

CONCLUSION: Text

The outcomes of the research and the proposals made in this dissertation have explained at a pictorial level many of Manet's most problematic paintings, and presented insights into processes involved in his picture-making. These processes, involving strategies of spatial ambiguity, show that Manet was much more deliberate than has been previously thought in the creation of those unsettling, uncertain qualities which have always been perceived in his work, but usually in terms of illegibility of narrative, contradictory or faulty depictions, or incomprehensible spaces. That Manet should have crafted his artifice in such a way and to the extent shown here should not be surprising.

As an integral component of his art and underlying many works throughout his career at varying levels of involvement, influence, and visibility, this spatial ambiguity has been shown to provide not only the spatial structures upon which many of Manet's works evolved, but also the artistic means by which they could be layered. It was neither the point of his paintings nor simply a pictorial vehicle for their content, but the means to interplay his apparently clear and dynamic images with displacement, effacement, deflection, reflection, or the implied or explicit dualities of unity/fragmentation, cohesion/fracture, or frontal/angled, so as to locate them away from the obvious and unequivocal. And by being crafted with unambiguous and rational structures and elements the ambiguity also provided an element of contradiction, ensuring that there was no singular point of focus in the geometry, space, narrative, or meaning in the works, always keeping them open-ended, without closure.

The two strategies for this spatial ambiguity were independently developed in the early 1860s, conjoined in a number of works in the 1870s, and brought to their most creative integration in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. One involved the spatial shaping provided by offset viewpoints in perspective views, in which the geometry is part of a frontal view but the view itself seems angled, and the other involved the creation of

composite images, seen as cohesive views from a single viewpoint but in reality the synthesis of disparate parts of different, but actual, views. Both were influenced by processes of photography, with the offset viewpoint geometry available in the *chambre photographique* 'view' camera, and the composite images created from parts of photographic images, with some of those only possible as aerial photographs taken from a balloon. In their different ways, both strategies used the unifying geometry of linear perspective to create a new kind of coherence between spatial illusion and surface, with the illusion inherent in linear perspective retained but recontextualised and engaged within the surface of a painting, and in doing so to reclaim the terrain of the painting's surface in its much more traditional role as a field of artistic negotiation and speculation. It is proposed that it was this new coherence, rather than a reconstitution of the flatness of a painting's surface, which underlay the developed understanding that a decisive change in painting, involving a shift in the dynamic between pictorial space and surface, had occurred with Manet's work. The anchoring of this new dynamic within the conventions of linear perspective also positioned the work as a point of conflation in Western painting, set between its past and future.

It is clear that these strategies were carried out by Manet, apparently without divulging the nature of the work to friend or family, over a period of at least twenty years. To a certain extent, that in itself is a contradiction of the typical image of the artist who was more than happy to have visitors present while painting, and of whom Théodore Duret wrote, "Variant sans cesse, il ne se tenait point à un sujet une fois réussi, pour le répéter. L'innovation, la recherche perpétuelle formaient le fond de son esthétique".¹ But it does fit the artist whose work is never quite what it seems. For someone whose statements about his own art were few in number, and of which most were couched in general homiletic terms unrelated in any direct way to his own works, a proposition that Manet steadfastly undertook a long-term, covert program of pictorial strategies may not seem so implausible. With the intended outcome involving spatial ambiguity, any disclosure of the mechanisms by which it was created also would have subverted those very intentions. That those same strategies are the very means by which a number of his

spatially problematic paintings have been able to be now explained confirms both their use by Manet and their concealment.

Variouly involving the description of the underlying spatial shapings, identifications of elements and locales, and the processes by which the images were constructed, these explanations and proposals, developed and refined by means of computer-generated modelling with selected works, have demonstrated the extent to which Manet used these strategies of spatial ambiguity throughout his oeuvre. In doing so they have presented new understandings of *Incident in a Bullfight*, *View of the 1867 Exposition Universelle*, *The Burial*, *The Railway*, *Masked Ball at the Opera*, and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, provided insights into the nature and development of his artistic practice, and repositioned that practice, both historically and artistically, into new contexts.

These proposals not only suggest that the accepted readings of particular paintings of Manet need to be reconsidered but also provide a new understanding of their artifice from which other aspects of interest in his art or its contexts could be re-examined. Moreover, with the methodology used in the research demonstrating that Manet's art can be addressed in ways very different to previous approaches, the potential for new avenues of study into its enigmatic domain may also be realised. The last word, as always, has yet to be written.

© Malcolm Park – Excerpt from 2001 PhD Dissertation:
Ambiguity, and the engagement of spatial illusion within the surface of Manet's paintings

CONCLUSION: Notes

DISSERTATION: Volume 2, p.32

NOTES

1. Théodore Duret, Manet, Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1919, p.92.
-