

## REVIEW

**Michel Foucault, *Manet and the Object of Painting*, translated by Matthew Barr (London, Tate, 2009; 2011), ISBN: 9781854379962**

Between 1967 and 1971, Michel Foucault gave a lecture entitled “The Painting of Manet” in Milan (1967), Tokyo (1970), Florence (1970), and Tunisia (1971) that is included neither in the French nor English editions of his collected works. This non-inclusion is due to the ephemeral material status of the text itself. Maryvonne Saison, the editor of the French edition, painstakingly traces the lecture’s uncertain path to publication: at first, rumors circulated that Foucault had been working on a book on Manet, justified by the fact that he had signed a contract with Éditions de Minuit in 1967, just before his arrival in Tunisia, to write a book about the artist entitled *Le Noir et la Couleur* (some sources report that it was to be entitled *Le Noir et la Surface*). A recording of the presentation in Tunisia was discovered, transcribed by Rachid Triki, and published in *Les Cahiers de Tunisie* in 1989. Saison obtained this recording and transcription, as well as another transcription in the possession of Daniel Denfert, which permitted the establishment of a more faithful text (the Tunisia recording was missing the end of the presentation), which was published in the annual bulletin of the Société française d’esthétique in 2001. This in turn provoked the organization of a colloquium devoted to discussion of the text, entitled “Michel Foucault, un regard.” That same year, Dominique Séglaard, a philosopher, editor, and translator, found a complete recording of the first presentation, which allowed for the completion of the 2001 version. The French edition of the lecture, entitled *La Peinture de Manet* and published in 2004, in addition to Saison’s informative introduction, includes essays presented at the colloquium by Triki, Carole Talon-Hugon, David Marie, Thierry de Duve, Catherine Perret, Dominique Chateau, Blandine Kriegel, and Claude Imbert.<sup>1</sup>

The first English edition, translated by Matthew Barr with an introduction by Nicolas Bourriaud, was published in hardcover in 2009 and issued in paperback in 2011. The present review is based on the paperback edition. The paperback is compact, and therefore affordable, but has the disadvantage that the color reproductions it contains of the paintings

---

<sup>1</sup> Maryvonne Saison, “introduction” in Michel Foucault (auth.) *La Peinture de Manet* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2004). John Elias Nale’s review of this book, published in *Foucault Studies* 2 (2005), 145-149, discusses these essays. Saison claims the projected Manet book was to be entitled *Le Noir et La Couleur*, and Bourriaud claims it is *Le Noir et La Surface*, as does Didier Éribon, in *Michel Foucault*, translated by Betsy Wing (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 190.

under discussion are quite small, making it difficult to see the details to which Foucault is alluding (reference to another source for the actual paintings might be necessary). The English translation is accurate and manages to capture the spontaneous, oral status of the text. Bourriaud's introduction seems intended for a non-specialist reader, and refrains from delving into the theoretical issues raised by Foucault's engagement with Manet. By contrast, the introduction and critical essays contained in the French edition offer a comprehensive introduction to the range of complex issues the lecture raises, both in terms of its place in the history of criticism on Manet, and, though to a lesser extent, its place in Foucault's thought in the late 1960s. Bourriaud does provide some helpful reference points, directing the reader to Georges Bataille's study of Manet and suggesting an affiliation between Bataille's notion of "heterology" and Foucault's of "heterotopia." It also makes the simultaneously problematic and provocative assertion that Foucault's interest in Manet is as "a founder of discursivity, that he instituted a 'discursive field,' in the same way as the works of Darwin, Buffon, Marx, or Freud" (Bourriaud's Introduction, 12-13).

It is understandable yet problematic to interpret Foucault's interest in Manet solely in light of his thought about discourse, or in terms of the author function, when the disjunction between word and image, between seeing and saying, persists as a problem throughout his *oeuvre*. No one has expressed this concern more clearly than Gilles Deleuze: "From the beginning, one of Foucault's fundamental theses is the following: there is a difference in nature between the form of content and the form of expression, between the visible and the articulable (although they continually overlap and spill into one another in order to compose each stratum or form of knowledge). Perhaps this is the first area in which Foucault encounters Blanchot: 'speaking is not seeing.' But while Blanchot insisted on the primacy of speaking as a determining element, Foucault, contrary to what we might think at first glance, upholds the specificity of seeing, the irreducibility of the visible as a determinable element."<sup>2</sup> One wonders whether Foucault's transformation of Manet's paintings into an enunciation—his saying aloud of what he is seeing during the lecture—was itself a self-conscious practice that allowed for the analysis of this disjunction, this interval, between seeing and saying.

Foucault gave the Manet lecture for the first time just after the publication of *The Order of Things* (1966), which famously opens with his exhaustive verbal transcription of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*, intended to emblemize the classical episteme in terms of its defining trait: the confidence that knowledge can be completely encoded within representation while expelling the observing subject. It seems that the most obvious direction to take in understanding Foucault's lecture is in its relation to this major work. If *Las Meninas* emblemized the classical episteme, which stretched from the seventeenth century to around 1800, did Manet's somehow emblemize the modern episteme, and if so, how? Was Manet a missing puzzle piece that Foucault had intended to include in *The Order of Things*? These, I think, are the obvious questions that Foucault's interest in Manet at this time generates. In

---

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, translated by Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 61.

addition to Velasquez, Foucault introduces Don Quixote, the literary figure who, in the first and second parts of the novel, embodies the Renaissance and classical epistemes respectively. The Don Quixote of Part I insists that words (specifically the words of chivalric novels) still have a purchase on the real world, while the Don Quixote of Part II is known by others precisely as the character in a book they had read, and so himself comes to be composed purely of words, the embodiment of a representation. The book thus presents us with a painterly and literary embodiment of the classical episteme, but when we move to the modern episteme, a sole literary figure is deployed to carry us forward: Sade. Why Sade? And why no modern painter whose work tracks the collapse of the classical episteme founded on the self-sufficiency of representation?

The end of the classical episteme, in Foucault's view, is marked by the surging of forces that cannot be contained by representation, by the table of visibilities that made knowledge possible in the classical age: "Something like a will or a force was to arise in the modern experience—constituting it perhaps, but in any case indicating that the Classical age was now over, and with it the reign of representative discourse, the dynasty of representation signifying itself and giving voice in the sequence of its words to the order that lay dormant within things."<sup>3</sup> Sade's work marks the very limits of representation, its opening onto an unrepresentable outside force: "Here, without doubt, is the principle that 'libertinage' which was the last in the Western world (after it the age of sexuality begins): the libertine is he who, while yielding to all the fantasies of desire and to each of its furies, can, but also must, illumine their slightest movement with a lucid and deliberately elucidated representation."<sup>4</sup> The shift will entail one from an emphasis on surface visibilities to invisible forces, which Foucault often describes in terms that recall the Freudian death drive. Language loses the self-sufficiency it apparently possessed in the classical age to securely name things, and so "with Nietzsche and Mallarmé, thought was brought back, and violently so, towards language itself, towards its unique and difficult being."<sup>5</sup> At this late point in the argument, *Las Meninas* is again evoked, to point out that the position of the spectator—whether the royal couple, painter, or beholder—is foreclosed by the representation of representation itself that the painting sets in motion. It is only with the collapse of the self-sufficiency of representation that man becomes visible as both a subject and object of knowledge, and with that, the human sciences are born.

And it is here, precisely, as *The Order of Things* shifts from the classical to the modern episteme, in which, Foucault asserts, we are still immersed, that we might have expected to find Manet presented as Velasquez's modern double, Manet who returned painting to itself (as Mallarmé did with language) and who, as Michael Fried has argued, acknowledged the

---

<sup>3</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1970), 209.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 306.

theatricality of painting and the presence of the beholder in a radically new way.<sup>6</sup> At the start of his lecture, Foucault insists that Manet made not only impressionism possible, but all of twentieth-century painting, by refusing the ruse of classical painting that denied the materiality of the surface in favor of the production of the illusion of three-dimensional space. The two main traits of the material surface denied were its quadrilateral shape, obfuscated by the use of spiral or oblique lines, and its illumination by a real, exterior source, obfuscated by the representation of a light source interior to the painting. Foucault thus leads us to see from the start of his lecture that Manet was a painter who acknowledged the material reality of painting, that is, that the painter paints on a square surface lit by a source in the real world. The painting emanating from the tradition of the Renaissance spent a great deal of effort distracting the beholder from this reality. In successive readings of the first group of paintings—*Music in the Tuileries* (1862), *The Masked Ball at the Opera* (1873-4), *The Execution of Maximilien* (1868), *The Port of Bordeaux* (1871), *Argenteuil* (1874), and *In the Greenhouse* (1879)—a radical closure of the illusion of depth and an emphasis on rather than denial of the quadrilateral form of the canvas. For example, the refusal of depth in *The Masked Ball at the Opera* is so extreme that Foucault, convincingly, compares the painting to wallpaper (the pattern of partygoers seems to repeat at the top of the painting—we see the feet of people on a higher level—rather than opening up to a ceiling or a light source). In *The Execution of Maximilian*, the flat, quadrilateral space in which the figures stand mimics the shape of the canvas itself. In the *Port of Bordeaux*, the materiality of the canvas itself is brought into prominence through painting that mimics its vertical and horizontal fissures. In the next group of paintings—*The Waitress* (1879) and *Saint-Lazare Station* (1872-3)—another aspect of the materiality of painting is, according to Foucault, revealed, the fact that the painting has a front and a back, a recto and a verso. Both of these paintings show us groups of figures looking both toward the front of the painting and toward the back, but neither shows us what the represented figures are actually looking at.

The next group, *The Fifer* (1866) and *Luncheon on the Grass* (1863), experiment with the refusal of the representation of a light source interior to the painting. *The Fifer* implies a single light source that is perpendicular and exterior to the painting, while *Luncheon on the Grass* includes a traditional interior light source in the top half—the maiden bathed in a soft glow—and the real, external, harsher light source in the front half, a technique that will be pushed to an extreme in *Olympia* (1863). Here, the harsh frontal lighting of the prostitute scandalized viewers, who were thereby implicated in the scene, positioned perhaps even as customers. As Foucault humorously put it, “there were the bourgeois types who, visiting the Salon, wanted to put their umbrellas through it, so indecent did they find it” (63). Manet’s intention to scandalize through this technique was all the more obvious in his overt modeling of *Olympia* on Titian’s discretely lit *Venus*. Looking back to the analysis of *Las Meninas*, it is no wonder that Foucault was interested in the presence or absence of an internal, artificial light source in these paintings by Manet. In *Las Meninas*, light emanating from

---

<sup>6</sup> Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

a barely visible window, sweeping across the attendants, painter, and painting, serves to found nothing less than “the common locus of the representation,” the very possibility of knowledge in the classical age.<sup>7</sup> With the disruption, fragmentation, or outright removal of this unifying light in Manet’s work, Foucault is perhaps alluding to the rupture of representation that he points to in his diagnosis of nineteenth-century thought.

This affiliation of the Manet lecture with the argument of *The Order of Things* may be further supported by his analysis of *The Balcony* (1868-9), which insists upon the oscillation between visibility and invisibility, and between life and death. This painting, he proposes, reverses the traditional relationship handed down from the Renaissance in the use of color and black and white, which dictated that the most important figures be rendered in bright colors, while the framing architectural details be depicted in somber tones. Here, the three rigid figures, which appear to be floating in space rather than realistically seated in the balcony window, are painted a deathly pale against a black background, while they are framed by the bright green shutters of the window. Foucault writes, “the three figures are suspended between the darkness and the light, between the interior and the exterior...they are suspended at the limit of light and darkness; notice something of the Raising-of-Lazarus aspect to this picture, at the limit of light and darkness, of life and death” (70-71). He does not fail to evoke Magritte’s rendering of this painting, which fulfilled the logic of the painting by depicting the three figures as coffins. It is tantalizing to locate in this painting a visual emblem of the nineteenth-century episteme, which emerged from the ruins of that of the classical age and was characterized simultaneously by the discovery of life itself as an object of knowledge, and by a shift in focus to invisible animating forces as opposed to purely visual, surface elements that could be organized on a table. For the nineteenth century, life is no longer representable, but rather becomes what Foucault, insisting throughout this discussion on the presence of death within life, and already predicting the theorization of biopower, calls “that sovereign vanishing-point, indefinitely distant but constituent.”<sup>8</sup>

The final painting analyzed, *A Bar at the Folies Bergère* (1881-2), shifts to the problem of the position of the observer. As in previous paintings, this one, too, refuses the representation of depth in placing a flat mirror behind the central figure, and in implying a frontal, external light source, obfuscated by the representation of two lamps reflected in the mirror. But what Foucault emphasizes here is the contradictory and floating position of the beholder, contrary to its fixity in classical painting, *Las Meninas* again serving as a valid counterexample. Numerous contradictory elements in this painting make it impossible to establish a fixed point of observation: if we were standing facing the woman, we would cast a shadow on her, but no shadow appears; her reflection would be hidden, but instead it appears to the right; the man reflected in the mirror appears to be looking down at her from above, but she is painted from an ascending viewpoint. This analysis leads Foucault to abruptly conclude that unlike classical painting, which fixed the point of the observer, “the picture appears like a space in front of which and by rapport which one can move around: the

---

<sup>7</sup> Foucault, *Order of Things*, 6.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

viewer mobile before the picture, real light striking head on, verticals and horizontals perpetually doubled, suppression of depth...He was therefore inventing, if you like, the 'picture object,' the 'painting object,' and this no doubt was the fundamental condition so that finally one day we can get rid of representation itself..." (78-79).

This analysis, seemingly cut short, is unsatisfying. Does Manet's apparent granting of mobility to the observer mark as radical a rupture with tradition as Foucault insists? The situation in the *Bar*, which requires multiple viewing positions, recalls another painting central to French thought in the 1960s, Hans Holbein's *Ambassadors* (1533), evoked by Jacques Lacan in his seminar conducted in 1964-65, entitled *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.<sup>9</sup> Here, as is well known, Holbein's use of anamorphosis demanded that the viewer occupy two positions, one frontal, the other radically oblique. In my viewing experience, this painting, exhibited at the National Gallery in London, evokes the kind of motion that Foucault is attributing to the *Bar*: the most exciting way to view it is to walk rapidly back and forth in front of it in order to watch the death's head dynamically gain and lose its shape. It is also significant that Lacan evokes Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas* in his 1965-66 Seminar, entitled *The Object of Psychoanalysis*, which Foucault attended for at least a few sessions. Foucault's analysis of the *Bar* thus seems to require further elaboration in order to more precisely establish its distinctness from the extensive experimentation with the positioning of the observer that persisted throughout the history of art in the West. Nevertheless, it opens up fascinating avenues for further thought, notably the interchange between Lacan and Foucault in the 1960s that took place over this question, and again, the relationship between Manet's interrogation of the position of the observer and Foucault's argument concerning the appearance and disappearance of man in *The Order of Things*.

In the wake of the appearance of *The Order of Things*, just as he was leaving for Tunisia and signing the contract to write a book on Manet, Foucault conducted several interviews with the press that reveal that the general public (or at least the construal of the popular reaction by the media) was most shocked by Foucault's declaration of the brief appearance and death of man. In an interview with Madeleine Chapsal for *La Quinzaine littéraire* (May 16, 1966), Foucault launches into a critique of an educational system that does not equip students to understand their own historical moment, and instead remains embedded in humanist nostalgia, a version of a nineteenth-century curriculum. Chapsal remarks that, "only that this new form of thought, numbers or no numbers, seems cold and very abstract..." Foucault's response is revealing: "Abstract? I'll respond in this way: it's humanism that's abstract! All of these outpourings of the heart, all of these claims of the human being, of existence, are abstract: that is, cut off from the scientific and technological world, which is our real world...It is the 'human heart' that is abstract, and it is our research, that attempts to connect man to his science, to his discoveries, to his world, which is concrete."<sup>10</sup> In other

---

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Michel Foucault, "Entretien avec Madeleine Chapsal", in *Dits et Écrits, Volume I* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 545-546 (My translation).

words, we must know and address our own episteme, the current conditions of knowledge, which is only possible through gaining an awareness of prior epistemes and the outdated objects of knowledge they have handed down to us, including man himself. Humanist interiority and sentimentality continues to haunt our thought, even though we have moved into a new episteme determined by science and technology that has often been associated with the term “posthuman.” What does this have to do with Manet? It is my sense that, even though Foucault does not mention Bataille in his own presentation, that the latter’s pin-pointing of Manet’s own anti-humanist stance seems to underlie Foucault’s critique here. In his reading of *The Execution of Maximilian*, Bataille writes that “it is the negation of the kind of painting which, like language, expresses sentiments and relates anecdotes...Maximilian reminds us of a tooth deadened by novocain; we get the impression of an all-engulfing numbness, as if a skillful practitioner had radically cured painting of a centuries-old ailment: eloquence.”<sup>11</sup> Foucault’s predominantly formalist critique of Manet’s paintings traces the collapse of the representational codes that sustained classical painting, just as Bataille’s rhetorical reading brings out Manet’s refusal of humanist eloquence and sentimentality. The two may be productively read together to locate how Manet stands as a crucial figure at the threshold of a posthuman future.

Suzanne Verderber  
Pratt Institute  
sverderb@pratt.edu

---

<sup>11</sup> Georges Bataille, *Manet*, translated by Austryn Wainhouse and James Emmons (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 48.