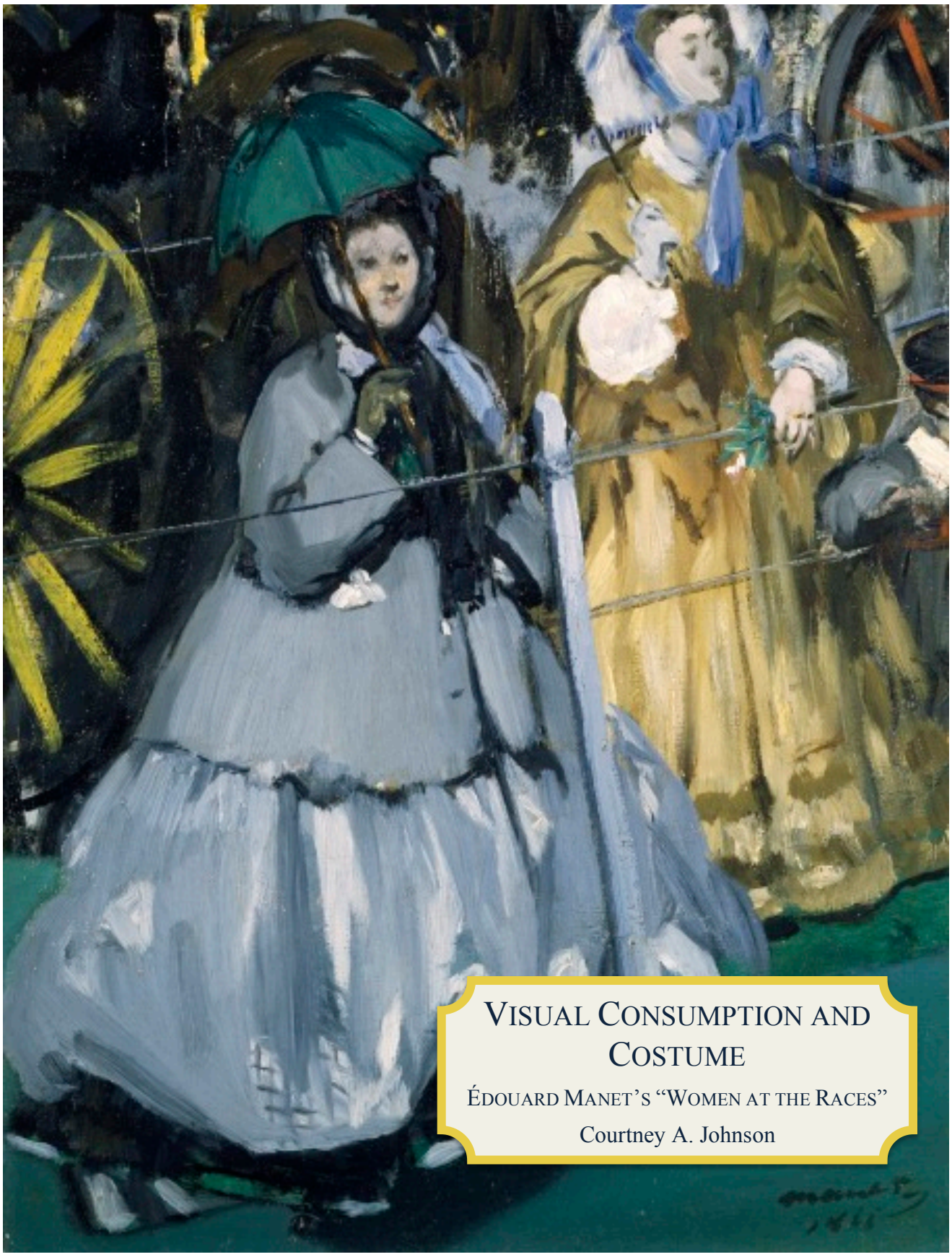

Visual Consumption and Costume

Édouard Manet's "Women at the Races"

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December 8, 2015

Édouard Manet was born in Paris on 29 January 1832, four days after his father Auguste was named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor.[1] Raised in his familial *hôtel particulier* on the rue Bonaparte, Manet's upbringing was a privileged one, cushioned by the upper-class lifestyle of his politically connected family. A consummate gentleman, Manet had nothing of the stereotypical starving artist about him – meticulously dressed, frock coat and top hat clad, the painter possessed both the snobbishness of a socialite and the elegance of a dandy.[2] Well-versed in the mores of the chic circles he would depict in his work, Manet assumed the guise of an amiable *boulevardier*. As his lifelong friend and future Minister of Culture Antonin Proust once said, "One was conscious of his breeding … few men can have been as seductive as he was. Paris has never produced such a *flâneur*, let alone a *flâneur* to such good purpose."[3]

Despite the aura of conformity and upper class restraint that accompanied Manet's attire and persona, as an artist he deliberately placed himself outside of the realm of his social peers, assuming the guise of an interloper, the *flâneur* whose objection to bourgeoisie values

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[1] Krell, Alan. ""But What a Scourge to Society Is a Realist Painter"" In *Manet*, 10-11. New York, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1996.
[2] Néret, Gilles. "A Wolf in the Spanish Sheepfold." In *Édouard Manet*. Los Angeles, California: Taschen GmbH, 2008.
[3] Proust, Antonin. *Édouard Manet: Souvenirs*. Caen: L'Échoppe, 1913. 36. On the gendering of the *flâneur*, see Wollf, Janet. "The Invisible Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity." In *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, edited by Andrew Benjamin. London: Routledge, 1989. See also Tester, Keith. *The Flâneur*. London: Routledge, 1994.

was "intellectual, a question of attitude rather than dress."[4] Situated as both a social insider and artistic outsider, Manet was perfectly positioned to take up the mantle of Charles Baudelaire's call for a truly modern art – an expression of the contemporary urban experience that was unfolding in Paris in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the Baudelarian conception, the *flâneur* was a man about town, who ambled in pursuit of fragmentary glances of modern life, absorbing the socio-visual culture of the city. In his incitement to "The Painter of Modern Life," the role of the artist was to translate these glimpses to the canvas, "distilling the eternal from the transitory," to transform life's fleeting reality into artistic permanence.[5] One of the most essential elements of Baudelaire's perception of modernity was the role of the social gaze – how people choose to present themselves and perceive others in the depersonalized, artificial context of metropolitan life and convention.[6]

In realizing Baudelaire's call for depictions of the monumentality of urban life, Manet and his ilk sought out the spectacle of Parisian leisure as artistic subject: the urbane preoccupations of the bourgeoisie, with all the pretense and theatricality those pursuits encompassed. The racetracks at Longchamps provided an ideal setting for this. It was during the Second Empire that these splendid racecourses in the Bois de Boulogne were finished, making it easy for residents of the fashionable west side of Paris to go to the races. "Le Jockey-Club," the prestigious equestrian society that established the track, encompassed a

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[4] Sturgis, Alexander. *Rebels and Martyrs: The Image of the Artist in the Nineteenth Century*. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2006.
[5] Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays.* Translated by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon, 1964.
[6] On the Baudelarian conception of modern women, see, "Life on the Surface: Woman as Aesthetic Spectacle." In *Women in Impressionism: From Mythical Feminine to Modern Woman*, edited by Sidsel Maria Søndergaard. Milan: Skira Editora S.p.A., 2006.

cross section of France's new breed of entrepreneurial, political, and financial elites.[7] As such, Longchamps presented the opportunity to not only capture to speed and thrill of the horses themselves, but also the spectacle and pageantry of fashionable society. The Grand Prix de Paris, which was founded in 1863, was the annual nexus of metropolitan style.[8] A daylong affair, it attracted thousands of spectators, who attended to witness the parade of elegant attire and society as much as for the race itself. It was a place to see and be seen, the ideal subject for the modern *flâneur*.

By 1863, Manet had been drawn to Longchamps in pursuit of recording the fashionable spectacle there, and in that year the latter began a massive canvas entitled *Aspects of a Racecourse in the Bois de Boulogne*. It is clear from the extant evidence that Manet never exhibited, and likely never completed, the painting, though it is recorded in detail by a well-finished 1864 watercolor and gouache work currently held by the Harvard University Art Museum. The original canvas was evidently cropped into several sections, two of which survive.[9] One of these, a fragment featuring a pair of female spectators viewing from the sidelines, currently resides at the Cincinnati Art Musum as "Women at the Races." This work, though small and sketch-like, characterizes Manet's pursuit and rejection of Baudelarian representation of the spectacle of modern society, as realized through the utilization of characterizational costume and reciprocal *flânerie*.

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[7] Herbert, Robert. "Chapter Five: Parks, Racetracks, and Gardens." In *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, 152-160. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1991.

[8] Brevik-Zender, Heidi. "Tracking Fashions: Risking It All at the Hippodrome De Longchamp." In *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007*, edited by John Potvin. New York, New York: Routledge, 2009.

[9] For a history of the original canvas, see, Brettell, Richard. *French Salon Artists*. Chicago, Illinois: Art Institute of Chicago, 1987. 63-64.

In the piece, two women are pressed against a wiry barrier, presumably observing a race in progress. Clad in cumbrous, weighty attire, their costumes dominate the frame and provide almost the entirety of their characterization. The foreground figure is attired in bulbous tiers of steely-toned petticoats, a short coat restricting the volume of her capacious skirts while guarding her against the chill of autumn or spring. A comically small parasol floats above her cumulonimbic form, its hue mirroring the hunter green grassy plane she stands upon. Her neighbor wears shades of mustard and buttery gold, an ungloved hand gripping the fence with a flower while she strains her neck to observe the horses presumably cantering along the track. The faces of both are swaddled in thick scarves, binding their hats and cossetting them against the cold, though their features are executed with minimalistic detail.

Manet's brushwork here is definitively liberal and dramatically looser than much of his work of the same era, such as *Olympia*, also of 1865. Painted in broad strokes, volume is suggested here by color, not traditional variations of tint and shade. Sudden transitions of hue give shape to his figures, rather than modulations of tone to suggest depth. Traditional perspective is given only cursory attention, with space indicated by overlapping rather than any conservative linear cues, imbuing the work with a sense of flattened stillness – rather than the dynamic play of motion and space one would expect from a depiction of the racetracks. Additionally, little focus is directed towards the illusion of surface texture – an area in which the artist typically excelled. A flattened plane of blue-green suggests the grassy foundation on which the spectators stand, but no shading or tonal variation remotely suggests the texture underfoot. If not for positional context, the viewer would be entirely unable to even differentiate between the surface consistency of the blades of grass and the silken umbrella the

main figure holds aloft. Utilizing a restraint palette, Manet's choice of pigment is typical of the artist – creams, blacks, and silvers punctuated by vibrant touches of lemon and cloudy blue.[10] The formalistic qualities and textures of the shades themselves are given more attention that the evocation of figural reality. Mere daubs of black and brown demarcate their eyes, their portrayal devoid of any sort of portrait-like specificity – suggesting the Impressionistic tendencies Manet would lean towards in his later years. Their faces are almost masklike – while their directional gazes are perceptible, not real emotion or distinguishing features are discernible.

Closely cropped as to exclude any reference to the horses or racers themselves, the two women are set against a dense background of the elegant carriages often paraded at the Bois du Boulogne. While citrusy yellow and clementine spokes evoke the glossy wheels and trim of these status-suggestive vehicles, they are mostly illustrated in terms of shadowy black smudges. This charcoal-like exterior delineation is continued in the outlines of the foreground woman's skirts, their density suggested though thick strokes of black. This is additionally suggestive of his six-year apprenticeship in the studio of Thomas Couture, an academic painter who often built layers of color off of a dark background obtained through the mixture of bitumen and cobalt – though Manet rejected that practice in favor of the use of local color, the smudgy outlines here are evidence of the continued impact of that practice on his style, and a hallmark of his work.[11]

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[10] For more discussion of Manet's frequent color choices, see, Shone, Richard. *Manet*. New York, New York: Park South Books, 1985.
[11] Neret, Gilles. *Édouard Manet*. Los Angeles, California: Taschen GmbH, 2008. 14-15.

In fact, despite the small scale of the work, and focus on only two subjects, the atmosphere of "Women at the Races" evokes a sense of crowdedness, a suggestion of urban density. Boxed in by both the bulk of the carriages and the delineation of the fence, the painting imbues the viewer with the sense of being tightly packed in by one's surroundings, by the bulk of metropolitans surrounded them. In fact, were it not for the mossy green ground plane and the thin barrier separating the spectators from the racetrack, it would be reasonable to construe this as an city scene. The women here appear as likely to be exiting Le Bon Marché as there are to be observing a steeplechase, their attire implying a sense of generalized bourgeoisie chic more than any locational specificity.

Manet's characterization of the modern woman in terms of her attire inititially appears entirely in line with Baudelaire's call to contemporary painters. Fashionable attire, in his eyes, declared an alignment with modernity – an affiliation with the visual culture he believed defined the era. In "The Painter of Modern Life," the writer declared:

> "No doubt Woman is sometimes a light, a glance, an invitation to happiness, sometime just a word; but above all she is a general harmony, not only in her bearing and the way in which she moves and walks, but also in the muslins, the gauzes, the vast iridescent clouds of stuff in which she envelops herself, and that are, as it were, the attributes and the pedestal of her divinity; in the metal and the mineral which twist and turn around her arms and her neck, adding their sparks to the fire of her glance, or gently whispering at her ears. What poet, in sitting down to paint the pleasure caused by the sight of a beautiful woman, would venture to separate her from her costume?"

In the eyes of Baudelaire, the elegant and powdered woman was a defining aspect of modernity. However, in his eyes the conception of the female goes no further than her wardrobe – the contemporary lady is not assigned the philosophical duties of the *flâneur*, and her participation in the modern-day city is a purely visual one. In Baudelaire's conception, the woman is to exist as an *objet d'art*, and little more. As he once put it, "She is a kind of idol, stupid perhaps, but dazzling and bewitching."[12]

At first glance, in Manet's representation of the women at Longchamps, his philosophy appears to extend no further than that of Baudelaire. These women are not granted full facial rendering, let alone the evocation of personality. Swamped by their massive costume, the ladies appear to be a superficial ornamentation of Longchamp's modern spectacle, a visual feast for the patrons of the racetrack to consume.

However, upon further observation, and comparison with the Harvard watercolor and gouache preliminary study, one realizes that we, the viewer, do not merely voyeuristically perceive a woman passively consuming the spectacle of the race. In fact, upon comparison with the cropped race, we realize that the foreground woman herself has become a *flâneuse*, and is actively engaging with the visual spectacle surrounding her, rather than merely existing as an object for the consumption of the male gaze.

This is the argument behind Heidi Brevik-Zender's "Tracking Fashion: Risking It All at the Hippodrome de Longchamps," one of the few extended art historical evaluations of

[12] Baudelaire, Charles. *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays.* Translated by Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon, 1964. 30.

"Women at the Races."[13] In this evaluation, Brevik-Zender details the fashionable pomp and circumstance of the Bois du Boulogne, and its transformation from an outlet of equestrian entertainment to a playground of the elite and the ideal target of the *flâneur.* However, contesting the politics of the male as viewer of the modern female, she notes the active participation of the female in the politics of the gaze in Manet's Longchamps works, stating of the central female figure, "She is not focused on the approaching racehorses but later on someone or something on the opposite side of the track, distracted by a sight so compelling as to turn her attention from the din of the horses' pounding hooves."[14] In Brevik-Zender's view, the female as an object of consumption is transformed into an empowered consumer herself through her active engagement with the Baudelarian conception of *flânerie.*

In his illusionistically reductive representation of the fashionable female, I believe Manet is problematizing Baudelaire's reductive view of the modern female as an object of consumption. In amplifying and overstating the centrality of the female costume to our view of the central figure, Manet seems to be both asserting and rejecting an exaggeratedly stereotyped femininity. The simplification of the female representation in "Women at the Races" is so extreme as to appear satiric, a denouncement of Baudelaire's simplified perspective.

While Manet did in some regards take up the invocation of Baudelaire's "Painter of Modern Life" in his pursuit of contemporary subject matter, it was never enough for him to merely recreate the reality of the modern urban lifetstyle. From *The Old Musician* to *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe* to *Olympia*, for Manet art making was never as simple as the replication of visual

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[13] Brevik-Zender, Heidi. "Tracking Fashions: Risking It All at the Hippodrome De Longchamp." In *The Places and Spaces of Fashion, 1800-2007*, edited by John Potvin. New York, New York: Routledge, 2009.
[14] Ibid.

phenomena. In the works of Manet, it is clear that art is meant as more than a mere record of reality – be it a social commentary or a refute of the methods of academic classicism. As often is the case with this artist, an unequivocal reading is impossible. But, by exaggeration and representation of the female and her costume, referencing the voyeuristic conventions of the race at Longchamps, and engaging the female figure in the previously exclusionary practice of *flânerie*, I believe that in "Women at the Races" Édouard Manet goes beyond the call of simple representation of modern spectacle to subvert the Baudelarian conception of woman as an object of visual consumption.

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