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### **Death and Immortality in Édouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère***

On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1883, only a year after displaying *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* at the Salon in 1882, Édouard Manet passed away at the age of 51. Although *Bar* is one of Manet's final major works, as well as among his most well-known, analyzed, and critiqued, it is often overlooked or minimized that it was painted in the midst of his deteriorating physical condition and acute awareness of nearing death. However, some historians have examined how the thematic content, compositional form, and painterly style reveal and reflect the state of its maker. In particular, Jack Flam and Albert Boime, two art historians whose analyses focus on Manet's physical and psychological state at the time of creation, argue that the barmaid is a representation of the artist facing death, describing her as "immobile and confined"<sup>1</sup> and "contemplating the transience of all pleasures and all things."<sup>2</sup> By situating Flam and Boime's conclusions within a broader review of relevant scholarship on *Bar*, I will show that just as the barmaid is suspended spatially, societally, and visually in *Bar*, Manet was suspended in the ambiguous space between life and death, contemplating his own immortality. Then, through a close visual analysis of the composition, I will attempt to characterize Manet's broader position on the pursuit of personal and artistic immortality. Ultimately, by integrating French writer Milan Kundera's philosophy of immortality, this paper argues that *Bar* suggests Manet was uncertain about the possibility of personal immortality but believed he could achieve artistic immortality through painting.

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<sup>1</sup> Albert Boime, "Manet's 'A Bar at the Folies-Bergère' as an Allegory of Nostalgia," in *12 Views on Manet's Bar*, edited by Bradford R. Collins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Flam, "Looking into the Abyss: The Poetics of Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère," in *12 Views on Manet's Bar*, edited by Bradford R. Collins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 184.

As mentioned above, Manet's *Bar* is one of his most studied artworks, and has been analyzed from a countless number of historical, theoretical, and visual perspectives. One dominant line of thinking surrounding *Bar* finds significance in its complex consideration of the socio-economic context of 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris. T.J. Clark, for example, in his foundational chapter on *Bar* in *The Painting of Modern Life*, argues that, for Manet and his peers, "their practice as painters – their claim to be modern – depended on their being bound more closely than ever before to the interests and economic habits of the bourgeoisie they belonged to."<sup>3</sup> For Clark, Manet's address of modernity is lacking due to his reliance on a bourgeois, subjective understanding of social class. Ruth Iskin extends Clark's argument by centering her analysis of *Bar* on the presence of the burgeoning commodity and consumer culture in Paris. By focusing on the counter and the crowd, Iskin argues that while Manet's position on mass consumption is ambiguous, the work reveals Manet's interest in visualizing his reliance on a mass public, his participation in the art market, and the increasing presence of advertising imagery in his visual world.<sup>4</sup> This argument is complicated by Carol Armstrong, whose essay in *12 Views on Manet's Bar* also discusses the relationship between the counter and the crowd, but instead focuses on the significance of the barmaid's position. Armstrong writes that the barmaid "divide[s] and bridge[s] the twinned zones of the commodity and the consumer," proposing that she represents Manet's understanding of the position of painting between these poles.<sup>5</sup> This brief overview of

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 260.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth E. Iskin, "Selling, Seduction, and Soliciting the Eye: Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergere," *The Art Bulletin* 77, no. 1 (March 1995): 25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3046078>.

<sup>5</sup> Carol Armstrong, "Counter, Crowd, Maid: Some Infra-thin Notes on *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*," in *12 Views on Manet's Bar*, edited by Bradford R. Collins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 42.

how several scholars have situated Manet's figuration of consumerism and commodity in *Bar* demonstrates that this painting cannot be siloed as a simple address of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian economy and art market. Instead, as Clark, Iskin, and Armstrong's findings suggest, Manet's presentation of these issues is more productively understood as personal rather than societal. This reveals why other historians have focused on *Bar* as Manet's examination of his role as a modern painter rather than his often flawed and subjective perspective on social issues.

Questions related to modernity, authorship, and painting are taken up by Richard Shiff and Bradford Collins in their respective essays in *12 Views of Manet's Bar*. Richard Shiff shows that while material and social change lie at the core of Manet's depictions of Paris, he came from a conservative family and did not advocate for radical social change. In fact, the writer Emile Zola, a close friend of Manet, rejected the notion that the artist would "commit the error of entertaining 'ideas' in the practice of his art."<sup>6</sup> Instead, Shiff argues that Manet sought a form of "intellectual and emotional liberation" on the canvas.<sup>7</sup> Shiff's perspective demonstrates the importance of focusing on *why* rather than *what* Manet painted. For example, it is more productive to characterize *Bar* as a *painting* of a Parisian café-concert that Manet had frequented, rather than referring to it as the space itself or as a pseudo-photograph of it. This discursive shift allows us to ask: why did Manet choose to *paint* the Folies-Bergère on this canvas, and, further, what aspects of his personal and social life precipitated this focus on his subjective perception of this particular Parisian space? One way of answering these questions is provided by Bradford Collins, who considers painting, like "all human actions," to be "aimed at satisfying some

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<sup>6</sup> Emile Zola, "Une Nouvelle Manière en peinture: Edouard Manet," 101, in *Mon Salon, Manet, Ecrits sur l'art*, ed. Antoinette Ehrard (Paris, 1970), 141-42, quoted in Shiff, "Introduction," 9.

<sup>7</sup> Shiff, "Introduction," 9.

need.”<sup>8</sup> On one level, Collins acknowledges that the painting was created for the Salon of 1882. After contracting syphilis and developing symptoms in the summer of 1881, Manet returned to Paris intent on exhibiting this work at what could have been his final Salon. However, Collins argues that Manet’s “need,” beyond external recognition, was external representation. Collins demonstrates that *Bar* is a form of “artistic mirror,” a way of externalizing himself “in the domain of things” for “narcissistic delight.”<sup>9</sup> While the connection between self-representation and Manet’s condition is not made explicit by Collins, the timing of this picture is clearly not a coincidence. In this sense, we can conceive of the painting and his condition as inextricably intertwined: Manet’s narcissistic desire to paint a metaphorical self-portrait was grounded in his recent recognition of his nearing death.

By integrating Collins’ notion of the ‘artistic mirror’ with Jack Flam and Albert Boime’s arguments that center Manet’s physical and emotional condition at the time of painting, we can begin to recognize Manet’s depiction of both personal and artistic immortality. In Boime’s essay in *12 Views*, he focuses on Manet’s nostalgic attitude toward places like the Folies-Bergère as key to understanding why he painted *Bar*. Like Collins, Boime posits that the barmaid represents Manet at the moment of creation. He writes that “she is held in suspension,” which recalls Armstrong’s argument about her positioning in the composition as well as her imagined position in society.<sup>10</sup> However, we might also understand this as a material suspension: the paint that comprises her is fixed in place. In this way, the painted object, for Manet, was a way to present a

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<sup>8</sup> Bradford R. Collins, “The Dialectics of Desire, the Narcissism of Authorship: A Male Interpretation of the Psychological Origins of Manet’s Bar,” in *12 Views on Manet's Bar*, edited by Bradford R. Collins (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 116-117.

<sup>9</sup> Collins, “The Dialectics of Desire,” 133.

<sup>10</sup> Boime, “Allegory of Nostalgia,” 60.

depiction of himself in perpetuity; not only would he be able to present the canvas at the Salon of 1882, but long after he passed away, his brushstrokes, paints, and the visual and compositional tensions he rendered, would be associated with his name.

This idea is also supported by Jack Flam's *12 Views* essay, which deconstructs some of the many ambiguities in *Bar* to reveal the artist's address of his own indefinite position in life. In particular, Flam focuses on Manet's use of ephemeral brushwork, his incoherent compositional logic, and the inclusion of the iconography of mortality. For Flam, Manet's confusing depiction of a space that profited off humans' propensity for sensuality and vanity shows his literal and mental detachment from the "world of frivolity" that he would soon depart.<sup>11</sup> Simultaneously, however, it also represents his inability to ignore the unique beauties of this world; Flam writes that the barmaid represents the artist: "both detached and engaged, absent but always present."<sup>12</sup> While many historians have sought to resolve or explain the tensions in the canvas, Flam demonstrates that this painting may be more productively viewed as a "meditation on a number of dualities."<sup>13</sup> Building upon this idea, I suggest that the dualities addressed on this canvas include Manet's simultaneous recognition of the overwhelming influence and the sheer frivolousness of his pursuit of immortality.

The presence of immortality on the canvas is created through the spatial and visual position of the barmaid and the connections that Manet produces between the counter and the balcony. Building on the idea that the barmaid stands in for Manet in this painting, we can

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<sup>11</sup> Flam, "Looking into the Abyss," 184.

<sup>12</sup> Flam, "Looking into the Abyss," 184.

<sup>13</sup> Flam, "Looking into the Abyss," 166.

conceive of the world of the counter as the material world in which Manet existed. Pushed up close to the plane of the viewer and painted to highlight details like the gold foil of the champagne, the still life on the counter produces a sense of heightened yet objective reality. By contrast, the mirror presents a simultaneity between materiality and imagination, a tension that juxtaposes the steadiness of the still life. Due to the barmaid's perspective, the world in the mirror, primarily the balcony, is encountered in front of her while it is positioned in the mirror behind her. This fundamental tension forces the spectator to question which balcony is more real: the material world it reflects or the visual reflection that is materialized in paint on the canvas. In one sense, the reflected balcony is merely that, a visual projection of a space produced by a specific angle and light at a particular moment in time. Yet at the same time, the physical reality of the balcony, comprised of lights, people, and space, is similarly singular and fleeting. This contrast between counter and balcony, between the sharp reality of the material world and the ambiguous and confusing world of the mirror, positions the barmaid, and the artist, as arbiter of these realities. In this sense, Manet depicts himself as situated between the reality of the world and his subjective perception of it.

This is supported by other visual evidence in the composition. Namely, the divergent painted styles of the counter and the crowd suggest that Manet recognized a fundamental tension in his own artistic practice between representation and expression. The visual relationship between objects on the counter and elements of the crowd and the balcony contribute to the sense of dualism between objective and subjective reality on the canvas. Moreover, this produces a metaphorical distinction between art objects in the material world and the artist who creates them. One example is the similarity between the gold, elongated forms of the champagne bottle covers and the gloves on the woman in white in the balcony. The saturated color of her gloves

stands out in the crowd and indicates the remnants of objective reality in subjective perception. Another example is the relationship between the spherical form of the oranges in the bowl and the light fixtures reflected in the mirror. One on level, the relationship between these objects is geometric; however, Manet also depicts the presence of the reflected lights on the oranges. A third example is the chromatic and geometric relationship between the glass bowl holding the oranges and the chandeliers reflected in the mirror. These visual connections extend Linda Nochlin's short analysis of *Bar* in *Politics of Vision*. Nochlin notes that the greens of the trapeze artist and the crème-de-menthe bottle position the barmaid as a "way station" between the distinct painterly styles in the still-life and the balcony.<sup>14</sup> Just as the objects on the counter are literally and metaphorically reflected in the mirror world, Manet's paintings, such as *Bar*, reflected aspects of his own being. While there is clearly a material disconnect between art object and artist, Manet suggests that a painting is eternally tied to the painter.

The final portion of my visual analysis reveals how this self-referential composition depicts Manet's perspective on death. Specifically, I argue that the painting itself is spatially and compositionally infinite, leading us to consider how Manet viewed himself at the precipice of personal and artistic immortality. As I have noted, Manet positions the barmaid between the mirror and the counter. However, if this composition is truly about the painted object, we can also think of mirror and the canvas as parallel planes that surround her figure. Yet both of these planes are artificial: just as the world of outside of the canvas extends away from the painted surface into the spectator's reality, the world of the reflected bar recedes backwards into an indefinite space where people become brushstrokes and fields of color. Manet positions himself

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<sup>14</sup> Linda Nochlin, *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 89.

suspended between two infinities, that of the future spectator's inaccessible reality and the immediate painted world on the canvas. While this indicates Manet's recognition of his approaching death, it also places *Bar*, a painting that is inevitably linked to its maker, in the infinite continuums of time and space. In this sense, Manet suggests that personal immortality is impossible, that is, despite our tendency to seek remembrance, it is materially idealistic to imagine a true representation of ourselves persisting in the world. However, this painting reveals that Manet, as a painter, recognized the possibility of artistic immortality. While he would never be remembered as he was personally, physically, or emotionally, his paintings would persist, containing an impression of his existence.

Though I have attempted to make a convincing argument as to Manet's belief in artistic rather than personal immortality, it is helpful to situate this analysis in French author Milan Kundera's philosophy of immortality. In his 1990 novel, *Immortality*, Kundera presents a framework for understanding the phases of human life based on our relationship to our eventual death. During the first part of our life, Kundera writes that "our death seems too distant for us to occupy ourselves with it. It is unseen and invisible."<sup>15</sup> Then, one day, we begin to not be able to look away from death and become obsessed with the notion of immortality. This second stage comprises the majority of our life until death comes so close and intimately familiar that it once again becomes 'unseen and invisible' and we arrive at the final stage of our life. In our final stage, Kundera writes that "Immortality is a ridiculous illusion, an empty word, a butterfly net chasing the wind;"<sup>16</sup> for Kundera, our relationship to death is tied to our desire for immortality.

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<sup>15</sup> Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991) 70-71.

<sup>16</sup> Kundera, *Immortality*, 71.



This framework is useful for situating Manet's *Bar* as a potential representation of the artist's shift between the second and third stages of life. In this sense, we can imagine Manet reckoning with a growing indifference to personal immortality after a potential lifetime of obsessing over how he could exist ad infinitum. The abundance of ambiguities, tensions, fluctuations, and dualities that have been repeatedly analyzed in this composition may be understood, then, as Manet's uncertainties about approaching death. I do not want to suggest that Manet did not care about immortality at all; instead, that his perspective shifted to valuing artistic rather than personal immortality. As Kundera writes, "those who *create* deserve more respect than those who rule...works of art, not wars or aristocratic costume balls, are immortal."<sup>17</sup> While it is difficult to trace a definitive connective line between Manet's *Bar* and Kundera's *Immortality*, it is clear that both believed that the role of the artist, no matter their medium or subject matter, is to express the immortality of art.

While many art historians ignore or diminish the importance of Manet's worsening physical and emotional condition to *Bar*, this paper has argued that this work is an engagement with the tensions of personal and artistic immortality brought on by Manet's illness. I have shown that while Manet recognized that immortality for a human, even a famous painter like himself, was impossible, paintings, or works of art more generally, could be eternal. Manet's achievement in *Bar*, beyond its formal, compositional, and thematic innovation, is his assertion of the immortality of painting. At a time when the role of painting in society was threatened by photography and advertising, *Bar* represents a timeless and irreplaceable intervention into the visual world.

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<sup>17</sup> Kundera, *Immortality*, 208.

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