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Abstract

This paper explores two cases of complex relationship between painting and ideology. These two cases will serve to outline the intricate relation between painting and ideology. Besides, they will also make it possible to understand, in a slightly different manner, the visual aspect of the very concept of ideology or worldview and the unique fashion in which this concept may be realized in painting.

Before analyzing these cases, I examine the psychoanalytic conceptualization of ideology in general, and not necessarily in its relation to art, as designated by Freud and Lacan. As I will later show, while psychoanalysis criticizes ideological stances, painting, with its unique attributes, makes it possible to hold two antithetical positions; it fashions a multi-layered relationship with an ideological position, and sometimes is even capable of expressing complexities that language fails to capture.

Keywords

Ideology, Weltanschauung, Painting, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Gerhard Richter, Luc Tuymans

Ideology and Anti-Ideology in Painting:
The Case of Gerhard Richter and Luc Tuymans

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The two following images were painted in the beginning of the 21st century by prominent European painters. Both are oil paintings on canvas; yet, this is where their resemblance ends. In all other ways, in size, colorfulness, style, composition – the paintings are utterly different. The dim colorfulness of Gerhard Richter's painting makes it seem, at first glance, abstract, while Luc Tuymans' painting is a large-scale still life. The two paintings refer to a specific topic that is relevant to the moment of their creation – an extremely charged and traumatic political event. Hence, it seems probable to suppose that each painting conveys a certain ideology or at least a worldview.¹ This article will explore the question of whether we can indeed extrapolate such a definitive position from painting, while simultaneously, underscore the complex, or perhaps even impossible, relation between ideology and art.



Gerhard Richter. *September*. 2005. © Gerhard Richter 2020 (20012020).

¹ Although there are semantic differences between ideology and worldview, as this paper will show, a close reading of Freud indicates that the two are inherently intertwined. Hence, in psychoanalytic terms, which constitute the perspective of this essay, the two terms are interchangeable.



Luc Tuymans. *Still Life*. 2002. Courtesy: Pinault Collection

The word ideology, as is well known, is a composite of ideal and logos, that is, an idea and its intellectual expression. However, if we search beyond this composite, various languages reveal a connection between the word ideology and sight. Thus, for instance, in English, one of the words that interprets the concept of ideology is worldview, that is, looking at something. The parallel expressions in French (*vision du monde*), Italian (*vision del mondo*) and Spanish (*una vision del mundo*) maintain this meaning, while the Hebrew term (*Hashkafat Olam* השקפת עולם) also consists of the same combination. Something similar also takes place in the German *Weltanschauung*, whose literal meaning is observing or watching the world. As Freud claims in his essay from the early thirties, this German term has no precise translation; yet, the link between ideology and sight is also preserved in the German *Anschauen*, which means to look or observe (Freud, 1933, p.158).

The relation between ideology and sight seems obvious, since sight, at least in Western culture, is a metaphor for knowledge and reason. If the concept of ideology is based on an ideal or idea, then the mainspring of the relation between ideology and worldview is very clear. However, this essay will explore this link in a somewhat different manner, through the various ways in which ideology relates to painting, or the ways in which ideology can be manifested in painting. The theoretical background for this conceptualization is the psychoanalytic theocratization of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan. As will be argued in what follows, whilst prominent aestheticians and art critics seem to have a stand against the recruitment of painting for the service of ideological position, psychoanalysis provides a basis for explaining this rejection and its complex consequences.

The link between ideology and painting creates, at least intuitively, a slight rejection or unease. The coupling of art and ideology, so it seems, is foreign to art and does not comply with what we would like to ascribe to it. Although 20th century most prominent art critique, Clement Greenberg, had distinct ideological positions, his high esteem of purism in art may testify to his rejection of ideology as a way of interpreting art (Greenberg, 1940). Susan Sontag's fundamental essay of 1964, "Against Interpretation", also reflects the rejection of ideologies as ways of deciphering objects of art (Sontag, 1964). Thus, for instance, the term "political art", is often used in a critical framework, since it evokes dark regimes that have deprived art of the free spirit and liberty that are part and parcel of its life.

The connection between art and ideology also seems fundamentally foreign to philosophical thinking about art. Kant, after all, claims in his aesthetics that the beautiful is "that which, apart from concepts, is represented as the object of a universal delight", that is, it gives pleasure on the basis of the subject's encounter with the object itself (Kant, 1790, p. 50). This pleasure cannot be based on interests or any well-argued position one might ascribe to the object (Kant, 1790, p. 42). Since the beautiful object is experienced as such and does

not depend on a logical argument or obedience to any pattern, art, by its very nature according to Kant, cannot be recruited in the service of an idea that is external to it, or at least, it cannot be considered beautiful on the basis of an idea. Kant, it seems, also found it difficult to accept works of art that were created in the name of an artistic ideal, since, according to him, the genius artist is the only one who bestows laws to the artistic object (Kant, 1790, pp. 168-169). Moreover, even if this object is considered beautiful, it is not so because it adheres to any prior principle. That is, art, according to Kant, is the product of the free activity of the genius, and not an object that was prepared in accordance to any a-priori and binding set of rules. In his aesthetic doctrine, which constituted the foundation for the aesthetic doctrines that were to follow, Kant argues that art is free, and hence it cannot adhere to any ideological or conceptual framework.

However, we cannot so easily undo the link between art and ideology. The history of art, after all, reflects a much more complex state of affairs. For instance, many of the canonical twentieth century's works of art were created on the bedrock of notably ideological movements. We need only recall, in this context, the works of the Russian Supremacists, who at the beginning, drew their avant-garde notions of art from the 1917 Revolution (Aronov, 2008). Furthermore, some art movements worked in accordance with an explicit ideology which was often even expressed through manifests – for instance, the Italian Futurists, who sprang from Marinetti's manifesto, in which he condemns the past and glorifies modernity, speed and violence (Marinetti, 1909), or the case of the Surrealists and André Breton's art manifesto, which advocates for imagination and association rather than rational thinking (Breton, 1924). And if we turn to much earlier periods, we can see that most, if not all, artists worked within very solid worldviews, such as Christianity or other religions, while artworks were financed by patrons. In other words, while we, like many philosophers of art, might be inclined to reject the idea of art in the service of a certain ideology – in actuality, the history

of art reveals a strong link between art and ideology. In fact, it is difficult to think of a work of art in separation from the backdrop of its worldview.

The objection cannot, then, stem from the actual link between art and ideology, since if we follow through with this objection, we will be forced to erase vital blocks of works of art throughout history. The problem of distinctly ideological art is hence placed elsewhere – not in the link itself, but in the ways in which this link is expressed. It is possible that the problem lies in cases in which the work of art is made for the sole purpose of communicating a message at the expense of pictorial values, or when judgment is made solely in accordance with the message rather than the internal values of the object.

However, this is what points towards the unique strength of visual imagery. It is commonly believed that in cases in which a painting, any painting, whether oil on canvas or an aquarelle, is wholly enrolled at the service of an ideological dictum, it comes across, in the best case as naïve, or in the worst case, just bad. The devaluation of Russian art given to the demands of Stalinist regime can serve as an example for this state of affairs. Yet, on the other hand, the very combination of pictorial values (such as: materiality, color application, composition, etc.) with ideology makes possible the emergence of intricate forms of thought. And only painting, with the unique attributes of its medium, can encapsulate this complexity. An ostensibly ideological painting can be considered a bad work of art because of its one-dimensionality or explicit monolithic message, which makes redundant the aesthetic being of the painting. However, in still other cases, the pictorial values themselves can create a productive and even fascinating tension between painting and ideology. In such cases, the painting is not a mere catalyzer of a certain worldview but rather, it enters into a complex relationship with the worldview and sometimes even undermines it.

This essay explores two cases of complex relationship between painting and ideology. The two were chosen because they are both prominent contemporary painters who exemplify,

albeit in different manners, extraordinary painterly skills which convey current aesthetic notions about painting. Moreover, the two painters display complex attitudes towards ideology in painting and hence can serve as a fertile ground for examining this subject. These two cases will not only serve to outline the work of two contemporary major painters and analyze the intricate relation between painting and ideology, they will also make it possible to understand, in a slightly different manner, the visual aspect of the very concept of ideology or worldview and the unique fashion in which this concept may be realized in painting.

Before analyzing these cases, the psychoanalytic conceptualization of ideology in general will be examined, and not necessarily in its relation to art. As will be shown later, while psychoanalysis criticizes ideological stances, painting, with its unique attributes, makes it possible to hold two antithetical positions. Painting fashions a multi-layered relationship with an ideological position, and sometimes is even capable of expressing complexities that language fails to capture.

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Between 1927-1933 Freud composed two essays “The Question of a *Weltanschauung*” and “The Future of an Illusion”, in which he criticizes ideology as such (Freud, 1927, Freud, 1933).² In these essays, Freud distinguishes between an illusion and a mistake; he identifies illusion with a human wish, which, in a certain sense, is close to delusion, yet is not necessarily as farfetched (Freud, 1927, p. 31). Unlike a mistake, illusion can sometimes materialize or retain a certain kind of consistency with external reality, yet we cannot extrapolate any knowledge from it regarding this reality – since only scientific research can help us know anything about this reality. Religions, for Freud, are forms of illusions, which,

² Freud defines *Weltanschauung* as “an intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis”. According to Freud’s editor and translator, James Strachey, the word might be translated as ‘a view of the universe’.

even if cannot always be disproved, can also not be validated (Freud, 1927, p. 31). The origin of religion, like the origin of other *Weltanschauung*, lies in the human being's primal helplessness (*Hilflosigkeit*), which drives him to seek the safety of a mature and benevolent father figure. Religion, in this sense, is the expansion of a father figure. This paternal figure provides protection, a promise for fulfilling demands for justice, and, on the condition of upholding a system of values, also a promise for eternal life (Freud, 1927, p. 30). Freud also turns to the philosophical and artistic *Weltanschauung*; he argues that even though we may question the truth value in their descriptions, they are not as harmful as the religious *Weltanschauung*, and even contain a few advantages (Freud, 1933, p. 160).

According to Freud, the various worldviews strive to describe, in an imaginary fashion, a single coherent, unified picture of the world – while reality as such contains no such promise for coherence, unity or moral causality. The only possibility of learning anything about external reality, argues Freud, is through scientific experimentation, in which results can be verified. This path presents more challenges, since it is more difficult to prove hypotheses, and these hypotheses often have to be amended on the basis of new discoveries.

Psychoanalysis, according to Freud, does not fashion its own *Weltanschauung*, rather it is part of the scientific field, and hence cannot promise a unified or comforting *Weltanschauung*. Other worldviews may offer a certain comfort, but it would be an illusion to believe that they really have the power to promise truth or security (Freud, 1933, p. 181-182).

Jacques Lacan shares Freud's criticism of worldviews and ideologies. The concept of *Weltanschauung*, according to Lacan, characterizes a different discourse than the one of psychoanalysis, for instance philosophical discourse (Lacan, 1998, p. 30). Since for psychoanalysis nothing is less certain than the existence of a world somewhere outside the psychic reality of each and every one of us. A few years before, in a seminar from 1967,

Lacan compared ideology to a sieve through which reality is filtered, so that it would comply with the coordinates of ideology. Yet, truth, says Lacan, is located elsewhere, in a place which is not necessarily compatible with this ideological sieve, for instance, the symptom, which is a product of a disturbance and incapability (Lacan, 1966-1967, p. 216). That is to say, while the concept of *Weltanschauung* supposes a coherent world that is external and separate from the subject, and which can be examined objectively through philosophical thinking, Lacan argues that the very term *Weltanschauung*, by its very definition, relates to the imaginary order in which the subject postulate a safe and structured world as well as a supposedly “objective” position from which she can observe this world. Psychoanalysis, then, is suspicious of concepts such as ideology or worldview, and treats them as human ways to deal with reality, imaginary covers to veil an experience of a disorganized world that does not comply with our systems of values; an experience in which there is very little sense, order or logic.

As Slavoj Žižek shows, ideology makes it possible to describe a chaotic state of affairs in an organized and structured manner, but it will always remain a veil that provides a fictional view of order and logic. Ideology, argues Žižek, should not be confused with realistic description, on the contrary – its very presence points towards the need to conceal the lack of order or coherence and the fundamental absence of unity that is the human world (Žižek, 1998). Hence, from the perspective of the psychoanalytic discourse starting with Freud and continuing with Lacan and Žižek, ideologies as such, by their very definition, and despite of their coherent and justified appearances, should be regarded with suspicion, as a symptom or a cover for a senseless experience, a lack or other kind of deficiency.

*

In many of his interviews, German painter Gerhard Richter claimed that he does not subscribe to any ideology and opposes it in all its forms (Richter, 1995, p. 177). And indeed,

Richter's immense corpus seems to reflect this position. His pictorial subject matter is deeply extensive; it is as if there is nothing that he does not deem worthy to paint, from portraits of famous personas, such as Albert Einstein or Thomas Mann, to portrait of his wife and son, and up to a roll of toilet paper.



Gerhard Richter,
Toilet Paper, 1965.
© Gerhard Richter
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And if the sprawling gamut of these pictorial subject matters, which exhibits no hierarchical selection, is indeed a product of an ostensibly anti-ideology position, then the conclusion might be that Richter is interested in pure pictoriality, void of content or additional meaning. Hence, his defiance of ideology is expressed in his pictorial practice.

If we accept at face value Richter's statement that he rejects ideology as such, then we can place at its antipode the works of Belgium painter Luc Tuymans, a generation younger than Richter. Tuymans makes an almost antithetical claim. He positions content and meaning as the most crucial components of his paintings, to the extent that his paintings almost lose their value without their accompanying title. But surprisingly, despite his seemingly antithetical position to ideology, much like Richter, Tuymans also makes use of a wide-ranging gamut of

subjects. A first birds-eye view of his *oeuvre* would make it difficult to extrapolate the reason behind his choice of subject matters. For instance, he paints mundane objects alongside Nazi war criminals. That is, if we were quick to conclude that a plethora of pictorial subjects is a product of an anti-ideological position, how can a fundamentally ideological position also yield a similar non-hierarchical variety? A close examination of the works of Richter and Tuymans may offer an answer. These two painters, each in his own fashion, have complex relationships with the very concept of ideology, and as this paper argues, this complexity plays a pivotal role in their art and qualifies their paintings. As will be shown, this quality stems precisely from the meeting point of ideals and worldviews with pictoriality in and of itself.

Gerhard Richter was born in Dresden in 1932. Like many of his generation, his family was involved with the Nazi regime – his uncle Rudi was an officer in the army, while his aunt Marianne was schizophrenic and was murdered in the camps (Storr, 2003, p. 161). The early and intense exposure to the effects of extreme ideologies and the ruin that they brought contributed, it seems, to Richter's reservation from ideology; and he attests to this reservation in his interviews. In the sixties, after finishing his studies at the Art Academy at Dresden, where the dominant fashion was mainly socialist painting, Richter relocated to the West, to Düsseldorf, where he continued his art studies and began establishing his status as a leading painter – during a period in which painting gave way to installations and conceptual art.

From the very beginning of his career, Richter's paintings were based on ready-made photographic images rather than direct observation.³ These photo-paintings became his stylistic staple. This kind of painting refers not only the subject of the photograph, but also traces the characteristics of the photographic image. The paintings include cropped and

³ For a comprehensive view of Richter's work of art see: <https://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/art/>

blurred images painted in black and white, while added texts, typical to newspapers or advertisement, are turned into an inseparable part of the image.

Even though photo-painting has become Richter's most famous trademark, he has made use of so many other pictorial styles that it is often difficult to believe that a single persona is responsible for such a vast selection of paintings, drawings and installations. Thus, for instance, in 2008, Richter showcased in London an exhibition composed completely of color-charts, while in Venice Biennale he exhibited a series of abstract paintings, inspired by American musician John Cage. In still other exhibitions he showcased monochromatic paintings, more series of abstract painting, and his *Atlas Project*, an on-going vast collection of images arranged on panels. This artistic abundance constitutes part of Richter's resistance to any binding and limiting worldview. In an early interview he stated: "I have no favorite pictorial themes... I have no program, no style, no direction. . . I don't know what I want. I am inconsistent, non-committal, passive" (Storr, 2003, p. 60). Thus, for instance, for him, photo-painting and abstract painting do not seem to represent two distinct positions in relation to painting but are rather two sides of the same coin: photo-painting is in many ways an abstract painting, while abstract painting is in a sense figurative. When he spoke of his *Color Charts* paintings, Richter stated that these paintings "were copies of paint sample cards, and what was effective about them was that they were directed against the efforts of the Neo-Constructivists, [Joseph] Albers and the rest" (Richter, 2009, p. 169). That is, while Albers, one of the founders of abstract geometrical painting, believed that there are only certain colors that can be placed one next to the other, Richter believes otherwise: one can place any two colors together and let contingency work its magic. Perhaps this is the reason Richter turned to John Cage for inspiration.

The case of the *Color Charts* raises the possibility of thinking of ideology and its negation in painting through abstract painting as well, that is, not through what the painting depicts but

rather via its painterly style and genres. Richter, in this sense, provides ample material for examination, since his monochromatic paintings are radically different from the ideological



Gerhard Richter, *180 Colors*, 1971.
© Gerhard Richter 2020
(20012020).

aspect attributed to the American abstract painters. As Clement Greenberg has argued, the American abstract expressionism ethos was seen as “manly”, since its use of the field of color was considered ripe with power (Greenberg, 1955, Greenberg, 1960). Richter’s abstract painting, however, stems from a radically different position – and thus also subverts this ideology.

In a similar vein, at least according to his website, Richter makes use of images without glory, while turning the ridiculous, the beautiful, and the tragic into something ordinary, thus undermining the hierarchy of art vs. everyday life: “I do not believe in anything”, he claims. He argues that ideologies are harmful and therefore must be taken seriously as a phenomenon, while their contents should never be taken seriously, since it is always wrong, regardless of the ideology at hand (Richter, 1995, p. 177). In an earlier interview, when asked why he does not find socialist realism attractive, he answered that “it subordinates art to an ideology. . . Art can [be] truly relevant only when it isn’t directly employed to do a job. If art

represents itself, society can use it; but not if it advertises anything. Then it's advertising design" (Richter, 1995, p. 69).

The link between Richter's position as a painter and ideology, then, is one of negation and rejection, as we can understand from his statements, and may deduce from his extensive pictorial range and his copious pictorial subjects. Because of his criticism of ideology, he was interpreted as a representative of a postmodern position in painting, who uses readymade images of second or third sources, representations of representations with no fixed origin. A sample of Richter's photo paintings from the early sixties seem to provide ample evidence in support of this claim. These manifold paintings, like— a rack for drying clothes with a text, pedestrians, a portrait of Hitler, a Ferrari, etc. — share no common theme but rather indicate that Richter either considers anything worthy of becoming a pictorial subject or is simply indifferent to the painted object. A closer look, however, reveals a different state of affairs. For instance, in the sixties, when the second World War was still an open wound in the public discourse in Germany, Richter painted, amongst his seemingly banal subjects, the American bombers which decimated Dresden, his hometown, at the end of the war. *Aunt Marianne* from 1965 is yet another example. This painting is based on a family photo, in which his aunt, who later suffered from mental illness, is photographed as a child with Richter as a baby. That very same year, Richter also painted *Herr Heyde*—a painting of a newspaper clipping that depicts Werner Heyde, a Nazi war criminal who was convicted of murdering the mentally ill, being led to trial. Heyde was of course responsible for the murder of Marianne during the Nazi regime. When Richter was asked about the connection between these two paintings, he claimed that he was not even aware of a possible connection when he painted them (Storr, 2003, p. 164). At the same time, he also disagrees with accusations that he is cynical of his painted subjects or that he chooses them on merely aesthetic basis. According to Richter, it is strange that he, of all people, whose subjects are so exposed, is attacked for

having a distant, cynical and cold position, while similar accusations are never leveled against formalist painters, whose interest genuinely lies solely with shapes and colors (Storr, 2003, p. 161).

The question regarding Richter's actual position only intensified when he painted *October 1978*, a series of the night in which the members of the Red Army Faction (also known as Baader–Meinhof Group) died in prison. This black and white series, which depicts police photos that were published in the German press, touches a disturbing and unresolved topic, which became the subject of strained debates in post-war Germany.

How may we, then, depict the relation between Richter and the question of ideology and its representation in painting? Is he a pure aesthete, who turns every subject into a beautiful painting? Or do his paintings, in fact, betray the exact opposite, a fundamentally sentimental position? In this context, it seems interesting to go back to one of his interviews, in which he stated that at a certain point he thought about painting images from the death camps, images that appear on one of the plates from his *Atlas* project. He later gave up on this idea, since he believed that this is something that is impossible to paint. In a similar vein, years later, he claimed that it was impossible to paint the images of the people jumping off the burning buildings of the World Trade Centre. In what sense is a certain topic impossible to paint? Robert Storr, who curated Richter's retrospective exhibition in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2002, claims Richter does not adhere to a certain taboo. Storr argues that this kind of subject may be understood too easily, grasped all too quickly and lead its viewers to a single conclusion, and hence makes it impossible, for Richter, to paint.⁴

The answer to the question of what ideology is for Richter seems to lie precisely in the meeting point of a certain position with the pictorial matter, a meeting point which also fuels the deep allure of Richter's art. Like life itself, with all its contradictions and ironies, in

⁴ <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/videos/works/september-38>

which the tragic and the comic reside under the same roof— Richter's paintings also make possible a complex tapestry of contradictions and incongruities which do not yield a uniform ideological picture. Pictoriality, unlike the written word, is precisely what makes it possible for this fickle semantic structure to surface, and this, in turn, makes it possible for Richter, as he himself states, to reveal his positions more than abstract painters, while simultaneously leaving behind a string of bewildered critics (Storr, 2003, p. 161).

Freud, as was shown above, claimed that ideology or worldview is akin to a comforting father figure, who promises the helpless infant a coherent and organized world. Richter, in a certain sense, refuses to present us with a solution to the riddle posed by his paintings. Does he oppose or support the Baader–Meinhof Group? What was his stance on the Allies bombing Dresden's civilian population? The answers to these questions, like the questions themselves, are not relevant, not because he is only interested in visibility instead of the painterly subject, nor because any answer will suffice, but rather because he presents complex human situations with no univocal answer, especially given that what is at stake is life itself and the ideological sieve through which we may observe it.

This argument may be demonstrated through a painterly subject that appears throughout Richter's *oeuvre*, the representation of death. Our relation to death flashes from within the plethora of painterly subjects such as: skulls, the pyramids in Egypt and burning candles. The theme of death is made present in the style of the paintings: in the blurry strokes, in the images that vanish before the eyes of the spectators, and in the very process of painting the picture, in which Richter first paints the picture in its entirety and then, when the paint is still wet, erases it with broad brushes. That is, the link to death is indeed present throughout many years of work and production, but not as an articulated and direct theme but rather as a painterly subject that finds many paths to reach the surface. Thus, Richter presents different aspects and ways to think about death without offering a univocal position.

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Luc Tuymans was born in Antwerp in 1958. According to the press, his mother's family was part of the Dutch resistance during World War II, while some of his father's siblings belonged to the Hitler Youth. He studied art, first at Brussel and then at Antwerp, with a focus on painting, the main medium of his work, with the exception of a few years in which he worked with the cinematic medium. Unlike Richter and his anti-ideological stance, Tuymans, in many ways, represents an almost inverse position. According to him, the main core of his paintings lies in the semantic structure that they yield. Moreover, the meaning of the paintings can, usually, only be understood based on the title accompanying the picture. And indeed, many of Tuymans's paintings refer to painful issues that are ripe with meaning, such as the Holocaust, the Belgium colonialism in the Congo, or the visibility of diseases. Yet, like Richter, Tuymans also chooses other, seemingly meaningless, subjects, such as an apple with a bite in it, or a corner of a room. Despite his painful themes, there is a distinct painterly ease to his paintings. It is as if they were painted in a light and nimble manner, as the serious themes are represented in partial and fragmented details. The tension between the charged themes of his paintings and their light painterly mode may be explained by Tuymans's claim that "the small gap between the explanation of a picture and the picture itself provides the only possible perspective on painting" (Tuymans, 1996, p. 146). That is, the painting as a whole is not necessarily regarded according to the compatibility between form and content but rather through the deviations between the two. Tuymans, however, does not stop there, he also sometimes paints seemingly meaningless objects. This makes it impossible to extrapolate a univocal ideological position or a coherent worldview from the paintings, despite the profound themes he regularly depicts.

The comparison between Richter and Tuymans is not unusual. Richter often appears in texts about Tuymans as a reference point and a source for comparison (Loock, 1996, p. 47).

Despite their very different painterly style, they share quite a few similarities. Both offer new painterly paths at a time in which it seems as though painting has reached its end. Both are figurative painters, at least in some of their works, and both aesthetically transform the image, or in other words, turn it into a magnificent painting, yet in different ways. While Richter's magic stems from a virtuosic painterly skill, the allure in Tuymans's works lies in their low profile, the refined colors, a powerful virtuosity through diminished means.

Both artists draw on a vast range of inspirational sources, and both make it difficult for the viewer to discern the principles behind their choice of painterly subjects. While Richter's paintings enter into an intensive dialogue with photography, Tuymans's paintings engage with film, and especially the way in which the cinematic frames are cropped and isolated. Both artists often borrow images from popular culture.

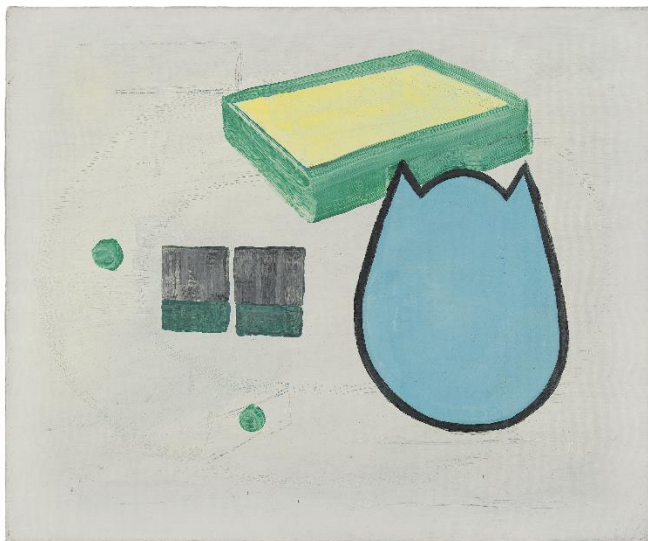
Tuymans's unique touch is manifested in the unassuming style of the paintings: their often-small formats, the dim pastel shades of colors, the seeming effortlessness and the visible brush strokes that demonstrate the speed with which the artist painted the painting.



Luc Tuymans. *Gaskamer*, 1986. Courtesy: Over Holland Collection

This painting is present in its delicacy and beckons for an intimate gaze. However, within the framework of this article, it would be interesting to focus on the subject matter of his paintings. For instance, *Gas Chamber* from 1986 or *The Walk*, which depicts Hitler walking along the mountains with someone by his side. Or a painting like *The Architect*, which depicts Nazi architect Albert Speer on a ski.

In other paintings, Tuymans depicts the portraits of people with various infirmities that manifest on the surface of the body; for instance, the series *The Diagnostic*. Later paintings touch on the Belgium colonialism in the Congo, for instance, *Tiger* depicts the carpet that is rolled out when a high-ranking official visit. Titles of yet other paintings, such as *Child Abuse* or *Superstition*, evoke disturbing issues. In these paintings, the link between the painting and its charged title remains obscure.



Luc Tuymans,
Child Abuse, 1989

What, then, is the relation between Tuymans's paintings and his position towards ideology? Is he merely trying to take a stand, through his art, against all the injustices of the world? And if so, what is the relation between the painterly position, with its refined colorfulness, the light brush strokes and the stylistic ease—and the charged, disturbing themes to which the paintings refer? Does Tuymans offer an aestheticization of the horror by veiling it in an attractive pictorial visibility? What is the function of the gap that is left open

between the title of the painting and the painting itself, which can sometimes seem almost abstract? And finally – may we point towards any connection between Tuymans's and Richter's respective positions towards ideology and painting?

The answer for these questions may be found in two paintings in which Tuymans relates to the second world war. *Our New Quarters* relates to Nazi propaganda postcards that tried to make Theresienstadt concentration camp look like a summer retreat. This is also one of the only paintings in which the title constitutes part of the painting itself. As Ulrich Loock shows in his extensive interpretation of Tuymans's paintings, the most striking aspect of the painting is the minimal visual information – such as, the building, the pale-yellow letters and the greyish-green monochromatic background. In this painting, claims Loock, “the drawing, so sparse, so general, represents little more than nothing. The pictorial elements of this work appear as an inscription of its background, its description, and thus the text ‘our new quarters’ actually comes to denote a total loss of space” (Loock, 1996, p. 55). The title, then, does not contradict the image, yet it also does not explain it. The inscription on the painting supposedly represents the sender's handwritten supplement to the postcard, and hence constitutes a testimony from the real for a supposedly false construction. Thus, the title connects to the concept of “authentic forgery”, a term which Tuymans himself makes copious use of when showcasing his works. In other words, the two layers of meaning, the verbal title and the visual image, do not mean anything but rather do the exact opposite – they empty the image of meaning. As Tuymans states, the “film stills” – the single represented moment, which was always considered to be a fertile moment which encompasses a meaningful part of the represented scene, is here emptied of meaning. It stands as a pure visual moment that communicates nothing: “the meaning of the representation does not reside in the picture. Thus, the picture is not a ‘visualization’, i.e, the symbolic possession of the object. Representation is transposed to the ground zero of meaning” (Loock, 1996, p. 47).

In *Gas Chamber*, as well, the truth it contains can only be made present when it is presented as a painterly failure (Loock, 1996, p. 55). The painting itself can easily just seem beautiful, because of its delicate colorfulness, minimalistic composition and color application. According to Tuymans, “the picture, it’s aesthetic character, is the disguise of something that is absolutely inaccessible if it is not disguised” (Tuymans, 1996, p. 133). As Loock explains, “a painting like *Gas Chamber* fails irreversibly in the task of providing any kind of accurate picture of its object, as this object itself is deprived of any possibility of representation” (Loock, 1996, p. 51). Hence, the way to represent it must necessarily also include the attempt to conceal it. Similarly, the painting *Schwartzheide* from 1986 references a concentration camp in which the prisoners would make secret drawings. The drawings were cut into vertical strips and later reassembled by the survivors. Tuymans painted the painting after visiting the concentration camp, which seemed to contain no trace of its past. He painted what he saw, when in fact, he saw nothing of the actual camp. The treetops substitute the object that he supposedly painted. The failure of the painting to represent the camp encapsulates guilt – at least according to the author of the article. This implies, then, that Tuymans’s painting often misses its object. Rather than constituting and producing meaning, the image empties it. This missed encounter with the object takes place on several dimensions. First, since the image is seemingly senseless, the title gives meaning not to what is present but rather to what is absent. The text and the image do not produce a productive and invigorating tension, they are simply mismatched; the text does not cast meaning into the image, but rather drains it of meaning. Second, the light painterly style, the quick brush strokes, the thin color application and the delicate colorfulness clash with the serious subject matters. Third, in his seminal essay *Laocoon*, Lessing argues that a certain represented visual image may describe a “pregnant moment”-- when the image refers to a meaningful moment containing a significant part of the narrated plot which the viewer can reconstruct (Lessing,

1766, p. 102). In this instance, the image functions in an inverse manner. It is no longer a charged moment, but a random, mundane, meaningless moment.

And what is the connection to ideology and worldview? Tuymans's painting allegedly takes an ideological stance. At the same time, his unique painted visual image presents its very inability to tackle ideology or to articulate a coherent response. By taking an ideological position on the one hand and making use of visual shorthand on the other, Tuymans reveals the way in which painting, through its seeming inability to express a univocal ideological position, can also puncture this very position and hence expose the complexity of ideology and its limits. In his seminal article of 1926 "Inhibitions, Symptom and Anxiety", written a few years before his essay on *weltanschauung*, Freud relates briefly to *weltanschauung* and expresses his reservation from it. Activities such as the fabrication of *weltanschauungen*, he claims, "may be left to philosophers, who avowedly find it impossible to make their journey through life without a Baedeker of that kind to give them information on every subject" (Freud, 1926, p. 96). Psychoanalysis, he continues, acknowledges that "only patient, persevering research, in which everything is subordinated to the one requirement of certainty, can gradually bring about a change. The benighted traveler may sing aloud in the dark to deny his own fears; but, for all that, he will not see an inch further beyond his nose." While Freud posits a sharp dichotomy between the ideological belief he attributes to philosophy and the patient research that is the characteristic of psychoanalysis, Tuymans's paintings seem to succeed in having it both ways. He points towards an ideological stance while exposing its limitations and infirmities, or, to use Freud's metaphor, he sings in the dark to avoid fear and yet acknowledges the deficiency of sight.

Turning back to the two paintings which began this study reveals that the painted subject, in both cases, is a response to the 9/11 attack on the world trade center. Richter painted this painting in 2005, and as Storr claims, this painting responds to the genre of historical

painting, the most respectable genre of painting, especially in the 18th century. Yet, while the traditional historical painting, like Jacques-Louis David's *Oath of the Horatii*, is a large scale painting that attempts to create a live picture of reality, Richter chooses a small format, like the reflected image on the television screen on 9/11, which is also the way this image reached public consciousness. While the historical painting is a celebration of force, a representation of an authoritarian voice and the ruling ideology, Richter's small and blurry image does not refer to power but its collapse, to the manner in which the image melts before our eyes.⁵

Tuymans's response to the attack on the world trade center is inherently different. Tuymans first showcased the painting in the international art exhibition *Documenta* in Kassel, in 2002, as a way of deliberately ignoring the events of the hour. As he states: "In Still-Life the idea of banality becomes larger-than-life, it is taken to an impossible extreme The attacks [of 9/11] were also an assault on aesthetics. That gave me the idea of reacting with a sort of anti-picture, with an idyll, albeit an inherently twisted one" (Davies, 2019, p.450). That is, he relates to this deeply charged event by turning his back to it, yet, how may we interpret this act of turning away? Tuymans does after all chose to make the subject present, even if circumlocutory, or to draw attention to the fact that he ignores this event through a large-scale painting, which deviates from his usual painterly style.

Do these positions negate ideology by showing its collapse? Or do they, rather, articulate a new ideology? Even if we choose to answer the latter question in the affirmative, it seems that painting and its characteristics make this answer more complex and less univocal.

To conclude, "can two walk together, except they be agreed?", says the famous phrase from the prophet Amos (Amos, 3:3). The intricate relation between painting and ideology seems to challenge this phrase, since although the two are historically intertwined, they seem to contradict one another, as Kant already stated. However, despite the differences

⁵ <http://www.gerhard-richter.com/en/videos/works/september-38>

between them, Richter and Tuymans manifest this complexity in their unique painterly styles and convey the vicissitudes of this complexity, as it was theorized by Freud and Lacan.

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