

# A Farewell to modernism? Re-reading T.J. Clark

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Modernism had two great wishes. It wanted its audience to be led towards a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim); but equally it dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed. [...] Modernism lacked the basis, social and epistemological, on which its two wishes might be reconciled. The counterfeit nature of its dream of freedom is written into the dream's realization.

T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 9-10

It is over a decade since the publication of T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*.<sup>1</sup> The passage of time presents an opportunity to reconsider Clark's argument and his contribution to the discipline of art history. Clark's name has long been synonymous with the social history of art: his previous books—*The Absolute Bourgeoisie*, *The Image of the People*, and *The Painting of Modern Life*—exemplified what was strongest and most vital for an art history that gave serious consideration to the social and political determinants of artistic endeavour.<sup>2</sup> Yet *Farewell* transforms the social history of art's polemical tone into to an elegy for modernism's unrealized promise, and an attentive reading of its argument discloses a complex intervention with revisionist accounts of modernism advanced in the wake of the challenge of postmodernism.

The study of modernism has changed since the publication of *Farewell*: the cosmopolitan bazaar of the global economy has challenged the Eurocentric focus of metropolitan modernism, revealing the parochial concerns of earlier debates on modernism, and remapping the coordinates of values that inform current scholarship.<sup>3</sup> This shift does

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<sup>1</sup> T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From the History of Modernism*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> T.J. Clark, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973; *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1973; *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the book series *Annotating Art's Histories*, edited by Kobena Mercer, and published by inIVA and MIT Press: *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, 2005; *Discrepant Abstraction*, 2006; *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*, 2007; *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, 2008.

not invalidate *Farewell*; rather it sharpens its focus on a specific historical trajectory in modernism—one that has been central to Clark's own career as an art historian—the emergence of a modernist canon associated with the work of Courbet, Manet, Cézanne, Picasso and Pollock.<sup>4</sup> Clark does not seek to overturn this canon in favour of greater diversity. His goal is to understand the conditions that gave rise to this canon, to locate modernism as a complex response to the broader experience of modernity. Ironically, there is a remarkable degree of affinity between Clark and the passionate advocates of modernism like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried: they share a belief in the power and value of modernism. Where they differ is in Clark's rejection of any belief in transcendental aesthetic values; rather, he seeks to expose the social content of these values, their relationship to the unresolved social antagonisms within the experience of modernity.

*Farewell to an idea* is a complex and difficult book. It does not attempt to provide a history of modernism so much as a series of interventions in existing histories of modernism. Rather than a continuous narrative, *Farewell* consists of a series of episodes; each episode represents a limit-case in the construction of modernism, a point of maximum stress between past events and the retrospective incorporation of these events within a history of modernism. The principal reference point is the construction of modernism by 'the modernist critics' of the 1950s and 1960s—passionate advocates like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, for whom modernism was 'local and in a sense terminal' (175); yet Clark is also writing against the new academic orthodoxy in the work of Rosalind Krauss, Yves-Alain Bois and their acolytes.

*Farewell* can be located between two histories of modernism: on one hand the traditional narrative of formal innovation that leads from Manet to Pollock, a tradition closely identified with the influence of Greenberg; on the other hand the 'postmodern' revision of this narrative, which rejects the emphasis Greenberg placed on the essence of modernism in favour of a more sophisticated theoretical armature, often drawn from structural linguistics and psychoanalysis, as in the work of Rosalind Krauss.<sup>5</sup> Whereas both Greenberg and Krauss approach modernism as a delimited field of endeavour, primarily medium-specific, Clark's goal is at once more limited and more ambitious.<sup>6</sup> It is to demonstrate how the historical logic of artistic modernism arises from the frustrated utopian ambitions of modernism; that the logic of negation within modernism is a specific response to a historically defined situation. It is through a process of thick description that Clark ensnares the logic of modernism in the contingency of historical happenstance.

Yet it would be mistaken to read *Farewell* as a teleological history; the rhetoric of modernism is always located in a specific historical context, so it is important to recognize a counterpoint between moments of revolution, political crisis and times of social order. Modernism secures its effects through a refusal to cohere; while its ambitions may be

<sup>4</sup> Clark offers an account of modernism that has been synonymous with the ambitions of the west: its origins are located in the Enlightenment; indeed, modernism serves as a vehicle for the assimilation and incorporation of difference produced through the history of contact between cultures since the enlightenment. For the economic transformation of capitalism during the nineteenth century—central to Clark's earlier accounts of Courbet and Manet—were predicated on European colonial expansion.

<sup>5</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, Krauss attempts to discover an alternative structural logic at work within the history of twentieth-century art—the optical unconscious, the informe—which ultimately legitimizes the practice of art history.

totalizing, its means are always specific, and it is the tension between these two levels that animates its enterprise.

I am not going to attempt to paraphrase the argument of *Farewell* here—a daunting task even at the best of times; what I will do, however, is concentrate on Clark's analysis of what I shall call, for want of a better term, the 'rhetoric of modernism', the series of figures and devices that regulate the relation between representation and experience within modernism. At the outset Clark includes a provisional definition of modernism, which is characterized by three features: i) a recognition of the social reality of the sign; ii) the simultaneous belief that the sign was grounded in some experience of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity; and iii) that modernism lacked the social and epistemological basis on which these two beliefs could be reconciled.<sup>7</sup> At the heart of the modernist enterprise is the peculiar status of the sign, suspended between convention and motivation, arbitrariness and origin. This antimony becomes the motor of his dialectical analysis. It reappears in a number of guises: the status of writing in David's *Marat*; the significance of 'sensation' in the work of Pissarro and Cézanne; or the status of metaphor in Picasso and Pollock.

Allied to this peculiar status of the sign is a concern with the social and political context at particular historical moments. Indeed, one achievement of Clark's in *Farewell* is to locate the rhetoric of modernism within the specific representational crises produced by contingent political events—namely the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution, and the War Communism of 1920 that followed the Russian Revolution. These two events represent moments when there was an intimate connection between art and society, when historical forces neutralized any claim to art's autonomy; and indeed art was forced to participate in the process of revolutionary renovation.<sup>8</sup> But Clark is also concerned to understand the nature of modernism in less revolutionary circumstances: thus he includes chapters on the work of Pissarro, Cézanne, Picasso and Pollock, which discuss modernism during periods of relative social stability.

From the start Clark has advanced an ambitious program to revitalize the discipline of art history. In 'On the social history of art'—the programmatic introduction to *The Image of the People*, published in 1973—he described the principal goal of the social history of art as being to demonstrate the processes of 'conversion', 'relation', and 'mediation' through which the pictorial 'text' incorporates the socio-historical context of its production.<sup>9</sup> Clark's success in realizing this program is debatable: the 'connecting links' between particular 'artistic forms' and 'more general historical structures and processes' are notoriously difficult to establish.

<sup>7</sup> 'Modernism had two great wishes. It wanted its audience to be led towards a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim); but equally it dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed. [...] Modernism lacked the basis, social and epistemological, on which its two wishes might be reconciled. The counterfeit nature of its dream of freedom is written into the dream's realization.' *Farewell*, pp. 9–10.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Clark's analysis of French art during the Second Republic in *Image of the People* and *The Absolute Bourgeoisie*.

<sup>9</sup> 'I want to explain the connecting links between artistic form, the available systems of representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies, social classes, and more general historical structures and processes. [...] I want to discover what concrete transactions are hidden behind the mechanical image of "reflection", to know *how* "background" becomes "foreground"; instead of analogies between form and content, to discover the network of real, complex relations between the two.' Clark, *Image of the People*, 12.

Clark's subsequent writings have repeatedly encountered a fundamental impasse: the history of modernist art repeatedly exposes the effacement of the social. Since 1848 the relation between art, society, and politics has become increasingly tentative: whereas Clark discussed politics in *Image of the People* and *The Absolute Bourgeoisie*, class became the focus of his analysis in *The Painting of Modern Life*; by the time he discusses the work of Picasso and Pollock in *Farewell to an Idea*, he limits his analysis to the attempt to suspend the metaphoric dimension of the picture through the technical act of painting.

However, it would be a mistake to read *Farewell* simply in terms of 'On the social history of art,' which, after all, was written in 1973. One of the virtues of *Farewell* is that it foregrounds a dimension of Clark's previous work that sets it above less ambitious approaches to the social history of art; whereas the latter reduce the complexity of artistic endeavour to an ideological effect of dominant class interests, or merely consider an artist's iconography as an instance of contemporary discursive practices, Clark regards aesthetic experience as an over-determined symptom of social contradictions, one that renders an encounter with the sensuous materiality of the world; the aesthetic is precisely the fault line between different orderings of experience.

Indeed, Clark's methodology represents a sophisticated overhaul of Erwin Panofsky's method of the re-creative experience of the aesthetic object.<sup>10</sup> His work recalls the debates of the 1920s that initially informed Panofsky's methodology: the critiques of neo-Kantian epistemology and historicism found in the writings of Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin, Georg Lukács and Martin Heidegger.<sup>11</sup> However, whereas Panofsky was concerned with the art of Renaissance Europe, Clark addresses the art of modernity, which shattered the unity and coherence of the pre-modern world. Clark combines aesthetic evaluation of artworks with archival research, seeking to unearth the complex of historical factors that informed the making of the original object. Yet Clark is no naive beholder who believes that it is possible to re-create the original experience; after all, the objects of analysis have undergone a lengthy process of historical selection, and the reputations of Courbet, Manet, Picasso, or Pollock have been validated by the passage of time.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the re-creative experience restages a counterfactual moment when other possibilities inherent in the artwork have not yet succumbed to the vicissitudes of history. The intimate relation between political factors and artistic factors that form the basis of Clark's writings emerge at this point, for his analyses demonstrate the way the production and reception of artworks are inscribed in the social space. That Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* or Manet's *Olympia* could become the focus of intense political antagonisms in 1852 and 1865 respectively discloses something about the

<sup>10</sup> On the re-creative experience of the artwork see Erwin Panofsky, 'History of art as a humanist discipline', in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983, 23-50.

<sup>11</sup> On Panofsky's early writings see Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984; and Georges Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art*, trans., John Goodman, University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005. Clark discusses his debt to an earlier generation of art historians in 'The conditions of artistic production,' *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1974, 21.

<sup>12</sup> Clark has always been an attentive reader of Walter Benjamin, and the social history of art implicitly or explicitly draws on Benjamin's critique of artistic tradition and historicism. Of particular importance here are the essays in *Illuminations* and the writings on Baudelaire. See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed., Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, New York: Schocken, 1969; *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans., Harry Zohn, London: New Left Books, 1973.

relation between aesthetic experience and an experience of freedom that always has political implications.

The logical consistency of Clark's argument is dependent on the immediacy of aesthetic experience, which acts as an articulation between analysis and synthesis, sense and meaning; yet it is precisely the ideology of the aesthetic that the social history of art initially questioned. The social history of art no longer regarded the monuments of high culture as repositories of transcendental values like beauty and truth; rather these monuments were documents of barbarism that revealed social and historical antagonisms.<sup>13</sup> In this context the redemptive smile of the aesthetic succumbs to doubt and uncertainty; in its immediacy the aesthetic harbours a negative, disruptive face, one that grimaced with the torment and tribulation of materialism.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, the immediacy of aesthetic experience constitutes a fault line Clark is forced repeatedly to traverse in his writings. His arguments alternate between historical determination—the detailed contextual interpretation of themes and subjects—and the direct visual evidence of the painted surface. The persuasiveness of his argument appeals to a process of historical mediation (the process of real, concrete transactions between artist and milieu, how background becomes foreground, etc.), yet this process needs to incorporate aesthetic experience as one moment of its dialectical development. To accommodate and reconcile this impasse Clark attempts to restage an encounter with the object of analysis. The status of this encounter is ambiguous, oscillating between Panofsky's goal of a re-creative experience of the original work, and the self-reflexive awareness that this goal is irrevocably metaphysical, and ultimately impossible.<sup>15</sup> It is this awareness that generates the performative mode in Clark's writing. In contrast to the social and historical determinations of context, which act as so many general rules to frame the singularity of an aesthetic experience, Clark focuses on the particularity of an artwork's appearance as a moment that negates these general descriptions; he looks for clues of an immanent reading incorporated into the very structure and appearance of the work. Unlike Panofsky, for whom the intellectual worldview provides the code for understanding the work, for Clark it is the way that the artwork evades and frustrates the intellectual worldview that is productive in his account. However, this escape is only partial, for Clark's account of a specific artwork is always framed by an understanding of its subsequent history, its retrospective incorporation into a history of modernism.

It is at this point that Clark's work becomes interesting. The aesthetic extends beyond an articulation between artwork and social context; it also represents the point where art and politics converge and diverge. The aesthetic renders an encounter with the political, that is, the experience of freedom that is the unfounded ground of any contingent political state.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> As Walter Benjamin notes in the 'Thesis on the philosophy of history', 'There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'. *Illuminations*, 256.

<sup>14</sup> In Kant this appears not in the *Third Critique*, which attempts to tame experience through the faculty of judgement, but in the transcendental aesthetic of the *First Critique*. See Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, trans., Richard Taft, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997; and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Masked imagination', in *The Ground of the Image*, trans., Jeff Fort, New York: Fordham University Press, 2005, 80-99.

<sup>15</sup> The influence of deconstruction on Clark's writing is felt indirectly through the work of Paul de Man; this is a topic worthy of further discussion. Clark has discussed de Man in 'Phenomenality and materiality in Cézanne', in *Material Events: Paul de Man and the Afterlife of Theory*, ed. Tom Cohen et al., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001, 93-113.

<sup>16</sup> Here I draw on the work of Ernesto Laclau, and Jean-Luc Nancy on Freedom.

Significantly, this dimension of Clark's work does not refer to some positive feature or factual quality; rather it emerges in the formal ruptures of the argument, the points of disarticulation within a configuration of relations between specific details of a work and its context.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 1 Camille Pissarro, *Two Young Peasant Women*, 1892. Oil on canvas, 89 x 165 cm. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1973.

In the remainder of this paper I want to focus on Clark's analysis of specific works. To bring out this dimension of *Farewell*, I want to look at a review of the book by Stephen Eisenman that appeared in *Art in America*. According to Eisenman:

*Farewell to an Idea* is an undeniable brilliant and effective book, but it is undermined by fundamental—and mutually aggravating—weaknesses of language and argument. Clark's analysis are often so immured in the rhetoric of contingency, antimony and fracture [...] as to court obscurantism. Alternatively, his writing is highly seductive and self-assured—displaying, indeed, a confidence unwarranted by the subjective

<sup>17</sup>This requires a thorough account of the role of negation in Clark's writing, not only in terms of the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, but also the deconstruction of Hegelian dialectic in the work of Derrida. See, in particular, Jacques Derrida, 'From restricted to general economy: a Hegelianism without reserve', in *Writing and Difference*, trans., Alan Bass, London: RKP, 1978, 251-77; *Margins of Philosophy*, trans., Alan Bass, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982. This feature would also be the site to explore the common ground between Clark's social historical method and the neo-formalism of Rosalind Krauss and Yve-Alain Bois.

nature of the observations. This mix of elusiveness and urgency is especially apparent in passages of formal analysis, the very places where, given his project, incisiveness and discretion are most needed. [...] It resembles the language of authority, which coerces readers into suspending their own critical faculties in order that the author may do their thinking for them.<sup>18</sup>

As an example of this tendency Eisenman cites Clark's analysis of Pissarro's *Two Young Peasant Women* (fig. 1):

It is all a matter of surface and light. But these are the aspects of the picture that are hardest to grasp and describe—the aspects that any viewer (certainly this one) is most likely to lose hold of, or change his or her mind about, as the minutes go by. [...] The picture now hangs in a room where natural light, shining from above through a partly translucent ceiling, is helped out by a mixture of tungsten and neon. Only when the sun is high and unobstructed does natural light overwhelm its substitutes. And that is when *Two Young Peasant Women* comes into its own. On a summer's day with broken clouds—a typical New York's summer day—you sit there watching the picture flinch and recede and recover as the original studio light comes and goes. [...] Only slowly, if my experience is typical, does it dawn on the viewer that the key to the picture's color organization is the fact that its two peasants are taking their rest in a translucent foreground shade, with here and there a trace of sunlight coming through the leaves onto their fists and foreheads. Of course that is what they are doing! Rest seeks shadow, work usually cannot. (64-65)

Although Eisenman acknowledges Clark's 'extended, fascinating exposition that shifts back and forth between formal, semiotic, political and philosophical registers,' he objects to the claim that this evanescent light effect 'carries the picture's semantic charge': 'since Clark's argument—quite a tendentious one, really—depends almost entirely on a transient impression of light and colour in *Two Young Peasant Women* which no spectator can truly replicate, the reader is forced to accept Clark's interpretation on faith.'<sup>19</sup>

What makes this review interesting is that Eisenman recognizes the tenor of Clark's argument only to mistake its tone. It is precisely the 'tendentious' character of this evanescent light effect in *Two Young Peasant Women* that underpins Clark's argument about the picture, particularly its relation to the emergence of modernism. Here is Clark's comment on the following page:

How typical a moment of modernism this is! Typical of its strength and its pathos. Everything depends on an effect of saturation, and looking at light through shadow, and the effect is marvelous; but it is only on offer, in my experience, to the most sustained (fanatic) attention; and inevitably it is the quality in the picture that is mistaken for tentativeness, or too heavy build-up of color—it is the quality that keeps the picture out of the modernist canon. (66)

<sup>18</sup> Stephen F. Eisenman, 'Modernism's wake', *Art in America*, 87: 10, October 1999, 59.

<sup>19</sup> Eisenman, 'Modernism wake', 61.

The point of Clark's analysis of *Two Young Peasant Women* is as a limit-case; it describes an aesthetico-political program that had to be repressed for modernism to emerge. Clark is careful to locate *Two Young Peasant Women* within the visual culture of the 1890s, particularly the work of Monet, Gauguin, Puvis de Chavannes, Jules Breton, Maurice Denis, and finally Matisse as the twentieth-century heir to the pastoral tradition. For *Two Young Peasant Women* was Pissarro's attempt to redo the pastoral, to offer not merely leisure but a politics of leisure to the beholder. Ultimately, Pissarro's anarchism was embedded in his re-imagining of the pastoral, in his attempt to give determinate form to his 'sensations.'

"Sensation" in particular [...] is Pissarro's way of indicating what for him is the ultimate mystery (and motor) of signification: the way in which the raw contact of sensorium and object is always already infected by a unique totalizing power, the one we call individuality, which is *there in the perception* and therefore potentially also in the means of registering it. [...] We are close to the root of Pissarro's anarchism here, and to his view of what made painting truly difficult. Signs could *admit* to their own inimitable ordering power – their belonging to a moment at which object and subject are still (always) being constituted. (80)

I have cited these passages at length because they indicate the ambition of Clark's argument in *Farewell*. Indeed, the chapter on Pissarro implicitly proposes an archaeology of modernist 'opticality', an archaeology that establishes a link between optical sensations that are the stuff of painting, and the anarchist politics of the 1890s. However, as Clark well realizes, *Two Young Peasant Women* was never an unqualified success. Although he is at pains to grasp hold of Pissarro's ambition, he is fully aware that history has not been kind to the artist. Pissarro's *Two Young Peasant Women* represents an aesthetic program that had to fail for modernism as we know it to emerge.<sup>20</sup>

At the epicentre of *Farewell* is the chapter on Picasso, 'Cubism and collectivity'. This chapter, which discusses high analytical cubism of 1911–12, focuses on a pivotal moment in modernism's history: when Picasso and Braque verged on a new language of representation. The key term here is 'verged', for their attempt to discover a new language was ultimately a failure, for there was no corresponding shift in social reality to validate the language. Yet what is important for Clark is that the cubism of 1911–12 represents a limit-case that is suspended between two representational regimes: the Western illusionistic tradition that the experience of modernity had called into question, and a new language of abstraction that emerged in the wake of cubism. Part of Picasso and Braque's achievement was to refuse to choose between 'illusionism' and 'abstraction'; rather they attempted to figure both sides of the equation. This moment also precedes the breakthrough to synthetic cubism, and although Clark does not discuss synthetic cubism at any length, his argument is pitched against the semiotic reading of Krauss and Bois, particularly the primacy they give to the

<sup>19</sup> In this context it is interesting to consider Clark's reading of Pissarro in relation to other readings of modernism, such as Rosalind Krauss's critique of modernist opticality. Whereas Krauss understands the optical unconscious as structural (although grounded in the agency of the artist), for Clark this unconscious dimension is social. See Krauss *Optical Unconscious*.



arbitrariness of the sign, which in effect defuses the tension that animated cubism during 1911–12.<sup>21</sup>

For Clark, the crux of cubism during 1911–12 is to understand the role of metaphor in the work. He characterizes his disagreement with modernist critics like William Rubin and his semiotic heirs in terms of the place of the ‘figural’: ‘the place, so to speak, where the metaphorical moves get started.’<sup>22</sup> The question is the relation between materialism and metaphor, between the material fact of paint and ‘the local acts of illusionism’: ‘What metaphors of matter strike us as giving the surface of “*Ma Jolie*” or *Man with a Guitar* their characteristic tone and consistency; and in particular, what metaphors of painting’s matter?’ (fig. 2):

The metaphor [. . .] is in the materialism of the works [. . .]. The question to ask Cubism . . . is what kind of metaphorical structure it gives to its procedures, to the local acts of illusionism which lead us as viewers across the surface, now that those acts are conceived—and, if lucky, actually carried out—as nothing but manual, nothing but matters of fact? (179)



Figure 2 Pablo Picasso, *Man with a Guitar*, 1912-13. Oil on canvas, 131.8 x 89 cm. Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art. The Louise and Walter Arensberg collection.

<sup>20</sup> See Yve-Alain Bois, ‘Kahnweiler’s lesson, in *Painting as Model*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990, 65-97; Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Picasso Papers*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1998.

<sup>21</sup> ‘The picture’s metaphorizing of [...] the process of representation . [...] happens in its microstructure: the metaphor, the shifting, is in the relation of procedures to purposes, of describing to totalizing, of “abstract” to “illusionism”.’ 179

Clark's analysis patiently gives body to these abstract formulations, painstakingly taking apart a number of works, examining the scant evidence of the artist's decision making processes, interrogating the kind of purchase they had on social experience. Ultimately, however, the project of analytical cubism—and by extension modernism—is to be understood under the sign of failure. Cubism may have sought a new description of the world, but in the end it only provided a 'counterfeit of such a description—an imagining of what kinds of things might happen to the means of Western painting if such a new description arose.' (215) For the project to succeed, cubism would have required not only a new description of the world, but also an 'overall recasting of social practice.' (215)

In the next chapter Clark turns to one such attempt to recast social practice, the Russian Revolution of 1917. If the antimony between materialism and metaphor was at the heart of cubism, then the antimony between visuality and textuality is central to his analysis of the Russian avant-garde. Clark's argument turns on two examples by El Lissitzky: a propaganda board from 1920, and a small gouache from 1920–21, *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg)*, although for the sake of simplicity I shall focus on the latter work (fig. 3). According to Clark:

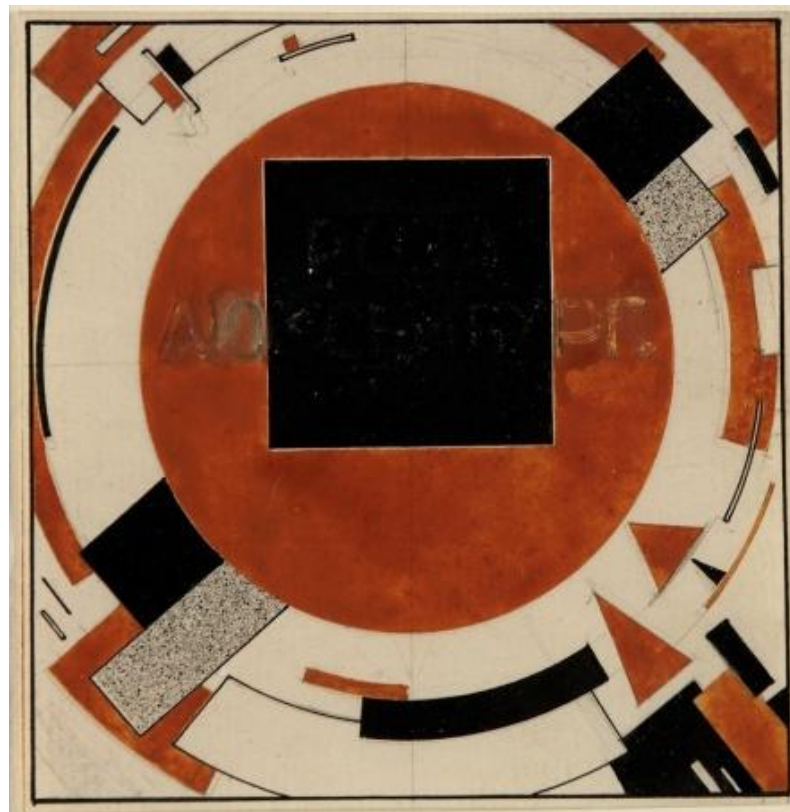


Figure 3 El Lissitzky, *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg)*, 1920-21. Gouache, graphite and ink on paper, 9.7 x 9.7 cm. Thessaloniki: Greek State Museum of Contemporary Art. Costakis Collection.

Abstract art [...] was haunted by a dream of painting at last leaving the realm of convention behind, and attaining immediacy. [...] the old dream of a purely visual totalizing in painting—of escaping from words into seeing and being. (253)

In *Rosa Luxemburg*, however:

Textuality is a force that ironizes the efforts of all the other elements in the picture to “take their places” and do the decent work of signifying. It is a reminder of the weirdness—the black hole or black square—that signifying ultimately is. (p. 252)

More importantly, textuality—in this case the name of a martyr to world revolution, Rosa Luxemburg—imports history into the visual field, but the precise relation between history and abstraction remains undefined. And indeed, this is part of the picture’s success, since it is the indeterminacy of this relation, the way that writing ‘ironizes’ the work of abstraction, that ‘energizes and complicates the picture’s whole economy.’<sup>23</sup>



Figure 4 Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793. Oil on canvas, 165 x 128. Brussels : Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.

Writing also plays a central part in Clark’s earlier analysis of David’s *Death of Marat* (fig. 4). Here Clark focuses on the letter in Marat’s hand as offering the key to the picture’s

<sup>22</sup> El Lissitzky wanted ‘abstraction to be an eternal war between the discursive and the immediate, the total image and the fragile assemblage—between signs with names attached to them . . . and others still floating in the ether of nonsense.’ *Farewell*, 254.

modernism. Again, writing introduces indeterminacy into the picture, not simply in referring to the contingency of political events—13 July 1793, Marat's assassin Charlotte Corday—but in David's whole conception of showing the world. Painting is 'forced to include the accident and tendentiousness of politics in its picture of the world,' but 'writing infects the picture's whole economy of illusion,' and 'swallows up the figurative in general.' (38)

The ambivalence introduced by writing is repeated in the indistinct background above the figure of the dead Marat: this part of the composition contrasts to the representational strategies in the lower half of the painting, which are all tied to the depictions of specific object—bath, body, packing case, pen, paper, etc.; the upper half, by contrast, is an example of painting in neutral, of the artist falling back on the material practice and procedures of painting. This strategy is typical of modernism—the procedures of Picasso or Pollock discussed later in *Farewell*—and it justifies Clark's inclusion of David's *Marat* as an episode in his history of modernism.

In both cases, David's *Marat* and El Lissitzky's *Rosa Luxemburg*, writing enters the picture and unsettles the relation between work and world. Clark's analysis turns on demonstrating how these local problems of representation are in fact symptomatic for the culture as a whole, caught in the grip of revolutionary social, political and economic upheaval. Questions about looking become questions about reading:

[...] the metaphor of revolutionary totality to be qualified (infected) by the metaphor of endless revolutionary discursiveness—a deferring of meanings, even of perceptions; a shuttling between spaces, and between kinds of materiality, kinds of narrative construction, kind of agreement about reading. This is what it would be like, the propaganda board says, to live in a world where the sign was arbitrary, because subject to endless social convolutions. It is not a world we shall live in without the revolution taking place. (255–56)

What makes these works exemplary is that contingency is written into the texture of the works, figured as uncertainty about the very process of representation. This contrasts to the discussion of metaphor in the work of Picasso and Pollock, where there is an effort to neutralize the linguistic structure of metaphor in the act of painting, or at least ground it in the materiality of process.

In place of a general history of modernism, Clark advances a thick description of key moments in the modernist enterprise, thereby revealing what had to be excluded to constitute the history of artistic modernism. They are moments through which painting had to pass for modernism to emerge, but moments repressed within the history of modernism. Indeed, what *Farewell* offers is less a history of modernism than a series of interventions in the writing of history that disclose the conditions of emergence of modernism. These moments are also moments of intense aesthetic engagement, when the rules that govern judgment are called into radical question, when the beholder is forced to decide matters on the available evidence, to articulate particular in the general, the general in the particular. Representation becomes a question of experience, experience a question of representation.

It is in this sense that Clark's work is forced to traverse the faultline of the aesthetic. Historical knowledge always involves a moment of subjective judgment, a moment when the historian is forced to construct an explanation out of the fragmentary historical record. In the case of art history, this moment pivots on aesthetic experience: when having assembled

the available evidence, one is forced to establish some kind of connection between what one sees and what one knows. At this point the enterprise of art history converges with the travail of the artist, for each is forced to wrest eloquence from the mute materiality of the world. One of the virtues of Clark's writings is that this moment is also an act of political engagement. Indeed, the elegiac tone of *Farewell to an Idea* is generated by Clark's fidelity to the politics of modernism, a belated effort to preserve the dream of freedom in a world increasingly hostile to that dream.

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