Erin Lukow

Dr. Christine Connell

Humanities Core Course

23 May 2013

Suzon's Revolution: Manet's *Bar* as a Window into the Chauvinistic Alliance between Two Opposing Subcultures of Parisian Society

Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies Bergere* was his last major work and arguably one of his most influential paintings. Completed in 1882, the *Bar* combined the Impressionistic style of the early 19th century with the up-and-coming Realistic style of the late 19th century. The visual texture created through thick, semi-blended brushstrokes used to render the crowd and the male customer, alludes to the earlier Impressionistic style. Likewise, the clarity and definition of the barmaid's face and body indicate Manet's use of Realism, as he illustrated the barmaid in one sitting to capture the vitality of the model standing before him. In merging the Impressionistic and Realistic painting styles, Manet fabricated an artistic contention that imitates the classism of the 19th century. Although, the class divisions between the subcultures of Parisian society were explicit, the *Bar* asserts the convergence of the bourgeois and bohemian subcultures, both physically in the Folies Bergere night club and socially in their mistreatment of women, while simultaneously acknowledging women as a separate subculture, forcefully alienated from the Parisian social order.

The Paris of the late 19th century was divided by two main subcultures, bourgeois and bohemian. Frequent interaction existed between the two, but their respective social practices varied greatly. The bourgeois class was made up of well-to-do professionals, entrepreneurs and housewives. Most importantly, bourgeois women were consumers and gave rise to the consumerist age of the early 20th century. The bohemians dwelling in Paris lived in Montmartre and The Latin Quarter. This subculture formed from disillusioned former-bourgeois, who desired to oppose conventional society, and grew through an influx of poverty-stricken young dreamers

and social activists. They practiced moral and sexual freedom and adopted professions as artists, writers, poets and performers. Their moral freedom justified their shameless indulgence in prostitution while their political and their societal views advocated protest, mostly in literary form. Many bohemians took on voluntary poverty to avoid any affiliation with the bourgeois lifestyle and to intensify their resolve for artistic protest. Virtually the only common ground between the bourgeois and bohemian classes was the oppression of women. Bourgeois women were expected to be housewives and to obey their husbands; women were severely discouraged from seeking jobs outside of domesticity and pursuing artistic avenues. Unlike bourgeois women, bohemian women enjoyed moral freedom—they were not punished for promiscuity and could freely converse with men. However, bohemian men strongly discouraged women from painting and writing, and claimed that women did not have the capacity to understand the academic and artistic realms. These undermined working-class women, such as the barmaid featured in Manet's *Bar*, were categorized in many ways. Barmaids such as Suzon—the name of the model that posed as the barmaid for Manet—often interacted with the bourgeois and adopted many of their customs and mannerisms to better appeal to their customers. These types of working women were called "petit bourgeois" for they knew how to behave, but were not considered as respectable as bourgeois women (Iskin). Bohemians often classified these same women as grisettes. In his novel *Maggie, Not a Girl of the Streets* Daniel Cottom describes the grisette as a working woman who has "little education" and "no family resources" and works in "any sort of humble occupation." In the bohemian sprit, she was "carefree and careless" and was considered a "loose woman" who, as a consequence of her freedom from bourgeois social constraints, had to "strain [her] imagination simply in order to feed [herself]." In his book *Bohemian Paris,* Jerrold Seigel concludes that Bohemian and bourgeois were "parts of a single field" as they "imply,

require, and attract each other." His conclusion proves most true for Parisian women. Suzon identifies with the *petit bourgeois* and the bohemian grisettes as she assumes the artificiality and customs of the former and endures the social degradation inflicted of the latter. This historical background of 19th century Paris is essential to the analysis of Manet's *Bar* as it allows the painting to be examined as a fragment of reality, thus transforming an artistic masterpiece into an imperative societal statement.

Critics Carol Armstrong and Novelene Ross adopt different perspectives on the implications of Manet's *Bar* that act as effective supplements to my argument. In her article "Counter, Mirror, Maid: Some Infra-Thin Notes on *A Bar at the Folies Bergere*, Carol Armstrong uses 19th century consumerism as a base and builds upon it the assertion that the barmaid represents our place in society's commodity culture. She claims the barmaid's "hard contours [and] closed, finished appearance succeed in likening her to the closed objects in front of her," thus rendering Suzon as an item to be sold as well as a cog in the consumerist machine. She continues, the barmaid "appears before us…as a kind of signboard advertisement," suggesting that the barmaid, being "emphatically thin and closed" is less a human and more a representation of commodity. Armstrong's focus on Manet's supposed dehumanization of Suzon effectively empties the painting of all emphatic quality and makes it a stolid symbol for the "doubling of consumer and commodity" in 19th century Paris. In the first chapter of her book *Manet's "A Bar at the Folies Bergere" and the Myths of Popular Illustrations*, Novelene Ross takes a similar interest in the barmaids appearance, but approaches her as an example of the " chauvinistic tradition of Parisian journal illustration." Although Ross acknowledges the hardships of women in Parisian society, she too presents the barmaid as a poster-girl and deprives her of true humanity. Additionally, Ross aligns the painting with Manet's personal life,

emphasizing that he turned "the anonymous crowd into the society…to which he himself belonged" and makes Suzon a testimony to Manet's "personal attitude toward his model" which, she speculates, might have had "some significant bearing upon the content of the painting." Most notably, Ross considers the barmaid "an authentic cultural heroine" who represents reality in a scene of impressionistic illusion. Here she adopts a viewpoint contrary, in part, to Armstrong's by considering Suzon's humanity; however Ross continues to inflict artificiality upon her by labeling her a cultural mascot. In my argument, I adopt aspects of both Armstrong's and Ross's analyses. I honor Armstrong's sensitivity to the relevance of consumerism in 19th century Paris, but I simultaneously humanize the barmaid and, much like Ross, argue her ability to relate to the women of the age. Unlike Ross and Armstrong, I consider the barmaid to be a victim in male-dominated society and consider female oppression in both bourgeois and bohemian sectors. In considering the historical aspects of Parisian Bohemia alongside that of the middle-class, I can analyze several possible tracks of a working-class woman's life, and apply my findings to my interpretation of the *Bar*. Therefore, I've elected to analyze Manet's *Bar* through many lenses—cultural, historical, artistic, and humanistic—rather than scrutinizing the painting from a single vantage point.

Suzon's appearance presents her as a representation of all middle-class and working-class women who were subject to oppression in bohemian and bourgeois Parisian society. Due to her placement in the Folies Bergere among all classes of people, the status of the barmaid is unclear. She wears an elegant dress trimmed with lace; however, it is most likely the uniform of the establishment meant to make her attractive to all men, no matter their station (Ross 1). Because Suzon is employed rather than the lady of a house, she can identify with the bohemian grisettes who were "caught between their working-class status and the world of fashion" (Wilson 92).

Suzon wears a grey dress beneath her fashionable bodice that resembles "the grey material of [grisettes'] gowns" that gave them their namesake (Wilson 92). However, the unique structure of 19th century Parisian society, specifically the interaction between the bourgeois and the bohemian sectors, allows the grisette to be a prostitute as well as an associate of the bourgeois (Seigel 5). Being a barmaid at the Folies Bergere, Suzon is often in the company of members of the bourgeois, allowing her membership into the petit bourgeois subclass. Therefore, she can also represent bourgeois women through her placement amongst their kind. Suzon's accessories further represent the bondage of women and hint at Manet's relationship with the painting. The golden bangle restricting her arm ties Suzon to the luxury of bourgeois society as its' color correlates with the gilt frame of the mirror shown just above the counter, as well as the gold foil covering the necks of the champagne bottles. The golden color of these objects, thus, emphasizes Suzon's subjection to the artificiality of the bourgeois sector, a subjection that is required of her position. The resulting implication is that women in the bourgeois subculture are treated as actresses and their male directors determine the roles according to personal desires. Because Suzon embodies the oppression of all classes of Parisian women, bourgeois and bohemian, every interpreted emotion and circumstance surrounding Suzon can here forth be applied to these women, thus allowing Parisian women and Manet's barmaid to be analyzed as one body.

The structure of Manet's *Bar* defines the painting as a representation of the parallels between bourgeois and bohemian society regarding the subordination of women. There are several vanishing points, the most prominent of which point to Suzon's mouth and to the space between Suzon and her reflection (de Duve 148). These draw attention to the key themes of the painting: the silencing and suppression of women and the contrast between illusion and reality, respectively. The vanishing point that rests at Suzon's mouth points out the inability of women to

participate in the public social sphere. In the 1880s, respectable bourgeois women were neither permitted to participate in politics nor able to pursue a professional career without earning society's contempt. Likewise, bohemian women, despite their achieved individualism, were "continually and viciously attacked by their male rivals" if they pursued an art (Wilson 89). Therefore, the vanishing point ultimately represents bourgeois and bohemian women, as Suzon's closed mouth speaks to the personal and political rights that were stripped from women of all Parisian classes. The vanishing point between Suzon and her reflection represents the separation of two selves, one a true self and one a façade. Suzon's reflection is her illusionary self that appears when serving a man; she engages in conversation with the male customer to suppress her true emotions and obtain the financial means necessary for survival. Contrarily, the frontal image of Suzon illustrates her true emotions as her countenance fails to hide her disillusionment. Because this vanishing point lies on a mirrored surface, it implies the "loss of a sense of depth" in the painting (Herbert 221). This translates to the loss of genuineness in Suzon's world and makes the vanishing point an illusion itself, as the supposed point of depth cannot continue through the mirrored surface. Therefore, the image of society captured in the mirror suggests that Suzon's world is one massive façade because neither bohemians nor bourgeois can offer her a place of freedom, for each sector requires women to assume a false contentedness to avoid backlash and humiliation.

Perhaps the most prominent structural feature of Manet's *Bar* is its polarity. An extension of the vertical line of buttons on Suzon's bodice creates a central line that divides the painting into the poles of Parisian society: bourgeois on the left and bohemian on the right. The Folies Bergere was home to a mixture of classes, but this painting uses the barmaid as a divider suggesting that she is trapped between the bourgeois and bohemian subcultures as neither

liberates her from chauvinism. Because Suzon "does not wholly coincide with the role she is supposed to play," evidenced by her discontented expression, she cannot belong to either society and thus is somewhat of an "other" that lies between the two panes of the painting. The left pane of the *Bar* symbolizes bourgeois society through the detail in the crowd, which is slightly more defined than the crowd on the left, suggesting the elevated status of the bourgeois over bohemians. As a consequence of status, bourgeois women were taught to "guard against looking fixedly" at "men who pass near them" as a sign of respect and subordination (Iskin 36). Consequently, every woman in the bourgeois crowd has her gaze averted from the viewer; the woman in the yellow gloves and the woman with the binoculars both have their heads turned to the left, as if consciously avoiding the gaze of every male viewer that may stand before the painting. Suzon is the only woman who is not averting her gaze, but is rather brazenly confronting the viewer as if to express her contempt for the Parisian society that binds her. Ross asserts that Suzon "dominates" and "presides" over the *Bar*'s scene, however, her countenance does not convey sureness and "self-possession." Instead, her gaze conveys weariness and despondency because, as a woman, she is a perpetual slave to society's need for cultural apposition. She is silenced, subordinated and solicited as an object for pleasure in a misogynistic effort to make her a service of society and sever her access to democracy. As previously mentioned, the golden bracelet on her left arm is tight and restrictive, resembling a handcuff that visually reiterates her imprisonment in bourgeois society. Her choker, appropriately named, likewise represents her imprisonment, but because it is split by the vertical dividing line, it represents Suzon's subordination in both subcultures of society. Finally, the trapeze artist on the top left of the painting illustrates the woman's role in the interaction between the bourgeois and bohemian subcultures. Because performance was not considered a respectable profession in

bourgeois society, the trapeze artist is most likely a bohemian woman (Wilson 91). Therefore, as a bohemian crossed over into bourgeois society, the trapeze artist has become a servant. Moreover, as a woman, she is ignored by the spectators, as no one in the crowd is acknowledging her efforts the men ignore her presence and the women preoccupy themselves with upholding their moral expectations by withholding their gazes. This establishes the hierarchy of Parisian society: bourgeois men lead, followed by bohemian men, and women lie at the bottom. The crowd on the right pane of the *Bar* is void of bright color and fashionable clothing and is less defined, indicating the less-sophisticated bohemian society. Because Suzon's reflection lies on the side of the bohemians, it is implied that bourgeois men see her as an inferior grisette, despite her efforts to appeal to them through her put-on barmaid persona. This placement also indicates her bohemian-like moral freedom, which she requires to offer herself as a subordinate public servant, whether that means selling her goods or selling herself. In the background, many people in the crowd are facing the right, the opposite direction of the bourgeois. This speaks to the dissimilarities between the Parisian subcultures, and corresponds to the differences in the items on the counter, such as the distinctive assortment of bottles and the addition of fruit and flowers on the bar's right side. Like the two separate panes of the painting, the counter illustrates societal divisions and, through Suzon's placement between the panes, labels the manipulation women as the common ground between the two subcultures.

The counter full of items before the barmaid not only represents the rising consumerism of the age, but also implies Suzon's selling of herself in several ways. In her article, "Counter, Mirror, Maid", Carol Armstrong emphasizes the importance of consumerism when she asserts "the still-life on the countertop belongs to the public…realm of consumption" and so "the barmaid belongs with the things on the counter." Although her analysis associates the counter

area with the selling of Suzon, she does not humanize the items by making them extensions of Suzon's emotions, and thus misses an opportunity for interpretation. The flowers positioned provocatively between Suzon's breasts correlate with the vase of flowers on the selling counter, suggesting that her body is in fact for sale. Armstrong emphasizes the duality of Suzon's soliciting, deeming it "the covert buying of sex" disguised as a business interaction between a male consumer and a barmaid. In soliciting herself, Suzon abandons her virtue and her pursuit of happiness in both the bourgeois and bohemian sectors, as neither a dandy nor a bohemian would consider a whore worthy of participating in the academic community. In her book *Bohemains: the Glamorous Outcasts*, Elizabeth Wilson denounces this type of gender stratification as "an insulting denial of female creativity" as the "legendary coupling" of a bohemian with a grisette or prostitute, who rarely engaged in studying the arts, ensured male dominance in the artistic realm. In effect, Suzon's engagement in prostitution, indicated by the flowers, emphasizes her femininity as a necessary device for men's pleasure while deeming it her ultimate disability. The champagne and wine advertised on the two sides of the bar represent the bottling of her spirit and optimism because as a woman she can only remain stagnant or regress in her society. Armstrong speculates that the green bottle on the left side of the bar, "the only bottle that is not duplicated," is there as if "to signal some sort of play between the single unit and the multiple." The single unit, the green bottle, is most likely absinthe, the infamous drink of the bohemians who visually distinguished themselves from the bourgeois majority, as the distinctiveness of the bottle implies. It's presence among the other "mass-produced" bottles suggests that the men of Bohemia condemn Suzon to stagnation just as the bourgeois do, and reemphasizes her imprisonment within the constraints of Parisian society. Finally, the particularly low counter itself suppresses Suzon's independence as it "cuts off [her] body at the thighs" rather than at the waist as expected

(Armstrong 37). This placement defines her role in society as it severs her legs, preventing forward mobility, but preserves her sex, allowing her to continue to service men. Thus, the humanization of the items on the counter effectively transforms this consumerist scene into a representation of society's flaws, as Suzon's hardships are narrated through the very items that complement the lifestyles of bourgeois and bohemian men.

The barmaid's problematic reflection and the appearance of the male "dandy" in the mirror emphasize the contrast between the female actress putting on a role and the female citizen struggling through her disadvantages in society. The reflection represents an illusion while the front of the bar scene speaks to reality and the raw emotions of the barmaid's inner prisoner. The illusionistic quality of the reflections in the mirror is furthered by the hazy smudges that discolor the painting's background. The "frostiness and fuzziness" of the smudges presents a stark contrast to the crisp clarity of Suzon's form and the counter full of goods (Herbert 221). Here the smudges not only illuminate the contrast between perceived reality and perceived illusion, but also suggest an impurity and artificiality in the scenes captured by the mirror. The reflection itself speaks wonders to the practiced artificiality of oppressed women of 19$^{th}$ century France through an exaggeration of the barmaid's interaction with the male customer. She is "leaning towards the client" as if too eager to offer her services whether that entails soliciting the goods in front of her or her body (Boime 242). Contrarily, the frontal image of the barmaid is reminiscent of an out-of-body experience. The angle at which the barmaid's illusionary counterpart stands in one which the real barmaid could easily snap back into if necessary, suggesting that the real barmaid in front of us does not represent Suzon in her fullest consciousness but rather in the midst of a daydream or revelation. This ambiguity begs the question, which image is truly real, the reflected illusion or the apparent reality? In the context of the working-class woman, both are.

In his article "How Manet's Bar Is Constructed" Thierry de Duve insists that the *Bar* is "a composite image" and insists it "conflates two or more moments in time." However, it seems the image of the barmaid and her reflection rather separates one moment in time. The reflected image may have been Manet's intended depiction of reality within the painting, in which case Suzon is acting the role of the barmaid artificially and robotically in the frontal position, while harboring the pains of oppression which we, the viewers, witness outright. Contrarily, if Manet's intended depiction of reality outside the painting is the frontal image of Suzon, the illusionistic reflection represents her momentary dismissal of the societal constraints which require her to adopt artificiality in order to maintain a lively persona for the sake of her male customers. In other words, both images of Suzon take place in one moment. The frontal image representing her inner pain is the "real" image to us, the viewers, as we recognize her suffering through Manet's depiction. Her reflection represents what she is really doing at the moment inside the painting—serving the male customer—and is "real" to the rendered customers at the Folies Bergere for they do not acknowledge Suzon's pain.. Both situations are compatible and interchangeable as we imagine Suzon living in society working as a barmaid and suffering as a woman.

The interplay between the reflection of the man and the "real" image of Suzon in contrast to the interplay between the two reflections in the mirror asserts a rebellious facet of women in response to their subjectivity by the men of society. If the reflection of the man presented in the mirror is deemed accurate, the true figure of the man would be positioned at the far left, presumably out of the frame of the painting. Because Suzon is staring fixedly ahead, whether by an out-of-body experience or not, she is putting the man in a position of subordination as she effectively fails to acknowledge his presence; because this is an act that would earn her no punishment in bohemian society, she is effectively as much a bohemian in this moment as she is

a *petit bourgeois*. In this instance, Suzon fulfills a desired opposition to the societal constraint that requires her to attend to men who would never extend sincere attention to her outside of sexual interest. As Tag Gronberg suggests in his article "Dumbshows: A Carefully Staged Indifference", the man in the painting likely represents a boulevardier of Manet's caliber and station. In this case, the man would invoke a sort of amiability towards the barmaid as Manet comfortably conversed with struggling artists and worked as they did to gain recognition (Iskin 40). However, the male customer's stoic expression and notable sophistication suggest his pride in his bourgeois pedigree. Therefore, he remains an elite figure who, although has seemingly crossed over into the pane occupied by bohemians, has actually made no effort to mediate between classes as his actual body lies in the left pane with his bourgeois brethren. However, his illusionary presence in the bohemian pane and his tangible presence in the bourgeois pane allude to a common bond between bourgeois and bohemian society: both societies, despite their different values, oppressed women through forceful subordination. Therefore, Suzon's dismissal of the man forcefully subordinates him just as he and his societal affiliates subordinate women like her. In this effect, Manet's *Bar* not only asserts the existence of the oppression of women, but also illustrates the Parisian woman's need to overcome societal restraints. Manet effectively captured this need by rendering Suzon in her true emotional state, thus allowing her to momentarily break free from society and protest against the hardships of bourgeois and bohemian women alike.

The polarity of the *Bar,* expressed through the items on the counter, the background scene and the separation of the painting's panes, continuously places Suzon in a central ambiguous space outside of the world of men. Moreover, despite the notable differences that exist between the sectors, bourgeois and bohemian men are united against the inclusion and

advancement of women. The chauvinism expressed in the *Bar* is so potent that it dissipates cultural boundaries and, thus, attempts to exclude women from Parisian society altogether. In this way, women are not human in the eyes of men, but are "others" who must service society but cannot claim a rightful place in it. Therefore, Manet's depiction of Suzon as an "other" in an oppressive society makes *A Bar at the Folies Bergere* as much an aesthetic masterpiece as it is a trademark of the tyrannized woman.

Works Cited

Armstrong, Carol. "Counter, Mirror, Maid: Some Infra-thin Notes on A Bar at the Folies-Bergere." 12 Views of Manet's Bar. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. 25-46. Print.

Boime, Albert. "Manet's "Un Bar Aux Folies-Bergere" as an Allegory of Nostalgia."Zeitschrift Fur Kunstgeschichte 2nd ser. 56 (1993): 234-48. JSTOR. Web. 8 May 2013.

Cottom, Daniel. *Maggie, Not a Girl of the Streets*. Vol. 41. N.p.: Duke UP, 2007. 73-98. Ser. 1. *JSTOR*. Web. 6 June 2013.

De Duve, Thierry. "How Manet's A Bar at the Folies-Bergere Is Constructed." Critical Inquiry 25.1 (1998): 136-49. JSTOR. Web. 8 May 2013.

Gronberg, Tag. "Dumbshows: A Carefully Staged Indifference." *12 Views of Manet's Bar*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. 189-205. Print.

Herbert, James D. *How to Analyze and Write About a Work of Art*. *HCC Writer's Handbook*. Ed. Ava Arndt. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Humanities Core Course*. University of California, Irvine, 2012. Web. 6 June 2013

Herbert, James D. "Privilege and the Illusion of the Real." *12 Views of Manet's Bar*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. 214-32. Print.

Iskin, Ruth. "Selling, Seduction and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergere." The Art Bulletin 77.1 (1995): 25-44. JSTOR. Web. 8 May 2013.

Manet, Edouard. *A Bar at the Folies-Bergere*. 1881-82. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London. *12 Views of Manet's Bar*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996. N. pag. Print.

Ross, Novelene. "Un Bar Aux Folies-Bergere." *Manet's Bar at the Folies Bergere and the Myths of Popular Illustration*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research, 1982. 1-14. Print

Seigel, Jerrold. "The Boundaries of Bohemia." *Bohemian Paris*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1986. 3-30. Print.

Wilson, Elizabeth. "Women in Bohemia." *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts*. London: I.B.Tauris &, 2000. 86-99. Print.