

**MIRROR MIRROR ON THE WALL:
REFLECTIONS ON THE 19TH CENTURY-PARIS THROUGH MANET'S
"BAR AT THE FOLIES-BERGÈRE"**

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ABSTRACT

19th century-Paris is the scene of a vast urban change both physically and socio-culturally. The massive Haussmann plan rapidly transforms the city scape which is to design a network of boulevards combines many different activities such as arcades, public gardens, operas, cafes and bars. In this system, people who stroll by the boulevard look around, visit cafés and shops keep avenues alive. This is so new for that epoch and changed the citizens' attitude and leads the birth of the *flâneur* who leisurely strolls around for amusement. The *flâneurs* occupy the boulevards while they are viewing the scenes, viewing the crowd and also being viewed by the people. So, Paris becomes a scene of this mesmerizing spectacle. Beside these new buildings and glittering boulevards the ones can also see the demolished structures yet the city is still underconstruction. The old quarters vanish rapidly but the poor, fallen, regretted people live in there become visible on the new streets. So the "modern" Parisians confront the "other" side of the city. In that point, however Paris is regarded as a fairy tale city with all these modern aspects, it actually is the space of confrontation and distinction. There are several intellectuals observe this situation and represent the physical and social stratification in their works; such as Baudelaire, Flaubert, Balzac, Renoir and Manet. This study basically focuses on Edouard Manet (1832-1883) and his painting called "Bar at the Folies-Bergère" to read the socio-cultural and socio-spatial condition of the 19th century-Paris. And in this reading the mirror on the wall which dominates the painting stands as a reference to decipher Manet's critique of the society. In order to conduct the study thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Marshall Berman will be references to read the dilemmas of internalizing modernity in the 19th century; art historians T.J. Clark and Jonathan Crary will broaden the view to understand the change of the object of the gaze in that epoch and to reflect on the questions who is the viewer, what is to be viewed and how it is represented; and the philosopher

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Michael Foucault who reads Manet's work as a field of discourse will expand the critique of society beyond the canvas.

Keywords: 19th Century-Paris, modernity, flâneur, Manet, "Bar at the Folies-Bergère"

At the beginning of the 19th century the image of Paris is not nice. There is poverty; the epidemics are all around, the streets are congested and dirty (Hall, 1999, pg. 81, 265). In order to put an end to this problematic situation Napoleon and Eugène Haussmann decide to renovate Paris. Their plan is to design a network of boulevards which combines many different activities such as arcades, public gardens, operas, cafes and bars (Choay, 1969; Panerai & Castex, 2004; Benjamin, 1985). In this system, people who stroll by the boulevard look around, visit cafés and shops keep avenues alive. This was so new for that epoch and changed the citizens' attitude. The well-known thinker of the period Charles Baudelaire who witnessed the change of life the modern city called Parisians "who practiced leisurely strolling as a form of entertainment" les *flâneurs* (Forgione, 2005, p. 664). The *flâneurs* occupied the boulevards while they were viewing the scenes, viewing the crowd and also being viewed by the other people. The boulevards become a place where people like to boast and spend most of their time. On the other side there is another *flâneur* who "goes botanizing on the asphalt" (Benjamin, 1985, p. 37). This one looks like a scientist who is investigating the unnatural environment which was effected by modernism. This *flâneur* is also strolling around, viewing the crowd but not being viewed by them. This is the artist who is observing the 19th century Paris (Benjamin, 1985; Berman, 1988).

Paris in the 19th century is very valuable scenery for the artists of that epoch. There are lots of writers such as Balzac, Flaubert and Zola, painters such as Renoir, Cezanne, Degas and Manet. This study basically focuses on the Impressionist painter Edouard Manet (1832-1883) and his work called "Bar at the Folies-Bergère".

According to T. J. Clark (1999, p. 3) Impressionists "broke things up into finely discriminated points of color, as well as in the 'accidental' momentary vision." Representing the "moment" becomes important for Impressionists in parallel to the invention of photograph in 1830 (Krausse, 2005, p. 72). Snapshot catches any moment in life and represents it on a piece of paper. This feature of photography fascinated the Impressionist painter "who endeavors to express the general impression produced by a scene or object, to the exclusion of minute details or elaborate finish" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Hence, the technique and the

idea of their paintings are different from their formers. The contours are sketchy to catch the moments. Behind this they "had a fondness for their own time haunted the territory of the *nouvelles couches sociales*" (Clark, 1999, p. xxx). So the experiences of newly emerging social classes are the sceneries. Therefore the traditionalists refuse Impressionists works, and blame them for not using divine symbols or heroes (Krausse, 2005, p. 72). In the 19th century it was generally believed that "art should teach a moral lesson," like holy symbolism, or "evoke a powerful sentiment," like the stories of heroes, so the subject of the artwork, in other words the theme, should be worth to represent (Chu, 2006, p. 388). Instead of this the impressionists "depicted the life of the contemporary urban middle class, and were emphatically modern" (Chu, 2006, p. 390). Therefore, the traditionalists are against the changing idea of reflection of the world; the mimesis is no more the same.

Mimesis means "imitation" especially "the representation or imitation of the real world in (a work of) art, literature, etc" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). So the work of art is approved as the "mimetic mirror" throughout the centuries (Şengel, 2002, p. 12). In that point the Impressionists differ, they "wanted somehow to suggest the constantly changing aspect of reality" (Chu, 2006, p. 390). So they observe, reflect and criticize the changing conditions of the modern time with their "*flâneur/artist*" gaze (Pollock, 2008, p.218). It can be said that with the new mimetic approach, they propose a critical relation with social reality. So, what are the social realities of that epoch? To answer this question Manet's "Bar at the Folies-Bergère" (Figure 1) stands as a reference.



Figure 1. "Bar at the Folies-Bergère" (1882), Edouard Manet.

(Source: Foucault, M. (2009). Manet and the Object of Painting. London: Tate, p. 72.)

In this painting, firstly the woman figure occupies the center (Figure 2, 3). The whole painting is based on her position and she directly looks at the spectator. She is in front of a bar and on the bar there are several bottles of beverages. Then the images behind her catch the eye. These are sketchy representations of a crowd (Figure 4). But this is not the room when people enjoy the bar, this is a reflection on a mirror and we understand it when we see the reflection of the woman and the man in front of her (Figure 5). So she is in between with the bar and the mirror. In other words, she is behind a bar and the main room of the Folies-Bergère extends before her. Therefore we understand that she is a barmaid ready to serve the crowd depicted on the mirror.



Figure 2.

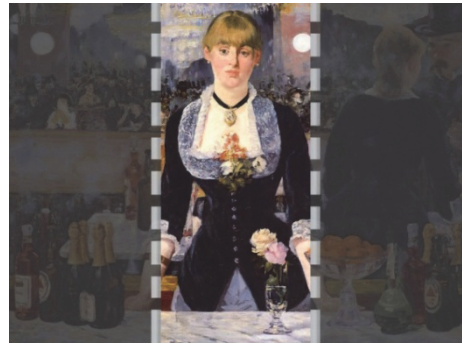


Figure 3.

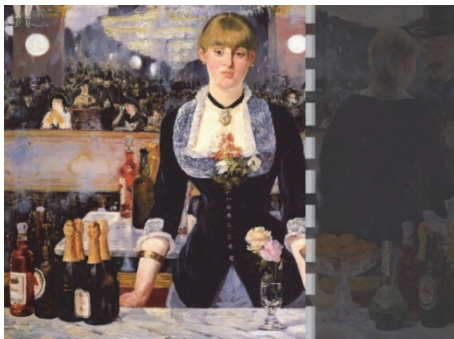


Figure 4.

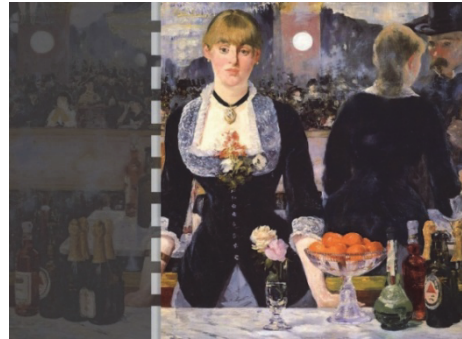


Figure 5.

With the help of the mirror we just understand the space, the position of the woman and her occupation. It is also important to recognize the crowd, because here we can only see the people's reflection on it. This is a crowd of bourgeois who entertain by watching the spectacle at the bar. At the same time through the reflection on the mirror they turn themselves into a spectacle. The mirror

shows that, the bourgeoisie culture is a "culture of display" in the 19th-century Paris (Iskin, 1995, p. 25). Every moment is like a spectacle. While wandering on the streets or in a bar, the crowd composes a spectacle; while the one is in that crowd she or he also turns out to be a spectacle. The commodities displayed in shop windows of stores and in arcades are spectacles, while viewing these goods one becomes a part of the spectacle. The basic interaction is based on to view and to be viewed. In that point the mirror in the painting shows us the effect of the gaze and how the direction of the gaze focused on the women.

Jonathan Crary (1999, p. 1) states that "western modernity since the 19th century has demanded that individuals define and shape themselves in terms of 'paying attention,' that is [...] for the sake of isolating or focusing on a reduced number of stimuli." Then, here it is possible to interpret that the stimuli is the image of women. According to Griselda Pollock sexual policy of the gaze determines the borders of social organizations (Pollock, 2008, p. 211). In other words the male gaze determines the position of women. In the case of "Bar at the Folies-Bergère" we see the reflection of a man on the mirror. His attention is towards the barmaid and his gaze is on her. It is not clear that he is ordering something to drink or in the middle of an indecent proposal to her. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu (2006, p. 388) interprets that "the barmaid's face is aloof and emotionless, showing only boredom and indifference to the customer—one of countless men who, night after night, ask for drinks or the price of her after-hour services." When we read Pollock's article this comment becomes more meaningful. According to Pollock (2008, pg. 215, 249) there is a relation between immorality and being a working-woman. This also shows a differentiation between the working-woman and a bourgeois lady which we clearly see in the painting. The bourgeois ladies are on the mirror, depicted as watching the spectacle; and the barmaid is behind the bar serving for the bourgeoisie. According to Ruth Iskin (1995, p. 26) the bar is also the symbol of the class difference; being behind the bar means being in the service sector. However she mentions that there is a difference working in a stylish place. For instance, in Manet's painting the barmaid is wearing a fashionable dress and she looks like a bourgeois lady in that garment, even though she is not. She is "something between a work-girl and a middle-class lady," in other words she is in a "new class of the petite bourgeoisie" (Iskin, 1995, p. 26). Because it is a necessity for "the day-to-day discourse of selling and consumption at the time required saleswomen's dress code to be pleasing to a bourgeoisie clientele" (Iskin, 1995, p. 26). Therefore, the appearance of her becomes important for the commerce. So, as Iskin (1995, p. 27) asks "what was it she was selling, after all?" The goods or her image? In other words the image of her forms a display for the goods, and makes them more attractive to the

customers. It reminds the function of shop windows where the goods are displayed behind a large plate of glass.

As it is mentioned before this is the age of “display” so it is related with “to exhibit”. Yet, the 19th century is the age of world exhibitions, and according to Walter Benjamin (1985, p. 165) these were “places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity.” The bourgeois fascinated by the luxury goods displayed in the world exhibitions dwell in the “universe of commodities” (Benjamin, 1985, p. 166). This universe of commodities is comprised of not only world exhibitions, but also the arcades and department stores, the “recent invention[s] of industrial luxury” (Benjamin, 1985, p. 36). And to commodify these objects advertisement becomes important. In that point shop windows are absolutely needed in order to exhibit and advertise commodities. As Benjamin (1985, p. 37) states these places are the houses of *flâneurs*. Hence the bourgeois spend most of their time in these spaces by leisurely wandering and looking around. The first things that catch their eyes are the shop windows. They are fascinated by the shimmer of luxuries goods; though they cannot reach or have the product they are looking at without paying its price. So the desire of obtaining this good, displayed in the shop windows, turns it into fetishism. Iskin (1995, p. 42) quotes Baudelaire about viewing an object with a woman who he did not know:

I catch myself thinking as I look at some handsome object or beautiful scenery or anything at all agreeable. ‘Why isn’t she with me, why isn’t she here to admire that with me or to buy that with me?’

Iskin (1995, p. 42) interprets that “in this discourse of romance in the age of consumption, Baudelaire’s fantasy suggests that both he and she enjoy being seduced together by ‘some handsome object’ in a shop window.” Iskin’s interpretation is meaningful in terms of commodity fetishism. The gaze of the spectator makes the product a desire object. In this regard, Baudelaire is both seduced by the object and the image of the woman. Baudelaire’s solicitous gaze turns the woman into a fetishized object like the luxuries displayed on shop windows. Iskin (1995, p. 27) also quotes Henri Houssaye who describes the barmaid in Manet’s “Bar at the Folies-Bergère” as “vaguely shaped mannequin”. If the expressionless woman is like a mannequin, the man is the spectator and then the mirror turns into a shop window; because we can just see the man’s gaze through it (Figure 6). The man is standing her very closely and his attention is on her.



Figure 6. Detail from "Bar at the Folies-Bergère".

The mirror reflects not only this customer's gaze; Manet also reflects the focus of male gaze in the bourgeoisie society. Another detail from the painting shows us how the male gaze towards the woman (Figure 7). In this sketchy crowd one can hardly see faces but the gestures of the man and woman tell the direction of the attention. The crowd is in the second storey, which we can only understand from the reflection, and they are probably watching a show. Especially the women are depicted in the moment of viewing the show. There is a woman with binoculars in her hands, and another woman near her is looking to the same direction. Nevertheless, there are several men in this section whose gestures are towards these women watching the spectacle. It is an interesting detail that we see a pair of legs on the left corner on top. This is probably a performer's image and it seems that the performer is a woman. Unsurprisingly, the spectacle is a woman; the spectators are also women and the men around them look at those women. In this painting the male gaze dominates the scenery. In other words, through the mirror Manet reflects the reality of gendered look and the condition of women as a spectacle. The hegemony of the look is masculine; even if the woman preserves her subjectivity with her own gaze, the male gaze turns her into a spectacle, to a desire object.



Figure 7. Detail from “Bar at the Folies-Bergère”.

The mirror is also a shop window of the display of the bourgeoisie society. Manet reflects their luxury consumption habits and entertainment based on a consumption product, the mirror (Melchior-Bonnet, 2001, pg. 9-98). As mentioned above Impressionists reflect the daily life of the 19th-century Paris, and the bourgeoisie. Clark (1999, p. 3) states that, “the actual bourgeois’s being brought on to enjoy Impressionist painting,” and they are the “first purchasers and enthusiasts” of these paintings. It is remarkable that bourgeoisie sees those works and desires to buy their own paintings. Manet criticizes the reality of his epoch and reflects the bourgeoisie life, then the bourgeoisie society’s solicitous gaze towards this mirror with the intention to purchase; so there is an irony here. It is interesting that how the bourgeoisie people, who see their own reflection on the mirror, identify themselves; whether they question the subject/object, or spectacle/spectator position of themselves. Additionally, their desire to buy the painting reminds the myth of Narcissus that the bourgeoisies see their reflection, amazed by it and want to have it. In that point they turn themselves into a desire object, a spectacle. Thus, the mirror is “making spectacle of everything” (Melchior-Bonnet, 2001, p. 98). So, the bourgeoisies identify themselves through the “culture of display,” with viewing the crowd which they also belong to and

being viewed by the others. Therefore, the function of the mirror is not just reflection; it draws the borders of identity, criticism of subject and object, spectator and spectacle, consumption and luxurious life of the 19th century.



Figure 8. "Bar at the Folies-Bergère", edited by the author.

What if there is no mirror in that painting? In Figure 8 the mirror is erased, and the texture of the wall is applied to the mirror surface. This stroke changes the whole scene. Now there is no clue about the space, we cannot understand the ones to whom the barmaid serve for, or her position in the society. It is clear that the mirror is a key element in that painting and Manet's criticism. Without that mirror we may say that Manet painted this beautiful woman for the pleasure of the bourgeoisie men. However with the mirror it turns into a critique of the society, the bourgeoisie habits and the place of woman in that society. Manet's mirror is the "mimetic mirror" which does not only show the world; but instead reflects the social reality and invite people to reflect on it from an intellectual distance and criticize it. As last words Bonnet's quotation from David Hockney is remarkable that, "If we consider life without the mirror, we are only considering it half-way" (Melchior-Bonnet, 2001, p. 98).

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