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## MYSTERY AND MANET IN "BOULOGNE SUR MER"

Manet through his revolutionary new style of painting renounced social myths and stylistic codes used by preceding traditional artists, thereby creating a perceptual mystery for the non-critical viewer. The conceptual and stylistic innovations that emerged from Manet's rebellion created a new visual sign for his contemporary viewers - a sign that is naturalistic in conception, capturing the distilled essence of a moment. Manet's new visual sign required the viewer to interact with artwork unhindered by anecdotes, conventions, or preconceived cultural myths. "Boulogne Sur Mer", painted in oil in 1869, is not obviously socio-revolutionary as is Manet's "Olympia" or "Un Dejeuner Sur l'Herbe", but clearly shows his technical and stylistic innovations. The painting, however, is conceptually innovative in that Manet creates a mood of detachment and alienation peculiar to modernist artistic expression; it impartially records his vision of modern actuality, creating a non-idyllic representation of the moment as he sees it.

In contrast to Manet's socio-political rebelliousness and his virtuosity in stylistic innovations, Manet aspired to gain the official respect of

the art critics of his time; and longed to be recognized as a master in the tradition arena:

"The salon is the real field of battle. It is there that one must take one's measure" (1)

The mystery of Manet's dual intentions as an artist are illuminated by this comment. He chose the established critics as his ultimate audience even after having abandoned traditional academia to pursue his personal vision and working style, notable in his rejection of the curriculum at L'Ecole des Beaux Arts and with his teacher Couture. Manet in this respect bought into a myth defined by traditional academia, a myth composed of archaic criteria for validating artists as worthy or unsuccessful, or in Manet's instance, void of aesthetic value and disrespectful of the viewer.

However strong his need for traditional validation, Manet was successful in his struggle to synthesize and transform old and new elements of visual representation. Manet's modern style synthesized elements from many influences, most notably Courbet, but also Japanese prints, Spanish and Venetian masters (such as Velasquez and Titian), photography, Hals, and modern engravings. Baudelaire perceived Manet's representation as quintessentially modern, comparing his perception to the Dandy, the "Peintre de la Vie modern", the anonymous personality who strolls at the fringe of the crowd objectively looking in. In Manet's models he saw the "character of the Dandy's beauty... the coldness of the gaze, the outward expression of an unshakeable resolution not to be moved" (2) The qualities of vacancy

of expression and motionlessness have also been attributed to the influence of the impartial eye of the camera on Manet's work.

Unfortunately, Manet's new expression only miscommunicated to the majority of his contemporaries: some of the critics dubbed his work as blatantly mediocre, vulgar, and devoid of all quality. He was criticized as using excessively vivid color, for having lack of conviction and sincerity, and that the characters seemed "to be absent, having no solidity of expression" (3). The average viewer or critic of Manet's time failed to recognize these qualities as being a valid expression or perception of modern reality, so mystified they were by the lack of convention in Manet's style.

My first sensation upon viewing "Boulogne Sur Mer" was of calm and silence, but as I studied for a few more moments my reaction became more austere, more of an effect of detachment and alienation: detachment of the characters from each other, the painter from the characters, and my detachment as a viewer from the characters. Did Manet intend for the subjects to convey the meaning of his sign, or did he create them as mere decorations? Manet represents the scene as a silent surveyor, detached from and looking down on a scene of non-descript faces. I also perceived time depicted as a duality:

the sketchy, spontaneous gestures of clothing and smoke in the wind seem to be alive in the moment, yet the painting as a whole evokes a feeling of stagnancy, as if the subjects froze in action for a very long photographic exposure. The subdued and simple clarity of expression in

the painting is disturbed by the heavily ornate, gilded frame, which

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speaks of the tradition that ruled the critics' and the audiences' perceptions during Manet's day. A more simple or modern frame would have complimented the ambiguity of the subjects' personas and the flatness of the landscape as rendered, making it even less accessible to the non-critical viewer, and might even give the painting more of a surreal quality.

It is worth noting that shortly before Manet painted "Boulogne Sur Mer", his one man show at the "Salon" in 1867 was attacked so viciously by the critics that he resorted to painting only friends and family (4). Perhaps this also explains the non-controversial nature of his subject matter in 1869: still lifes and beach scenes. However, the quality of his craftsmanship and the presence of his naturalistic and gestural technique remains as testimony to his convictions in representing his vision in a non-academic and unidyllic manner.

The composition in "Boulogne Sur Mer" is somewhat unbalanced and random, like a photograph cropped without concern for focal point or conscientious arrangement. The figures weigh heavily in the lower right corner; both the woman with the umbrella and the horse are sliced by the canvas in mid-gesture. A horse and cart emerges haphazardly from the edge of the waves on the left side of the painting. Without a cohesive design structure or formal arrangement, Manet's composition of this traditional subject (people on the beach) seems almost primitive or naive in its naturalistic representation of the moment. In this way, Manet succeeds in rejecting academic tradition and dispells the myth of the human being as the most omnipotent or glorious

creature on the earth. The people are mere patterns on the beach, portrayed with as much importance as the landscape.

The energy of the painting flows in whirlwinds, mimicking in a naturalistic way the conflicting gusts of wind at the beach. Each subject or group of subjects is isolated within an insular, concentric circle, due to the grouping of subjects and the direction of their gestures (diagram #3). Although they are close in proximity, they do not interact, much like strangers on a crowded street corner. The rendering of their faces as flat surfaces with smudges for features create a sense of vacancy or anonymity, distancing or even mystifying the viewer. A more expressive quality of the models, however, lies in the gesture of their clothing - Manet's vision is truly modernistic in that he has rejected another myth: the glorified representation of the nude and the portrait. Instead, of borrowing cheap symbols and clichés, Manet metonymically attributes expressive qualities to the plain clothes of the present day. In this painting, Manet introduces a thoroughly modern form of expression: metonymy. The lone man covered by the umbrella faces away from the viewer, yet he seems to stand in intense enthrallment. The clothing of the solitary woman in white twists away from the sea as if escaping a spell, and the seated woman in yellow and black at the center of the oceanfront is absorbed inwardly, concealed by her garments.

The subjects of the painting are further objectified by the strange "aerial" perspective of the painting; Manet distances himself by looking down from a nearby but somewhat lofty point. He creates this

perspective by placing the focal point of the light source at the center of the beach and of the ocean (diagram #2), whereas shadows contour the four corners of the painting and the horizons of the sand and ocean. His perspective is also strange in its duality; both the ocean and the beach are contoured roundly; the ocean does not recede in the distance but is as well-defined as the beach. The characters on the beach are also subject to this erratic scale - Manet does not adhere to a formula for defining characters in the foreground with greater scale or definition than those receding into the distance. This abandonment of tradition perspective flattens the canvas; Manet was the pioneer of this modern perspective, the emphasis of the literal canvas.

Also contributing to Manet's innovative modern vision is the drastic reduction of half-tones: colors are used in relatively pure swatches, (tans, blacks, grays, whites, blues), with minimal definition of contour to create the figures. The shapes are more structural than they are descriptive, detail is all but eliminated, and forms are swiftly outlined rather than contoured. The flat black shapes puncturing the canvas are especially indicative of Manet's new vision; a technique he synthesized from Japanese prints. Although the black shapes do not create a cohesive design pattern in this composition, Manet did create visually pleasing designs in other of his paintings, notably "Le Fifre" of 1966. Emile Zola spoke of this work as "resembling an outfitters sign board... the boy's uniform has been treated with the simplicity of a popular print" (5). Perhaps with these flat patches of color and heavy outlining Manet can be seen as one of the innovators of popular design elements, or "posterization" in the Western tradition of oil painting.

The shimmering play of light on the scene is impartial, non-central, and the palette is luminous and translucent, qualities which drastically influenced the Impressionists. His brush strokes are sketchy, gestural, implying the description of a subject at one moment suspended in time, rather than a solid stance fixed in permanence. This quality can be seen in the rendering of the smoke from the distant ship and in the yellow and white clothing of the two women seated in mid-foreground to the left of the man standing alone. The spontaneity of light and gesture as rendered capture the essence of the moment, yet the quality of the scene as a whole emanates a stillness, almost a static quality. Perhaps this is an effect of the interaction between the shimmering light and sketchy gestures interacting with the solid, immovable flat swatches of black. With these stylistic, perceptual and conceptual innovations, Manet has rejected the dark palette, solidity of figures, overwrought detail, and self-consciousness, interpretive or moralizing depiction of subject matter that belong to the traditional school. With these innovations, Manet decreased the visual and emotional accessibility of his art, mystifying most of his audience.

In rejecting the formal qualities of the old school and searching for the true, natural qualities of modern life, Manet dispelled the traditional mystification or idealization of his subject matter. His impartiality toward his subjects, however, discountenanced the average viewer of the time; they were offended by Manet's detached portrayal of people and by his refusal to make his art accessible through conventions.

Manet himself, though, was caught in a perceptual myth - the desire for artistic validation by the critics of his time.

Today "Boulogne Sur Mer" appears dated and formal, directly portraying 19th Century life. At first glance, the painting could even be imagined to have hung in a 19th Century parlor. Instead of using the figures almost as objectified patterns, an intensified emotional representation of the two weary mothers in the foreground could have made a revolutionary feminist statement, as he did in "Olympia". If Manet had not been so preoccupied with "Salon" approval, perhaps his parlor-safe subdued colors during this period of seascapes would have been charged with the brilliancy and starkness as in "Le Fifre". Also, Manet could have introduced subtle hints of the vernacular: a petticoat whisked above-ankle by the wind, or children gleefully dirtying themselves with sand and surf. Any of these formal or emotional alterations would have shaken the stiff formality that rules the mood of the painting - the formality and etiquette that make this painting appropriate for the 19th Century parlor. Perhaps if he had not been mystified by the desire to please his viewers, this painting would present a more timeless commentary on modern issues such as alienation within modern, industrialized society, the vernacular and ordinary as valid subject matter, radical changes in form, and lack of critical recognition as an innovative, controversial artist. The final mystery to consider is that of the rift between the artist's intent in representing his or her perception, and what is communicated to the viewer: Manet as both revolutionary traditionalist has created mystery for the well read viewer in his duality of intent.

*very complete and ... fun!*

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## FOOTNOTES

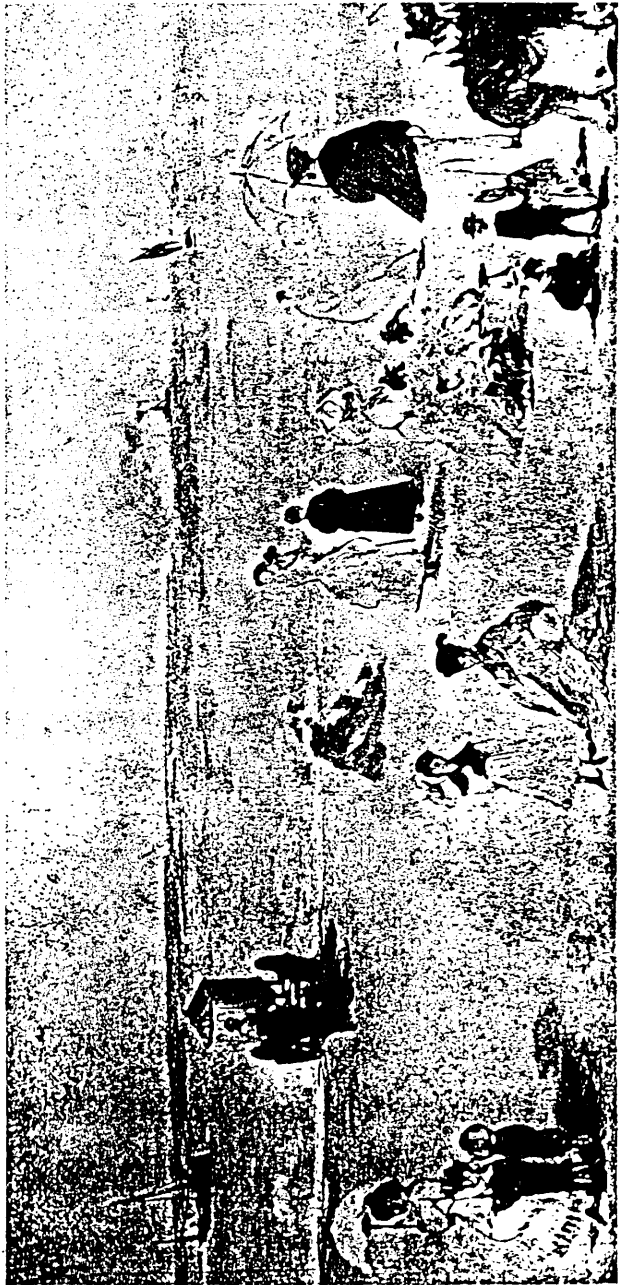
1. Richardson, p. 5
2. Richardson, p. 16.
3. Ray, p. 27
4. Richardson, p. 25
5. ibid.

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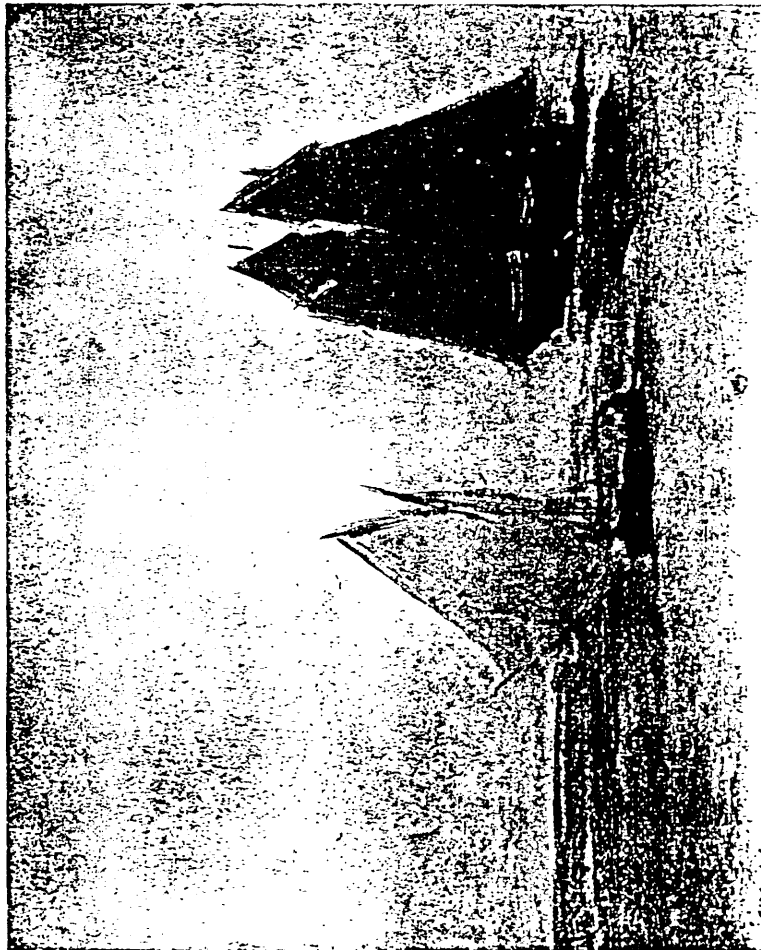
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Boulogne sur Mer, EDOUARD, ANET, 1869

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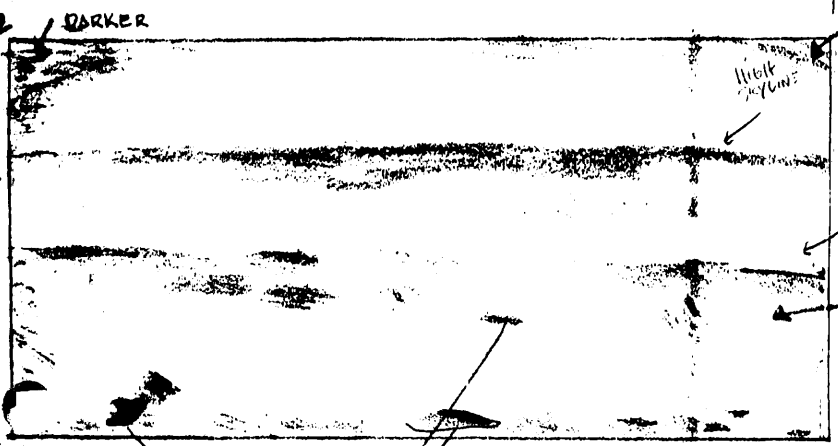
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(1)



#1

USING FLAT BLACK SHAPES  
AS AN ELEMENT - AS A DESIGN/COMPOSITIONAL  
ELEMENT?  
RANDOM PATTERN  
LEAVES IN THE WIND



DARKER

#2

SERIAL, "GOLDEN" PERSPECTIVE: BEACH DROPS &  
SKY DARKER!  
DISTANCES PATTERN  
OBJECTIFIED SUBJECTS

BEACH

FLATTENS PAINTING: SEA IS CON-  
HIGH HOK.



#3 COMPOSITION

A. DIVERSITY OF SUBJECT MATTER;  
B. COMPOSITION UNPLANNED: GRAVITY SEEMS TO  
TO LOWER RT.

WOMAN HIDDEN + CROPPED

HORSE CROPPED

C. DIRECTIONAL FLOW OF COMPOSITION: ① MANY  
NATURALS

② CHARACTERS ARE  
DIRECTIONAL



#4 COMPOSITION

CHARACTERS INSULATED WITHIN SEPARATE



①



②



③



④

