

Realism and Reification: A Photorealist Pragmatism

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The running method of this contribution is something of an *après-coup*; a retrospective seeing of significance triggered by reflection on present concerns. The chapter draws out latent import in American Photorealist painting of the 1970s prompted by two contemporary stimuli. The first of these is our troubled contemporary capitalism and the second is a still-contentious debate about philosophical pragmatism and its consequences. Both stimuli have ready connection to the urban American everyday commonly pictured by Photorealist painters of that decade, although my focus for concision is on the work of the East Coast artist, Richard Estes. The two present concerns seem now to illuminate aspects of what was then in many respects - and what remains so - a traumatic form of painting for despite its *prima facie* representational simplicity such work strongly resists assimilation into normative art history or art theory categories. The essay is intent on revealing what might be illuminated by these two stimuli in order to offer both new ways of approaching the Photorealist image from a twenty-first century vantage point and, more importantly for this author, novel thinking about our contemporary everyday from the vantage point of the *pragmatic* Photorealist image.

The speculation which follows is developed from: i) insight on reification and advanced capitalism proffered by cultural theorist, Timothy Bewes; and ii) theorising of philosophical pragmatism in the work of Richard Rorty. These two components are synthesised with iii) critical analysis from 1968 by American art historian, Linda Nochlin into then-contemporary realist practices in painting. Of especial relevance, therefore, are Bewes's, *Reification: or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (2002);¹ Rorty's *Consequences of Pragmatism* (1982);² and Nochlin's milestone exhibition and catalogue essay *Realism Now* (1968).³

Bewes's thinking on reification is here retrospectively charged to re-evaluate aspects of Nochlin's influential writing on realism and to illuminate Photorealist painting, as read through a salient work by Estes. The purpose of the method at play is to allow Bewes to help us see powerful but inadvertent prescience in Nochlin's analysis of Photorealism. This foresight is explored through a reading of Estes's representative photorealist everyday as both a critique of capitalism *and* as a visual touchstone for a pragmatist world view. With regard to the latter, the work of Rorty bears on an elaboration of the potential pragmatist significance of such paintings, and it is this dimension that the essay seeks to speculate upon by way of conclusion.

American Photorealism is presented in conclusion as an instructive exemplar of a pragmatist worldview, one which is, *sui generis*, linked historically and forcefully to an American everyday: an exemplar which might underpin a contemporary pragmatism,

situated as that is in the everyday of lived relations, dynamically persistent throughout processes of reification and dereification.

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In a famous 1968 catalogue essay for the exhibition, *Realism Now* which she also curated, Nochlin did her best to find a place for Photorealist practices in the ongoing modernist concern for aesthetic and painterly issues. Taking a purist line on Richard Estes, Robert Bechtle, Sylvia Mangold, Lowell Nesbitt, and others, Nochlin insisted that 'not since the Impressionists, has there been a group so concerned with the problems of vision and their solution in terms of pictorial notation and construction'. She went on to emphasise the ocular significance of such works in this way:

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* – it is thereby assimilated to the opaque, continuous surface that constitutes the totality of the aesthetic statement.⁴

With retroactive help from Bewes in due course we might come to see the acuity of Nochlin's analysis. Arguably, she identified the *aporetic* crux of much Photorealism but stopped short of exploring its deeper significance. Nochlin's emphasis on vision and notation in *Realism Now* had the substantive core of Photorealism registered but repressed, if you will, and this article is an endeavour to have that core further unconcealed and developed. *Anything that would tend to pierce the presented surface and give rise to narrative meaning or psychological implication is put between parentheses*: what does it mean for that aspect of content to be held in parentheses in that way, visible, but checked? And what significance arises from the everyday detail and ostensible banality of that seemingly inert content? In other words, what was it that type of picture making was telling us in the late sixties and seventies about the strain of capital which permeates the urban everyday of the twenty-first century? Or, to read ahead to Bewes on reification, what was it that Photorealist painting like Estes's was telling us about the everyday world that is so 'easily transformed into a series of objects that are removed from us, and towards which we may feel a sense of reverence, or loss, or revulsion'?⁵ And what might be constituted apropos a pragmatist outlook in answering these questions in the face of the Photorealist painting with guidance from Bewes and Rorty?

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Bewes reminds us that reification is an inordinately complex term. His explication of the concept within his thesis on the anxiety of late capitalism stems from Georg Lukacs and the seminal 1968 work, *History of Class Consciousness*. From Lukacs, remember, we can take the term to conjure that concretising process set in train by humans (via ideas,

ideologies, institutions, workplaces...as we know) which effects a pernicious control of individuals and which, in turn, alienates them from lived relations between one another as humans and between themselves and objects in the world. For Lukacs this phenomenon is central to understanding the commodity-structure as espoused by classical Marxism for it brings into being 'an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people'.⁶ The autonomy is that of the downstream *thing* reified in this structure, a thing which masks the upstream organic potentiality of labour and human relations to be found on a river bank to which the Marxist will always and forever reverse paddle.



Figure 1 'Central Savings', Richard Estes, 1975, Oil on canvas, 36 x 48".

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Mo. Friends of Arts Collection.

The ease with which Nochlin determined a neo-Impressionist significance for the painted surfaces of the Photorealist canvas masks something of a Lukacsian phenomenon of reification in such works. Estes's *Central Savings*, 1975, my emblematic Photorealist picture for the sake of (precarious) concision, presents a *downstream*, downtown world, devoid of the organic in both content and method. The picture alights on the representative secondary services which satellite the big centre of accelerating US capitalism. Humans appear as shadows on man-made surfaces, reified in silhouette as things which take their place under instruction as regulated bits in another's machinery. The ocular is rightly highlighted by Nochlin, but that aspect is borne from the spectacular

lights of an urban manifestation of the commodity-structure, the advanced state of which the picture literally cannot conceive for the representation proceeds symbolically in all directions. The entire picture is flatly replete with the potentiality of capitalist management and consumption.

Perforce, 'Central Savings' might well embody in metonymic form one DNA strand of the pervasive capitalism upon which rode the culture industry. In his contemporaneous 1975 publication, *Culture Industry Reconsidered*, Theodor Adorno wrote:

The culture industry lives parasitically from the extra-artistic technique of the material production of goods, without regard for the obligation to the internal artistic whole implied by its functionality, but also without concern for the laws of form demanded by aesthetic autonomy. The result for the physiognomy of the culture industry is essentially a mixture of streamlining, photographic hardness and precision on the one hand, and individualistic residues, sentimentality and already rationally disposed and adapted romanticism on the other.⁷

In their method of construction, Estes's signature Photorealist works, unlike Impressionist equivalents, unify the painted field in a normalising act which would seem to symbolise the triumph of the uniform over the idiosyncratic. As Adorno claimed, the ideological power of the culture industry is such 'that conformity has replaced consciousness. The order that springs from it is never confronted with what it claims to be or with the real interests of human beings'.⁸ Estes's paintings involve a streamlining, photographic hardness, wherein the appearance of a figure, by the painter's own admission, would destroy the order of the background, which is now tellingly dominant in the foreground. Indeed, to push the analogy from an Adornoesque perspective, figures only appear in Estes's picture as puppeteered relics, controlled as they are by painter-managers who toy expediently with populist desire for romantic expressionism.

Palettes might be shared, unsurprisingly, between the Photorealist painting and the Impressionist canvas, and there can be occasional resemblance between the painted dashes which structure typical images of both approaches, but the systematic procedure of the Estes and the painstaking way in which he finishes the totalising surface, makes this select image conspicuously different. The ocular warmth of Impressionism, supported so often by an organic construction at the level of the picture surface, is overpowered in this comparison by the oppressive visibility of the systematic, streamlined seeing of the Photorealist picture.

If one can countenance such interpretations, and one should, it is entertaining to re-read then-contemporary criticism of Estes's work as inadvertent (or maybe prophetic) statements on the Capitalist component of his art of the everyday. For example, John Canaday, in a 1978 catalogue essay for an exhibition of Estes's paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, wrote:

Never before have there been cityscapes exactly like these, where the haphazard conjunctions of commonplace details are transformed into a matrix that would be violated if any of its

multitudinous bits and pieces were excised from the mass. If the function of art is to impose order on the chaotic material of human experience (as good a definition of the classical principle as I can summon up), then Estes is a classicist, but a classicist who, unlike such predecessors as Poussin and Jacques-Louis David, is not free to synthesize his subjects or even idealize them – unless the extremity of his tidying-up can be called a kind of purification.⁹

As Lukacs made clear, reification requires the emergence of systems of social control which are compelled to purify themselves as they evolve by rowing further from the variegation of that river bank whereupon, we are led to believe, humans played out their organic lived relations unmolested. Perhaps it is the self-expanding system of interest-bearing capital that is the system to end all systems in respect of (military) sanitisation contiguous with (economic) growth.

Canaday sees the purification inherent in Estes's systematic representation as benign compositional classicism, but the same observation lends more weight to an Adornoesque interpretation of the image: the Photorealist eye, as an unwitting ambassador for capitalist ruthlessness refuses the idiosyncratic in the homogenising of the painted surface. So let us also venture here that Estes's pictures are visual acts of capitalist reification in their own methodological right. People and places are purified and subjected to an ocularly seductive but antiseptic regime which would elide difference and plasticise sameness in the name of the fluid operation of art as capital. *Central Savings* in this logic is now an unviolated metonym of the everyday order of expanding capitalism.

This type of Adornoesque analysis might be taken yet further. David Harvey in a recent work, *The Enigma of Capital*, traces much of the economic crisis of 2008 to New York in the mid-seventies. The city then was experiencing a turbulent chapter in its capitalist development and, as Harvey argues:

The local solution, orchestrated by an uneasy alliance between state powers and financial institutions, pioneered the neoliberal ideological and practical political turn that was to be deployed worldwide in the struggle to perpetuate and consolidate capitalist class power.¹⁰

With hindsight, *Central Savings* contains an inadvertent critical potentiality which Harvey would no doubt see now as accurate. To extend the Lukacsian reading one last time before challenging it: prompted by the position of letters and signs, we see in the painting that the natural relations between man and his environment have been gradually reversed as history moves us inexorably downstream, further into our predetermined Neoliberal future. We face not solid materiality but a fluid and illusory system of reflected signifiers: humans qua humans have been usurped by the things which service and partake of consumption; they have mutated and are now complicit in the proliferation into the capitalist everyday of phantom objectifying forces. As this reading has reached now the point of exaggeration, it is timely to bridge to an incisive caveat from Bewes on matters of Marxist analytical enthusiasm.

For Bewes there is something unwelcome and predictable about the quickness with which certain cultural critics will move to detect reification at work as they repair upstream, oared by a 'prevailing sense of nostalgia for what has vanished'. Bewes makes a telling observation that that sense of loss is an anxiety which prefigures the identification of reifying processes; more than that, it is a feeling that underpins a world picture which would have society in an interminable 'state of degeneration'.¹¹ He offers the idea neatly in this way:

such feelings are *constitutive* of the experience of reification, that the latter is incomprehensible without taking into account the consciousness of the perceiving subject who creates it; that the anxiety towards reification suggests a static, frozen conception of the relation between reality and its representation; that the anxiety towards reification is *itself reifying*.¹²

In Bewes's analysis classic Marxist figuring of reification can be, unwittingly, a disappointingly conservative critical action. At the very least (and this point does not depend on the veracity of a Lukacsian or Adornoesque reading of Photorealism contra Nochlin) the co-extensiveness in that action of anxious nostalgia and what is in effect *the reification of reification* perpetuates a lumpen dialectical shuttling from one river bank to another and back again. Now, although there is without doubt much to be said for Marxist readings of Photorealism, I want to suggest that there is something more pragmatist than Marxist (or Neo-Impressionist, of course) at work in these prescient images.

The fundamental characteristic of the Photorealist painting identified by Nochlin can be seen to effect a break from, or at least a resistance to, the heavy-industrial dialectic of conventional Marxism. This break or resistance is to be seen by virtue of the alignment here of Bewes's observations about the conservatism of reification with the reinterpretation of Nochlin's perceptiveness in the face of the Photorealist image that 'anything that would tend to pierce through the presented surface and give rise to narrative meaning or psychological implication is immediately *put between parentheses*'. To examine this alignment further I want to now delineate Bewes's thinking on alternative conceptions of reification and then return to Nochlin and a reading of the Photorealist painting as a pragmatist image.

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To wriggle free from the entanglement of the analyst's complicity in a depressing conception of the reified world as an arena for human ciphers, intrasocially crippled by the pervasive forces of liquid capital, and so on, Bewes brings to bear a term of his own invention, *thingitude*. He proposes thingitude as more constructive than reification in reflecting upon contemporary responses to the everyday capitalist commodity-structure and in doing so invests the term with a 'poetics of objectification'. The difference between the two conceptions, Bewes argues, is seen through this poetics, as he seeks an active willingness on the part of the human agent to 'name the process of objectification

as such and to refuse to *accede to its logic*'.¹³ So thingitude for Bewes is a possibly productive move downstream from the debilitating 'thinghood' to be found in a conventional equation of reification. By these means Bewes hopes to avoid what he sees as Lukacs's Hegelian logic, comprising as it does the schism of negative assimilation versus (interminably) positive salvation through revolution.

To elaborate on his inception and application of thingitude Bewes engages the term 'negritude' as coined by French poet-politician, Aimé Césaire. Bewes informs us that Césaire is to be commended for having wrested the word 'negre' from disparaging racist-colonialist vocabulary by styling and employing the term. Negritude is used in Césaire's thinking as a positive declaration of one's blackness which speaks, not of domination nor of salvific self-love, but of tempered pride, of a pragmatic self-determination in the world. Bewes draws upon Césaire's, *Notebook of a Return to My Native Land* which contains the following lines:

My negritude is not a stone
Nor a deafness flung against the clamour 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.*¹⁴

So – if the *tower* in Césaire's poem represents for Bewes the human agent reified and imprisoned by phantom forces of ideology, and if the *cathedral* represents the eternal hope of salvation through revolution or rowing upstream, then, for the sake of this discussion, Lukacs's conceptual pillars are duly analogised. And Bewes's thingitude, like Césaire's negritude is, of course, neither tower nor cathedral. Inasmuch, Bewes wants thingitude to overtake reification in discourse because, following Césaire, it is singularly and productively cognisant of the processes of reification under which it would otherwise be unwittingly stultified. In other words, indebted to negritude, Bewes discerns an operative reflexiveness for thingitude over against reification. In homage to Césaire, this position confers quite some positive agency upon any individual who is subject to erstwhile reificatory forces, but Bewes's point is that this is a very real human potential not fully acknowledged by Lukacs and his descendents: they are too enthusiastic about asserting the base fact of a movement downstream due to the must-be-pernicious forces of capitalist currents ('must be' because there is movement downstream – so runs the cyclical argumentation). Bewes lifts the following from Césaire's work in support of thingitude as an operative concept:

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.¹⁵

Here is celebrated the betweenness of Césaire's resisting agent – like negritude, thingitude is not a category, or a strict politics of identity. Crucially also it is not a masochistic or glorious resignation to the forces of ideology. It is to be understood as a mode of subjective insertion into what is unacceptable; it is a heavily inflected 'acceptance' of a situation which is thereby *materialized in its unacceptability*.

To summarise the discussion thus far, thingitude speaks not of a metaphysics, rather, it is the defiant recognition and cold articulation of a situation in the actuality of its lived relations. For Bewes, in what I see shortly as a pragmatist perspective, thingitude has itself at heart a conceptual reflexiveness which undercuts the conservative dichotomies held in mind by those who are interminably for or against sections of the river bank. Bewes says as much with more force, thus:

Reification is a condition which pertains as much to the idea of the primitive who pre-exists the subject's differentiation, as to that of the philosopher who regards himself with a sort of inverse narcissism, looking longingly, and self-disgustedly, to the other for salvation. The opposition between immediacy and fetishism – between primitive undifferentiatedness and capitalist reification – is a creation of reified consciousness, a category which is nevertheless simultaneously indispensable to any thoroughgoing critique of that opposition.¹⁶

Thingitude moves within this system of oppositions, unavoidably, but following Césaire, it allows the conventional conceptual movements to be breached and thus, you might say, an excluded middle appears as a viable perspective. But in what ways can we see the Photorealist image as an embodiment of reflexive thingitude as opposed to it being a prescient and excoriating critique of the iniquities of capitalism or even an unwitting totem to its dazzling spectacle?

Nochlin, recall, pinpointed the location of the particular 'power' of Photorealism but deferred consideration of the deeper significance. Now that we have met Bewes's anxiety about the conservative impulse of conventional reification, it might be said that Nochlin could not resist placing the images to one side or the other within a conservative framework. Like so many other commentators on Photorealism, she could not endure such images as unreified occupants of a liminal space within the logic of the history of images.

In *Realism Now*, in her bid to *reify* the aesthetic in Photorealist painting as a concrete component of a recognisable modernist project, Nochlin likened the practices of the artists of her selection to those of avant-garde filmmakers.

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 underneath.¹⁷

Nochlin goes on to state, as noted earlier, that ‘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*’. Indeed – and here thingitude might be seen to reside – this is where the something more exists which Nochlin foreclosed - between the ‘tower’ and the ‘cathedral’ in parenthesis. By avoiding, firstly, pessimistic reification within capitalist infrastructure, and, secondly, anticipatory zeal that would yearn for a day of judgment when Estes’s glittering surfaces are shattered to reveal ‘whatever once was’, this Photorealist image might embody Bewes’s concept of thingitude. Nochlin’s assessment seems all the more pertinent in such an interpretation.

The force of Bewes’s analysis, I would suggest, is linked to its persuasive resistance to normative metaphysics, and a similar force is seen in the Photorealist image. In vintage Estes style, the scene in front of us is transmitted in large part by reflection, but this is not the pictorialisation of the metaphysics of Plato’s cave, this is the here and now space of the capitalist everyday. The coexistence on the Photorealist Möbius strip of interior, exterior, distant, near and tangential spaces, cancels out the possibility of something lurking underneath, for there appears not to be that prepositional possibility. In Estes’s work, the shadows are cast by figures which enjoy an ontological status no more special, removed from or *obverse* to the surfaces onto which the shadows are cast. The conventional pressures of reification may be all around, and poised, but the thingitude of the image is its defence, it is what it is, in all its brutal actuality; not in Nochlin’s sense of formalist presence, or at least, not primarily, it is what it is in the sense of Césaire’s and Bewes – thus, my after-cut has Estes saying on behalf of a Photorealist worldview, I accept, I accept all this, and the message inscribed by Photorealist picturing is sent into the future to full effect.

It is an easy thing to do at this juncture, but an intimation of Estes’s own thoughts might lend some weight to this line of analysis. In a 1978 interview with Boston University gallery director, John Arthur, the artist reflected upon the influence of James Abbot MacNeil Whistler:

Whistler said that nature copies art, and, in a way, people don’t see things until they’re shown. A lot of people have said they never noticed any of this until they saw my paintings. They’ve lived in New York all their lives and it’s always been there, but people simply didn’t see it because their eyes were not attuned to it.¹⁸

Setting aside the totalising quotient of this kind of art statement, there remains a credible observation about our perception of the world. Estes’s picturing is the pointing out of the contingent contexts into which the individual is thrown, in the same way as Césaire’s reflections pay heed to the contingent factors of identity formation given by immediate social factors. In both cases, we see a pragmatic art form, I argue, which does not attempt to point beyond the contingent to an imaginary location up-river where things were not

so. Photorealism attunes us to what is in some sense always already there – and so emerges yet more of its pragmatist credentials.

In anticipation of the final stage of this inquiry, it should be said that the ‘pointing to the already there’ in Photorealism is tinged with a constructive fallibilism, and is, therefore, all the more pragmatist as a result. This is to say that there is a paradox built in to the super-realism of images like those by Estes, for the closer the artist moves to the full apprehension of the visual panorama, the more acute is the recognition that the elements of the panorama cannot all be held in a glance, or rather, as a result of this observation, *all is only ever* that which is seen partially through a pragmatist’s glance.

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Towards an endpoint for this speculation, I want to reapply Nochlin’s observation about parentheses as tempered by Bewes’s theorising of thingitude for a reading of the Photorealist canvas as touchstone for American pragmatist thought. The purpose in conclusion is to position Photorealist artworks as variants of a more or less systematic programme of thinking with a long history in the USA. If the conclusion holds water, then the works of Estes and others similar might be approached less as Neo-Impressionist optical treats disingenuously distant from the quotidian context which gave rise to their optical formalism; less as complex critiques of the purifying forces of advanced capitalism; and, most reassuringly, less as simple Pop fascination pieces gripped by the bedazzlements of a capitalist everyday.

Rather, let us understand the Photorealist image from its position in an ‘excluded middle’ as resistant to conservative dialectical shuttling, and, thus, release more fully the pragmatic effect and prescience of these artworks. This interpretation requires a summary sketch of some fundamentals of pragmatist thought and a closer look at the ways in which *Central Savings* corresponds with reality. Beyond that, the unearthing of a final irony in that correspondence between Photorealist picture and world will bring this essay to a stop.

For intellectuals like Richard Rorty, pragmatism is at its core a way of thinking about the world which is not dependent upon what Foucault described as ‘metaphysical comfort’. In *Consequences of Pragmatism*, in praise of a lineage of philosophical thought which recognises the primacy of language in the formation of the world of worlds, Rorty pinpoints key thinkers who have laid a path to contemporary pragmatism:

The ubiquity of language is a matter of language moving into the vacancies left by the failure of all the various candidates for the position of “natural starting-points” of thought, starting-points which are prior to and independent of the way some culture speaks or spoke. Peirce and Sellars and Wittgenstein are saying that the regress of intuition cannot be cut off by the sort of “intuition” which Cartesian epistemology took for granted. Gadamer and Derrida are saying that our culture has been dominated by the notion of a “transcendental signified” which...would bring us out from contingency and convention and into truth.¹⁹

Rorty's ambition in *Consequences of Pragmatism* is to make clear that the linguistic programme of philosophy, which is ongoing constructively through forms of pragmatic thought, began with a severe criticism of the metaphysical comfort which sits at the heart of Platonism and wound up, perhaps inevitably, with a severe criticism of Philosophy itself – Philosophy with a capital 'P' that is. Philosophy with a small 'p' is that project of creative and intellectual work which would, in Rorty's words, 'set Philosophy to one side'.

Analogously, the Photorealist canvas is a test-card for contingency and convention, and in as much it is very different in tenor from Modernist Impressionism which offered a transcendentalist visual culture which was volunteered with academic hubris to supersede the erroneous conventions of seeing and picturing which had gone before. Metaphysical comfort of a disconcerting type for the pragmatist is given also by way of the Lukacsian reading of these works for the spectre of the pre-subjugated ancestor edges in to the picture to haunt the contemporary viewer. To extend the analogy in the round, Nochlin's conventional categorisation of Photorealism takes the form of a professionalising act, to adopt Rorty's vocabulary, which would assimilate oddity, purify difference and iron-out contingency to permit a positivist fit of artefact into professional-academic schema. Such an interpretative move sits uneasily with the pragmatist as it is a move at the service of the Philosophy of the discipline, or, if you will, the logic of the discipline of human reason which drives the schematisation of the discipline.

Citing George Santayana, Rorty assails the idea that it is man's professionalised schemas, particularly Philosophy as such, which deliver the actuality of the outside world to us:

In a famous essay on American philosophy, he [Santayana] suggested that we were still spoiling our own fun. We wanted to retain, he said, the "agonized conscience" of our Calvinist ancestors while keeping, simultaneously if illogically, the idealistic metaphysics of their transcendentalist successors. This metaphysics embodied what he called the "conceited notion that man, or human reason, or the human distinction between good and evil, is the centre and pivot of the universe".²⁰

Rorty's pragmatism is consistent on this point – that Philosophy makes the mistake of thinking that 'truth is a vertical relationship between representations and what is represented'. On the other hand, pragmatism would join a tradition which 'thinks of truth horizontally – as the culminating reinterpretation of our predecessors' reinterpretation of their predecessors' reinterpretation'. And this is the crux of a form of philosophy with a small 'p', it is a horizontal project of creative thought which holds *itself* in parentheses to avoid the vertiginous, verticality of truth discovery according to professionalised schema and discursive terms and conditions. The pragmatist tradition for Rorty, thus, 'does not ask how representations are related to nonrepresentations, but how representations can be seen as hanging together'.²¹

So, according to the structure of the discussion here, it is the hubris of transcendentalist logic which would pierce the surface of the Photorealist canvas, break out of parenthesis, accede to the logic of metaphysics and, in turn, discern something Platonic lurking

underneath. A Rortian perspective might suggest that what makes *Central Savings*, for example, so forceful, frustrating and puzzling is precisely the absence of *piercing* to borrow again from Nochlin. As such we have a visualisation of an anti-Platonic standpoint which finds support in a pragmatist world picture. The neutrality of the non-piercing painting is precarious, admittedly, especially when what is pictured is our capitalist everyday, but that pragmatist neutrality is perhaps more politically loaded, following Bewes and Rorty, than Nochlin, understandably, was able to see.

But, there seems to be an irony at work in this parenthetical picturing – for what does it mean for the Photorealist image to present to the viewer so much visual information about the everyday world, and in such a seemingly objective manner, as if to reassert, that is, a vertical relationship between artwork and a world out there to which the artwork artfully and positively corresponds. Again with a sideways look to Impressionism as comparison, Photorealism masquerades as a sharper form of scientific realism which, what with its unique all-over retinal focus, might rival photography itself. But it is here that the irony of Photorealist pragmatism plays its part, and a philosophical point of order is made. The pragmatist world view is one wherein, necessarily, the certitude of scientific realism is not without condition. As noted above, the concept of such an exterior world, distinct in its *a priori* givenness from the world of representation is one born once again from hubris which, according to the pragmatist, needs to be held in parenthetical horizontal play to prevent the Platonic metaphysical consequences of a subsequent rush to vertical conclusions.

Estes gives us the contemporary everyday in all its detail and in doing so lets us know by practice that ‘all its detail’ is a conceited notion: ‘*all* its detail’ is something to which only Essentialists, Scientific Realists, conservative Marxists...lay claim. Estes gives only what his art can modestly corral, and it is this ironic Photorealist visual conceit, I would argue, which hammers home this point about *fallibilism*. Our world is but partial, but that is but our world, and partiality can never be remedied, mercifully, for the picture, so to speak, is forever provisional despite, in this case, its seductive levels of photographic detail as scientific exactitude.

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Nochlin’s recognition that ‘any thing which might be seen to pierce the surface presented in Photorealism is contained within parentheses’ seems ever more astute, although the postmetaphysical significance of that observation rested latent in her criticism. With Bewes’s and Rorty’s help we might say now that the nascent conservatism and negativity of classic reification is resisted in Photorealism *and* that the futility of wistful salvation through metaphysics is cast off. Human reflection and creative production persist in this worldview, but, pragmatically and willingly, not beyond the parenthetical surface of thingitude - and certainly not beyond art, for it is the correspondence of art to the world as the entity of our art which constitutes the fields of our existence, and the perfect

imperfect picturing of the Photorealist painter can return in this *après-coup* to ground our pragmatic existence midstream.

¹ *Reification: or The Anxiety of Late Capitalism*, Timothy Bewes, London: Verso, 2002.

² *Consequences of Pragmatism*, Richard Rorty, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.

³ *Realism Now*, exh. cat., Linda Nochlin, New York: Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, 1968, text reprinted as 'Realism Now' in *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology*, Gregory Battcock (ed.), New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975.

⁴ 'Realism Now', Nochlin, in Battcock (ed.), 1975, pp.122-124.

⁵ Bewes, 2002, p.xi.

⁶ *History and Class Consciousness*, George Lukacs, London: Merlin Press, 1990, p.83, first published 1968.

⁷ 'Culture Industry Reconsidered', Theodore Adorno, 1975, first presented as a lecture, 1963, first published in German, 1967, reprinted in *Theodor Adorno: The Culture Industry*, edited with an introduction by J.M. Bernstein, London: Routledge, 2003, p.101, first published 1991.

⁸ Bernstein, 2003, p.104.

⁹ *Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape*, exh. cat., John Canaday and John Arthur, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and New York Graphic Society, Boston, 1978, pp.7-10.

¹⁰ *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, David Harvey, London: Profile Books, 2011, p.172, first published, 2010.

¹¹ Bewes, 2002, p.xiii.

¹² Bewes, 2002, p.xiv.

¹³ Bewes, 2002, p.xv.

¹⁴ Aime Cesaire, *Return to My Native Land*, trans. Mireille Rosello with Annie Pritchard, London: Bloodaxe, 1995, p.124.

¹⁵ Aime Cesaire, *Return to My Native Land*, in Rosello and Pritchard, 1995, p.125.

¹⁶ Bewes, 2002, p.80.

¹⁷ 'Realism Now', Nochlin, in Battcock (ed.), 1975, p.162.

¹⁸ Richard Estes in conversation with John Arthur in *Richard Estes: The Urban Landscape*, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1978, p.39.

¹⁹ Rorty, 1982, p.XX.

²⁰ Rorty, 1982, p.60.

²¹ Rorty, 1982, p.92.