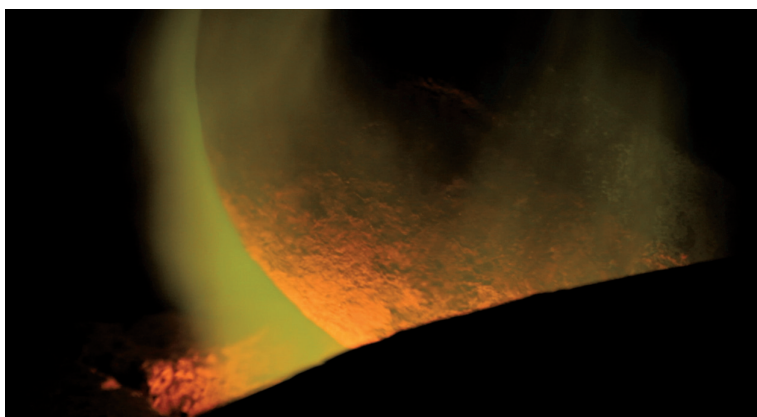


fig. 7–9
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
Ultimate Substance, 2012,
videostills, HDV video, 34 min.

between sensual and abstract forms of knowledge that persists into the present.

In an essay written to accompany *Ultimate Substance* Seaford captures both the apparent simplicity and great complexity of coinage specifically when he writes: “The first coins were made, about 600 BC, from the electrum that was washed down from mount Tmolos in great quantities by the river Paktolos, in Lydia. Electrum is a natural alloy of gold and silver, which occur in varying proportions, with the result that one piece of electrum can be of greater metallic value than another that contains less gold. Before the technique of separating the silver from the gold was discovered, the only way of standardizing the value of pieces of electrum (for the purpose of, e.g., paying mercenaries) was to proclaim that each piece was of the same value. This was probably the practical necessity that gave rise to the unprecedented phenomenon of coinage, for it established the principle that the value of a small, round piece of metal depended not on its precise metallic content but, rather, on the mark stamped on it by a state authority. This principle seems obvious to us, but at the time it was new, and had revolutionary consequences: it allowed pieces of metal (electrum, gold, silver, and even bronze) to circulate as money without being weighed and tested for purity at every transaction. All that was required was collective confidence in their conventional value (rather than their precise metallic value). For the first time in history, a substance could have both an inherent value and an imagined (ideal) value that was different from the inherent value. The ideal value was almost always greater than the inherent value (or the coins would have been melted down for their inherent value). The metal was a substance with an abstract (numerical) value (say 1.7 drachmas), but when marked with a stamp had a higher abstract value (2 drachmas). But what exactly was the substance that was worth more than the metal? The question seems to us misconceived, but the attempt to answer it contributed to the emergence of a paradoxical but revolutionary idea – abstract substance.”⁷

⁷ Richard Seaford, “Coinage, Metaphysics and Drama: The Mines of Laurion and the Athenian Polis”, in: *Ultimate Substance*, exhib.cat., secession, Vienna, n.b.k. Berlin, Extra City Kunsthall Antwerpen, 2012, p. 8.

One thing argued by Sohn-Rethel, Thomson and Seaford, is that the Pre-Socratic philosophers, many of them coming from exactly those areas where coinage was spreading most rapidly, started to unconsciously project this idea of “abstract substance” onto the cosmos. Plato sums up this Pre-Socratic perspective when he posits that behind the physical domain exists a higher-order of reality, an immaterial order, the domain of ideas. As Sohn-Rethel argues money is all too real, but it operates at a level that abstracts all relations between things, and leads to the emergence of metaphysics.

Narrative material, material narrative

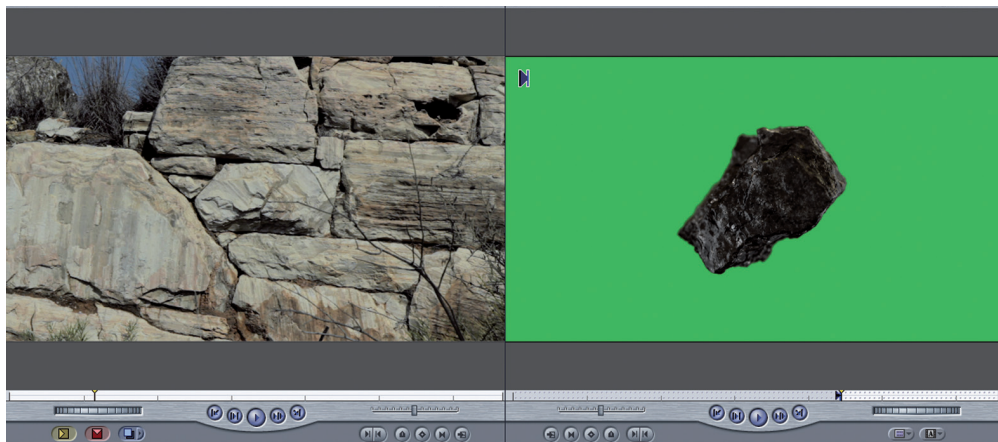
Although *The Last Days of Jack Sheppard* and *Ultimate Substance* both deal with value and abstraction, the material and the immaterial, they involved very different formal strategies, relating to the different stages of abstraction they refer to, to the different historical forms of social and material synthesis they actualise in relation to our own present tense.

The Last Days of Jack Sheppard is constructed in a manner similar to a television play, a dramatic dialogue, a fiction about the production of fiction masking as a costume drama. The theatrical sets and dialogues are put together from fragments of carefully researched texts, letters, newspaper articles, court documents and popular prints from the period. Due to the development of the printing press and a rapidly expanding commercial market in printed matter, there is a huge amount of material available to draw on. Once the intimate dynamic established between finance and fiction at the beginning of the 18th century becomes visible, financial allegories are shooting up almost everywhere. Well-known texts such as Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) revolve around a general uncertainty about the measure of things and absurd shifts in size and scale (think of Liliput). Within Jack Sheppard's time everything is shifting, everything is moving, everything becomes relative.

Ultimate Substance takes a different approach, decidedly less synthetically narrative, and colliding a range of different filmic strategies, from highly aestheticised "pasolini-esque" tableaux to observational documentary. Witnessing the material and mental reality of the crises in Greece, the question arose to what extent we have today internalised abstraction way beyond the domain of the economic and in how far does that render narrations which present themselves as genuinely material problematic or even ideological.

Our research for the collisions between this abstraction and its materialities brought us to Lavriotiki, a mining area 50 miles outside of Athens, where tens of thousands of slaves had extracted the silver for the coins that made the Athenian city state rich. Abandoned in Roman times, the mines of Lavriotiki were re-discovered in the 19th century making Lavrio the first factory town of the modern Greek state. In the 1970s the local mining industry was again dismantled. The factory ruins today house an educational museum on mining history. Around the factory and throughout the mining areas different layers of history have been compacted and confused. Tunnels dug in the 19th century, here intersect with much older ones, where the chisel marks made by slaves 2,500 years ago are still visible.

Ultimate Substance's abrupt montaging of different layers of footage play on the idea of this disrupted, synchronous landscape, and the physical experience of being in it. Images and words are frequently



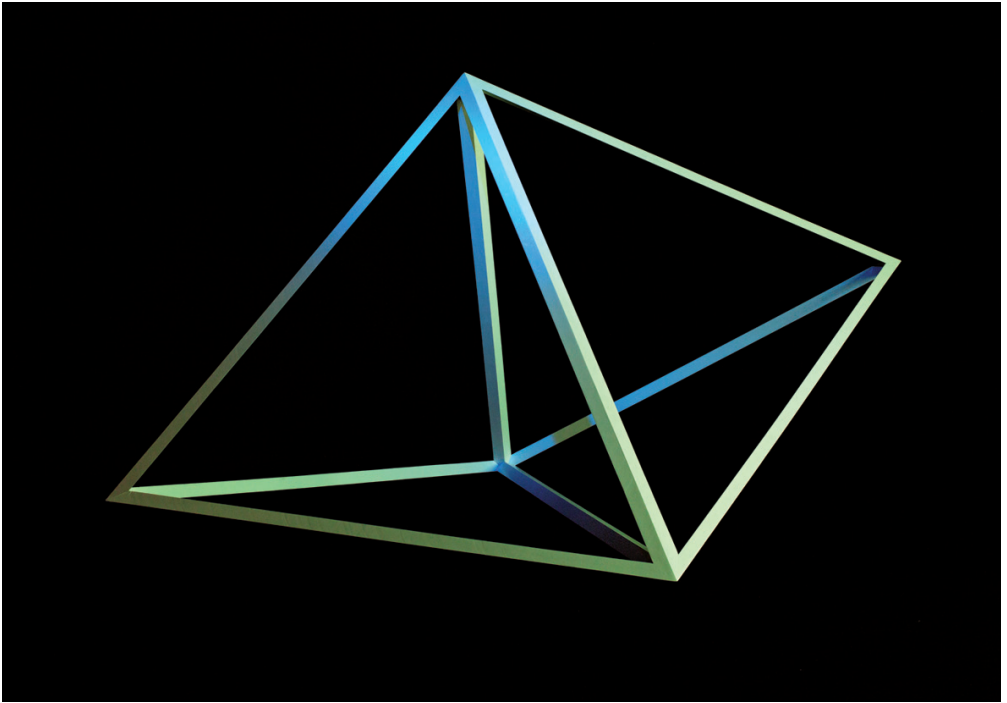
separated, slipping between different filmic languages and creating sequences of connections and disconnections. The film's initial themes were transformed in the process, with the footage following its own logic, exploring the historical hypotheses around monetary and cognitive abstraction without illustrating or necessarily advocating them, and pushing them into a confrontation with contemporary and virtual orders of images and the materialisations of failed abstraction, of rupture and the actual brutalities of its production.

General Equivalence

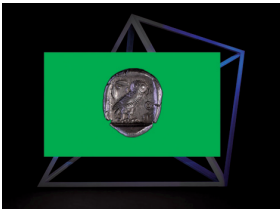
In *Ultimate Substance* an “impossible” image recurs – a 3D scan of a lump of silver ore silently rotates over a layer of green. This image embodies the role that the digital domain often plays in cancelling and obscuring labour – with our open-ended images of mining, of dancers performing gestures and postures of slave labour in the abandoned mines of Lavriotiki, hinting at the extraction of the rare earths that still today form the material backbone of the digital domain. *Ultimate Substance* crescendos in a sequence where all of the elements are finally brought together, delivering on the potential of the green screen – bodies, digital ore, and flows of molten metal compounded, layered and interchangeable. The narration is not, as in *Jack Sheppard*, passed on, but it deteriorates and disintegrates while progressing.

In both films, *Ultimate Substance* and *Jack Sheppard* digital compositing and green screen techniques are employed to create images that have a certain exposed artifice, a “flatness” that draws on a Brechtian tradition of anti-naturalism. In *Ultimate Substance* the green screen becomes a sign in itself – a stand-in for abstraction and infinite substitutability. The unique colour of the greenscreen becomes a symbol of general equivalence. It has started to become an alternative to the white, neutral space of the white cube as an aesthetic symbol of neutrality or nothingness, and regularly turns up on gallery walls and in recent video work.

fig. 10
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
Ultimate Substance, 2012,
postproduction screenshot,
HDV video, 34 min.



Noises from Below



Where in Plato the ascent towards true knowledge was posed as an exit from the cave towards a higher realm of pure concepts, we now propose a descent into the underground mines, discovering behind the shadows on the wall the marks of a thousand chisels, a thousand living bodies coerced to produce the material foundations for the economic and cultural edifice of the “Western world”. Can you hear the sound of them chipping away the foundations? Go for a walk in the ruins. Abstract new lines of flight and actualise them with your body!

fig. 11
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
Ultimate Substance, 2012,
installation shot secession
(Wien), HDV video, 34 min.

fig. 12
Anja Kirschner, David Panos,
Ultimate Substance, 2012,
installation shot secession
Neuer Berliner Kunstverein (Berlin),
HDV video, 34 min.