

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

INTRODUCTION: Text

That there was a decisive change in painting with the work of the nineteenth-century French artist Edouard Manet (1832–1883) seems to be now unquestioned. The nature of that change and its relationship with later artistic developments are less certain. It has been seen to incorporate the Modernist declaration of a painting's surface in the very production of the work rather than its concealment, and has seen the mode of representation at the surface as a metaphor for concepts such as modernity, rather than as description, or as a re-alignment of the engagement between the painting and the viewer. Notwithstanding their differences, an important aspect common to such notions involves the dynamic between illusionistic space and surface. This dynamic in Manet's paintings has generally been interpreted as the compression of space into, and its alignment with, the flatness of their surfaces. Although these spatial manipulations have been seen to partly explain their spatial disjunctions or apparent discrepancies, the uncertain and ambiguous qualities of Manet's works have been considered more as traits of his painting process rather than crafted outcomes, and certainly to have no rational explanation.

This dissertation proposes that the engagement of spatial illusion within the surface of Manet's paintings was one of the critical conditions of their artifice and ambiguity, and that in many of his more problematic works that ambiguity was not created as an arbitrary or erroneous outcome of a creative process but, rather, was crafted with clear intent and can indeed be explained. Although Manet used a complex range of spatial manipulations, his spatial ambiguity was primarily created with the application of two strategies which, paradoxically, were both anchored in the conventions of linear perspective.

One strategy involved the ambiguous spatial shaping provided by offset one-point perspective viewpoints in which the geometry is part of a frontal view but the view itself seems angled. Although Manet would have been aware that such offset viewpoints had

been used since the development of linear perspective in the Renaissance, it is proposed that his understanding of its potential for ambiguity and his unique application of it were more influenced by the underlying geometry of the *chambre photographique* 'view' camera and its capacity to produce similar images.

The other strategy involved the creation of composite images as a synthesis of separate parts of actual views, and rather than being loose interpretations of locales, these images were constructed with interlocked or overlaid segments of views taken from the same or different viewpoints. It can be shown that many of these segments were most likely derived from photographs and that in two of his paintings some of the segments could only have been from photographs taken from an aerial balloon.

Perspective, both as a geometry for the construction of spatial illusion and its implicit confirmation within a photographic image, is thus seen as a crucial component in Manet's construction of his spatial ambiguity. Its conventions were used by him to translate the perspective of natural vision to the surface of his works, and were themselves transferred directly from available images such as other paintings, illustrations, or photographs. His use of perspective was, however, certainly not a straightforward or consistent one. Although clearly he had often used the traditional potential of perspective to pictorially unify a view, his more ambiguous works seem to be both a rejection of its conventions as well as a fragmentation of a view's pictorial unity. Nevertheless, it can be shown that in most, but not all, of those works, perspectival geometry provided an underlying structure to his picture-making. This use of a coherent system to structure modes of apparent spatial incoherence or incomprehensibility not only heightened the ambiguity but also created a new pictorial coherence, rather than a unity, within the surface of his works.

Such suggestions are certainly a contradiction of those established beliefs about the incongruities in Manet's use of scale, space and perspective, and the impossibility to rationally explain his works. Most of these perceptions, however, have been speculative or notional at best and are very much open to question. By its very nature, however, ambiguity is elusive and, superficially at least, very difficult to quantify, inviting and

encouraging generalities rather than specifics, and speculation rather than analysis. In art-historical terms its role in the art of Manet has indeed developed an uncritical reputation. The ambiguity of his paintings has been explained by both his contemporaries and later scholars either by inventing narratives of their own making or by claiming the existence of narratives within supposed representations. Too often these narratives have involved issues or contexts external to the work. The identification of representations based upon superimposed contexts can qualify and expand upon those issues, but they cannot provide very cogent insights into a work's ambiguities. The lack of specificity to the work itself and their inability to be contradicted have also allowed such representations to be presented as 'fact'. It follows that only further speculation can qualify, develop or even refute such proposals.

An alternative approach is to search for evidence of the process of the picture-making itself, to look behind the artifice for information which can transform the way in which a work may be read. Whereas a self-contained final image is the mediator of responses and interpretations made in front of its surface, one needs to understand what exists within a surface to find evidence of a process of production. In the same way that X-radiographs can illuminate the existence of previous states within a painting's surface, a visual deconstruction of an image may enable the identification, for example, of what Manet had actually depicted or the underlying geometry which he had used for its spatial illusion, rather than speculating or imagining what is there or not there. Such identification has the potential to provide insights into the layering and meaning of his paintings, and allow interpretations which are less speculative and, by that very fact, more compelling.

Implicit in this search for evidence of the process of production is the question of the importance, or otherwise, of the specificity of the site, the viewpoint(s), and the view(s) involved in a painting's image. As Manet's paintings can exist without a viewer's knowledge of their visual referents, imagined or real, it could be considered that the confirmation of a site, viewpoint, or view would add little to one's understanding. Alternatively, such an identification could, to some degree, be seen to lay bare the

premise of an ambiguity and to uncover, without necessarily providing meaning, the nature of the artifice involved. A search for such evidence is by no means a new technique for art historical research, and indeed has been the time-honoured way to try and sort out fact from fiction. Certainly many works of Manet have been scientifically and visually examined with techniques involving X-radiography, infra-red reflectography and microscopy but, with some notable exceptions,¹ the established information has generally not been integrated by Manet scholars into the wider artistic implications of his works. One can only make the conjecture that the perceived nature of Manet's work has precluded an approach which could be seen as a contradiction of the very works themselves.

With the perceptions about Manet's use of perspective, for example, it is surprising that the extent or manner of his use of its geometry has not previously been examined in detail. The fact that in many of his works there are few, if any, readily available lines to facilitate a perspectival analysis, does not mean that the geometry of perspective was not involved. Manet's eye was a trained and expert one, and there is ample direct visual evidence available in both his paintings and drawings to indicate that he understood the principles of linear perspective and had used them in the translation of what he saw onto a work's surface, even if not as an accurately constructed geometry. Certainly many of those paintings of a more problematic nature have provided contradictory cues about his pictorial space rather than obvious indicators of the use of traditional perspectival spatial illusion, but it is that translation which seems to have deflected any notion that analysis is able to contribute to our knowledge about Manet and his art.

In the midst of such notions of speculation and analysis, some questions need to be asked. Is it possible to examine, for example, the extent to which Manet did truthfully paint what he saw? Is it possible to establish the means by which he constructed his images? And is one able to determine the extent to which he adjusted, manipulated, and invented to make things seem real, or conversely, to which he attempted to hide things in a shroud of ambiguity or apparent invention? Although the answers to these questions

can only be established if one can determine what it was that he painted, can that be determined with any certainty, if at all? The inherent artifice of a painting is so layered, and so open to speculation and interpretation that any attempt to do so could be seen to be of limited relevance or use. A painting's meaning, moreover, is seen to be influenced as much by a work's contextualisation as by what is actually depicted. And in addition, with the dynamics of Manet's picture-making involving so many other painterly and colouristic aspects as integral components of his expressive armoury, is it possible to isolate retrospectively one aspect from all the others?

Manet's artifice provides the key to the problem. Although abstruse and complex, his artifice is certainly not arbitrary. The art of picture-making involves the ability to craft the artifice as an integral part of the painting, and the guile to make the techniques which are involved appear less than obvious. If the latter is not achieved then the potential of the artifice is diminished, and the work becomes little more than pastiche or illustration. Manet certainly knew the nature of the artifice he desired and achieved it with deliberate intent. But it was rarely obvious, and the fact that he also layered it with wit and irony enhanced the achievement. Too often, however, the ambiguities, contradictions and fractures resulting from his intentions, or more correctly his presumed intentions, have rather been seen to be variously inexplicable or incoherent,² indicative of a faulty technique,³ an arbitrary process,⁴ an artful manipulation with a wilful disregard of conventions,⁵ or an infusion of his imagination and genius.⁶ And rather than being seen as integral parts of the mechanics of his picture-making process, they have been perceived to exist only as unintended, accidental results.⁷

It is certainly clear that Manet had preferred not to explain or clarify his works, even to his closest friends and artist colleagues, and had also wished the viewing public to be kept guessing. Such secretiveness does not necessarily imply that intentional strategies of subterfuge were involved in his picture-making process, but if that were so then the inexplicable is more likely to turn out to be the result of such strategies and to have been created with formal intent. The ability to examine the artifice of Manet's paintings on the basis that it had been crafted with intent and most probably with a

strategy of subterfuge has been the basis for the approach taken in the research for this dissertation. Similarly, the potential of a pictorial deconstruction to provide insights into his art and artistic process has been the rationale for undertaking the particular program of spatial analysis, which has involved the extensive use of computer-generated modelling. The results of such a program and their pictorial, contextual, and art historical implications have provided the basis for the various proposals made in this dissertation. In light of the fact that an analytical procedure such as this has not been used previously with Manet's works, and mindful of the cautionary concerns stated above about such procedures, it does need to be unequivocally stated, almost as a statement of defence, that the methodology used is seen as a valid and rigorous means to better understand the rich and complex qualities of Manet's art, and not *per se* as a process of particular significance.

A consideration of the gap which exists between an artist and a work of art and which is potentially so complex, layered and elusive that it is often not able to be closed, highlights the methodological differences between the approach taken here and that of many others. Often taking an approach from outside a work, scholars have examined the interspace between Manet and his paintings by seeing it as a void to be filled with agendas of contextualisation. T.J. Clark, for example, has viewed it from a perception of the times within which Manet lived and worked, together with their social, cultural, and political implications, and in doing so has transmuted the work of art into a metaphor.⁸ In contrast, the approach taken here is to look upon the works as repositories of information about production and creative process which, on examination, have the potential to inflect upon such a gap from within and through the works themselves. All approaches are valid, but it is believed that a technique such as this can provide importantly different insights into both Manet's creative practice and the nuances and resonances of his work.

The analytical procedures have been applied both in an overview of Manet's oeuvre in Chapter 4, and in the detailed analyses of five of his paintings as case studies in Chapter 5. Where possible, these case studies have sought to identify the viewpoint(s)

from where Manet had painted a work, what it was that he had actually depicted and how accurate was the depiction, the extent of his use of linear perspective or other spatial geometries in his pictorial space, the types of spatial adjustments and manipulations that he had used, and the nature and means of creation of evident spatial ambiguities. The works include *View of the 1867 Exposition Universelle* (1867, Fig.34), *The Burial* (1867?, Fig.35), *The Railway* (1873, Fig.53), *Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873–4, Fig.54), and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1881–2, Fig.80). Except for *Masked Ball at the Opera*, these canvases have been seen in the past as works with problematic spaces, even though for somewhat different reasons, but all involve space as an integral part of their pictorial organisation. And each depicts something of Manet's creative centre, that of urban Paris.

A sixth painting which has been analysed in a somewhat different way is one which Manet had shown in the Paris Salon of 1864, *Incident in a Bullfight* (1864). At an unknown time after the Salon the canvas had been cut to form at least two smaller canvases, and although contemporary descriptions of the original work exist, its original composition has remained unknown. The two extant paintings from the original canvas, *The Bullfight* (c.1863–65, Fig.23) and *The Dead Toreador* (c.1863–65, Fig.24), which have provided the only means by which the composition can be speculated, were brought together for the first time at an exhibition in New York in 1999. A proposal by this writer for the original composition of *Incident in a Bullfight* was made in a joint essay included in that exhibition's catalogue. The analysis, which was based on an examination of the X-radiographs of both paintings, together with those proposal details which were not published in the catalogue, are set-out as the first of the case studies in Chapter 5.

Both the *View of the 1867 Exposition Universelle* and *The Burial* are paintings which were not displayed in Manet's lifetime and, with the possibility that their existing states are indicative of interim stages of works-in-progress, they provide an opportunity to better understand his artistic process. Additionally, and although the dating of *The Burial* is uncertain, the probability that it had been painted prior to 1870 means that

these two works provide an insight into the degree and sophistication of Manet's spatial manipulation in the 1860s. Although both the site and general view for *View of the 1867 Exposition Universelle* have generally been known, its composition has been seen as a free interpretation of the Parisian panorama with pictorial compressions and adjustments. Lateral compressions of space indeed are certainly involved, but with the detailed identifications made from the analysis it is proposed that the painting is a composite of parts of relatively accurate views from six different viewpoints which have been overlaid and collaged to form the one image. At least three of those views are considered to be from an aerial balloon and the possibility that most of the views had been taken from photographs is also raised. *The Burial* has also provided speculation about its site and view, and although some clarification was presented in an article by Nancy Locke published as recently as March 2000,⁹ the identification of the viewpoint(s) and view(s) of the painting and its apparent pictorial anomalies have not been explained. And even though the painting has been seen in more recent times as a depiction of Baudelaire's funeral cortege, details of the event visible in the foreground remain uncertain. It is proposed that the upper part of the painting is a composite of thirteen parts of reasonably accurate views as seen from an aerial balloon in eleven different positions along a feasible flight path, with the view segments overlaid and collaged in a similar manner to that used in *View of the 1867 Exposition Universelle*. Implicit in these proposals is the identification of the landmarks and buildings of Paris forming the skyline, as well as the probability that all of these views were taken from photographs. The lower part of the painting, with the burial group and surrounding trees, is proposed as the single view of an anonymous burial at a specific site at the Cimetière du Père-Lachaise in Paris. This collaged image is evidence of Manet's strategy to integrate disparate views, subjects and locales into an ambiguously cohesive pictorial unity.

Until 1998, the siting for *The Railway* and the identification of its background building facades had been the subject of much speculation, not helped by a misreading of the source material. The identifications of both the site and view were made by Juliet Wilson-Bureau in her catalogue to the *Manet, Monet, La gare Saint-Lazare* exhibition,

held in Paris and Washington in that year, and an acknowledgment was also given of the same identifications which had been made independently by this writer.¹⁰ The analysis of the painting in Chapter 5 demonstrates the perspectival basis upon which those identifications were made and the way in which the painting brings together the full range of Manet's spatial and perspectival manipulations. It is proposed that the painting is a composite of two views from two different viewpoints at the same site, with the foreground formed from an offset viewpoint, and with part of the background view adjusted in scale. The spatial geometry of the offset viewpoint as was understood with the contemporary use of 'view' cameras again raises the possible use of either a photographic image from such a camera or at least the application of its perspectival geometry.

Although the site for the *Masked Ball at the Opera* in the corridor to the first floor foyer of the Opéra Rue Le Peletier has always been known, there has been much speculation on why Manet painted such a work at that particular time. The possible influence of the destruction of the Opera house by fire or the implications of an earlier play which had used the identical site as the setting for one of its scenes, had been raised in detail by Éric Darragon in 1983.¹¹ A proposal for a source for the painting's composition is presented here as well as an explanation of the spatial manipulation of that source to produce the painting's final image.

Since its first showing in the Paris Salon of 1882, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* has become an icon for both the art of Manet and the Paris of his time, but its uncertain and problematic spatial organisation has generated much speculation. There has been universal acceptance that the mirror's reflection cannot be reconciled with what appears in front of it and that a relationship of some kind, be it spoken or one of eye contact, exists between the reflected images of the barmaid and the gentleman. In the belief that this spatial disjunction, and indeed the whole spatial organisation of the painting, was not arbitrary but, rather, was most probably based on a coherent system of spatial illusion, perspectival and spatial analyses of the final painting and related preliminary works were undertaken to examine such a possibility. It is proposed that the final

painting is a composite of relatively accurate views of the theatre at the Folies-Bergère establishment and a reconstruction of the bar in Manet's studio, with offset viewpoints providing the underlying spatial geometry for each of the views. Proposals are also made for the sequence in which the final painting was executed, and for a rational explanation of the mirror and its reflection, including the relationship between the barmaid and the gentleman. Photographs of a bar re-construction are used to confirm the accuracy of the proposal as presented with the computer-generated modelling.

Although these proposals together suggest that some of those works which to date have been considered inexplicable can be explained in factual terms, the explanations are not presented as interpretative readings of the works themselves. They do, however, provide insights into Manet's artistic process and intent, as well as into the nature, construction, and purpose of his spatial ambiguity. Although it is apparent that in these works Manet had followed his dictum 'faire ce que l'on voit'¹² and made direct use of photographic images to an extent much more than previously thought, their ambiguity had been created with a manipulation of pictorial space. This involved an interplay of spatial shaping from particular viewpoints and the fragmentation of pictorial space with interlocked and overlapped views, often with adjusted scales. The resolution of these manipulations into cohesive works of art involved the engagement of all the disparate spaces within the surfaces of his works. And with the extent to which Manet involved these manipulations and composite constructions of views in his paintings of the 1860s it can be seen that the stratagems used in later works, such as in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, were not new and innovative techniques but, rather, were simply part of the development in his spatial experimentations.

The proposals also suggest that Manet's influence on later developments in painting may need to be reconsidered. After Manet, the relationship between pictorial space and surface, and indeed their very roles, was transformed, but the extent to which Manet influenced such developments can never be accurately established. Nonetheless, the nature of his conscious fragmentation of pictorial space and its cohesive engagement within the surface of a work reinforce, albeit from a different standpoint, those proposals

that have seen him as an important influence on the later Modernist notions of the reclaiming of painting's flatness, as well as contradict many of the assumptions about his work upon which those very same notions have been based. Certainly, the dynamic between pictorial space and surface in Manet's paintings has been historically of importance. But their ambiguous relationship underpinned with a complex use of coherent perspective is very different, it is proposed, to those formalist descriptions of Manet's flattening of space and form.

This paradoxical use of perspective also positions Manet's approach as a point of conflation between the development of coherent perspectival spatial illusion used in Western painting from the fifteenth-century Renaissance and those disparate ways in which space and surface, with a purposeful break from the conventions of perspective, were newly related in the art of the twentieth century. From such means, one of the lines of influence on the many different movements of the first decades of the twentieth century in which such spatial experimentations occurred can possibly be repositioned.

In the context, then, of these main considerations of ambiguity, spatial illusion and surface, the content and sequence of the dissertation includes the nature of Manet's art in terms of reality and artifice in Chapter 1, the underlying pictorial characteristics and influences in his work in Chapter 2, critiques and analyses in Manet's own time and since in Chapter 3, an overview of his oeuvre in Chapter 4, and the case studies of six paintings in Chapter 5. The Conclusion presents a summary of the dissertation's proposals together with a review of the research outcomes and their possible implications for further Manet research.

In anticipation of some difficulties that may be experienced by readers when confronted by a plethora of details and references between text and images, particularly in the case studies in Chapter 5, it needs to be stated that such a situation has been dictated by the nature of the research and proposals. It is, as it were, the nature of the beast. Nonetheless, care has been taken to make the process of sifting through the information as user-friendly as possible.

INTRODUCTION: Notes

DISSERTATION: Volume 2, pp.1,2

NOTES

[\[p.1 of dissertation here\]](#)

1. See the later discussion in Chapter 3 on work by scholars such as Juliet Wilson-Bareau, Juan Corradini, Theodore Reff, and Anne Coffin Hanson.
2. e.g. Théodore Pelloquet, in his review of the Salon des Refusés of 1863 and in discussing the lack of cohesion in *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863, Fig.18), wrote that "L'incohérence, l'inégalité d'exécution de M. Maner [sic] ne s'expliquent." (Théodore Pelloquet, L'Exposition: Journal du Salon de 1863, no.22, 23 July, 1863. Quoted from: Michael Fried, Manet's Modernism: or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1996, p.575-n.115).
3. e.g. In 1864, Jules Castagnary questioned Manet's technique by asking "Dans son *Episode d'une course de taureaux*, l'homme tombé et présenté en raccourci est un morceau excellent; mais où est la perspective et que devient l'ensemble du tableau?" (Jules Castagnary, 'Salon de 1864', Le Grand Journal, no.11, 12 June, 1864, p.3). Théodore Duret, in his early assessment of Manet, wrote in particular terms that "Son faire n'est pas poussé à un point assez arrêté, son modelé manque de fermenté, et ces défauts s'accusent surtout chez lui dans le traitement des figures." (Théodore Duret, Les Peintres français en 1867, Dentu, Paris, 1867, pp.110–11). Josephin Péladan suggested more broadly that, as an artist, Manet was "Sans idéal, sans conception, sans émotion, sans poésie, sans dessin" (Josephin Péladan, 'Le Procédé de Manet; d'après l'exposition de l'École des Beaux-Arts', L'Artiste, February, 1884, p.103). And more recently, John Richardson wrote that with Manet's art "the spatial illusion is flawed, at times irreparably, by a... habitual weakness (*due possibly to some defect in the artist's vision* [this writer's emphasis]), a fallible sense of scale" (John Richardson, Manet: Paintings and Drawings, Phaidon Press, London, 1958, p.13).
4. e.g. Jules Castagnary, in his response to *The Luncheon* (1868–69, Fig.44) and *The Balcony* (1868-69, Fig.45) as part of his review of the Salon of 1869, wrote of Manet that "Ses sujets, il les emprunte aux poètes ou les prend dans son imagination; il ne s'occupe pas de les découvrir sur le vif des mœurs. De là, dans ses compositions, une grande part d'arbitraire." (Jules Castagnary, 'Le Salon de 1869', Le Siècle, 11 June, 1869, p.3).
5. e.g. Seymour Howard, in his article 'Early Manet and Artful error: Foundations of Anti-Illusion in Modern Painting' suggested that the "oddities in Manet's painting have been usually explained as defects of technical ability, and they have been considered as by-products of his methods of composing", but that "They can also be explained as willfully subjective and self-justifying distortions." (Art Journal, v.37, no.1, Fall, 1977, p.16). Anne Coffin Hanson, in referring to the two paintings, *View of the 1867 Exposition Universelle* (1867, Fig.34) and *On the Beach at Boulogne* (1868, Fig.40), within a wider discourse of Manet's compositional devices, wrote that "Perspective rules require that figures diminish in size in exact proportion to their distance from the spectator, but in both these pictures size is often arbitrary" (Anne Coffin Hanson, Manet and the Modern Tradition, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1977, p.201), and believed that "in view of the carelessness of perspective training at mid-century

- and Couture's apparent lack of interest in the subject, I doubt that Manet had much knowledge of the details of mathematical perspective." (ibid., p.201-n.318)
6. e.g. Théodore Duret wrote that "La faculté de voir à part, chez Manet, ne venait ni d'un acte raisonné, ni d'un effort de volonté, ni du travail. Elle venait de la nature. Elle était le don. Elle correspondait, chez lui peintre, à la supériorité qui chez l'écrivain crée le poète, l'homme à part exceptionnellement inspiré." (Théodore Duret, Histoire de Edouard Manet et de son œuvre, avec un catalogue des Peintures et des Pastels, Bernheim-Jeune, Paris, 1919, pp.64-65).
 7. e.g. The ambiguities in *The Luncheon* and *The Balcony* were seen by Jules Castagnary as an "attitude contradictoire" which confused him. Of *The Luncheon*, he suggested that "De même que M. Manet assemble, pour le seul plaisir de frapper les yeux, des natures mortes qui devraient s'exclure; de même, il distribue ses personnages au hasard, sans que rien de nécessaire et de

[\[p.2 of dissertation here\]](#)

- forcé ne commande leur composition. De là l'incertitude, et souvent l'obscurité dans la pensée." (Castagnary 1869 (as in n.4), p.3).
8. See a consideration of Clark's writings in Chapter 3.
 9. See the discussion of Locke's article "Unfinished Homage: Manet's *Burial* and Baudelaire" in Chapter 5(C).
 10. Juliet Wilson-Bareau, Manet, Monet: La gare Saint-Lazare, exh. cat., Réunion des musées nationaux, Paris, 1998, p.187-n.34 (also, Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare, exh. cat., Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1998, p.186-n.34).
 11. See the discussion of Darragon's article 'Manet, le Bal masqué à l'Opéra' in Chapter 5(E).
 12. Recorded by Manet's life-long friend Antonin Proust as "Voilà qui est fort sot... il faut être de son temps, faire ce que l'on voit, sans s'inquiéter de la mode" (Edouard Manet: Souvenirs, L'Échoppe, Paris, 1996, p.10).
-