
ИЗОБРАЗИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИСКУССТВО

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Absent Look. Edouard Manet and Timothy Clark's Theory of Modernism

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The paper considers issues of interpretation of Edouard Manet's oeuvre in the context of the Modernist theory of art. The focus is on the Anglo-American theoretical tradition. The author traces the evolution of Modernist conceptions in the American study of art (from Formalism to "New Art History"). Emphasis is given to Timothy Clark's "Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers" (1984) and its evaluation from the Post-Structuralist point of view. The author concentrates on the key metaphors and mythological constructs of Clark's text (flatness, literalness, the society of the spectacle, ideology, class, uncertainty, and resistance to interpretation). T. J. Clark's theory of modernism is analyzed in connection with reductionist and negativist strategies in the modern humanities. T. J. Clark's attitude to the Formalist tradition and Clement Greenberg's heritage is examined. The main Marxist conceptions, developed in the works of Marx, Benjamin, and Adorno (alienation, reification, fetishism), have their analogies in aestheticism, formalism and modernism. This is the reason why Clark's interpretation quite naturally supplements the existing scientific literature on the subject. Specific attention is given to the semiotic element in Clark's Marxism. The author speaks of the advantages of Manet's interpretation in Jacques Derrida's vocabulary of notions (absence / presence, *différance*, and deconstruction). Particular importance is paid to Manet's links to Primitivist strategies and eighteenth-century art. The author comes to the conclusion that Marxism can be interpreted as a cultural phenomenon and Modernist hypertext. According to this logic, Clark transforms Marxist theory into a system of metaphors projecting it onto concrete artistic material. The paper is part of the author's project investigating the origins of modernist / avant-garde art.

Keywords: modernism, avant-garde, theory, art, Edouard Manet, Timothy Clark, Clement Greenberg, Marxism, Jacques Derrida, postmodernism.

Timothy Clark is one of the best-known figures in the “New Art History” [1] whose works for decades ahead defined the guidelines of a scholarly debate about nineteenth-century art. The importance of his work is in many respects explained by the fact that he succeeded in enriching the British and American study of art by his interpretation of the intuitions of French and German philosophers on the material of postmodernist art. As a Marxist scholar, Timothy Clark produced an alloy consisting of the study of art and “Western Marxism” supplementing the cultural deductions of Benjamin, Adorno, Guy Debord, Georges Bataille and other theorists with his shrewd descriptions of art works.

The ambitious nature of Clark’s task lies in his striving to combine “historical materialism” with contemporary semiotic theory of representation. In his book *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (1984) [2], Clark looks at art through the prism of social and economic life, which, in its turn, is dissolved in various acts of reception and “the struggle of representations”. Clark’s works are tinged with positivism as if his fantasy as an art researcher was sacrificed for the sake of “historical authenticity” and “scientific objectiveness”. The problem of Modernism in this connection turns out to be linked to the capitalist “myth of modern age”, which transforms class society into the “society of the spectacle” (Guy Debord).

Edouard Manet is traditionally considered to be the founder of Modernism. The assessment of his works changed in line with the evolution of the Modernist theory. For quite some time, the artist was seen as an unequivocal stalwart of aestheticism and later formalism. Julius Meier-Graefe spoke about Manet’s triumph as the “victory of a noble minority” and associated his art with a certain (idealist and humanist) system of values [3, p. 142–3]. The theorist Clement Greenberg developed the most known version of formalist Modernism. Manet for him is an artist who put an end to the dispute between color and drawing, and who discovered the fight of pure optics with the optical experience modified by some tactile associations [4, p. 89]. Pure visuality, which, according to Greenberg, Manet strives for, had different connotations, both philosophical and social. Freed from all impurities, “optics” meant an unheard of rise in reflection in the field of visual art. Liberation from all associations “incidental” for painting (sculptural, tactile, “carnal” or “profane”) paved the way for a new refined art “for the connoisseurs”. Though Greenberg juxtaposed this kind of art with the materialist disposition of a metropolitan urbanite, the transition to the “optical space” had something in common with de-materialization; hence, it becomes filled with idealist and even sacral meanings.

Timothy Clark came up with another variant of Modernism, in many respects opposing Greenberg’s concept [5–13]. While the “human” in Greenberg’s works is “repressed” within the framework of formalist utopia (the “form” is above “life”), Clark’s “humanism” falls prey to capitalism under which “life does not survive”, whereupon the Marxist interpretation resembles a religious concept: the world in the thrall of “the devil”-capital, alienation, reification, and consumer fetishism (“idolatry”). “Artificiality” with a minus sign drives out feelings, experience, life, everything, which is natural and humane. The reductionist mechanism launched by Greenberg keeps working assuming a different meaning. Clark projects the categories of Marxian philosophy onto art and builds his theory around negative principles.

Like Greenberg, Clark pays a heightened attention to the category of flatness. This problem, critical for Modernist discourse, is a telling example which illustrates Clark’s peculiar approach. He builds on the flatness concept of Clement Greenberg subjecting

it to criticism, but he finds himself depending on it. First of all, Clark transfers the problem to a semiotic sphere: flatness is a sign, which has an infinite number of meanings. In his analysis of the two-dimensional aspect of space phenomenon (in nineteenth-century culture and art), Clark focuses his attention on the complementarity principle and symbolical meaning of the word “also”. Flatness has “elitist” connotations; it stands in the way of philistine desire to enter the canvas (symbolizing “the ebony tower” of art). At the same time, flatness refers to the populist discourse (posters, photographs, playbills). Besides, it corresponds to the tendency to virtualize reality in the age of capitalism [2, p. 12–3].

Alienated from the habitual meanings, the bare surface of the painting is concrete, anti-metaphysical and relates to the American formalist theory of literalism (or minimalism) expounded by Barbara Rose and Michael Fried. In a sense, flatness also opposes intellectualism; it withstands the tendency to create one’s own space of conceptual bonds. Paradoxically, one meaning of “flatness” is resistance to any meanings and metaphors. This reductionism manifests itself both formally and socially. For example, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is a “painting of surfaces” where modeling of volumes is reduced to a few brushstrokes. But the “lack of depth” characterizes the painting not only formally, but meaningfully. The painting and its principal character resist interpretation, they are “modern”, hence, they are taciturn and reticent [2, p. 248].

All this capitalist modernity, according to Clark, is imbued with “impenetrability”, “concealment”, and a vacant look that does not express anything. Thus, Clark builds his own system of detachment, one which supplements interpretation mechanisms of formalism / aestheticism. The perplexity of Manet’s characters, their departure from the communication space have social and economic grounding. Manet conjures up face-masks, thus making a first step toward the image of man in the twentieth century (Picasso, Modigliani). This de-psychologizing technique, however, was already known in eighteenth-century art (compare Manet’s *Balcony* with the “primitivist” strategy of Pietro Longhi). Gustave Courbet, one of Manet’s conceptual opponents, also took advantage of a number of primitivist gimmicks and was cherishing the dream of “people’s” art.

Clark wanted to add semiotic theory to Marxism claiming that vulgar Marxism should be disposed of. Economy *per se* is a sphere of representations; how can the antithesis of money and commodity otherwise be characterized? In capitalist society, economic representation is a sort of matrix around which all other representations are arranged [2, p. 7]. Class affiliation is one of the critical and determining factors of social life. Certainly, from one’s affiliation to a class one cannot immediately infer individual religious or aesthetic preferences, choice of clothes, moral traits or sexual behavior. Clark, nevertheless, believes that the notion of class should be applied to spheres outside the economy. The main question in this regard is, of course, how the “real” (social relations) transforms into the “symbolical” (art).

Ideology, according to this theory, is not a set of definite ideas and images, but rather a series of discourse limitations. Social order is a classification, problems of solidarity, of distance, of belonging and of exclusion. That is why the question of class “camouflage” comes to the forefront. “Absent look” suggests resistance to classification, refusal from self-expression. This is the girl from the *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* or Dega’s characters from the *Portrait of Henri Michel-Lévy* [2, p. 253–8]. Clark speaks about Modernism in terms of disguise and mimicry. This is a negative theory of anti-expressionism and anonymity. Expression is the enemy of the gaze, since it betrays the mystery of belonging to a class.

The modern man wears a disguise (indifference, carelessness, being blasé) which rejects interpretation. Picasso used the term “camouflage” defining Cubism. Timothy Clark extends this strategy onto the art of Impressionism. To see the enemy or to let oneself be seen means to win or to be defeated in the social struggle. From this, “sneaking from interpretation” takes its root which formalists interpreted for their benefit.

Besides, ideology for Clark is primarily a “spectacle”, an “illusion”, something, which refers to the problems of Guy Debord’s “Society of the Spectacle”. In Clark’s works, it is associated with the name of Haussmann and his plan of rebuilding Paris [2, p. 23–78; 14, p. 200–14]. Modernity is a new culture, special forms of dramatizing social life, but not a new economy. Clark minted his formula: “Haussmann’s purpose was to give form to modernity; thanks to his effort, Paris becomes an image, a spectacle” [2, p. 66]. Ideology, according to Clark, is everything virtual and simulative. A big capitalist city creates an illusion of the blending and disappearance of classes, but “in reality” class differences do not disappear, but frequently become even more rigid [2, p. 258].

The relation of Modernism to the “society of the spectacle” according to Clark was dual. The illusion of freedom intoxicated poets and artists making them the cantors of “modern life”. Modernity was turning into a sort of religion. Claude Monet combined nature and civilization into one colorful extravaganza. He tried to find some unity and homogeneity of the primeval origin. Meyer Schapiro in his article *Nature of Abstract Art* [2, p. 3–5; 15] also describes the first (“utopian”) stage of the Impressionist aesthetics as a riot against social formalities. The very subjects of early Impressionism — picnics, strolls, boat sailing, out-of-town outings — is evidence of interest in the new forms of social interaction. Underlying the art of this type was the myth of a free individual, mobile spectator of a new “society of the spectacle”, of an idler or “petty bourgeois” who is at liberty to enjoy his pastime and constantly changing life of the street.

Modernism (in Clark’s theory) for a time became an “accomplice” to capitalism and the “society of the spectacle” taking the deceptive amusements of Parisian life at face value [2, p. 258]. Avant-garde / Modernism believed that modernity was no longer characterized in terms of a system, classification and control, that mixing, transgression and duality replaced social hierarchy. The ideal character of this myth was a petty bourgeois that as it seemed belonged neither to the proletariat nor to bourgeoisie nor to the class society as such. At a certain moment, he became an *alter ego* of the Avant-garde, an explorer and the only mobile element of the new society and its ideal spectator. But in the earliest versions of Modernism and Impressionism, there materialized a new tendency associated with a more rational attitude toward social realities.

An example of this critical tendency for Clark was Manet’s *Olympia*. Paul Valery had marked some sacral aspects of this image: “*Olympia* repels, she induces sacred horror, she establishes herself and triumphs. She is bloody shame, an idol of idols... The beastly Vestal virgin in her total nakedness celebrates a dream of that primitive barbarity and ritual bestiality which is hidden and observed in the skills and work of the prostitution of big cities” [16, p. 232]. Timothy Clark notes that *Olympia*’s gaze, which was the subject of so many comments, means the spectator’s inclusion into the system of relations between the whore and her client [2, p. 133]. Her nakedness is a sign aimed at other people, a sign of her class. *Olympia* is a number of sexual constructions, for sex is always a construction. At the same time, *Olympia* in general is a shifting circulation of signs, which questions social and sexual identities. The category of prostitution is the critical constituent of the “society of the

spectacle” which provides a bridge between the social, the sexual and the contemporary, in other words, the link between the desire and capital [2, p. 103–7].

Georges Bataille spoke of the communication impasse in *Olympia*: void of its rhetoric content, Manet’s painting (“you see what you see”) makes us experience a shock perception which is different from the effects of Impressionism [17, p. 86, 88]. *Olympia*’s body, similar to an abandoned sunken ship, exudes silence and sacred horror [17, p. 67]. The literalness of nakedness and of the canvass means a transition to a mode of intuitive vision — “nothingness” according to Bataille. Clark explains it by the fact that *Olympia* reveals the mystery of a class society. She is a proletarian who denies class barriers, a threat to the existing order who slightly opens the sphere of social transgression and contamination [2, p. 144–6]. This is the meaning of the “operation” (“*Olympia*”) Bataille was writing about [17, p. 88]. Her body is a commodity, but consumer fetishism is questioned in this painting. *Olympia*’s body ceases to be “one thing”, disintegrating into separate surfaces and fragments [2, p. 134]. The painterly here triumphs over the graphic; representation of this body-collage is dominated by the element of indefiniteness, which is reminiscent of the concept of art from the nineteenth century suggested by Werner Hofmann [18, p. 50–88].

Clark’s remarks that Manet belonged to a camp of ironists denouncing the “natural world of suburbia” and other myths of modern society. His *Argenteuil* as well as *Bathers at Asnières* by Seurat represent a blending of the restrained and spontaneous, enjoyment and boredom, rest and fashion, nature and industry [2, p. 199–201]. *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* is another example of a similar objective method, an image of a “solitary crowd”, weird disunity prevailing in modern society. A new Panathenaic procession is composed of reiterating closed, standardized forms. Modernity and freedom are purchased at a high price — in exchange for alienation and the mechanization of life. According to Clark, social classes and the unseen boundaries common to them are also present in this masterpiece by Seurat, though the workers and bourgeoisie turn out to be consumers of the same pleasures [2, p. 265–7].

The curve on the lace of the woman’s hat in *Argenteuil* looking like whipped cream on a fancy cake is a direct likening of the painter to the craft of a pastry cook [2, p. 164]. Manet emphasizes the mismatch of the object and the painting, thus suggesting one of the first semiotic models in the history of art (Lionello Venturi spoke of the resuscitation in the artist’s work of a medieval understanding of the image as convention) [19, p. 10]. Painting is a set of conventions and material marks and spots referring to reality. *The Dead Toreador* is an aestheticized art-object that is interesting due to its frightening independence from reality. Manet’s aestheticism, his practices of deconstruction are akin to the Rococo age rediscovered in the middle of the nineteenth century. His canvases *On the Beach* (1873, Musée d’Orsay) and *The Beach at Boulogne* (1868, Museum of Fine Arts, Virginia, Richmond) bring to mind the gallant festivities of Watteau. Michael Fried was right noting Manet’s return to the “theatrical” tradition of the eighteenth century [20–22]. The list of Manet’s Venetian references (from *Courtesans* by Carpaccio to *Il Ridotto / The Foyer* / by Francesco Guardi) can be continued to infinity.

Returning to the age “prior to Goya and David” was a strategy relevant for Manet. The eighteenth century with its skeptical attitude toward ideas and theories was the age of deconstructions. Manet’s renunciation of “great passions” and global theories, his “sentimental” attention to trifles, his ability to see big in small, his phantasm-images floating in a vacuum — all these features are close to the refined culture of the eighteenth century.

Richard Hamann noted that “the age of Rococo will always be before our eyes as an ideal of the Impressionist culture...” [23, p. 179]. This refined hedonism of Manet, as Timothy Clark’s analysis demonstrates, turns out to be receptive to the most complex social problems of his time, the ones that are still important today. The “society of the spectacle” is only one of the names of the postmodernist culture; that is why the analogies between Manet and Warhol seem to be appropriate [24; 25, p. 112–4; 26, p. 24–5]. Manet’s romantic irony, his world of “pure visuality” and realism (“strip-tease”) of pictorial means of expression have many social aspects. Comparison with Claude Monet’s “monism” shows to what extent Manet was free from the illusions of “secular religiousness” [2, p. 182–91; 27, p. 28; 26, p. 22].

The term “Modernism” (with its moderate and formalist connotations) corresponds to Manet’s works to a larger extent than the term Avant-garde. At the same time, “absence”, ghost-quality, citationality — this is the true nature of Manet’s works which also firmly ties the painter to the postmodernist culture. Manet reveals painting as a sign, as image making; he is interested in its conventionality, its means of expression, self-revelation, the “strip-tease” of art. But the topic of *différance* (Derrida), of the clearance separating “life” from “image”, of the presence of emptiness, of death is even more significant. It is as if the images of Manet inherently have some mechanism of self-destruction, they dissolve in the material of painting. These are phantasms, thrusts of Reality, of “absolute presence”, of a feast, which immediately repudiate, become frozen and erased; they always resonate farewell.

Timothy Clark did not try to fix Manet’s aestheticism / postmodernism in the Procrustean bed of Marxian aesthetics. His task was of a modest scale. He was interested in Marx’s connotations of Manet’s art, in the probability of projecting certain metaphors onto a concrete sphere of humanitarian knowledge. A narrow and quite a scholarly task and in a sense — a compromise with the fashionable post-structuralist study of art. Inhibition, trance, dreaminess, somnambulism of Manet’s characters are enveloped in Marxist metaphors. Mythological constructs of Baudelaire and Mallarmé are matched with those of Karl Marx and his followers. Of course, we had expected something more radical from Marxism. But Clark did not offer us a “finished picture”, a finished theory of “Marxism” or of “modern art”. His works on modernism / avant-garde are no more than a series of sketches, which do not covet for completeness. In this combination of research and theory, there lies the merit of Clark’s works.

“Californian Marxism” [28] is the same luxury item in the modern world as Manet’s aestheticism in the nineteenth century. Clark suggested one of the most influential versions of this trend, popular in the West, while adapting it to the study of art and the conventions of the Humanities of his time. There is some understatement in Clark’s *Painting of Modern Life*. In a methodological sense, it is connected with the difficulties of joining “real history” with its representation (including art). Manet with his accentuation of the sign nature of art is particularly difficult for a Marxist analysis. In many respects, Clark finds support in the reductionist system of metaphors of formalism. His book supplements but not denies Greenberg; they constitute one common intellectual field. In many respects, this happens because of the concentration on the negativist side of Manet’s works.

Analyzing concrete works of art, Clark does not depart from the general theory of Modernism. His works provide a feeling of the complex conflict of social reality, which cannot be separated from art [12, p. 13]. His works demonstrate a study of a new type,

which combine an analysis of works of art with historical material and broad philosophical generalizations. This hybrid genre, of course, has its limitations as any inter-disciplinary paper. Clark always focuses on some certain examples from art, and theoretical inversions in his writings do not claim to be encompassing. The author's "Marxism" as well as his "theory of Modernism" is a collage, of inconsistent character. But this "procedural", "research" principle of Clark's methodology is one of the reasons which makes his works interesting for a contemporary reader.

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