Birkbeck BA History of Art, Art and Society in the Nineteenth Century, Year 2

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In *The Painting of Modern Life* Clark wrote "It is not enough to say, as we all do now, that the terms of modernism and the facts of Parisian life are somehow linked."[1] In this essay I shall explore why it is not enough.

There is no simple definition of modernism but it is generally seen as a project, rather than a style. Part of the project of modernism was to find ways to represent the contemporary; as Baudelaire wrote, "The painter, the true painter for whom we are looking will be he who can snatch its epic quality from the life of today, and can make us see and understand, with brush or with pencil, how great and poetic we are in our cravats and our patent-leather boots."[2]

Paris during the nineteenth century was a time of enormous change. In a few years France rose from revolution and terror to a pan-European power only to descend to defeat. Paris was at the heart of the rise, the fall and the disorder which continued through the restored monarchy, the July revolution and reign of Louis Philippe, the Second Revolution, the restored Empire of Napoleon III, the hubris of the war on Prussia, the horrors of the Commune and the Third Republic and the creation of an African/Asian empire.

During the Second Empire Napoleon III appointed Baron Haussmann to turn Paris into a modern city[3], with wide boulevards, sanitation and clean water,

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[1] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2003), p. 14

[2] Baudelaire's review of the Salon of 1845, quoted from S.F. Eisenman's *Nineteenth Century Art: A Critical History* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 13

[3] "Baron Haussmann was Prefect of the Department of the Seine from 1853 to 1879", N. Blake and F. Frascina Modern Practices of Art and Modernity in F. Frascina, N. Blake, B. Fer, T. Garb, C. Harrison (eds.) *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven & London,

and to remove the tiny streets in which discontent had festered and which provided protection from the army. Although Haussmannization was much criticized Paris became a lively city full of sparkle, glitter, café life and new forms of entertainment. "It went without saying that modernity was made of dandies and *cocottes*, especially the latter."[4]

Baudelaire saw that every previous age had had its own modernity and described that of nineteenth century Paris, "By 'modernity' I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable. Every old master has had his own modernity …" With this formula Baudelaire was undermining the rigid, hierarchic academic system that looked back to the past.

Manet was a friend of Baudelaire but Manet was torn between wanting to be part of the academic system[5] and wanting to be a great artist on his own terms. Although trained according to the best academic traditions in Couture's studio[6] and although he never exhibited with the Impressionists he was regarded as their leader and was rarely accepted by the Salon.

It might be argued that the roots of modernism lay in social comment, as in the work of Courbet, or a desire to escape the rigid formality of the academic tradition, as in the work of the Barbizon artists, but art historians today regard it as a formal property associated with the self-defining aspects of painting. Greenberg writes that each art in the new age is obliged "to determine, through the operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself."[7] In the case of painting this was to recognize itself as dealing with a flat surface covered in pigment or other materials and separated from its surrounding ("framed").

Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 50-140, p. 82

[4] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 12

[5] Manet said "It can't be helped: the Salon is the real battlefield. That's where you have to show what you can do. All the other places are a waste of time." quoted in J. Cuno, *Manet Face to Face* (London, Courtauld Institute of Art, 2004), p. 99

[6] R. Shiff Introduction: 'Ascribing to Manet, Declaring the Author' in B.R. Collins (ed.), *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, pp. 1-24, p. 6

[7] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 11

But this is not enough, Clark writes as part of his definition of modernism "Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence."[8] He goes on to show how Manet sought the "edges of things" amongst the facts of Parisian life and painted them in an ironic and ambiguous way that today we regard as amongst the first examples of modern art.

Manet grew up as part of a rich upper class family and became a dandy or *flâneur.* Herbert writes "The *flâneur* was characterised by exquisite manners and by impeccable dress".[9] "He was devoted to newspapers" and was "the best-informed person in Paris". "The Parisian *flâneur* was the role in which Baudelaire, Manet, Degas, Caillebotte, Duret, Duranty, Halévy, and Edmond de Goncourt cast themselves as did so many of the artists and writers of their era." He wore the clothes of the upper-class but was distinguished by his interest in "the aesthetic and elegant" not in mundane "sales and investments". In some ways he was like the old aristocracy in that he despised talking about money. More significantly "he flaunted his wit in artful phrases whose irony was fully appreciated by only by the inner circle of writers, painters, musicians, intellectuals and fashionables to whom they were addressed." *Flâneurs* adopted an "attitude of protest against the vulgarized, materialistic civilization of the bourgeois century."

Clark believes a painting does not really say something about terms, such as "class", unless it "puts established notions of 'picturing' under pressure."[10] This is done using new forms, new techniques, different subjects, novel perspectives and framing. By putting them under pressure it puts social structure under pressure and this tells us something about the terms. The pressure creates "explosions"—public hostility, academic rejection and inflamed articles in the press. These are mostly the reactions one would expect to novelty but Clark argues that in the "gaps", the things left unsaid, the asides and

[8] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 12
[9] This and the following quotes in the paragraph are from R.L. Herbert *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (London, Yale University, 1991), pp. 33-40
[10] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. xxiv

phrasing used we learn something about what really mattered to society at the time.

Clark describes how Manet takes people at the fringes of society, such as prostitutes and represents them in a historically respectable convention, such as the nude, but by using new artistic conventions of form, such as an absence of modelling and presenting them in a modern setting, he makes a social comment.

In a painting such as *Olympia* (1863, Musee d'Orsay, Paris) it is possible to argue that the critics' hostile reaction was a result of the effect of novel formal techniques (such as black outlines and flat colour surfaces). The formal changes introduced an ambiguity so that the painting could not be categorized as an academic nude or simply, conventionally erotic. Ambiguity in this sense is what prevents a work from being labelled and forces it to be dealt with or dismissed.

Clark sees the classical nude as a safe category as it enables us to find a place for the work in our mental filing cabinet under "art". Nakedness was "dangerous"[11] in the nineteenth century as it suggested prostitution which meant the "transgression of normal class divisions - a curious exposure of the self to someone inferior."[12] At the same time the flatness prevents us from entering the fictive world of the painting and instead presents us with an object that has been created by an artist. Flatness draws attention to the painting as a painting rather than create a world in which the viewer is immersed in their own associations.

I shall look at the link between modernism and Parisian life more closely by considering one late work of Manet, *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* (1881-2, Courtauld Institute of Art), and compare Clark's analysis with other more recent analysis taken from Herbert's *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian*

[11] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 146
[12] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 144

Society[13], *12 Views of Manet's Bar*[14] and *Manet Face to Face*[15] in order to show how different approaches to the analysis of the painting link modernism and Parisian life in different ways.

Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère was shown at the Salon in 1882.[16] The Folies-Bergère was one of the cafés-concerts that became popular from the 1860s onwards.[17] These popular public entertainments were part of what Clark (and others) call "spectacle" and "spectacular society" representing a shift within production towards the provision of consumer goods and services and involving the restructuring of free time, private life, leisure and the term includes what others call "consumerism", "the society of leisure", the rise of the mass media, the expansion of advertising and the growth of official diversions (Olympic Games, exhibitions, *biennales*).[18]

Many sources describe these cafés-concerts, for example, Maupassant gives a clear description of the Folies-Bergère,

> *In the vast corridor leading to the circular promenade, where a painted tribe of prostitutes were on the prowl, mingling with the sombrely dressed crowd of men, a group of women was waiting for any newcomers in front of one of the three bars, presided over by three heavily made-up, raddled dispensers of drink and love.*[19]

Manet took one of the "raddled dispensers of drink and love" from the Folies-Bergère and painted what is at first glance a conventional portrait. The critics at the time seem to have dealt with it that way variously criticising the painting technique and the electric lights.[20] The first sign of a deeper issue was the realisation that the gentleman reflected in the mirror was not in the picture

[13] R.L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (London, Yale University, 1991)
[14] B.R. Collins (ed.) *12 Views of Manet's* Bar (Chichester, Princeton University Press,1996)
[15] J. Cuno and J. Kaak (eds.), *Manet Face to Face* (London, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, 2004)
[16] We do not know if it would have been accepted by the jury as the previous year Manet had been awarded the second place medal for *M. Pertuiset the Lion-Hunter* (1880-1) and a few months later he received the Legion d'honneur and so from then on all his submitted works were automatically shown. As an ironic footnote the prize was awarded thanks to pressure from Cabanel, who's *Birth of Venus* (1863, Musée d'Orsay) is now so often used to illustrate the outdated academic nude.
[17] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 207
[18] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 9
[19] G. Maupassant, *Bel-Ami* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1976)
[20] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p. 243. It is interesting that a critic mentions "the globes of electric light" as they had only been invented in 1880 and this must have been one of the first installations in Paris.

although this was often regarded simply as a mistake. It is unclear why it was regarded as a mistake as the same technique was used by Velasquez's in his *Las Meninas* which even has a centrally placed, fair haired person, arms stretched straight and a mysterious pair of people in the mirror with no correspondence in the picture space.

However, with Manet, as we examine the picture more carefully the picture space starts to fall apart, the lack of a floor, the mispositioned bottles and the shifted reflection hint at a deeper meaning. Manet takes a conventional scene from the life of Parisian society and creates a subtle comment on ideology. We are confronted by a modern day Virgin Mary[21], a Marianne, a prostitute, a sales girl, a free woman, a representative of the spectacular society. The setting is conventional but threatening; are we ordering a drink or being judged and who are we? Are we the displaced figure on the right or is that some figment of imagination? Are we looking at a painting or are we engaged in some transaction with the barmaid? Does our view of the painting depend on our gender?

In *The Painting of Modern Life* Clark devotes a chapter to "A Bar at the Folies-Bergère". The first three quarters of the chapter describe the development of the cafe-concert, the nature of the "popular" and various acts that were staged at the Folies-Bergère. Clark's approach is to start with what the critics said at the time—"badly drawn", "indecisive", "bluish and murky", "botched". The descriptions of the barmaid are remarkable in so far as they saw nothing surprising and Clark wonders if the critics saw it with a "knowing wink" as a thinly disguised painting of a prostitute. This then enabled them to disambiguate the painting and, having categorized it, deal with it simplistically, with a knowing smirk. Clark, like the critics, starts with the "lack of depth, its resistance to interpretation, its impossible mirror and incomprehensible barmaid"[22] but rather than regard these things as mistakes he treats them as

[21] D. Carrier, 'Art History in the Mirror Stage: Interpreting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère'* in B.R. Collins (ed.), *12 View of Manet's* Bar (Chichester, Princeton University, 1996), pp. 71-90, p. 78
[22] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life,* p. 248

systematic and supportive of a simple meaning, it is a painting of surfaces organised around juxtapositions that invites the viewer into a series of spaces.

Clark shows how by introducing ambiguity and disturbing the normal expectations a social comment is made. He suggests Manet was one of the first to respond to social circumstances by formal means and an emphasis on those elements that define a painting. Manet started to adopt these techniques early on; *The Absinthe Drinker* of 1858-9 (Ny Carlsberg-Glyptotek, Copenhagen) already shows an ambiguous representation of space, a shadow that does not seem to fit the figure, a figure that is neither sitting not standing, a contradictory use of shadows.

As soon as we enter the spaces of *Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère* and accept the mirror we are presented with ambiguities and uncertainties, the reflection is misplaced; the attitude of the barmaid's reflection differs from the front view. Our doubts accumulate, there are contradictory clues, the equation does not add up.

We know from X-ray analysis[23] that the inconsistencies were carefully contrived so must have been thought appropriate by Manet to the social form, towards the Folies-Bergère and "towards modern life in Paris".[24] The expression on the woman's face avoids any expression as being part of the bourgeoisie, she wears "the face of the popular"; she is the first modern woman. The fact that the reflection is almost right introduces a tension, it is ambiguous; it cannot be accepted as correct or dismissed as completely wrong. It is plain as well as paradoxical, fixed as well as shifting; in essence it is "modern".

Other historians, such as R.L. Herbert in *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* add factual details. The woman has been identified as Suzon, a barmaid at the Folies-Bergère; however the real identity and life of artists' models tells us little about the painting itself. Herbert states the Folies-Bergère was "dominated by the well-to-do" although the entry price of two francs was

[23] J. House, 'Face to Face with *Le Déjeuner* and *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère'* in *Manet: Face to Face* (London, Courtauld Institute, 2004), p. 66

affordable by Duroy, the hero of Maupassant's Bel-Ami when he becomes a sub-editor on the newspaper earning 200 francs a month.

Herbert's approach is less formal than Clark's; he takes the social circumstances as most important in determining the meaning. So he writes, "In his austere figure we find the anonymity and loneliness inherent in the arbitrary encounters of modern life." Although he adds, "none of this denies that we continue to have trouble reading her iconic image."

The number and variety of interpretations of the painting have given rise to *12 Views of Manet's* Bar (1996).[25] It was written in response to a question about how the "New Art History" would approach such a work from a Marxist, psychoanalytical, structuralist, post-structuralist, and feminist point of view. In the book it is argued that previously art historians were not open about subjectivity and their approach was based on creating a corpus of related images in order to demonstrate influences, themes and evolving styles with the implicit understanding that this was creating an objective body of knowledge that would yield a deeper understanding.

Recent research has abandoned this approach and looks for an approach based on a single word or obscure pictorial feature while taking an unconcealed subjective stance. For example Gronberg discusses aspects of modern masculinity in representations of acrobats.[26] Levine speculates on the possible links between Suzon as an un-biblical Susannah "longing for sexual knowledge" and as a woman "who awakened his memory of his mother's happy smile of sensual rapture." [27]

As Collins points out New Art History "rejects an earlier preoccupation with an artwork's authorial meaning in favour of a concern with its implications for

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[24] T.J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life,* p. 253
[25] B.R. Collins (ed.), *12 Views of Manet's* Bar
[26] T. Gronberg, 'Dumbshows: A Carefully Staged Indifference' in B.R. Collins (ed.) *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, pp. 189-213
[27] S. Levine, 'Manet's Man Meets the Gleam of Her Gaze: A Psychological Novel' in B.R. Collins (ed.) *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, pp. 250-277

some spectator or spectators, historical or contemporary."[28] Like many of the other essays he discusses the barmaid's look which has been interpreted as "day dreaming", "coldly detached", "tired and glum", "absent, weary, dispirited" and so on. Clark categorizes the look as "not quite focused on anything" which Collins believes creates an elusiveness and inaccessibility reinforced by the hard textures that dominate the work resulting in a "drama of invitation and denial". This, he suggests, highlights the theme of the painting "the psychological gap between the sexes", not a result, as Baudelaire claims, of women's stupidity but because of their Otherness.[29]

Pollock considers the "narratives of class and gender … that coincide on the body of the barmaid."[30] She presents her essay in the form of open letters to anonymous friends and to historical figures, such as Mary Cassatt, and discusses elements of the picture, such as the women in the background, the significance of the ungloved hands and the semiotics of hands including the emphasis on the "bulging mounds of Venus".[31]

We see why, for Clark, the simple link between modernism and Parisian life is self-evident but only a small part of the analysis. He takes a formal approach to art history combined with a detailed analysis of Parisian society and the associated class structures and changes and pressures in the society at the time. He has been criticized for reinforcing the idea of the "great" artist and "significant art works" and ignoring gender issues by other historians such as Pollock and the historian Fernie questions Clark's demand that his social historical method should be used to the exclusion of all other.[32] Nevertheless, Clark's view has stood up remarkably well to the test of time and the onslaught of competing approaches.

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[28] B.R. Collins, 'The Dialectics of Desire, the Narcissism of Authorship: A Male Interpretation of the Psychological Origins of Manet's Bar' in B.R. Collins (ed.), *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, pp. 115-141, p. 116

[29] B.R. Collins, 'The Dialectics of Desire, the Narcissism of Authorship', p. 127

[30] G. Pollock, 'The "View from Elsewhere": Extracts from a Semi-public Correspondence about the Visibility of Desire' in B.R. Collins (ed.), *12 Views of Manet's Bar*, pp. 278-314, p. 281

[31] G. Pollock, 'The "View from Elsewhere"', p. 301

[32] E. Fernie in *Art History and Its Methods* (London, Phaidon, 2002, first published 1995) p. 247 on T.J. Clark's 'The Conditions of Artistic Creation' (pp. 248-253) reprinted from the *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 May 1974, pp. 561-2

Finally, my personal view is that Manet painted the work when he knew he was dying and when he knew it would be exhibited at the Salon so it is likely that it was an important work for him. Manet was a flâneur, someone who observed modern life and commented in an ironic and witty way. Its setting is modern, shallow but full of life. The painting is a reflection on life and death but more than a simple vanitas. The young woman is wistful as she carries out her allotted task. We are an intimate participant yet absent from the transaction. Everything will be consumed. E.M. Forster perhaps catches the mood,

> *Mature as he was, she might yet be able to help him to the building of the rainbow bridge that should connect the prose in us with the passion. Without it we are meaningless fragments, half monks, half beasts, unconnected arches that have never joined into a man. With it love is born, and alights on the highest curve, glowing against the gray, sober against the fire … Only connect! … But she failed."*[33]

[33] E.M. Forster, *Howards End* (Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1977), Chapter 22, p. 187-188

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