

Subjectivity, historical imagination and the language of art history

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A great deal of recently produced art writing and art theory foregrounds subjectivity. Art historians are already reflecting on this but a clearer picture is needed specifically of how foregrounded subjectivity works together with the objects involved and their histories. What do these new qualities of subjectivity do to the visibility of the objects in question, of their shapes and colours and worlds? Chari Larsson, for example, in an interesting and highly agreeable recent article in the *Journal of Art Historiography* uses Roland Barthes to think about the foregrounding of subjectivity in some recent art-historical texts as a kind of ‘amicable writing’ in which a fragmented authorial selfhood characterised by a ‘lack of resolution or mastery’ announces ‘a distinct shift in the subject-object relationship’. While this kind of subject-declarative, fragmentary and anti-authoritative writing is, with George Didi-Huberman’s book *Aperçues* (2018), coming to the surface right now, Larsson draws a genealogy going back through T. J. Clark’s *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing* (2006) to Walter Pater to Michel de Montaigne. Larsson describes Clark’s diary entries recording (or purporting to record) his perceptions and thoughts while looking at two Nicolas Poussin pictures in LA day in, day out, as one of the most significant recent stagings by an art historian of a ‘lack of authorial clarity and cohesion’, one which short-circuits conventional expectations of claims of authority over Poussin and the past with its unstable prose.¹ My essay, however, explores the question of the relations

¹ Chari Larsson, ‘Didi-Huberman and art history’s amicable incursions’, *Journal of Art Historiography*, 22, June 2020, 15, 10. See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Aperçues*, Les Editions de Minuit: Paris, 2018 and T. J. Clark, *The Sight of Death: An Experiment in Art Writing*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. Like me, Larsson’s article also addresses Michael Ann Holly, whose work has become a touchstone in these debates, see below. My essay is also building on other recent work. Sam Rose reveals a seam or cord running from modernist conceptualisations of form, which he convincingly reappraises as aesthetic and imaginative communing between subjects, picture and world rather than an autonomous abstraction, all the way down to T. J. Clark. In some ways I unpack intense and nuanced episodes along this seam and my emphasis on language complements Rose’s consideration of the intellectual legacy of modernism. *Art and Form: From Roger Fry to Global Modernism*, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019. Rose locates Baxandall in this post-Fry continuum, e.g. 85 and elsewhere, in passing, Rose nods at just what I am unpacking in Baxandall, ‘The Fear of Aesthetics in Art and Literary Theory’, *New Literary History*, 48: 2, spring 2017, 223–244, 237. See also Catherine Grant and Patricia Rubin eds, *Art History: Creative Writing and Art History*, 34: 2, April 2011, republished as *Creative Writing and Art History*, Chichester and Malden MA: John Wiley & Sons, 2012; and Elizabeth Prettejohn, ‘Art Writing Now by T. J. Clark and Peter de Bolla’, *Art History*, 30: 5, November 2007, 769–777.

between subjectivity, object and history I posed above by turning to Clark's later and rather different book, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (2018), a collection of essays about worldliness and embodiment in pictures by Giotto, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Poussin, Paolo Veronese and Pablo Picasso.² I'll be proposing a rather different reading of Clark to Larsson's in which subject and object, imagination and history are seen to interact with one another in intricate and powerful verbal patterns. What will emerge is a picture not of an unstable but rather an intricately choreographed Clarkian prose which will be seen, in turn, to be doing interesting things with subjectivity and its place in writing about art and the past.

An article by Michael Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', will give me the tools for my verbal analyses, my close readings. Published in 1979 in *New Literary History*, a journal established ten years before to explore the theoretical dimensions of literary criticism and which soon became a forum for theoretical debate across the humanities, the article strikes a rather different, more subjective tone to Baxandall's books and is a sometimes rather sarcastic put-down of contemporary theoretical wrangling, but it is also a significant theoretical intervention into the discipline.³ In a key section of the article, Baxandall develops an analysis of three and a half indirect ways words point to what is visually interesting in the object of study. I will unpack implications in Baxandall's beguilingly economically written and subtle reflections on the language of art history, and I will deploy Baxandall's model to close read art-historical writing, attending at the verbal level to the intricate ways that subjectivity is put to work by different writers in order to bring the reader closer to the object and, via this closeness to the object, into histories of the object's making.

This essay is doing two interconnected things, then. First it extracts and deploys Baxandall's model for analysing relations between subjectivity, the object and history at the level of language. Second, it reveals the sophistication and power with which subjectivity, object and history have been handled in some particularly excellent writing about art and the past, ranging from Baxandall to Clark. I also consider some writing by Adrian Stokes, whom Baxandall very pointedly describes in his *NLH* article as a writer who communicates a very close and vivid engagement with the object and its making through subjective response. In turn, then, I will be proposing a perhaps rather surprising genealogy of my own, stretching back through Clark, Baxandall, Stokes and ultimately to John Ruskin. What I will be emphasising is, in tandem with a declaration at the verbal level of the existence and function of the imagining subject, Baxandall, Clark and Stokes constantly, deftly,

² T. J. Clark, *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come*, London: Thames & Hudson, 2018.

³ Michael Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', *New Literary History*, 10: 3, April 1979, 453–465. See Ralph Cohen, 'The First Decade: Some Editorial Remarks', *New Literary History*, 10: 3, April 1979, 417–421. Cohen commissioned Baxandall's piece: Michael Baxandall, *Substance, Sensation, Perception: Interview by Richard Cándida Smith*, Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute, 1998, 116. An abridged version of Baxandall's essay: 'The Language of Art Criticism' in *The Language of Art History*, eds Salim Kemal and Ivan Gaskell, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, chapter 5, 67–75. K. R. Lodge's contemporaneous article focuses on grammar (and German): 'The Language of Art History', *Art History*, 2: 1, March 1979, 73–84; at the time Baxandall was on the editorial board of *Art History*.

unrelentingly bend their words towards the object, making aspects of the picture, the sculpture, the relief, visible, throwing new verbal light on its colours and edges and the long-vanished hands and brains that went into making them. Objects and their histories are made visible partly subjectively. Clark foregrounds subjectivity more dramatically than Baxandall, but the fundamentals of the operations at work are continuous and these continuities are traceable at the verbal level. There is, I will be suggesting then, more than meets the eye to Clark's denunciation of Baxandall in the first chapter of *Heaven on Earth*, although it is true Baxandall and Clark are in the end very differently oriented art writers. Crucial to understanding these diverging orientations—towards the past and the present, respectively—is the different (and in Clark's case changing) function of imagination in their writings.

One of the attractions these writings share, it seems to me, is that in different ways their language offers us a kind of writing in which properly calibrated subjectivity is not felt to be an impediment but the very means by which to get at something like 'history'. Baxandall calls this deployment of subjectivity in the service of historical interpretation 'imagination', and at the end of the essay I'll be arguing a case for rethinking the question of subjectivity in art-historical writing through an expanded notion of imagination. The somewhat un-likeable terms 'subjective' and 'objective' are convenient. They are at their most useful when thought of as dialectical and I am content to let my ensuing exposition of Baxandall and the others do the rest of the work of defining them. The writings I will be close reading and unpicking work on the basis that the way to be an objective art historian, the way to really have something worthwhile to say about works of art and the past, is by being comfortable in one's subjective skin. In these writers, self-consciousness about the limits of historical interpretation becomes the basis for an interpretation that respects the integrity of the object and its belonging to a lost historical world, while at the same doing justice to the object's affective hold on us in the present. This self-consciousness about the limits of interpretation registers as subjectivity, creatively and tactfully deployed at the level of language. While I am not proposing here to 're-define' Baxandall's art historical methodology *tout court*, I'll indicate how the *NLH* arguments fit in with the environment of Baxandall's thinking on art history around the time of his article and I'll suggest, along the way, that the fundamental importance he attaches to subjectivity has been somewhat downplayed in scholarly appraisals of Baxandall's work. Fundamentally my analysis makes the point that the exigent and even philosophical questions of art history are negotiated by excellent writers such as Baxandall and Clark at the level of their language. Following Baxandall, I don't make an awful lot of the distinction between 'art criticism' and 'art history' here, and I suspect Adrian Stokes and late Clark wouldn't either. If we wanted to, we could say that the writers I discuss seem to want to bring elements of what is sometimes thought of as art criticism to bear upon art history. To take Clark, he is certainly making interventions in the discipline of art history but he is often doing so (with all his authority) from the margins of the scholastic discipline via Thames & Hudson and the *LRB*.⁴ The way I'd ultimately

⁴ See, for example, T. J. Clark, 'Picasso and Tragedy', *London Review of Books*, 39: 16, August 2017, which speaks to the last chapter in *Heaven on Earth*, 'Picasso and the Fall'.

like to put it is that these art-critically eloquent writers make it clear that relaxing the distinction can do much in the way of animating writing about art and the past.⁵

Language and time

Though it might be familiar to some, the absence of Baxandall's analysis from recent methodological discussions and curricula is one reason for my bringing it to attention here. It is worth approaching Baxandall through Michael Ann Holly's writing on him because Holly, who has become a touchstone in debates about subjectivity and art-historical writing, foregrounds something important about which Baxandall also has very interesting things to say: the relation between language and time. Holly's book *The Melancholy Art* (2013) characterises the discipline of art history in eponymous terms. For Holly, art history is the melancholy art because it involves a continuous re-living of and paradoxical compensation for the sense of loss we feel upon looking on material things which linger into our present but which belong to a lost past. We almost cannot bear to look upon all that we have lost to the past, the vividness of life in that moment when the just-finished object was first beheld by someone long ago, or yesterday. And yet of course we keep on looking. In confirming, beyond all doubt, our separation from that past, the objects of study nevertheless continuously motivate the art historian to keep trying to recover it. '[T]he sensation', says Holly, 'that erupts with the suddenness of experiencing the frailty of human comprehension in the face of something material beyond all understanding', which the best writers on art acknowledge, is painfully addictive; 'research' is a way of both holding it at bay and keeping it close in this strange, creative and masochistic practice.⁶ Language, says Holly, all the words of art history, are one huge over-compensation for that loss; one long attempt to avert the eyes from the incomprehensible material thing, always edging away from the art historian's finger tips and slipping from their grasp. Yet in being so, words somehow stop the object from falling away altogether, from vanishing into time. Words are a kind of postponement. Therefore writing art history can be seen as an attempt to compensate not just for the past's irrecoverability, but for the soon-to-be-forever pastness of the present. Holly puts it back the other way. Writing 'incessantly tries to build a bridge across the void, but in doing so it only makes visible the absence that the passage of time bequeaths to us.' It 'echoes the distance between the past and the present by interjecting the opaque membrane of language'.⁷ It is what Baxandall has to say about that membrane's different kinds of opacity, or rather translucency, that I will turn to in a

⁵ I would also refer the reader to the *Journal of Art Historiography's* mission 'to ignore the disciplinary boundaries imposed by the Anglophone expression "art history"': <https://arthistoriography.wordpress.com/mission-statement/> (accessed: 30/7/2020).

⁶ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, xv.

⁷ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, xix–xx. These issues continue to be broached by art historians. See, for example, Dan Karlholm and Keith Moxey eds, *Time in the History of Art: Temporality, Chronology, Anachrony*, New York and London: Routledge, 2018. However I am putting subsequent responses to Holly, historicity and temporality to one side here and focusing on Holly's important comments about language.

moment. In the fourth chapter of her book, revised from an article published in *Art History* in 1998, Holly characterises Baxandall as the melancholy artist *par excellence* (other chapters consider turn-of-the-century Vienna, Adrian Stokes, and Meyer Schapiro, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida).⁸ She offers a synopsis of Baxandall's career, taking in four of his books as 'a sustained reflection on the impossibility of closing the gap opened up between words and images in the practice of art history that he inherited' — "It's all just words", he seems to say'.⁹ To put it another way: Baxandall's interest in language is a function of his interest in the visual. He is committed to discerning the inadequacy or bluntness of language in describing visual experience. Having revealed language to condition the consumption of art in his book *Giotto and the Orators* (1971), much of Baxandall's subsequent work tunes our understanding of words as finely as possible in order to sharpen our perception of art.¹⁰ Holly gives us an extremely interesting insight into the issue of language in Baxandall. But I put things slightly differently, responding as I do not so much to Baxandall's melancholia as to his evident pragmatism. Remaining with Holly's imagery a little longer, I will be showing that in the *NLH* article Baxandall actually proposes that the membrane of language, when it is calibrated delicately enough, can detect, or convincingly seem to detect, something of that past and transmit it to the reader in the present.

Three and a half types of indirectness

With a stiffer upper lip than Holly, Baxandall remarks that the problem that the past is lost and unknowable is 'so obvious' that 'it is hard to understand why it is still stated so often and with such an air of discovery'. His next point is important. 'But to see it as an argument against *exerting oneself towards* reconstructing an old artist's intention and its medium ... seems odd' (463, italics Baxandall's). This exertion of oneself towards history, Baxandall points out, can be managed at the level of language. There has been a lot of confusion about this, he says, partly because of 'the terrible crudeness of our language' (455), by which Baxandall means English and probably French and Italian too (he mentions Baudelaire and Vasari, and he is

⁸ Michael Ann Holly, 'Patterns in the Shadows: Attention in/to the Writings of Michael Baxandall', *Art History*, 21: 4, December 1998, 467–478.

⁹ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, 75.

¹⁰ Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators: Humanist Observers of Painting in Italy and the Discovery of Pictorial Composition 1350–1450*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1971. Baxandall's commitment to the visual *per se* on the other side of language distinguishes him from Ludwig Wittgenstein, with whom his work is sometimes aligned. Robert Williams points out that Baxandall denied directly engaging with Wittgenstein, 'Inferential Criticism and *Kunstwissenschaft*' in *Michael Baxandall, Vision and the Work of Words*, eds Peter Mack and Robert Williams, Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2015, chapter 5, 91–106, 93–94. I am indebted to Williams's chapter. For a different angle see Catherine Lord and José A. Bernadette, 'Baxandall and Goodman' in *The Language of Art History*, eds Kemal and Gaskell, chapter 6, 76–100. Allan Langdale explores a range of possible influences from the field of linguistics on Baxandall's *Giotto*, 'Linguistic Theories and Intellectual History in Michael Baxandall's *Giotto and the Orators*', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 1, December 2009.

one) words is type one and a half or type one *bis*. These 'refer to representational works of art as if the things or persons represented were actual', for example: 'agitated', 'calm' or 'spirited' figures. To the left of the object we have causal or inferential type two words which 'characterize the work of art in terms of the action or agent that would have produced them': 'tentative', 'calculated', 'sensitive', 'elaborate', 'difficult', 'skilled', this or that 'treatment' or 'development' or 'virtuosity'. To the right of the object we have type three subject or ego words which 'characterize a work of art by describing its action on the beholder or his [or her] reaction to it': 'imposing', 'unexpected', 'striking', 'disturbing', 'unpleasant', this or that 'effect', 'a feeling of crowding' (457). Baxandall's fundamental point which it's important to keep in mind (and it's an obvious one) is that these 'are all projections of the subject, the speaking beholder' (458). If we pay attention to the topology of the schema we can draw out the different ways these types of word are managing that gap between subject and object. Comparative (type one) words point from the object to other objects; in this sense they veer off in other directions. Type one *bis* words point into the object, yes, but also through it, to the things depicted as if they were real, as if they were active behind the canvas or beyond the lifeless stone. Cause (type two) words point beyond the work to the maker and to the maker's actions. And effect (type three) words bounce back and settle in the realm of the beholder. They all point through or past or away from the object and in this sense Holly is quite right. To return to the thread of Baxandall's argument, art-historical writing is made up of all these kinds of words working in combination; the examples are all taken from Heinrich Wölfflin on Raphael. 'It is the pattern', says Baxandall, brilliantly, of the different types of words used 'that gives the individual critic a physiognomy'. In the case of Wölfflin here, 'within a sentence of type three, reporting an impression, there is often a type two word as core: he tends to have an impression of a cause, honest man.' (459)¹¹ Wölfflin's impressions, registering as effect words, are kinds of echoes or ripples whose origin or epicentre is a claim on cause and circumstance of making, made in type two. Baxandall approves of this pattern because for him there is a hierarchy to these types of word.

Type two words, inferential as to cause, he says, 'are the main vehicle of demonstrative precision' (461). To restate this: the reader gets closest to the object when the art historian speaks about its visual interest in terms of inferring cause. This could be the action of a machine's stencilling, but Baxandall means primarily the action of a human maker, his or her tentativeness, sensibility, skill at or development of this and that. This claim is extended and problematised in Baxandall's book *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (1985) where 'intention' is given a loose definition: it pertains not to the maker's state of mind when making the work of art, Baxandall says, but rather to both maker and work of art together and the 'forward-leaning look of things', a 'relationship between a picture and its circumstances' that is visible, as it were, in the present.

¹¹ See Heinrich Wölfflin, *Classic Art: An Introduction to the Italian Renaissance* [1899], trans. Peter and Linda Murray, London: Phaidon, 1953.

The art historian's job is to re-enact the object's making via intention.¹² Intention approaches if not quite attains this radical ambiguity in the earlier article. There, a similar point is differently put. Cause words, he says, 'characterise the work of art in terms of the action or agent that would have produced them.' (457) This 'agent' is obviously the maker—Donatello or Turner, an anonymous artisan or a stencilling machine—but it is not much of a leap to extend this to mean something like 'the situation' that produced the object, 'the circumstances that went into its making', and even 'into the making of the maker'. Couched in this is the agency of history. I will offer an explanation below of why Baxandall leaves this implicit.

What Baxandall does say explicitly is that type two words are better because they 'involve the speaker in the activity of inferring' (462) causes and circumstances of making; as I said, these could be the maker's skill, the province's artisanal specialism, the society's instability, the culture's luxuriousness. Then cause words bring in that third person, the reader-viewer, the one for whom the art historian is pointing: they involve 'the hearer in the activity of reconstructing and assessing the pattern of implication' (462). The 'hearer' or reader-viewer actively evaluates the type two inferences' claims on history, according to shared information and within commonly accepted parameters, by looking closely themselves at the object. It is an essential part of Baxandall's type two register that it necessarily involves the offering of a proposition to someone else, in whom trust is liberally invested, who is then actively engaged in weighing it up and responding according to their own observations. Arguably type one words ask for a commensurate degree of reciprocal engagement but Baxandall seems to be saying that comparison and metaphor can be very broad and can blur rather than sharpen perception of visual interest. Type one *bis* words lead into a kind of dream world, a fantasy of existing in the object or depiction, which has its specific uses and fascinations of course. Effect words lead straight back to the beholder.¹³

¹² Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, 41–42. See Whitney Davis's illuminating discussion of *Patterns*: 'Art History, Re-Enactment and the Idiographic Stance', in *Michael Baxandall, Vision and the Work of Words*, eds Mack and Williams, chapter 4, 69–89 and Sam Rose on the general problem of intention in art history (with a brief mention of Baxandall), 'Close Looking and Conviction', *Art History*, 40: 1, February 2017, 156–177, 161.

¹³ In an intricate and dazzling essay, Paul Tucker argues that Baxandall overemphasises 'lexis at the expense of interpersonal discourse functions'. I have shown that what Baxandall would think of as particularly good interpersonal discourse about art is behind type two words, although I agree with Tucker that Baxandall's diagram is not clear about that. "'Inferential Muscle" and the Work of Criticism: Michael Baxandall on Adrian Stokes and Art-Critical Language' in *The Coral Mind: Adrian Stokes's Engagement with Architecture, Art History, Criticism, and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Stephen Bann, University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 2007, 161–188, 167. Sam Rose puts what I have just unpacked into a broader history, arguing that Baxandall's redirection of impression on the beholder (type 3) into inference (type 2) effectively folds the supposedly 'bad' kind of formalism available to twentieth-century art history into the 'good' one (focus on external shape to the exclusion of process and representation, worldly response to (e.g. pictorial) surface, respectively): 'The Significance of Form', *Nonsite.org*, 20, January 25, 2017,

As Baxandall says, in real and good art history this all works at a high level of intricacy. A particularly engaging passage in Baxandall's own *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy* (1972) will serve as demonstration:

The geometrical concepts of a gauger and the disposition to put them to work sharpen a man's visual sense of concrete mass. He is likely to be aware at a higher level of the character of Adam in Masaccio's *Expulsion from Paradise* as a compound of cylinders or of the figure of Mary in Masaccio's *Trinity* as a massive truncated cone, and so of the figure itself. In the Quattrocento social world of the painter this constituted a stimulus to using his available means—in Masaccio's case, the Tuscan convention of suggesting a mass by representing the tones of light and shadow one source of lighting would produce on it—in order to register his volumes clearly, with recognisable skill. A painter working in another convention could use different means to a similar end. For instance, Pisanello came from a north Italian tradition that registered a mass less with tones than with its characteristic edges. He could respond to the gauging sensibility with figures set in twisted, counterpoised attitudes so that the edge presented to the picture plane spirals round the body like ivy round a column ... Pisanello's *St George* is a gauger's field-day in its own way.¹⁴

In the first section of this passage, the visual experience common to the 'society' Baxandall is describing in this part of the book, the gauger's sensibility or habit of visually estimating irregular volumes of barrels, sacks or bales of goods—which was inculcated among Italian fifteenth-century middle-class boys at school, he explains elsewhere—is personified as an 'ideal' historical subject (a man, no doubt, of the picture-buying class) and then this subject is deployed in the description of two frescoes by Masaccio. We look at the frescoes through this subject's eyes, as it were, and see that they are fundamentally geometrical. Let's call this section 'A'. Next, from 'In the Quattrocento', the tables are turned (section 'B') and the above imagined ideal or general visual experience of Masaccio's two paintings is inverted and used, in conjunction with a context about Masaccio (his Tuscanness), to infer Masaccio's way of working in cause (type two) words: 'representing the tones of light and shadow' in such and such a way. This particular Masaccio case exemplifies a more general inference about Quattrocento painting procedure then made in a more general type two fitted back into the social visual experience formulated in A: the artist would 'register his skill' by satisfying the 'gauger's sensibility' and this general circularity has real depth now because of the actual sharpening of our perception of Masaccio's cylindrical Adam and the truncated, cone-like Mary to the

<https://nonsite.org/the-significance-of-form/>. I address Baxandall's responses to formalism and the social history of art in greater detail in the ensuing pages.

¹⁴ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972, 91–93. Baxandall is referring to *The Expulsion from Paradise* (c. 1425–1427) in the Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence; and *The Trinity with the Virgin and St John* (c. 1427) in Santa Maria Novella, Florence.



Figure 2 Pisanello, *The Virgin and Child with Saints Anthony Abbot and George*, c. 1435–1441. Egg tempera on poplar, 46.5 x 29 cm. London: The National Gallery. Image: The National Gallery, London.

left of Christ's feet. Non-Tuscan Quattrocento traditions are to be understood analogously. The particular case of Pisanello, in section 'C', is inferred along similar lines, this time taken back through the social visual experience, the gauger's sensibility. Then, interestingly, it is taken through something like effect (type three) words, the felt effect of counterpoise or equilibrium, sandwiched between two type one *bis* words: his 'figures' feel rather alive in the prose and almost 'set' and adopt 'attitudes' themselves, though intriguingly the effect word rendered as a past-tense verb, 'counterpoised', carries a sense of cause: the painter was at work composing and counterpoising. Then there is the stunning ivy column simile, type one. Then this is all pressed back into another personification of the social visual experience, with deadpan, as the gauger having a field-day looking at Pisanello's elaborately armoured Saint George (fig. 2). Effect words have a very minor part to play and are further muted by the elaborate comparative (type one) word ambiguity surrounding them, though the part effect words do play is a good one because we would not want to do without the pointing to the counterpoise in Pisanello. At the same time, the mention of 'the edge presented to the picture plane' immediately conjures both the writer and us looking at the picture in the present and is wonderfully ostensive writing. An important clinching moment, then, does involve effect words. But if the spine of the passage is the gauging sensibility then cause (type two) words, like the edges of Pisanello's figures, spiral very tightly down around it, with an odd preponderance of 're' prefixes: 'representing', 'register ...

clearly', 'recognisable skill', 'registered', 'respond' and so on. 'Represent' and 'register' are particular cause words, doing something more than 'skill' or 'scumble' for instance, and they seem to loop back to the gauger's sensibility in their structure or feeling. This passage is taken from Baxandall's influential chapter 'The Period Eye' setting out the culturally relative component of vision, and the sort of axiomatic nature of that chapter in Baxandall's book might account for the particularly taught integration of type two and what I have called A here, but this all serves as a good indication of the way Baxandall ties pointing to things in paintings to history at the level of language, with cause words dominant and comparative and effect words active but subservient.¹⁵ Qualitative judgment, inference of skill, is part of this activity and that is why Baxandall declines to distinguish between art criticism and art history. As Baxandall says of "'objectivity'" in his *NLH* article – putting it in quotation marks – 'sensitive critical inference does demand that we *seek* something like this' (464, italics Baxandall's). With those quotation marks, it is as if Baxandall admits that 'objectivity' is part of an academic mythology; it guides our work, though we may never discover it. I find this a helpful way of putting it, and I would suggest this is a good example of what Jeremy Tanner has aptly called 'the richness, or arguably the ambiguity, of [Baxandall's] analytical framework' or strategy.¹⁶ Importantly, the idea of 'history' that Baxandall is working with is very ambiguous, constituting what Adrian Rifkin has eloquently called 'a play with historical estrangement and contingency that paradoxically eschews anachronism'.¹⁷ With this in mind, a detour to a passage in the introduction of *Patterns of Intention* outlining the same lexical categories as those in the *NLH* article will be helpful. Baxandall starts describing effect (type three) words. 'And indeed it is usually precisely the effect of the picture we are really concerned with: it has to be. But terms of this type', Baxandall continues, 'tend to be a little soft and we sometimes frame our sense of the effect in secondarily indirect ways', in comparative and cause words. 'Awareness that the picture's having an effect on us is the product of human action seems to lie deep in our thinking and talking about pictures ... and what we are doing when we attempt a historical explanation of a picture is to try developing this kind of thought.'¹⁸ Given his status

¹⁵ For the many appropriations of and responses to this influential concept see Allan Langdale, 'Aspects of the Critical Reception and Intellectual History of Baxandall's Concept of the Period Eye' in *About Michael Baxandall*, ed. Adrian Rifkin, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 1999, chapter 2, 17–35. In this essay Langdale emphasises complementarity rather than divergence between Baxandall and the Marxist social history of art, see below. Alex Potts describes Baxandall's irritation with 'schematic applications' of the period eye concept, 'The Visual Conditions of Pictorial Meaning' in *Michael Baxandall, Vision and the Work of Words*, eds Mack and Williams, chapter 1, 9–23, 19. John Onians proposes a neurological basis to the concept and Baxandall's wider art history, *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, 178–188.

¹⁶ Jeremy Tanner, 'Michael Baxandall and the Sociological Interpretation of Art', *Cultural Sociology: A Journal of the British Sociological Association. A Symposium on New Directions in the Study of Art and Cultural Production*, 4: 2, July 2010, 231–256, 238.

¹⁷ Adrian Rifkin, 'Editor's Introduction' in *About Michael Baxandall*, ed. Rifkin, 1–4, 2.

¹⁸ Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 6.

as ‘probably the most important art historian of his generation, not just in Britain but in the world’, and of his work as ‘a kind of ideal of art history’, in scholars’ words, the range of implications in Baxandall’s suggestion that subjective response is always fundamental have not been fully thought through.¹⁹ Subjectivity is always there in writing about art, albeit a subjectivity given to redirecting felt effects via language into comparison (type one) or, better, inference (type two). Nor has it been adequately taken in, in fact, that this redirection of subjectivity, or indirection, constitutes for Baxandall ‘historical’ art history writing. Tiptoeing around or lying about this would be as tactless as free association about the object, imposing the self on the work of art. By ‘tactless’ I refer to Baxandall’s stated aim for ‘tactful’, decorous and sensitive writing that opens up rather than finishes off a picture.²⁰ The dance is a delicate one to be sure, and much, one feels, could—and in fact does—go wrong during it. But the fact of the matter for Baxandall here is that the sharpness of the perception of the object depends upon mobilising its effects on the subject to infer its existence in past time. The Introduction to *Patterns of Intention* is much more explicit than the article on this point that felt effects on the self are the foundation of writing critically and historically about art, partly because one of the three targets of the article is the ‘unshrunk-Self people’ (463), such as David Rosand, who worry that ‘a pretension to historical objectivity is liable to shrivel the faculty through which worthwhile perception of art happens.’ (454)²¹ According to Baxandall, such people are of the view that subjectivity is cramped or harmed in historical interpretation, that is that subjectivity and historical interpretation are fundamentally incompatible. As we have seen, to Baxandall the art historian’s

¹⁹ John Onians, ‘Michael David Kighley Baxandall’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 166, 2011, 26–46, 27. Davis describes this reputation, ‘Art History, Re-Enactment and the Idiographic Stance’, 71. Jules Lubbock notices, though somewhat marginalises, the importance of personal response: “‘To do a Leavis on Visual Art’: The Place of F. R. Leavis in Michael Baxandall’s Intellectual Formation”, in *Michael Baxandall, Vision and the Work of Words*, eds Mack and Williams, chapter 2, 25–47, 26; Williams passingly quotes Baxandall’s assertion that around 97 per cent of our response to pictures is not ‘a purely cultural thing’, ‘Inferential Criticism and *Kunstwissenschaft*’, 98. In an interesting analysis of *Patterns of Intention* as allegorical, Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville convincingly sum up Baxandall’s ‘strong assumption’ that pictures and culture are ‘both inherently historical in themselves and essentially exposed to criticism’. Baxandall is important to them because he represents someone who resists the abstraction of ‘method’ and for whom interpretation takes place in writing itself. However, their interest in their book in the art-historical construction of objectivity is ‘more or less systematically at odds’ with methodological reflections which ‘seem to entail a reflexive attention to something like the historian’s position or identity’, which I find harder to understand. *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures*, Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 2010, 36, 4. See chapter 2.

²⁰ See Peter Mack and Robert Williams, ‘Introduction: Of Tact and Moral Urgency’ in *Michael Baxandall, Vision and the Work of Words*, eds Mack and Williams, 1–8, 2–4. I would add that Baxandall’s idea of tact or ‘good manners’ is steeped in class.

²¹ David Rosand, ‘Art History as Criticism: The Past as Present’, *New Literary History*, 5: 3, April 1974, 435–445. Rosand is said to have got this from Leo Steinberg, ‘Objectivity and the Shrinking Self’, *Daedalus*, 98: 3, summer 1969, 824–836. See Baxandall, ‘The Language of Art History’, 453–454.

subjectivity is actually the conduit to history. One of the most interesting implications here, which emerges in this light, is that the art historian's subjectivity is in turn constituted, honed and refined, in reaching out to the object and its past. That is why in his article Baxandall is very explicit that type three words rank lowest, existing as they do in a sort of echo chamber. But Baxandall's article also has in its sights those who want to formulate a coherent philosophical ground of "humane values" to replace the hodgepodge of European intellectual traditions out of which art history was born, and which have given rise to such troublesome conundrums as 'form' and 'content', 'the social' and 'the aesthetic'. Needless to say Baxandall is sceptical. And Baxandall's third target, occupying the other side of the coin to Rosand, are those represented in Baxandall's article by Kurt Forster. These people want an anti-formalist, 'genuine social-historical approach', in which line of thinking the 'self' poses a serious problem to the interpretation of art, what with our 'lack of self-awareness about our own preconceptions and their social roots' (453), that is our ideological contamination.²² In Baxandall's ventriloquism of the Forsterian social art historians, we see the problem is the same one afflicting the unshrunk-Self people: history is incompatible with subjectivity. All three have it wrong, he says. Baxandall wants neither more nor less, but rather properly calibrated subjectivity.

Personal response is the foundation of it all. An ambiguity arises from the idea that 'context' will be sought for and supplied in so far as it elaborates personal response, as a redirection of subjectivity. For Baxandall, that does not seem to make this context suspect. History, we might say, is written by the art critics. This is an extremely striking thing for Baxandall, in the introduction to one of his most-important books, to be implying. In what follows I return to Baxandall's 1979 article in this light before deploying his model of language to analyse some other art-historical writing's negotiations of subjectivity, the object and history. This will bring us back to the situation in the present day.

Imagining the past

There are further interesting implications embedded in Baxandall's arguments in his *NLH* article. A lot of bad art history, he says, is actually clumsily composed of type three ego forms masquerading as terms which pretend to infer about 'culture': 'an un-self-aware type three quality at the lowest verbal level marshalled at a higher level in large a priori type two patterns — soft impressions sloshing about in hard causal schedules.' (461) I am not analysing, here, art history ('good' or 'bad') from the 1970s but to take Baxandall on his own terms for a bit longer: bad art history gets lost in itself. The past is not thrown into relief, and furthermore the visual interest of the object, its power and hold, is obscured by the embarrassed prose. By contrast Baxandall claims that by putting subjectivity to work tactfully one can

²² James S. Ackerman, 'Toward a New Social Theory of Art', *New Literary History*, 4: 2, January 1973, 315–330 and Kurt Forster, 'Critical History of Art, or Transfiguration of Values?', *New Literary History*, 3: 3, April 1972, 459–470, cited by Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', 453; 'humane values' is Ackerman.

discern and convey valuable perspectives on what went into the making of the object's visual interest, and therefore a sense of the object's existence in past time. Such sensitive critical inference is achieved, says Baxandall, by none other than Adrian Stokes. (He also praises David Summers's 'actual art history' and Richard Wollheim's 'authentic aesthetics' as examples of contemporaneous excellence in writing about art; part of Baxandall's larger point is that there can be many kinds of art history(464)). In foregrounding subjectivity from the very beginning, Stokes occasionally, extremely vividly, imagines what went into the art work's making, Baxandall says. Here and there, Stokes loses himself in the object and its past. As Baxandall puts it: 'one can read the early books of Adrian Stokes for *local* inferential muscle, however subject-assertive the total manner and effect' (461), particularly *The Quattro Centro* (1932) and *Stones of Rimini* (1934) (by 'early' I get the impression Baxandall means Stokes before he gets too Kleinian). To demonstrate what he means, in a note Baxandall quotes Stokes on Donatello's *Dead Christ Tended by Angels* (c. 1520–40) in the V&A and italicises what he takes to be the cause (type two) words: to Donatello surface '*meant*' little more than '*chiaroscuro, the instruments of plastic organisation*'. Stokes goes on describing the specifics of Donatello's gouging and 'wholesale' treatment of layers, and concludes: 'the composition is not so much *founded upon* the interrelationship of adjoining surfaces, as upon the broader *principles of chiaroscuro*'.²³ This is from a passage in *Stones of Rimini* in which Stokes is comparing Donatello's relief with the *Virgin and Child with Five Angels* relief by Agostino di Duccio (c. 1450–60), the carver of Stokes's principal subject in the book, the reliefs at the Temple of Malatestiano. In his note Baxandall refers us to the whole passage and I turn to it to unpack the full range of Baxandall's implications. Stokes guides us through the comparison and then he makes the famous claim that the Donatello relief typifies the modelling conception, with its masses subordinated to the preconceived composition as if a flat drawing of Christ and the angels has been rendered in stone. Looking at Donatello's relief with Stokes's eyes, it is almost as if the rounded figures emerge and exist independently of the material. On the other hand, the Duccio relief, we are told, typifies the carving conception with its far more dynamic relation between the interacting shapes and planes, and it is as though everywhere the forms are inextricable from the stone. Donatello's plastic method was abstract from the medium but Duccio engaged with stone as stone. Baxandall, who to reiterate only quotes the comments on Donatello, seems to mean that in pursuing his theoretical distinction between carving and modelling conceptions, Stokes comes to a perspective on the Donatello relief that is in itself valuable for pointing the reader to the visual interest in the work and inferring how that came

²³ Adrian Stokes, quoted in Baxandall, 'The Language of Art History', 465n9. The quotation is from *Stones of Rimini*, London: Faber & Faber, 1934, Part Two, 'Stone and Clay', chapter four, 'Carving, Modelling and Agostino', 105–166, 139. Baxandall cites a reproduction of this excerpt in the Wollheim edition and references a larger passage around the excerpt about the distinction between carving and modelling: '*The Image in Form: Selected Writings of Adrian Stokes*, ed. Richard Wollheim, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972, 147–183, 168–169. According to the Victoria and Albert Museum there is some doubt about attribution of the relief to Donatello (<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O14765/the-dead-christ-tended-by-panel-relief-donatello/>) (accessed: 3/8/2020).

about. The passage stands alone as an account of Donatello's thinking and making. It could be said to have further value in Baxandall's sense in that it is expressed in terms which map onto broader aesthetic and historical distinctions, between carving and modelling conceptions. It is interesting to think here that Stokes takes Baxandall's quotation marks around 'objectivity', as it were, quite far but that he certainly does not abandon the idea altogether. The 'Quattro Centro', for Stokes, is not so much an actual bracket-able history as a way of seeing, making and feeling based on the carving conception dispersed throughout space and time, though traceable in some sense in both. Of course, in the middle of his book Stokes makes the extravagant claim that his six years of research has added nothing substantially new to the 'intensity of feeling' he first experienced at Rimini 'on 5 July, 1925'. That is, type two is a way of fleshing out type three.²⁴ This is unambiguous and ultimately Stokes goes well beyond Baxandall. But that Stokes, however locally, is valuable for inferential criticism is quite a polemical assertion of Baxandall's which is worth pausing over. Baxandall's dissatisfaction with conventional British art history, 'Courtauld stuff' he called it, and his corrective of close observation (adapted from Cambridge literary critic F. R. Leavis) combined with Warburgian cultural history is justly well documented, but we might now ask whether Baxandall's pointed praise of Stokes was well received (or received at all) in 1979 and after?²⁵ Arguably Baxandall is proposing an art historical genealogy (one of several potential genealogies proposed in his article) from Stokes back to Walter Pater's imaginative narratives about past artists and their art, and ultimately to Ruskin (*Stones of Rimini* is a homage to *The Stones of Venice*). After all, this English line tended to be discounted in the second half of the twentieth century in favour of a genealogy drawn from the philosophical and scientific German tradition, as epitomised by Baxandall's contemporary Michael Podro's book *The Critical Historians of Art* (1982).²⁶

Holly's reading of Stokes in *The Melancholy Art* complements what I have surmised to be Baxandall's of Stokes. By facing up to the lostness of the past, Holly writes, Stokes is able to recover something of it. This is precisely what eludes boring 'professional prose' which 'seems so bereft of feeling [...] that we can almost say that, unlike Stokes, we work more at forgetting than remembering'.²⁷ Turgid writing loses track of precisely what it martyred itself for. Something needs to animate the writing to bring the object into view. Before leaving Baxandall's *NLH* article behind I want to pause on Baxandall's introduction of the term 'imagination'. At the point I just left him, Baxandall says: 'Inferential criticism entails the imaginative reconstruction of causes, particularly voluntary causes or intentions within situations.' (463) I will unpack that significant statement. First of all we have that 'within situations' which is a necessary part of the proposition: inferring intention

²⁴ Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, 171.

²⁵ 'Courtauld stuff' is from an interview with Baxandall: Alan Langdale, 'Interviews with Michael Baxandall', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 1, December 2009, 27. See also Rose, *Art and Form*, 67.

²⁶ Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982.

²⁷ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, 71.

happens in relation to a context which is absolutely historical. This is the small 'leap' I drew attention to earlier. It is not just the maker, but him or her in situations, the maker's place in relation to and within them at a given point in time. ('Intention' in the eponymous 1985 book). Inferring cause within historical context is an act of imagination. The imagination is an historical tool. It is the magic that reacts with those special type two particles on the opaque membrane and makes them come alive and sparkle. From this perspective Baxandall's writing seems to me to gain far more purchase on both the object and its history than Holly's characterisation would suggest. Imagination, Baxandall is fundamentally saying, is of real value to art history. And, furthermore, in exercising it, the art historian exercises him or her own self in the history making, his or her own mind and experiences in the offering up of an idea of an object's past life or lives. I said I would offer an explanation for why Baxandall leaves so much of this ambiguous and unsaid. Part of the reason might be that in 1979, in art history at any rate, the word 'imagination' might have felt dubious or un-serious, given the dominance of the scientific school. However the ambiguity is itself part of the enduring value of Baxandall analysis of the language of art history.

It is true that Baxandall's analysis hangs on several necessary conditions that also go unsaid. A principal one is that writer and reader share a commensurate 'expertise' within common parameters. Furthermore, Baxandall presents himself above the fray. His invitation to reciprocity aside, a highly classed voice and droll masculinity make up his claims to authority and compromise those claims today. There's also a lot of room for manoeuvre in Baxandall's analysis as I've unpacked it. Obviously I have been focusing on English-language writing about things made in Italy. But could Baxandall's 'three rough divisions or moods' (457) be adapted to fit other languages, such as French, Italian, Yoruba or Classical Chinese? Would a comparison of analyses yielded from such models tell us something about how 'art history' and 'art criticism' have been and are developing elsewhere in the world? Baxandall rightly cautions against isolating foreign-language terms from their contexts (he regrets, specifically, that his writings on German woodcarvings cannot fully benefit from the eloquent descriptor *didón*, meaning smooth luminosity of sculpted surface, since the term ultimately derives its full meaning from its place within a whole complex of Yoruba critical concepts) so such a project would require real intimacy with the languages and the cultures to be compared, the ways these cultures verbally negotiate the object's appearance, its past, and its present affective hold. But it would be doable. Finally, Baxandall's three and a half types could be used to analyse writing about not just painting and sculpture but any object of a high level of complexity of visual interest.²⁸

The three and a half types can be used to analyse some recent writing by T. J. Clark. I will point to some surprising ways Clark's deployment of type three qualities—felt effects on the beholder (sometimes lexically disguised)—seems to

²⁸ Whitney Davis follows through problems that would arise, however, from extending Baxandall into the territory of visual culture, 'Art History, Re-Enactment and the Idiographic Stance'. See also Whitney Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011, 158–160.

respond to Baxandall. I'll also reveal the function of historical imagination to be rather different in these two writers. I analyse passages from early on in Clark's first chapter on Giotto's *Joachim's Dream* (c. 1303–5) in the Arena Chapel in Padua, up to page thirty four.

Imagining forever

Throughout the opening pages, the fresco itself is the active thing, the agent, in Clark's prose. He begins and stays with what he calls '(for want of a better word) "formal"' things—shapes and colours—rather than the narrative. Seen from far below, he says, the 'bleached grey of the hills and the shepherds' hut reads essentially as a single shape', they register as one, 'the blue as an answering force field', and here there is a strong sense of the viewer's experience, of a type three quality.²⁹ The points Clark then draws from these two shapes in *Dream* are taken via comparisons with the other panels in the Chapel. Then a close analysis of *Dream* happens, which can be read as an elaborate pattern made up of Baxandall's different lexical types. I will quote the sentence.

Having the painting be so much a matter of two equal and opposite plain fields in this way, laid out like crumpled geological strata, may have to do in the first place with Giotto's desire to establish, in line with his sources, that what we are looking at is a wilderness, a scene of bare life.³⁰

The sentence begins pointing from the beholder's perspective from down on the ground to a particular view or reading of the picture's formal construction, that it is basically two fields of colour, that 'bleached grey' and the blue force field. The colours are given character and relation to each other. The 'bleach' and 'force field' are comparative (type one) words, similes for us today, but ones that anachronistically approach a type two quality inferring about Giotto's intention to charge the electric blue with responding to the barren grey. This is pulled back into a type three position by our reminiscence of the all-important beholder's perspective, earlier on, standing on the Chapel floor looking up. But of course 'the painting', not Clark, is subject, is 'being'. The particular view registers as undisputable ontology. Then we are offered more comparative words: 'like crumpled geological strata'. Although cause (type two) words follow soon after—Giotto's 'laying out'—this is quite a straightforward inference of action, of composing, and so emphasis I think falls on the simile, and it is all almost parenthetical anyway in that it has no essential relationship to the sentence's ultimate sense, interesting though it is. Then we have a very big cause (type two) phrase, 'Giotto's desire', which occupies the heart of the sentence and it is as though the authority of Giotto's desire pulses outwards and activates the rest of the claims. This imaginative inferring about what made Giotto's heart beat quickly is immediately bolstered, brought down to earth, by notice of research or at least some

²⁹ Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 30.

³⁰ Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 30.

thinking about context: 'in line with his sources'. We should note, furthermore, that this comes with riders: 'may have to do in the first place with' (we are of course at the beginning of the book and Clark is getting the argument going tactfully). Next is the clinching claim. On the face of it, it is made in type one *bis*, words characterising the art work as though the things it depicts are real: 'is a wilderness, a scene of bare life'. But the switch from cause (type two) words to type one *bis* comes via the outstretched hand (or the firm shove) of 'what we are looking at', bringing together Giotto's inferred desire, the inferring voice and our looking. Therefore what we have at the end is not quite one *bis*, but cause (type two), inferred via effect (type three), registering in the end in one *bis*. Explication of depiction is stated absolutely as a condition of artist's intention. At first sight the passage seems to have little problem with that. To put it the other way, Giotto's 'desire' is 'established'; 'we are looking' at its fulfilment and success. But in Clark's good critical dance, to paraphrase Baxandall, and in light of this indirection of flow between past, object and present, it is interesting to ask, whose life is bare? It is not quite Giotto's. It is Joachim's, for the moment, of course. But is there another resonance? Is the modern reader living in the wilderness? Clark's book amounts to an argument that some of the 'best' depictions of the beyond shake us out of modernity's illusions, root us as viewers in our embodied worldly existence and get us to face up to being alive while there is still time. We can understand Clark to be staging this core agenda, and maybe others (the first chapter is partly about how Joachim's doubt in Giotto foreshadows modern secularism, the second chapter is about full-blown atheism) at the lexical level. And so the passage, the opening analysis of the book, is phenomenologically grounded in the present, 'we' are standing on our feet in a building looking up at a wall.

Along these lines, *Heaven on Earth* early on declares an interest in something outside history, something (dare I say it) as universal as the horizon or death:

Blue and grey, then: equally weighted, essentially singular, and standing for the opposites of the universe as a Trecento intellectual might have understood them. [...] And it is above all in this drawing of the boundary between colours—this particular staging of relation between earth and heaven—that Giotto's understanding seems to me to pull away from any 'period' frame of mind.³¹

Partly Clark's point, which he elaborates later in the chapter, is that Giotto 'is the inaugurator of the drive to match more and more of the detail and substance of the world—the drive we now (half-guiltily) call "European painting"—but also the inheritor of that great palimpsest of popular and elite understandings named ... the "late Middle Ages"'. In this Giotto is analogous to Shakespeare. 'The Middle Ages live and die in him'.³² Giotto's work is pivotal, then, it sums up and transcends historical forces, partly confounding attempts to comprehend it in terms of its time of making. But this isn't all of Clark's point. In being pointed towards 'form' in paint

³¹ Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 34.

³² Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 48.

itself, form that is felt to offer a humane kind of visual experience, the reader encounters an interpretation in which cause (type two) words—‘Giotto’s understanding’—contained in extremely plain effect (type three) words—‘seems to me’—becomes a way to penetrate more than the past, a way to detect a persistent, human perspective. Clark, here, is doing something new with how subjectivity works with the object and its history, and this occasions the anti-Baxandall point (jibe). History certainly still plays an indispensable part in bringing the fresco into view, but the calibration—the order of priorities—has been rejigged.

At least momentarily: in the sequence of quotations I have been discussing, Clark’s next sentence begins with the word ‘Originally’, plunging us back into the period frame. Then Clark immediately establishes the period’s lostness forever by pointing out the damage along the left-hand side of the mountain. To return to Clark’s interesting way of putting it in the first passage I quoted, though, about which there is more to say: ‘Having the painting be’. The painting, partly dried-up and chipped as it is, is given present agency, it is charged with a power felt and relayed, with awe, by a type three entity inhabiting the now. This is fundamental to the beguiling simplicity and power of Clark’s prose. But at the same time this passage also seems to be about questioning that ‘be’ or ‘being’, about measuring it up against the various other options subsequently introduced, all the options other than the painting ‘being’: the painting resembling, Giotto desiring, his sources dictating, us looking. Of course the painting’s being is reasserted at the end: it *is* wilderness. But on the other hand does the painting there not collapse in on itself? Does depiction not disappear into depicted? ‘Having the painting be ... what we are looking at’. ‘What are we looking at?’. The text seems to offer up this question and I like to think of the rest of the chapter, even the rest of the book as attempts at trying out different answers. I am reminded here of the words of John Passmore quoted by Baxandall in his article: ‘it is very difficult to say a great deal about a painting, except by talking about its relationships to something else’.³³ Clark seems to be sustaining an argument against that. With Baxandall in mind, I would add that by offering up the question ‘what are we looking at?’, Clark disrobes himself of the kinds of expertise Baxandall seems to enjoy and the overarching type three quality in *Heaven on Earth* is all the more persuasive for it.

Clark in 2018 goes further, then, than Baxandall officially countenances by foregrounding un-redacted subjectivity, in all its full-blown type three glory. Except foregrounding subjective response as not only the beginning but also the end of interpretation is in fact exactly what Baxandall does at the end of *Patterns of Intention*. There, Baxandall seems to admit that the ‘historical explanation’ of Piero della Francesca’s *Baptism of Christ* (after 1437) has exhausted itself, can proceed no further. After denouncing ‘high iconography’ and submitting and critiquing his own ‘low’ alternative, Baxandall says: ‘we have here reached a point where individual response must take over’. The prose flirts with cause (type two)—Piero’s *commensurazione* or systematic perspective—but simultaneously and finally rejects it. With an air of reluctance Baxandall explains the foreground foliage not according

³³ John Passmore, ‘History of Art and History of Literature: A Commentary’, *New Literary History*, 3: 3, April 1972, 575–587, 579. Baxandall, ‘The Language of Art History’, 455.

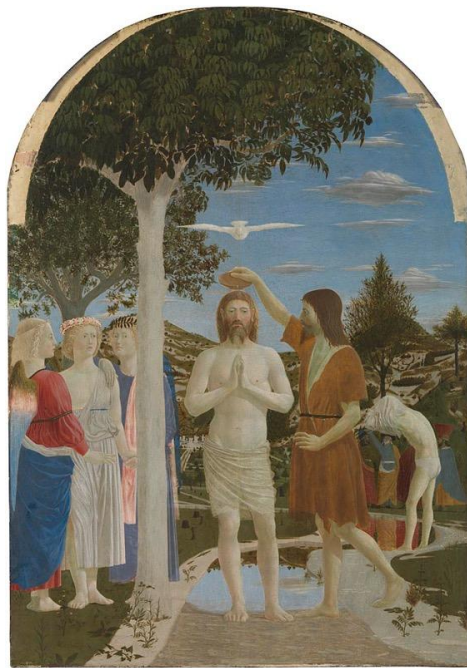


Figure 3 Piero della Francesca, *The Baptism of Christ*, after 1437. Egg on poplar, 167 x 116 cm. London: The National Gallery. Image: The National Gallery, London.

to historical but ‘aesthetical’ relations. The foliage is there to balance the commensurazione-initiated rendering of space and arrest or add satisfying drag to the representational pull into the canvas. By picking up the texture of the verdant distant hills it anchors the picture plane (fig. 3). This maintains two ways of seeing the picture, two ways Baxandall sees it: a box containing the receding three-dimensional space in which Christ stands registers within the overall perception of the ordered complexity of the application of marks to a flat, rectangular surface. In fact the second, formal way of seeing the *Baptism* is given priority. As Baxandall says: ‘this is the sort of medium in which I think pictures signify’.³⁴ It is very true that ‘historicising’ of one kind or another, and also narrative, are always important to Baxandall; these play a big part in the analysis of Piero della Francesca’s other masterpiece *The Resurrection of Christ* (c.1463–1465), in the last chapter of his much later book *Words for Pictures* (2003).³⁵ Nonetheless we have Baxandall’s 1985 book about historical explanation ending on the surface of the picture, with the effects of ‘forms and colours’ registering in individual response. This is where Clark’s 2018 book begins.

Alex Potts has illuminatingly explained Baxandall’s highly ambiguous scepticism of a kind of historicism that privileged a radically discontinuous past over present experience of the artefact, as in Michel Foucault. Potts mentions Clark

³⁴ Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 121–137 (130, 133, 135). Running parallel to my interpretation, Iversen and Melville illuminate a ‘twist’ on Erwin Panofsky in Baxandall’s Piero passage, *Writing Art History*, 35.

³⁵ Michael Baxandall, *Words for Pictures: Seven Papers on Renaissance Art and Criticism*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2003, chapter 7, 117–164.

on this point too.³⁶ That said, Clark doesn't quite do away with the radical discontinuousness of history. In a later paragraph the fresco's belonging to a lost imaginative world and the irrecoverability of that world are reincorporated into the rationale of the interpretation. This occasions yet another anti-Baxandall point:

I have tried to keep alive in my account of *Dream* an awareness that heaven and earth, for Giotto, were (probably) two equally believable realities. But in the end I am with Walter Benjamin in thinking the pretence of the historian to enter the 'lost' mental world of a long-ago maker a hopeless fantasy. In front of *Joachim's Dream*, I do not believe it can ever be me who time-travels to the Trecento; on the contrary, it is this stubborn fragment of an utterly unknowable world that brings (or refuses to bring) its 'now' with it into my present, putting my picture of pastness and continuity in doubt. I either own up to my own naive claim on the work, that is, and the way the work answers and resists that claim—the way it suspends my usual pragmatic sense of history—or I settle for that far flight of historicist fancy called 'looking with a period eye'.³⁷

The first part of this passage describes a response similar to that described by Holly ('the frailty of human comprehension in the face of something material beyond all understanding') but Clark quickly moves beyond this ('[b]ut to see it as an argument against *exerting oneself towards* reconstructing an old artist's intention and its medium ... seems odd'). The way he does so is rather Baxandallian, right down to the extravagant modesty. Subjectivity is acknowledged ('I ... own up to my own naive claim') and this subjectivity is put to work on the object ('the way the work answers and resists that claim'). Nevertheless, Clark implies he is rejecting Baxandall, papering over complex subject-activated descriptive re-enactment as 'historicist fantasy', reducing it to the crass slogan 'period eye'. (Benjamin isn't so much a red herring as the entirely predictable reference here). The two allusions—or anti-allusions—to Baxandall in Clark's chapter I have highlighted occur during the main methodologically reflective elements of the two principal interpretive gambits: looking at *Joachim's Dream* as if its form communicates something that (partly) transcends history; looking at *Joachim's Dream* in the knowledge that it is (entirely) lost to the past. This equivocation is left unresolved but it reinforces, rather than undermines, the chapter's compelling effects. In fact, the power of the chapter arises precisely from the way the reader is led along various co-existing but paradoxical interpretive pathways converging on Giotto's fresco, some of which I have tracked at the verbal level.

Of course, Clark had taken Baxandall to task before, in 1976 lambasting the latter's expansive historical category 'experience' as unideological, which after all is

³⁶ Alex Potts, 'Michael Baxandall and the Shadows in Plato's Cave' in *About Michael Baxandall*, ed. Rifkin, 69–83. I am indebted to this perceptive piece.

³⁷ Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 59.

fair enough.³⁸ Baxandall and the social history of art of Clark were always at cross purposes. Yes, Baxandall contextualises art in terms of commerce and class but for him art criticism and art history should apparently shrink and accept regrettable facts about the world.³⁹ But the *Heaven on Earth* comments on Baxandall are less equitable, less earnest. This deliberate mis-reading of Baxandall, I suggest, is ultimately not proffered as serious critique of the author of *Patterns of Intention* but rather as critique of those supposedly guilty of over-systematic and over-simplistic deployment of Baxandallian methodology. That is, we see Clark opening here a second front in his critique of art history. Clark sets out the more familiar front of this critique in *The Sight of Death*. The original, social history of art argument had been with a formalism that removed painting from human life and politics but now, in the face of a 'parody notion' of painting's '*belonging to the world*', painting's very separateness from reality is felt to be politically potent.⁴⁰ Elsewhere, Clark elaborated on this modified position, describing how the social history of art had become deformed into 'social iconography', the initial endeavour to interrogate visual imagery's '*constructed materiality*' and '*real-world antagonisms*' had been 'vulgarised' as 'a practice where what art historians were mainly expected to do was

³⁸ T. J. Clark, 'Preliminary Arguments: Work of Art and Ideology', in *Papers Presented to the Marxism and Art History Session of the College Art Association Meeting*, Chicago, 1976, 5, quoted in Langdale, 'Aspects of the Critical Reception ... of the Period Eye', 29–30.

³⁹ See, for example: 'Money is very important in the history of art' and, of course, 'The peasants and the urban poor play a very small part in the Renaissance culture that most interests us now, which may be deplorable but is a fact that must be accepted', Baxandall, *Painting and Experience*, 1, 39. Patricia Rubin points out that peasants and the urban poor 'were nonetheless churchgoers and piazza frequenters', *Images and Identity in Fifteenth-Century Florence*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007, chapter 4, 98. I am grateful to Paul Hills, who also thinks relations between Baxandall and the social history of art have been overstated, for directing me to Rubin, 'Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*', *The Burlington Magazine*, 153: 1299, June 2011, 404–408, 408. Craig Clunas describes a rather loose 'social history of art' tendency and briefly discusses Baxandall's ambivalent position within it, 'Social History of Art' in *Critical Terms of Art History*, eds Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003, chapter 31. Baxandall has found a warmer reception among the sociologically inclined. Nevertheless, Tanner notices Baxandall's 'very high level of ambivalence about the social, and its place in the understanding of art', before comprehensively surveying this reception, including, interestingly, in the work of Pierre Bourdieu: 'Michael Baxandall and the Sociological Interpretation of Art' (quotation from 232).

⁴⁰ Clark, *The Sight of Death*, 121–123, '22 February'; italics Clark's. See also *Heaven on Earth*, 8–25. The idea that Clark abandoned the social history of art was around before *The Sight of Death*. Gail Day challenges this idea. Uncovering a series of 'aporias' nesting in his art writing, Day argues that Clark consistently interrogates the problematics of mediation (between 'text' and 'context', 'art' and 'history'), redeploying these problematics as the very grounds of interpretation. Among her many interesting observations, Day points out that Clark's prose is always eluding binaries and displacing categories. 'Persisting and Mediating: T. J. Clark and "the Pain of 'the Unattainable Beyond'"', *Art History*, 23: 1, March 2000, 1–18, reproduced in Gail Day, *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Postwar Art Theory*, New York and Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2010, chapter 1.

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', although Clark ultimately blames capitalism's insidious alteration of the nature of the image and its circumscription of representation as an autonomous realm containing its own phantom agencies and antagonisms.⁴¹ Clark seems to be drawing an equivalence between the parody notion of the social history of art (art's fully belonging to the world in such a way that it can be decoded into language to recreate that world, with the help of a document or two) and the decadent version of Baxandallian historicism alluded to in *Heaven on Earth* (which would declare Giotto invisible outside the period frame). This equivalence apparently lies in both diminished attitudes' rejection of subjectivity.

In spite of their very different politics, there are actually comparable ethical commitments underpinning Baxandall's and Clark's engagement with painting, making Clark's misreading of Baxandall all the more ironic. Baxandall sets those commitments out most clearly in the last chapter of *Patterns of Intention*. He wants to restore 'the authority of common visual experience of a pictorial order' in a direct, inferential and 'democratic' writing that eschews art history's dubious 'developing entrenchment behind a clerly apparatus the laity do not share', arcane exposition of artefacts via ever-obscurer documents.⁴² Thinking mainly of 'late' Clark, the arguments in *The Sight of Death* and *Heaven on Earth* are with the contemporary image regime of 'visual flow, displacement, disembodiment, endless available revisability', 'a pseudo-utopia' of flat, reproduced images corrupted by language. Painting, with its weirdness, depth and demands on our attention, is proposed as a mitigation available to everyone (maybe a salvation). That Clark should publish the latter book with Thames & Hudson, as well as the readability of his prose, suggest a comparable scepticism of what Baxandall calls, in the *NLH* article, the 'academicizing-up' of art history (454). This is not to overstate the similarities. Baxandall and Clark, however, end up politically adjacent in this specific sense: they seem to operate from a conviction that to put and keep the work of art front and centre of vision and thinking, and to try actually to describe and account for it in language, are humanly very difficult and very important things to do. Ultimately we can trace this thread of feeling in writing about art back to Ruskin. It is about clarity of vision, about really 'seeing' the world, being fully awake to it with one's human eyes and body, and how art can activate this sight. Clark seems to want to declare this inheritance by beginning his book with Ruskin's description of being struck, via Veronese, by painting's intellectual superiority to poetry, and by his using Ruskin as a springboard for some of the arguments about Giotto.⁴³ Ruskin was evidently important to Baxandall, too, although he doesn't admit as much without a large dose of characteristic ambivalence. In an interview conducted in 1996 at Berkeley, where he was teaching, Baxandall reflected that he had felt 'a bit uneasy about being lumped with the social history of art' and that, even in 1980, he

⁴¹ T. J. Clark, 'Art History in an Age of Image Machines', *EurAmerica*, 38: 1, March 2008, 1–30, 5–7. Clark's actual rendering is 'vulgarization' (6). Emphases Clark's.

⁴² Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 137.

⁴³ Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 10 and chapter 1.

'still saw' himself 'as a sort of old-fashioned English aesthete, of the sort of Roger Fry / Ruskin kind, but an aesthete with certain interests.' A bit later, he praises Stokes for 'marvellous, intuitive, gut art criticism', although he 'can't sustain an argument in a conceptual way'. As Baxandall points out, this 'old-established and rather good English tradition of sensitive art criticism, maybe too sensitive' — 'the tradition of Ruskin', which 'I still like', 'for all sorts of reasons' — 'didn't adapt very gracefully ... to the arrival of German and Austrian practices, which were obviously so much more advanced'. This situation has meant 'a lot of the strengths of both sides have been lost'. Wollheim is someone who has come closest to an adequate synthesis, says Baxandall.⁴⁴ In that striking aside, 'maybe too sensitive', we have echoes of Baxandall's ambivalence about the 'aesthetical' conclusions he finds himself forced to reach in front of Piero. Overall, I find these comments unsatisfactory and maybe untrustworthy in part. Baxandall hardly does justice here to Ruskin's reformist zeal, which was not exactly revolutionary, but not far from it either, and certainly hard to miss. Furthermore, the not hanging together conceptually, which Baxandall blames Stokes for, is literally the quintessence of Ruskin: it was an apparently intentional strategy consisting of a dynamic of constantly shifting perspectives, arising from deep distrust of philosophical system. (Some of this is there in Clark on Giotto). Thinking about Baxandall's actually published texts, I would say Ruskin was a persistent and identifiable influence, above all, on what Baxandall calls his democratic motivations and how these manifested in his interest in and approach to language. Clarity of expression, then, is another important shared feature of Baxandall's and Clark's respective projects. They both publish writing which is always saying: 'look there, and now see for yourself'.

In adopting their respective, almost anti-academic stances, the ironies are considerable, of course; both Baxandall and Clark were Courtauld graduates and both were professors at Berkeley, among other august institutions. But their rhetoric is not entirely perverse, at least it has real effects in making the objects vividly visible to the reader, and the objects' histories urgent and imaginable, with powerfully conveyed (and true-to-life) ethical stakes at hand. In the end, maybe excellent writing should be left to speak for itself, but I'll add one more observation, which might at first read like a caveat but is meant to be more like a glance at the other side of the coin. I've been talking about the question of subjectivity, but that question entails another one about the place of the object because the physiognomy of the writer acquires form not only from the pattern of the three lexical types but also from the manner in which the pattern bends around and in the end recoils from the silent surface of the object, from the place where words ultimately fail. In Baxandall and Clark, Piero and Giotto become visible and seem to speak to us in the present but what we hear is strangely always incomplete. Such is the talent of these writers on art and the past, that their texts, in different ways, some of which I have alluded to, repeatedly rediscover painting in all its object-ness.

⁴⁴ Baxandall, *Substance, Sensation and Perception*, 95–112. For a nice take on Ruskin's modern reception within and beyond art history see Suzanne Fagence Cooper, 'Stones and Lilies: Ruskin's legacy since 1969', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 22 June 2020.

Imagining the future

Baxandall's model of language as I have unpacked it here offers a way of tracking changes and continuities in art history's negotiations of subjectivity, the object and its history, a valuable way if language is considered an important factor, as I believe it should be. While concepts such as 'amicable writing' elegantly illuminate the textual effects of foregrounded subjectivity in art writing, such as in the recent work of Didi-Huberman, the kind of analysis of language I have undertaken here arguably has wider applicability in that subjectivity's functioning in relation to the object and its history can be attended to.

By way of conclusion I will say a few words about the political potency of 'imagination', that term almost hiding away in Baxandall's *NLH* article, so as to offer it up as a helpful concept for thinking about the role of subjectivity in negotiating object, past and present in art-historical writing. One of the questions Holly asks in her Preface is: 'What makes us face forward, then, in art history writing as well as in life itself?'⁴⁵ That is, if art history is about trying to look back into a lost past and this is a futile endeavour, what is it that keeps it going? Holly's answer is that the renunciation of the past that the best art history writing leads to, the acceptance of loss, brings with it its own creatively enabling consolation. In relation to Clark, Baxandall and even Stokes I would put it slightly differently. What keeps them going is imagination. The political philosopher Raymond Geuss sees the imagination as a western mental operation often deployed in the modern era to negotiate antecedent and desired outcome. The imagination uses history to conceive of a future.⁴⁶ I've already described Baxandall's democratic argument with his present, and therefore his hope for a future in which art will be demystified. The function of imagination in Clark is similar in that it negotiates past, present and future but for Clark imagination is a matter of content as well as interpretation (presumably it takes imagination to recognise it). Clark uses the term pointedly in an article published in 2008:

For imaging—imaging 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.⁴⁷

In this sentence, Clark is describing what visual imagery (his examples are oil painting and lost-wax bronze casting) has lost, has had stripped from its capacities by the dematerialising contemporary regime of images which exist '*not to be looked at*

⁴⁵ Holly, *The Melancholy Art*, xiii.

⁴⁶ Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010. See especially the Preface and chapters 6 and 7.

⁴⁷ Clark, 'Art History in an Age of Image Machines', 18.

closely'. Art history, Clark says, must attend to how imaginative material resists the debased 'new forces and relations of image-production', and that is what he says *The Sight of Death* is doing.⁴⁸ Clark's positive claims for painting and sculpture here, and the imaginative interpretations he demonstrates in *The Sight of Death* and *Heaven on Earth*, are compelling, however much one hesitates to denounce so completely the contemporary image. Adrian Stokes's Ruskinian argument was with the '[s]everal recent academic sculptors' of the early twentieth century 'reputed not to have handled a chisel in their lives', and the aesthetics and politics (or modernism) that allowed such a situation to develop: modelling conception tends towards delegation to 'subservient masons', and Stokes was pleading for renewal led by 'the handful of serious sculptors' or carvers of his day.⁴⁹ All three turn to past art to imagine the future. The imagination is, however, an unstable time machine. It pulls the writer back from their imaginings of past and future into the present. In Baxandall, this backwards pull into the present, back into the shoes of the observer standing there in the here and now, is the very basis of tactful inference, of critical insight, of historical imagination, of purposeful and meaningful pointing, of art history itself, but it can also be accompanied by a strange ambivalence, like the passage on Piero's *Baptism* at the end of *Patterns of Intention*, which rather abruptly demarcates historical interpretation's limits. In 2018, the effects are different. Clark is able to give imagination's backwards pull into the present a particularly convincing power.

Things are of course a great deal more complicated, however. The imaginative operation of taking a stake in the future by writing in the present about art made in the past is often a matter of irony and paradox. Baxandall's historical imagination is plainly invested in a future however this investment is understated. Clark is openly present-oriented and the nature of Clark's investment in the future in *Heaven on Earth* is highly ambiguous given a further modification in his political stance. In the essay 'For A Left with No Future', originally published in 2012 and which is reproduced as a coda to *Heaven on Earth*, Clark argues that political attention should be unfixed from a future to come and redirected towards addressing the present, exposing the horrific reality of now, shedding all illusions in the process. The imaginative stakes hang together in Clark's writing itself and do not lend themselves to disentangling, but his introduction sets some of this out explicitly. Clark is interested in pictures which, in imagining another world in some way (in very different ways), 'essentially set aside the question of belief and

⁴⁸ Clark, 'Art History in an Age of Image Machines', 16, 18. On the other hand, reflecting on *The Sight of Death* Clark also says: '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' (15). This position is not held for long, he immediately insists that the book is making an urgent art-historical intervention into its present. However briefly, though, it is notable that Clark is happy to indulge an imaginative orientation towards the past for the past's sake here, specifically towards Poussin's seventeenth century.

⁴⁹ Stokes, *Stones of Rimini*, in Wollheim ed., *The Image in Form*, 169. Quoting Julia Kristeva, Holly hints at the role of imagination in confronting melancholy, *The Melancholy Art*, 70–71. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York and Oxford: Columbia University Press, 1989, 9.

unbelief' and paradoxically attend to the quality of existing on earth, in the here and now, with their feet firmly on the ground. In making the viewer be 'fully and only here in the world', Clark says, these pictures offer a way of 'imagining (even making) the world otherwise'.⁵⁰ Most excellent art history being practiced at the moment *is* highly imaginative, exploring all sorts of realms of culture to illuminate and sharpen our perception of objects, and analysis of all sorts of objects to illuminate and sharpen our perception of realms of culture (today's 'Courtauld stuff' I would say). Like Baxandall, however, a great deal of excellent art history is modest (sometimes ambivalent) about the present and future stakes in such work. But foregrounded subjectivity, and, in the face of an imperilled present, hope for the future, need not compromise the integrity of one's historical imagination, far from it.

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⁵⁰ Clark, *Heaven on Earth*, 8. T. J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review*, 74, March and April 2012, reproduced in *Heaven on Earth* as a coda, 237–262. Somewhat downplaying the atheistic undertones in Clark's book, Ayla Lepine proposes *Heaven on Earth* represents a theological turn in the discipline of art history (her interesting review also takes in Naomi Billingsley's *The Visionary Art of William Blake*, 2018, and Thomas Crow's *No Idols: The Missing Theology of Art*, 2017), 'Heaven, Earth, and Art History's Theological Turn', *Art History*, 43: 4, September 2020, 862–869.