

## REVIEW

### **Michel Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004). ISBN: 202058375**

From the late 1960s until the early 1970s Foucault had a significant interest in the work of Edouard Manet. In 1967 he had a book contract with Les Editions de Minuit to publish a book on the painter, which was to be entitled *Le Noir et la Couleur*. Although this text never came to fruition, Foucault did give several lectures on Manet in Milan, Tokyo, Florence, and Tunisia. Unfortunately, none of these conferences were taped and reproduced for the public. Consequently, the Foucault scholar has been forced to search for a series of clandestine, roughly transcribed copies of this conference for years. Fortunately, one of Foucault's lectures has at long last been published in *La Peinture de Manet*, under the direction of Maryvonne Saison. The lecture itself comprises twenty-six pages, discussing thirteen of Manet's works. The rest of the book features eight commentary essays culled from a November 2001 conference also entitled "La Peinture de Manet." Additionally, the publisher has conveniently included all thirteen paintings that Foucault discusses in full color plates immediately following the text of Foucault's lecture and preceding the commentary essays. Maryvonne Saison of Paris X-Nanterre, who has also written a short introduction, edits the text.

Foucault gave several versions of this lecture beginning with a 1967 presentation in Milan. This published text however was presented in Tunisia in 1971, well after both *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *The Order of Things* (1966) that includes the famous analysis of *Las Meninas*, which itself dates to 1965. The lecture begins with Foucault's own brief preface in which he provides crucial historical context regarding all painting from the Renaissance through Manet—that is, "the game of dodging, of hiding, of illusion, or elision that [has] administered occidental representational painting since the *quattrocento*."<sup>1</sup> Foucault sketches the three fundamental components of this tradition: 1) attempting to mask or hide the rectangular dimensions of the canvas through the use of oblique or spiraling lineage; 2) attempting to deny the real light of day by illuminating the spectacle with an internal lateral lighting; 3) the placing of the spectator at a certain site in front

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1 Michel Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004), 23. All translations are my own.

of the painting, a position from which she is not encouraged to move. These three components combine to create an "ideal" object, an object that is strictly representational as the material components of the canvas and stretcher are completely dissimulated and forgotten.

These aspects of traditional painting will structure Foucault's discussion of Manet as he classifies the thirteen paintings under three parallel rubrics: the materiality of the canvas, the lighting, and the positioning of the spectator. By means of his inversion of traditional painterly tactics, the tactics of ideality and illusion, Manet will be the first painter to submit the represented spectacle to the exterior demands of objecthood, as the ideal enters the jurisdiction of the real. This "rupture" is itself the appearance of a new object: "This invention of the *tableau-objet*, this reinsertion of the materiality of the canvas into that which is represented, it is that which I believe to be at the heart of the grand modification brought on by Manet..."<sup>2</sup> It is this heterogeneous object, the *tableau-objet* that gives Manet relevance for Foucault beyond impressionism; in fact, Foucault will credit Manet and the *tableau-objet* with making possible *all* painting of the twentieth century (although we might question how far this influence extends beyond Post-Painterly Abstraction).

Just what is this peculiarly modern object that is manifested through Manet, and what are its characteristics? Foucault begins with the *tableau-objet* as a painting composed of a lineage governed by the rectangular vertical and horizontal axes of the canvas. Foucault points to Manet's *L'Execution de Maximilien* where the boldest line in the painting is the top of the back wall, a line that perfectly retraces the horizontality of the canvas itself. A wall such as this, legislated by the rectangular geometry of the canvas cannot open onto a depth (this would entail oblique lineage), entails the negation or denial of depth in the picture plane, and consequently everything represented in Manet's oeuvre is thrust forward, onto the spectator (see *Le Bal masqué a l'Opéra* and *Le Chemin de fer*).

Furthermore, this intrusion of the real, objective components of the canvas into the space of representation is complimented by Manet's use of a real, external lighting affecting the picture plane from the outside. In fact, Foucault will insist that as the source of illumination loses its divine, ideal source that worked from inside the picture plane, it relocates itself in a new agent outside the painting: the spectator. In speaking of Manet's *Olympia*, Foucault says, "A lighting that comes from the front, a lighting that comes from the space that is found in front of the canvas, that's to say the lighting, the illuminating source that is indicated, that is supposed by this lighting of the woman, this illuminating source, where is it if not precisely where we

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2 Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet*, 24.

are?”<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is not simply an external lighting, but rather an external lighting that is grounded in the gaze of the spectator, since “our gaze and the lighting make but one and the same thing.”<sup>4</sup>

Finally, there is the inversion of the spectator’s placement in relation to the canvas. Rather than using the lines of perspective to anchor the spectator immediately in front of the painting, thus preventing the spectator from exploring the material dimensions of the canvas, Manet will use representation to shift the spectator, restoring a certain freedom of motion. This is most conspicuous in Manet’s *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*, which serves as the capstone of Foucault’s thesis.<sup>5</sup> Foucault shows how the lines of perspective in this painting offer us three systems of incompatibility that result in the displacement of the spectator—a spectator in motion. First, there is the impossibility of Manet painting the barmaid straight on while her reflection in the mirror is projected to the extreme right. Consequently, there is a displacement of both the painter and the spectator, as we would need to be standing not directly in front of the barmaid, but off to the left to make her reflection appear where it is in the mirror. Second, we see in the mirror an anonymous man speaking to the barmaid; in the mirror it appears that he is positioned very close to her. If in fact the lighting does come from the outside (and there is no lighting behind the barmaid), then this man should project a shadow onto the barmaid’s face. But there is no shadow, thus entailing that this man who is present in the mirror is not present outside the painting. This leads Foucault to conclude this second incompatibility of presence and absence. Finally, Foucault points out the way in which this man in the mirror stands above the barmaid, his gaze descending to meet her face. However, we the spectators cannot conflate our gaze with his perspective because as we look at the barmaid the painting indicates that she stands slightly above us. Consequently, there is a third incompatibility, that between our ascending gaze and his descending gaze. All of these contradictions are tantamount to a destabilization of the spectator’s positioning, and lacking a stable, definite, or normative place, the spectator is forced to move around the canvas in an attempt to situate herself.

These modifications that Manet’s *tableau-objet* has brought to painting, which circumscribe the techniques heretofore relied upon to mask the architecture of the canvas, are summarized by Foucault toward the end of his lecture.

Mobile spectator in front of the painting, real lighting hitting it at full force, verticals and horizontals perpetually redoubled, suppression of depth—there

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3 Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet*, 40.

4 Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet*.

5 A copy of this painting can be viewed at Artchives at [http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/manet/manet\\_bar.jpg.html](http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/manet/manet_bar.jpg.html)

is the canvas in its reality, its materiality, and in a way its physicality, as it is in the process of appearing and playing with all its properties within representation.<sup>6</sup>

In this short but allusive lecture the reader is unsure what to make of these obscure references to certain features of the paintings. Fortunately, the rest of the book is composed of commentaries on the lecture, and some of the essays are enlightening, although none of them could really be said to exhaust the significance of Foucault's interpretation (if that is possible). Of the eight commentaries, three stand out: Catherine Perret's "Le Modernisme de Foucault," which attempts to use the lectures to ascribe to Manet a particularly modern re-interpretation of invisibility; Blandine Kreigel's "L'Art et le Regard Loquace," which is indispensable for understanding Foucault's profound similarities to Merleau-Ponty's work on vision and visibility; Claude Imbert's "Les Droits de L'Image," which attempts to perform the essential work of situating these lectures in relation to Foucault's other work on the visual arts—most importantly his famous text on Velazquez to open *The Order of Things* and, later, *This is Not a Pipe*.

Following Imbert's lead it seems most promising to pair these analyses of Manet with Foucault's previous analysis of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* to discern a relationship between the two. However, none of the commentary in the text sufficiently clarifies what this relationship is exactly. It is well known that Manet was heavily influenced by the Spanish tradition, Velazquez in particular (he made several visits to the Prado), and we can see this influence clearly in several canvases (for example, compare Velazquez's *Pablo de Valladolid* and Manet's *Le Fifre*). If we could assume that a similarity of aims governs a similarity of proceedings, then it would be worthwhile to note the parallels between these two analyses. Regarding *Un bar aux Folies-Bergère*, which Foucault calls "one of the most disrupting" works in Manet's oeuvre, we observe a scene with some structural similarities to Velazquez's *Las Meninas*: the spectacles, young girls, both share the same pose; there is a mysterious man either entering or leaving in the upper right of the picture plane; and most significantly there is this crucial play of the mirror governing the positioning of the painter, the spectacle, and the model. In both of Foucault's analyses it is of course the organizing role of the mirrors that defines the conditions for the possibility of vision, and it seems that Manet inverts Velazquez's mirror, which locates all parties at one and the same site. Comprehending the relations of these mirrors, both of which reflect inaccurately,<sup>7</sup> neither of which bend around any intruding obstacle,<sup>8</sup> both

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6 Foucault, *La Peinture de Manet*, 47.

7 Compare Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970), 7, and *La Peinture de Manet*, 45.

8 Compare Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 8, and *La Peinture de Manet*, 45.

causing a peculiar flickering of presence and absence between the model, spectator, and painter outside the canvas,<sup>9</sup> and both of which structure the placement and displacement of all three parties in fundamentally different ways, seems essential to understanding the historical mutations in vision that have occurred. What exactly is the significance of these regularities that Foucault has extracted and plotted in these analyses? How do these transformations affect the conditions of our own vision? Our blindness? Our knowledge? These are the essential questions that are opened up by *La Peinture de Manet*, questions that are indispensable if we are to comprehend the interplay of rules legislating vision, blindness, visibility, and invisibility.

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9 Compare Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 5, and *La Peinture de Manet*, 47.