

THE ARTISTIC ARTIFICE OF THE IMPRESSIONIST GAZE

Impressionism, the Look, and the Modern Social Structure

During the nineteenth century, a woman's place and power in society was a recurring subject in Impressionist paintings. The Impressionists utilized the female gaze, in particular, as a means to define female social mobility and reveal the resulted male anxiety of this new development. Though these works seem to celebrate a woman's ameliorated agency, they are actually artistic artifices unearthing the intensity and endurance of the nineteenth century's male-dominated culture. Through the painted gaze, these artists ultimately brought about an awakening concerning modern day's gendered social construction.

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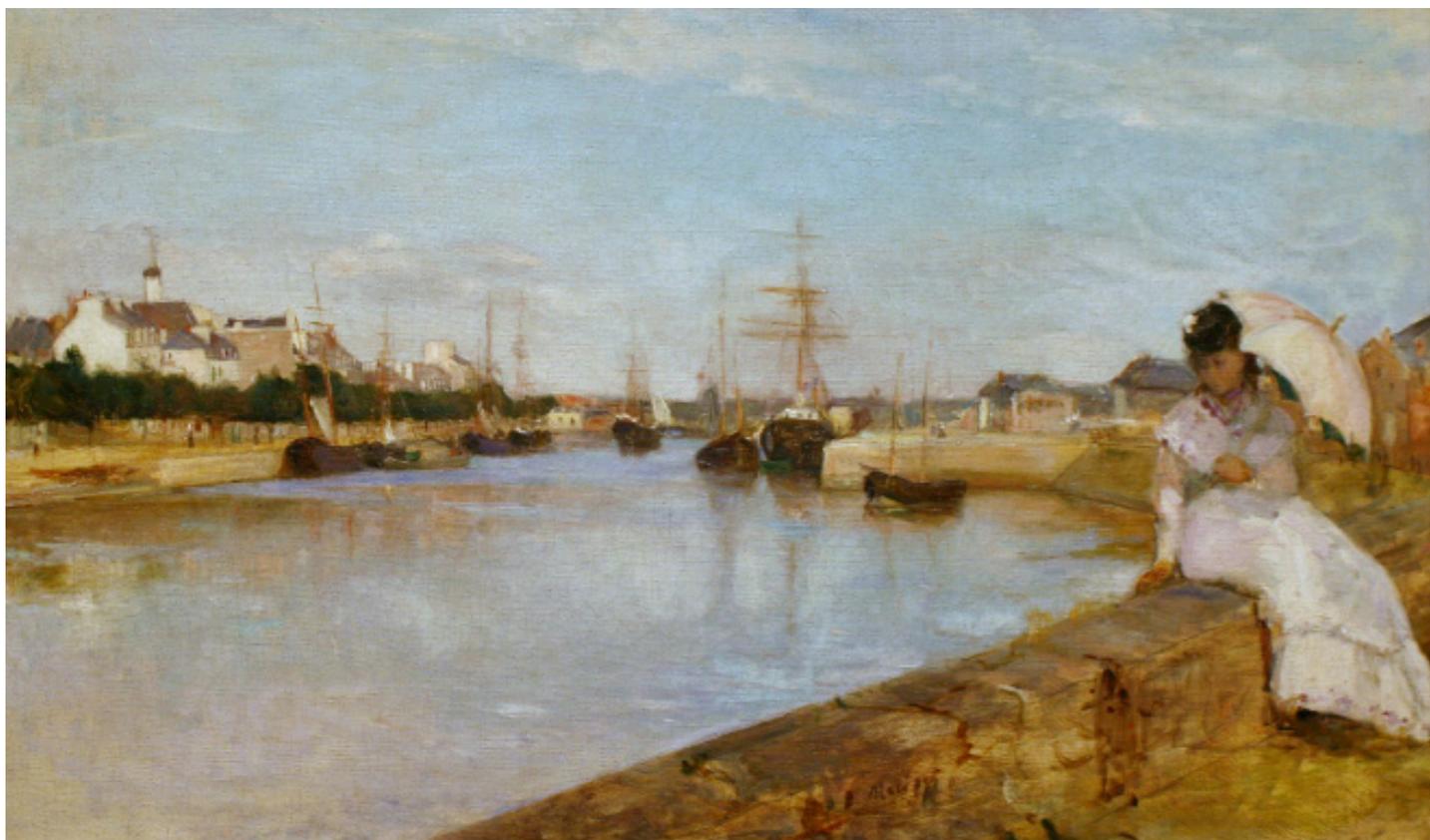


Edouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (*Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*)

Source: Courtauld Institute of Art

The Impressionists seem to render their paintings as exact reflections of modern life only upon initial examination; as revealing and avant-garde as they were, the Impressionists' works were artifices commentating on the nineteenth century's modern progression. With subjects as controversial as recognizable figures in prostitution and contemporary men bathing, the Impressionists were the visual commentators of their time, either revealing new leisurely activities, cross-divisional social class interactions, or the forefronting presence of women within society. It is particu-

larly the topic of women that most Impressionists concern their work. However, no matter the creative presentation of the woman, the Impressionists implicitly note the extent to which the modern age allowed women to socially progress. During the Impressionist era, women have gained the ability to gaze or become a spectator both inside and outside the picture space; it is here that the Impressionists' mastery of visual artifice for their social mobility becomes evident. Though Impressionist artworks represent the modern woman's increasing flexibility and mobility as a spectator, they



Berthe Morisot's *The Harbor at Lorient (Vue du petit port de Lorient)*
Source: National Gallery of Art

are more reflections of the restrictions placed upon women's new freedom as opposed to celebratory replicas of women's social change in nineteenth century Parisian culture.

THEORIES ON THE IMPRESSIONIST GAZE

The motif of woman as spectator, whether within or without the picture space, was popularized during the turn of the twentieth century. As Griselda Pollock clarifies in "The Gaze and the Look: Women with Binoculars - A Question of Difference," the Impressionists, particularly Edgar Degas and Mary Cassatt, admired the image of the woman, especially her ability to gaze.¹ Pollock continues her analysis by constructing the social implications of a woman's gaze and how the independent artistic group represented it within its works. The great bulk of her argument is a psychoanalysis on how the gaze impacted men negatively and how this physio-social interaction constructed both sexes' social roles. However, what is not sufficiently explained is that men were commonly portrayed as spectators of these gazing women, nor is it explained that the male's voyeuristic action within the painting was a reflection of nineteenth century social conventions.

Pollock continues in "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity" and elides vital information that establishes the extent to which women transgressed within the modern era.

Her argument demonstrates how space illustrated within a female Impressionist's work exemplifies the differences of space between private and public, proximal and compressed, for a man versus a woman. Consequently, Pollock suggests that female Impressionists, like Cassatt and Berthe Morisot, confine the female subject's space in accordance to historical social conventions and are able to visually articulate the female perspective due to their relation to the modern woman;² the artists achieve this, for example, by painting female subjects in positions where they are displaced from city life while looking enviously behind physical boundaries, as seen in Morisot's *The Harbor at Lorient*. In addition, the author implies that the rendering of space specifically painted by a woman's hand is the only means of reflecting the restrictions placed upon a woman at this time.

Though Pollock's article is groundbreaking work on how women, both as artists and citizens, were confined in the social sphere and artistic profession, her argument becomes faulty when she references Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* of 1882.³ She fails to acknowledge that Manet's work is similar in spatial configuration to Morisot's work, *The Harbor at Lorient*, as being compressed and displaced, which counteracts her argument of female artists creating female relatable works as expressed through space. Thus, this negates the notion that female artists were the only Impression-

ists capable of portraying female social confinement. Lastly, Pollock omits the fact that a male figure is present staring at the female bartender in Manet's work, again ignoring the significance of the male's voyeuristic action in Impressionist paintings and how this interaction enforces the definition a woman's place in modern society.

The analysis of Pollock's two articles on women within the nineteenth century Parisian culture is helpful, for it establishes a basis on how female social limitations were represented within Impressionist paintings by both genders. Her

Laura Mulvey concludes, the female viewer had the choice to "identify herself with the male viewer (both viewer of the picture, and by association, the viewer in the picture), or identify with the female in the picture."⁶ Using Eva Gonzalez's *Une Loge aux Italiens* as an example, if the female viewer identified with the male viewer, "she [became] not an object but the subject of the look"⁷ and no longer appeared yet acted.⁸ By becoming a viewer and spectator, she transgressed normal femininity within modern Paris, meaning the Impressionists painted women's agency and their ameliorated social capabilities.⁹

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recognition of the female gaze inside and outside the pictorial space emphasizes the gradual presence of women in social atmospheres, their gained freedom, and the effects of this freedom upon both sexes, ultimately leading to the notion that the gaze is a predominant factor determining a woman's flexibility and progression in Impressionist paintings. Pollock's analysis of female space also illustrates that the Impressionists formulated certain visual elements to allude to how women were still restricted within their gained freedoms. However, what is important to note is that the gaze was a constant element that the Impressionists of both sexes utilized to explain women's confined progression. The gaze, not space, was a visual signifier of both freedom and restriction as well as an universal observation made by Impressionists of all genders to visually explicate the extent of female progression, as seen in Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere* of 1882 and many other works. More specifically, the interplay of gendered gazes by the man as spectator and the woman as both spectator and subject from within and without these paintings unveils how Impressionist works did not represent female progression, but were actually artistic artifices of the restrictions placed upon women's new ability to gaze.⁴

A WOMAN'S GAZE AND ITS "POWER"

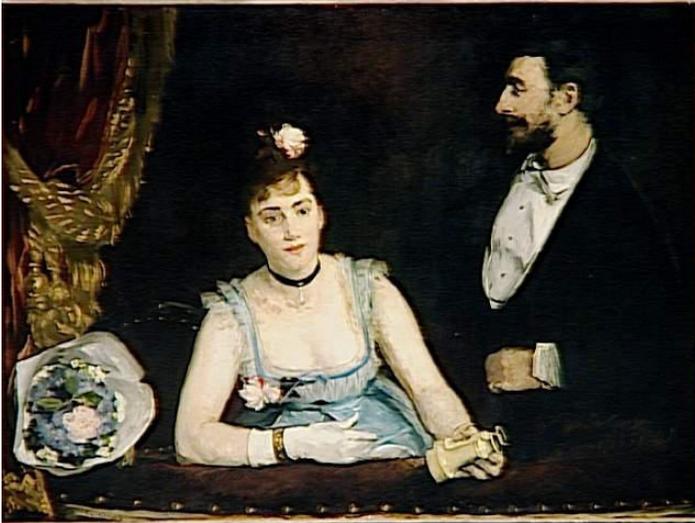
As commonly stated within the art historical discipline, "[t]he way that looking is staged within an image can echo (or subvert, in some instances) dominant patterns of looking within the culture in which it is produced."⁵ Now positioned as both viewer and spectator, the way that nineteenth century women looked in an image, such as Cassatt's *Woman at the Opera* of 1879, both echoed and subverted modern Parisian patterns of the gaze. One way in which a woman undermined this trend was by her new freedom to look, for it was only typical for men to possess the look at this time. As

However, if the female viewer were to identify herself with the female spectator, she essentially accepts herself as the object of the look and mimics the male viewer's perception of women as objects; consequently, she denies herself power, limits her sight, and echoes typical patterns of modern gender construction. Within this position, the female spectator is now looked upon by two men, a female impersonating a male viewer in addition to the male spectator in the painting. Whether impersonating a male viewer or assuming the role as female spectator, the female spectator does not escape the male gaze in either situation, enforcing the Foucauldian notion that "Men's surveillance disciplines women."¹⁰ In regards to this Foucauldian notion and Lacan's mirror theory, the female viewer is therefore forced to relate herself to the female spectator within the piece as one having the power to gaze but always kept under the male watchful eye.¹¹ Here, the Impressionists created an artistic artifice, one that seemed to have represented the transcendence of a woman's gaze in society, but ultimately revealed her sustained immobility by omnipresent male dominance.

HIS GAZE AND ANXIETY

By analyzing the female gaze through the male gaze, male social construction in modern Paris is also defined. As spectators and viewers without surveillance, the male figures within Impressionist pieces "[stand] for looking as a masculine prerogative within late nineteenth-century French culture."¹² In paintings such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir's 1876 *La Première Sortie*, Cassatt's 1879 *Femme dans une Loge* (Lydia), and Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* of 1871, the male spectator directs his gaze upon the female spectator with the addition of the male viewer gazing upon her as well. Therefore, Berger's concept that "men act and women appear" still remains true due to how two men actively gaze upon one woman and

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A Box at the Theatre des Italiens (Une loge aux Italiens)
Source: Musée d'Orsay, Paris

subdue her power to gaze, forcing her to still appear while the men remain to act.¹³ The direction of these gazes “tells us more about the dominant construction of masculinity, its projections, fears, and anxieties.”¹⁴ It reveals the nineteenth century man’s need for overarching dominance in modern society through the submission and limitation of women, ultimately implying his anxiety and fear of female potential.¹⁵ Again, the interaction between the gendered gazes unveil how the Impressionists portray one subject, all the while painting a hidden meaning - that is, the overt display of male dominance as expressed through his gaze with subtle suggestions towards his insecurity of female power.

A MODERN AWAKENING

The presence of such an artifice within Impressionist artworks implies the intellectual development of self-awareness in French culture. Throughout the nineteenth century, the Impressionists paralleled many theories, both literary and philosophical, on social consciousness. One exemplary writer, who was in tune with this social consciousness as well as the changing art scene, is Charles Baudelaire. His writing on modernity talks of how the “Modern man... is compelled to the risk of becoming a self-conscious being or agent” and also “suggests that forms of social consciousness, by which

individuals construct their identity, can only be adequately expressed in modern life by means of metaphors, by representations.”¹⁶ Other poets in addition to Baudelaire, like Stéphane Mallarmé and Arthur Rimbaud, wrote alternative meanings to their texts and created metaphors allusive to the subject’s eventual self-awareness.¹⁷ The nineteenth century was thus an age of defining the modern man as being more self-aware within society through the means of metaphors, representations, and artifices- a concept inescapable from the Impressionists’ works.

The Impressionists’ application of the gaze between the genders, in particular, was the process through which they revealed their awareness of gender construction in the Parisian nineteenth century. Michael Fried boldly states that Manet was “the first painter for whom consciousness itself is the great subject of his art” and comments on Manet’s “self-consciousness about his relationship to reality.”¹⁸ The artist portrayed consciousness through representations, paralleling his humanist contemporaries, by manipulating each gender’s gaze. As viewers themselves, the artists’ gazes initiated their own social awareness, enabling them to visually translate the implications of the gendered gazes in art, particularly the ones concerning social restrictions upon women. Moreover, it is important to note that this application of the gaze was not only portrayed in Manet’s work, but also in the paintings of Cassatt, Gonzales, and Renoir. The fact that other Impressionists of each gender painted this interplay of gazes further demonstrates an universal observation and awareness of modern Parisian gender construction, that both men and women had realized this highly structured society and their role within it.

The artist’s painted realization and the effects of Lacan’s mirror theory influenced the self-consciousness of the viewer, specifically about his role within society. The Impressionists therefore initiated a perpetual cycle of self-realization and awareness of gender social construction, first within themselves then the viewer. These multifaceted, layered artworks were not only artifices representing the true social role of each gender, but were also visual vehicles spurring an awareness of modern social structure in both artist and viewer alike. 

Endnotes

- [1] Griselda Pollock, "The Gaze and the Look: Women with Binoculars - A Question of Difference," [excerpt] in *Dealing with Degas, Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, eds. Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock (New York: Universe, 1991), 112-130.
- [2] Griselda Pollock, "Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity," in *Expanding Discourse. Feminism and Art History*, eds. Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), 230-243.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 251.
- [4] It will be noted that from here on spectator will indicate those possessing the gaze within the painting and viewer will indicate those possessing the gaze upon the painting.
- [5] Tamar Garb, "Gender and Representation," *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 225.
- [6] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 8-18.
- [7] Pollock, "The Gaze," 112.
- [8] John Berger, "Ways of Seeing," *Critical perspectives on art history* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 128.
- [9] Ruth Iskin, *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 57.
- [10] Pollock, "The Gaze," 112.
- [11] Pollock, "The gaze," 112. Lacan's theory states "the child looks to this Other for confirmation of what is has seen [within the mirror], an image which it is told as his/hers," with 'Other' referring to an authoritative figure.
- [12] Garb, "Gender and Representation," 225.
- [13] Berger, "Ways of Seeing," 128.
- [14] Garb, "Gender and Representation," 223.
- [15] Though not discussed in this essay, the reasons for this direction of the male gaze hints towards the desire of portraying the cultural ideals of masculinity, as seen in Tamar Garb's "Gustave Caillebotte's Male Figures: Masculinity, Muscularity, and Modernity," as well as an aversion to homosexuality, referring to Patricia Simons' text, "Homosexuality and Erotics in Italian Renaissance Portraiture."
- [16] Briony Fer, "Introduction," *Modernity and Modernism: French Painting in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1993), 53.
- [17] Roger Pearson, "Unfolding Mallarme: The Development of a Poetic Art," (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Daphne Merkin, "Rimbaud Rules," *The American Scholar* 72 no. 1 (Winter 2003): 45-52.
- [18] Michael Fried, *Three-American Painters: Kenneth Noland, Jules Olitski, Frank Stella* (Fogg Art Museum: Harvard University, 1965), 4-10.