

Ghosted Clients, Oriented Strands: Composites and Class in Ian Gonczarow's Painting

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Mr. and Mrs. Andrews: the famous figures from Thomas Gainsborough's celebrated landscape-portrait from c. 1750 haunt Ian Gonczarow's Bond House exhibition, like a couple of ghosts lodged in its title. The young Mr. Andrews was a landed gentleman; his father had made much of his money by lending large sums to other gentry at high interest rates. The young Mrs. Andrews' family, also of the landed gentry, had made its money in drapery, and then avoided the collapse of the textile industry by buying land. In Gainsborough's painting, the couple pose on their new estate, a sumptuous English landscape. This portrait was kept within the family, hidden from public view, until its first public exhibition in 1927. Since then, the image of this long-dead couple has flickered through the years. Often, it was praised as a vision of oneness with nature – until John Berger retorted that it was nothing of the sort. Its subjects, he said, "are not a couple in nature as Rousseau imagined nature. They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and expressions."¹ As Jonathan Jones has argued,² such a comment should by no means be interpreted as a criticism of the work. This proprietary attitude is at the very core of the painting's thought – its contractedness, its tension. Gainsborough loved the landscape, but hated entitled, rich clients. He wryly depicts his subjects' aggressiveness, their awkwardness, their distance from the land. Every brushstroke seems to wish away their ownership.

Somewhere around 266 years later, Gonczarow repaints and reframes the scene to exclude its subjects. He reworks the image how Gainsborough, we might imagine, would have wanted: as a painting without clients.

To make this move – to ghost the clients – in our age of increasing wealth inequality and rapidly disappearing social welfare, is a cutting, agonized and highly complex comment on the relations between painting and finance. Without clients: on the one hand, this imagined position expresses a utopian wish for freedom, for the classlessness of painting: for a painting that could do what it wanted, and in so doing act in service of a public good, and contribute to a shared cultural inheritance.

¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972).

² Jonathan Jones, "The Hidden Story," *The Guardian*, 19 October 2002 (online): <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2002/oct/19/artsfeatures> (Accessed: 7 September, 2016).

Painting – as owned yet imagining the free – echoes, in this sense, the proprietary preconditions of landscape. Landscape, at least in principle, could function as a commons, as a shared inheritance and resource jointly tended to by all. (This is a potential written into the 1217 Charter of the Forest – a companion document to the Magna Carta – which declared free men’s right of access to the royal forest, where they could forage for food, collect fuel and graze their animals. This document envisioned land as a commons, and guaranteed some minimum of economic protection.) By transforming landscape into image, painting shares and circulates the idea of potential shared-ness even further, reframing and redistributing the concept of shared land as shared inheritance.

Of course, this image of desired freedom from class, arguably, must fall short of its utopianism, as it not only reflects a concept of common inheritance, but is also infused – in Gainsborough’s time and in part, I think, also in our own – with a modern, humanist bent: one rooted in a presupposition of the authority of personal feeling as a path to understanding the utopian potential of this equally shared inheritance. Arguably, personal feeling is a conceit that purports to be classless, but cannot in fact be. As Chris Taylor recently reminded his *New Enquiry* readers,³ the Enlightenment, for all its ideals of equality, was haunted from the very outset by the spectre of slavery. Equality, ironically, was only ever for some.

Without clients: on the one hand, a painting without clients expresses a utopian, egalitarian potential to be freed from the strictures of class. On the other hand, to be an artist without clients, in the age of austerity, precarity and privatization, is simply not to survive. A hint of imagined freedom smells strangely similar to poverty, to not subsisting in an ever more unequal, winner-take-all, client-driven art market. By ghosting the clients, Gonczarow grapples with the intertwined failure and promise of classlessness that haunts painting’s historical and conceptual inheritance.

To ghost the clients is to make a painting without subjects. Yet by ridding Gainsborough’s scene of its pesky proprietors, Gonczarow, in turn, makes subjects out of surfaces. He foregrounds the background: Gainsborough’s beautiful billowing clouds. Then, he gives this new foreground another background: a painting of a sheet of oriented strand board that dwarfs the landscape with brilliant-hued slashes of painted wooden flakes. This jagged, criss-crossed surface forms a complex sea of textures and qualitative particularities. The background takes over; it is as much a subject as the ghostly couple whose name hangs over the show like an absent owner. Or – even better – perhaps it is an anti-subject, a mundane material underlay, an antagonist to the antagonists: a surface that opposes the absent characters it wishes away, and counteracts their class position move by move.

Oriented strand board (OSB) is an engineered lumber invented in 1963; it is made of flakes of wood, arranged into sheets at opposed orientations and compressed with adhesive. The wood is shredded into strips, sifted, oriented and laid out on a belt before being placed into a thermal press. In the process, trees are transformed into image-thin, brushwork-sized flakes, becoming interwoven composites: a multitude, cut into many, compressed into one flat sheet. OSB sheets are readymade collages – the ultimate derivative objects. Much like contemporary financial products, which package enormous bundles of slivered investments to hedge risk, OSB contains a

³ Chris Taylor, “Plantation Neoliberalism,” *New Enquiry*, 8 July 2014: <http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/plantation-neoliberalism/> (Accessed: 7 September 2016).

fragmented and recomposited multitude of trees: a forest that is not so much a commons as it is common.

Gonczarow has taken out the main characters of Gainsborough's work, and replaced them, as it were, with wooden flakes – brushmarks of equally minor importance, which add up to a major presence. Minor-ness pulls at protagonists' privilege.

Writing on nineteenth century literature, Alex Woloch argued that minor characters are the proletariat of the novel.⁴ Nineteenth century novels – so thoroughly preoccupied with class – always privileged some characters over others, spent much more time with their protagonists than with their incidental actors. Yet still, these novels proffered the possibility that any of their minor characters *could* have been the protagonist. Even as the narrative form singled out privileged players, it also held open the promise that such privileging could be superseded with a different – or even more egalitarian – distribution of narrative attention. Minor characters thus reflexively draw attention to the limits of the text's egalitarianism. In the visual grammar of oriented strand board – and of Gonczarow's painting of it – no component piece is given precedence over any other. The OSB is a flecked surface of equally insignificant flakes, of equally minor characters – reconceived, here, as a lavish weave of paint and brushwork, an ironically upgraded cheap surface.

Oriented strand board acts as a grammar, of sorts, for Gonczarow's work: the way it equalizes differently-classed shards of history, of image-inheritance; the way it presents derivative subjects, composed of cut-up composite parts. A canyon landscape. A sound-wave diagram. Amy Schumer. A palm tree. A Picasso. Gonczarow orients these strands so that the image-shards seem to move toward their own compression into a weave, a surface, a background condition. The woven shards express a distance from direct interpretation: a detachment from the derivative landscape of images, which also seeks to distance itself from the ghost of a proprietary stance. Still, it knows that it partakes of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews' distilled, proprietary distance from their twice-purchased land: land purchased first as estate, and then again as painting, as image. This time around, it's a cut-up, shredded and reconstituted propriety: a consumerist iteration of ownership, which seems democratized since it can be accessed via small purchases and small amounts of purchase on freshly-clicked cultural tropes. Of course, the ostensible democratization of images does nothing to decentralize power, and promises an egalitarianism it will never deliver.

Without clients: sometimes, powerful figures, when taken out of the images they commission, hold *more* sway over the image, not less. The derivative-image, the oriented strand, decentralizes images of authority – and in doing so, is involuntarily enrolled in a greater, near-compulsory project of contemporary images: to obfuscate the globalized financial network that centralizes power – in spite of the spiderweb-thinness of its distributed strands, and in spite of the ostensible democratization of images.

For Gonczarow's work as with Gainsborough's, this deep and cutting ambivalence toward the fleeting spectre of classlessness in painting – toward the fact

⁴ Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many: Minor Characters and the Space of the Protagonist in the Novel* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

that classlessness seems to be both painting's inevitable promise and its inevitable failure – is certainly not to be understood as a flaw in the work. Much to the contrary, this ambivalence is at the very crux of the painting's thought: its contractedness, its tension, its urgency. These works were made, in part, in an inflamed, intelligent, and complex anger at the sundry failures of egalitarianism in our time – subtle authoritarian shifts which, in many cases, are all the more efficient for adopting the guises, the grammars, the gestures of equality.