

## T.J. Clark's Most Recent Book

Let me say straight off that I'm not going to spend a lot of time or effort writing this review of T.J. Clark's book *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (Thames & Hudson, 2018). It just wouldn't be worth it. Several of the key points that I'd make have already been made in my very long and in-depth review of Clark's *Farewell To An Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (Yale University Press, 1999),<sup>1</sup> and I see no reason to repeat them here, 20 years later.

The title of Clark's most recent book is inaccurate in two ways. It doesn't concern painted depictions of heaven *on* earth (utopia), but the meeting or juxtaposition of images of heaven and earth *in* the works of four well-known European painters (Giotto, Bruegel, Poussin and Veronese), and it doesn't concern "the life to come" (in the future), but the life lived "now," here in the present.

Like *Farewell To An Idea*, this new book starts off exceedingly well – the chapter on the use of the color blue in Giotto is really excellent – but it ends very badly, even worse than its predecessor, to which it is somehow connected.<sup>2</sup> Its last chapter – its "Coda" – doesn't even concern painting at all, but Clark's rather presumptuous ruminations about the state of "the Left" in the Twenty-First Century. Who gives a fuck what a retired art history professor thinks, especially one whose biography and conceptual framework no longer refers to or derives from his formerly much-vaunted membership in the Situationist International<sup>3</sup> and Retort?<sup>4</sup>

"The text that follows," Clark notes, "was first published in Oslo as 'The Experience of Defeat,'<sup>5</sup> then in *New Left Review* in April 2012,<sup>6</sup> and later as a booklet in Brazil in 2013." I can find no good reason for tacking this particular essay to the end of this particular book. Does Clark actually believe that the readers of an expensive hardcover-only volume of art history are really and truly interested in what he calls "a root and branch opposition to capitalism"? Does he actually believe that those who are interested in "a root and branch opposition to capitalism" – the Zapatistas, the ZADists, the insurrectionaries of Rojava – will seek out such a book for guidance or new ideas? If he does, he's out to lunch.

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<sup>1</sup> "Beginning Well and Ending Badly," *NOT BORED!* #31, 1999 (<http://www.notbored.org/farewell.html>).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Clark's extensive quotation from it in his "Coda."

<sup>3</sup> Cf. "Manet in situ: T.J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life*," *NOT BORED!* #9, 1986 (<http://www.notbored.org/manet.html>).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. "Blunders, Gullibility, Over-Reach, Unfathomable Ignorance and Wishful Thinking: An Unkind Reply to Retort," *NOT BORED!* #36, 2004 (<http://www.notbored.org/retort.html>) and "Another Unkind Reply to Retort," *NOT BORED!* #38, 2006 (<http://www.notbored.org/retorted.html>),

<sup>5</sup> *The State of Things*, edited by Marta Kuzma et al. (Oslo and London, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Issue # 74, March-April 2012.

In brief, Clark thinks “the Left” – in this book, that’s all there is: “the Left” and “the Right,”<sup>7</sup> and, for him, there’s no real difference between “the Left” and “the ultra-Left,” a term that presumably applies to the SI – needs to abandon completely the very notion, not to mention the goal, of social revolution and must instead embrace unapologetic reformism. “The question of capitalism,” he insists, “has to be bracketed. It cannot be made political. The Left should turn its attention to what can.” And what does *that* mean? Moderation, “moderacy in politics.” He says, “You may ask, finally, what is the difference between the kind of anti-utopian politics I am advocating and ‘reformism’ pure and simple. The label does not scare me [...] Reform, it transpires, is a revolutionary demand.”

The wheels fall off – this book turns into a complete waste of time – in its chapter on Picasso, which, for some reason, is titled “Conclusion.” Suddenly, out of nowhere, the desire to see “heaven on earth” becomes indistinguishable from *hell on earth*. After quoting from Hannah Arendt, Clark claims that “the late twentieth century, she argued, would truly confront itself in the mirror only if it recognized that the battle for heaven on earth (the classless society, the thousand years of the purified race) was over.” This conjunction, to use a word Clark applies to a remark by Nietzsche, is “unforgiveable”: it is *obvious* that “the classless society” (the dream of “the Left”) would be, if achieved, heaven for *everyone*, while “the thousand years of the purified race” (the dream of the Nazis) would be heaven for *a small minority of people* and hell for everyone else. But Clark pretends this conjunction is valid because his “moderacy” needs to position both “the Left” and “the Right” as extremists and, for him, *any* kind of extremism always leads to mass murder.<sup>8</sup> He’s full of shit.

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<sup>7</sup> Just as, for him, in the Spanish Revolution of 1936, there were no anarchists, just fascists and Communists.

<sup>8</sup> For a “more nuanced” (a more intelligent and useful) view of this question, see the works by an author whom Clark completely ignores when he discusses the Movement of the Free Spirit: Raoul Vaneigem.