

## Economic Figuration

Conference Paper for Critical Finance Studies VI  
University of Amsterdam, 13-15 August, 2014

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With multinational capitalism, Frederic Jameson notes, comes a fundamental representational problem of unprecedented magnitude: “to think a system so vast that it cannot be encompassed by the natural and historically developed categories of perception with which human beings normally orient themselves”. The inability of perception – or even much detailed research, for that matter – to encompass the complexities of globalized financial networks gives rise to an urgent call to democratize access to network information (particularly since the 2008 financial crisis). This call echoes from disparate sources, from the Bank of England’s Executive Director of Financial Stability, Andrew Haldane, to the London-based, non-profit organization Positive Money, which seeks to raise public awareness of how money is created in order to democratize its production. In part, such democratization strategies, given the complexity of the terrain, must be both narrative and figural: they involve representing the economy – characterizing it with moods, attributes and behaviors – within a narrative context. Such characterizations perform the economy, translate its machinations from imperceptible to perceptible – and in doing so, performatively shift what – and how – the economy, as a concept, can produce understanding (and itself come to be understood as perceptible). Given the urgent need for innovative narrative methods for doing this, what might be learned from past literary and artistic instances of such methods? What can comparisons between such instances across eras tell us about changes in the economy, and the changing economy’s relation to representation?

To explore these questions, I examine the appearance of money and/or financial networks as characters or figures within three vastly different narrative milieus: Thomas Bridges’ novel *The Adventures of a Bank Note* (1771), in which a bank note observes various human interactions as it is passed from pocket to pocket; Mark Lombardi’s *Narrative Structures* (1990s) – pencil drawings that diagram complex webs of financial networks involved in insider trading, money laundering and other nefarious activities; and London-based artist Amir Chasson’s painted diptychs of abject, slightly disproportioned portraits of businessmen paired with abstract statistical diagrams (2009-10). Each of these works, I argue, reflexively links economy to the problems of perception. Bridges’ novel imagines the economy itself (characterized by the bank note) as possessing perception, and focalizes human interactions within the bank note’s “sensory” range. Lombardi’s complex *Narrative Structures* construct a near-omniscient perspective on corporate crime, making hidden networks newly perceptible. Chasson’s diptychs invite comparisons between the perceptual apparatuses of facial recognition and diagram reading that question the very sensory architecture underlying any attempt to make the economy perceptible. Analysis of such complexities could complicate established discourses on contemporary art and financialization, which tend to ignore the qualities of specific artworks in favour of offering a meta-analysis of the art world itself as an exemplar of financialized capitalism. Such analysis could also help to generate criteria as to what counts as a “critical” form of economic figuration within the current economic climate, and to generate new figural strategies for those seeking to democratize network information.