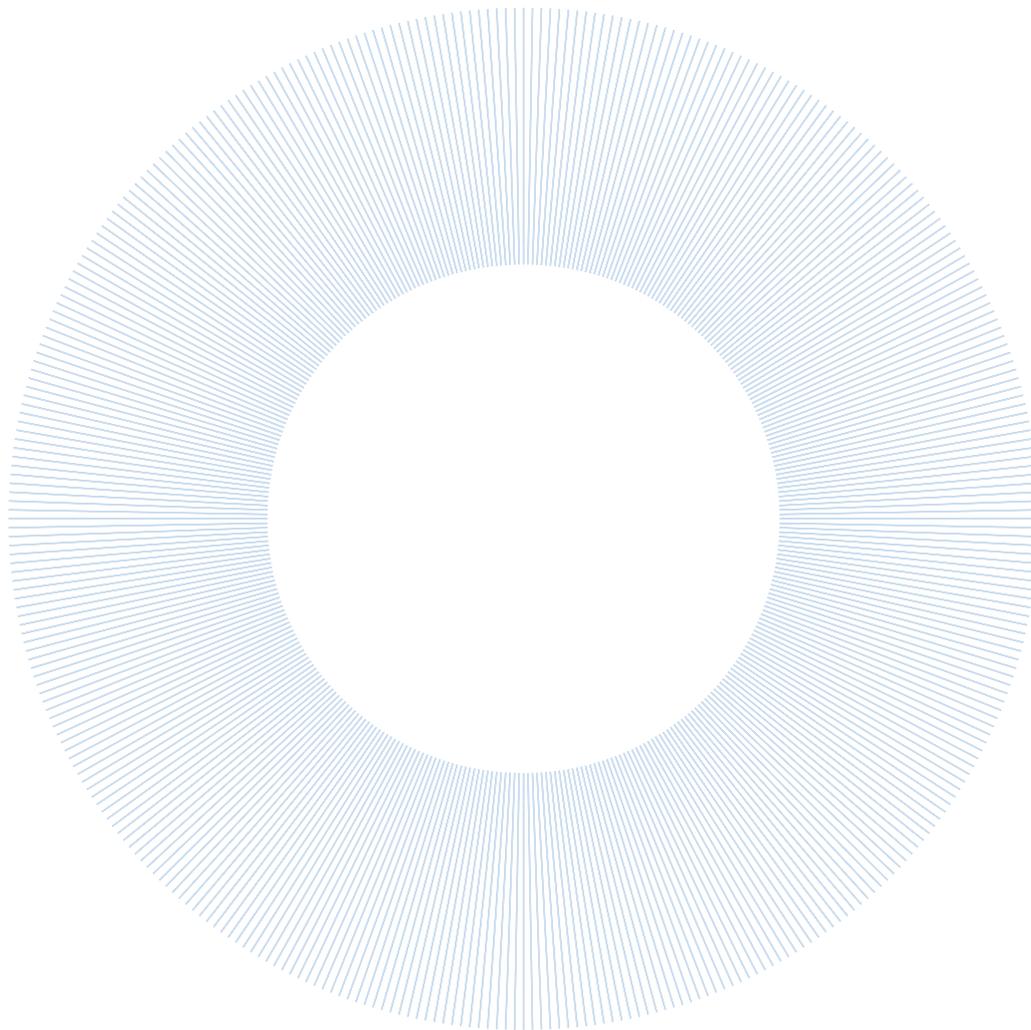


Negation, Possibilisation,  
Emergence and the Reversed  
Painting



Richard Read

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## NEGATION, POSSIBILISATION, EMERGENCE AND THE REVERSED PAINTING

*My recent work has been a book project on the reversed painting in Western art, where the reversed painting is defined as a pictorial motif that depicts another painting or paintings turned against the viewer (think of the huge canvas back that dominates the left-hand side of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, 1656). This essay addresses research on a core aspect of the project as pursued at Durham. Under the aegis of 'emergence' it involved thinking about the political potentiality of the reversed painting in negative and positive lights. In respect of the motif's negational role, the image of the reversed canvas resembles acts of iconoclasm that stimulate the memory or imagination not only of an obscured image, 'but all that has attached itself to it in the course of the fight for and against it and all that this fight has brought to light' (Dario Gamboni). The powerful negational significance of the reversed canvas depends, therefore, on its potential effacement of the entire history of the frontal image it occludes, namely, the complex emergence of the portable easel painting as the central and most meaningful form of Western culture amongst many other competing media. Mutatis mutandis, the negation of the world depends on a prior, constitutive representation of the world. Seen in a positive light, therefore, the reversed painting can be read as a symbol of collective imagining that might bring into being a new ideal world – aesthetically and politically – by inducing an abstract kind of collective longing. The essay considers some concrete examples of politically emancipatory imagining in the works of particular artists, as well as theoretical justifications for it in the aesthetic writings of Friedrich Schiller and Hans Belting, the philosophical writings of Martin Heidegger and Edmund Husserl and the political writings of Giorgio Agamben.*



The motif of the reversed painting would form little more than an antiquarian footnote to the history of European painting did its themes not resonate with an issue that concerns all cultures and takes on vivid new relevance today: the emergence of the unseen into the visible realm of culture. I define a reversed painting as a painting of another painting reversed against the spectator, perhaps most famously exemplified on the left of Velázquez's great court painting, *Las Meninas* (1656).<sup>1</sup> Here, I consider the possibility that its significance as a signature motif of metapainting (that is, painting that comments on its own significance) depends on its capacity to negate the meaning that developed over several centuries as the portable easel painting gradually conquered other visual media. Its dominance was not assured until the seventeenth century, when the hanging of portable paintings in domestic interiors became the major European form of decoration it remains today.

It is therefore not surprising that in the seventeenth century a number of successful artists painted 'backs', as I shall call them, whose complex meaning established for posterity the enduring variations of the motif: for example, paintings of artists standing behind their easels by Rembrandt (*The Artist in his Studio*, 1628) and Velázquez (*Las Meninas*, 1656); backs leaning

against studio walls by Nicholas Poussin (*Self Portrait*, 1650) and what I call ‘total’ or *trompe l’oeil* backs by Cornelius Gijsbrecht (*Reversed Side of a Painting*, 1670), a type that persists to the present in works by Vik Muniz, Adam Scott, Gerard Byrne, Cathy Wilkes and other contemporary artists.

Hans Belting interprets the evolving concept of the painted *tableau* or *Gemälde* in the late medieval Low Countries as the ambition to endow the image with the conceptual and thematic character of a ‘representation of the world’ (Stoichita and Martens, 1996, p. 733). He argues that from the middle ages onwards Netherlandish painters progressively enlarged the *tableau*’s field of reference at the expense of other media so as to amalgamate together the subject matter hitherto separately isolated in votive images, images in bedrooms, narrative scenes with multiple figures, full-length group portraits and moralising genre paintings, with the result that the ‘tableau ceased to be confined to a particular thematic repertory, as had formerly been the case’ (p. 733).

The hypothesis I have worked on at Durham is that the concealment performed by paintings of backs of paintings could not have conveyed general significance until fronts of paintings had come to stand, if not for reality as a whole, then for the character of reality. ‘The new type of support, far from closing the image in on itself, would on the contrary open it up to the real, as much from the thematic as from the conceptual point of view’, Belting writes (p. 733). This, then, is the opposite function to the Southern easel painting whose frame, according to Jacob Burckhardt, isolates beauty from reality (Burckhardt, 1918, p. 315), though there too the secularisation and privatisation of paintings from their former ecclesiastic purposes vastly increased the range of their subject matter and possible meanings (Goldthwaite, 1993, p. 139). If the fronts of paintings had gradually acquired a sense of pictorial reality larger than their specific subject matter in any given instance, then representations of the backs of paintings showed that this larger reality is mediated and indeed brought into being by art. In this way the motif contributed to the formation of complex, reflexive images, able to comment on their own capacity to represent reality.

Whether Belting was aware of it or not, the lineaments of his argument about painting ‘opening itself up to the real’ bear a strong resemblance to Martin Heidegger’s sense of ‘originary *possibilitisation* (*die ursprüngliche Ermöglichende*)’ (Agamben, 2004, p. 66) that profound boredom makes possible. What could be duller or more reductive than the image of the back of a painting, but by means of it we become aware of the full gamut of reality that becomes possible as subject matter when we imagine (rather than merely observe) the other side of the depicted image. Giorgio Agamben glosses Heidegger’s sense of this boredom:

Being-held-in-suspense as the [...] essential characteristic of profound boredom, then, is nothing but this experience of the disconcealing of the originary possibilization (that is, pure potentiality) in the suspension and withholding of all concrete and specific possibilities (Agamben, 2004, p. 67).

In ‘The Age of the World View’ (1936/1976), Heidegger seems to underwrite Belting’s sense of the emergence of the modern image again:

World view, properly understood, [...] means, not a view of the world, but the world understood as view. [...] it is existent when and only when and in the degree to which it is held at bay by the person who represents and establishes it. [...] But wherever the existent is *not* conceived of in this sense, the world cannot change into a view; there can be no world view. [...] The world view does not change from a previous medieval to a modern one, but this fact – that the world as such becomes a view – is the distinguishing mark of modern times (Heidegger, 1976, pp. 350–1).

As a result of this diverse, accumulated inheritance of meaning amounting to a 'world view', paintings of the backs of paintings in the early modern period are distinguished by the simultaneous achievement of two quite contradictory effects.

On the one hand, as I have suggested, they intervene upon the accumulated realism of imagery painted on the rectos (fronts) of Northern paintings to show that 'reality' is after all mediated by art and the skill of the artist. This effect is 'phatic', according to Roman Jakobson's model of communication, in that it draws attention to the material medium in which the communication is occurring (Jakobson, 1960, pp. 350–77). This is negational because it destroys belief in illusion. On the other hand, backs include themselves within rhopography, which is the realistic repertoire of ordinary, domestic 'primal objects' – basic and habitual kitchen implements, crockery, furniture (Bryson, 1990, pp. 60–95). They are objects like other objects but are also 'pivotal' objects in both a literal and reflexive sense of the word. Literal, because they convey a potential for physical pivoting that would show their hidden side. Reflexive, because they turn between the status of actual and metaphorical meaning. On account of 'possibilisation' they are both themselves and more than themselves.

If Heidegger expanded possibilisation to infinity, then Edmund Husserl sets limits to it with his concept of the indeterminateness of the other sides of all things. In *Thing and Space* (1907) he asks us to consider an ordinary box whose back and interior are indeterminate, but makes the important qualification that 'Indeterminateness is never absolute or complete [...] is always delimited in this or that way' (Husserl, 1907, p. 50). We do not know what kind of back the box has, or what colour it is, but we know that it will have a back or colour of one kind or another. So it is with paintings. If we belong to a culture that is familiar with them, both their fronts and backs will have predictable characteristics. From the front, we expect paintings to have less interesting, relatively fungible, fully materialist backs that divorce the spectral image from its physical support. Compared to the entrancing diversity of images on the fronts of paintings, backs all look much the same (though one suspects that certain kinds of artists delight in the discrimination of their minute particularities, which is another topic of discussion). Seen from the back the support conveys brute thingness. Considered as an object, we know that its hidden front will have some common characteristics. It will be rectangular (or sometimes circular or oval) and will show combinations of light and shade falling upon its fixed configuration of pigments. The subject matter will also answer broadly to the iconography of the culture it comes from (gendered, class-bound, religious, political, regional, nationalist, etc.). Beyond that we expect only the unexpectedness of the hidden frontal image, of which the only limit is what is picturable (for example, the pictorial image may depict movement but it cannot move in the way that cinematic imagery does).

The roots of Heidegger's and Husserl's concepts of possibilisation and indeterminateness may well lie in Friedrich Schiller's Kantian meditation on the *Juno Ludovisi* sculpture in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794–1795), written at a time when the author had taken intellectual refuge in Germany from the French revolutionary Terror. In writing the book he was desperately seeking an aesthetic solution to the murderous unrest in France, whose cause he saw in the catastrophic divisions of labour between the aristocracy and the people, or bourgeoisie. For Schiller the face of the *Juno Ludovisi* is a godlike woman that both kindles love and distances us by combining grace and dignity. 'But while in ecstasy we give ourselves up to the heavenly beauty, the heavenly self-repose awes us back' (Schiller, 2002, Letter 15). For Schiller the sculpture is a paradigm of art as a social catalyst of utopian aspiration. Its power consists not just in what it represents but in its ultimate effect on spectators, the way it interpellates spectators but also releases them from interpellation as individual subjects in a restrictive ideology. It does not do this directly, however. The kind of indeterminacy offered by art is not

purposive. It invites play that instantiates freedom from sensual and ethical determinations of all kinds in the divided anthropological self. As such, freedom in art serves as a transitional state for newly moral subjects to a moral state that unifies the self and in doing so symbolises the moral freedom of the categorical imperative – Kant’s definition of the means for evaluating moral action – as an aesthetic idea.

Such an argument might seem the ultimate bourgeois diversionary tactic. If the people could be hooked on art, perhaps they would forget about fighting for equality in real life. But the analogy of the reversed painting’s capacity for political possibilisation becomes clearer when I cite Terry Eagleton’s gloss of Schiller’s argument, to the effect that when spectators apprehend the *Juno*, two strenuously antagonistic forces cancel each other out into a kind of stalemate or nullity, and this sheer suggestive nothingness is our pre-capacity for all value. There is, however, nullity and nullity – mere blank negation, and that richly potential vacuity which, as the suspension of every specific constraint, lays the fertile ground for free action (Eagleton, 1990, p. 107).

Here in art is a hinge on which the antinomy between possibilisation and negation swings, but the painting of the back of a painting is hardly a carved goddess. Its capacity to occlude exerts a different, more materialistic kind of political persuasion from that of a classical sculpture whose subject matter is manifestly divine as well as physical.

In ways I cannot detail here, paintings of the backs of paintings mediate between conflicting ontological realms, alerting us to incompatible registers of reality. Each of the paintings of backs of paintings I am about to mention deserves an essay for itself, but space allows me only to mention the ontological realms that each back puts in tension (see Read, 2009, pp. 130–3). An extraordinary *trompe l’oeil* painting of *The Virgin and Child with Angels* from the School of Ferrara of the 1480s in the National Art Gallery of Scotland shows what might be the back of a painting whose parchment cover has been ripped away to reveal the Madonna and Child painted on its back. It oscillates between the condition of an art work and a sacred vision at a time when the religious and aesthetic functions of images were in conflict.

Paul Cézanne appears twice in *The Apotheosis of Delacroix* (1890–1894?), once with other Impressionists, a dealer and a barking dog (representing uncomprehending critics) hailing Delacroix’s apotheosis, which is painted in the manner of Rubens, and again behind his easel as if he were painting a secular landscape without reference to tradition. It confronts the tensions between history painting and naturalism that are inherent in Cézanne’s ambition to ‘re-do Poussin again after nature’ (Thompson et al., 1993, p. 52).

When seen in photographic reproduction, the newspaper Ben Day dots in Roy Lichtenstein’s *Stretch Back with Cross Frame III* (1968), which is a reworking of Gijsbrecht’s *Reversed Painting* mentioned earlier, signify mass media’s ironic challenge to the cottage industry of handmade painting, but it is only when one stands before the painting in the Metropolitan Art Gallery in New York that the black and white dots scintillate in reaction from its yellow frame to make lovely greenish-brown after-images crackle in our eyes. This emphatically aesthetic effect strands the painting between the conflicted ontological realms of high art and mass reproduction.

Many contemporary images accentuate the anti-aesthetic aspect of the back of a painting by reversing fronts of objects that resist classification as art. Again they have positive or negative valencies, by which I mean the capacity to idealise or critique an ideological position. An advertisement for a global communications and distribution company called Flextronics that I saw at Tokyo airport illustrates the positive valency of a reversed laptop. A young Asian woman

in the lotus position meditates before a laptop against a background of a formal fountain associating information flow with water. That the screen is concealed from us, her eyes closed and her palms upturned from the keyboard conjures up an immediate, invisible and infinite exchange of information that reconciles East with West, mysticism with capitalism, nature with technology, tradition with innovation, and work with ecstatic meditation on the prosperous unity of the universe, even as it levels out the cultural differences between work and worship. In this it engenders mystical indifference towards what Georg Simmel called the 'relentless matter-of-factness' of economic exchange between 'entirely unknown purchasers who never appear in the actual field of vision of the producers' (Simmel, 1971, p. 327). In asking us to believe that a computer can be made to deliver messages without the use of the user's hands there is of course a touch of comedy, as if tacitly admitting that the typical office worker's job is far from effortless (and is not performed in a garden). This fancifulness exploits to the full Colin Campbell's sense of 'autonomous self-illusory hedonism' (Campbell, 1987, p. 78) that in advertising from the British Victorian era onwards 'centred on the indulgence of emotions and sensations that individuals provide for themselves, from an imaginary world that they themselves create' (Nead, 2000, p. 188). 'Autonomous self-illusory hedonism' takes on a collective form here, for the user is both a religious acolyte and an industrial office worker. We encounter this imaginary hedonism again in Microsoft adverts of children behind laptops using Photoshop to draw with. Through this commercially produced appliance they are building a future world of their own that we can only imagine. Both images project a utopian vision of capitalist futures whose power is enhanced by us not being able to see what they can imagine.

These are examples of positive occlusion. The utopian possibilities of negative occlusion are better suited to politically oppositional art. In their art film *Czech Dream* (2011), Vít Klusák and Filip Remunda attempt to make the general public aware of the hidden forces that shape the capitalist dream operating on consumers from without and within the collective psyches. The artists spent a government grant on enlisting a reluctant advertising agency to create an installation work that drew thousands of intending shoppers, including the disabled, across a rugged field to take advantage of special deals at a fictional supermarket widely advertised in the media. On arrival the would-be shoppers discovered that the other side of the façade was nothing but blank scaffolding. The trouble was that despite efforts to discourage the elderly and infirm from wasting their energy on crossing the rugged field to buy, buy, buy, the venture provoked more anger than enlightenment in those who felt that the artists, not capitalism, had duped them (for capitalism would have supplied the goods, if not the answer to their dreams).

Stephen Gill's *Field Studies* fares better in this respect. This book of photographs contains a sequence devoted to the backs of billboards in which the titles record only the legends from the adverts we cannot see. The mismatch triggers memories of the hoardings as we are likely to have absorbed them in the fugue state of driving on roads on the other side, but now these memories seem alienated and disabused by the detritus behind them. Hence the irony of a heap of promiscuously mixed brands of cars rusting inertly behind the legend of a fresh, new advert: *Turn the key. Start a revolution. Mazda* (2004). Gill uses counter-memory to reveal the potency of outmoded objects extracted from slick surfaces, and of derelict spaces cut off from main routes of circulation. By investing a billboard with the aura of a back region in Erving Goffman's sense of the word (Goffman, 1990, pp. 109–40), he engineers an exchange between photoerotic advertising and the invisible hyperobject of global waste (Morton, 2013). In doing so he reveals the psychological mechanisms that disassociated them in the first place.

In his essay on 'negation' Freud wrote of the oldest oral imperatives – 'I should like to eat this' or 'I should like to spit it out' – as the basis of introjecting within ourselves everything that is good and ejecting from ourselves everything that is bad (Freud, 1984, p. 439). Gill challenges the

way we divide things in this way by inviting us vicariously to occupy the dystopian spaces behind the ideal worlds of advertising posters, immersing us in the trash or ruthless instrumentalism that adverts screen us from. The distinction seems prim compared to poorer societies where the useless and the useful are necessarily entangled, where whole ways of life are based on combing rubbish dumps to eke value out of other people's discards.

The political force of the reversed canvas and its contemporary surrogates in the backs of laptops, plasma screens and advertising hoardings lies in the unthreatening reverie they induce about new kinds of human constituencies attempting to become aware of global hyperobjects. In *The Coming Community* Agamben rejects Schiller's project of employing art to heal the divisions of labour because 'there are no longer social classes, but just a single planetary petty bourgeoisie' bent on its own destruction (Agamben, 1993, p. 64.5). The urban scavengers just mentioned are enough to unsettle that claim, but he goes on to argue more plausibly that instead of 'continuing to search for a proper identity in the [...] senseless form of individuality,' we should seek a 'singularity without identity, a common and absolutely exposed singularity' (p. 64.5), for 'then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable' (p. 64.4). Perhaps the strength of the Tiananmen Square protest and the Occupy Movement was the 'relative absence of determinate contents in their demands.' What the State cannot tolerate is 'forming a community without an identity' for then, 'sooner or later the tanks will appear' (p. 86.7). By subordinating human identity to awareness of hyperobjects, the iconoclastic tactics of occlusion promise the emergence of new political formations that unite us in awareness of collective blind spots. This assault on the uses of consensus and the identity politics of the focus group has doubtless many impracticalities and drawbacks, but in contemplating the emergence of new aesthetic and political formations I think its occlusive strategies and the traditions that sustained them are worth considering, and are already being implemented in many spheres of public life.



### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Illustrations may be found on Google Image by entering artist and title on Google.

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*Insights*

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