



Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism

By T. J. Clark, Timothy J. Clark

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In this intense, far-reaching, and poignant book—a book that sums up the work of a lifetime—the acclaimed art historian T. J. Clark rewrites the history of modern art. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, he explains, the project called socialism may have come to an end at roughly the same moment as modernism. Did modernism and socialism depend on each other for their vitality—for their sense of the future and their wish to live in a fully material world? Have they died? Aware of modernism's foibles and blind spots, but passionately attached to the movement's wildness, Clark poses these fundamental questions in *Farewell to an Idea*.

Modernism, Clark argues, was an extreme answer to an extreme condition—the one Max Weber summed up as “the disenchantment of the world.” Clark focuses on instances of maximum stress, when the movement revealed its true nature. The book begins with Jacques-Louis David, painting at the height of the Terror in 1793, then leaps forward to Pissarro a hundred years later, struggling to picture *Two Young Peasant Women* in a way that agreed with his anarchist politics. Next the author turns in succession to Cézanne’s paintings of the Grandes Baigneuses and their coincidence in time (and maybe intention) with Freud’s launching of psychoanalysis; to Picasso’s Cubism; and to avant-garde art after the Russian Revolution. Clark concludes with a reading of Jackson Pollock’s tragic version of abstraction and suggests a new set of terms to describe avant-garde art—perhaps in its final flowering—in America after 1945. Shifting between broad, speculative history and intense analysis of specific works, Clark not only transfigures our usual understanding of modern art, he also launches a new set of proposals about modernity itself.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

No two social or aesthetic movements have been as agonizingly debated and lamented as Modernism and Socialism. Both arose in the wake of the French Revolution, and both were deemed untenable by the late 1980s. In this career-defining work, a collection of seven ruminative essays on the "co-dependency" of these concepts, eminent art historian Clark offers not so much a summation as an archeology, working through "limit cases" in the long and tortured relationship of art and politics, from David's shrewd positioning of his portrait of Citizen Marat within the fervor of the French Revolution to the perceived "anarchism" of Pissarro's laboring field women and the social meanings of Jackson Pollock's post-War drip paintings (Clark reads them in two intriguing contexts: first, as an expression of "lordly," aristocratic attitude, dismissing content in favor of form; and secondly, in terms of their use as backdrops for a 1950 Vogue magazine photo shoot). He writes about politics and art without cynicism, speaking often in the direct, if melancholy, voice of one who wants something to have been, so that it might still be. Clark's is a reclamation project: he seeks to return agency to the artists and paintings that gave face to modernity, and to steer us, as readers and interpreters, away from facile historicism on the one hand, and formalism on the other. The essays in this volume are always historically nuanced, aglow with Clark's deep learning and masterful prose; they will doubtlessly elicit much praise and be the subject of much debate.

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From Library Journal

This synthesis of three decades of Clark's (modern art, Univ. of California, Berkeley) thinking and writing about modern art is not a simple book. It raises basic questions on the vitality and viability of modernism and its relation to other intellectual, political, and social developments of the 20th century. Modernism's duality, its inward reflecting and outward reaching, is echoed in Clark's approach, which treats both a broad historic view and specific works of art in relation to the material world. The reader is exposed to philosophical rumination, critical detail, and historic perspective: from David at work during the Terror of the late 18th century to Cézanne painting at the time Freudian theory was evolving to Pollock's view of an abstract form reaching outward limits. A difficult, thought-provoking work that requires almost as much effort on the part of the reader as that of the author but is well worth the effort. For all academic art collections. *APaula Frosch, Metropolitan Museum of Art Lib., New York*

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Review

"Clark digs holes under the ramparts of conventional art history [and] challenges . . . the prevailing histories of modernist art." -- *Robert Herbert, New York Review of Books*

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