

T. J. Clark's book about Picasso

I wanted to like T. J. Clark's *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica* (2013) – I really did, just as I've wanted to like every book by T. J. Clark, whose second major work,¹ *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1985), not only offered an original and convincing analysis of Impressionist painting, but also demonstrated what one could do with situationist critique (Clark was briefly a member of the Situationist International in the mid-1960s): not merely recapitulate it and keep it alive, but also reinterpret it and expand it into new areas of study (in this case, Paris in the 1860s). *The Painting of Modern Life* was good from start to finish; it was coherent and convincing; and it certainly seemed to bode well for future efforts.

Though he's tried, Clark has in fact been unable to write another book as good as *The Painting of Modern Life*. To my mind, three of the other books he's written since then – *Farewell to An Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (1999),² *Heaven and Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (2018),³ and *Picasso and Truth* (I've listed them in the order that I've read them) – are disappointing, to say the least. Significantly, perhaps, they share the same general features: they begin well, start falling apart halfway through, and end badly. These books aren't simply "about" catastrophes; they *are* catastrophes. Perhaps Clark's post-2001 pessimism (or at least his retreat from revolutionary critique into Social Democratic reformism) has prevented him from seeing and completing his vision of the proverbial Big Picture.

As I've indicated, there are problems with the overall structure and execution of *Picasso and Truth*.⁴ The book begins by asserting that the dominant movement in European modern art during the Twentieth Century – a century of world wars, mass destruction and terrorism – was "retrogression (or regressiveness, or primitivism, or nostalgia, or the cult of purity, or the creation of private worlds)" (14), and that this retrogression was a conscious refusal of the catastrophes then in progress. "I see the period as catastrophe in the strict sense," Clark writes, "unfolding chaotically from 1914 on, certainly until the 1950s (if we widen our focus to Mao's appalling 'Proletarian Cultural Revolution' – in essence the last paroxysm of a European fantasy of politics – well into the 1970s)" (16). Of course, there were artists who were active during this period, especially during the immediate aftermath of World War II, who remained optimistic, forward-looking and proudly "progressive" (revolutionary). They included several people Clark might know personally: Isidore Isou, the founder of Lettrism; the

¹ His first books, *The Absolute Bourgeois: Artists and Politics in France, 1848-1851* and *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution*, formed a pair and were first published in 1973.

² Reviewed by me here: <http://www.notbored.org/farewell.html>.

³ Reviewed by me here: <http://www.notbored.org/Heaven-on-Earth.pdf>.

⁴ In what follows, the pages from which quotations from this book – \$45, hardcover only – have been taken are indicated within parentheses (thus).

members of the Lettrist International (especially Guy Debord and Gil Wolman); and the members of COBRA (especially Constant and Asger Jorn, whom Clark once called “the greatest painter of the 1950s”). But Clark dismisses them all, not by name, but as part of a larger group of people without names. He writes, “As for the artists who did *not* retreat or regress during the period in question – who went on believing in some version of modernity’s movement forward, toward rationality or transparency or full disenchantment – they were too often involved (the record is clear) in a contorted compromise with the tyrannies and duplicities just listed” (19). But – and this would seem to be a key question, given the stakes involved – what about the artists who looked and moved forward and *didn’t* get involved in any contorted compromises? Surely there were a few.

The main problem with *Picasso and Truth* as a whole is the fact that, by the time Clark has finished with *Guernica*, which is discussed at the book’s end, we are *not* in fact confronted with a retrogression, but with a hard-won breakthrough, with a new way of painting, which came in response and as an objection to a terrible instance of terrorist violence. The result of this unexpected ending is that, at least for people who remember what they read and keep it in mind as they read further, Clark’s book seems incoherent. Its forward-looking ending flatly contradicts its backwards-looking beginning.

Another problem with Clark’s book on Picasso is the way that it presents Cubism. Quite justifiably, it focuses on Cubism’s depiction of and reliance upon interior spaces, rooms and apartments. Cubism always placed or displayed its marvelous objects inside such spaces. This observation certainly accords with Clark’s insistence that Cubism harkened back to the Nineteenth Century, which was, as demonstrated by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*, a century preoccupied with interior spaces and things that enclosed other things. But Clark completely ignores the other half of the dialectic at play here: city streets and the throngs of people in them. In both the Nineteenth Century and Cubism’s pictures, one came into the room (one was in the room) *to seek refuge from the street*, which existed even if or precisely because “the street” wasn’t mentioned by Picasso himself. (If Picasso was a Bohemian, as Clark repeatedly asserts, then he was a man of the city, even when he was alone in his room.) In place of the modern city street, which developed concretely at a particular moment in history, Clark gives us apparently eternal, metaphysical entities – “Wildness and otherness are always just *there* in the world [...] That is why ‘interiors’ are indispensable. They keep wildness and otherness within bounds” (145). Elsewhere he claims that “The room for the Cubist was what the river surface had been for Monet or the village street for Pissaro: the real-world condition under which appearances became substances” (190). But of course, as the reader of Clark’s *The Painting of Modern Life* knows, Monet’s river ran right through the heart of a famous French city, one that was also the home of Camille Pissaro, the urban anarchist.⁵

⁵ See as well Clark’s comments about Courbet in *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (University of California Press, 1973): “I think the evidence shows that Courbet needed the brasseries of Paris in order to sustain his painting of rural life; he played the rustic – believing in the role, of course – in order not to be a bourgeois, but to have access to everything

And so, inevitably, the street side of the street-and-room dialectic reasserts itself; not surprisingly, this reassertion comes during Clark's discussion of *Guernica*. He writes, "Privacy had been torn apart; the room, in the chaos, must give way to the street" (251). But the street was *already there*.

There are also problems with Clark's presentation of the monsters in Picasso's paintings, specifically the monstrous, misshapen women. As always, Clark feels that there is only one authority or source to draw upon here, and that is Freud. And not the parts of Freud that remain alive and useful today (his interest in literature and art, in languages and puns), but the dead and still-poisonous parts that, one thought, had been thoroughly discredited by the bisexual, homosexual and feminist theorists and activists of the 1970s and abandoned by everyone else in their right minds, as well (Freud's theories of castration, sexual difference and childhood sexuality). And so, what we get from Clark's single-minded emphasis and reliance on Bad Freud are what Clark himself acknowledges to be "clichés of sexuality" (181), all of which are *a little too obvious*: "I take it I do not need to labor the point that beheading, in this fantasy world, is also castration. Heads are penises, and severed necks so many holes asking to be penetrated" (167); "The sketchbooks and drawings are, to state the obvious, a free-fire zone for Freudian reading" (169) because they are driven by the "compulsion" that "it might be possible *to show the scene of castration as it takes place* – as it becomes visible, as it makes the body visible to itself and others. The blade actually falling, that is" (169); "There is, in the depth of the unconscious, always a blade that swings and severs, but always a phallic eye that survives the blow" (170); the "sheer force of sex – the blade and the womb" (183); "the endless knife blow of sexual difference" (190); etc. etc. *ad nauseum*. Anyone who has ever read and understood Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's groundbreaking critique of Freud, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972), will tell you that certain grotesque pictures by Picasso aren't necessarily or merely child-like representations of a dubious mythological event (castration); they can also be adult engagements of real-life ("machinic") flows and the cutting of flows; while a cut in the former creates an absence and a lack, a cut in the latter simply creates another flow.

Perhaps because of his unhealthy obsession with Freud, Clark completely fails to acknowledge, not to mention appreciate, the role that Sade's writings clearly played in Picasso's depictions of monstrous women. Clark quotes Picasso as saying that women are "suffering machines" ("I am primarily the painter of woman, and, for me, woman is essentially a machine for suffering") (225), but doesn't think of Sade, not to mention Deleuze and Guattari and their desiring-machines! Clark notes that "few painters have had more of a sense, from the beginning, of how easily the human body might be destroyed" (27), but he doesn't think of Sade. Clark doesn't think of Sade when he speaks of "the artists who seem to us to have spoken most deeply of (maybe even for)

that only a [Parisian] bourgeois knew" (p. 29); "What facts we have about 1848-49 suggest a man immersed in Paris for the moment, but discovering a rustic subject-matter at the same time as he lords it over Bohemia. It seems as if [Parisian] Bohemianism and the painting of [rural] Ornans go together, depend on each other, in some curious way" (p. 51).

bourgeois society – Flaubert, George Eliot, Simmel, Manet, Marx, Menzel, Baudelaire, Ibsen, Henry James” (17), nor does he speak of Juliette when writing of “the heroines of the new order” who “stare its horrible decencies most fully in the face: Olympia, Madame Bovary, Hedda Gabler, Kate Croy” (17-18). Perhaps Clark *does* think of Sade – but then tries to push the thought out of his mind as fast as possible. Perhaps he does this in the same way that he deals with/fails to deal with *Les Desmoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), which appears as an undiscussed illustration on page 31 (1.6), is identified with “a certain strain in Cubism – not a central strain, but one cropping up repeatedly – that specializes in sexual beserk” (160), and is finally reduced to a mere descriptor (“*Demoiselle*-type theater”) (172). Or in the same way that he deals with/fails to deal with the Sadean writer Georges Bataille, who gets dismissed in a single snide aside. “There is a certain amount of Paris-in-the-thirties banality to all this – a touch of the Georges Bataille, one might say – but no one can doubt that Picasso was of the party” (176).

If the reader is truly interested in a fresh reading of Picasso, one that doesn’t fall prey to the tawdry psychoanalytical traps that Clark lists in the beginning of his book and then falls into mid-way through (*doh!*), he or she should seek out the writings of Annie Le Brun. According to Le Brun,⁶ who recently organized an exhibition of modernist paintings that, to her, bore the influence of the writings of Sade,

The thought of Sade worked upon the very depths of the 19th century, and, indeed, this wasn’t limited to literary works. During my work on this exhibition, I was passionate about seeing the degree to which everything communicated with everything else in the night of this era. Of course, in the 19th century, the connection between artists and writers was very strong. And so Delacroix, who was very close to Baudelaire, had necessarily read Sade’s works. [...] The questions about desire that [Sade] posed are those that worried painting, to the point that they provoked the revolution that began with Ingres and Delacroix and continued with Cézanne and Picasso. In fact, this is the history of a great de-centering, in the course of which desire came to be the [main] subject of painting. This is a secret history, a subterranean one, which starts with [Sade’s] *Philosophy in the Bedroom* and ends with *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, whose original title was *Le Bordel philosophique* [*The Philosophical Whorehouse*]. And not without good reason, since, with this painting, Picasso (in a certain way) arrived at putting painting in the bedroom, years before Surrealism recognized desire as the great inventor of form.

⁶ Annie Le Brun, «*Sade. Attaquer le soleil*», an interview conducted on the occasion of the opening of her exhibition titled *Sade. Attaquer le soleil*, which was presented at the Musée d’Orsay, and the simultaneous publication of its catalogue by Gallimard, both in 2014. Translated from the French here: <http://www.notbored.org/Sade.pdf>

In another interview from this same period,⁷ Le Brun speaks of “a subterranean history that, starting with [Sade’s] *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, ends with *Demoiselles d’Avignon* (1907), the title of which, at the start, was *Le Bordel philosophique*.”

At the beginning of the century, the great smuggler of Sade [whose works had been banned by the French authorities for decades] was Apollinaire. His novel *Les Onze Mille Verges* (1907) isn’t a tall story, but a disturbing, troubling text about the ferocity of desire. It is interesting that this book was published the same year that Picasso, with whom Apollinaire was very close, finished work on *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*.

Yes, *very* interesting.

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(Footnote #4 added 2 December 2019)

⁷ Annie Le Brun, “*Sade Nous Concerne Tous. Entretien Avec Annie Le Brun*,” an interview conducted by Frédéric Joignot and published 20 October 2014. Translated from the French here: <http://www.notbored.org/sade-concerns-us.pdf>.