

"Gender, Leisure and Urban Space"

Sources: '*La Loge*' (1874) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir and '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (1882) by Edouard Manet

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Renoir's '*La Loge*' and Manet's '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' are paintings with relevance to issues of gender and leisure in the urban society of nineteenth century bourgeois Paris. These are the themes that will be explored in more detail in this short paper. The idea of the male spectator and the female spectacle is important and the theatre and opera were venues where such spectating would take place, some of it innocent and some of it less so. The theatre was an important part of the bourgeois, urban social life and so the setting of the two paintings is highly relevant to the themes discussed. Due to the creativity and personal interpretations inherent in impressionist painting much can be uncovered from both of the works, perhaps more than could be from any photograph, but they must be researched in conjunction with texts to validate arguments on the nature of Parisian society.

'*La Loge*' (the theatre box) was painted during Renoir's impressionist period in which he painted his *Parisiennes* (Dumas, 2005, p. 9). '*La Loge*' (1874) was the first painting by a major impressionist of a subject that was well known to the bourgeoisie: the theatre loge. The audience would go to the theatre not only to see a performance for themselves but also to "*see who was with whom*", "*what the latest fashions were*" and gauge the reaction of the bourgeoisie to the performance (Herbert, 1988, p. 96). Manet's '*Au Paradis*' shows the spectator as not interested in the theatre show, but rather the audience seated below. However, the loge was not always confined to the bourgeoisie. Damourette illustrated in 1852 the difference between the clientele of the loges at the *Opéra* and at the *Théâtre-Français* (the state theatre) (Herbert, 1988, p. 97). Damourette's illustrations highlight the difference between the elegantly dressed bourgeoisie family in the opera loge and the tired, working class family in the loge at the *Théâtre-Français*. The proletariat were not excluded per se from venues such as the opera or the museum (places frequented by well-to-do Parisian women) but the costs involved, the standards of dress required, and their lack of free time meant visits were extremely rare. Urban workers tended to frequent the pub and the street rather

than the club or concert hall (Hohenberg and Lees, 1985, pp. 276-277). However, they did of course have their own clubs and music halls.



'La Loge' (1874) by Pierre-Auguste Renoir. Photo: Art and Architecture

Degas and Cassatt also painted the subject of the loge with the loge itself acting as a frame for the women within who were essentially on display to the rest of the audience (Herbert, 1988, p. 96). The woman in Renoir's *'La Loge'* has an extensive array of expensive clothing, jewellery and make-up and she sits as a side attraction to the show itself (Herbert, 1988, p. 97).

Renoir was not concerned with the spatial dynamics of his painting and neither was Manet, as we see in the reflections in *'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère'* (Duve, 1998, p. 140). Renoir used the impressionist technique of mottling light and dark shades to break up forms and give the painting its vibrant effect. This technique is used particularly well in the creation of the woman's striped dress, which further enhances

her presence (Clark, 1935, p. 3), and is also used by Manet. Blanche emphasised the importance of Manet's early influences, such as Velázquez and Goya, even in his later works (Rich, 1932, p. 1). Pollock highlights the proximity between the viewer and the barmaid as a key technique to focus attention on her in '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' (Pollock, 1988, p. 87). The barmaid is also painted in more detail than the crowd behind, further indicating that she is the primary object of spectacle in the painting.



'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère' (1882) by Edouard Manet. Photo: Art and Architecture

The assumption remained in the late nineteenth century that the woman's role was to look after the home, an opinion Renoir himself expressed (Dumas and Collins, 2005, p. 10). The idea of the woman as nothing more than a spectacle; an object, is important. Renoir commented that "*I like women best when they don't know how to read; and when they wipe the baby's behind themselves*" and on another occasion that "*When women were slaves, they were really mistresses. Now that they have begun to have rights, they are losing their importance,*", although he did have great respect for his good friend and fellow impressionist Berthe Morisot (ibid.)

Throughout the nineteenth century women were still expected to have chaperones in the public sphere if they were not with their husbands. Women of the bourgeoisie

were rarely to be seen alone on the street in the nineteenth century, a fact demonstrated by Culliford's illustration of a lady merely waiting for a bus but taken for a prostitute in Nead's '*Victorian Babylon*' (Culliford in Nead, 2000, p. 63). When the bourgeois woman did enter the public sphere she was expected to be well behaved and look elegant whilst the bourgeois man could take his role as a *flâneur*: an urban wanderer looking on at the "*rituals of modern life*" (Pollock, 1988, p. 68), a man comfortable in the public sphere of the city (Nead, 2000, p. 67).

The concept of the *flâneur* is an important theme in both paintings and is also identified in the works of authors Zola and Balzac and the poet Baudelaire: "*the spectator...the lover of universal life*" (Baudelaire in Iskin, 1995, p. 25). The *flâneur* is a "*native who becomes like a foreigner*" (Shields in Boles, 1995, p. 823). He disassociates himself from the world but continues to observe (Boles, 1995, p. 823). The *flâneur* can only be an urban character, as only in the urban sphere would a wanderer be able to conceal himself. It is the busy nature of the city that allows this.

In '*La Loge*' we assume a role as a *flâneur*, drawn to the woman who is on display in front of her husband. Renoir captures the respectability of the bourgeois woman but although she is a spectator at the theatre she is primarily an object of sexual *spectacle*. However, we see the woman as a *spectator* in Manet's '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*', albeit as an aside to the primary spectator in the top-right corner. There are two fashionably dressed women at the front of the balcony, one of which is even looking through a pair of opera glasses. She appears to be more interested in the audience than the performance: she is certainly not looking in the direction of the trapeze artist, whose legs we can see in the top-left corner of the painting. In '*La Loge*', the husband is also shown to be a *flâneur*, partially hidden behind his wife as he observes someone in a loge above. Perhaps he is looking at another women of the bourgeoisie, perhaps he is looking at a mistress. Married bourgeois men often had mistresses that were given financial aid and they were often to be found at the opera (Wilson, 1991, p. 56). A bourgeois man could be found arranging the sexual services of a young working class woman whilst acting as a respected gentleman, enjoying an opera with his wife, in the same evening.

The *Folies-Bergère* is a venue in Paris where operettas and cabarets have taken place since 1869 (Bareau, 1986, p. 77), much like the infamous *Moulin Rouge* (which it predates). Bareau describes the atmosphere within the *Folies-Bergère*: "*The soul of Paris is concentrated and inhaled in this soft, perfumed atmosphere*" (Bareau, 1986, p. 77). Men of the Parisian bourgeoisie would go to the *Folies-Bergère* to pay for the sexual services of working class women. However, the woman Manet focuses on is a barmaid rather than a prostitute - although most interpreters have assumed that the man in the mirror is asking her for sexual favours (Iskin, 1995, p. 25). There is certainly an association between the *flâneur* and the prostitute, as Pollock infers in her '*Visions and Difference*': "*The prostitute is the female counterpart to the flâneur*" (Pollock, 1988, p. 68).

The barmaid's appearance is appealing to a wide range of spectators, as she is neither obviously proletarian or bourgeois (Pollock, 1988, p. 53). Zola would describe her as "*something between a work-girl and a middle-class lady*" (Zola in Iskin, 1995, p. 26). Her dress is "*the costume of her employment*" which was necessarily respectable due to the contact with the bourgeoisie involved (Tabarant in Iskin, 1995, p. 27). Her facial expression is typically blank due to the dull conversation Renoir tended to engage in with his models (Dumas and Collins, 2005, p. 12). Manet, unlike Renoir, was of the bourgeoisie himself and although '*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' was painted in his studio he was able to arrange for Suzon, a barmaid from the *Folies-Bergère* to pose for the painting (Tabarant in Iskin, 1995, p. 27 and Bareau, 1986, p. 77).

'*A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*' does have a sexual nature to it, which is emphasised to the trained eye by the promiscuous setting of the *Folies-Bergère*, where men of the bourgeoisie often paid for sexual favours from working class women (Wilson, 1991, p. 56). Iskin also argues that the display on the counter is provocatively positioned, with items at each side of the barmaid but nothing in the middle so we can see as much of her as possible (Iskin, 1995, p. 25). There is a man's reflection in the mirror, conspicuously looking on from the corner of the painting, typical of the *flâneur*.

As we have identified, themes of gender, leisure and urban space are very relevant to both works. The paintings encourage ample thought through a multitude of

references, in particular the Parisian woman as a spectacle and the male *flâneur* as a mysterious spectator. However, the paintings cannot explore these references in depth as texts could. There are numerous relevant themes that could be explored but have not been touched upon here, for instance the purchasing power of the woman displayed through their fashionable clothing, which was encouraged by the advent of the department store from the 1850s. However, the woman as a spectacle to the sexually promiscuous male *flâneur* is the most important theme in relation to these two paintings and therefore deserved to be focused on most.

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