

Realism, Reification, Pragmatism: Photorealist Painting and the Limit of Common Sense

1 INTRODUCTION AND INTENTION

Key concepts at play in this presentation:

Reification – as described by Georg Lukacs (1885-1971)

Thingitude – as coined by cultural theorist Timothy Bewes

Après-Coup - as found in the work of Lacan.

The aim of the paper – is to perform a modest Lacanian ‘after-cut’ and see in Photorealism something about an engagement with (particularly) urban capitalism which we can see, now, from our contemporary vantage point.

The main intention is, then, to suggest that the depiction of the urban everyday in American Photorealism of the 1970s is a provocative insight into our tense 21stC relationship to capitalism – and that now we are in a position to say that Photorealism saw it coming.

2 the terms in play:

2.1 Reification is a complex (and much reviled term). It is also much used and always indebted to Lukacs’s application of the concept after Marx.

For Lukacs, reification, as a central phenomenon of concepts of class, should be taken to mean that phantom objectifying force, set in train by humans (an idea, an ideology, an institution...), which comes to control humans and which, in turn, alienates them from relations between themselves as humans and between themselves and the objects of the world.

(An example – a nostalgic one – ‘property boom’ as a concept pits man against man in a test of accumulation – property becomes perniciously objectified as ‘investment’ and the societal relations between human and habitus are subordinated and usurped.)

As Timothy Bewes puts it, reification is the process in which ‘thing-hood’ becomes the standard of objective reality: the ‘given world is taken to be the truth’.

Now there are obvious difficulties with such a term for at its most abstract, it doesn’t seem to mean much more in Lukacs than ‘humans are governed by the inevitable crystallisation of ideas into

infrastructure'. But the emphasis in his definitions is on the particular nature of class structure and the particular type of 'thing-hood' as experienced by the alienated individual (worker).

In Lukacs's classical sense of reification the implication is very much that society is in a state of disintegration ; human relations are spoiled, and man's engagement with the objects he needs and meets is ruined by the forces of capitalism's relations. This endemic syndrome of reification is, then, clearly not for the good – the collective possibilities of society are stillborn because the individual is individuated only in the sense that he or she has a particular position in the concretised class-based infrastructure.

That said, this negative outlook on 'how things work', is accompanied in Lukacs by the logical possibility of *dereification* - a potential *undoing* of the crystallised, pernicious relations between man, object and system; this would be a *revolutionary* return, says Lukacs, to a condition in which the (proletariat) are de-exploited, somehow taken out of the harmful domain of phantom objectifying forces.

To an image – extemporise Lukacsian position

Richard Estes' *Central Savings* 1975 might be read in a 'classical' Lukacsian Marxist manner. Here we see the arena of urban capitalism, the two principal feeders of consumption – the bank and the food outlet – a kind of capitalist gluttony, all too vivid and nauseating in all its detail.

In a Baudrillardian sense there is a pornography of opticality – an indecent level of visual consumption seems to be being invoked.



Tellingly for this kind of reading, the normal relations of man to his environment have literally been reversed, and we face not solid materiality, but an illusory and fluid system of reflections and signs – humans have been superseded by the structures which serve consumption, edged out of the frame, shadowy figures who are at their mercy of the phantom objectifying forces of the ideology of consumption.

In keeping with this, as Patrice Marandel has pointed out, the all-over quality of Estes painted surfaces might be further suggestive of an all-pervasiveness of consumer possibility. The fact that Estes packs so much materiality into his rendition of surfaces, might chime, at a stretch, with the 'melting into air' notion from Marx – capitalism is here depicted as an all-encompassing stain which renders variegated materiality into a homogenous surface.

2.2 Bewes's Thingitude

In his 2002 book, *Reification or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* Timothy Bewes begins with Lukacs and sets out to read reification in a way which is less committed to what Bewes calls the Hegelian logic of Lukacs's take on reification - a logic which tends to the rather essentialist positions of negative 'assimilation' and positive 'revolution'. Bewes attempts to explore a middle ground, by proposing that the human agent might profit from amidst objectifying forces by dint of exercising a strong reflexive sense of 'what's happening' – a cultural knowingness.

Bewes proposes *Thingitude* as more usefully expressive of a 'poetics of objectification' which arises out of a willingness of the human agent here to 'name that process as such' and to 'refuse to accede to its logic'.

For Bewes Thingitude exceeds the too-simple Hegelian, and nostalgic, dialectic of reification in Lukacs – and he cites the application of the term 'negritude' in the work of Aime Cesaire as the motivation for his term.

Cesaire is famed for having wrested 'negro' from racist colonialist discourse to style 'negritude' as a positive declaration of one's blackness which spoke of pride not domination. In *Return to My Native Land*, published in 1940s, Cesaire wrote:

**my negritude is not a stone
nor a deafness flung against the clamor of the day
my negritude is not a white speck of dead water
on the dead eye of the earth
my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral**

So, if the tower in Cesaire represents the human agent being imprisoned by ideological forces, and if the cathedral represents here the nostalgic and pious condition of eternal hope, which is Lukacs's intimation by way of dereification, then Cesaire is searching for something in between.

Bewes works towards this in his book by making plain that most human agents entangled in the processes of reification are aware of this entanglement. To say as much the passage which he cites from Cesaire's poem is:

And the negre everyday more debased, more cowardly, more sterile, less deep, more spread out of himself, more estranged from himself, more cunning with himself, less immediate with himself,

I accept, I accept all this...

Now, putting to one side (although you may wish to put it back in come the discussion) putting to one side the undiluted Marxism which would maintain that even if the alienation which the individual is subjected to might not be acutely felt by the subjugated individual it is nonetheless real – Bewes offers a way out of reification which is not driven by essentialist revolution.

"Like negritude – Thingitude may be invested with radical divergent political implications. " It is not a category, or a politics of identity, or over identification, thus it is not (what some people did see in Cesaire) a masochistic 'glorious resignation' under the force of ideology."

Bewes argues that Thingitude like negritude is to be understood **as a mode of subjective insertion into what is unacceptable – a strategic, heavily inflected ‘acceptance’ of a situation which is thereby *materialized in its unacceptability*.**

Negritude is not a philosophy or a politics as such, BUT THE DEFIANT RECOGNITION AND COLD ARTICULATION OF A SITUATION IN ITS BRUTAL ACTUALITY.

2.3 Lacan’s APRES-COUP

As referenced in my introduction – the Lacanian notion of après-coup is at work here.

To encounter Bewes’s adjustment of Lukacsian reification is to understand in the present what was latent in Photorealism in the past (the letter has arrived at its destination). Thingitude, for me, triggers a text in the Photorealist painting which was dormant, or at least sub-textual to a commonplace reading of the Photorealist canvas as a testament to the reign of capitalism in the American everyday (rural and urban environment).

Retrospectively, with Bewes’s help, then, the Photorealist painting might speak to our everyday in a slightly different (different from 1970s and 80s) and also a very timeous way.

3 Thingitude in the Photorealist picture

So Bewes means something a little more positive with ‘thingitude’ than conventional takes on reification as expressed through such terms as alienation, objectification and the like.

Bewes argues that previous usages of reification as concept involve a rather too static understanding of the relation between reality and its representation.

To wit Bewes writes: “A profound anxiety towards reification may be unearthed behind every piece of serious writing on the subject. Such feelings of anxiety are incomprehensible without taking into account the consciousness of the perceiving subject. The anxiety towards reification is itself reifying.”

I take this to mean (notwithstanding my earlier caution about the individual being objectified even though he has no conception of it from his lowly class position, I guess) that the agency of the to-be-reified (that is me and you and any other member of our kind, and all the authors behind every piece of serious writing) can come into play productively despite the acknowledgement by that person that they are inevitably embroiled in the phantom forces of objectification.

How to connect this to the works – exto on my wish not to totalise Photorealist practice, on the other hand there are credible continuities in the work of Richard Estes, my case-study here –

With reference to Estes *Nedick’s* 1970 – let’s recall typical criticism of this kind of realism when seen in the 1970s – Linda Nochlin likening the photorealist practice of Lowell Nesbitt and others to avant-garde cinema, made note of the eradication of conventional narrative:

Painters and filmmakers avoid involvement with narrative theme or symbolic content, and resolutely exclude any possibility of interpretation that would involve translating the visual 'given' into terms other than its own, or reducing it to a mere transparent surface for an all-important 'something more' lurking beneath."

Nochlin sees the picture freeze the onlooker in the recognisable everyday – nothing lurks beneath the surface of the Estes windows – there is a bizarre and negative stasis which seems to lock down, in essentialist Modernist fashion, the image as nothing but what it is. She writes:

"The literalness of the imagery makes the art object dense and opaque; anything that would tend to pierce through the presented surface and give rise to narrative meaning or psychological implication is immediately put between parentheses (which, for Nochlin, means that) it is thereby assimilated to the opaque, continuous surface that constitutes the totality of the aesthetic statement."

Elsewhere in her essay, *Realism Now*, she mentions the posterlike deadening of the surfaces of Photorealist works – close, in many ways, to a classical treatment of Photorealism as some kind of numbing but inevitable fall out from accelerating post-war capitalism.

→ BUT – can we see through the après-coup, that Nochlin is right about the quality of the frozen everyday in Photorealism, but too pessimistic about its significance? Can Bewes's 'thingitude' now take up that discursive space which Nochlin saw as so supra-real so as to be mortified?

I think so –

Thingitude is not a philosophy or a politics as such, BUT THE DEFIANT RECOGNITION AND COLD ARTICULATION OF A SITUATION IN ITS BRUTAL ACTUALITY.

The beholder of the photorealist painting is confronted by a brutal actuality – but might the invocation more readily welcome the 'cesairean' I accept all this – in doing so, there is nothing to pierce, no parentheses to break free from – the brutality of actuality promotes a productive pragmatism, one could argue, which sees the ideologies of objectification and revolution as obsolete, as too hot, too naively artistic.

And here, by way of conclusion of sorts, the thingitude in Photorealism is curiously redolent of a contemporary postmetaphysical pragmatism in American thought which would see the acceptance of parentheses as being the first step towards disregarding parenthesis altogether – as if we are held between the frozen and the animated the good and the bad the real and the unreal.

