

Growing up in a harbor predisposes one to retain quaint ideas about matter and thought. I'm speaking only for myself here, although I suspect that a certain stubborn and pessimistic insistence on the primacy of material forces is part of a common culture of harbor residents. This crude materialism is underwritten by disaster. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen everyday. Gravity is recognized as a force. By contrast, airline companies encourage the omnipotence of thought. This is the reason why the commissioner of airports for the city of Los Angeles is paid much more than the commissioner of harbors. The airport commissioner has to think very hard, day and night, to keep all the planes in the air.

In the past, harbor residents were deluded by their senses into thinking that a global economy could be seen and heard and smelled. The wealth of nations would slide by in the channel. One learned a biased national physiognomy of vessels: Norwegian ships are neat and Greek ships are grimy. Things are more confused now. A scratchy recording of the Norwegian national anthem blares out from a loudspeaker at the Sailors' Church on the bluff above the channel. The container ship being greeted flies a Bahamian flag of convenience. It was built by Koreans laboring long hours in the giant shipyards of Ulsan. The crew, underpaid and overworked, could be Honduran or Filipino. Only the captain hears a familiar melody.

What one sees in a harbor is the concrete movement of goods. This movement can be explained in its totality only through recourse to abstraction. Marx tells us this, even if no one is listening anymore. If the stock market is the site in which the abstract character of money rules, the harbor is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange. Use values slide by in the channel; the Ark is no longer a bestial but an encyclopaedia of trade and industry. This is the reason for the antique mercantilist charm of harbors. But the more regularized, literally containerized, the movement of goods in harbors, that is, the more rationalized and automated, the more the harbor comes to resemble the stock market. A crucial phenomenological point here is the suppression of smell. Goods that once reeked—guano, gypsum, steamed tuna, hemp, molasses—now flow or are boxed. The boxes, viewed in vertical elevation, have the proportions of slightly elongated banknotes. The contents anonymous: electronic components, the worldly belongings of military dependents, cocaine, scrap paper (who could know?) hidden behind the corrugated sheet steel walls emblazoned with the logos of the global shipping corporations: Evergreen, Matson, American President, Mitsui, Hanjin, Hyundai.

Space is transformed. The ocean floor is wired for sound. Fishing boats disappear in the Irish Sea, dragged to the bottom by submarines. Businessmen on airplanes read exciting novels about sonar. Waterfront brothels are demolished or remodeled as condominiums. Shipyards are converted into movie sets. Harbors are now less *havens* (as they were for the Dutch) than accelerated turning-basins for supertankers and container ships. The old harbor front, its links to a common culture shattered by unemployment, is now reclaimed for a bourgeois reverie on the mercantilist past. Heavy metals accumulate in the silt. Busboys fight over scarce spoons in front of a plate-glass window overlooking the harbor. The backwater becomes a frontwater. Everyone wants a glimpse of the sea.

RED PASSENGER

When Friedrich Engels set out in 1844 to describe in detail the living and working conditions of the English working class, he began oddly enough by standing on the deck of a ship:

I know of nothing more imposing than the view one obtains of the river when sailing from the sea up to London Bridge. Especially above Woolwich the houses and docks are packed tightly together on both banks of the river. The further one goes up the river the thicker becomes the concentration of ships lying at anchor, so that eventually only a narrow shipping lane is left free in midstream. Here hundreds of steamships dart rapidly to and fro. All this is so magnificent and impressive that one is lost in admiration. The traveler has good reason to marvel at England's greatness even before he steps on English soil. It is only later that the traveler appreciates the human suffering that has made all this possible.¹

For Engels, the increasing congestion of the Thames anticipated a narrative movement into the narrow alleys of the London slums. Very quickly, the maritime view—panoramic, expansive, and optimistic—led to an urban scene reduced to a claustrophobic Hobbesian war of all against all:

The more that Londoners are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and disgraceful becomes the brutal indifference with which they ignore their neighbors and selfishly concentrate upon their private affairs. . . . Here indeed human society has been split into its component atoms.²

Engels' descriptive movement from the open space of the river to the closed spaces of the city's main streets and slums also anticipated an incipient theoretical insight of historical materialism: the discovery of the unequal development of the technical means and the social relations of production. The river port, like Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan, is a huge figure of contained and purposeful energy, contrasting with the aggressive and brutish frictions of the city itself. The city, at this juncture, is more primitive than the river.

If the river and the city did not entirely exist in the same present, it is also the case that the river belonged to an earlier epoch. Thus the geographical passage from river to city was on a more subtle level a historical shift from one motive force to another: the river was still ruled by the wind while the city ran on coal. Looking back, in a footnote added to the 1892 German reissue of his book, Engels felt the need to qualify that moment on deck:

This was so nearly fifty years ago, in the days of picturesque sailing vessels. In so far as such ships still ply to and from London, they are now to be found only in the docks, while the river itself is covered with ugly, sooty steamers.³

By the end of the century, Engels knew that his earlier rhetorical strategy had rested on an aesthetic and spatial contrast that had lost its validity, a contrast between the "picturesque" (*malerisch*) port and the "ugly" city. Like Joseph Conrad, who described a steam tug as "an enormous and aquatic black beetle" leaving an "unclean mark" on the waves, Engels now found nothing to celebrate in the maritime use of steam. The city, and the factory system behind the city, had devoured any difference—or beauty—the river had to offer. But this obliteration of the river's "difference" is already prefigured in the

¹ Friedrich Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England* [1845], trans. and ed. W.O. Henderson and W.H. Chaloner (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 30.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 30, n. 1.

⁴ Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* [1898], ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 16.

earlier text: as the river narrows it becomes less like a port and more like a city street.⁴

The "magnificent" (*grossartig*) scene on the Thames leads on to the dismal alleys of Manchester. At the outset, industrial capitalism is prefigured through its older mercantile counterpart, culminating in the image of the small steamships, that "dart rapidly to and fro," sharing their motive force with the modern factory. From this point on the text is permeated with the metaphor of steam: society is a contained and superheated gas under increasing pressure. The working-class slum is the ultimate locus of this looming explosion, of atomized forces that threaten to build and rupture the cast-iron walls of the urban factory-boiler. Engels was to push his Hobbesian prophecy to its grim limit in the concluding chapter of his book: "The war of the poor against the rich will be the most bloodthirsty the world has ever seen."⁵

⁵ *Condition of the Working Class*, p. 334

Engels' narrative begins at sea, in *maritime space*, a space defined in many of its distinctive features by an earlier preindustrial capitalism, a capitalism based on primitive accumulation and trade. When it was initially seized by the imaginary and made pictorial as a coherent and integrated space rather than as a loose emblematic array of boats and fish and waves, maritime space became panoramic. Its visual depiction even today conforms to models established by Dutch marine painting of the seventeenth century. It is in these works that the relationship of ships to cities is first systematically depicted. Obviously, the various historical modes of picturing maritime space should be distinguished from any provisional list of actual maritime spaces: the ship itself, the hinterland, the waterfront, the seaport, breakwaters and seawalls, coastal fishing villages, islands, reefs, the beach, the undeveloped shoreline, the pelagic space of the open sea, the deeps, and so on. (I include the hinterland here because it is terrestrial space defined in its spatial relationship to the seaport.) One can produce other, more strictly functionalist or legalistic typologies: strategic naval space, fisheries, trade routes, national and international waters, exclusive economic zones, free ports. And yet, on a fundamental level, there is a strong connection between the qualities of boundedness or openness of these worldly spaces and the possibilities imagined in pictorial representation. Over time, this relationship became partially reciprocal, and some maritime spaces, those devoted to touristic pleasures, were developed to conform to pictorial exemplars.

The panorama is paradoxical: topographically "complete" while still signalling an acknowledgement of and desire for a greater extension beyond the frame. The panoramic tableau, however bounded by the limits of a city profile or the enclosure of a harbor, is always potentially unstable: "If this much, why not more?" The psychology of the panorama is overtly sated and covertly greedy, and thus caught up in the fragile complacency of disavowal. The tension is especially apparent in maritime panoramas, for the sea always exceeds the limits of the frame.

It is in early seventeenth-century Dutch legal theory that the sea is emphatically understood to exceed and even resist terrestrial boundaries and national proprietary claims. Writing in defense of the interests of the Dutch East India Company against Portuguese claims to exclusive trading rights in the southwest Pacific, Hugo Grotius spoke, perhaps somewhat cynically, of

... the OCEAN, that expanse of water which antiquity describes as the immense, the infinite, bounded only by the heavens, parent of all things. ... the ocean

which . . . can neither be seized nor enclosed; nay, which rather possesses the earth than is possessed.⁶

Thus the sea's infinitude gives rise to a doctrine of free trade well before it provides a basis for eighteenth-century aesthetic notions of the sublime. Panoramic maritime space in Dutch painting is implicitly "open" in this pre-romantic sense: open to trade, a net cast outward upon a world that yields property but that in its idealized totality is irreducible to property. When proto-romanticism is later confronted with this uncommodifiable excess, it transforms it into the sublime, taking it initially as proof of divinity; only later is the category naturalized and psychologized:

A troubled Ocean, to a Man who sails upon it, is, I think, the biggest Object that he can see in motion, and consequently gives his Imagination one of the highest kinds of Pleasure that can arise from Greatness. I must confess, it is impossible for me to survey this World of fluid Matter, without thinking on the Hand that first poured it out. . . .⁷

In its blunt and clever materialism, seventeenth-century Dutch painting had not yet reached this point: the hands that mattered most in contemplating the sea were those of the shipwright and the seafarer. Svetlana Alpers has characterized the "descriptive" and "topographic" mode of Dutch painting in these terms:

Like the mappers, [Dutch painters] made additive works that could not be taken in from a single viewing point. There was not a window on the Italian model of art but rather, like a map, a surface on which is laid out an assemblage of the world.⁸

Alpers' account of Dutch topographic methods invites us to consider a mobile spectator, more inquisitive than acquisitive, a crypto-cartographer, and not the fixed humanist subject of Renaissance Italian perspective. Nonetheless, the seventeenth-century Dutch still lived in a world in which commodification, while everywhere expanding, was not yet universal.

There is a profound historical shift in the passage from a seventeenth-century world view that recognizes a formal legal limit to the additive "assemblage of the world" and one that submits the totality to the same pecuniary accounting procedures with which it had grasped the fragments. That latter world had arrived with the factory system by the middle of the nineteenth century, thrusting the confidence and measure of older panoramic methods into crisis, while simultaneously routinizing the mechanical panoramic possibilities of the camera. The prototypically "Dutch" mobile spectator had been transformed into a figure of passive consumption. Dolf Sternberger argued that steam-powered travel by rail had submitted the world to a new panoramic spectacularity:

The railroad elaborated a new world of experience, the countries and oceans, into a panorama. . . . it turned the eyes of travellers outward, offering them a rich diet of changing tableaux, the only possible experience during a trip.⁹

Sternberger assumed that the rapid linearity of railroad travel extended even to the view from coastal tracks onto the sea, but implicitly this passage suggested that even sea travel had succumbed to the railroad model, for otherwise how could the oceans truly have become panoramic?

⁶ Hugo Grotius, *The Freedom of the Seas, or the Right Which Belongs to the Dutch to Take Part in the East India Trade* [1608], ed. James Brown Scott, trans. Ralph van Deman Magoffin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1916), p. 37.

⁷ Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, 20 September 1712.

⁸ Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 122.

⁹ Dolf Sternberger, *Panorama of the Nineteenth Century* [1938], trans. Joachim Neugroschel (New York: Urizen, 1977), p. 39.

It is true that steam travel by sea developed from steam travel by land, and thus was a step forward in the increasing dominion of the land over the sea. The gigantic transatlantic steamer *Great Western* of 1838 was the logical outward extension of its designer Isambard Brunel's earlier project, the Great Western Railway. But the monotony and malaise and occasional terror of pelagic space, the space of the "middle passage," resisted conversion into "a rich diet of changing tableaux," whether or not one's ship was powered by wind or steam. The opulent interior spaces of first-class travel on the steamships of the late Victorian and Edwardian periods may well have been designed to compensate for that lack of external "tableaux" on the high seas. The sea's resistance to an all-consuming opticality lingered well into the modern period, most emphatically for those passengers unable to afford the outward view from the promenade deck or its inner surrogate in the grand saloon. Thus the sea's "excess" is not easily superseded by modernization.

Standing on the deck of his ship as it sailed upriver to London, Engels was straddling two very different ideas of panoramic space: the older panoramic tableaux of the Dutch and the new mobile panorama of an accelerated age of steam. He described a liminal maritime space that was just beginning to be enveloped by the polluted miasma of urban industry. This "enveloping" eventually rendered the older notion of the panorama obsolete, or at least anachronistic, in its reassuring depiction of a clear division between ships and the land, and ships and the sea.

This collapse, or blurring, of panoramic maritime space in painting was first grasped by J.M.W. Turner, in works produced coincidentally with the first appearances of oceangoing steam-driven ships in the decade preceding Engels' voyage up the Thames. This is not to reduce the Turneresque sublime

to a simple technological determinist explanation, but rather to suggest that a painted sky that presumed the wind to be a motive force had a different referential status from one in which steam and smoke were introduced as evidence of new powers. Steam cut an imaginary straight line through a space previously governed by the unpredictability of the wind. Paradoxically, however, steam made the possible directions of movement less evident in the aggregate view of ship and sea and sky. A line of smoke from a funnel is not always an indication of the vector available to or taken by a ship. Only if the speed of the ship greatly exceeds that of the wind, or if the ship steams directly into the wind, will this line indicate the ship's path. Weather became paramount in painting as its actual power over human movement diminished, and transit times became more predictable. Turner's exorbitation of weather occurred at the very historical moment when it was widely imagined to be vanquished.



Fig. 1
Joseph Mallord William Turner, *Snow Storm—Steamboat off a Harbour's Mouth*, oil on canvas, 1842.

Engels' implicitly romantic attitude toward the sea and seafaring—his sense of a heroic and even redemptive potential of the sea—required that his literary description of the

approach to London on the Thames, while couched in the language of the romantic sublime, conform not to a Turner-esque blurring, but to the older model of sharp encyclopedic delineation of ships, shoreline, and buildings, albeit with a sense of an increasing congestion that anticipated disorder even as it testified to prosperity. By turning back to an older panoramic realism, the realism of Joseph Vernet or before that of Hendrick Vroom and the Willem van de Veldes, Engels initiated a newer social realism, an art of crowded spaces, previously hidden details and the statistics of misery. In doing so, he assaulted the optimism and confidence of those earlier aristocratic and bourgeois visions of economies seen from the waterfront. The slum was for Engels what the storm was for Turner in his later paintings: a catastrophic limit set against industrial hubris. Their great difference lies in the fact that industry and the slum produce one another, while the storm remains an external force.

There was a deliberate and ironic anachronism in Engels' choice of the sailing packet as a platform from which to launch an economic investigation of the city, underscoring capitalism's descent from its "earlier heroic phase" to the depraved exploitation of the fully developed industrial system.¹⁰ This device contained an element of theater, a staging of a "backward" German traveller's touristic awe at the sights, which echoes even today in insurrectionary literature.¹¹

But ultimately Engels recognized that the port of London was in no respect anachronistically "outside" the contemporary system of production: "This great population has made London the commercial capital of the world and has created the gigantic docks in which are assembled the thousands of ships which always cover the River Thames."¹² The order of causality here is significant: the port is the product of industrial capitalism. What is absent is a developed theory of primitive accumulation, which would comprehend the prior role of the merchant ship in producing that next stage of capitalist development. If the initial iconography of Engels' journey to London and Manchester can be traced to Amsterdam, the Dutch precedent for his opening description of the bustling scene on the Thames can be found most clearly in paintings such as Ludolph Backhuysen's *Shipping before Amsterdam* (1666), or earlier in Hendrick Vroom's *Return of the Second Dutch Expedition to the West Indies* (1599). These are paintings with a deck or lower-mast level viewpoint from which the profile of the city of Amsterdam is partly obscured by the density of triumphant vessels in the river IJ. The standard art-historical interpretation of pictures such as these assigns a larger symbolic and anthropomorphic significance to the image of the ship:

... a ship is not an inanimate object but a complex manned entity that is rarely depicted in isolation; by its very nature it is related to a larger visible or implied whole. Not only are these ships some of the most complex products of seventeenth-century engineering, but their inherently human presence arouses our interest. Once we realize that they are pitted against the elements or against each other we become absorbed in their destiny. By implication the subject is dramatic because there must be an outcome: survival or destruction—victory or defeat.¹³

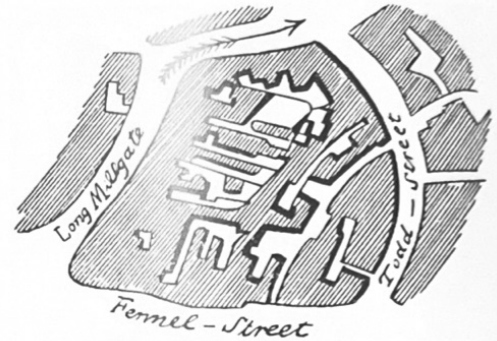


Fig. 2
Map of Manchester slum. From Friedrich Engels, *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England*, 1845

¹⁰ Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 74. Marcus notes that in 1837 Engels, aged 17, wrote a "romance in prose" entitled "Seeräuber Geschichte" (A Pirate Story).

¹¹ See, for example, Marcos and the Zapatistas, *Mexico: A Storm and a Prophecy*, trans. and ed. Barbara Pillsbury, Open Magazine Pamphlet Series, no. 31 (Westfield, New Jersey, Open Magazine, 1994).

¹² *Condition of the Working Class*, p. 30.



¹³ George Keyes, *Cornelis Vroom: Marine and Landscape Artist* (Alphen aan den Rijn: Canaletto, 1975), p. 17. See also his *Mirror of Empire: Dutch Marine Art of the Seventeenth Century* (Minneapolis and The Hague: Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Gary Schwartz/SDU Publishers, 1990).

It is precisely this insistence on hidden allegory that Svetlana Alpers opposes in her argument that what distinguishes Dutch paintings is the intellectually complex character of their non-narrative, “descriptive” engagement with the world and conditions of visual knowing. Alpers defends a mode of pictorial absorption that is not dependent on symbolization or narrativity. But the dramaturgy of eternal struggle and “destiny,” intended to elevate marine paintings above the level of mere documents of “seventeenth-century engineering,” manages to arrive unwittingly at the threshold of an interesting and sometimes embarrassing historical truth: these ships are *war machines*, and their purpose is bloody plunder.

It might do well for us to rethink these Dutch pictures in allegorical terms, to regard them as allegories of empire in which national identity and external threat and dominion are persistently figured by descriptive, topographic means. This requires a move from Alpers’ interest in the epistemological basis of Dutch paintings to a regard for their combative and even paranoid features. Expansive panoramic space is always haunted by the threat of collapse or counter-expansion. Thus the panorama is always implicitly or explicitly militarized: the net can close in from the other side of the horizon. For example, nowhere is the panoramic spatialization of an external threat more topographically evident than in Willem van de Velde the Elder’s *The English Fleet at Anchor off Den Helder*. This elongated drawing from 1653, with a vertical to horizontal ratio of 2 : 9, traces a densely massed line of British warships blockading the strategic gap between the island of Texel and the mainland of Holland. Here the imperium implicit in the Dutch panorama meets its mirror image. The blockade matches and implicitly “contains” the otherwise expansive view from the Dutch coast. The British antagonist is like-minded but stronger, and it is worth noting that this defeat of the Dutch “viewpoint” is reenacted in the van de Velde’s subsequent decision to cross the horizon line and practice their craft in England.

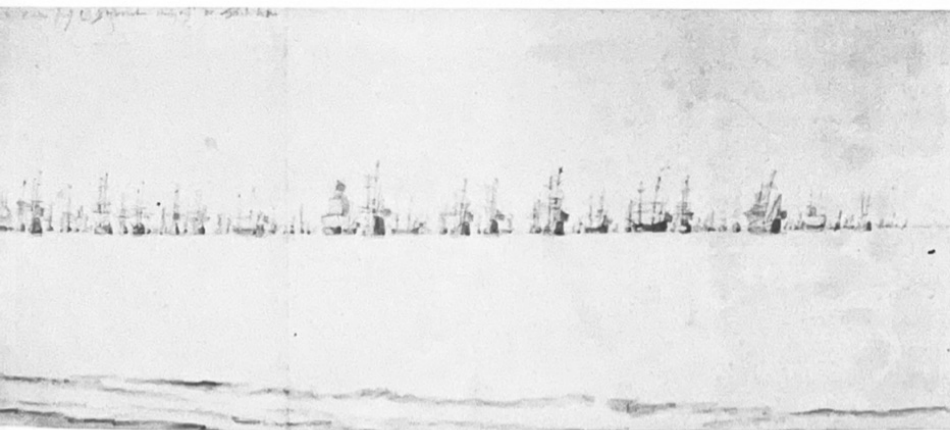


Fig. 3
Willem van de Velde the Elder, *The English Fleet at Anchor off Den Helder*, drawing, 1653.

Many Dutch maritime paintings were commissioned by city magistrates, or by shareholders in the great trading companies. One obvious condition of their success lay in the ability of the painter to articulate the economic link between the ship and the city in appropriately illusionistic and nonsymbolic spatial terms. Consider an earlier Dutch maritime painting, Hendrick Vroom’s *View of Hoorn* of 1622. Hoorn does not sink modestly into the sea as Dutch cities tend to do when viewed from deck level. The elevated masthead view, and the slight curvature of the coastline combine to place the city of Hoorn at the center of a global circle, with favorable offshore winds propelling ships immediately outward in their quest for wealth. In effect, this picture gives us two pan-

oramas: one visible and contained, showing the clear profile of the city and the parallel expanse of the IJsselmeer, and the other “providential,” implied and open. This second, implied panorama extends outward at an oblique angle from the frame, along the speedy radius offered by the wind, leading to the larger expanse of the North Sea and on to the Baltic or the Indies. The viewer, a vicarious (or actual) seafarer, is invited to look back toward the city with the peculiar longings characteristic of approaches and departures.

Once the ship loses sight of land, this panoramic and umbilical linkage back to the port of origin is broken. At the end of the age of sail, Joseph Conrad would come to understand well the phenomenology of this separation of the ship from the land:

The passage had begun, and the ship, a fragment detached from the earth, went on lonely and swift like a small planet. Round her the abysses of sky and sea met in an unattainable frontier. A great circular solitude moved with her, ever changing and ever the same, always monotonous and always imposing.¹⁴



Fig. 4
Hendrik Cornelisz. Vroom, *View of Hoorn*, oil on canvas,
c. 1622.

The painter of this latter space was of course Turner. And with Conrad and Turner, the economic function of the ship loses the positive value it held for the Dutch. The mood shifts from the supposedly sanguine temperament of the lowlands to the melancholy of the late romantics, and the frontier, even bloodier and more colonized now than before, is imagined to be "unattainable." As it moves at the center of its own panorama, the ship becomes the lost and wandering daughter of the land. One measure of Engels' radicality was his ability to break with the fatalism of this emerging romance of the sea's isolation, and to step from the deck of the ship onto the streets of the city at the center of the global circle of power.

¹⁴ *Nigger of the "Narcissus,"* p. 18.

FORGETTING THE SEA

It may well appear at this juncture that I am performing a grotesque juggling act at a triple funeral: a memorial service for painting, socialism, and the sea. Leaving aside for the moment the second and presumably most recently deceased of the three, what possible claims can be made for the totalizing ambition of the classical maritime view a century and a half after Engels turned his back on the waterfront? Why would anyone be foolish enough to argue today that the world economy might be intelligently viewed from the deck of a ship? Furthermore, isn't an interest in marine painting liable to charges of antiquarianism and antimodernism? And finally, by posing these three questions together, don't I risk the additional charge of "naive realism" or reflectionism? The economic questions are relatively easy to answer, while the aesthetic questions are more difficult.

To the extent that transnational capital is no longer centered in a single metropole, as industrial capital in the 1840s was centered in London, there is no longer "a city" at the center of the system, but rather a fluctuating web of connections between metropolitan regions and exploitable peripheries. Thus the lines of exploitation today may run, for example, from London to Hong Kong, from Hong Kong to Shenzhen, from Taipei to Shenzhen, from Taipei to Hong Kong and Taipei to Beijing, from Beijing to Hong Kong and from Beijing to Shenzhen, and perhaps ultimately from a dispersed and fluid transnational block of capitalist power, located simultaneously in London, New York, Vancouver, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taipei, and Beijing, drawing ravenously on the rock-bottom labor costs of the new factories in the border city of Shenzhen and in the surrounding cities and countryside of Guangdong province in southern

China. The ability of Taiwanese manufacturers to move rapidly from production in Taiwan to production in Guangdong or Fujian province is largely a function of the unprecedented physical mobility of manufactured goods and machinery. Shoes made one month in Taiwan are suddenly made a month later in Guangdong at greatly reduced cost. The shoes are identical, only the label registers the change. And even labels can be falsified when import restrictions are to be circumvented. The flow of cargo to Japanese or North American or European markets is never interrupted. A ship leaves Hong Kong with its forty-foot steel boxes full of sneakers, rather than Keelung or Kaohsiung.¹⁵

¹⁵ See Xianming Chen, "China's Growing Integration with the Asia-Pacific Economy," in Arif Dirlik, ed., *What Is in a Rim? Critical Perspectives on the Pacific Region Idea* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993), pp. 89-119.

The key technical innovation here is the containerization of cargo movement: an innovation pioneered initially by United States shipping companies in the latter half of the 1950s, evolving into the world standard for general cargo by the end of the 1960s. By reducing loading and unloading time and greatly increasing the volume of cargo in global movement, containerization links peripheries to centers in a novel fashion, making it possible for industries formerly rooted to the center to become restless and nomadic in their search for cheaper labor.¹⁶ Factories become mobile, ship-like, as ships become increasingly indistinguishable from trucks and trains, and seaways lose their difference with highways. Thus the new fluidity of terrestrial production is based on the routinization and even entrenchment of maritime movement. Nothing is predictable beyond the ceaseless regularity of the shuttle between variable end-points. This historical change reverses the "classical" relationship between the fixity of the land and the fluidity of the sea.

¹⁶ I owe this insight to Stan Weir.

The transition to regularized and predictable maritime flows initiated by steam propulsion was completed a century later by containerization. If steam was the victory of the straight line over the zigzags demanded by the wind, containerization was the victory of the rectangular solid over the messy contingency of the Ark. As we will see, containerization obscures more than the physical heterogeneity of cargoes, but also serves to make ports less visible and more remote from metropolitan consciousness, thus radically altering the relationship between ports and cities.

The story is of course more complicated than this. It would be difficult to argue that the pioneers of containerized shipping had a vision of the global factory. Their innovations were responses to the internal competitive demands of the shipping industry, but these demands were by their very nature of an international character. Historically-militant seagoing and dockside labor had to be tamed and disciplined: the former had to be submitted to the international search for lower wages, the latter subjected to automation. Ships themselves had to be built bigger and differently and by workers earning relatively less than their historical predecessors. International capital markets had to be deregulated and tariff boundaries circumvented or dissolved by fiat or international agreement, but these legal changes follow rather than precede containerization. NAFTA and GATT are the fulfillment in international trade agreements between transnational elites of an infrastructural transformation that has been building for more than thirty years.

Indeed, it can be argued further that the maritime world underwent the first legally mandated internationalization or "deregulation" of labor markets with the invention by American ship owners and diplomats of the contemporary system of "flag of convenience" registry in the late 1940s. At the time, American trade unionists concerned about the decline of the U.S. merchant fleet

complained about "runaway ships," drawing an analogy with the "runaway shops" of the textile industry then relocating from New England to the non-union South.¹⁷ Little did they imagine that within three decades factories would follow ships to a more complete severing of the link between ownership and location. The flag of convenience system, which assigned nominal sovereignty to new maritime "powers" such as Panama, Honduras, and Liberia, allowed owners in the developed world to circumvent national labor legislation and safety regulations. Crews today are drawn primarily from the old and new third worlds: from the Philippines, Indonesia, India, China, Honduras, and Poland, with Asians in the majority. Seagoing conditions are not infrequently as bad as those experienced a century ago.¹⁸ The flag on the stern becomes a legal ruse, a lawyerly piratical dodge. To the victories of steam and the container, we can add the flag of convenience: a new ensign of camouflage and confusion, draped over the superficial clarity of straight lines and boxes.

My argument here runs against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, "cyberspace," and the corollary myth of "instantaneous" contact between distant spaces. I am often struck by the ignorance of intellectuals in this respect: the self-congratulating conceptual aggrandizement of "information" frequently is accompanied by peculiar erroneous beliefs: among these is the widely held quasi-anthropomorphic notion that most of the world's cargo travels as people do, by air. This is an instance of the blinkered narcissism of the information specialist: a "materialism" that goes no farther than "the body." In the imagination, email and airmail come to bracket the totality of global movement, with the airplane taking care of everything that is heavy. Thus the proliferation of air-courier companies and mail-order catalogues serving the professional, domestic, and leisure needs of the managerial and intellectual classes does nothing to bring consciousness down to earth, or to turn it in the direction of the sea, the forgotten space.

Large-scale material flows remain intractable. Acceleration is not absolute: the hydrodynamics of large-capacity hulls and the power output of diesel engines set a limit to the speed of cargo ships not far beyond that of the first quarter of this century. It still takes about eight days to cross the Atlantic and about twelve to cross the Pacific. A society of accelerated flows is also in certain key aspects a society of deliberately slow movement.

Consider, as a revealing limit case, the glacial caution with which contraband human cargo moves. Chinese immigrant-smuggling ships can take longer than seventeenth-century sailing vessels to reach their destinations, spending over a year in miserable and meandering transit. At their lowest depths, capitalist labor markets exhibit a miserly patience.

For those who face the sea under such conditions, the imagination both seeks, and is coaxed, to leap over the middle passage. This brings us back to the aesthetic questions posed earlier. In a short story by Bharati Mukherjee, a Tamil schoolteacher hoping desperately to emigrate from Sri Lanka seeks the services of a smuggler's go-between:

¹⁷ Rodney Carlisle, *Sovereignty fo Sale: The Origins and Evolution of the Panamanian and Liberian Flags of Convenience* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1981), p. 112.

¹⁸ See Paul K. Chapman, *Trouble on Board: The Plight of International Seafarers* (Ithaca, New York: ILR Press, 1992).

"Options!" the man sneered. Then he took out a foreign-looking newspaper from a shopping bag. On the back page of the paper was a picture of three dour sahibs fishing for lobster. "You get my meaning, sir? They have beautiful coves in Nova Scotia. They have beautiful people in the Canadian maritimes."¹⁹

¹⁹ Bharati Mukherjee, "Buried Lives," in *The Middleman and Other Stories* (New York: Fawcett Crest, 1988), p. 158.

Having "heard stories of drowned Tamils," her protagonist dreams of safe passage to the north, "crisscross[ing] national boundaries on skates that felt as soft and comfortable as cushions."²⁰ Mukherjee's schoolteacher is a striking figure: a postcolonial "throwback" to the fearful Irish and Scottish emigrant passengers of the age of sail. And yet the image of danger is presented in the form of a grotesquely improvised tourist brochure; the counter-image of safe passage from tropical south to frozen north is conjured up as if from textbook reproductions of Pieter Bruegel the Elder. It is in diasporic texts such as Mukherjee's, full of desires sparked by images from elsewhere, that the threats and lures of actual maritime space continue to live.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 156.

The "forgetting" of the sea by late-modernist elites parallels its renewed intransigence for desperate third world populations: for Sri Lankans, Chinese, Haitians, Cubans, for the Filipinos and Indonesians who work the sealanes. Air travel assures that bourgeois cosmopolitanism no longer requires any contact with the sea. Social classes no longer rub shoulders in the departure terminals of the great steamship lines. And cruise ships, the floating apartheid machines of postmodern leisure, have a way of obscuring from passengers the miserable conditions endured by the third world crews who cater to their mobility and their desires.

Culturally, the sea becomes a vast reservoir of anachronisms, its representation redundant and overcoded. The last aesthetic movement to claim the sea with any seriousness was surrealism. It is both perverse and fitting that the founder of structural anthropology should later in life sustain this surviving surrealist spirit, asserting his preference for the eighteenth-century maritime painting of Joseph Vernet while dismissing cubism and lamenting the modernist "shipwreck of painting." Of Vernet he says:

By means peculiar to the art, one is transported into a vanished world. And even more marvelous, perhaps this world never existed, for the painter didn't slavishly reproduce what he saw; he rearranged the elements and combined them into a lyrical synthesis. One of Vernet's great harbors is not far from the evening at the Opera that Proust described!²¹

²¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss and Didier Eribon, *Conversations with Claude Lévi-Strauss*, trans. Paula Wissing (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 174.

In keeping with the surrealist love of obsolete didacticisms, Claude Lévi-Strauss is producing here a radical recoding of the classical edification demanded from the port scene. This earlier project of waterfront enlightenment, toward which we can orient the ironical figure of Engels as well, has been described in a recent book by Alain Corbin:

The practice of walking along wharfs and stone piers . . . expressed the fascination exerted by a stage on which spectators could observe particularly manifest displays of energy, activity, heroism, and misfortune. It fitted logically into the classical journey. Here nature had retreated before the labors of man, who had cut stones and reshaped the boundaries that God had set to the ocean.²²

²² Alain Corbin, *The Lure of the Sea: The Discovery of the Seaside in the Western World 1750-1840*, trans. Jocelyn Phelps (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 187.

Corbin remarks further that "Vernet made the harbor view into a privileged panorama. In his work, the port is first and foremost a picture that walk-

ers in the hills examined with their spyglasses."²³ We can better understand Lévi-Strauss's point when we realize that Vernet's viewpoint, described thus, corresponds to Proust's initial "naive" attitude toward the theater: ". . . real people, just living their lives at home, on whom I was thus able to spy without their seeing me. . . ."²⁴ But Lévi-Strauss's discovery of Marcel Proust in Vernet is all the more perverse and comical when we turn to some of what Proust had to say about seascapes:

A few weeks later, when I went upstairs, the sun had already set. Like the one I used to see at Combray, behind the Calvary, when I was coming home from a walk and looking forward to going down to the kitchen before dinner, a band of red sky over the sea, compact and clear-cut as a layer of aspic over meat, then a little later, over a sea already cold and blue like a grey mullet, a sky of the same pink as the salmon that we would presently be ordering at Rivebelle reawakened the pleasure which I was to derive from the act of dressing to go out to dinner.²⁵

This paragraph, in which the mundane synesthesia of culinary anticipation slides into a reverie of shipborne escape from "the necessity of sleep and . . . confinement in a bedroom," ends with the line, "I was on all sides surrounded by pictures of the sea." But it is precisely the unity of the "picture" that Proust is dissolving, by stripping the perceptual qualities of iconic signs away from the larger visual field. As Walter Benjamin observed:

It is the world in a state of resemblances, the domain of *correspondences*; the Romanticists were the first to comprehend them and Baudelaire embraced them most fervently, but Proust was the only one to reveal them in our lived life.²⁶

Throughout this chapter, "Seascape, with Frieze of Girls," Proust repeatedly forces the tropes of romantic longing up against a de-psychologized post-impressionist treatment of seashore space. On the one hand, his narrator speaks of "the shipwreck of my nervous storms." At the other extreme, the optical superimposition of a garden in the foreground and a steamship in the far distance is described in this way: ". . . the tiniest slice of blue still separates the questing prow from the first petal of the flower towards which it is steaming."²⁷

Proust's deconstruction *avant la lettre* of seascape is all the more striking for being staged within the realistic idiom of the novel. For Proust, it is photography that initiates the collapse of seascape into an increasingly undifferentiated spatiality. His character Elstir, a painter of seascapes and port scenes, produces confusions of terrestrial and maritime space for which a precedent was already found in certain photographs. Elstir "reproduce[s] things not as he knew them to be but according to the optical illusions of which our first sight of them is composed. . . ." Having "prepared the mind of the spectator by employing, for the little town, only marine terms, and urban terms for the sea," Elstir gives the "impression of harbours in which the sea entered into the land, in which the land was already subaqueous and the population amphibian. . . ."²⁸

Over the course of this chapter, Proust engages in a double and contradictory movement: participating both in a romantic revival of the deluge and in the counter-tendency to domesticate the maritime sublime by converting its perceptual properties into the raw material of still life. This ambivalent strategy is entirely consistent with surrealism.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁴ Marcel Proust, *Within a Budding Grove* [1919], in *Remembrance of Things Past*, vol. 1, trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Random House, 1934), p. 343.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 606.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, "The Image of Proust" [1929], in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), p. 211.

²⁷ *Within a Budding Grove*, pp. 619, 602.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 629-31.

But this ambivalence, which allows the features of classical and romantic seascape to atrophy and hypertrophy at the same time, has also become a routine and unconscious staple of journalistic prose. A reporter for the *New York Times* produced a series of accounts of the oil tanker *Braer* breaking apart on the rocky coast of the Shetland Islands:

The *Braer's* final hours came in the overnight darkness, in a setting of almost primeval fury, as 30-foot surf and winds gusting up to 95 miles an hour smashed the writhing superstructure. Every so often, flashes of lightning illuminated the dark cliff and the wild seascape.²⁹

²⁹ William E. Schmidt, "Tanker in Shetlands Breaks Apart, Losing All Oil," *New York Times*, 13 January 1993, p. C17.

But two days before this, the scene is described with an almost Proustian taste for the banality of culinary metaphors: "At its worst, patches of cappuccino-colored foam swirl along the shore, barely staining the beaches and rocks."³⁰

³⁰ William E. Schmidt, "The Afflicted Shetland Islands Pray, for Themselves and for the Beasts," *New York Times*, 11 January 1993, p. A7.

If this account seems to veer between Lord Byron and Proust with a shift in the weather, the reporter's confusion may have more to do with an epistemological difficulty than with any migration of modernist indifference or postmodern semiotic play into journalistic discourse. Confronted with an oil spill and a tempest, the reporter is hard-pressed to differentiate between the destructive workings of first nature (the storm) and manufactured second nature (the leaking oil). The result is the forced simile by which leaking crude oil is repeatedly and reassuringly likened to upscale coffee. Wittingly or not, this metaphoric loop takes us back to the very origins of maritime risk insurance at Lloyd's coffeehouse in eighteenth-century London.

But it is unlikely that most readers of the *New York Times* would make this connection. If Proust can be said to have rigorously enacted the exhaustion and death of seascape within the modernist literary canon, then the elite newspaper of a coastal cosmopolis, the *New York Times*, can be said to have taken the lead in turning its back to the sea. When maritime news appears it is restricted to stories of disaster, war, and exodus: thus the subject is compressed into a weirdly blasé and episodic *faux*-sublimity. The sea is the site of intermittent horrors and extraordinary but brief expenditures of energy, quite distinct from the dramas of everyday life.

The disappearance of the sea took place slowly, over two decades. In the 1960s, the *New York Times* typically ran a page of shipping and transport industry news, alongside the weather, which was charted far into the Atlantic. Cargo and passenger ship departures and arrivals were reported daily. By 1970, the "Shipping/Mails" section was restricted to passenger and mail ships only, excluding cargo vessels. By 1980, the "Shipping/Mails" listing had migrated to a small corner of the "Stock Options" pages of the newspaper's business section. The weather maps, placed elsewhere, were more likely to hug the Eastern seaboard. By the end of 1985, in the middle of the Reagan-era decade of speculative accumulation, the everyday shipping news sank entirely from sight. By contrast, a paper such as Hong Kong's *South China Morning Post* continues to make shipping news a major feature of daily coverage, rivaling the more specialized press, such as the New York-based *Journal of Commerce*, in the depth of its reporting.

One can argue correctly that this disappearance is coincident with New York City's decline as a seaport. But this argument misses the point that the

combined Port of New York and New Jersey remains second only to Los Angeles and Long Beach on the west coast as the preeminent port in the Americas. But the working port is invisible from Manhattan and increasingly so from Brooklyn, with the main cargo terminals relocated with the advent of containerization to Port Elizabeth and Port Newark.

The metropolitan gaze no longer falls upon the waterfront, and a cognitive blankness follows. Thus despite increasing international mercantile dependence on ocean transport, and despite advances in oceanography and marine biology, the sea is in many respects less comprehensible to today's elites than it was before 1945, in the nineteenth-century, or even during the Enlightenment.

This incomprehension is the product of forgetting and disavowal. In this sense elites become incapable of recognizing their own, outside of narrow specialist circles. Consider, by contrast, the obscurity of Malcom McLean, the trucking executive who initiated containerized cargo movement in 1956, alongside the historical and cultural importance accorded to Donald McKay, the nineteenth-century Boston clipper-ship builder. In his *American Renaissance* of 1941, F.O. Matthiessen reproduced as a frontispiece a striking daguerreotype portrait of McKay by Southworth and Hawes:

McKay's portrait makes the most fitting frontispiece, since it reveals the type of character with which the writers of the age were most concerned, the common man in his heroic stature, or as Whitman called the new type, "Man in the Open Air."³¹

Matthiessen's choice reflects both the legacy of American romanticism and the pragmatism of a nation entering a convoy war in the North Atlantic. But the line leading from American romanticism to American pragmatism has since been broken. The new model hero, in an age that celebrates cunning survivors of corporate bankruptcies and victorious commanding generals in wars against abysmally inferior opponents, is less Walt Whitman's "common man" than Herman Melville's archetypal American swindler, the Confidence-Man.

³¹ F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), p. 100.

Nonetheless, the proletarian world of the sea was not so completely channeled, if for no other reason than that the more powerful and ultimately triumphant forces were those of reaction. Another narrative from the same period offers an even more claustrophobic, stateless, and anarchistic view of the bilge spaces of the maritime world, closer in its absolute homelessness to the youthful anarchism of Victor Serge, and the anarcho-syndicalism of American Wobbly seafarers and dock workers of 1919-23. The book is B. Traven's novel *The Death Ship*, first published in German as *Das Totenschiff* in 1926, the story of a sailor rendered anonymous and stateless by the loss of his passport. The protagonist is hurled from country to country by surly border guards, only to seek refuge working on a doomed vessel, laboring in its heterotopic hell of an engine room. Or as Traven put it in a more utopian moment of filial devotion to the imagined maternal body of the ship: "Home is always a ship."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ B. Traven, *The Death Ship: The Story of an American Sailor* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934), p. 110.

With Traven, the physiognomy of the sailor is erased, in a dark comedy of the loss of "documents." Traven himself, in his Mexican exile, enacted a fierce proletarian anonymity, more radical in his resistance to authorship and citizenship (but not to categories of gender) than most of those who have followed the lead of Duchamp.¹⁰⁷ *The Death Ship* followed both the sailor's path and the path of dada, which led to surrealism:

¹⁰⁷ The most convincing argument is that Traven was Ret Marut, a German anarchist newspaper editor who had gone underground after the suppression of the Munich Soviet in 1919. Marut fled to Mexico in 1922, eventually "creating a long and ingenious array of impediments and false leads for biographers." Heidi Zogbaum, *B. Traven: A Vision of Mexico* (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1992), p. xvii.

He jumped. He did it. There was no riverbank. There was no port. There was no ship. No shore. Only the sea. Only the waves rolling from horizon to horizon, kissing the heavens, glittering like the mirrors of sunken suns.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ *The Death Ship*, p. 371.

The drowned and canceled sailor was resurrected in the landlocked figures of the Mayan peasant revolutionaries of the Lacandón rain forest of Chiapas in southern Mexico, the subjects of Traven's novel *The Rebellion of the Hanged*, first published in Spanish in 1952.

But is the phenomenology of the sailor so thoroughly reducible to Jakobson's model of a nomadic, proletarian subspecies of dada, to Benjamin's proletarian epistemology of the close-up? Are there, even today, forms of human agency in maritime environments that seek to build a logical sequence of details, a *synoptic* interpretation of observed events? Is it possible to construct such knowledge from below, or is this only the purview of elites? Can these questions even be approached in the present tense, in the face of an automated, accelerated, computer-driven, and increasingly monolithic maritime world?

* * *

My story, this "dismal science" of the *image* of the ship and the sea and the sailor, has taken us only to the end of the 1930s, when the sea was still within the realm of physiognomic contact, of overlapping cosmopolitanisms, both bourgeois and proletarian.¹⁰⁹ This period saw the triumph of fascism and Stalinism, and the dawn of the Depression-born military-Keynesian "American Century," anticipated symbolically by the glamorization of capitalist industry in *Fortune* magazine. With the end of this decade, "mutiny" disappeared from the popular imagination, only to be replaced by the heroic image of the "convoy."

¹⁰⁹ And here I must confess the source of my title, Thomas Carlyle's satirical term for political economy, coined when his writing had turned increasingly bitter and reactionary, after having been a great source of inspiration to the young Friedrich Engels. Thomas Carlyle, "The Nigger Question" [1849], in *Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. 4 (New York: Scribners, 1900), p. 354. The "dismal science" of wealth and scarcity was implicitly to be contrasted with the "gay science" of poetry. On Engels' debt to Carlyle, see Steven Marcus, *Engels, Manchester, and the Working Class* (New York: Random House, 1974), pp. 102-112.

After the war, in 1953, the Trinidadian socialist C.L.R. James wrote a book on Melville while incarcerated as an unwanted foreign radical on Ellis

Island, that great heterotopic space of immigration and expulsion in New York harbor, that great valve of regulated difference. James' book, *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, was a complex appeal for citizenship as well a meditation on the whale ship as the very model of capitalist domination over labor power and nature. (Written by a prisoner of McCarthyism, to be read by his warders and comrades and the general public, the book has at times the eerie ambiguity of Melville's mutinous-slaveship masquerade *Benito Cereno*.) In the course of his argument, which rejected more allegorical and psychoanalytic readings of *Moby-Dick*, James claimed that the multi-racial crew of the *Pequod* were

candidates for the Universal Republic . . . bound together by the fact that they work together on a whaling ship. They are a world-federation of modern industrial workers. They owe allegiance to no nationality.¹¹⁰

James' idea, that it is the everyday culture of the workplace that provides the basis for solidarity and revolt, was to become a crucial heuristic insight for independent socialists during the long night of the 1950s.¹¹¹

At about the same time that James was writing his book on Ellis Island, management experts in the shipping industry were beginning to dream of a fluid world of wealth without workers. In a period of declining profitability, postwar strikes, and increased labor costs, the petroleum tankship stood as the model for smooth automated operations for the entire shipping industry:

. . . tankers carry a very limited range of uniform types of cargo, which can be handled at very low terminal costs. Handling costs are low because the cargoes can be transferred by mechanical methods requiring very little labor. If similar improvements, now available, could be introduced in the technology of dry-cargo transfers, the prospects . . . could become brighter.¹¹²

By 1956, experiments with containerized cargo movement had begun in earnest. By the 1970s, the very contours of seaports had changed. The intricate pattern of finger piers, resembling intestinal villi, had given way to the smoothed-out rectangularity of container storage yards. In their insatiable demands for flat open spaces, seaports became remote from urban centers, distanced from the neatly encapsulated possibilities of the Mediterranean seaport tableau found in Joseph Vernet's views of Naples.

In this sense, the port of Los Angeles, twenty miles from the city's downtown, was paradigmatic, both in its remoteness and in the artificiality of its construction. Unlike New York, Los Angeles never had to turn its back on the industrial waterfront. Here was a city with a mythical concept of the sea entirely coded in relation to the imaginary category of "the beach," even to the point, in the 1930s, of promulgating booster photographs showing rows of secretaries typing while sitting on the sand in bathing costumes.¹¹³ Developed from an inauspicious tidal estuary offering no natural shelter at the beginning of America's imperialist initiative in the Pacific, this great "man-made harbor" was a port designed for "relations between sites." Here was a port that would be perpetually suspended between its hatred and fear of, and need for, the Asian continent on the other side of the Pacific.

The joke and fantasy of a Pacific Coast childhood is that one can stand on the cliffs at Point Fermin on a clear day, and see beyond Catalina Island to

¹¹⁰ *Mariners, Renegades and Castaways*, pp. 19-20. See also Paul Buhle, *C.L.R. James: The Artist as Revolutionary* (London: Verso, 1988). Buhle argues that this is "the least representative of his major works" (p. 106).

¹¹¹ See Stan Weir, "The Informal Work Group," in Alice Lynd and Staughton Lynd, eds. *Rank and File: Personal Histories of Working-Class Organizers* (New York: Monthly Review, 1988), pp. 169-193. See also the novel by Harvey Swados, *On the Line* (New York: Little, Brown, 1957).

¹¹² Wytze Gorter and George H. Hildebrand, *The Pacific Coast Maritime Industry, 1930-1948. Volume II: An Analysis of Performance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), p. 314.

¹¹³ "Los Angeles remained inland by ambience. The City of Angels was too far away to hear the call of steamers entering the harbor or to smell the salt on the air." Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California through the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 90.

Japan. The dark side of this fantasy is revealed in the fact that War Plan Orange, the U.S. Navy's patient and successful plan for making war with the island nation on the other side of the Pacific, was initiated in the wake of anti-Japanese-immigrant riots in San Francisco, during the mass-psychosis that followed the 1907 earthquake.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan 1897-1945* (Annapolis, Maryland: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 21.

Today, containers are the ubiquitous material link with Asia. Even for those who shun the freeways that lead through South-Central Los Angeles to the harbor, they are hard to avoid on the highway. They bear the logos of companies that are nominally American, Danish, German, Israeli, Japanese, South Korean, Taiwanese. These are now joined by boxes labeled COSCO for China Ocean Shipping, carrying the manufactured goods flowing from the low wage factories of southern China a little more blatantly, perhaps, than the others. The truck drivers who shuttle the containers from the docks to the inland rail-transfer yards are mostly immigrants from Mexico and El Salvador, driving battered Kenworth tractors that have seen a few previous owners, desperately shuttling back and forth in the hopes of clearing, after expenses, seventy dollars in a twelve-hour day. On Sundays, the tractors can be found wedged into crowded street-side parking in the immigrant apartment districts of central Los Angeles. In a curious reversal of the middle-class American dream, these *troqueros* would prefer to be recognized as workers, rather than independent entrepreneurs, since the latter legal status makes them vulnerable to insurance fraud, excessive taxation, and the trucking companies' indifference to health and safety: "They call you owner-operator, but you work like a slave."¹¹⁵ Their recent slogan, a funny reference to the distinct tax forms issued to employees and "independent contractors": "W-2, Si! 1099, No!"

¹¹⁵ Edwin Stanley Paniagua, in conversation, 15 April, 1992.

Beyond that, the waterfront truckers have demonstrated in support of fired longshore workers, and against NAFTA. More recently, they have joined demonstrations by Latino high-school students against an anti-immigrant initiative on the California ballot. Their children bring home video cameras, and pay close attention to the behavior of the police. On occasion, when they want to win a dispute with one of the trucking companies, the drivers manage to "lose" large numbers of containers full of valuable goods for a few days.

Other continents were not always so close, their products not so reducible to the illusory uniformity imposed by packaging, a uniformity that hides the chaotic restlessness and indifference of the profit motive. This new proximity and smoothness had to be won:

In the summer of 1965, Saigon was the only major port in South Vietnam. Saigon is a river port. It lies 60 miles up the treacherous, winding Saigon River. The slow trip up the narrow river from Vung Tau is a nightmare for the ship's crew, and for the pilot, since the jungle on either side of the river is Viet Cong territory and ships make inviting targets for enemy marksmen. . . .

From the port area, cargo had to be moved through narrow, crowded streets teeming with civilian traffic. . . . A mishap on a bridge could tie up traffic completely and block the port for hours. To eliminate the bottleneck in Saigon, new ports, depots, and air bases have been carved out of the jungle and sand dunes.

The writer, the United States general in charge of the Army Materiel Command, continues:

One of our most notable logistic tools has been the CONEX container. This is roughly a 7-foot metal cube that is almost worth its weight in gold. Each CONEX carries five tons of cargo. . . .

The CONEX container was designed to speed movement of cargo and protect goods from loss, damage and pilferage. It has found countless additional uses in the war theatre. The metal cubes are converted into dispensaries, offices, supply rooms and command posts. . . .¹¹⁶

Perhaps the innovation was yet to come, or perhaps the general saw fit not to sully his suburban metaphor, but the containers were also used to imprison mutinous and delinquent American troops at the Long Binh Stockade, or jail, nicknamed LBJ by its inmates.¹¹⁷

The general's enthusiastic remarks predict a protean future for the cargo container. Within the shipping industry, the container comes to be seen as *the* crucial element in the functional ensemble, submitting all the older heroic machines to its rule:

It is obvious that the ocean transportation industry must rid itself of the *box syndrome* and begin to accept the fact that the container must be viewed as a *vehicle of transportation* and the ship itself only as an underlying carrier, or perhaps, more vividly, as merely a form of locomotion for the container.¹¹⁸

This is the manifesto of those who would forever sink the notion of the hetero-topic vessel.

Given the increasing ubiquity of the shipping container during the 1960s, one cannot help but wonder why this new form passed unnoticed by the artists most likely to have been interested: artists associated with pop art, minimalism, and conceptual art. One reason, of course, is that containers did not move through either the Manhattan waterfront or the city streets. The container port was developed in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

With his silkscreened boxes, Andy Warhol moved behind the stage of advertising and immediate retail consumption, reaching the warehouse, but no further. Dan Graham, who recognized the serial geometric uniformity of suburban housing in *Homes for America* (1966), also regarded the highway largely as a space of domestic family travel, rather than commercial transport. The one artist who demonstrated a sustained interest in industrial landscapes was Robert Smithson. But Smithson was enamored of a science-fiction scenario of entropic heat-death and sought only evidence of stasis and decay. Furthermore, his hostility to action painting and kinetic sculpture led him to dismiss anything that moved.

Smithson's *Monuments of Passaic* (1967), with its robotic camera-eye journey to the spaces of his childhood, continually returns to the figure of the box: "I was completely controlled by the Instamatic (or what the rationalists call a camera)." Then later: "I looked at the orange-yellow box of Kodak Verichrome Pan. . . ." Ultimately, the automatic recording device and the dead landscape mirror one another:

Time turns metaphors into *things*, and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs.¹¹⁹



Fig. 22
Andy Warhol, *Brillo Box (Soap Pads)*, silkscreen on wood, 1964.

General purpose freight container

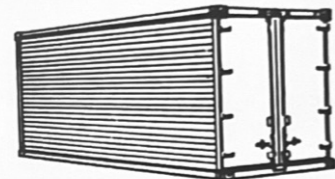


FIG. 1

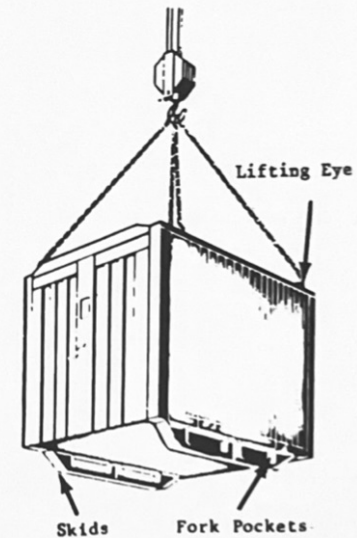


FIG. 2

Fig. 23
International Organization for Standardization, illustration from "International Container Standards," [1970], in *Jane's Freight Container*, 1971-72.

¹¹⁶ General Frank S. Besson, Jr., "From Factory to Foxhole—A 10,000-Mile Pipeline to War," *U.S. News and World Report*, 19 June 1967, pp. 98-99. The description of the port of Saigon echoes the sociologist (and former labor editor of *Fortune* magazine) Daniel Bell's description of the port of New York in the 1950s: "The pier facilities are still inadequate to speed the flow of cargo; the narrow fringe-like piers still have little radial space to permit trucks to maneuver and unload. Forced into the narrow grid-iron-patterned streets built to accommodate the horse and wagon, the trucks force all traffic to back up behind them. And astride the ports stand the mobs; at this vantage point between trucker and steamship company, like medieval robber barons, they erected their sluice gates and exacted their tolls." Daniel Bell, "The Racket-Ridden Longshoremen: The Web of Economics and Politics," in *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), pp. 189-190. Furthermore, an early high-speed digital-computer study of the feasibility of containerization was commissioned by the Office of Naval Research, and widely distributed throughout U.S. military circles and the international shipping industry. See Joseph D. Carrabino, *An Engineering Analysis of Cargo Handling-VI: Containerization* (Los Angeles: University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Engineering, 1957). While Bell was concerned with inefficiencies caused by organized crime in New York, the larger fear in this period was of sabotage by the allegedly communist-led West Coast longshore union. See House Committee on Un-American Activities, *Communist Activities among Seamen and on Waterfront Facilities*, Part 1. 86th Congress, 2nd sess., 1960. In the end, neither containerization nor the flow of supplies to the war in Vietnam was resisted by the union leadership.

¹¹⁷ Conversation with William Short, 29 June 1994. Short was an infantry platoon sergeant charged with leading a conspiracy to mutiny in Vietnam in 1969, subsequently sentenced to LBJ for refusing to fight. See the book of photographs and interviews by William Short and Willa Seidenberg, *A Matter of Conscience: GI Resistance during the Vietnam War* (Andover, Massachusetts: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1991).

¹¹⁸ R.P. Holubowicz, "Preface," to Patrick Finley, ed., *Jane's Freight Containers* (London: Jane's Yearbooks, 1971-72), p. 60. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁹ Robert Smithson, "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson: Essays with Illustrations*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), pp. 53, 55, 56. Originally published as "The Monuments of Passaic," *Artforum* (December 1967).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹²² *Ibid.*, pp. 53, 56.

This is a variety of deadpan anti-vitalism, Movement—the image of life—is the source of metaphor, and thus either subject to hilarious disavowal, or simply unknowable. Smithson remarks on his discovery of a "fountain" consisting of pipes discharging effluent into the Passaic River:

It was as though the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm. A psychoanalyst might say the landscape displayed "homosexual tendencies," but I will not draw such a crass anthropomorphic conclusion. I will merely say, "it was there."¹²⁰

And earlier in his walk along the river:

From the banks of the Passaic I watched the bridge rotate on a central axis in order to allow an inert rectangular shape to pass with its unknown cargo.¹²¹

In Smithson's entropic parable, then, the box becomes the very image of death: the "last monument," a children's sandbox, "somehow doubled as an open grave." What would Smithson have seen if he had chosen not to return to the spaces of his childhood, but to Port Elizabeth instead? What if it had not been Saturday, when "many machines were not working"?¹²²

Cosmic entropy fails to explain the moving box, carrying "unknown cargo." Nor does it explain the vampiric vitality of capitalism, although it certainly offers a tempting "explanation" of economic stagnation, which may give Smithson something of the aura of a prophet since he was writing during the Vietnam War economic boom, before the recession of the early 1970s.

I propose a more provisional funeral. If anything, the appropriate metaphor is found in Marx's notion of the "dead labor" embedded in commodities. If there is a single object that can be said to embody the disavowal implicit in the transnational bourgeoisie's fantasy of a world of wealth without workers, a world of uninhibited flows, it is this: the container, the very coffin of remote labor-power. And like the table in Marx's explanation of commodity fetishism, the coffin has learned to dance.