

Modern Monsters / Death and Life of Fiction

THE  
EQUWA  
FOR  
OF  
ALIENNA  
FION



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What modern capitalism—concentrated and fully established capitalism—inscribes within life’s setting, is the fusion of what had been opposed as the positive and negative poles of alienation into a sort of equator of alienation.

—“Urbanism as Will and Representation”  
in *Internationale Situationniste*, 1964<sup>1</sup>

The world only appears before my eyes as a solid “landscape,”  
lustrous like plastic.

—Takuma Nakahira<sup>2</sup>

That landscapes are manufactured or altered by human interests is not a discovery of late capitalism. Whether seen as pictorial genre or as ideology, the representation of landscape has allowed the modern subject to frame his mastery over nature—crucially by clearing the land of indigenous, insurgent, and independent inhabitants—in terms of a propertied metaphysics. But the representation of landscape also functions to depict human artifacts, imprints of social intercourse.

When the landscape is not scoured for traces—aftermaths of trauma, indices of futures past—its indeterminacy is most often coded as indifference: the indifference of modularity and iteration across social spaces, the indifference of concrete abstraction (pun intended). It is an indifference remarkable for its ubiquity and magnitude, as well as for the sheer scale of its continued reproduction—tract homes all the way into a vanished horizon, container terminals that never sleep, banks of screens in a stock exchange.

It should come as no surprise that landscape—that prime terrain for the assertion of the view from power—should have been thematized in the 1970s as the emblem of a kind of inhuman subsumption. With the urbanization of capital transmuting the lived and visible landscape into a social factory—especially evident in once-rural suburban and functional milieus—built space attained an experiential, as well as an allegorical, status that it didn’t previously enjoy. This was especially so in those places where postwar “planner-states” enabled an

1 “Urbanism as Will and Representation” [*Internationale situationniste* 9 (August 1964)], in *The Situationists and the City*, ed. Tom McDonough (London: Verso, 2009), 208.

2 Takuma Nakahira, “Rebellion Against the Landscape: Fire at the Limits of my Perpetual Gazing ...,” in Takuma Nakahira, *For a Language to Come* (Tokyo: Osiris, 2010), 8.

accelerated industrialization, quickly saturating landscapes with the infrastructures of accumulation, as seen in the massive industrial establishments in Michelangelo Antonioni's seemingly depopulated Po valley. It is worth dwelling on two salient approaches to representing landscape in the shadow of these shifts, found in the work of the photographers surrounding the 1975 New Topographics exhibition, with its attention to the suburbanization of habitation and production in the American West, and the "landscape theory" (*fukeiron*) proposed by militant artists in Japan in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Aside from their foregrounding of "landscape" as medium, object, and in a sense subject of their work, these otherwise unconnected aesthetic practices share some telling formal traits. In both cases, vistas are vanquished (and if they open up, it is only into a kind of orthogonal featurelessness). The built world is encountered frontally, deadpan. Captions are minimal, doing little of the critical work famously invoked by Brecht and Benjamin. Spaces are depopulated and if humans appear it is in the kind of routine everydayness that sees them circulate obediently through the built world—which is ironic, given that demographic density is a significant feature of the processes that produce these spatial figures.

These are not landscapes virtually possessed by a subject, but ones that either refuse to allow any grip for a projected presence or that simply crowd out agency altogether. As one of the proponents of *fukeiron*, the photographer Takuma Nakahira, noted, this tendency prevails in Godard's *Weekend*, where "the central 'characters' are a series of traffic accidents and a sea of draining blood, while the human couple running away plays only a small role." But this inversion is for Nakahira the bearer of an aesthetic and political truth: "it seems very vivid and pertinent for us, because we are actually living in such a time, more than ever before"; in turn, it calls for the artist to make "our age's syndrome more explicit, to expose it for what it is."<sup>3</sup> Where an urban landscape "covered over with expressionless smoothness" is still looked at by practitioners of *fukeiron*

3 Takuma Nakahira, "Why an Illustrated Botanical Dictionary," in *Setting Sun: Writings by Japanese Photographers*, ed. Ivan Vartanian, Akihiro Hatanaka, and Yutaka Kanbayashi (New York: Aperture Foundation, 2006), 127.

in the context of rebellion (be it the impasses of student struggles or the shootings by Nagayama Norio, the absent subject of the key *fukeiron* film *A.K.A. Serial Killer*), in the new topographics the inhuman homogeneity of built space is presented without comment, in a studied aesthetic of anonymity, of style-less style.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely this claim to featurelessness that drew the critical rebuke of Allan Sekula against the new topographics photographer Lewis Baltz. In a postscript to his own photo-essay on the kind of schooling, exploitation, and discipline at work in the same “new industrial parks near Irvine” that were the object of a 1974 book by Baltz, Sekula questioned the manner in which this photographic trend, lured by the pictorial examples of modernist minimalism, approached a new spatial phenomenon. The trend was inextricable from a certain spatial logic of capital, voiding the social and laboring referent of the built environment—a bad abstraction, according to Sekula, that “finds an exemplary aesthetic freedom in the disengaged play of signifiers.”<sup>5</sup>

Baltz’s images, like those of what Sekula sarcastically dubbed “the neutron bomb school of photography,” would thus be led by their own economic unconscious—chiefly, modernism’s reassertion of the separation between intellectual and manual labor—to a complicity with the “mystifying translation of a site of production into a site of imaginary leisure,” synthesized in the oxymoronic blandness of the very term “industrial park.” Though this is a suggestive line of criticism, there is a parenthetical qualification in his postscript on Baltz that bears examination. He writes: “To his credit, Baltz’s ambiguity [between documentary photography and abstraction] echoes an ambiguity and loss of referentiality already present in the built environment.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, there is an element of realism (though perhaps not of a critical kind) in depicting landscapes that capital has rendered fungible, homogeneous, faceless. What we have is a kind of short-circuit

4 Takuma Nakahira, “Rebellion Against the Landscape,” 8.

5 Allan Sekula, 1982 postscript to “School is a Factory” (1978/1980), in *Allan Sekula: Performance Under Working Conditions*, ed. Sabine Breitweiser (Vienna: Generali Foundation, 2003), 252.

6 *Ibid.*, 251.

between abstraction as a figural genre and abstraction as a real, concrete product of capital becoming spatialized.

Though Baltz's *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California* does not include a preface, his occasional comments and writings suggest that the abstract reality of these spaces, and the social mutations they reveal, lay very much at the heart of the project. It's suggestive in this respect to contrast the seemingly anti-political character of the 1970s turn to landscape—a reductive reserving of judgment in the interest of “describing the surfaces of the phenomenal world in a manner unique to [photography]”—with what, at least for Baltz, were its motivations.<sup>7</sup> As he stated in an interview: “Coming from Orange County, I watched the ghastly transformation of this place—the first wave of bulimic capitalism sweeping across the land, next door to me. I sensed that there was something horribly amiss and awry about my own personal environment.”<sup>8</sup> But, in what we could call a mimesis, or indeed an ascesis, of abstraction, the aim was, appropriating the “vernacular model”<sup>9</sup> of real-estate photography, to deny the singularity of image or subject matter (even if this didn't stop certain interpretations from reintroducing a rather ideological sense of “American beauty”). In this respect, non-judgment was a prelude to a kind of typology.

In his 1974 essay “Notes on Recent Industrial Developments in Southern California,” Baltz shows some of the research involved in the visual inventorying of these new spaces:

*Typical functions:* Such developments typically house industries that have become significant in the years since the Korean War. These include: aerospace, data processing and information storage; leisure time industries, such as the fabrication of recreation vehicles and equipment. Often these developments house storage and distribution centers for firms whose manufacturing occurs in other parts of the country or abroad.<sup>10</sup>

7 Lewis Baltz, “American Photography in the 1970s: Too Old to Rock, Too Young to Die” (1985), in *Lewis Baltz Texts* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2012), 63.

8 Quoted in Cathy Curtis, “The Wasteland,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 29, 1992.

9 Lewis Baltz, “American Photography in the 1970s,” 69.

10 *Lewis Baltz Texts*, 16.

The typological abstraction of these denatured landscapes is also the product of a process of real abstraction. This process allows us to see the mimesis of modernism and minimalism, which so fascinates our pictorial sensibility, as the product of a compulsive dynamic of profit and planning that is in many ways incommensurate with its artistic capture:

One of the most common views capitalist society takes of nature is among the most rigorous and most appalling. “Landscape as Real Estate.” This was the view of nature presented to me in Park City and the viewpoint I showed in my photographs. To know that an apparently unbroken expanse of land is overlaid with invisible lines demarcating the pattern of future development is to perceive it in a very different way than one would otherwise. That these divisions only coincidentally pertain to topography and are the arbitrary result of financial speculation, illustrates the casually rapacious disdain that our culture has of the natural world as such. This attitude holds all non-productive land as marginal; “nature” is what’s left over after every other demand has been satisfied.<sup>11</sup>

It is worthy of note, then, that in the Irvine photographs criticized by Sekula, the spatial logics of capital that Baltz gestures towards are not just elided; rather, there is an explicit aesthetic decision to depict homogeneity, modularity, and opacity as just that, withholding further elucidation.<sup>12</sup> The question of how to approach this anti-cognitive aesthetic of landscapes becomes one of the conundrums thrown up

11 “Notes on *Park City*” (1980), in *Lewis Baltz Texts*, 45.

12 “The mostly windowless factory buildings were erected as gigantic speculation objects in suburban zones optimized for traffic infrastructure. Printed without an introduction, devoid of commentary, Baltz’s fifty-one photographs of these uniform structures reveal nothing beyond the structural facades. The focus lies upon the texture of the surfaces and the grid-like structure of the architectural ensemble. No single element is accentuated more than another ... Is not the lack of commentary itself a commentary on this serialized, suburban conformity? Whereas someone like Allan Sekula documents the transformation of the working environment under the auspices of a global economy, these causalities remain invisible in Baltz’s case, as indeed does every form of production behind factory gates.” Vanessa Joan Müller, “Between Representation and Reality: Reflections on a Film Installation by Mario Pfeifer,” in *Reconsidering The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California* by Lewis Baltz, 1974, by *Mario Pfeifer*, 2009 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2011), 83, 84. Pfeifer’s installation returns to the site of one of Baltz’s photographs to document it from the inside.

by the work of Baltz and those associated with new topographics, as well as by some of the work inspired by *fukeiron*.

As Baltz has famously noted, looking at these new industrial landscapes, at these seemingly limitless tracts of boxes: “You don’t know whether they’re manufacturing pantyhose or megadeath.” Sekula’s response—that what we need is not a topography of abstraction but a “political geography, a way of talking with words and images about both the system and our lives within the system”—is still valid. Yet work like *The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California* also suggests that we take serious stock of the peculiarity and political intractability of such spaces of abstraction.

Their evacuation of the subject can of course signal many things. In that levy of American photographers, one can detect, depending on the angle: cynicism, aestheticism, restraint, or even a kind of ecological consciousness. By contrast, Japanese landscape theory is marked by a kind of maximum antagonism. “Landscape” is the closure of the space of politics and experience by capital, nation, and state. Hence the relentless face-off between its imperviousness and the violence or sexuality of individuals who, in the end, leave no trace.

The allegory that is Oshima’s *The Man Who Left His Will on Film*—where a vanished activist filmmaker leaves a handful of actuality film<sup>13</sup> footage as his legacy, and characters seek to revitalize these bland spaces with violent action in a “war of landscapes”—speaks to this aesthetic and political impasse. As does Nakahira’s apocalyptic humanism:

A day will come when a single crack will nick this “landscape” which is uniformly covered over with expressionless smoothness, and a fissure will gradually deepen until this “landscape” is completely turned inside out like a glove being taken off. There will undoubtedly be a revolt. When that time comes, the “landscape”

13 “Actuality film” refers to the kind of generally brief, unstructured recordings of real places, objects or events that marked the origins of cinema (for example, in the Lumière brothers’ *Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory*). I am indebted to the work of Yuriko Furuhata for an understanding of the theoretical and political significance of this form. See her *Cinema of Actuality: Japanese Avant-Garde Filmmaking in the Season of Image Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming in 2013)

will already not be a “landscape,” but will instead become a crucible of confusion, trampled over by the bare feet of vivid human kind. The fire will engulf the entire surface of the city. There, people will run amok. Fire and darkness. Barefoot people running around recklessly. In ancient times, people must have scrambled about in the midst of fire and darkness barefoot. It’s an old-fashioned image but when I envision urban rebellion, this is the scene I always imagine.<sup>14</sup>

What remains unimaginable—be it through the lens of militant anxiety or disenchanting coolness—is what could become of this landscape whose unassailability, to use Nakahira’s term, seems to belie its character as “manufactured” or “man-altered.” From De Chirico’s arcades for human marionettes to the crushing volumes of *Metropolis*, from Antonioni and Welles to Gursky and Burtynsky, the dwarfing (or expunging) of the human by the built has frequently been held up as an index of alienation.

Yet a reflection on the contemporary depiction of landscape should allow us to reject the temptation to treat such alienation by way of some counterfeit existentialist reflex. The aesthetic, cognitive, and political problems thrown up by *fukeiron* and new topographics are related to the difficulty we have in confronting the logistical spaces of the social factory, precisely those spaces which most evidence Brecht’s demand that we reinvent realism in light of reality slipping into the functional. Though industrial parks are certainly not devoid of their own pseudo-bucolic managerial aesthetic, one of the most significant aesthetic, disciplinary, and political-economic aspects of such spaces is that, unlike the monumental volumes of metropolitan capitalism, they’re not there to be seen.<sup>15</sup> Their opacity is no accident. Nor is the relative fungibility between underwear and overkill.

14 Takuma Nakahira, “Rebellion Against the Landscape,” 9.

15 On the pseudo-bucolic managerial aesthetic of industrial parks, see Chris Balaschak, “New World: Lewis Baltz and a Geography of Aesthetic Decisions,” in *Reconsidering The New Industrial Parks Near Irvine, California* by Lewis Baltz, 1974, by Mario Pfeifer, 2009.

What's more, the short-circuit between artistic and social abstraction, though rife with its own mystifications (among them landscape's fetishization), also points us towards the concrete processes that do shed labor (or shunt it into windowless sheds), that witness the mutation, in certain regions, of the organic composition of capital, of the proportions between living labor-power and accumulated dead labor. In a nutshell, the problem of landscape theory, of new topographics, is the problem of dead labor, a problem that Marx encountered in the factory, but which we strangely strain to recognize when it is written, visibly and invisibly, into space.<sup>16</sup>

The crucial paradox in viewing the 1970s approach to depicting landscape as thematizing the spatial, material, and experiential impact of capital's rising organic composition comes in the fact that this quantitative raising of the dead over the living is properly invisible. The domination of past, dead labor (and of the relations it is instantiated in) can thus manifest itself as the past's disappearance (as experience or visibility).<sup>17</sup> It is an antiseptic, air-conditioned nightmare that weighs on the brains of living.

Similarly, a landscape periodically destroyed by speculation, riven by unevenness, and generative of inequality can appear

16 "Here too past labor—in the automaton and the machinery moved by it—steps forth as acting apparently in independence of [living] labor, it subordinates labor instead of being subordinate to it, it is the iron man confronting the man of flesh and blood. The subsumption of his labor under capital—the absorption of his labor by capital—which lies in the nature of capitalist production, appears here as a technological fact. The *keystone* of the arch is complete. Dead labor has been endowed with movement, and living labor only continues to be present as one of dead labor's conscious organs. The *living connection* of the whole workshop no longer lies here in cooperation; instead, the system of machinery forms a *unity*, set in motion by the prime motor and comprising the whole workshop, to which the living workshop is subordinated, in so far as it consists of workers. Their unity has thus taken on a form which is tangibly autonomous and independent of them." Karl Marx, "Economic Manuscripts of 1861–63," *Marx and Engels Collected Works*, Volume 34, available at [www.marxists.org](http://www.marxists.org).

17 "It is not past labor and its structural relationship to the present which "extinguishes" it that is different, but rather the immense quantity of that past labor now deployed. ... At the same time the dead labor embodied in machinery suddenly swells to inhuman proportions (and is properly compared to a monster or a Cyclopean machine). It is as though the reservoir, or as Heidegger would call it, the "standing reserve" (*Gestell*) of past or dead labor was immensely increased and offered ever huger storage facilities for these quantities of dead hours, which the merely life-sized human machine-minder is nonetheless to bring back to life, on the pattern of the older production. The quantities of the past have been rendered invisible by the production process ... and yet they now surround the worker in a proportion hitherto unthinkable." Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011) 101, 102.

suffocatingly smooth. The theories and practices of landscape I've invoked testify to the petrifying effects that such a domination by dead labor can have on landscape-altered men and women. In so doing—to paraphrase Nakahira—they make the syndrome more explicit but, at the same time, risk mutating it into a fetish, a Medusa of the really abstract.<sup>18</sup>

18 I use the metaphor of the Medusa advisedly, as both *fukeiron* and new topographics touch on the beauty of these landscapes.