



Giotto, *Joachim's Dream*, c. 1303-5. Fresco. Arena Chapel, Padua.

# Interview with T.J. Clark

This interview was conducted by *Selva* editors Daniel Marcus and Daniel Spaulding in the spring of 2019.

**Selva** Your latest book, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come*, promises an engagement with art, politics, and religion, albeit from an atheist perspective. As readers quickly discover, however, the book's focal objects are hardly the usual suspects. Eschewing straightforward images of utopia, you instead nominate a handful of paintings—Giotto's panel on the theme of Joachim's Dream, from the Arena chapel; Bruegel's *Land of Cockaigne*; Poussin's *Sacrament of Marriage*; Veronese's *Allegories of Love*; and Picasso's UNESCO mural—which straddle the line between sacredness and profanity, and between "bare life" and superhumanity, to an unusual degree. Can you reconstruct what led you to write about these particular works? Should readers interpret their selection (and your insistence on their exceptional status) as part and parcel of the book's overall argument?

**T.J. Clark** Yes, Giotto, Bruegel, Poussin, and Veronese are a strange quartet; and Picasso's *Icarus* a deeply unlikely end-piece. I've come to believe (or to find, in practice) that the only way for me to write effectively on art is to *wait*—of course the waiting isn't a passive activity, but at the heart of it is a coming-together of forces and impulses that are certainly not under my conscious control—wait for 'a picture to hold me captive.' Subsequently, if things go well, it begins to emerge as I write what might have impelled the captivity in the first place—some of the reasons for it come to the surface. I talk a little about the process in the book: for instance, about how long it took for me to see that I 'chose' the Giotto *Dream of Joachim* from all the series of panels in the Arena Chapel because (but I'd be inclined to put the word 'because' in scare quotes) it spoke to a condition of uncertainty, outsideness, and disbelief—a moment at which the 'grand narrative' of Christianity is stopped in its tracks, at its very beginning, and a particular embodied consciousness falls into doubt about the future he has been promised. And this, I came to see, was the condition, or frame of mind, that truly preoccupied me, and that certain paintings helped me to bring in focus. Out of this came the book.

Was it the Giotto painting, then, that brought the book into being? Or was it the circumstances in which the Giotto first took hold of me—the five or six years following 2011, the arrival of 'fundamentalism' on the stage of world politics, the deepening chaos in the Middle East, the founding of Islamic State, the proclamation of the Caliphate, the renewed glib talk of 'a clash of civilizations,' the attacks in Paris, Oslo, London, Manchester?

I don't have an answer to those questions. And in any case, I'm aware that for many readers there will be something inordinate (maybe even absurd) to having the *Dream of Joachim* be my way of confronting such present miseries, or claiming that it is. Some will think it just *isn't*—it can't be. I see why: I too have my doubts. 'A picture held me captive': I think I see why in retrospect, and what, in the book, I tried to do with the captivity; but I may well be wrong.

Anyway, Giotto was the book's starting point. Some of its elements—the Bruegel, for example, and the Poussin—I'd thought about and written on before; but it was writing about the *Dream of Joachim* that enabled me to see what was truly at stake for me in those other pictures—and at stake, I hoped, for the present.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Land of Cockaigne*, 1567. Oil on panel, 52 x 78 cm (20 1/2 x 30 3/4 in.). Alte Pinakothek, Munich.

**Selva** We have a question about “disciplinarity,” ugly as the word is. Notoriously, you don’t write like most other art historians—there’s a degree of personal intensity to your involvement, as well as a degree of non-conformity with respect to trends and consensus (“the state of the literature”), that at times sets your work apart from the disciplinary mainstream. In the chapter on the *Land of Cockaigne*, for example, you take aim at the pessimistic view of Bruegel currently “dominant among experts.” Yet it could be said that *Heaven and Earth* is faithful to the classic program of art history that you described in “The Conditions of Artistic Creation,” back in 1974: the “worrying away at the fundamental questions” that you found in Warburg, Wölfflin, Riegl, Panofsky, Saxl, Schlosser et al. So, what kind of art history is *Heaven on Earth*? What does it imply about your understanding of the discipline?

**TJC** My main quarrel with the discipline of art history is very simple, very commonsensical. It seems to me not to take seriously enough the difference between visual and verbal representation. It does not truly confront the investment of the human species in non-linguistic forms of thought. It exists, as a discipline, too completely and comfortably in a

textual universe—it is happiest when it finds a piece of language to ‘correspond’ to an image, or indeed to generate (to determine) it.

I have no doubt that we do exist in a textual universe—more’s the pity. Understanding the world as a grand narrative, or a palimpsest still to be deciphered, or an epic about to open onto an ultimate truth: these seem to be indelible characteristics of the ‘humanity’ that came into being with the first city states and sedentary agriculture and the first great (appalling, astounding) class inequalities. This is the humanity we are still saddled with. But I also think, in my always optimistic way, that it matters enormously that from the beginning there existed, alongside the scribal and priestly world of writing, other rival systems of representation, opening onto quite different modes of being-in-the-world—other temporalities, other kinds of concreteness and immediacy, other promises of order, other balancings of body and mind. ‘Depiction’ may be the one that holds me captive; but of course music, and dance, and the shaping of stone or clay, and the patterning and reshaping of the body’s surface (or indeed the very form of its face and musculature) are just as fundamental *counter-languages* at the species’ disposal.

I dream of a discipline more open to the tension and opposition between text and image. And one obvious thing that such a reorientation would mean is that much more attention would have to be paid to the business of making language—making writing—reach out to the non-linguistic in experience. We live in a textual universe. Me too. And it is an entirely ordinary activity of language, spoken or written, to be constantly confronting aspects of the world that do not fall easily, or perhaps at all, ‘under a description’—that do not chime in with established categories, that present the world ‘in a different light.’ Language, to state the obvious, is very far from being all certainty and clarity, or even from having such characteristics as its goal: it knows in its heart that its patterning of experience is partial, and it is obliged all the time to ‘open onto the object’—to stutter, to improvise, to disobey its own rules, to be scandalously ‘figurative.’ Our professional language—our discipline—should take a leaf out of ordinary language’s book.

**Selva** The trajectory from Giotto to Picasso, by way of Bruegel, Poussin, and Veronese, will surely strike some readers as overdetermined, following a textbook account of art-historical progress—the *longue durée* of Renaissance humanism, in a nutshell. A defender of *Heaven on Earth* might point out how little your case studies affirm the humanist’s arch-narrative, and, relatedly, how much each chapter depends upon the presence, and pressure, of various figures of outsiderdom and subalternity, from Giotto’s shepherds to Poussin’s *femme-colonne*. Nevertheless, the words “human” and “anthropology” loom large in your analysis, which presents the species *Homo sapiens* as its historical subject—a subject approached *en direct*, as it were, absent the usual archival bracketing devices (you dispense with Michael Baxandall’s notion of a “period eye” in the Introduction, for example). How would you define the stakes of this approach?

**TJC** I guess I’m guilty as charged. Not that I think my book tells a narrative of progress—Picasso’s dreadful strip-cartoon cackle at Icarus, which is the book’s conclusion, surely squelches any such residual hope; and so do the two Blake engravings the book ends with—but yes, *Heaven on Earth* as a whole does stay within the thought-world of Western

humanism. This is no doubt a limitation; but limitations (I'm a Chomskian on this) are the grounds of real knowledge. 'Giotto to Picasso' is the thought-world I've spent my life inside and whose workings I'm most familiar with. I think I have a hold on its deep structures. And this means I believe I can see, and possess the competences to describe, the thought-world's moments of true discontinuity, its opening (most often in spite of itself) onto the insubordinate, the marginal(ized), and the repressed; as well as its stranger episodes of true non-'humanness,' even its flickering moments of *non-knowledge*, *anti-'ism'* of any kind. (The Picasso is one such moment, I reckon; but so, I try to argue, is the 'I'm-done-with-thinking' cleric on the grass in the *Land of Cockaigne*. Or the 'non-woman' by the column in Poussin.)

As you recognize in your question, these moments of discontinuity or non-knowledge are, for me, moments at which a wider or deeper dimension to our history can sometimes put in an appearance—the dimension I want to call the 'anthropological.' Or what Marx, following Feuerbach, called 'species-being.' (I don't flinch from the word 'human' to describe this dimension, as long as the term is understood to refer to a 'humanness' that has inhumanity or non-humanness always written into it. A humanity, in other words, deeply at odds with the 'humanism' whose imagery and assumptions it has, necessarily, as its raw material.) Of course I understand the dangers involved in thinking such a dimension accessible, let alone describable. Most accounts of 'human nature,' I guess we'll agree, are little more than pieces of ideological puppeteering. But not Bruegel's, in my view; not Giotto's, not Poussin's or Veronese's. That is the book's core argument. I think their art is capable (at moments) of opening onto aspects of the species we still need—urgently—to confront.

**Selva** In a recent conversation with Jeremy Harding at the London Review Bookshop, you spoke about "performing" a painting, as one does a musical composition, in opposition to ekphrasis (a translation of the visual into words). This throws a new light on your practice of description. Or rather, it suggests that "description" might not be the right word for what you're doing at all. Can you say more about what's involved in this mode of performance?

**TJC** The idea of a linguistic description being, or trying to be, a kind of 'performance' of the painting in hand brings me back to issues that came up in answer to your question 2. I know that art history has lately become more interested in the history of 'art writing,' and is determined, not before time, to give art writing its due. But the term it prefers to deploy here, ekphrasis, seems to me to point in the wrong direction. The highest moments of art writing, so the term suggests, issue essentially from a tradition—a classical tradition—in which language, marshaled in great poetic set-pieces, was confident that it could create, on the basis of an absent visual artifact, a self-sufficient (maybe even superior) linguistic equivalent for the thing described. This can have its own brilliance, granted; but I think it has very little to teach us if we are trying, for instance, to get the *Dream of Joachim* into words. Ekphrasis, in the case of such an act of visualization, is impossible. The picture's combination of plainness and particularity is too closely bound up with its medium—its wordlessness—to be ever 'translated.' We should be trying instead for something much closer to a performance of the picture—meaning that the thing itself, the 'notes on the page' in the Arena Chapel, will be constantly, vitally, discontentedly *present* in the writing we do, as the reality our writing moves toward and always misses. Misses but maybe gets closer to—in ways that throw up

new possibilities of phrasing, new tempi, new kinds of rubato, new instrumentation. Ruskin, at his best, is a performer of Turner in this sense. His syntax, his cadence, his local intensities and excesses of diction, do the work; and above all he knows when to break off and admit defeat—to do no more than point and enumerate, to look as passively at Turner (as idiotically) as he looked as a child at the sea. (This last is a touching confession in *Praeterita*.)

Performances of pictures ought to be one main thing our discipline tries to do. And why shouldn't such performances be given a little of the importance we naturally accord to those of music? I did say 'a little,' and I know that the two cases are not strictly comparable. Music is (mostly) made to be performed, pictures are (mostly) not. But at least we might agree, apropos ekphrasis, that performances that substitute *themselves* for the music, or the painting, are not what we want.

**Selva** *Heaven on Earth* cites the literary historian Erich Auerbach on two occasions, once in a footnote to your Introduction and then, naturally enough, in the Giotto chapter. In a 1938 letter, Auerbach wrote:

**The challenge is not to grasp and digest all the evil that's happening—that's not too difficult—but much more to find a point of departure for those historical forces that can be set against it. [...] To seek for them in myself, to track them down in the world, completely absorbs me. The old forces of resistance—churches, democracies, education, economic laws—are useful and effective only if they are renewed and activated through a new force not yet visible to me.**

This passage reminds us of the final, prophetic lines of “For a Left with No Future,” an essay you first published in *The New Left Review* in 2012, and which furnishes the coda to *Heaven on Earth*:

**There will be no future, I am saying finally, without war, poverty, Malthusian panic, tyranny, cruelty, classes, dead time, and all the ills the flesh is heir to, because there will be no future; only a present in which the Left (always embattled and marginalized, always—proudly—a thing of the past) struggles to assemble the “material for a society” Nietzsche thought had vanished from the earth. And this is a recipe for politics, not quietism—a Left that can look the world in the face.**

Do the paintings discussed in *Heaven on Earth* offer, then, if not a straightforward recipe for “politics in a tragic key” (as you write elsewhere in “For a Left with No Future”), at least a glimpse of the “material”—human material, that is—from which a viable society might be assembled? Could you walk us briefly through this argument?

**TJC** Such a great quote from Auerbach. It epitomizes the *tone* of politics that I think—I hope—*Heaven on Earth* is out to discover, to point to in the paintings it depends on. And you are right: it is a (predictable) misreading to construe the book's last lines, and the essay that precedes them, as at all straightforwardly pessimistic. ‘All the evil that's happening’: Auerbach is surely right that any politics that flinches from grasping that evil, and trying to make sense of it, is worse than useless. We know from the history of the last century that it will most likely end up as the evil's accessory—its utopian false face.



Paolo Veronese, *Infidelity*, c. 1570-75. Oil on canvas, 189.9 x 189.9 cm (74 3/4 x 74 3/4 in.). National Gallery, London.

As for the 'material for a society' I see exemplified in the paintings in the book, I'm reluctant to try again to put the material into words. Better here simply to point. Look at the peasant asleep in *Cockaigne*, for example, and think of him next to Veronese's nonplussed superman; look at the contact of Joachim and Anna at the Golden Gate, and compare the 'community of saints'—their crowding, their contact, their care for one another—in the foreground of Veronese's Ognissanti altarpiece. Put Bruegel's *Cripples* next to the beggars on the ground in *Christ in the House of Simon*. Let Blake's child climb its ladder to the moon. Let the kolkhozniks march again, under a better banner.

**Selva** Your chapter on Picasso’s UNESCO mural occupies a position analogous to that of the Abstract Expressionism chapter in *Farewell to an Idea*. There’s a similar sense of an ending in both, of the passing of the “short Twentieth Century,” with the difference that the AbEx essay turns on a particular class figure: the post-World War II American petty bourgeoisie. There you make a claim that Abstract Expressionism belonged to this class at the moment of its illusory triumph, and that it’s the “vulgarity” of this art that tells us the most about that dynamic. Picasso’s later work has also famously been thought vulgar by most arbiters of high bourgeois taste. Is there a connection to be made to *Heaven on Earth*—not just in relation to Picasso, but vis-à-vis your other protagonists as well?

**TJC** It is a fascinating conjunction, the one between the UNESCO mural and Abstract Expressionism; and I confess it hadn’t occurred to me. (Though I guess that calling the style of the mural ‘a burlesque Barnett Newman with figures supplied by Matisse’ got me close. Especially if one thinks, as I do, that Barnett Newman’s style *was* a form of burlesque, even before Picasso put a hand to it.) And yes, in both cases I think I am telling the story of the coming-to-an-end of the ‘classic’ period of bourgeois culture, bourgeois self-confidence. AbEx, as I see it, is a magnificent last gasp of bourgeois individualism, pushing the language of uniqueness and immediacy to breaking point. Picasso’s situation in 1958 is different: he is operating at the heart of the post-war cultural order, and invited (almost obliged) to speak in a grand public voice. He is expected, as the UNESCO chief put it, to show us ‘the forces of light defeat the forces of darkness... [and] a peaceful humanity present on the shores of the infinite at the accomplishment of its destiny.’ It may even be that this is the mural’s subject. But style annihilates subject. Style speaks to the impossibility or exhaustion of all the culture’s key terms—most of all, you’ll notice again, that hopeless term ‘humanity.’ As I put it in the book:

**UNESCO, we might say,—just because of the urgency and nobility of its aims—was the theater in which the disintegration of the ‘international community’ could still bring on a shudder. It is this wider disintegration, I think, that the *Fall of Icarus* tries to represent. And the mural’s stylistic bizarrerie—the tragicomic strip-cartoon idiom Picasso devised for it—could not be more apt.**

It is, by the way, very much part of the story that in both cases, AbEx and the later Picasso, the fate of Communism—the unresolved relationship of a bourgeois avant garde to an established (itself disintegrating) Other to the bourgeois order—is a constant presence. The *Fall of Icarus* is nothing if not an allegory of Cold War.

**Selva** In your previous book, *Picasso and Truth: From Cubism to Guernica*, you offer a certain defense of the bourgeois interior, and Picasso’s retreat therein, against modernism’s public-facing, progressivist current. Strands of this argument are woven through *Heaven on Earth*, but not without significant changes: The scenery has been altered, trading Picassian “room-space” for the “ground level,” and the “wonderful easy godlessness” of French bohemia for the vanishing “peasant ontology” of early-modern Europe, as you write in your Bruegel chapter. If the term “retrogression” sets the tone of *Picasso and Truth*, “resistance” seems closer to the



attitude of *Heaven on Earth*. These lines from your Introduction strike us as particularly relevant:

**Painting does not have anything to say. It would be foolish to deny that in many circumstances this has proved a limitation or worse. Powers of all sorts, religious, political and economic, have seized on the silence and seeming transparency of the visual image, and filled the silence with speech (or sub-speech) that appears to emanate from the image itself. But I am with Ruskin in thinking that a picture is not by its very nature ideology's mute servant, and has at its disposal kinds of intensity and disclosure, kinds of persuasiveness and simplicity, that make most feats of language by comparison seem abstract, or anxiously assertive, or a mixture of both. Of course I step back from Ruskin's endearing wild claims for painting's total superiority. But at certain moments and on certain subjects—this is the book's essential proposal—painting's muteness gives it a peculiar advantage over the spoken or written word.**

Jumping from these lines to your image of parading kolkhozniks in “For a Left with No Future,” we can guess how a picture’s “not hav[ing] anything to say”—its refusal of ideological servitude, as you put it—might speak to the predicament of Europe’s peasants (and, moreover, to the plight of all “people without history,” *pace* Eric Wolf) on the long march toward “civilization.” Figures of peasantry crop up throughout in *Heaven on Earth*; we imagine painting’s “No” spoken in their voice.

At the same time, however, your argument often hinges—crucially, we think—on the prospect of reconciliation between social antagonists, peasants included. (“What seems to matter most in Giotto’s *Sheepfold*,” you write, ‘is simply an imagining—a realization—of the rich man and his servants together.’) How should readers make sense of the various social forces figured—and figured *together*, sharing a world in common—in *Heaven on Earth*? Should we hold out hope for social reconciliation, or for resistance, or for both at once? And what lessons might the book offer to those of us still committed to the ‘68er slogans, “Abolition de la société de classe”—“A bas la société spectaculaire-marchande”?

**TJC:** Again you are seeing patterns in *Heaven on Earth*, and resonances with my previous work, that had not occurred to me, and that will take time to digest. I suppose it is true that the political ‘figure’ that tends to recur in *Heaven on Earth* is that of the peasantry—in the Joachim story, in Bruegel pervasively, in the kolkhoznik photograph (which stands, of course, for the wider ironies and horrors of the recent past). It’s a ‘figure’ that is never far away in my writing: *The Peasants of Flagey*, *We Field-Women*, Malevich’s *Complex Presentiment*, Millet’s *Man with a Hoe*, Cézanne’s *Cardplayers*, Modotti’s *Men Reading ‘El Machete’*—I go back and back to them. I think that is because I go on being interested in retrieving the evidence we have—it will most often be fragmentary, and truth in it will almost invariably be glimpsed through a tissue of lies and condescension—of the experience of the great mass of human beings, and the ways, through the ages, they have given that experience form. “There are always other meanings in a given social space—counter-meanings, alternative orders of meaning, produced by the culture itself in the clash of classes, ideologies, and forms of control ... meanings rooted in actual forms of life; repressed meanings, the meanings of the dominated.” (‘Preliminaries to a Possible Treatment of Olympia in 1865,’ *Screen*, Spring 1980. Apologies for the nostalgia here; but at least I’m not plunging you back to 1974....)

The figure 'peasant' is approximate, of course—not to say duplicitous. It lumps together far too much: it ignores or travesties class struggle. It is itself an instrument of the ruling class, intended to make the mass of humanity half-visible. (The kolkhozniks were not wrong about that.) In this it is analogous to the word 'people,' which is currently enjoying a new time in the sun—'people' as in 'populism.'

The present panic about populism on the part of the righteous is not entirely self-serving, of course—only a fool would minimize the danger of a new xenophobia, a new wave of ethnic fundamentalisms—but behind it, as usual, lies the rulers' fear that politics may yet slip out of their control ... be made by someone else. If 'the people' do go on to engage in real struggle with their neoliberal masters (the 'if' is enormous, but the crisis of neoliberal politics shows no sign of abating), then for sure the process will involve, as you intimate, the emergence—the positive construction—of specific new identities, alliances, forms of 'reconciliation' between very different social groupings. The *gilets jaunes* in France may be a premonition of what is likely to happen—the possibilities as well as the pitfalls. I don't think, however, that *Heaven on Earth* is covertly preaching class détente. *Joachim at the Sheepfold*, remember, is only a passing moment in the Joachim story, and its picture of master and men together in the wilderness is shot through with Giotto-type irony. Giotto is a realist. But he is also a believer in miracles. If the horizon of history shifts—if men and women come to set themselves new tasks, and begin to envisage a new kind of community, a new form of life—then 'classes,' along with very many other differences and identifications now thought immovable, stand ready to be thrown into the melting pot.



Pablo Picasso, *Fall of Icarus*, 1958. Acrylic on forty wooden panels, 910 x 1060 cm (35 1/4 x 417 3/8 in.). UNESCO Bâtiment des Conférences, Paris.