

The Three Scenes in Manet's *Bar*

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A Bar at the Folies-Bergere, painted in 1882 by Edouard Manet, has eluded artists and critics for over a century as to what it portrays. Initial impressions would suggest that it is a simple bar scene with a female barmaid serving a male patron. However, after observing the painting for a while, the observer realizes that there are several inconsistencies and oddities. For instance, an obvious inconsistency is the discrepancy between the forward facing barmaid and her reflection in the mirror. Another is the fact that the bar in the mirror appears to be hanging over the balcony. Several interpretations can be made of this painting; however, it is apparent that the reflection in the mirror is not a true reflection of what is actually there. There are three distinct scenes in the painting, that of the barmaid, of the reflected image from across the hall, and the reflected image of the interaction between the woman and the man. The lack of depth between the bar and the reflected balcony in the mirror and the reflected image of the woman and man to the right supports this hypothesis.

The Bar was Manet's last painting before he died on 30 April 1883. It was his last chance to present a painting to the Salon in 1882 along with his other final painting, *Jeanne* (Krell 197-198). Both paintings made it. The painting is set at the Folies-Bergere which was initially a department store opened in 1860. In 1871, a businessman named Leon Sari purchased it and remodeled it into two primary spaces, the "Garden," and the theatre (Herbert 79) where patrons would come to meet and enjoy various entertainments such as acrobats, operettas, and circuses (Krell 198). It was not a cheap place to visit. People on a small income such as students could visit, but they would have to dress up and perhaps spend a small fortune to be adequately entertained (Herbert 80). The painting is set in the theatre, which Manet visited and drew sketches of. However, when he painted the picture, he used a model known to work there named

Suzon. He painted the pictures in his studio, placed her behind a marble table with various props, and painted the scene (198). A painter friend of his, Gaston Latouche, posed as the man in the picture (Herbert 80).

This close reading or interpretation of the painting shall focus solely on what is visible to observer. What does the average art enthusiast see and what are they to think? Most of the observers walking through the art gallery will not know about the history of the Folies, so it is only fair to look at the painting as they would. To begin an interpretation into the painting, the observer must first start with the basics. Three primary scenes catch the eye of the observer. The first, and most obvious, is the female barmaid looking at the observer, the second is the reflection over her shoulder to the left, and the third is the reflection of the female and male to the right.

In the first scene, the woman facing the observer is obviously a barmaid. She is nicely dressed, attractive, and young. She is in the center of the painting suggesting that she is the center of attention. Her body is facing the observer and she appears to be making eye contact, although, upon closer observation, it appears that she is looking slightly to her right at an object past the observer. She appears to be standing upright unlike her posture in the mirror. The expression on her face is that of boredom, a desire not to be there at all, or perhaps she is new and not sure what to do. Her job is simply to tend the bar and serve drinks; however, another common idea of that time was that some of the barmaids also would prostitute themselves out (Flam 174). It would seem that if she were hoping to lure a potential client, she would have a more inviting or welcoming expression.

The second scene that catches the eye of the observer is the scene to the left reflected in the mirror. It portrays the scene of the theatre, large chandeliers, acrobats, and people enjoying

themselves. However, the reflection in the mirror appears closer than is possible. Just past the mirror image of the reflected bar appears to be the round lights from the pillars and the heads of patrons from the lower level. This lack of depth would not be feasible because it places the bar as literally hanging over the people below. The bar, in reality, would have been along the back wall in front of the mirror that is present all the way around. If the space directly in front of the bar is similar as that across the hall, there should be reflections of people between the bar and the balcony on the other side. In fact, there should be two balcony walls present in the image if at proper depth and the images of the lower level should not be visible at all. However, these reflections are missing suggesting that the image in the mirror is zoomed into the scene on the other side.

Another important feature is that, aside from the barmaid, there are only three faces clearly identifiable. One is a female in a white dress wearing tan gloves looking to the left of the picture, the other is a woman looking to the left with a pair of opera glasses, and the third is a man wearing a black top hat, with a mustache, and wearing a black suit. The man is looking in the direction of the barmaid from across the hall. The expression on his face is neutral and unemotional. However, he appears to be looking in the direction of the woman with piercing focus. No one else appears to be focusing on her in the picture.

The third scene is the interaction between the barmaid and the customer reflected in the mirror to the right. We will assume that it is the same woman in both the forward facing figure and the reflection. The observer would be standing in the same spot as the man. In addition, there is not room for two women behind the bar as presented. He is not talking and she is leaned into him and it appears that they are having a somewhat intimate interaction. Of course, the hall could be noisy, so it would be necessary to get closer to listen. The man appears in similar

likeness to the image of the man to the left of the picture in the balcony. He has similar features such as the hat, mustache, and slim face. Of course, the woman's expression is not visible in the reflection, but her body suggests an interest of some sort. Whether that interest is just to take his order or to establish a more intimate connection is not evident.

This brief description of the three scenes focuses strictly on the people of interest in the painting. It does not cover symbolism such as the flowers both on the bar and on the woman's dress. Nor does it cover the overall atmosphere of the hall. The presence of three clearly definable scenes suggests that Manet is telling a story. The goal of defining that story is very challenging and difficult to do, as there are many possibilities. Jack Flam in his essay *Looking Into the Abyss* states, "The relationship between the various elements of the painting suggest several different scenarios, all of which have a certain internal consistency, and none of which, I believe, can be privileged exclusively over the others" (Flam 180). Flam focuses on two possible scenarios as will be discussed in this paper. Furthermore, it is evident that the image seen in the mirror is not a real time depiction of what is happening.

The most obvious interpretation is that the image in the mirror is the imagined or desired interaction on the part of the woman. This is the best choice for those of the opinion that she is daydreaming. Perhaps she has noticed a male in the patronage and is imagining him coming to meet her. Flam's observations support the interpretation that the woman seems to look past the observer (181). As mentioned earlier, she is looking a little bit to her right in the direction of the male. Would it be feasible that they would both look at each other at the same time? The possibility that they would notice each other at the same time is improbable given the distance between them in reality. However, if the woman were to stare at the man for an extended length of time, he is likely to look at her because of her dress and beauty. The fact that she is staring in

his direction would perhaps illicit the man's imagination and arouse within him a curiosity.

Perhaps they already know each other. This explanation would explain how he notices her from across the hall.

The purpose of her desire to meet him is not evident from the painting, but it must include some form of desire to interact. Is it simply to have a chance to get a large tip from him or perhaps some type of sexual interlude later? The fact that the male is sitting on the other side of the balcony would require him to walk some distance to meet her. What would entice him to make that trip? She must offer something that he desires. Is it her age, her beauty, or her manner of dress? How many other bars are there? Why would he go to that bar and not one closer to him? The observer does not see another bar in the mirror reflection; however, it is known that there were multiple bars.

Another possibility is that she has not actually picked out a real life person from the crowd but has in fact made him up in her mind. Perhaps she is imagining the ideal man or potential customer. This interpretation would mean that the entire mirror image is imaginary and does not depict real events. Flam suggests, "The presence of the man is like the visualization of a thought in her mind, something contemplated, perhaps even desired, but not actually present" (Flam 181). If this were the case, then if she were a prostitute, the imagined man would most likely not be a client. Why would a prostitute imagine meeting someone for money? She most likely has plenty of clients. Perhaps she is looking to meet a man to take her away from that life. The expression is clearly one of discontent or boredom.

An alternative possibility is that the man is having the dream. This suggestion is highly feasible and is a strong scenario. This is the second of Flam's suggested interpretations that it is "he who stares at her from the distant balcony, unseen by her, imagining him as the object of her

attention” (182). What supports this idea is that all of the men in the hall are likely dressed in similar fashion making it difficult for the woman to single him out. However, she is most likely quite unique and it is likely that he has picked her out, especially if he is looking for some sort of connection. If this reading is accepted then, “The compression of the picture space, what we have referred to as the magnifying effect of the mirror, lends an added force to the energy of his gaze” (182). Assuming that the mirror reflects that man’s desire, then it is reasonable to believe that his focus has washed out all of the objects that should be present between him and the woman. It is his daydream. But to what purpose? Is he wondering whether she is a prostitute and he is looking to hire her or is he simply looking for a flirtation? Was it common practice to seek out these women in that place? Perhaps he has interacted with her previously and wishes that she had shown more interest in him. The idea that they have met before would explain the capture of each other’s gaze. However, it is the idea that they have not met before that makes it most mysterious or perhaps romantic.

Now it is time to turn attention to the interaction between the man and the woman in the reflection. In this image, we are aware only of the man’s lack of expression. The woman’s back is to us therefore we cannot see her face. In reality, she should have the same expression on her face that she has facing us. However, since we are assuming three different scenes, then it let us assume she is not simply staring blankly at the man. She is clearly leaning into him closing the space between them. The forward facing image shows her well decorated with a locket around her neck, flowers, and the gold bracelet on her arm. It is expected in the forward facing image that her hair “at the back of her head it is pulled back and up, perhaps in a compact bun or small ponytail” (Flam 166). In the reflection, we can see that her hair is down. It appears to be wide enough that if it were down in the forward image, it would be visible. Flam gives the best

observation as to the differences between the two images of the woman:

If the woman we face is erect, at once very much present but also disengaged—the woman whose back we see in the mirror seems to lean forward and she appears warmer, gentler, eager to please. She not only behaves differently, she actually *looks* different. She is plumper, her hair falls in unexpectedly casual wisps, she wears no earring, and her jacket appears undecorated and severe. (Flam 167)

Of course, it is obvious that in the reflection, the particulars of the front of the woman would not be visible. This leaves a lot to the imagination of the observer. It is impossible to know what her expression is towards the man or whether she has removed any decorations. However, her body position and language presents an obvious relaxed state.

The man, however, does not appear to be responding to what she is saying or doing. The man is dressed in proper fashion. His facial expression is neutral and his mouth is not open suggesting that the female is doing the talking. What is that conversation? It cannot simply be regarding a drink order. If she were simply taking his order, then she would be standing up straight and filling his drink. However, she is clearly leaned in and engaging him in some way. To imagine what the conversation is about is what makes this painting so intriguing. The lack of emotion from the man suggests that it is a simple business transaction whether sexual or otherwise. However, it could simply be that he is not stimulated by the woman and “not only does she refuse to relate to the male spectator, but he cannot fully relate to her” (Collins 120). If she stimulated him, he would show some other form of outward emotion in the form of a smile or other facial expression. If this were some planned sexual encounter, he would show some form of enthusiasm. The relaxed posture of the woman and the stiff and neutral expression of the man adds to this mysterious interaction.

The *Bar* is one of those paintings that leaves a lot open to the imagination. It is difficult to interpret the interactions that take place in the painting. However, there are clearly three

scenes present in the painting. But not all people agree. Albert Boime in his essay *An Allegory of Nostalgia* states that “two moments in time are being recorded simultaneously in the picture: one occurring in actuality and the other in the shadowy dream world of the mirror” (Boime 55). It is difficult to see how Boime can suggest that only one scene is present in the mirror as the man in the top hat appears on both sides of the mirror. How could he be in two different spots at the same time? It is feasible to suggest that only two scenes are present if the eye contact between the barmaid and the man across the hall are the same moment. Then you would have the eye contact between them on the left and the meeting on the right. However, this essay makes the argument that the whole thing is imagined and a person accepting this premise has to subscribe to the idea that at least three scenes are present.

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