

EURAMERICA Vol. 38, No. 1 (March 2008), 1-30  
[http://www.ea.sinica.edu.tw/euramerica/ch\\_index.php](http://www.ea.sinica.edu.tw/euramerica/ch_index.php)  
© Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica

## Art History in an Age of Image-Machines\*

Timothy J. Clark

Department of History of Art, University of California, Berkeley  
E-mail: [travesty@berkeley.edu](mailto:travesty@berkeley.edu)

### Abstract

The article reflects on the continuing power of Ralph Mannheim's (Marxist) proposals for art history, and on the fact that Mannheim's basic model of image production—his picture of a conflictual, material field of concrete image-activities—has proved so difficult to sustain. It is argued that important features of the image-world we presently inhabit tend to make it increasingly difficult to keep hold of the practical materiality of image production, in the face of a realm of images that seems (or claims to be) more and more mobile, disembodied, and disposable. Art history's task and tactics in this situation are far from clear. The article describes the author's own tactics in two recent publications, and goes on to reflect on the pedagogical opportunities offered to art history as a result of its existing in the face of a more and more strident cult (or ideology) of image flow and image immediacy.

**Key Words:** art history, material, image-world, spectacle

---

Invited article, Received November 5, 2007

Proofreaders: Chia-chi Tseng, Wen-chi Chang, Pei-Hua Lee

\* This is a speech given at the 2006 Sociology of Arts Conference, Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, 17 November, 2006.

Once upon a time in the U.S. and Europe—say, 20 or 25 years ago—there was a battle about how art history should be done. On one side were the formalists: Those who saw themselves as defenders of the specificity of the artwork, and who believed that the essential *life* of the world of art objects—its essential history—was an internal one, to be told in terms of influence and transmission, with artworks most powerfully shaped and changed by their responses to other artworks. By their belonging to tradition, in a word; their responsiveness to the demands and opportunities of craft; their dealings with the hard facts of medium and material. This was the art history I was taught as a beginner, in the mid-1960's; and I and other people were soon in full-scale revolt against it. We did not believe, back then, that what mattered most about art was its internal history. We thought that art was one among the panoply of social practices by which human beings continually reached out to the world—the world of beliefs and relations and social identities just as much as the world of Nature or matter—and sought to give it form. That is, they sought to give it *meaning* through form. And the human beings engaged in this activity were always, in our view, specific social actors—always located somewhere in a system of domination, serving identifiable interests, producing artworks as *instruments* of a contestable world-view. Artistic traditions were double-edged phenomena. Certainly at one level they were vessels—protectors—of skills and solutions and modes of humane understanding. Granted: But at the same time any given tradition could reasonably be viewed as a set of relentless templates, of obligatory means of replication, of tremendous *exclusions* of other imaginings of the world. Traditions were repressions. They left us with nothing but faint traces (which all the same might be recoverable from the record, we felt) of the understandings of the vast majority of humankind through its long history.

This was all summed up, for us, by Brecht and Benjamin—by the first lines of Brecht's "Questions from a Worker Who Reads" ("Who built Thebes of the seven gates?/In the books you will find

the names of kings”) (Brecht, 1987: 252-253)—and the famous aphorism from Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: “Without exception the cultural treasures [that an historical materialist] surveys have an origin which he cannot contemplate without horror . . . . There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Benjamin, 1955/1969: 256). And somewhere even deeper in the back of our minds—for, after all, Brecht’s and Benjamin’s remarks were no more than battle-cries, and some of us wanted far more than that, we wanted a plan of campaign—echoed the following questions from Karl Mannheim:

Whose mentality is recorded by art objects? What action, situation and tacit choices furnish the perspectives in which artists perceive and represent some aspect of reality? If works of art reflect points of view, who are the protagonists and who the antagonists? Whose reorientation is reflected in changes of style? (Mannheim, 1956: 33).

Mannheim’s questions come from a short essay, written probably in the 1940’s, entitled “Digression on Art History.” You will notice that the essay was already somewhat ancient when we rediscovered it around 1968; but even now Mannheim’s sentences are capable of taking my breath away when I turn to them again—perhaps because they point to a program for a truly materialist art history that has proved so difficult to put into practice. I shall come to that. Certainly I think that the sentences go a long way toward capturing the original impulse of the so-called “social history of art,” as it was launched in the 1960’s and 70’s. Let me state the impulse one more time. With Mannheim’s and Benjamin’s deep questions always nagging us, we thought, back then, that it might be possible to build a way of describing the work of art that would capture the painting or sculpture or piece of porcelain as something *produced*—as a material and historical object, tugged and shaped by a field of

conflicting voices, practices, wishes, perspectives, and powers.

I am not going to argue today that this original horizon of ambition for the social history of art has simply vanished. Of course, in the ebb and flow of academic fashion in the U. S. and Europe, Mannheim's proposals, in the 1980's and 1990's, came to seem a little antiquated, and were displaced by ones borrowed or adapted from very different sources—from Roland Barthes in his high-semiotic moment, from Foucault, from Derrida and Paul de Man. And in using the word "fashion" to describe these new initiatives, I am not meaning to sneer at them. Fashion in the academy is inevitable. It can lead to trivial or serious new work. The social history of art was a fashion. For every dreadful exercise in Foucault-type or Kristeva-esque art history, I can produce just as wooden and embarrassing an example of would-be Marxism or recycled Horkheimer-and-Adorno. The important thing in the academy (as elsewhere in social life) is what happens in the case of that small minority for whom Mannheim's questions—or Foucault's or de Man's—register as a real project, haunting and propelling a genuine program of research. And those minorities continue to exist. There is, I should tell you, truly serious work still going on under the banner of the social history of art—just as there is in the difficult conceptual space opened up by post-structuralism.

Nonetheless, as someone directly involved in the launching of the social history of art, I would be less than honest if I did not admit to a sense of disappointment at what that project turned into over the following decades. Putting fashion aside, and thinking of the best and most serious examples of the genre, it still seems to me notable that Mannheim's program for art history has proved immensely difficult to put into practice. The model implied in Mannheim's questions, looking at them theoretically for a moment, is first and foremost an *action* model, dealing in situations, tacit choices, and reorientations—of actors always partly engaged, but also alienated, by the objects they make or demand. It is an action model, and also a conflictual one, in which patrons are protagonists, with implied or explicit antagonists in view. Let me

put it more sharply: Mannheim's model is a Marxist one: It represents the best side of the Frankfurt School's reworking of Marx's picture of representation as *praxis*—constantly shaped, constrained, and distorted by the criss-cross of class struggle, but also informed and enabled by it. I am not expecting many in the academy these days to agree with the particular picture Marx gave of the forms such struggle took, or would take. I do not agree with it myself. It is Marx's and Mannheim's *general model of representation* that I want to keep hold of: representation as social action, and as action of a necessarily conflictual kind. This is the picture that still strikes me as powerful and plausible. And this is what the social history of art failed to keep alive. Not any one specific account of art under capitalism, or bourgeoisie versus proletariat, or high versus low, or elite versus popular (all of these are dispensable, hypothetical narratives, rightly open to the corrections of research); but rather, Mannheim's whole model of art as *agency*—Mannheim's ontology, if you like. This is the essential loss.

Again, I want to beware of blanket judgments. The social history of art is a complex field. Exceptional work goes on being done within it. But here is the rule, to which the exceptions are exceptions. By and large, in the 1980's and 1990's, the social history of art retreated from Mannheim's interactive model toward a set of interpretative procedures that I want to call, I hope fairly, "social iconography." That is, toward a practice where what art historians were mainly expected to do was *read out* of a picture (plus some accompanying documents) a set of social contents or referents, and behind them or in them a set of patron expectations and viewer understandings. Is this what was hoped for in the early 1970's? I don't think so. Mannheim's key sentence, you may have noticed, is conditional. "If works of art reflect points of view," he says—in other words, if the image of *reflection* is at all an adequate metaphor for the work of art's unstable belonging to its circumstances. And even if it is, provisionally and crudely, then "who are the protagonists and who the antagonists" reflected? A

“point of view” is always constructed at the expense of the excision or occlusion of others. A work of art is an *agon* not an icon. Mannheim did not intend art historians to be iconographers of a work’s social content, then, so much as re-inventors of the form the artwork took in a pattern of social purposes—its *practical materiality*, to put it in a nutshell.

So why did that not happen? Why did it prove so hard, in practice, to carry out Ralph Mannheim’s program—that is, to keep hold of the idea of the work of art as a fully material product, with that materiality always as a virtual, disputable *dimension* to the object, fought over by possible viewers? There are no doubt many answers here, including crude “disciplinary” ones. Art history occupies a specific place in the academy, and is tied closer to the institutions of the market and museum than any of its near neighbors in the humanities. In addition, part of the problem may be the fact that Mannheim’s basic idea, as just stated, is truly conceptually difficult—and therefore susceptible to vulgarization, either in a “social content analysis” or “naive materialist” direction. But part of the reason, I am sure, is the project’s profound dissonance with the regimes of representation under which we currently live. For the two qualities or vectors to visual imagery that the original social history of art most wished to insist on—its *constructed materiality* and its *existence in a field of real-world antagonisms* (actual struggles for power *over* images and power *through* images)—I should say that these were the very qualities or dimensions to representation that our present system of symbolic reproduction exists to repress. Our ruling regimes of representation wish above all to secure representation as a separate, water-tight *realm*—a self-sufficient circuit of pure exchange values, pure image differences, presences eternally at war with absences and absences eternally winning hands down. And they wish to instate antagonism, or struggle for power, or image-instability, as themselves disembodied moves *within the realm of representation*. Images *themselves* are agents, actors—antagonists—destabilizers of meaning. The image-world itself constantly produces and

reinforces the illusion of its independence from the “social.” Is it any wonder, then, that the social history of art failed to keep hold of the difficult, utterly contrary, picture Mannheim is putting forward?

Agency and antagonism, I am arguing, have become ordinary properties of the image-world itself—things images seem to have or do *by their very nature*. Any attempt to sum this process up in a couple of specific illustrations is bound to trivialize it: It is a question of the whole pervasive idiom of our image-world, not of any one or two examples. Nonetheless I want to show you two photographs, which I hope will make certain things clear. Figure 1 was taken 20 or more years ago in Stockholm. The painting it shows is site-specific; done, if I remember rightly, in real fresco, and fitted quite skillfully into its alcove. In it a man of color, maybe African or African-American, dressed in a Catholic priest’s white robe, is offering what looks to be his penis, in a form of Holy Communion, to a group of agitated, but obviously pious, young white worshippers. The piece, as I say, is site-specific, and clearly done with the full cooperation of the site’s owners, and the white tiling visible on the wall below the fresco begins to give the game away about where we are standing. In one of the stalls of the Men’s Lavatory belonging to the Swedish Museum of Modern Art in Stockholm. I still remember the feeling of exiting from the room of Pollocks and Picabias there and finding that State-sponsored outrageousness, of the kind that would once have brought down the full force of the law on any Dadaist or anarchist bold enough to do it, now looked down on me in the Modern Museum even as I took a leak.

Figure 2 is slightly more recent, taken in 1990, in Bratislava, in what was then Czechoslovakia, toward the beginning of the end of the Communist regime there. Let me add another view of the same small space (Figure 3). The acquaintance who took these photographs had been involved for several years with the anti-Communist Left in Czechoslovakia, and I recall him showing me them after one of his trips and saying that he had gradually

come to realize that decor of much the same kind, collaged from Western newspapers and magazines, was something like standard decor for the libertarians Leftists and Green Party activists with whom he had been staying. It is, by the way, another bathroom snapshot. Apparently this was the favorite place in 1990 for image-imaginings of what capitalism would soon have to offer.

My two examples could lead us in many different directions. What they suggest, for a start, about the possibilities of a visual practice in our societies which would have some genuinely subversive or antagonistic effect is to my mind chilling. It seems that any past avant-garde aggression—any attempt to move the object, as Man Ray once tried to, from the space of exchange to that of gratuitous desire or revulsion—can now be recycled as one more ironic gracenote to the round of diet successes and decorating ideas.<sup>1</sup> It seems that any act of insolent desublimation and irreverence toward the cultural achievements of the past—acts which once were believed to wound and scandalize the reverence for culture of the powers-that-be—are now comfortably part of the corporate world's fake populism.<sup>2</sup> What's the future of fun, asks Bally (Figure 5)? What's Art but the reward of Money?<sup>3</sup> We've learnt your lessons, Marcel Duchamp!

What matters in all this is not simply that contemporary capitalism seems to *want* dissidence, on the level of imagery, almost as its lifeblood, and is prepared to provide for and subsidize it as part of the state apparatus. That may be true, but the problem goes deeper. It is that the very language—the syntax, the deep

---

<sup>1</sup> See Figure 4 for the cover image of *Good Housekeeping* magazine that was shown here in the speech.

<sup>2</sup> An advertisement of men's underwear was shown here in the speech, with a detail of two Roman-Greek bronze statues of male warriors in modern underpants. The image is not included because the copyright holder cannot be traced, though every effort has been made.

<sup>3</sup> It refers to an advertisement of *Money* magazine with the heading "The rewards of Money." Unfortunately, the image is not available for reproduction due to copyright issues.

structure—that the avant-garde once devised as an argument *with* and *against* capitalist circulation (let us call it for short the language of collage)—is now the idiom that signifies capitalism’s hold *on* our imaginations, whether we are part of a capitalist polity or still just outside it (See Figures 6 and 7). Image flow and image displacement—the image as the perfect form of a generalized de-materialization of social existence—are *now what capitalism is*, or wants to be. They are the idiom in which it presents itself—so far, irresistibly—to people preparing to be consumers. “Test the West” *as an image-world*, and you are sure not to find it wanting.

Many of you, looking at the sequence of images I have just shown to suggest how the present image-world is constituted, will have had the strange feeling that you were looking not at the present but at the recent past. The images already look dated, in ways that are hard to define. And you are right. The photo of the “Test the West” advertisement (Figure 6), for instance—just to make it explicit, “West” is a brand of German-made cigarette—was taken somewhere on the streets of East Berlin in 1990, only a matter of months after the Fall of the Wall. And the Stock Exchange photomontage—here it is *in situ*, on the front page of *The New York Times* (Figure 7)—appeared only a year or so later. Still in the Gorbachev era, you will notice.

I think these examples continue to speak to certain central features of our image-apparatus. But obviously things have changed in the 15 years since 1991, and I need to register that fact, verbally and visually. Let me put up a couple of further icons to suggest the nature of the new situation. What you are looking at are the front and back pages of the *San Francisco Chronicle* from two years ago, 9 May 2004 (Figures 8 and 9). I take them as symptomatic of the new image-moment in several different ways. First, they are typical of a more and more widespread recognition that images have become part of the very fabric of politics—and maybe not any more an optional extension or embellishment of political and social control, but a central instrumentation of it. And this centrality, it is thought, has to do with the invention and

dissemination—essentially over the past two decades—of a whole new armory of image-machines, which make visual representations of many different kinds instantly accessible to users worldwide. This is point number two: The arrival of a world of images immensely more diverse and speeded up and personally malleable, so they say, than anything human beings had previously been used to. And thirdly, as the *Chronicle* headline implies—and the pessimism of the headline is entirely typical of commentary in the U. S. over the past two years—this new image-regime is increasingly unstable. It is less and less open to control from the center. Once upon a time the U. S. *owned* the image-world, and exported its imagery of the good life unobstructed to the ends of the earth. Hollywood, pop and celebrity culture, the language of branding and packaging and commodity chic, the small world of the sit com and the soap opera—this was the *world language* of modernity. It established the forms that freedom and community were to be allowed to take. It was irresistible, intoxicating.

And of course it still is. I am very far from underestimating the continuing magic of commodity culture. But all the same, something is shifting. Power itself is beginning to wonder whether the image-world is still under control. Here, for instance, is no less than Donald Rumsfeld, the U. S. Secretary of Defense, speaking to the Council on Foreign Relations just a few months ago. “Our federal government,” says Rumsfeld, “is really only beginning to adapt our operations to the 21st century . . . . Today we’re engaged in the first war in history—unconventional and irregular as it may be—in an era of e-mails, blogs, cell phones, Blackberrys, Instant Messaging, digital cameras, a global Internet with no inhibitions, hand-held videocameras, talk radio, 24-hour news broadcasts, satellite television. There’s never been a war fought in this environment before” (Rumsfeld, 2006).

“Consider this statement”—I’m still quoting Rumsfeld, but now he himself is quoting someone else—“‘More than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. We are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of Muslims.’ The

speaker [says Rumsfeld] was not some modern-day image consultant in a public relations firm here in New York City, it was Osama bin Laden's chief lieutenant Ayman al-Zawahiri. Consider that the violent extremists have established media relations committees—these are terrorists and they have media relations committees that meet and talk about strategy, not with bullets but with words . . . . They plan and design their headline-grabbing attacks using every means of communication to intimidate and break the collective will of free people” (Rumsfeld, 2006).

Let us call this the Donald Rumsfeld theory of the spectacle. Rumsfeld and Ayman are at one, as I see it, in picturing the new structure of the image-world as a matter essentially of *technics*—a question of the present tempo and vividness of image production and dissemination. And both commanders would like to reduce the structure of politics in conditions of hyper-modernity to a battlefield of warring image machines, or better, of image military-industrial complexes. “The longer it takes,” says the Secretary, “to put a strategic communication framework in place, the more we can be certain that the vacuum will be filled by the enemy . . . . The U. S. government will have to develop an institutional capability to anticipate and act within the [current globalized] news cycle. That will require instituting 24-hour press operation centers, elevating Internet operations and other channels of communication to equal status with traditional 20th century press relations.” And so on.

I shall have something to say in a moment about Donald Rumsfeld's theory of spectacle—his view of the present forces and relations of image-production. Many of its background assumptions I deeply disagree with. But let us agree with Rumsfeld on one basic point. Over the past two decades—and inescapably since the events of 11 September 2001—it has become clear (clear to the point that the recognition has become commonplace) that the image-field matters to the very identity, the very legitimacy, of the state. If it cannot maintain control of the realm of standardized appearances, it may lose control, period. And it is

vulnerable—maybe more vulnerable at the level of the image than at any other. Yes, the Twin Towers are the icon of that (Figure 10). But so is the whole spectrum of counter-images conjured up by the *Chronicle* story—turning as they do on the obscurity of Abu Ghraib. And so does the image-battle this past summer in Lebanon, which was intertwined *completely* with the battle of bombs and rockets. So that by now Israel’s defeat in the image-war in Lebanon is indissociable from its defeat on the ground and in the air. Defeat *was* defeat at the level of the image. No wonder that one typically pro-Israeli U. S. columnist was led to comment bitterly, on day 6 or 7 of the Israelis bombing campaign, that “terrorists may have developed methods that make it nearly impossible for superior military forces to uproot them, given the global media environment.” I could spend the rest of my 50 minutes decoding this—its level on level of hypocritical resentment is mind-boggling! What it says, essentially, is that the normal havoc and butchery of war from the air has become *visible*, and that that visibility is more and more, “given the global media environment,” a form of counter-attack.

These are the lineaments of the new image-world. A new ubiquity and flexibility and availability, it is claimed; and to go with that, a destabilization. As I say, it is not necessarily the case that I accept all the elements of the picture we are being offered of this new situation; or agree that the new features really add up to an epoch-making change. But *some* real intensification of the life of images in society is taking place. A new kind of machinery, and a new degree of uncontrol.

The question for me to answer, in the present context, is how all this affects the practice of art history. How, in particular, does it alter the terms and ambitions of the kind of art history I began by describing to you—the kind that wanted to follow the thread of Ralph Mannheim’s “Digression”? Without making my answers here merely autobiographical, perhaps it would help to say that in the past two years I have published two books; or, more strictly, two books have been published which I have had a hand in writing.

The first, written with three other Bay Area authors, is entitled *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (Figure 11) (Boal, Clark, Matthews, & Watts, 2005). It is a polemical survey of world politics over the past few years, and it focuses directly on many of the issues I have just outlined—in particular the late-capitalist state’s investment in the production and management of a strictly choreographed realm of appearance, and the threat to that investment represented by the *image-defeat* of 11 September. The book is very far from arguing that the war of images has become the main battleground of hyper-modernity. That is how *Afflicted Powers* has been read, it seems, by certain image-besotted readers. But the present world crisis is obviously over-determined. The politics of oil remain vital; so does the panorama of “failed states” and out-of-control arms markets left behind by the Cold War and the chaos of the neo-liberal 90’s; likewise, the terminal fiasco of secular nationalisms and the turn to religion as an alternative “imagined community;” and the savage dynamics of American militarization. *It is to the extent that 9/11 chimed in with, and crystallized, these wider realities that it became the event that ushered in a new political order.*

Image-events are not, then, in my view, determinative. They still stand in complex relation to a wider pattern of protagonists and antagonists, interests and ideological commitments. Mannheim’s questions still apply. But it may be true (if regrettable) that image-events and image-circuitry—new conditions of image-production—give the image-world *agency* of an unprecedented kind. This is very much what *Afflicted Powers* is addressed to. And right at the heart of the book is an attempt to mobilize again the basic insight into the mechanics of spectacle that fired Guy Debord’s first brilliant discussion: That the power of images, to the extent that there is a such a power, is a function of the powerlessness—the constantly manufactured and reinforced powerlessness—of those other forms of life, that other texture of social relations, which, through the long course of human history, have been capable of speaking *back* to the image, and putting the

Rumsfeld world-view in doubt (Debord, 1967/1994). For let me say again what every art historian knows: That the state and the image have *always* gone together. The oldest monument we have of ancient Egyptian state-formation—the stela of King Djet from Abydos (Figure 12)—has on it three signs: Two of them, the snake and the falcon, are totemic labels of the king’s name and divinity, but the third, already, is an image of his image-apparatus—a representation of an elaborate, patterned, gigantic palace façade. In the oldest Egyptian calendars, the erection of statues is an event as important to the state’s record of time as the date and height of the year’s Nile flood. What is new about the society of the spectacle, then, cannot possibly be the importance power places on visual bombardment of its subjects: What is new is the thinned and standardized social texture into which the image-bombardment is launched. What is new is the isolated and marketized “individual” whose parody of freedom leaves him or her with fewer and fewer counter-languages—anti-imageries—with which to *speak back* to Rumsfeld’s “strategic communication framework.” It is, in a word, the “colonization of everyday life” that makes the image-world into the social power that it has become.

So much for *Afflicted Powers*. Taking part in writing it, by the way, was not a carefully plotted and meditated move on my part—it was a reaction to an extreme situation. But I suppose, looking back, that the move makes sense in relation to the model of art history with which I began. One form present-day art history may be obliged to take, as the war of images intensifies, is that of direct—and partisan—inquiry into the war; always with the wish to recapture (I revert directly to the two key phrases I used earlier) the *constructed materiality* of a set of representations and their *existence in a field of real-world antagonisms*.

This may be necessary. Much in the present situation demands it. But I am very far from believing that all art history can do, even in the current moment, is have its questions about the power of the image become part of directly engaged, directly political writing. I believe it is possible for art history also to

address the present regime of appearance purposely *from a distance*—from a deliberate Otherness, from a pastness, *from a commitment to a bygone materiality*. That is what I found myself doing in the other book I wrote, this time on my own, in the years since September 11. *The Sight of Death* (Figure 13) (Clark, 2006), which has the subtitle *An Experiment in Art Writing*, has as its subject two landscape paintings by Poussin. One of them is this one, the *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake* done in 1648 (Figure 14). The other is called *Landscape with a Calm*. For a matter of months in early 200 the two paintings hung face to face in the same room in Los Angeles; and I found myself returning morning after morning to confront them. More or less without thinking, I started to jot down my shifting responses. And after a while it dawned on me that we have almost no records of just such a process—a person returning, day after day, to images that for some reason ask to be seen again. This is what the book is about. It is mainly composed of day by day diary entries, written in front of the paintings; and it tells the story of two images changing through time, offering up different aspects and dimensions of themselves, resisting interpretation, persisting in their wordlessness.

You can imagine that I have often been asked the question, in the months since *The Sight of Death* appeared, how on earth it could possibly belong to the same project as *Afflicted Powers*—and whether it was anything more than a last-ditch *retreat* from the present image-world, letting me go to ground in an imaginary 17th century? No doubt that's true, partly. And anyway, I *believe* in retreat. I don't feel it is anyone's duty to live continually in the present—especially a present like the one we have. But this on its own is not quite an answer. For of course I do think that *The Sight of Death* is a kind of art history addressed specifically *to* the present. Let me say how.

And let me speak first to art history as pedagogy. It will not surprise you to hear that teaching for me has always seemed an embattled activity, taking place in a culture—university culture very much included—increasingly turned against it. Let's call it the

culture of multiple choice, of lectures as performances, of “methodologies” chosen from the supermarket shelves of “disciplines,” of books as disposable databases on the verge of being superseded by others less quaint and inflexible (less “elitist”). This culture has always been the dominant one in the universities I have worked for. There is very little difference, ideologically speaking, between the claptrap of the “new universities” of the 60’s (higher education “forged in the white heat of the new technological revolution”) and the current talk of “virtual higher education” carried on in cyberspace.

Nonetheless, there is a sense in which the social and educational drift of the last 15 years has made a difference—at least, to the teaching of art history. For somewhere at the center of the current claptrap is the idea that “we” are passing from a word-based culture to an image-based one. And this idea, “lite” as it is, does point to something. Citizens of advanced industrial societies, to return to the point made earlier, are accustomed from an early age to living in a constant flow of visual imagery. “Flow” is important here. The imagery is designed *not to be looked at closely*, or with sustained attention. It would not do its work (of selling, of confirming and enforcing approximate—marketable—visualizations of the good life, of achieved satisfaction, of individual fulfillment) if it *was* looked at closely. (Videogames are the exception that proves the rule. Attention is allowed here apparently because it can be stripped down to a state of nerve-racking fear and suspicion, with the world continually scanned for incoming bullets.) “Flow”—meaning constant replacement, fading in and out of focus, speed-up and slow-down, instant magnification and miniaturization, a ludicrous and mind-numbing overkill of visual stimuli—erodes the boundary between the imaged (the imaginary) and the real. Everything is “representation,” they tell us. Everything is manipulable, virtual, scaleless, infinitely translatable.

I think these are the main features of the visual culture in which my students are brought up. And at one level I see art

history as a modest, no doubt quixotic, effort to present to them the fact that other visual cultures were (and are) very different, and in some ways preferable. Visual images were, for a start, made in the past with limited and intractable physical means. An oil painting or a lost-wax bronze are pathetic, vulnerable, proud *things*. They bear the mark of individual or collective effort (call it craftsmanship) on their faces. The best oils and bronzes are full of a sense of—a positive reflection on—their own mere thinglikeness and vulnerability (as well as an exultation in the thinglikeness and vulnerability overcome). In a word, they are human. They spell out the limits of human imagination and practice. They are all about the eternal war between possibility (“virtuality”) and resistant material fact. The best moments in teaching come when I find a way of conjuring this kind of consciousness back into being—against the worst that the belching slide projector and crumpled screen can do. I go on wondering if this year, finally, the conjuring trick will fail. There is a social pessimist in me, who sees less and less reason to doubt that one of these days the symbol managers and cybertechnicians will have made the world they dream of, so that I and my sad little technology—words from a stage, xeroxed handouts, essay requirements, dim celluloid shadows of Titian or the *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*—will mean nothing.<sup>4</sup> But it interests me that this has not happened yet. I still take comfort from the fact that simply presenting the opportunity for sustained attention, and proposing that visual images carry within them the possibility of genuine difficulty, genuine depth and resistance—doing this strikes some students as such a *relief!*

Those we teach at the moment are clearly aware that they live within a specific, and evolving, regime of visualization: A specific technics of imaging and image-renewal, which more and more of them realize carries with it (in it) a specific cognitive potential (and anti-potential)—an epistemology, an ethics and politics. Some of

---

<sup>4</sup> Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, 1907, oil on canvas, 8’ x 7’8”.

them want help in understanding this regime, and some (fewer) want help in thinking a resistance to it. They are asking for art historians' help in thinking alternatives to an image-world in which "image" equals immediacy, transparency, speed, disposability, semantic flattening, and constant flow.

Alternatives there are. The immense multiplicity of the image-past provides a store of them. It ought to be possible for those of us whose job is to dwell in that past to present our best students with a picture of the ways in which visual communication has struggled, over the centuries, to elude and exceed the bounds of the verbal—or of the visual conceived as a mere function of the verbal, an instrumentation of a world where words define the limits of the known. For imaging—*imagining otherwise*—has been one of the great means by which human subjects have proposed (always fitfully, always against the grain) accounts of human suffering and aspiration that the powerful have not been able to turn immediately, or turn wholly and irrevocably, to their purposes. The accounts survive. It takes rather little, in many cases, to release them from the tissue of lies and half-truths that has most often constituted their art-historical afterlife. An historian of the Russian Revolution once commented that the "black" economies of the civil war period testify to "the persistence and ingenuity of human beings in devising ways and means to exchange goods when this becomes necessary to their survival." No less can be said of the human urge to warp and interrupt the established circuits of representation. Survival, for the species, involves resistance at many levels.

These issues are made the more urgent, I believe, because any critical art history worth the name is obliged to do battle at present with the image-ideology spawned by the new forces and relations of image-production. In particular, we are confronted by the notion that some kind of threshold has been passed in our time between a verbal world and a visual one. Not that it is argued that the realm of language has proved dispensable for human beings (only a few fools toy with the idea of its being left behind

completely), but that its pacing and structuring and sedimentation of experience is increasingly invaded—interfered with, overtaken—by the different rhythms and transparencies of the shifting visual array. We have at last a technology of visualization, it is claimed, that truly can emulate language’s flexibility and imaginative force, but augment that force by its own unique offer of vividness, its promise of worlds laid out in an instant. Grammar gives way to perspective.

This is a persuasive story, but I deeply do not believe it. On the contrary, our present means of image-production strike me as still utterly under the spell of the verbal—that’s a main part of the trouble with them. They are an instrumentation of *a certain kind of language use*: Their notions of image clarity, image flow, image depth, and image density are all determined by the parallel (unimpeded) movement of the logo, the brand name, the product slogan, the compressed pseudo-narrative of the TV commercial, the sound bite, the T-shirt confession, the chat show question and answer session. Billboards, web pages, and video games are just projections—perfections, perfected banalizations—of this world of half-verbal exchange. They are truly (as their intellectual groupies go on claiming) a “discourse”—read, a sealed echo-chamber of lies.

This is the situation in which it becomes more and more imperative to point to the boundaries between seeing and speaking, or sentence and visual configuration. And imperative, as I have said, to keep alive the notion of a kind of visuality that truly establishes itself at the edge of the verbal—never wholly apart from it, that is, never out of language’s clutches, but able and willing to exploit the difference between a sign and a pose, say, or a syntactical structure and a physical (visual, material) interval. I take a dim view of the present regime of the image not out of nostalgic “logocentricity,” then, but because I see our image machines as flooding the world with words—with words (blurbs, jingles, catchphrases, ten thousand quick tickets to meaning) given just sufficient visual cladding.

This, ultimately, is what *The Sight of Death* is about. We are

living, I think, through a terrible moment in the politics of imaging, envisioning, visualizing; and the more a regime of visual flow, displacement, disembodiment, endless available revisability of the image, endless ostensible transparency and multi-dimensionality and sewing together of everything in nets and webs—the more this pseudo-utopia presents itself as the very form of self-knowledge, self-production, self-control—the more necessary it becomes to recapture what imaging *can* be: To suggest what is involved in truly getting to know something by making a picture of it: To state the grounds for believing that some depictions are worth returning to, and that this returning (this focusing, this staying still, this allowing oneself to respond to the *picture's* stillness) is a form of politics in itself, meeting other forms head on.

I believe, in a word, that the distance of visual imagery from verbal discourse is the most precious thing about it. It represents one possibility of resistance in a world saturated by slogans, labels, sales pitches, little marketable meaning-motifs. And that is why the stress in art history now has to fall, it seems to me, on *the specificity of picturing*, and on that specificity's being so closely bound up with the mere materiality of a given practice, and that materiality's being so often the generator of semantic depth—of true thought, true stilling and shifting of categories.

I know, finally, that the kind of polarized practice of art history I seem to be recommending—the polarities represented by *Afflicted Powers* and *The Sight of Death*—is bound to seem outlandish to some. And particularly *The Sight of Death* side of the polarity: The idea that one main part of what we should be doing in the age of image-machines is dwelling on pictorial particulars, insisting on the semantic power of the still, the mute, the material. A critical art history has spent the last thirty years believing, or pretending to believe, that its task was to disabuse the young (and old) of the illusion of culture. When almost no one we teach has the illusion any longer—when our young allies want urgently to know *the utmost that images have been capable of*, in order to fight back against the present illusion of *anti-culture*—we are faced

with a state of affairs in which it seems we shall have to unlearn our most treasured clichés. Mannheim's agenda does not disappear, but it is radically reinflected.

Whose mentality is recorded by art objects? [he asks] What action, situation and tacit choices furnish the perspectives in which artists perceive and represent some aspect of reality? If works of art reflect points of view, who are the protagonists and who the antagonists? Whose reorientation is reflected in changes of style? (Mannheim, 1956: 33)

These are great and difficult questions still, but they strike me now as not materialist enough. Just as much as the “Who” and “What,” we need to insist at present on the “How.” We need better *verbs* of visualization than Mannheim's “reflect” and “record” and “represent.” We need a picture of art-making in which the facts of manufacture—the object-ness of the “art object”—is a possible site of resistance to the mere reproduction (or “reflection”) of an already established “point of view.” To what extent is *another* human history embedded in the endless images of itself—of its unspeakable perfection—that the past of Power has left us? That is the question I want to add to Ralph Mannheim's list. A disabused art history—disabused, that is, of *both* the negative and positive myths of culture—may one day, I hope, take the question as its own.



Figure 1 One of the stalls of the Men's Lavatory of the Museum of Modern Art, Stockholm. Photo by Robert Baldwin.



Figure 2 Snapshot of a bathroom, taken in 1990, in Bratislava, then Czechoslovakia. Photo by Geoffrey Sea.



Figure 3 Another view of the bathroom in Bratislava. Photo by Geoffrey Sea.

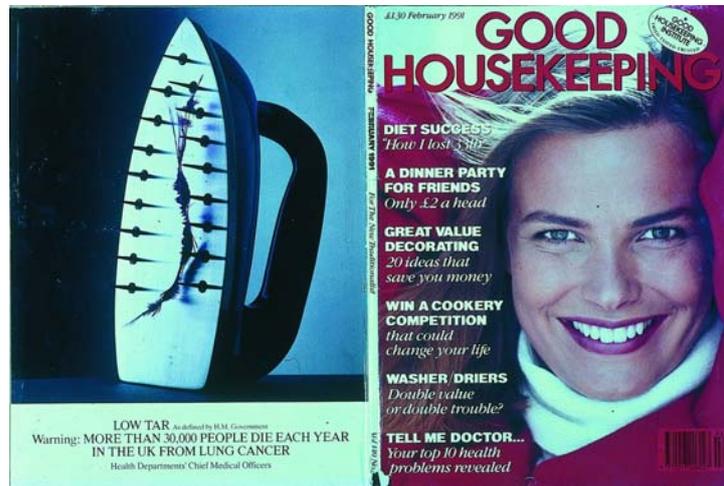


Figure 4 From *Good Housekeeping* (1991, February). Right (front cover): courtesy The National Magazine Company; left (back cover): advertisement of “Silk Cut” cigarettes, courtesy Gallaher Group.

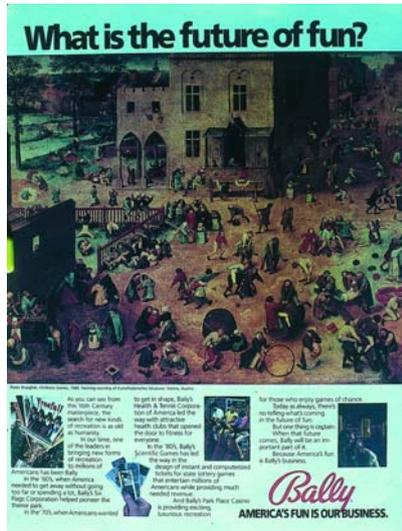


Figure 5 Advertisement of Bally slot machine, 1986. Courtesy Bally Technologies, Inc.



Figure 6 Advertisement of West tobacco, taken on the street in East Berlin, 1990. Courtesy Reemtsma.



Figure 7 Stock Exchange photomontage on the front page of *The New York Times*. From *The New York Times*, April 18 © 1991 The New York Times, Inc. All rights reserved. Used by permission and protected by the Copyright Laws of the United States. The printing, copying, redistribution, or retransmission of the Material without express written permission is prohibited.



Figure 8 The *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 9, 2004, page E1 © The San Francisco Chronicle.



Figure 9 The *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 9, 2004, page E6 © The San Francisco Chronicle.



Figure 10 World Trade Center Attacked, on September 11, 2001. Photograph by TDI/Getty Images.

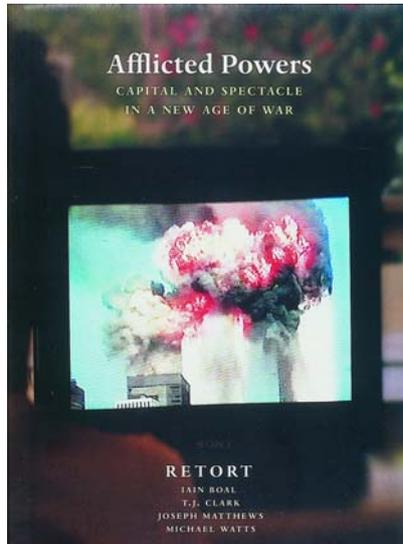


Figure 11 Front cover of *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War* (Boal et al., 2005). Courtesy Verso Books.



Figure 12 Stela of King Djet from his tomb at Abydos. Courtesy Musée du Louvre, Paris.

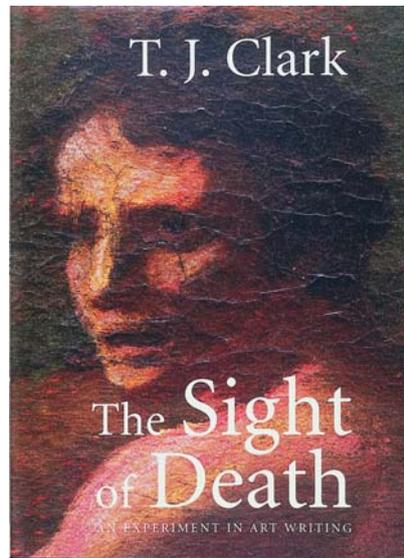


Figure 13 Front cover of *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (Clark, 2006). Courtesy Yale University Press.



Figure 14 Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), *Landscape with a Man Killed by a Snake*, probably 1648, oil on canvas, 118.2 x 197.8 cm.

## References

- Benjamin, W. (1969). Theses on the philosophy of history (H. Zohn, Trans.). In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and reflections* (pp. 253-264). New York, NY: Schocken. (Original work published 1955)
- Boal, I., Clark, T. J., Matthews, J., & Watts, M. (2005). *Afflicted powers: Capital and spectacle in a new age of war*. London, UK: Verso.
- Brecht, B. (1987). *Poems, 1913-1956* (Rev. ed.). London, UK & New York, NY: Methuen.
- Clark, T. J. (2006). *The sight of death: An experiment in art writing*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Debord, G. (1994). *The society of the spectacle* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). New York, NY: Zone Books. (Original work published 1967)
- Good Housekeeping*. (UK ed.). (1991, February). 139, 2: Cover.
- Mannheim, K. (1956). *Essays on the sociology of culture*. London, UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Rumsfeld, D. H. (2006, February 17). Speech delivered at the Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved November 5, 2007, from <http://www.defenselink.mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=27>

## 「影像—機器」時代的藝術史

提摩西·J·克拉克

(李珮華譯)

Department of History of Art, University of California, Berkeley

E-mail: travesty@berkeley.edu

### 摘 要

本文思考，曼海姆提出的（馬克思主義）藝術史計畫何以在多年後依然深具力量，並且探討，難以將曼海姆的影像生產基本模式付諸實行的現實。曼海姆的模式描繪了一個衝突的、物質性的具體影像活動進行的場域。而我們目前所處的影像世界裡，影像顯得（或宣稱要）愈來愈流動、非具體與一次性，這些重要特性使得要掌握影像生產的實踐物質性日益艱難。在此情況下，藝術史的任務和策略仍然渾沌未明。本文描述作者在最近兩本著作裡所採取的策略，並進而思考，面對當前對於影像流動性與立即性愈加喧囂直上的崇拜（或意識形態），藝術史的教學可以有何種機會。

**關鍵詞：**藝術史、物質、影像世界、奇觀