

Financial Slavery and Its Regime of Perception

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Companion Text to Boz Deseo Garden's *Harriet*

We now know that the mortgage was first popularized in the United States to supplement slave markets. Slaves were also seized by banks as collateral in the case of loan payment default. The development of financial instruments (specifically the bond, where the sale is made with a promissory note for payment plus interest on a future date) widened the access to slave ownership by embedding the actual ownership into a third-party institution for the life of the bond. This presents us with two alarming facts; first, slavery was not reducible to simple notions of “private property” or “forced labor” under the monadic influence of a single plantation. Rather, insofar as slavery was entrenched across institutions like banks, courts, lenders, and borrowers, the profit to be made was in fact from the slave’s status as an asset, or non-human object. Second, though financial expansions appear as reasons for slavery (much like the slave economy itself), the truth now appears the opposite. Racial domination was the material basis that engendered economic developments with their reason.

Before finance referred to abstract formulas and derivatives, it depended upon bodies and movement. Financial instruments grew out of the slave economy as means to minimize risk or create new angles of profit. We need to underscore the instrumentality here, not in terms of a physical device, but rather as a mode of relation expressed in visibility itself. A relation of visibility is one that cannot be seen but rather frames the conditions of possibility for new modes of seeing. When using the instrument, vision becomes modulated, one must employ a technique of ‘seeing with’. In other words, one must take on a certain *regime of perception*. Adopting a regime of perception would be necessary to use the microscope to see cells, a telescope to see stars, or a camera to see an eternalized moment. This mode of relation is true for optical devices as much as financial ones. However, what is “seen” with the bond is a future-value, either the seller’s future-value (original sum plus interest), or the purchaser’s anticipated gains to be made with the object being loaned. In both cases, this future-value depends on the body of a slave, whose future is rendered present, as a virtual object, as *what* is being traded. For a future to be traded it must first be seen, and this is made possible by the visibility of an instrument that renders it present.

But what could it mean that the slave’s future is rendered present? In a word, it is spatialized. The future as a temporal event is converted into a virtual

distance that is or isn't reached. Next, this "distance" is covered over by movement; the series of links that will lead from point A to point B as every step-by-step moment is subsumed into the larger circuit, or the Whole within which all its moments are contained as "parts". This is the exact definition of Gilles Deleuze's movement-image, time is subordinated to movement by minimizing it to a chronological series. Situations and actions follow one another as if on a string, the entirety of which is enveloped in a totalizing sense (for the movement-image in cinema, this appears as: either the hero saves the day or doesn't, either the man and woman fall in love or they don't). This totalizing sense is paramount to the movement-image formula, and it is what ultimately gets shattered by the time-image that splits any and all spatial links in favor of an intensive, mental time. The totalized sense of the bond is the promise of a future-value, which hence produces the spatialized future-present (the future-value is produced, or it is not) and this sense dominates the chronological series as each party approaches this ultimate point.

The distinction between the step-by-step movement and the governing sense can be deepened further. The notion of 'sense' or 'meaning' is necessarily outside the physical state of affairs they dictate. The side of physical affairs is understood as *partes extra partes*: parts external to one another in a purely Cartesian extensive space. Sense itself is found only as the binding or linkage of movement, the metaphysical surface whereupon physical bodies can cohere. Comprehension, description, or anticipation can only be possible as certain themes of sense that seemingly bubble up from the perceptive field. Meaning is seen in the same way that an object is, yet the former is non-dimensional, it is what grasps the object and embeds it in a milieu of cause and effect. The inscription or production of sense therefore indirectly, yet totally, affects the movement of bodies, *partes extra partes*. Law for example is such a metaphysical surface because legal codes work by becoming binding to physical movement without themselves being physical. The case of the bond's enactment through the court implies the passage of sense from a subjective vision into a gaze — a matter-of-fact surveilling force from above. This is precisely the regime of legal perspective that 'observes' a process, which is to say, ensures all the parties conform with the governing sense. The bond can be "looked through" and *the strictures for all the parties can be seen for the life of the bond*. This decoporealized legal perspective

produces the potentialities of movement, and the parties of the bond take on double perspective: first-person and third-person. Consequently, the borrowing slave owner, in his self-subjugation to the legal process, becomes all the more oppressive. If the whip comes out, it is because there is an image of the future that must be met. His own debt is turned into self-surveillance, the cause of his violence is externalized into the matter-of-fact vision of the bond.

A double vision like this is symptomatic of a symbolic fetishism, for there are no “eyes of the law” except for those human eyes that take on its regime of perception. There is no third-person’s perspective that is not a first-person’s of another. Lastly, this form of fetishism depends on the duration of racial subjugation, this virtual image of the future falls back entirely on the body of the slave who has all but vanished from consideration. Does this picture not complicate the traditional understanding of the fetish of the commodity? In the situation that the commodity does in fact walk herself to the market, the owners no longer take on a fetishistic vision that sees the commodity as self-expressive. The site of expression must be delegated into the third party that mediates the trade (the bond) and therefore the fetish formed is precisely a projection of vision by the slave owners through the bond, whereby vision becomes hypostatized.



Garden’s ten crystals contain the signature on the verso of an 1851 bond (where it was casually signed by the parties and enacted) with each turning in increments of 20°, completing a 180° rotation. These crystals appear completely opposed to the likes of optical instruments, because such instruments draw movement out from a series of static images via the visual regime; and to the contrary, Garden’s crystals do not simulate motion by spinning, instead motion is dissected and presented simultaneously. By disjoining the bond in this way (spatially distinct, non-moving capture of movement), the crystals invert the instrumentality of the bond. The regime of perception is disassembled because the observer no longer conjoins with the instrument to see the virtual image of the future but rather is compelled

to move from one crystal to the other in order to comprehend the whole. You must reproduce its rotation 'manually' so to speak, *inside your head*. Without the internal machinations of an instrument, the virtuality of the future can only grow from one's own vision as subjective experience. Once deprived of the agency of seeing, the instrument is rendered down to an object of physical force, one weapon among many in a lineage including chains, whips, and ropes. The instrument rebirthed as *partes extra partes* means all that is left is the technique of vision that it depended on.

It was mentioned above how the time-image (specifically the crystal-image) ruptures the spatial links of the movement-image. This happens by a splitting of each moment of movement into two unresolvable halves, corresponding to the central paradox of time: the present is only that which passes and the past is only that which is preserved. The present which passes is actual and objective, and the past which is preserved is necessarily virtual and subjective. Garden's crystals appear as an explicit reference to this phenomenon. The signature of the verso appears as the seed from which each crystal grows; the bond doesn't move, but only your virtual image of it does, as each one differs from the others which remain present in your memory. The movement that was once produced by the bond is now enveloped into a virtual past, which must be differentiated from the virtual future discussed above. Instead of the virtual future being made present by the instrument (wherein movement is dictated), the virtual past is coextensive with the passing present of time, it 'grows' in its varying iterations as self-differentiations. The first is spatial distance, a whole derived from a circuit whereby movement is necessary to traverse or 'complete' it. The second is always an immediately given unity, the totality of the past. The first inscribes sense as the forecasting intention which homogenizes movement and action under its purview, the second depends on a heterogeneity of instances; sense can only be found as the in between of each instance. As an indirect symbolic continuation borne by the internal action of perception, independent of any regime which otherwise contains and conceals the act.

Put concretely, the event of a past moment is preserved by its lineage – *the history of slavery*. This history is a virtuality that is all-too contemporaneous with the present. The afterward to slavery is always defined as its negative image, a persisting afterlife that internally differentiates within itself different regimes of racial violence

and subjugation (Jim Crow laws, lynch mobs, race science, the prison system, etc.). This series of repetitions presents a cyclical movement of time – rather than a linear “before” and “after” – so repeated moments of racial violence conjure slavery as a persisting, contemporaneous past. These crystals in their intentionally ambiguous expression (non-moving movement, the contemporaneity of an anachronistic bond) provide you with a point of departure. In contradistinction to the instrument that engenders present movement with a virtual future, they reflect a virtual past that self-differentiates as it grows. In the interstices of law, economics, and social convention, a form of racial slavery still persists.

What other regimes of perception need to be dismantled? We continue to find new repetitions for what was previously thought to be singular: insurance plans for slave traders, administered arts and festivities in the plantation, mortgages and bonds for the bodies of slaves, mass graves under parking lots. Every ‘development’ in history brings with it new techniques of perceiving that are as material as the paper of the bond itself. Race is less a signifier or set of signifiers than it is an infrastructure. Hence, perception itself becomes equivalent to action. For the instrument of the bond to be disassembled in this way, what becomes clear is each instance of perception-action that is involved. With no shroud to conceal the sleight-of-hand, the perceptual metamorphosis becomes forefront. The visual field itself cannot be seen, but it can be problematized. As much as racial subjugation continues to persist, we still struggle to see it, the totality of it.

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