

Mark Rothko's good paintings about nothing

SLIDE 1: *Untitled* 1969

This talk will turn, I've no doubt, on the matter of how much we need words to make sense of paintings – Rothko's abstract paintings in particular – and I will argue that this dependency finally threatens to discredit usual claims about the spirituality people discern in his pictures. By 'spirituality' I take it that we mean, for instance, capacity for 'transcendence,' or 'to see God,' or 'to intuit things beyond earthly, human, material existence.' Fundamental incoherencies around the meanings of the term 'spirituality' – also necessarily formulated in language – seem to me to be insurmountable. I fall back, therefore, on considering it a category like that of 'aesthetic feeling,' something one can only know through personal experience leading to an ineffable belief in its existence and significance. I have no such belief, despite (or perhaps because of) spending my first 18 years as a Roman Catholic, attending mass weekly and confessing my sins regularly during that period. In this time I never once intuited the existence of God, or ever took

seriously the liturgy and admonitions of my priests.

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When one enters Tate Modern's current exhibition of Rothko's later paintings there is a statement from the artist inscribed across the wall. It says: 'If people want sacred experiences they will find them here. If they want profane experiences they'll find them too. I take no sides.' This is Tate hedging its bets, and perhaps trying to head-off the accusations of 'pseuds' corner' pomposity that used to follow displays of its reverence for modern artists and artworks that, to many, seemed not to be about *anything much*. In comparing, however, the paintings of Rothko and other Abstract Expressionists to, say, art of 1990s Brit Artists – or comparing Andy Warhol's to Jeff Koons' productions – it is noticeable that this habitual scepticism, or philistinism if you like, has virtually disappeared from once reliably recalcitrant mainstream art journalism: Rothko's paintings now are *generally* considered 'proper art' – whatever in particular you make of them – with recognised historical provenance and critical value. I would say that this change

is linked to the perception that they are 'from another era,' which is clearly distinguished now from our own. There is also the implicit recognition, carrying various effects, that they have become *safely* historical ('of the past'), consignable now without irony or doubts to the museum's walls.

In a sense, though, Rothko himself thought of them this way all along.

But whatever this seminar today becomes to be about, it should not be about throwing Rothko quotations at each other in order supposedly to 'prove' whether his paintings are spiritual or not. Ruling this activity out is a shame in one respect, because Rothko wrote very well within philosophical quotations marks, one might say – and he spoke out loud and wrote down enough contradictory things to keep us all going without possibility of resolution for a long time. But I shall seek to put an end to this game now with one final quotation from him from 1950.

SLIDE 2: *Light red over black* 1957 and two quotations

In a letter to the abstract painter Barnett Newman he said, 'I have nothing to say in

words what I stand for' and that 'I am heartily ashamed of the things I have written in the past.' It would have been refreshing, and much more challenging, to see Tate inscribe their wall with these two sentences instead – truer overall, I'd say, to the artist's motivations and ideals, and to his extensive and eventually terminal capacity for self-criticism.

Rothko, we know, worked very hard to try to control the physical and social circumstances in which his paintings were to be seen. He treated them *as if* they demanded a space and place *apart*. There is no space or place, however, without a time within human history.

SLIDE 3: Houston, Texas 'Rothko Chapel' interior

Yet the 1971 Houston 'Rothko Chapel' setting [...]

and what had been the 'Rothko room,'

SLIDE 4: 'Rothko Room' Tate Gallery, Millbank

originally created in the Tate Gallery at Millbank in 1970, (later transferred to Tate Modern) were venues chosen and

orchestrated by him which replicated *something like* a sequestered church environment:

SLIDE 5: The ideal conditions for viewing Rothko's paintings?

the paintings arranged around the viewer, entailing the ideal of their solitary, contemplative experience. If these are some of the usual – the clichéd – indices of a 'spiritual life' then it was entirely predictable that the common assumption would arise that Rothko thought of, or proposed, his paintings as themselves 'about' spirit, or as in some senses even intrinsically spiritual.

SLIDE 6: *Black on maroon*, 1956

The blankness of the paintings themselves – blocks of shimmering colour and light, evoking, at the most, perhaps, 'doors' or 'windows', or 'landscapes' (all these terms with sets of scare quotes around them) – effortlessly lend themselves to this 'reading in' of spiritual meaning, whatever you might want that term to signify. Rarely, in my own experience, however, was the Rothko room at Tate Milbank ever like that ideal place: usually it was occupied by groups of people, and

often I was actually trying to conduct a seminar with students in front of these paintings – more sermonising, in the guise of education. When I visited the current exhibition at Tate Modern the scene reminded me of Grand Central Station in New York – it was noisy, people moved in swarms from painting to painting, through the hallways of largish rooms in which the show is hung. If spiritual experiences are 'supposed' to happen, or are aided in their happening, in spiritual places – the baroque 'theatrical festival' of architectural place and painted space being the exemplum of this ideal – then, in the conditions and relations of viewing at Tate Modern, the preferred Rothko inscription functioned as a tacit recognition that profanity was as likely (if not much more likely) a result of one's visit to such a teeming marketplace of signs and symbols.

If I have discarded the resort to reliance on Rothko's words as any key to explanation of his paintings because this merely permits commentators to select their favoured quotations from the artist's statements, I offer, in their place, comments made by another student of philosophy borrowed for non-philosophical ends. Guy Debord, author of

The Society of the Spectacle, published in 1967 (shortly before Rothko's death), no fan of spirituality himself, noted the following in his book, which one might imagine him uttering after a visit to the Houston Chapel or the Rothko room: quote 'When art becomes independent and paints its world in dazzling colours, a moment of life has grown old. Such a moment cannot be rejuvenated by dazzling colours, it can only be evoked by memory. The greatness of art only emerges at the dusk of life.' unquote

Debord records this observation near the culmination of his book, after he has dealt with defining the spectacle of modern capitalist society, with accounting for human history from its origins, and explaining the inevitable failure of Leninist-Marxist communism. Rothko, it would not be factitious to say, produced his abstract paintings of the later 1950s and 1960s after having completed a similar intellectual journey, as well as having lived out the last – the failure of Soviet Communism – during his own lifetime. Rothko wants his paintings to be 'independent,' to be 'apart' from society and history, but he still knows they must be placed *somewhere* physically and temporally to be seen at all by the living.

The places of the Chapel and the Rothko room were intended to signify separation from 'normal' or 'everyday' space and time – call that the world of the 'profane' if you want. And Rothko wants his paintings to be independent of words – including his own words.

For them to mean something somehow without words.

I will say in a minute that this means for Rothko for paintings to mean without the taint of ideology, in a world drained of the human value of commodities and the rule of state propaganda and deceit. Now, call *that* spirituality if you want.

SLIDE 7: Barnett Newman *Eve* 1950

Barnett Newman had made a similar declaration. When asked, in 1947, by the critic Harold Rosenberg to say what *his* painting meant, Newman replied that if Rosenberg 'and others could read it properly it would mean the end of all state capitalism and totalitarianism.'

Words, you see, can be hoped to mean everything as well as nothing.

**SLIDE 8: Mark Rothko *Untitled*, 1946-7
and Jackson Pollock *Birth*, 1941-2**

Most of the Abstract Expressionist painters had phases in which they produced paintings that imaged a 'pre-historical' world, a biological condition of scarcely differentiated human life before the rise of organised, hierarchical society and the dominance of rationality. These painting phases occurred in the period between the later 1930s and the later 1940s, corresponding closely to their desolation following the revelations of Stalinism, the Second World War, the dropping of the atom bombs and the rise of anti-communism in the USA. The great so-called 'signature styles' of Rothko, Newman, Jackson Pollock and others emerge after 1947 as a refusal or negation, of realist imagery and narrative conventions intrinsically associated, these artists believed, with all kinds of ideology, deceitful propaganda and failed, corrupt political doctrines.

SLIDE 9: Mark Rothko *Black on maroon*, 1958

The representation of these 'signature styles' by the mid-1950s as the 'triumph of American painting' – by institutions such

as the Museum of Modern Art and the US State Department financing their tour around the world as avant-garde symbols of US democracy and freedom – simplified drastically the ambitions, ideals and history of these artists, although they were no more enamoured finally of their supportive professional critics, such as Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg whose careers were made on the back of their differing validations of these artworks.

One kind of 1930s isolation for Rothko – an anarchist and anti-capitalist from his University days – was replaced by another in the 1950s and 1960s, despite the modest success he achieved then.

There remained, therefore, no language that Rothko could profitably use in the dusk of his life, in a world without 'true community.'

And painting, whatever it was, was *not* a language.

Debord has this to say on the matter, which, again, might be a comment on Rothko's 'dazzling' colours:

'Once society...lost its myth-based community, it loses all the reference points

of truly common language until such times as the divisions within the inactive community can be overcome by the inauguration of a real historical community. When art, which was the common language of social inaction, develops into independent art in the modern sense, emerging from its original religious universe and becoming individual production of separate works, it too becomes subject to the movement governing the history of all separate culture. Its declaration of independence is the beginning of its end.' unquote

Remember that, for Debord, 'separation' means alienation, which oscillates ambiguously in *The Society of the Spectacle* between meaning, following Hegel, an intrinsic condition of human life itself (of life lived apart from nature and God) and the specific historical alienations of life in capitalist society based on the fetishism of commodities, the root of which Debord calls 'spectacular life.' This latter kind of alienation, the critic Greenberg had written in 1948 – a sentiment with which Rothko agreed, I think – was nothing less than, quote, 'the condition under which the true reality of our age is experienced...Isolation [alienation] is, so to speak, the natural condition of high art

in America.' Unquote. The so-called 'triumph of American painting' was, at the same time, then, this alienation's artistic negation of *actually existing society and history*. (These paintings by Rothko understood as 'icons of the absence of God,' perhaps, to use the title of this conference.)

Here is Debord once more, and think of the Houston Chapel or the Rothko room, while we listen:

quote 'Art in its period of dissolution – a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived – is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its pretensions, the further from its grasp is its true fulfilment. This art is necessarily *avant garde*, and at the same time it *does not really exist*. Its vanguard is its own disappearance...a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence' unquote

Discourse with such philosophical trappings tends to veer off into obscurity, and Rothko's paintings have always invited, or failed to counteract, these kinds of philosophical, or spiritual, readings. But Debord and Rothko were both, in their

own ways, *realists* and concerned, overall, with the here-and-now. It was just that they 'thought' the essential problems of consciousness and 'being-in-the-world' through the concrete conditions of contemporary historical existence.

Rothko's abstract paintings, then, were 'about' the historical present, though he believed (and here I fall prey to the seductive trap of selective quotation myself) that what he called the 'familiar identity of things had to be pulverised in order to destroy the finite associations with which our society enshrouds every aspect of our environment.' unquote. He is talking here in 1947, *about* 1947, the year of the emergence of his own 'signature style'.

'Society' meant for Rothko two specific things. The two senses indicate what could be called the double alienation which he felt in the period between 1938 to 1948 (and after). In the late 1930s Rothko, employed on the New Deal Federal Art Project, an active member of the Artists' Union and the American Artists' Congress Against Racism and Fascism, holding libertarian socialist-anarchist beliefs, was involved in a prolonged argument with and against the organised Left's advocacy of socialist realism as the proper stylistic vehicle for revolutionary painting, as

dictated by the Soviet Union's Comintern and represented in the USA by the editorial position of *Art Front*, the newspaper of the Artists' Union.

SLIDE 10: Mark Rothko *Subway Scene*, 1938

His paintings at this time showed ambiguous but identifiably 'real,' modern, peopled, urban places, such as New York subway stations. However, within this radical political and artistic 'society' of left-wing groups and affiliations, Rothko found himself – like Robert Motherwell – profoundly at odds with Stalinist political and cultural orthodoxy.

Ten years later, in 1948, along with Jackson Pollock, Newman, Adolph Gottlieb and others, Rothko became transfixed by the threat of world wide nuclear annihilation and by the gathering momentum of anti-left hysteria in the US. The very possibility of speech, of signification, of painting – of adequate and truthful referential communication at all – was felt to be jeopardized.

SLIDE 11: Jackson Pollock *War*, 1946

Pollock's drawing *War* from 1946 or 1947, was one of the last works before his celebrated 'drip' period to contain any conventional, recognisable imagery or spatial composition. Between about June 1947 and April 1948 Rothko painted *Number 18*, Willem de Kooning *Painting* and Pollock *Number 26A 1948*, all works in which identifiable referential or iconic content was removed. In 1947 the US State Department's Office of Education announced its 'Zeal for American Democracy' programme; in August that year the American Federation of Teachers produced pamphlets showing how to understand and counter 'the strategy and tactics of world communism.' At about the same time J. Edgar Hoover and Tom Clark, the US Attorney-General, organised the so-called 'Freedom Train,' a patriotic museum-on-wheels touring the country, to coincide with the coming election in 1948. The day that Congress debated the implementation of the Marshall Plan for Europe, the National Guard conducted a practice bombing raid on Washington, a 'lobbying' technique designed to make the military's viewpoint on the matter of US security obvious.

SLIDE 12: Mark Rothko, *Antigone*, 1941, *Untitled*, 1947 and *No. 9*, 1954

Loathing the groups of artists who had moved towards a totally uncritical support for the US government during the war and the national chauvinism mounting after 1945 in America, Rothko's resort to the use of titles referring to ancient myths for his paintings, from *Antigone* in 1941, through to the use of colours, numbers and 'untitleds' only as titles after 1947, was part of a strategy for attempting to transcend linguistically – symbolically – the oppressive contemporary political and ideological context.

But Rothko's adoption of 'full' abstraction from 1948 onwards was *not* equivalent to the abandonment of 'social content.'

Backed into a corner, away from the dead ends of socialist realism and the dominant popular-cultural forms of American consumer-capitalist society, Rothko's situated 'consent' to, and 'acceptance' of, what became his classic abstract painting form can be seen as a consequence of a radical separation from, and negation of, other arid alternatives; in Debord's terms, a 'refusal' and 'negation' of bourgeois civilisation, the 'dazzling colours' of a moment in life, and art, grown old...

These paintings failed, though, to separate themselves from both the effects of the art market, its validating critical machinery *and* from the related general effects of language and ideology. How could they ever have succeeded in these absolutist terms, however? And the critical, commercial success he began to achieve generated in Rothko high ambivalence with apparently ever-diminishing returns as he grew older.

SLIDE 13: Mark Rothko *Untitled*, 1969 and Caspar D. Friedrich *Monk by the Sea*, 1810

Robert Rosenblum's 1975 discussion of a Rothko painting as Romantic art's 'omega equivalent to Caspar David Friedrich's 'alpha' *Monk by the Sea* from 1810 merely confirmed abstraction's induction into the art-historical 'dustbin' of styles – fundamentally ahistorical as most run-of-the-mill art history remains. The Russian critic Nikolai Tarabukin (writing in another era of prolonged crisis a few years after the 1917 October Revolution) called the art historians of Futurism 'those inexhaustible, dry as dust archaeologists,' writing art history texts 'for this sepulchral crypt...the cemeteries of the past.' unquote. Rothko's own place in art

history's crypt was being prepared, his paintings conjoined with the detritus of all periods, all past civilizations with which the society of the spectacle builds what Debord commentator Anselm Jappe calls a kind of 'baroque edifice perfectly embodying that negation of the historical which is so essential to its culture of decay.'

Rothko's sense of the sequestered place and space, and time, for *his* art – never the place and space and time of the art museum – runs radically counter to the historical and art-historical fate of his works.

Debord understands the broader process of incorporation as a kind of ironic 'hyper-baroque' of spectacular capitalist society. The ideal of a 'unity' to art and society, he says,

'recurs in a certain sense in today's *consumption* of the entirety of the art of the past...Only in this era of museums, when no [genuine] artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted – and accepted as *equal in value* – for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication *in general*,

suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own *particular* ability to communicate.’ unquote

Moreover, such ‘spectacular consumption,’ he says

‘...preserves past culture in congealed form... The most extreme destruction of language can be officially welcomed as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one’s acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent. The critical truth of this destruction... is obviously concealed, since the spectacle, whose function is to *use culture to bury all historical memory*, applies its own essential strategy in its promotion of modernistic pseudo-innovation.’

Rothko, we might conclude, then, is lucky *not* to see what the world has now made of his paintings. He knew what was coming, that is. With more distantly historical artists it makes no difference, so great appears the time and dislocation and separation between them and us. Their historical lives and deaths seem mythic to most of us anyway. The detachment of their embodied, historical subject-hood from what we think of as their ‘spirits’ is

absolute. The literary theorist Paul de Man mused on this eventuality in relation to the ambiguities of poetry, but it makes sense to me to see a Rothko painting in the same way, its presence and meaning in the world caught ambiguously, or prevailing ambiguously

quote ‘between the world of the spirit and the world of sentient substance. to found itself, the subject must turn itself into sentient substance, but the latter is knowable only in its dissolution into non-being. The spirit cannot coincide with its object and this separation is infinitely sorrowful.’ unquote

Erwin Panofsky, in his essay *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, remarked that rationalised perspectival systems in paintings developed in ancient times and then again in the Renaissance, in transforming ‘reality’ into ‘appearance,’ seemed to ‘*reduce* the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely... expanded human consciousness into a vessel *for* the divine.’ Panofsky, writing in 1925, was well aware that contemporary expressionist developments in modern art *appeared* to threaten perspective’s epochal dominance, but his observation might equally be

applied to Rothko's painting, where a highly abstracted sense of deep space and ambiguous spatial location is still identifiable, and whose 'spiritual' or 'divine' connotations were, and continue to be, so readily adduced. While the second birth of perspective in the Renaissance brings the first rearing of what Panofsky calls 'anthropocracy' – the unseating of the divine by human powers – I would say a better, critical, historical term, which also sees the dangers that Rothko saw, is 'ideology,' though his paintings, however he devised their form and attempted to specify the locations for their contemplation, could not escape its dominion.

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'Contemplation' for De la Motte is a bad thing – it means passivity and acceptance of separation and the absence of real communication and community. The 'contempt' of those organising appearances in spectacular society, he notes, mirrors the truly 'contemplative' spectator. Amongst those organisers he lists advertisers, the media and museum managers. The spectacle, he observes (and we might think of this finally as the Rothko show at Tate Modern):

quote 'preserves the ideological features of both materialism and idealism, imposing them in the pseudo-concreteness of its universe...The contemplative aspect of the old materialism, which conceives the world as representation and not as activity – and which ultimately idealizes matter – is fulfilled in the spectacle, where concrete things are automatic masters of social life. Conversely, the dreamed activity of idealism is also fulfilled in the spectacle, through the technical mediation of signs and symbols – which ultimately materialize an abstract ideal.' unquote

Somewhere inside this 'idealization of matter' and 'materialization of abstract ideals,' somewhere, that is, inside Tate Modern and on the surface of Rothko's paintings, lies the spirituality of these works and its simultaneous impossibility.

Can we think of a Rothko painting as a religious artwork sealed off from the realm of the magical, where the work of art itself works the miracle, and from the realm of the dogmatic and symbolic, where the work bears witness to, or foretells, the miraculous. But then it opens it to something entirely new: the realm of the visionary, where the miraculous

becomes a direct experience of the beholder, in that the supernatural events in a sense erupt into his own, apparently natural, visual space and so permit him really to “internalize” their supernaturalness. Perspective, finally, opens art to the realm of the psychological, in the highest sense, where the miraculous finds its last refuge in the soul of the human being represented in the work of art; not only the great phantasmagorias of the Baroque – which in the final analysis were prepared by Raphael’s *Sistine Madonna*, Durer’s *Apocalypse*, Grunewald’s Isenheim altar, indeed perhaps already Giotto’s *St John on Patmos* fresco – but also the late paintings of Rembrandt would not have been possible without the perspectival view of space. Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality) into the *phenomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to a mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine. It is thus no accident if this perspectival view of space has already succeeded twice in the course of the evolution of art: the first time as the sign of an ending, when antique theocracy crumbled; the second time [in the Renaissance] as the sign of a

beginning, when modern “anthropocracy” first reared itself.

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