

## Chapter 2

# PICTURES, KNOWLEDGE, AND POWER: THE CASE OF T. J. CLARK

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It is uncontroversial that the content of some paintings can serve as historical evidence. Holbein's paintings of the English court provide evidence of, for example, clothing styles of the period. Whether a particular painting is reliable in this respect will be a matter of historical inquiry into that particular painting. Was there a particular mode of dress that was worn only when sitting for paintings? Did the painter have a reason to misrepresent his subjects? No issues are raised here that do not apply quite generally to historical enquiry into primary sources.

In an influential diagnosis of the problems and prospects of his discipline, the art historian and theorist T. J. Clark quotes from, and comments on, Georg Lukács's 1922 essay, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat:"

Let's look at that simple and curious phrase, "the really important historians of the nineteenth century," and the way the examples that come to mind include two art historians out of three names cited! What an age was this when Riegl and Dvorak were the real historians, worrying away at the fundamental questions – the conditions of consciousness, the nature of 'representation'? (1974: 248)

Why, Clark asks, should art historians be cited as "the really important historians"? As we saw above, art is part of the historical record and therefore available as evidence, but, first, one would not have thought it was a particularly large part of the historical record and, second, one does not need to be anything more than a garden variety historian to make use of it. The answer

to Clark's question is, of course, that Clark believes (as, presumably, does Lukács) that paintings are not simply evidence in the sense described above. Paintings are, in addition, evidence of a particular sort that it requires a specialist type of historian to access. I am going to examine and assess this claim by looking at Clark's discussion of a particular painting, Manet's *Olympia*. We can approach this discussion by way of a puzzle. *Olympia* is clearly modeled on Titian's *Venus of Urbino*. The central figure in both paintings is a naked woman on a bed, in essentially the same pose; the black woman bringing flowers and the cat have echoes in Titian's servant, orchid, and dog. Despite this, of the seventy odd critics who reviewed Manet's work, only two mentioned the earlier picture (Clark 1985: 93). This might be explained, as Clark admits, by the critics registering their contempt for the result of Manet's efforts. In order to grasp the more interesting explanation that Clark produces, we need first to take a detour through Clark's theory of art.

Although a Marxist, Clark is careful to distance himself from the usual applications of Marx's thought to criticism.

I am not interested in the notion of works of art 'reflecting' ideologies, social relations, or history. Equally, I do not want to talk about history as 'background' to the work of art – as something which is essentially absent from the work of art and its production, but which occasionally puts in an appearance. (The intrusion of history is discovered, it seems, by 'common sense:' there is a special category of historical references which can be identified in this way.) I want also to reject the idea that the artist's point of reference as a social being is, *a priori*, the artistic community. On this view, history is transmitted to the artist by some fixed route, through some invariable system of mediations: the artist responds to the values and ideas of the artistic community (in our period that means, for the best artists, the ideology of the avant-garde), which in turn are altered by changes in the general values and ideas of society, which in turn are determined by historical conditions. For example, Courbet is influenced by Realism which is influenced by Positivism which is the product of Capitalist Materialism. One can sprinkle as much detail on the nouns in that sentence as one likes; it is the verbs which are the matter.

Lastly, I do not want the social history of art to depend on intuitive analogies between form and ideological content – on saying, for example, that the lack of compositional focus in Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* is an expression of the painter's egalitarianism, or that Manet's fragmented composition in the extraordinary *View of the Paris World's*