

MANET'S BAR (1.0.0)

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Édouard Manet's *Un Bar aux Folies Bergère* is a painting about looking, a painting that makes us see a particular instance of looking. In it a barmaid stands behind a bar before a mirror that reflects her surroundings, including the image of a man who stands looking at her. From the mirror's reflection, granting the unreal position of his image, we see that the man stands where we stand as we look at the painting. His perspective is our perspective; we see what he sees. The reaction of the barmaid to the man's gaze is presented as a reaction to our gaze. But what we see is not what we expect. She wears flowers covering her chest, not part of the standard Folies Bergère uniform. Her look is not one that invites the gaze openly. It is not the look of the attentive flirtatious women transfixed on a smartly dressed man found in a Jules Chéret poster for the Folies Bergère.¹ Instead we see that her eyes are averted from our gaze in a look almost of sorrow. Her look is one of not being what we expect her to be. It breaks the habitual understanding of her as something to look at. She is not depicted as an object but as a subject full of thought.

As we look it is the man's act of looking that is seen through our own act of looking at the painting. As we look we see an instance of looking that betrays the ideal of the voyeur who sees without the act of looking being seen, without the act being questioned or challenged. A photograph fulfils this ideal perfectly: the subject has no effect on the object; the object is unaware of it being the object of a vision. In the painting we see a moment in which this ideal is broken, a moment when the ways in which our gaze is operative in the world are disclosed. It is a moment when a gaze so habitual that it is usually passed over in silence, so habitual that it is for the most part meaningless, becomes visible and open to a new sense. The man can not only see the barmaid, he can also see himself looking. In the mirror's reflection, he may notice himself as a presence

¹ *Tous les soirs à 8 heures. Folies Bergère...* (1875). In the collection of the *Musée des Arts Décoratifs*, Paris: <http://opac.lesartsdecoratifs.fr/fiche/tous-les-soirs-8-heures-folies-bergere-travaux-de-voltige-ballets-pantomimes-operettes-o-metra>

who looks. Perhaps the situation wakens the man. Perhaps his reaction may be understood as one of shunned expectation, as a response to the uncanny way that the scene is unveiled by the mirror. The painting captures this moment allowing us to reflect on it. It suggests an understanding of our gaze as an action, a certain attention to what we are doing with our eyes, a moment when we realise that our vision itself is visible.

If we are in the painting, we could be the ones who are challenged: like in Manet's *Olympia* where we face our conscience as the painting implies our entrance into a brothel; like in the final version of *L'Exécution de Maximilien*, where a shadow cast from outside its frame puts us in the picture, making us eyewitnesses to the event. Manet's *Bar* is a painting about looking, a painting where we see our habitual actions laid bare. It creates a new thought for these actions, a new thought on the transparency of vision itself.