

# **DIALECTICAL EXPLORATION OF PAINTING**

*Painting painting*

Johan Wobbes  
Studentnr. 5614201  
Philosophy  
University of Amsterdam  
Tutor: Johan Hartle  
30-07-2010

## Contents

1.	Introduction	1
2.	The background	3
2.1.	Brushing; the methodological preference	4
2.2.	The phenomenon of reification	7
2.2.1.	The dark side or, why painting is reification	8
2.2.2.	The light side or, why painting isn't reification	10
2.3.	Drawing lines; the value-making process	12
2.3.1.	Primary colors or, why a painting is a commodity	13
2.3.2.	Earthly colors or, why a painting isn't a commodity	15
3.	The foreground	15
3.1.	'Position' of painting	16
3.1.1.	The artist and the media	17
3.1.2.	The conceptual in art	18
3.1.3.	Painting within the realm of the visual arts	20
3.1.4.	The role of art discourse and art institutions	21
3.1.5.	The pluralistic outlook	24
4.	The cognitive and empathic dimension of painting	25
5.	Conclusion	28
	Literature	

*Only by conceiving of thought as a form of reality, as a factor in the total process can philosophy overcome its own rigidity dialectically and take on the quality of Becoming*  
From: History and Class Consciousness by Georg Lukács

## **1. Introduction**

It's uncommon for philosophers to focus solely on painting, especially not within a dialectical discourse. Dialectics are generally concerned with the socio-economic exploration of society and its cultural implications. Their aim is to reveal the structural logic of it and the mutual effects of it on human consciousness. The aesthetic dimension within this discourse is often exemplary. When paintings are discussed they are usually described as signs of particular structures and processes within the total scheme of the theoretic outline. In this essay however painting is put on the foreground, admittedly this is somewhat contrary to the dialectical method since specific focal points in theorising can have a fragmentizing effect. Nevertheless the aim here is to get a closer look at painting against the background of neomarxist dialectics; in particular from the theoretical range of two authors, Georg Lukács and Fredric Jameson.

An attempt will be made to relate their 'positions' to the 'position' of painting within the structure of the arts and within society as a whole. Especially questions concerning the rules they play by and the fallacies that can be seen and how they can be tackled. The question of how we can talk about painting in an uncommodified fashion and how we can disclose or renew a more practical, genuine and playful discourse of painting is intended here.

The emphasis will be on the instrumental character of the dialectical method and the cognitive potentiality it has. This is more interesting for its refreshing qualities to all kinds of (mental) modes of production than the particular outcomes of it. They change all the time anyway, and since the world appears to us as highly complex and contingent it will be argued that this disposition is preferable over any profound theory; which by no means should be understood as a powerless relativism. On the contrary, the acknowledgement of change as a general feature of life and the cognitive as well as physical capacities of humans being limited

and finite makes it a more comprehensive and nonetheless meaningful attitude towards the subject.<sup>1</sup>

It has to be said that it is impossible to explore all aspects of painting and all what is related to it, but it is still intended here to grasp the objective nature of it, the knowledge of its historical character and of its actual function in the totality of society. At the same time it must be made clear that the outcome has to be seen, not as a sum of facts or definite explanation of the phenomena, but as an attempt to get a clear (in)sight on the ‘problems’ painting faces today, or maybe better stated, the problems we face in relation to art. It is to lay bare particular dominant practises that veil our consciousness and keep us in their sphere.

While exploring theoretically and moving from the transformative stance of art, we’ll have to admit that it is impossible to pose defining properties of art. Morris Weitz draws attention in his essay *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics* (1956) on the problem of theorising on art sufficiently. His fundamental critic is: ‘that aesthetic theory is a logically vain attempt to define what cannot be defined, to state the necessary and sufficient properties, to conceive the concept of art as closed when its very use reveals and demands its openness.’<sup>2</sup>

In order to get this clear sight we’ll have to step into the dialectical process so to speak and deal with artworks as ‘objects’ that not only tell us what the world is about but also as active agents, transformers if you like, in the real historical process of which we all take our own part. If so, we can rewrite the quote above this text and make it like this: ‘Only by conceiving [painting(s)] as a form of reality, as a factor in the total [historical] process can [our understanding of painting(s)] overcome its [rigid reified character] dialectically and take on the quality of Becoming.’<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> It goes beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss this position extensively. It should suffice to point at Lukács’s elaboration in *History and Class Consciousness* (pp. 110-121) on the attempt in modern philosophy of universalising rationalism and the demand for a system. He has shown the fallacy of this process by pointing at the impossibility of reconciling any problem with the principle of systematisation.

<sup>2</sup> Weitz, Morris. *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics* in: Cahn, Steven M. and Aaron Meskin [ed], *Aesthetics a comprehensive Anthology*, Hong Kong/Singapore: Blackwell, 2008, p. 411

<sup>3</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, p. 203

## 2. The background

Jameson has recognised Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* as '... one of the earliest explicit proposals for a new and more complexly mediated theory of ideology ...'<sup>4</sup>, the same can also be recognised as a fruitful and creative method when particular problems are dealt with dialectically and given 'epistemological priority'. It can not only break the barriers for some particular social groups that are experiencing problems in particular social circumstances, it can also be of great critical use when ever we're stuck in fixed modes of thought or established structures within all kinds of professions and disciplines throughout society.

It is from the awareness of the methodological validity and potentiality of *History and Class Consciousness* (its vitality and significance), that we can deal with questions concerning and in reference to art and painting in particular, in a more *concrete*, practical and creative way than in any other fashion. Although Lukács is hardly referring in his text to the arts, there are still some parts in which he points to particular elements that relate to art production that are quite interesting to deal with. I'd like to start this thesis with one of his examples that point at an antagonism, a particular character trait of advanced society. It is an example that shows a residual or apparently almost extinct cognitive feature, but still vital for his argument, as opposed to the obliterated and fragmented view we are all so often infected by and the sheer impenetrable complexity of production and of all the social relations that are concealed in it that appear to us as incomprehensible. The feature he describes as 'the objectively relatively stable, traditional craft production preserves in the minds of its individual practitioners the appearance of something flexible, something constantly renewing itself, something produced by the producers.'<sup>5</sup> It is exactly this flexible, reflexive and renewing mode of thought that I'd like to discuss here and to trace it in painting and how painting has preserved this active and flexible attitude that apparently has been lost in so many organisations, institutions and companies in our time. Nevertheless painting too didn't escape reification. In its modes of production a lot of examples can be given that point in this direction when we look at their (self) justification in art discourses, its relation to societal processes and to the use of the notion of progress within these practises. It can be argued for

---

<sup>4</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *History and Class Consciousness* as an "Unfinished Project" in: *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader, Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Hardy, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 143

<sup>5</sup> Lukács, Georg, *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, p. 97

instance that the proclamation of the pictorial-elements like lines, forms, color and so on, have a self-referential and autonomous quality with its own set of rules by the pioneers of modernity in the beginning of the 20th century, is an act of sheer reification and obliterates all the societal aspects that are involved. The reign of this so called autonomy, with all their preoccupations and false-consciousness, is still seen today.

## 2.1. Brushing; the methodological preference

Although a lot of Lukács's initial intensions are outmoded especially regarding the supposed fate of the proletariat along with its ideological and utopian inclinations<sup>6</sup>, his text contains to a great extent methodological validity that can help to clarify the questions we're concerned with and how it is still significant to comprehend present situations art is facing and painting in particular. The most significant characteristic of Lukács's argument I am aiming at here is the great potentiality it incorporates, or what is referred to as the transformative stance earlier. It is the way it shows possibilities of breaking with fixed modes of thought that bound us up to its inner logics, and how theory can go hand in hand with practise. When Lukács for instance discusses the situation in which the proletariat is becoming aware of its existence as a commodity. It comes at the same time to the point where it overcomes its supposed immediacy. He argues than that:

*[t]he unique element in its [the proletariat] situation is that its surpassing of immediacy represents an aspiration towards society in its totality regardless of whether this aspiration remains conscious or whether it remains unconscious for the moment. This is the reason why its logic does not permit it to remain stationary at a relatively higher stage of immediacy but forces it to persevere in an uninterrupted movement towards this totality, i.e. to persist in the dialectical process by which immediacies are constantly annulled and transcended.*<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> In the preface to the new edition (1967) and in the preface (1922) of *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács is referring to this aspect of his work when he looks back on it. He talks for instance of the "romantic anti-capitalistic overtones" or "the echoes of those exaggeratedly sanguine hopes that many of us cherished concerning the duration and tempo of the revolution."

<sup>7</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, p. 174

This might seem to be quite enigmatic at first glance but what he describes here is an ongoing cognitive movement in which moments where supposedly immediate facts become mediated aspects in a historical subject object relation, or moments where we penetrate the veil of reified thought and hit upon an active consciousness that is aware of its movement in praxis.

So when we return to painting and keep this in mind we can look at them and read them from this transformative stance, from within a movement where paintings are aspects of a (societal) development, i.e. within a dialectical totality, where they become fluid as parts of certain processes. When we relate to art as such, it will not only become more meaningful and intimate to us, we'll also escape the false consciousness of the contemplative stance in which we eventually either are struggling to inscribe the meaning of an artwork into a fixed presupposed theory of art or are caught up in the uncritical mainstream, mostly reified, dominant discourses in the media in which a lot of presupposed theories are taken for granted, and which, as I hope to show here, are holding us back from a more genuine and realistic social association with painting.

So Lukács is pointing here at a crucial element in the way we can deal with all kinds of problems consciously as well as unconsciously from an awareness that strives to comprehend the complex of processes, all kinds of structures in particular modes of thought, in order to grasp the historical object subject relation, not only to get a comprehensive view of the past but also a workable and transformable attitude in the present in which we can anticipate in a future that is not obsolete but open, on a qualitative level, to our understanding.

It is a conception as Jameson describes it 'that includes the diagnosis of blocks and limits to knowledge (reification as what suppresses the ability to grasp totalities) as well as the enumeration of positive new features (the capacity to think in terms of process).<sup>8</sup> These blocks and limits become quite visible when we're in a mode of grasping towards a dialectical totality. Almost immediately we hit upon specialised established terrains that have their own internal logical structure, their own proclaimed and guarded autonomy. As soon as we try to make it commensurable with other specialised terrains within our understanding, big gaps appear. What is important to notice here is that the incommensurability between different specialised terrains is not necessarily a problem. They can of course be looked at as valuable

---

<sup>8</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *History and Class Consciousness* as an "Unfinished project" in: *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader, Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Hardy (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 145-146

entities in their own right. What makes it interesting is the creative turning point that can be experienced in our mind when these blocks and limits are overcome, when all of a sudden we experience an opening towards new possible spheres and that we're not powerless towards the so-called fixed laws of rationalisation.

What we have to deal with still is the presupposition of what Jameson calls the '*conditions of possibilities* of new thinking inherent in this particular class position.'<sup>9</sup> For Lukács it was not his personal consciousness but the consciousness of the proletariat that was at stake. Out of the capitalist preconditions and the all embracing commodity-structure in society the consciousness of the proletariat necessarily emerges as the fate of society as a whole. Out of this notion Jameson extracts the 'prerequisites, its preparatory requirements, that without which it can not properly develop.'<sup>10</sup> So Jameson translates Lukács's conception of the special position of the proletariat in terms of preconditions that can possibly (re)shape our thinking. In this respect he sees feminist standpoint theory and other social groups as the most 'legitimate heirs' of Lukács's main argument. In this same notion he also recognises the aesthetic Lukács, the 'deeper continuity between the Lukács of History and Class Consciousness and the theoretician of the realist novel.'<sup>11</sup> So here the individual (consciousness of) Lukács is brought to the surface. His active and committed engagement becomes visible. And here the core of Lukács's argument appears alive and kicking in particular, for some perhaps unexpected, social areas.

Although painters, painting as a profession and painting(s) as a cultural phenomenon can hardly be regarded as a cohesive group, it still has a particular 'place' in society with particular problems. And although we can't think in terms of class position anymore we can look at their practises in society and their appearance in the media and see what they do and what not. I hope to show how painting can gain a more open, vivid and vital attitude in and towards society and how it can operate in and interrogate social life qualitatively. At least I hope to trace some interrelated aspects in close reference to notions like reification and commodification in order to gain insight in the deeper historical processes at work. I will argue that artworks are not static entities but that they have an inherent potentiality for change in them. It makes no difference if we're looking at for instance a landscape painting from the sixteenth century or an abstract painting from the 20th century as long as we're dealing with works that did not close these potentialities out of their realm in the first place.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 145

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 149

## 2.2. The phenomenon of reification

Reification is a key notion in Lukács's theoretical work. It points at a character trait within the Western world that is closely related to the rise of capitalism and its logical consequences. The phenomenon can be understood as an evolution towards an ever increasing distancing away from the material *concrete* towards a more abstract and highly differentiated manmade world of which the social relations become more and more abstract and obscured. The rationalisation involved in this process is characterised by an ever-increasing fragmentation. Not only the cutting up of work-processes cumulate, the subjects involved too are increasingly fragmented. This process entails a qualitative transformation from what at first was an organic unity, or at least appeared as such, into a breaking up in 'mechanical' parts which can be governed, calculated and predicted according the immanent fixed laws that are presupposed within this rationalisation that is involved in this process. All aspects of life become objectified; even our personal abilities, competences and consciousness are dealt with in this fashion. It is not faced and felt anymore as an organic whole, as an inalienable aspect of our being, but is regarded as an object-like complex that should be cut up in its elements in order to be able to predict and calculate all possible outcomes in terms of exchange value, as profit. Even our notion of time 'is converted, as mechanisation and rationalisation are intensified, from a merely empirical average figure to an objectively calculable work-stint that confronts the [individual]<sup>12</sup> as a fixed and established reality.'<sup>13</sup>

Jameson takes a step further in this respect when he talks of spatial dialectics, where even our modes of thoughts already are shaped in so many compartments that reality is pre-conditioned in this way.

This development can be looked at from the dark side. It can be seen as a virus, penetrating all aspects of life, shaping the forms of our thoughts and the structure of perception. It creeps in like a thief in the night. We hardly notice the impact it has on our consciousness and how it moulds us into slaves of its hidden 'program'.

On the other hand we can look at it from the bright side. Let's say that the notion of reification brightens up the notion of rationality, giving it back its earthly colors and tonality. It is the awareness of that 'aspect' of our *ratio* that doesn't fixate all knowable aspects of life

---

<sup>12</sup> Here I replaced worker for individual because this is more in line with this thesis

<sup>13</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, p. 88

into quantifiable and thing-like objects but smoothes it from one color into the other and grasps it from the dark into the light and the other way round. Reification recognised as an objective feature of thinking has the potentiality to enhance the critical mode of production, which can escape ‘the principle of rationalisation based on what is and can be calculated.’<sup>14</sup> Its objective efficacy on our consciousness influences the subjective stance; the way we relate to the world and deal with problems. Let us see how the dark and the light side of reification can be traced in painting.

### 2.2.1. The dark side or, why painting is reification

One of the pioneers of modern painting is Mondrian. The development of his work can be seen as a process towards an increasing purification of painting, narrowing it down to its purest forms, straight lines and flat surfaces filled with primary colors. With the peril of being too generalist here one can argue that his development is quite similar to the process Lukács has recognised in Classical philosophy, as to ‘the fact that it narrowed the problem down, confining it within the realm of pure thought.’<sup>15</sup> When we look, for instance, at *Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Gray* we see all references to the real world have been eradicated from the artwork. As pure thought claims a self-evidential relevance, this painting proclaims in much the same way to be autonomous, a pure entity which thrives on its own proclaimed premises. Mondrian was not an exception, on the contrary, he was one of many artists in his time that sought to purify. Before him, from Courbet to Cezanne and from Goya to Gauguin, they all in one or the other way detached their art from the familiar relation with the visible world.<sup>16</sup> In this process of purification the pioneers of modernity reached the limits of the pictorial possibilities. The total zero-point was reached in Duchamps conceptual work the ready-made, which in the end negates painting altogether. What was left, at least within this particular creative strategy of purification and the search for elimination of all references towards (human) existence, was a wide range of variations. Almost all of the artworks, at least those which show up in museums and in the upper stream of (art) society, up to the present

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 121

<sup>16</sup> Meijer, Willem L., *Moderne kunst en het algemeen betwijfeld vertrouwen in de werkelijkheid* in: *Niet alles is kunst* (Uitgeverij Aspect: Soesterberg, 2010), pp. 103-124

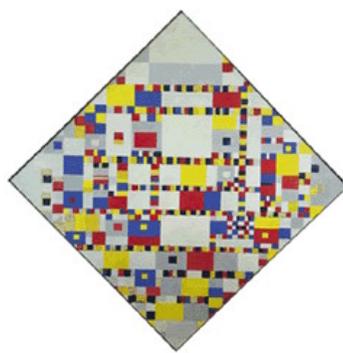
day witness this attitude. It became in the course of the century the dominant practise in art production. What we see is an enormous rich variety in pictorial outlooks in artworks but at the same time an extreme depthlessness. The inner core of these artworks do not testify of bringing all kinds of new found referents to a consistent whole, on the contrary, their aim is to push the limits and to outdo as much as possible. A highly atomistic multitude of works appear that are accompanied by a flood of apologetic writings of art critics and the like. These writings, in the beginning often appeared as manifests written by artists themselves, became more and more constitutive for the artworks.

Although Mondrian sought purification he must have known, or felt, that he would reach a dead end if he was too dogmatic a purifier. His last works at least testify of some kind of 'return' to a mode of production that is bringing different elements into a particular consistent whole. *Victory Boogie Woogie* is an example of this. Here he reintroduced the connective possibilities of painting. In this work references are made with music and the 'rhythm' of New York City life.

After Mondrian a lot of painters kept on working in this particular mode. Some of them tried to base their work solely in the material of paint; colorfield painting especially is an example of this. The work of art as a material object should have an immediate impact on the viewer, without the interference of anything in between. The premise here is that there exists such a thing as a direct unmediated experience when the viewer is confronted with the object. It remains to be seen if this premise holds or that more is involved.



Composition with Red, Blue, Black, Yellow and Gray, 1921 (MoMA New York)



Victory Boogie Woogie, 1944 (Gemeentemuseum Den Haag)

### 2.2.2. The light side or, why painting isn't reification

One could of course say that a painting among all other artworks is static, spatially limited and extremely object-like. A true empiricist would fully agree on this. From this perspective the painting is the end-product, the final stage of materialisation of a particular creative process, the materialisation of the artist's ideas, intentions, fascinations, etcetera. As we all know a painting is far more ambitious and ambiguous than that. The aura it has doesn't stop at the borders of the canvas. An empirical outlook is not enough; it will lead to a much too static historicism. The appearance of a painting in the spectator's eyes has a lot more significant inherent abilities. Its existence is not merely designated by its material appearance, not even in the works of artists who have focused on the material aspects of the artwork, and made it their single object of content. The very intent and proclamation of the painting as a thing, as an autonomous object, whose single value rests in its material being is in the end an ideological statement. Otherwise we would value a painting the way we would for instance value a brick in the wall. So within the realm of painting, even where the painter has eradicated as much as he can, it still can't escape the (metaphysical) value-making sphere of which it takes part. We can not forget the fact that a work of art is a socially embedded 'product', or should we say document; even the material *concrete* aspects of it can only be understood well as a social category and not merely as some immediate or intuitive given thing. Our appreciation of it would then become sterile and formalistic, it would be based on a false ideology and not have any *concrete* impact on our consciousness; concrete as in Lukács's notion of it, namely in a mode of perceiving towards a totality, in which the acknowledgement of a heterogeneous world is immanent.

When we bring back to our minds the earlier mentioned example of the practitioners of traditional craft production we have a connective starting point to solve the 'problem' of reification. The traditional craftsman, contrary to most contemporary workers, as Lukács claims had full control over the whole production process. The craftsman knew all the particular stages of the process and the relation of his craft towards all the other within the whole of society, and, for him it was still quite easy to comprehend and he had the genuine experience of being master of the product. As Jameson has recognised this vital feature too, at the same time he saw that it is highly oppressed in our society, even in art production, this feature became suspicious. Still Lukács has shown, man wants, and needs, in order to deal with all that he engages in life, to bring all his experiences into a consistent whole, that's why

he has said that despite the fragmentation, specialisation, and destruction of the organic unity, that takes place in our society, ‘the need to grasp the whole –at least cognitively- cannot die out.’<sup>17</sup> In painting we see this desire, to bring all the contingent and incommensurable aspects of life into a coherent image, still taking place, although one must notice that not all artistic modes of production and paintings witness such a need. In this respect painting still has the potentiality of criticising the phenomenon of reification, of showing its ugly face, but it has to acknowledge too that it contributes to reification in all kinds of ways. One can for instance argue that showing the process of painting in the paintings, the sheer act of painting, as we see for instance in the work of Pollock and Appel, doesn’t necessarily negate reification. As Jameson sharply noticed:

*Modern art, ..., drew its power and its possibilities from being a backwater and an archaic holdover within a modernizing economy: it glorified, celebrated, and dramatized older forms of individual production which the new mode of production was elsewhere on the point of displacing and blotting out. Aesthetic production then offered the Utopian vision of a more human production generally: and in the world of the monopoly stage of capitalism it exercised a fascination by way of the image it offered of a Utopian transformation of human life.*

Here too as he continues:

*modernism (including the Great Artists and producers) gives off a message that has little to do with the content of the individual works: it is the aesthetic as sheer autonomy, as the satisfactions of handicraft transfigured.*<sup>18</sup>

Artists as individual producers are still in control over the whole process, this should be acknowledged, they escape the fast and hyper fragmented modes of production in advanced society in which the individual lost a great deal of power and control over his or her own productivity and in this respect the feeling of freedom too. It is probably much more due to the fact that artists operate as individuals, and are seen this way, what obfuscates our view on painting, and what still keeps them in isolation from a more general and broader

---

<sup>17</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, pp. 103-104

<sup>18</sup> Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991) p. 307

experienced social practise. Individuality should not be ignored or transformed into collectivism but it shouldn't be mythologized either.



Jackson Pollock, Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)  
National Gallery of Art, Washington DC



Karel Appel Danse Amoureuse, 1955 Tate Collection

### **2.3. Drawing lines; the value-making process**

What I propose to do here must be recognised as something like drawing lines to an imaginary point which is never been hit upon. To get a clearer view on the drawing motion is here intended, as a vehicle to grasp the diverse processes that are taking place, to grasp the historical subject object relation of a painting. This is what we have to have in the back of our minds when we look at a painting. Not so much the question what a painting is about, but the question of what is going on here, when we look at it, is for different reasons interesting.

We have already seen that the production of art is not a free-standing process in society, although it often appears that way. It has the potentiality of dealing with virtually all aspects of life, and it used to do so, but as will be clarified later on, it also veils and ignores lots of aspects.

When Jameson talked of the capacity to think in terms of process, he pointed at a deeper and more empirically *concrete* understanding of objects (and thus paintings too) much the same way in which Lukács pleads for the disruption of the unmediated consciousness of the commodity. In order to do so we have to break with 'an awareness of abstract isolation and the merely abstract relationship – external to consciousness – to those factors that create it

socially.<sup>19</sup> Our consciousness has to become susceptible for the mediated originated history of the object and the immanent contradictions of the (societal) process of which it is a part. What we find here is a genuine criterion of evaluation, socially as well as aesthetically. In the next two subchapters I will elaborate a little on the phenomenon of a painting being and not being a commodity from this perspective. Two terms Lukács used frequently, come to our help here, namely immediacy and totality.

### **2.3.1. Primary colors or, why a painting is a commodity**

To put it plainly: The value-making process in art production is obviously not determined by the price a particular artwork has in the marketplace. It is not hard to see in a society dominated by the market how a painting becomes a commodity and how the disintegrating effects of the market show up in a mercantile discourse. When a painting by Picasso is sold in an auction for millions of dollars and hits all the news programs on TV, the announcer doesn't speak of the painting in terms of its beauty, its impact on our consciousness and the arts, its aesthetic significance, its meaning and so on, but solely in terms of money-value. The value of the artwork in terms of beauty is obliterated by the fetishist money-value; hardly anyone makes the distinction anymore. In our world we can't escape the all-embracing rules of the commodity-structure. Men have structured and built society along the lines and the logics of property. Whether you like it or not the market and the media are of course social embedded fields of practise too. The question that arises is: how much do we want to be imposed by these factors in society and how much do we want to be influenced consciously by its imperialistic tentacles. Jameson has observed: why is it that these particular fields of practise are so visibly present in our society and other terrains, like for instance art (production), are not, at least not in the way they are present.

Most artists have a troublesome relationship with the 'free' market. Their works and their careers generally evolve through a more or less fixed network of state authority, governmental subsidising art committees, art institutions and galleries before they appear as a profit maker on the market. Most of them never make it to the market. The attentive reader

---

<sup>19</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, p. 173

might wonder now how this is possible, how in a world which seems to turn around economics, artists can work ‘outside’ the realm of the market. This question cannot be answered here but will be touched on briefly later.

I’d like to show one example of an artist who ‘questions’ the commodity in his work. In recent years the British painter and conceptual artist Adam Neate<sup>20</sup> started to challenge the concept of artwork as a commodity, much the same way actually as Warhol did before him. At first he left his works, a mixture of paint and graffiti on cardboard, on the streets of London for anyone who liked it, for free. Art should be accessible for everyone, as he says. After a few years a journalist reported on this street art phenomenon and the artist became quickly well-known. A gallery-owner asked him to do an exhibition in his gallery and the prices of his works went sky rocketing. In 2008 he hit the news again by repeating the same action, but this time it wasn’t a spontaneous action, it was well orchestrated. This time the works weren’t handmade but screen prints on cardboard in a cellophane wrapper, it was mass production. At the event a lot of fans came to London to purchase one of these screen prints. They admired his work, as they said, so much, but nobody talked about the content of the work, the attraction came from the ‘brilliant exceptional’ action of the artist.

What strikes a blow here is the extreme superficiality artwork gets when it becomes a mere commodity. And what makes it even more worrying is that not a single critic questions this phenomenon, the devastating and illusionary impact the media and the market have on the artwork itself.

It might be that I missed out some information but in a time where the conceptual in art production dominates one can wonder why there hasn’t been anyone to proclaim his or her work as non-possessable, not for an individual, not for a company, not for an institution, not for a state, not for anyone now and in the future, since this is the most obvious feature of the commodity; the fact that it is a property-object. What implications would it have? It goes without saying that the negation of this feature would turn it in a non-commodity. Would we really not be able to value the work anymore and would we all of a sudden care less? And if we continue to envisage the consequences this might have, we will probably only meet juridical complications.

If we could treat artworks with a little more *amor fati* and a less economic beneficial inclined attitude, we would already come a bit closer to a more comprehensive, genuine and

---

<sup>20</sup> *The London Show: Adam Neate*, Sky 2008 ([www.skyarts.co.uk](http://www.skyarts.co.uk))

*concrete* understanding of the artwork, in order to do so it is probably interesting to ask the question why a painting isn't a commodity.

### **2.3.2. Earthly colors or, why a painting isn't a commodity**

A painting understood as a commodity is of course far too simplistic. It can not be understood well as an immediate given thing, and thus not as an 'immediate mimesis' as well. As something that is just there because the artist put it there, or because his name is attached to it, or just by the simple proclamation of it. It is this specific disposition; the inherent commandment of a work of art as being a unique and special 'object' that claims special treatment, that doesn't make it just a commodity. The sphere it operates in is unfixed and the impossibility of inscribing it into a logical system, although its sheer existence demands for it all the time, it denies it at the same time too. This should not be explained as some excuse for not dealing with the work *concretely*. The artist and the recipient have to deal with the totality of the work of art. That is, on the one hand the way it intensifies our subjectivity, questions should arise like: what does it do, what does it mean, how does it affect me and how does it move? And on the other hand the way it deals with life. Questions should arise about the objective side of the work of art. What relation does it have to reality, how does it reflect reality and how is reality transformed? All these questions together, will in the end not give definite answers but if these questions cannot be dealt with properly, have no impact whatsoever, or only on a very one-sided level, one can wonder if one is facing an artwork altogether.

### **3. The foreground**

Figures and objects in a traditional landscape painting that are put in the foreground usually are painted in sharper colors and a graver tonality as to set them out from the background. Much the same way this 'portraiture' of painting can be seen, and how these figures and objects 'behave' dialectically with the background.

Before we enter the matter of painting more closely it has to be said that this thesis isn't a plea for the rehabilitation of some kind of grand mastery of painting, or should it be understood as an attempt to restore or reinstall vanished functions of painting for nostalgic reasons. Needless to say that painting doesn't need such a thing.

Although some nostalgic functions are worthwhile to be reinvestigated and reevaluated in my opinion, as one might read between the lines. In this respect I agree with the reevaluation of the concept of mimesis by Stefan Beyst<sup>21</sup>, although in his renewed evaluation the emphasis is too much on the theory itself, instead of being a methodological interesting approach. The main intent here is to plead for a different aesthetic, a different attitude towards art (production), one which is less reified and less contaminated by the inclinations of commodification. It is a search for new conditions of possibilities, to trace antagonisms not for the sake of building a consistent logical theory, but to provide us with creative moments of thought, to learn and to delight, all within a wilfully attitude in change.

### **3.1. 'Position' of painting**

It must be said that the notion of position is a highly problematic one. 'The concept of art balks at being defined, for it is a historically changing constellation of moments'<sup>22</sup> as Adorno has said. There is no such thing like a foundation or a highest principle to what this notion can be related to and can answer all the questions that arise, certainly not since art, from the beginning of the 20th century, became increasingly conceptual, or should I say despite of this fact. Despite the efforts of the early modernists for a more spiritual and universal art, that has a meaningful embedded connection in society, art became less and less connected to societal processes and even more autonomous than the modernists probably wished for. The reasons why art became so alienated aren't so much due to the artworks themselves but should be sought on a deeper structural societal level; in which different fields of practise developed 'autonomy', i.e. became more and more reified.

---

<sup>21</sup> Beyst, Stefan, *Mimesis: Reconsideration of an apparently obsolete concept and Mimesis and Art* (www.d-sites.net)

<sup>22</sup> *Aesthetic theory*, Theodor Adorno in: Cahn, Steven M. and Aaron Meskin [ed], *Aesthetics a comprehensive Anthology*, Hong Kong/Singapore: Blackwell, 2008, p. 359

Like Jameson who wrote a book on Postmodernism without posing any outlined description of the term but investigating it in terms of the relation of past, present and future it incorporates, much the same way we can look at painting today.

There are these particular dominant features of art in our days that are playing a particular role on the foreground and who have become an obstacle in getting a clear view on painting, and which should be brought, or at least an attempt should be made, into a more harmonised composition with painting altogether. I will discuss five of them. First I will discuss the position of the artist in relation to the media, secondly the implications of the conceptualisation of artworks, thirdly painting in the realm of the visual arts, fourthly the relation with art discourse and the institutionalised art world and finally the pluralistic outlook of the visual arts. I have to admit that within the range of this thesis I can only touch these topics briefly, so only a rough sketch will be seen.

### **3.1.1. The artist and the media**

The profile of the artist has changed a lot through the years. Although among artists the painter is generally still seen as a craftsman, we see a whole lot of different aspects attached to his profile appear in an age in which the media emerged in society. The technological development of communicational devices has produced all kinds of new media-spheres which provides on different levels in the exchange of information. The image-profile of the artist became an interesting feature for the artist and an important factor in his career. One can argue that his image became reified too, as something that has to be created and brought between the artistic work and the public. From an outcast to a bohemian, from a visionary to a shaman, from a rebel to a cultural entrepreneur, from a deft image-builder to a shifty strategist, the artist exposed himself in all kinds of characteristic appearances. It goes beyond this thesis to fully explore this development but one can see the correlation between the outer image of the artist and the inaccessibility of their works for the general public. Although the general public still seems to want to conform the artist to a particular notion of what an artist looks like, in recent years these images have eroded a lot. As Jameson has noticed the Great Painters do not exist anymore because ‘if the poststructuralist motif of the “death of the subject” means anything socially, it signals the end of the inner-directed

individualism, with its “charisma” and its accompanying categorial panoply of quaint romantic values such as that of the “genius” ...<sup>23</sup> The profession of the artist has been stripped, for the best I would say, from its mythological centralistic subjectivism. The Great Painter as an authentic soul has died. His profession became like any other profession one that can be describes in terms of a career, as a strategy to become a well-known and good selling professional. However there are still traces of this old image of the great authentic and original individual that operates in the building of painting-careers, as we have seen in the case of Adam Neate. The image has been reified and turned into an instrument in the image-building of the painter’s career. Not only did the romantic image of the artist erode, at the same time we see that his name and career became much more affiliated with his position on the market. What we see recently is that the artist’s work is not judged on its content or skill but by the ranking of it in terms of market-value. The question that arises is, of course: if this is all that is left of what art is about, what can we expect of it for the future and what does it really mean to us anyway. Should it behave in conformity to this market related image or should it do something else.

### **3.1.2. The conceptual in art**

With art becoming more and more conceptual it increasingly denied its endless inherent potentialities, and it became pre-occupied as it seems with its own internal artistic problems. This might seem paradoxical but when scrutinised by dialectical method it becomes clear that it is not at all paradoxical as it appears to be. The more conceptual artworks become the more they negate their own existence. The more artworks have to be constituted by text and concepts the more they lose their base in the *concrete*. Unlike theory itself, handmade paintings can never fully be theorised. That’s why theory should serve art instead of dominating it, or even proclaiming being art, as we see in lot of conceptual artworks. Since Marcel Duchamp in 1913 presented the first readymade artwork *Roue de Bicyclette* the nature and function of artworks have become questionable. Art became highly problematic from a metaphysical standpoint. As Adorno has said it: ‘everything about art has become

---

<sup>23</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 306

problematic: its inner life, its relation to society, even its right to exist.<sup>24</sup> What we see here is that the vital feature described earlier, to some respect also known as mimesis, is almost completely eradicated from the artwork. Duchamp's work is closed for a 'retracing' of the process of production on a level of what is still to be felt in handmade paintings for instance. The different industrial objects he combined, he displaced out of their ordinary environment, and put them in a new constellation. From a Lukácsian perspective this can be seen as a double reification. Of course this was Duchamp's intention in the first place. He wanted to turn artworks into 'mind bothering' objects instead of eye pleasing and sensuous artefacts. With the eradication of this vital feature in the artwork, the 'first nature' of it disappeared and the content of the works can only be traced from the 'second nature' level. The misperception that comes to the surface is the presupposition that by displacing the objects out of their natural environment the object gains openness in the way it can be experienced, only by the announcement of the objects as an artwork. This is not the case, because in its conceptualisation it closed the sensuous aspects of it. So here we hit upon another antagonism because the more artworks become conceptual the more they deny their own essences and inherent potentialities and the more they become mere illustrations to particular concepts. Painting on the other hand and in particular handicraft painting, escapes this servitude to concepts, even when they have a certain conceptual content, because they move in a world of which the horizon is not fixed. When painting is seen from a dialectical standpoint, namely that it is, and at the same time reflects, an interaction, a relation between subject and object in the historical process, when we'll recognise its transformative stance, it will reveal their openness to us. We will see that it has the potentiality to change reality altogether, because it lacks, luckily I would say, a decisive logical structure. Of course all artworks, the conceptual included, can be seen from this standpoint. They can all be remediated into societal processes and described as such in particular narrative structures, or in terms of the connection in a chain. It also clears the false consciousness of which it thrives. One particular anecdote of Duchamp is quite illuminating in this respect. A gallery owner in New York once invited Duchamp to participate in an exhibition of self-portraits. Duchamp sends in a telegram with the following quote: 'This is my portrait if I say this is my portrait'. The gallery owner hangs the telegram on the wall along with the other portraits. When Duchamp afterwards sends a bill to the gallery owner, the gallery owner responded by replying with a telegram saying: 'This is

---

<sup>24</sup> *Aesthetic theory*, Theodor Adorno in: Cahn, Steven M. and Aaron Meskin [ed], *Aesthetics a comprehensive Anthology*, Hong Kong/Singapore: Blackwell, 2008, p. 358

a cheque if I say it is a cheque'.<sup>25</sup> What we see here is that as soon as the typical productive features are eradicated from artworks they become totally obsolete. If anything can be proclaimed as art, nothing will be art at the same time. Here we hit upon a particular problem of art in our time, and what can be recognised as a character trait in mainstream art discourses.

### 3.1.3. Painting within the realm of the visual arts

Within the scope of the visual arts a lot of specific disciplines have lost their 'hard' boundaries in the last decades. The fields in which the artists work have become supposedly less fixed. A lot of artists work with a range of different media's and apply different techniques and materials in their work. The image linguistic possibilities of these new materials and applications are appealing much more to the notion of boundary breaking progress, as will be discussed later. The painter who sticks to the basic materials appears as some kind of old-fashioned traditional craftsman from the background of this development; paintings fossilise to an archaic sphere. The painting seems to become an obsolete object, apparently only functional in terms of an appellant for aesthetic and nostalgic feeling, but unfitting as a referent for meaning. Its possibilities seem to be crushed on the one hand by new technological devices like photography, film, computer and video and on the other hand by the dead-end route of the modern mode of production. The traditional (the word itself says it all) material paint and canvas gets a closed and fixed connotation in relation to all the other new materials that seem to have a more contemporary appeal to them. Of course this perception is based on the presumption that art can only be significant when it operates in a boundary breaking fashion. And here again we still recognise the pre-occupation with the so-called autonomous sphere and association with the purifying mode of production, that are not open to a more extensive, outward looking, different mode of production.

It is evident that painters had to reconsider the position of painting with the emergence of all the new technological means to produce pictures, but instead of reconsidering the presupposed autonomy of a work of art, they fully explored all the 'autonomous' side paths possible.

---

<sup>25</sup> This example is borrowed from: Doorman, Maarten. *Steeds Mooier: over vooruitgang in de kunst*, Amsterdam: Bakker, 2005, p. 212

What characterises a lot of modern art works is that they seem highly atomised, the content of the particular works is extremely thin, that is to say, it often only refers to a single element in a web of interrelated art discourses. In so many pre-modern paintings a lot of different ‘worlds’ are brought together, to ‘harmonise’ in the mind and before your eyes those aspects of life that seem utterly incomprehensible and incommensurable. The attempt of how to imagine or to bring for your eyes a world which doesn’t exist, or a possible world that could become, or a mirage of our contemporary world, or all these aspects together, is hardly seen, at least not in painting, as it is for instance in film today. One particular example I saw years ago in an exhibition in Brussels is *Landscape with the abduction of Helen* by Maerten van Heemkerck. This vast and impressive painting from the sixteenth century combines all kinds of narrative, mythological and historical elements that are at once there in the picture, this is only possible in painting. And one wonders why this particular feature of painting is not worked with anymore.



*Landscape with the abduction of Helen*, c. 1535 (The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, Maryland)

#### **3.1.4. Art discourse and the institutions**

From all kinds of perspectives and angles the position of painting can be looked at. Critics, art historians, culture scientists and philosophers have done so in all so many ways, from the sociological to the hermeneutical, from the economical to the strategic play; angled from the artist, or the media, or the market, or a combination of these. There are a numerous positions examined and all worthwhile in their own right. What all these positions have in common is that they can’t escape the inherent homogeneous effects of the theoretic practise

and the societal constellation which makes their work possible, the institutionalised world they move in. The fixating unified laws they obey; the reification of their own field of practise. It is the kind of rationality that seems to adjust to and reflect the highly institutionalised and fragmented fields of practise.

Art discourse has gained, since the beginning of the 20th century, a prominent place within the realm of the arts and the notion of progress plays a dominant role in this discourse, since the sixties different authors described this development as the institutional theory of art. The false consciousness and ludicrous downsides come to the surface especially where it claims autonomy, where it claims being art and where the notion of progress is presumed to be the object of artistic production, as we have seen earlier.

In art production the notion of progress is often used to show the breaks with tradition or to set oneself opposite of the established protagonists of particular styles. It is for instance a paradox to see that the modernists in painting resisted the more institutionalised art, better known as academic art, because it did not have a meaningful relationship with society anymore. In order to break with this tradition they proclaimed that art should be more spiritual and universal. The paradox is that their art became even more autonomous and alienated from society than their immediate predecessors. And this process is repeated over and over again during the 20th century up to the present day, although one has to notice that the make-up of this process slightly changed.

Often the justification that is immanent in the discourse to settle a new art production is to proclaim that by fusing or overlapping disciplinary boundaries the artist opens up a whole new domain. The discourses are paved with typical words like: radical, rebel, controversial, contra movement, or lines like: 'to seek to expand the extension of the term art'<sup>26</sup>, 'outside the main stream', 'besides the common paths', etcetera. Not only there seems to be an ever increasing and fastening succession of breaks and 'radical new' paintings, the accompanying discourses describing all kinds of different crises as well. They need to proclaim a crisis in order to put something else in the floodlight. Whatever crisis is described, most of the time it is described as a self-evident phenomenon. What these discourses lack is critical reflection on the underlying presuppositions and in correspondence to this a broader structural and societal related critique.

---

<sup>26</sup> This quote comes from an eloquent article by Peter Osborne, *Painting Negation: Gerhard Richter's Negatives*, (in: *October*, Vol. 62 MIT Press (Autumn, 1992)) which paradoxically describes the appointed process and illustrates it at the same time.

This can be seen by the fact that the question of what painting should be about became pre-dominant over questions outside its own presupposed realm. The pre-occupation with the own mode of production as a thing-in-itself and a thing-for-itself became the dominant factor. The critical reflection on the own aesthetic discourse is of course not a bad thing to do, but when it becomes the object of painting it isolates itself from the world. It retreats itself in a circle of insiders of those who ‘know’, who studied art, who claim to be an expert and authority on the subject.

For Lukács progress is an immanent aspect of theorising and theorising cannot be some kind of discipline that deals with its own internal problems, it should always be regarded as a political and changing occupation. ‘The theory is essentially the intellectual expression of the revolutionary process itself’<sup>27</sup>, it is where thought actively interacts with praxis. What has to be acknowledged still is that a dialectical approach doesn’t lead to a complete and all included theory, but as we’ve seen this isn’t a problem really. Does it lead to the best praxis? Not necessarily. A tricky aspect about dialectics is that one might interpret particular processes, the social conditions that come with it, as inevitable. Lots of examples in (Marxist) history can be seen and to a certain extent we see a reflection of this in *History and Class Consciousness* as well. On the other hand we have to acknowledge in line with Zizek that: ‘... we have a Lukács who is much (...) more disposed to conjecture/contingency than it is usually assumed.’<sup>28</sup> And: ‘... the Act cannot ever be reduced to an outcome of objective conditions.’<sup>29</sup>

Although I believe that man is a dialectical being in nature, a preference for a dialectical methodology doesn’t necessarily follow. The promise though of dialectics is, that it can bring us back into a less material detached practise, it can pull us out of the tower of pure thought into our (material) bodies where all the senses interconnect but where none has gained superiority over the other.

Autonomous painting is in the end not a realistic idea but an ideological one, as if painting is moving in a domain that is completely isolated from the societal and political reality. An artwork gets its meaning when it becomes a part of a shared reality, or a narrative about reality. Of much the same magnitude we can think of the specialised and

---

<sup>27</sup> Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), Merlin Press, 1973, p. 3

<sup>28</sup> Zizek, Slavoj, *From History and Class Consciousness to the Dialectic of Enlightenment... and Back*. New German Critique, No. 81. Dialectic of Enlightenment (Autumn, 2000), p. 119

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 120

institutionalised art world which appears as an autonomous domain, and often is guarded as such, but which in the end is only fruitful to the extent where it acknowledges its protective, educational, serving and criticising tasks within the whole of society.

Let us put all of this behind us now and look at the future of (traditional handicraft) painting as a profession and as a cultural phenomenon with an unlimited societal significance and radiance.

### **3.1.5. The pluralistic outlook in art**

As many already have noticed and discussed extensively is that in our time the arts have become pluralistic. Never in history have we seen such a variety in styles and extreme complexity in image-linguistic outlooks. And those who are still looking for common traits in painting along the lines that art historians have set out, have a hard time dealing with it. The most common approach to this ‘problem’ is to see how and in what way the work of an artist resembles and contradicts the works of previous established artists. As we have noticed it is questionable if these attempts and the presuppositions that go with it are still valid and helpful. As we have seen earlier the modern mode of production implies a particular attitude which is still not, as it seems, at the end of its full grown potentiality. A particular feature of this mode of production is the seemingly shattered outlook of the visual arts. Painting today, like all other art forms, is like a disco ball reflecting its radiance in all directions possible. There isn’t a dominant style or straight line direction in painting anymore. The outlook can best be characterised as a multi-eclecticism, as a linguistic jumble. Do we have to be worried here? Not really I would say when we realise that the diversity enriches the plane of aesthetics besides the fact that artworks are defenceless in the first place. We should be worried though about the muteness of artworks, of the incapacity to communicate and to criticise. This muteness can only partly be described to the artworks *an sich* since their realm is not fixed, it suffers for a great deal from the ideology of difference too. Diversity can be seen as a cover up of an undercurrent which started in Western society; the dominant homogeneous program of (multinational) capitalism in the world which has its roots in the all embracing commodity-structure Marx has pointed at in *Das Kapital*. It is the radical opposition of the modern supranational capitalist world against the ‘traditional’ rest of the world and it is the radical

break with its own rich traditional background. In the monstrous walk of the capitalist hegemony ‘the embarrassing historical question of whether the tolerance of difference, as a social fact, is not the result of social homogenization and standardization and the obliteration of genuine social difference in the first place’<sup>30</sup> becomes quite acute. The extreme tension that one can feel and see in the culture political arena of our time, where mass pollution and climate change threatens the planet and where traditional cultures are totally overruled and transformed into tourist attractions.

The nihilistic outlooks of a lot of contemporary artworks and their corresponding muteness become all the more troubling against this background. Isn’t the ignorance of this anxiety in artworks, a sign on the wall, for the ever fastening depthlessness of their appearance?

#### **4. The cognitive and empathic dimension**

Jameson has used the term “Cognitive Mapping” as a spatial metaphor for what his ideology is about. It is closely linked to the dialectical notion that Lukács has of how the consciousness of man emerges from a particular social background. What is interesting to focus on here is the dual aspect of consciousness, the content and the form, in which it appears, and to look at painting from this standpoint. It’s like Jameson pointed out that when the experience we have in finding our way in a big city we always have this immediate perception of our surroundings and at the same time we have an imaginary map in mind of the totality of the city to which we orientate ourselves. It is this same spatial image that he extrapolates to ‘Althusser’s great formulation of ideology itself, as the “Imaginary representation of the subject’s relation to his or her Real conditions of existence.”’<sup>31</sup> And when we in our turn extrapolate this image to painting we’re getting a more extensive view on the subject.

As we have noticed before when discussing the pioneers of modernity and the false consciousness that came to the surface and the paradoxical outcome of their intentions

---

<sup>30</sup> Jameson, Fredric, *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, p. 341

<sup>31</sup> Jameson, Fredric. (1990) *Cognitive Mapping* in: Nelson, C. and L. Grossberg ed. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press (S. 347-60; m. Diskussion), p. 4

concerning society in relation to painting it can still be observed that the change they made, is especially a change within the range of cognition. Modern painting, an abstract painting of Mondrian for example, has influenced our perception and with that enriched our (knowledge of) perception schemes as Doorman<sup>32</sup> described it in his book about progress in art.

The representational aspects of a painting are not merely a question of imitation of reality; it is far more than that. It is an active mode of production in which aspects of life are transformed into a comprehensive image. An image that of course leaves out more than what it contains, but it can make specific connections in a specific way, so to relate 'things' on the canvas that are impossible to relate in any other way, by doing so the painting can have a cognitive impact on the spectator. It sheds a new light on reality and therefore contributes to our knowledge of it. In this respect the painting not only tells us something new about reality it also changes reality because when it has hit our consciousness hard enough we are not able to look at reality the same way as we did before.

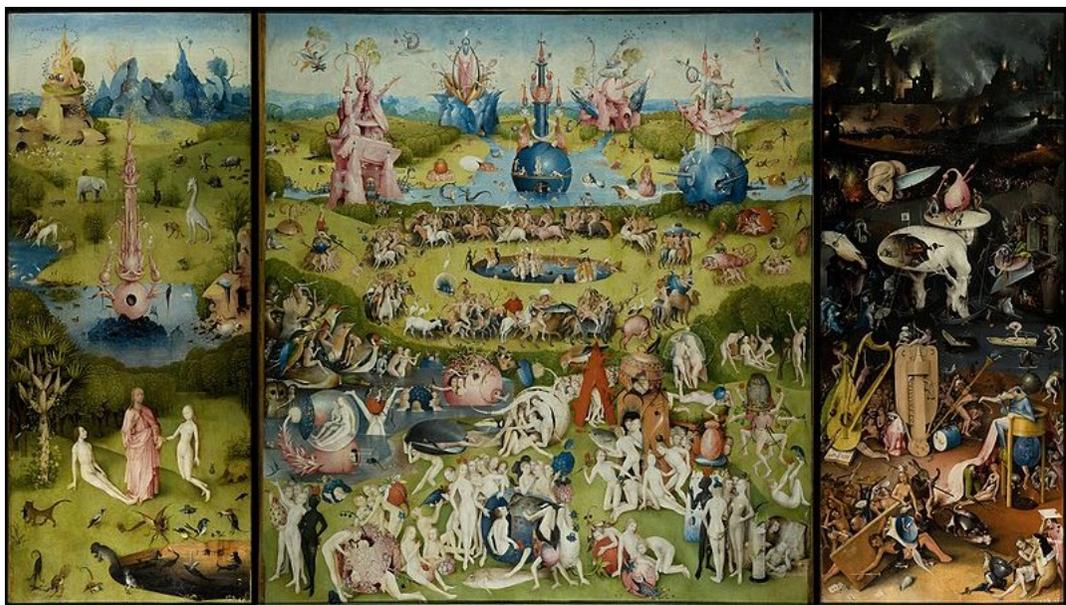
Painting seen as an open (political) playground, as a material source in which you participate actively and *concretely*, is hardly seen today. Paintings nowadays are usually engaged as fixed shrines of adoration, as objects that are made to give you visual satisfaction and nothing more, all in conformity with a fashionable and consummative mode of interaction. This hyper nihilistic attitude, which isn't only seen in the general audience but also within the production of paintings, is in the end an affront towards painting altogether. It is the negation of its rich and innumerable potentialities of engagement and to some extent the negation of its historical character. Although this attitude seems to heighten the empathic dimension of the artwork it only does so in a very superficial fashion. It does not penetrate the viewer in a deeper, more complex and *concrete* way.

The act of looking is closely related to the act of thinking. When ever we're gazing into the distance we miss all the details of the particular things in our immediate proximity and vice versa. In thinking about painting we often do the same. Making the broader historical processes commensurable is to fade the more detailed and closer view on the immediate past and focusing on the here and now often blurs the distant past. When running through art history we are often prone to think along the pickets art historians have set out. Let us try a different approach and see if we can look, for instance, at Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and try to comprehend, not by what he is saying, but by what he is 'doing' in this particular work of art, and see if this can have cognitive significance and meaning. He

---

<sup>32</sup> Doorman, Maarten. *Steeds Mooier: over vooruitgang in de kunst*, Amsterdam: Bakker, 2005, p. 200

constructed a well ordered spatial realm in which all kinds of particular figures and objects play a particular role towards each other. In our time we are not able to read the signs and their correlations adequately anymore because most of the particular referents are lost through the waste bins of history. The spatial form with its particular narrative interpretational structure can be extrapolated to a cognitive form, a particular form of thought through which one can comprehend a particular (mental) mode of production and vice versa. All the pictorial elements together with the outer form of the triptych could be seen as a representation model for cognitive forms. On the one hand it can be argued that the evaporation of the referential contents opens up a more abstract access. And here we remind ourselves the point Lukács made about the ever-increasing distancing of the material concrete, because the same question can be seen in the light of the phenomenon of reification, that is to say; is our consciousness formed by the all-embracing commodity structure to the extent that we now are much more inclined to look at it in this particular way? On the other hand one could look at the contemporary landscape of philosophy ‘through’ Bosch’s landscape and see a lot of differentiated discourses each playing a particular role and each having a specific interrelated connection, in time, to all the others. Due to this highly differentiated field it becomes extremely difficult, not to say impossible, to comprehend this landscape as a whole. What we see now, at least, is that the painting can be helpful in our aspiration to comprehend the whole. Not a single 20th century painting can do what *The Garden of Earthly Delights* does in this respect.



Hieronymus Bosch, *The Garden of Earthly Delights* (inside), 1503-1504 (Museo del Prado, Madrid)

## 5. Conclusion

Although painting is not directly comparable with Lukács's proletariat and Jameson's oppressed minorities, it can be conceived as some kind of group with particular problems, and unexplored possibilities in and against the background of society. What I have tried to clarify is the role they play and to make it more visible in as much as what they do as what they don't do. It is as Jameson said it:

*Art has always done a great many different things, and had a great many distinct and incommensurable functions: let it continue to do all that which it will, in any case, even in Utopia. But the very pluralism of the aesthetic suggests that there should be nothing particular repressive in the attempt to remind ourselves and to revive experimentally one traditional function of the aesthetic that has in our time been peculiarly neglected and marginalized, if not interdicted altogether.*<sup>33</sup>

And for him that is in particular the teaching aspects of it. I'd like to add to this, the criticising (mental) mode of production, the creative moments of thought they can afflict in our mind, the sheer joy they bring, when we are dealing with it in an active disposition and not in an, as so often seen today, passive, consummative or contemplative mode of interaction. Or to put it in a more Marxist fashion: where the use value of paintings has been obliterated by the capitalistic exchange value with all its fetishist aspects.

We have seen that reified thought and the commodified impact on society didn't bring us much closer to painting. It can even be argued that it drifted away from us. Painting deserves better because its uncountable potentialities and boundless mental possibilities are only explored to the extent, to use another metaphor, as mankind has mapped the Universe.

I think I am not exaggerating when I say that most painters experience themselves as complete organic whole beings in the creative process of their work. The heart, the mind and the body of the artist all take part in the practise of creating. Hardly any mode of production in our society has saved this unity in practise. Even where this is genuinely felt it is not necessarily the antidote for reification as we have seen. One of many reasons why painting has been alienated from society, and society from painting, springs from the fact that it

---

<sup>33</sup> Jameson, Fredric. (1990) *Cognitive Mapping* in: Nelson, C. and L. Grossberg ed. *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, University of Illinois Press (S. 347-60; m. Diskussion), p. 1

became, to a great extent, an autonomous field like so many other terrains in our society. In any case this should not be understood that art is some kind of beacon in a rough sea, a safe haven for those who want to escape the fragmentising aspects of the structural base of our society. Art in many respects changes analogue to the changes in society. We can see for instance the appearance of abstract painting in the 20th century as an expression of the ever-increasing abstraction of the interior of our technological advanced world, where social relations in social networks on the internet, to give an example, are purely abstract relations as compared to real-life relations. The expressions in art can even be regarded as preparatory agents for that matter, as signs of future times.

Where we see an increasing range of artistic modes of production, we do not necessarily see an increase of quality. And where we see painters 'still' working in their 'traditional' craft production, we do not necessarily see a profession in decline. What we do see is when painting becomes a self proclaimed autonomous playground, at the same time its reification, inherent limits and false-consciousness come to light. Where we see an ever-expanding diversity and perplexity, we do not necessarily see a deepening of the pictorial language which provides us with a genuine and profound understanding of human existence.

As we have seen in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* that through time there can be traced an inevitable dialectical process which at the same time can be renounced or enhanced by us when we're in an active mode of (mental) production. From this perspective one will be urged for a more extensive and dynamic stance towards painting, not painting squabbling over its own internal problems, but painting that searches its object outside its presupposed realm.

Art as a qualitatively changing playground in and about society, in which the whole structure of it is reflected and criticised, where cultural institutions, critics, etcetera, let's say the public in general, attain a more critical, creative, involved and engaged approach towards art production and painting. Because in the end society gets what it reflects, and here we hear Lukács's inevitability of the historic process, but it isn't inescapable.

What is at last the most intriguing and interesting (dialectical) question, and this question remains an open one, is how painting can step outside the aesthetic and cultural sphere of which it appears to be imprisoned, and impose qualitative changes on human praxis.

## Literature

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory* in: Cahn, Steven M. and Aaron Meskin [ed], *Aesthetics a comprehensive Anthology* (Hong Kong/Singapore: Blackwell, 2008)
- Doorman, Maarten. *Steeds Mooier: over vooruitgang in de kunst* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2005)
- Jameson, Fredric (1990). *Cognitive Mapping* in: Nelson, C. and L. Grossberg [ed], *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (University of Illinois Press (S. 347-60; m. Diskussion))
- Jameson, Fredric. *History and Class Consciousness as an "Unfinished Project"* in: *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader, Intellectual and Political Controversies*, ed. Sandra Hardy (London: Routledge, 2004)
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991)
- Kraaijpoel, Diederik, Meijer, Willem L. en Allan, Lennaart. *Niet alles is kunst* (Soesterberg: Uitgeverij Aspekt, 2010)
- Lukács, Georg. *History and Class Consciousness: studies in Marxist Dialectics*, translated by Rodney Livingstone (1971), (Cambridge/Massachusetts: Merlin Press, 1973)
- Weitz, Morris. *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics* in: Cahn, Steven M. and Aaron Meskin [ed], *Aesthetics a comprehensive Anthology* (Hong Kong/Singapore: Blackwell, 2008)
- Zizek, Slavoj, *From History and Class Consciousness to the Dialectic of Enlightenment... and Back* in: *New German Critique*, No. 81. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Autumn, 2000)