

The Problem in Edgar Degas: Images of Women and Modernity

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This article examines the sexual politics of modernity in the work of Edgar Degas by showing how his series of dance pictures produced in the 1870s and 1880s suggest a stylistic and thematic relationship between the discourse of modernity and the issue of femininity. In particular, I will discuss how Degas developed an aesthetic style which capitalised upon the fragmentary, the repetitive and the contrapuntal moment—stylistic conceits which were evocative of the discourse of modernity—in order to expatiate on his thematic obsession with the clandestine prostitute. Thus this article will demonstrate how Degas hit upon both a style and a subject whose themes and qualities were understood to correspond equally to the issues of modernity and femininity, which dovetailed seamlessly in his *oeuvre* in order to produce a phallogocentric aesthetic vision of the relationship between these two terms. In so doing, I will show how the coincidence between style and subject in Degas' *oeuvre*—between an avant-garde visual technique and the image of the clandestine prostitute—simply served to affirm the strong connection between avant-garde definitions of modernity and the depiction of working-class women as sexualised and commodified beings.

While the thematic and stylistic concerns of Impressionist art have been understood in modernist art criticism to represent a straightforward and truthful reportage of modern life in *fin de siècle* Paris, an analysis of Degas' *oeuvre* actually dispels that myth. Demonstrating the well-planned compositional complexity of his work reveals the extent to which his portrayals of working-class women, often understood to be clandestine prostitutes, were deliberate and, more importantly, *constructed* depictions of the essential character of the modern subject. Thus, Degas' depictions of ballet dancers and the dance world do not necessarily reflect an actual reality, but more often reflect his own personal vision of that world and its inhabitants.

Moreover, in seeking to call attention to the phallogocentrically contrived nature of Degas' vision of the relationship between femininity and modernity, I mean not only to discard certain myths about Impressionist art, but more crucially to reveal the way in which

patriarchy functions to cover over the deliberate consciousness of such depictions by portraying them as merely truthful and straightforward reflections of 'reality'. Thus, one of the final points that this article will make is that the apparent ease with which we assimilate Degas' images today is due not merely to the distance in time—which may have dulled their ability to shock and provoke—but more to the ability of patriarchal discourse to bridge the gap between artistic facture and aesthetic representation and, as a result, to paper over any of the potential cracks in Degas' representation of the relationship between modernity and femininity. In other words, this article questions the basis of the relationship between modernity and femininity and takes to task the assumption that Degas' thematic preoccupation with modernity, as articulated in his depictions of working-class women, is simply a reflection of life as it was in *fin de siècle* Paris.

In order to achieve these goals, I will first discuss the relationship between Degas' style and thematics in his work and how contemporary critics viewed his work in order to highlight his problematic position within Impressionism and to debunk some of the widely held myths surrounding Degas' relationship to this cannon. The aim of this section is to call attention to the deliberate and well-planned compositional complexity of Degas' canvases, which is at odds with the Impressionist technique of the *coupe d'oeil* or 'modern life viewed in the glimpse', in order to preface my remarks on the way in which Degas engineers a relationship between the discourse of modernity and femininity in his dance pictures. Next, I include a short discussion of the practice of *réglementation*, or 'tolerated' prostitution, in order to provide the historical and social background surrounding the subject matter in Degas' dance pictures. Finally, I will engage in a detailed analysis of the relationship between Degas' compositional technique and his subject matter of young working-class women in order to demonstrate the way in which Degas capitalises upon the fear and fascination with clandestine prostitution which enabled him to comment upon the discourse of modernity in *fin de siècle* Paris.

The Critics and the *Coulisses*

In the immensely popular works—the dance pictures from the late 1870s to the end of the 1800s—which portrayed the social and professional demands of the ballet world, Degas found an apt metaphor for the depiction of modern life with all its complexities, nuances, contradictions and occasionally dire consequences. It was a world

whose depiction and qualities would eventually become synonymous with Degas' *oeuvre*: the fleeting moment of a stage bow; the restricted views of limbs cut by curtains and scenery sets; and the foreshortened perspective of scenes from oblique angles. In addition to being cognoscible elements of his pictorial style, however, Degas' non-centralised compositions, his habit of cutting off figures by the frame and his transformation of typically private moments into public ones, enhanced the viewer's perceived sense of immediacy, of 'modern life viewed in the glimpse' in the guise of the hastily made *impression*, and thus bestowed upon his *oeuvre* the reputation of representing the apotheosis of Impressionist style.

Yet despite Degas' historical association with Impressionism, having exhibited in seven of the eight Impressionist exhibitions in the years 1874–1886, it is difficult to associate Degas unreservedly with the Impressionist project.¹ Reviewing the third Impressionist exhibition, Paul Mantz wrote:

It is hard to understand exactly why Edgar Degas categorised himself as an Impressionist. He has a distinct personality and stands apart from the group of so-called innovators ... Proximity does not create kinship. Degas may be exhibiting near Pissarro and Sisley, Cézanne and Claude Monet, but he does not belong to the family. He is an observer, a historian perhaps.²

Indeed, contemporary critics immediately recognised that his careful draughtsmanship and composition, his renowned abhorrence of nature³ and his obsession with all things artificial—especially lighting—were antithetical to the freely drawn sketches, the clear prismatic colours and the *plein-air* subjects of his Impressionist co-exhibitors at the Salon des Indépendants.⁴

Thus while the fragmentation and irresolution of narrative gave many of Degas' works the guise of the fleeting *impression*, the repetition and seriality of these works ultimately negated such assumptions. Indeed, unlike the typical nineteenth-century jeremiads criticising Impressionist painters for producing brief sketches and fragments, for not following through or working their pictures enough, in the case of Degas, critics connected his inability to produce a cohesive narrative with his inability to expatiate on different subjects. Degas was already notorious for repetition by the late 1870s, and standard rhetoric had it that his single-minded obsession with a few select themes taken from the modern urban experience of *fin de siècle* Parisian life was somehow connected with his penchant for depicting scenes in *media res*, furnishing them perforce with a modern sensibility of ephemeral experience. Thus

the irresolution and fragmentary nature of his work was said to stem from the distortions of his insistence on a single world and single phenomenon. On the other hand, Degas' preoccupation with just a few themes was difficult to comprehend, for his subjects seemed odd and unimportant and many nineteenth-century critics suspected that his concerns were trivial. Though Degas painted the modern markers of *fin de siècle* Parisian life—the street cafés, the Opéra, the *café-concerts*—he almost never painted them *in situ*, preferring to use paid models in the secluded and controlled atmosphere of his studio. Working in his studio allowed Degas the luxury of producing works from detailed sketches whose apparent casualness and spontaneity belied a well-planned compositional complexity. These were not, therefore, paintings of transient observations, but rather typical of a carefully worked project on the representation of modernity in the nineteenth century. As a result, one may really say that appearances can be deceptive in viewing Degas' canvases and one must remember that just because his pictures may seem fragmented and haphazard does not mean that they do not convey a cohesive thesis concerning the modern subject. Indeed, for certain ideological assumptions contained in his works, this fragmentation and haphazardness is often presumed necessary for the subject's composition.

The deception that much of Degas' *oeuvre* may play at our expense, however, is entirely a contemporary foible. For the artistic controls that lay beneath this specious spontaneity were at first so apparent that his works upset most nineteenth-century viewers who were looking for the familiar modes of pictorial organisation. In the paintings by Degas, nineteenth-century viewers found the fragmented limbs, the restrictive and partial views, the flattened perspective and his private mode of viewing his subject confusing, if not alienating. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the bright palette and the immediacy of Degas' work had won over the general public, and by the early twentieth century it had become one of the most 'natural' means of rendering the modern world visible. At that point, having been widely accepted and incorporated in the general public's aesthetic ken, Degas' underlying conventions no longer seemed obtrusive. On the contrary, earlier art now seemed old-fashioned and unnatural. It was especially abstract art that, by comparison, made Degas' work seem to be the most 'truthful' way of representing the world, so much so that vanguard artists and critics believed that he had merely produced simple imitations of the exterior world. Felix Fénéon called Degas' particular way of viewing his subject 'infallible cinema ... The modern expressed'.

presaging a century before perhaps the reasons why Degas' work seems so modern and does not confuse nor alienate us in the same way as it did its first viewers.⁵ For Degas' idiosyncratic means of viewing a subject, the frequent compression of foreground and background within a single frame, is in many ways a cinematic vision, in other words, a means of viewing the world that has become commonplace in our own *fin de siècle* aesthetic. This is perhaps one of the reasons why we must make an effort to recover the novelty with which contemporary viewers saw Degas' paintings if we are to understand how his work's apparent spontaneity and casualness was given conscious artistic shape.

And yet, recourse to such a limited explanation regarding the 'modernity' of Degas' works will inevitably bankrupt any investigation into the relationship between their facture and representation. Of course any aesthetic vision—cinematic or otherwise—is always a constructed one and carries with it inherent ideological assumptions which, in the case of Degas, often represented specific nineteenth-century ideals and/or experiences about modernity and its relationship to the differences in class and gender, the working-class and the feminine in particular. Hence, the use of the adjectives 'natural' and 'truthful' in order to describe Degas' particular brand of Impressionism should immediately alert us to the potential pitfalls of such metaphysical reductionism. Unpacking these suppositions, however, flies in the face of modernist interpretative theory which, in attempting to historicise the trajectory of modern art, conceived of the relationship between facture and representation as a mutually empowering one. Clement Greenberg—that shibboleth of modernist art criticism—argued in 1949 that:

the paradox in the evolution of French painting from Courbet to Cézanne is how it was brought to the verge of abstraction in and by its very effort *to transcribe visual experience with ever greater fidelity*. Such fidelity was supposed, by the Impressionists, to create the values of pictorial art itself. *The truth of nature and the truth, or success, of art were held not only to accord with, but to enhance one another.*⁶

In such modernist accounts 'documentary' accuracy and pictorial modernity were seen to appear simultaneously and to signpost the best aspects of Impressionist art. Of course it is patently clear in today's postmodern world that the transcription of visual experience can never be entirely 'faithful', nor can it reveal the 'truth of nature and the truth ... of art', for such transcriptions always carry with them their own subjective and partial truths. And yet it is striking the degree to which Degas' own depiction of *fin de siècle* Paris and the women who

inhabited it is taken for truth today and the ease with which such depictions have been assimilated into contemporary mainstream culture. Surely beneath the surface of such assimilations there lies an unquestioned ideological need to bridge the gap between artistic facture and aesthetic representation. Indeed, such is the effect of patriarchal ideology today, in its deft concealment of the potential cracks in Degas' *fin de siècle* depictions of women and modernity. My account, however, will attempt to avoid such potential pitfalls in that it calls attention to these various 'untruths' and 'cracks' in Degas' works. In so doing, this article argues that 'truth' and 'nature' in Degas' *oeuvre* were not necessarily objective aesthetic values when applied to nineteenth-century concepts of modernity and femininity.

Throughout this article, therefore, I will try to relate Degas' pictorial technique to a particular painting's subject matter. In other words, I will constantly be asking the question: what is the relationship between material execution and ideological content? In Degas' aesthetic project, the telling and representing of modernity required not only a stylistic medium, for example, fragmentation, repetition and suspension of narrative, but a subject as well and here he frequently chose female sexuality—especially working-class prostitutional sexuality—as his ideal trope of modern experience. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that my analysis of Degas' work and its relation to the feminine has as much to do with the material execution of his paintings as with their subject matter and ideological content.

Clandestine Prostitution and the *Coulisses*

Before embarking on analysis of Degas' dance pictures of the 1870s and 1880s, I would like to preface my discussion with a brief analysis of the practice of *réglementation*, or tolerated prostitution, which was developed in France during the period under discussion. Although an exhaustive historical and social analysis of *réglementation* is not appropriate for my analysis, a brief outline of the most general details would benefit the reader and provide a more nuanced understanding of the social conditions and attitudes related to prostitution at the time of Degas' production of the dance pictures.

As I stated above, prostitution was actually 'tolerated' in France throughout the second half of the nineteenth century under a system that became known as *réglementation*—a word that my French dictionary translates as 'strict regulation by system', which pithily describes the supervised prostitution at the hands of its nineteenth-

century French officials. First delineated by Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet, 'the man of Paris drains and refuse dumps',⁷ *réglementation* was ostensibly invented in order to control the spread of venereal disease by subjecting registered prostitutes to periodic health checks. In the minds of nineteenth-century regulationists, the system also ensured the availability of prostitutes with whom men could satisfy their libidinal pleasures while simultaneously controlling and sanitising these needs as well. And although nineteenth-century syphilophobia operated as a convenient excuse for *réglementation*, in reality the implementation of tolerated prostitution reflected the attempt to stem the threat of sexual and social contagion imagined in the prostituted body.

Under the system of *réglementation*, prostitutes were divided into two major categories, *filles soumises* and *filles insoumises*, that is, registered and unregistered prostitutes.⁸ Registered prostitutes were then subsequently divided into two more categories: those who were *filles en cartes* and those who were *filles en maison*. The *filles en cartes* were autonomous prostitutes who solicited independently from the *maisons de tolérances*, the strictly regulated and supervised brothel houses. They were obliged to carry their registration cards at all times which contained such pertinent information as identity, date of registration and the date of their most recent health check for venereal disease. The *filles en maison*, however, operated within the parameters of a brothel where they were required to live. They were also registered with the authorities, but all their pertinent information was kept in the brothel keeper's book where each became known as a *fille à numéro*, a numbered whore. Special branches of the police force for both morals and health in the form of the *police des mœurs* and the *dispensaire de salubrité* worked in conjunction with the judiciary to make sure that *réglementation* functioned smoothly.

Thus, the ultimate aim of those in charge of tolerated prostitution was to transform it from a criminal problem into an 'administrative' one. Needless to say, the systemic complexity of regulated prostitution—the nuances of its nomenclature, the obsession with registration, and the surveillance offered by regulated health checks—points to one of the major consequences *réglementation* had on the concept of sexuality. Alain Corbin intimates this effect when he writes that: 'Registration indicated the adoption not of a profession ... but of a state of being'.⁹ In other words, registering yourself as a prostitute meant that it was not something you *did*, but something you *were*. Thus the inscription of a woman's name on the rolls did not merely represent a statistical or

census figure, but conferred upon that woman the assignation of a sexual type—in this case a prostitudinal one.¹⁰

The most immediate consequence of *réglementation*, however, was the criminalisation and spread of unregulated prostitution since, for reasons that should be obvious from the discussion above, *réglementation* was not an especially appealing option for its putative practitioners. Faced with the choice of working for themselves, albeit illegally, or working within a strictly controlled government system, it is no wonder that many women opted for the illegal choice. Indeed, the failure of *réglementation* to control clandestine prostitution consumed the social imaginary of *fin de siècle* France since it was generally believed that unregistered prostitution threatened not only to spread disease, but erotic and criminal behaviour as well through the social body. Clandestine prostitution, especially its *disorderliness*, represented 'at once the cause and symbol of social disorder, [and] was, by its very essence, what haunted the regulationists most'.¹¹

The twin issues of *réglementation* and clandestine prostitution are important topics in Degas' dance pictures because, in depicting young working-class women engaged in one of the 'suspicious' professions, Degas was able to capitalise upon the public's fear and fascination with the clandestine prostitute in order to articulate his aesthetic vision of modernity. Thus, the subject of the ballet world was an expeditious metaphor of the problems of modernity for Degas because, not only did it engage with the struggle of controlling licit and illicit sexuality, but it also linked the issue of sexuality with the problems of work. Indeed, it is this conjoining of the issue of sexuality with the problems of work that enabled Degas to construct some of his most modern canvases.

What we see in Degas' dance pictures, therefore, is the dramatisation of *sexuality* in the realm of the work place, where the thematics of commercial exchange in modern life—the problems of work, of the marketplace, and of the struggle between private and social identities—are transposed onto the problems of sexuality. Given the theme of clandestine prostitution subtending the dance pictures, it is impossible *not* to view the issue of sexuality they evince as a conflict between the private and the public spheres in *fin de siècle* Paris. Though today we tend to categorise sexuality as obtaining to the 'private sphere', we must remember that: 'When we address tolerated prostitution in nineteenth-century Paris, we confront an intense struggle between the private and the public spheres, between the individual and the polity, because while licit sexuality was generally assumed to be a private

matter, prostitutional sexuality was understood to be property of the State'.¹² On the other hand, the historical failure of *réglementation* to control the demand for clandestine prostitution—in other words, the male bourgeois's desire for elaborate eroticism rather than simple genital release—suggests that this struggle between public and private means of sexual expression may have already been collapsing into one, that is, the private one.

Additionally inflecting the dance pictures, however, are struggles of class since the dance pictures do not randomly thematise any sexuality, but rather concentrate on a very particular one. To be exact, they depict the problem—and allure—of a working-class, prostitutional sexuality. For in the dance pictures we see social relations that are not only structured by the unequal effects of gender relations in *fin de siècle* France—that is, between men and women—but we also see the unequal effects of social relations that are structured by class—that is, between the working class and the bourgeoisie. And because Degas chose to portray those moments in which the struggles between class and gender were at their most acute, the dance pictures reflect some of the most salient observations of modern life. As Griselda Pollock has noted:

The spaces of modernity are where class and gender interface in critical ways, in that they are the spaces of sexual exchange. The significant spaces of modernity are neither simply those of masculinity, nor are they those of femininity which are as much the spaces of modernity for being the negative of the streets and bars. They are, as the canonical works indicate, the marginal or interstitial spaces where the fields of the masculine and feminine intersect and structure sexuality within a classed order.¹³

The dance pictures provoke because they depict a place where different genders, sexualities and classes collide in the modern metropolis: the *coulisses*, or the backstage world of ballet. As Callen argues, the depiction of highly visible professional women 'not only transgressed the *ideological* limits which defined the domestic. [These women] eroded the *physical* boundaries of public and private in the course of their daily labours'.¹⁴ This erosion of physical boundaries effected by working women in the modern metropolis which engendered widespread social anxiety is a crucial point for Callen. Elsewhere she writes that:

By focusing too exclusively on the women represented, it is possible to miss the fact that the locus of meaning of Degas' modern-life subjects lies in his choice of settings, in his taxonomy of the many different

sites of clandestine sexual encounter: the street, the cafe, the millinery boutique, the laundry, the racecourse, the art gallery, the opera coulisses and rehearsal rooms.¹⁵

However, I would go one step further and say that it is precisely the conjoined depiction of these two categories—that is, of the women and the sites of the modern Metropolis—that contains the locus of their meaning, that represents the most compelling feature of Degas' work. What differentiates the dance pictures is that, rather than depicting a male/female divide or one structured by class, the two polarities collide and become 'sites for the negotiation of gendered class identities and class gender identities'.¹⁶ Indeed, the dance pictures operate as succinct expressions of modernity in that these divides are not polarised. For the eroticised territories of modernity—the *coulisses*, the streets, the *café-concerts*—do not maintain the chasm between private and public identities, between separate and gendered spheres, but intersect and puncture these spheres. 'Here the division of the public and private mapped as a separation of the masculine and feminine is', as Pollock has eloquently written, 'ruptured by money.'¹⁷ Embodying all of these modern transgressions—the shifts from private to public, from feminine sphere to masculine sphere, from high-class to working-class—the figure of the clandestine prostitute rendered these ideological contradictions inherent in modernity comprehensible and available for the consumption of the *fin de siècle* social imaginary.

Contextualising the *Coulisses*

Although Degas is best known for his dance paintings, he was certainly not alone in his interest nor did he produce them in a social vacuum. Renoir painted and exhibited many dance paintings as did Degas' disciple, Jean-Louis Forain. Indeed, the painting of the dance world was not limited to the avant-garde painters but enjoyed substantial appeal with caricaturists and the more conventional *pompier* artists alike. This is not difficult to understand since the Opéra, where the dancers practised and performed, with its gilded and lavishly upholstered interior represented the world of the *demi-monde* and *galanterie*, where wealth, prestige, glamour and illicit sexuality commingled in Parisian society. A symbol of France's cultural power and wealth in its capital city, the Opéra provided a venue not only for the Parisian bourgeoisie to flaunt its newly acquired wealth, but for the entire country to display its cultural prowess as well.

Of course there was another kind of power game played out nightly

at the Opéra too: the sexual one. Members of the prestigious Jockey Club and the *abonnés* (men who had seasonal tickets to the Opéra) were allowed free run of the building and were to be found frequenting rehearsals, the dressing-rooms, and the backstage during performances. The most coveted privilege these men enjoyed, however, was pre-performance access to the *foyer de la danse*, a room located behind the stage, where the dancers would stretch, practise and chat with the men. Popular lore had it that the *coulisses* and the dance foyer were *points de réunion* for lightly veiled prostitution since the dancers themselves, like most theatre performers at the time, were considered to be more sexually available than other women.¹⁸ Thus, in the minds of most Parisians, the Opéra was regarded as little more than a highly exclusive bordello.

Degas, however, rarely explicitly narrated the relationship between the *abonnés* and the dancers; his *oeuvre* represents a more elliptical depiction of their understood relation than that of his more middle-brow contemporaries. Degas painted few moments of actual direct engagement between the *abonnés* and the dancers; instead, he preferred to depict moments coextensive with a rehearsal or a performance during which it was impossible for the pair to engage in actual discussion. The men are generally only partially visible, usually cut off by the canvas or occluded by scenery sets, or they are depicted together with other *abonnés*, chatting and waiting for their *danseuse* to finish her performance. Indeed, Degas' lopping habit was not limited to the *abonnés*, but extended to the dancers as well, who were frequently chopped at the waist or portrayed as just a profusion of incongruous limbs on stage. Contemporary critics often complained of Degas' habit of fragmenting bodies or cropping his canvases: 'One of M. Degas' most cherished methods is to cut the canvas arbitrarily, to eliminate feet or legs'.¹⁹ The prominent critic Paul Mantz wrote of 'figures cut in two and voluntarily shown in a state of fragments'.²⁰ Not only were bodies cut up in disconcerting ways, but they were shown *en désordre* as well. It was as if Degas refused to depict the normal bodily order of heads, arms and legs connected in their proper places; legs and torsos frequently emerged *above* the heads of others while hands and arms appeared in indecipherable tangles.

But Degas' penchant for the dismemberment and fragmentation of his dancers' bodies, resulting almost in complete bodily and pictorial incoherence, was also what separated him from his contemporaries in the minds of his critics, who were quick to read the pictorial incoherence evinced by the dancers' detached body parts as a visual language of

licentiousness. Critics read the inability to control and unravel the dissipation of all those limbs as Degas' own special idiolect to indicate the dancers' sexual immodesty. With bodies literally coming undone on the canvas and, what's more, these amputated body parts touching where they should not, it was easy for critics to read Degas' compositional style as an implicit means of expressing the dancers' sexual wantonness. For example, Degas' idiosyncratic compositioning of the relationship between orchestra in the pit and dancers on stage frequently placed the dancers and orchestral elements in a pantomime of sexual embrace.²¹ In *Musicians of the Orchestra*, a dancer appears to be embracing the end of an oboe jutting out of the orchestra pit while taking her stage bows. Introduced at a later point, the white-haired musician to the right only partially occludes the oboe—we can still see its outline emerging by the musician's left ear—though it still manages iconographically to represent the more roguish attributes of the all-male orchestra. Since the audience is only indirectly represented by the bouquets lying at the dancer's feet, the orchestra visually assumes the role of the *abonnés* in the audience who really threw them. Degas' contrapositioning of isolated male parts—violin bows, mutton chops, walking canes, top hats, and bow ties—amidst an abundance of exposed female limbs, therefore, served to focus attention on the sexual impropriety of the *coulisses*.

Yet if the rampant fragmentation and dissipation of body parts in Degas' dance pictures evidenced the dancers' sexual instability—thus linking them closely with the issue of femininity—it also articulated their association with the problems of modernity as the pictures thematised the quite literal dispersal of the prostituted body through the streets of Paris. That is, Degas' insistence upon the fragmentation of the female body in the dance pictures thematised the uncontrollable prostitutional body whose corporeal sinuosity might spread its contagion of venal sexuality disease-like throughout the social body. It was as though the *coulisses* could not contain the Opéra's overflow of immoral flotsam from its wings; hence, the perceived threat of the *coulisses* pictures to corrupt decent bourgeois men and—more disconcertingly—their wives, mothers, sisters and daughters. While the *coulisses* were symbols of clandestine pleasure and knowledge, to be enjoyed only by the few, the moneyed and the privileged, they also symbolised the threat of clandestine prostitution that obsessed the social imagination of *fin de siècle* France. The inability of *réglementation* to control the *filles insoumises*, who plied their trade unsupervised, inspired terror in the hearts of bourgeois Parisians who feared that sexual deviance—or,

more to the point, prostitution practised outside the official control of the State—was invading the ‘centre of their city’s life, threatening to upset the social and sexual balance of power’.²² Likewise, the expansion of the covert sexual economy was held to be responsible for degrading social life and transforming it into economic life.

Indeed, it appears that the transformation of social life into economic life is a theme that Degas exploited in his portrayal of professional women. For, in addition to complaints about Degas’ love of the fragmented female body, critics often objected to his representation of professional women on the grounds that their bodies were ‘singularly deformed by their work’.²³ Though critics tended to connect Degas’ preoccupation with corporeal deformation through labour as a reflection of Realist concerns with work, his depiction of the working body—especially the *female* working body—reflected an interest in the modern relation between the worker and her work. Forced to spend long hours practising the strenuous and disciplined balletic moves, the dancers were often painted by Degas in a state of near collapse: dozing on crossed elbows, leaning against a wall, or massaging their aching muscles. In *Dancers at Rest*, he drew two dancers rubbing their sore calves and ankles in almost palpable exhaustion. The dancers, however, also bear the signs of their labour, for they both maintain the turned out position that balletic training demanded even while slumped in fatigue. Exhibiting their training/working status at all moments—even at rest—the dancers’ condition reflected a popular bromide about the working woman not unlike the one regulationists engineered for the prostitute: that is, for working-class women, work represented not a discrete moment in time, but rather it was an entire state of being. Of course, what is revealing about the critical interpretation of the dancers’ relation to their work is not the physical ‘reality’ of, say, their hyper-rotated hip joints, but the way in which their relation to work was believed to be internalised in a way that differentiated them from other ‘normal’—that is, non-working-class, bourgeois—women. In the eyes of the nineteenth-century critics, the dancers bore all the telling details of their physical and moral degradation by the mere fact of their working. But not only that: because Parent-Duchâtelet’s work on prostitution had suggested that from an economic standpoint, working-class women were more ‘vulnerable’ to the lures of clandestine prostitution, regulationists tended to conflate working-class women’s economic ‘vulnerability’ with an active predilection for clandestine prostitution, a conflation which brought images of women at work under the shadow of suspected clandestine prostitution. Thus, in

portraying the girls as labourers in one of the 'suspicious' professions, Degas affirmed the strong connection between avant-garde definitions of modernity and the subject matter of sexualised, commodified, anonymous working-class women. Indeed, the ambiguity and confusion between women at work and women engaged in prostitution, which regulationists feared and which Degas' images exploited, is what also connects this theme in his painting to modernity in general: that is, the belief that in modern economic life, *all* work is prostitution.

Eroticising the *Coulisses*

What I have been trying to suggest is that Degas' idiosyncratic depiction of the Opéra dancers, women who were believed to be *filles insoumises*, narrated not only a threatened pictorial order with their dismembered torsos, deformed bodies, and errant limbs destroying any easy coherence in the pictures, but thematised an endangered moral order as well. Indeed, as the work of Hollis Clayson has shown, pictorial instability and narrational incoherence, *the* trademarks of Impressionist avant-garde works, also became signifiers for female sexual instability as Impressionist artists used a strategy of narrational evasiveness in order 'to contain and order the anxieties provoked by the modern sexualised woman in general and by the contemporary prostitute in particular'.²⁴ Certainly, art historians have long regarded the simultaneous appearance of narrational evasion and the depiction of modern life as the hallmark of the best Impressionist painting. What is striking about this relationship between pictorial *style* and pictorial *subject* in Degas' *oeuvre*, however, is that both strategies converge in the body of an assumed clandestine prostitute. In order to express his own aesthetic vision of modernity Degas used the body of the clandestine prostitute to articulate an avant-garde technique and an avant-garde theme.

Historically, contemporary critics and art historians alike have read the Impressionists' inclination toward 'narrational evasion' as a corollary of their predilection for offering a scene of life viewed in the glimpse, of action captured in a photographic vision. Thus, Impressionism's tendency to exaggerate the 'freeze-frame' quality of, for example, a street scene not only suspended pictorial narration by wresting the scene out of its larger context, but also conferred upon that depiction the notion that it was more 'real' and particularly evocative of the rapidly changing nature of experience in modern life. To nineteenth-century critics, however, this was not the case when it came to viewing Degas' painting. For them, 'Degas' fragmentation

and disordering of the human body were not functions of natural, "photographic" vision, but deliberately disruptive of coherent pictorial structure ... Intensely physiognomic, obsessively corporeal, they are nevertheless images of the illegible and disordered, rather than the legible, hierarchical and symmetrical body'.²⁵ The absence of symmetry and hierarchy, the inappropriate signification of the body, and the physical 'evidence' of physiognomy were all signs of the dancers' depravity and proof of their prostitional status for many nineteenth-century viewers.

Not all critics, however, interpreted Degas' idiosyncratic depiction of the dancers' bodies as outrightly repulsive. Marc de Montifaud's review of the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 offered a reading of the dance pictures with a slightly different cast from her critical peers and is worth quoting at length for that reason:

If M. Renoir only painted one dancer, M. Degas has introduced a whole seraglio in the Exhibition, and once more the Goddesses of the Opera surpass the great ladies of fashion. The art of choreography, which serves to display an array of rounded contours, offers an attractive revelation to him who lovingly studies the undulations of hips and the serpentine curves of movement. *The Dance Class* is a fine, profound study, from which emerges that which one would never encounter in the works of certain genre painters who would blush to put undraped figures in a canvas of only a few centimetres' size: the study of woman in all her opulent nudity, of her elegant or thin anatomical lines. M. Degas shows us, with equally witty verve, piercing, carved-out shoulder blades, and rebounding hamstrings beneath which are attached stockings so tightly pulled and 'stretched like a drum' that the leg enclosed in that mesh of rose silk recalls a typically Gallic quote. It concerns that genre of seduction which, it appears, certain women used often to practice: 'If it is good to contemplate their lovely legs and calves, and their charming slippers so tight and well-fitted, which they know so well how to display, and also when they have their dresses made shorter—*à la nymphe*—in order to tread more lightly, all of which tempts and warms even the most cold and austere'. M. Degas practises this costume *à la nymphe* with a mastery that Worth himself would not disdain.²⁶

One has only to compare Montifaud's celebration of the 'rounded contours', 'undulations of hips and serpentine curves', 'carved-out shoulder blades', 'rebounding hamstrings', and 'lovely legs and calves' with her contemporaries' contemptuous reviews to understand how her own review differed from the general critical reception of Degas' dancers. J. K. Huysmans's review of the fifth Impressionist exhibition

described the dancers in Degas' paintings as:

anaemic originals, girls in deplorable health from sleeping in garrets, exhausted by their trade's exercises, worn out at their age by precocious practice; there again, nervous, dried-up girls whose muscles show through their jerseys, veritable kids built for jumping, real dancers with springs of steel and knees of iron.²⁷

Montifaud's review was also different from those of her colleagues in that she acknowledged the erotic appeal of the dancers, but this recognition did not oblige her to cry: '*Scandale!*' Rather, she chose to embark on a discussion of the dancers' dress, which for Montifaud were all signs of their possible *undress* and nudity. For example, the short dresses revealed legs covered by 'rose silk' stockings 'stretched tight like a drum' which not only exposed their limbs in anatomical detail, but also imitated their true flesh colour. Likewise, their tight-fitting corsets disclosed the details of a 'carved out shoulder blade'. The slippers, 'tight and well-fitted', did not break the line of the dancers' legs as a shoe might have done and therefore suggested the nudity of an unsheathed foot. Hence, Montifaud's review offered an alternative interpretation of the dance pictures: rather than reading Degas' paintings as representing the fragmentation, the disorderliness, of body parts in their inability to stay put on the canvas, Montifaud chose instead to read the paintings as delineating the eroticisation of body parts in their inability to remain modestly covered.

In fact, as we pay close attention to the dance pictures, we begin to see the perspicacity of Montifaud's observation, for the dancers' *deshabillé* is a prominent aspect in all the pictures. The bare arms, legs, chests and backs draw attention to the dancers' potential for *un-dress*, as Degas simultaneously reveals and conceals their bodies. In writing about 'undraped figures in a canvas', Montifaud also suggests that Degas' chromatic play between the pink and white of the dancers' flesh against their costumes ingeniously recalled the classical conceit of suggesting nudity beneath drapery: for the play of revealed pink skin against concealing white drapery was a treatment typical of the classical nude which served to heighten the allegorical contrast in states of being between the dressed and the undressed female body. In other words, Montifaud suggests that beneath the white tutus, the satin bodices and the pink stockings we are meant to imagine the naked dancers' bodies. Finally, that Degas' dancers are continually arranging their corsets, adjusting their stockings and sashes, fixing their shoulder straps or re-tying the loosened laces of their slippers calls attention to the fact that, quite simply, their dress really *is* always coming undone. The sheer

repetition of this theme, the dancers' constant adjusting, correcting and fidgeting with elements of their costume, reinforces the indecency of the dancers' dress: for not only does their dress reveal too much of their bodies, but it also can't seem to adhere to them in any modest way.

Yet aside from her discussion of the dialectic between dressed and undressed in the dance pictures, what separates Montifaud's review from the others is her acknowledgment of the dancers' eroticism, indeed, of the *appropriateness* of their dress and potential undress in light of their profession—though whether this meant as dancers or as prostitutes was left to the discretion of the reader. To Montifaud, the constant revelation of their semi-nude arms, legs and torsos articulates the essence of their profession and sexuality which, in the changing social conditions of *fin de siècle* Paris, was connected to the general collapse between sexuality and work in modernity. Thus she writes at the beginning of her review that Degas has introduced, 'a whole seraglio ... [of] Goddesses'. But rather than depicting them as Goddesses or inmates of a harem, Degas has chosen to paint them as they are: dancers from the Opéra who represent the 'genre of seduction'. It is a decision that, Montifaud intimates, would make 'certain genre painters ... blush', the inference being, of course, that the depiction of clandestine prostitution is outside the normative moral code for more conventional painters. There was also the inference that the impropriety of putting 'undraped figures in a canvas of only a few centimetres' size' was somehow connected with the painting's rejection of the classical nude, as if the painting's facture and diminutive execution matched its modern themes. That is, the silk stockings, black neckbands, satin slippers, and ballet maillots are all accoutrements not only of the rehearsal hall, but of the boudoir as well and the conflation between work apparel and erotic lingerie is only an effect from the general conflation between work and sexuality in Degas' painting. Indeed, the inclusion of the erotic in the workplace—and the threat it entailed—was, perhaps, the most illustrative aspect of modernity in the dance pictures for nineteenth-century critics.

Conclusion

The pervasiveness of the perceived specular codes of prostitution in *fin de siècle* Parisian society means that Degas' dance pictures represent only a select portion of those cultural products which gave shape and meaning to the concept of modernity in the late nineteenth century. However, I have chosen to assert throughout this article that this select

view can be said to represent one aspect of the social and cultural meanings authorised by *fin de siècle* bourgeois patriarchal ideology. In choosing to focus on the work of Degas, I have opted to concentrate on one of the canonical artists whose style, subject matter, and ideological assumptions modernist art criticism has understood to represent what the best of Impressionist art in particular, and other modern avant-garde art in general, has expressed as the most compelling themes of modernity. In doing so, one of my aims has been to demonstrate that in the unquestioned valorisation of Degas' subject matter and artistic style as a representation of *the* emblematic aesthetic style and subject of modernity, modernist art criticism has covered over what Degas' work would reveal both thematically and stylistically about *fin de siècle* bourgeois patriarchal assumptions regarding sexuality, gender and sexual difference. Indeed, the effectiveness of this ideological concealment—to the extent that Degas' work is often understood to depict the condition of modernity in *fin de siècle* Paris in the strict 'realistic' manner of photo-journalism, rather than depicting an entirely manufactured view—demonstrates that we are potentially still under its sway.

That Degas' *oeuvre* operates today as the marker of unfettered aesthetic pleasure—in its iconographic depiction throughout mass culture on objects from umbrellas to coasters—in our own *fin de siècle* aesthetic is perhaps less a testament to our own lack of priggery (that is, we may be less easily shocked by depictions of covert prostitution) than to the way in which bourgeois patriarchal ideology has managed to cover over any potential conflicts in such depictions which may contest its own conventions. The images and debates surrounding avant-garde art and the issue of modernity may have shifted in the past one hundred years, but the discourses they articulate concerning the problems of constituting subjectivity, sexuality and sexual difference remain—albeit perhaps as distant echoes in different forms—with us today. Thus, interrogating these past moments in the history of Western cultural production is crucial if we are to understand the means by which patriarchal ideology continues to function in contemporary society.

Notes

- 1 For the problems in associating Degas with Impressionism see Richard Schiff, 'The End of Impressionism', in *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886*, ed. Charles S. Moffett, Washington, 1986, pp.61–89.
- 2 Paul Mantz, *Le Temps*, 22 April 1877. Quoted in Moffett, p.219.

- 3 See Ian Dunlop, *Degas*, London, 1979, p.221; Alfred Werner, *Degas Pastels*, London, 1969, p.11; and Jean Adhémar and Françoise Cachin, *Degas: The Complete Etchings, Lithographs and Monotypes*, trans. Jane Benton, London, 1986, p.89 for his hatred of flowers.
- 4 Degas himself had a rabid dislike of the *plein-air* style and his dealer, Ambroise Vollard, claimed that Degas once delivered him the diatribe: 'You know what I think of people who work out in the open. If I were the government, I would have a special brigade of gendarmes to keep an eye on artists who paint landscapes and nature. Oh, I don't mean to kill anyone; just a little dose of bird-shot now and then as a warning'. See Werner, pp.12–13.
- 5 '*Une cuisse, une fleur, un chignon, ballerines contordues en l'envol du tutu ... Cinématique infallible. Les roueries des lumières artificielles surprises. Le Moderne exprimé*'; my translation. *Oeuvres plus que complètes*, ed. Joan U. Halperin, vol. 2, Genève, 1970, p.540. It is worth noting that it was not only Degas' penchant for framing his subjects *à la cinématique* that Fénéon found modern, but also, of course, his subject matter. More to the point, it was the combination of the ballet dancers' isolated body parts and their location in a theatrical milieu that Fénéon considered the most compellingly modern aspect of Degas' *oeuvre*: 'A thigh, a flower, a chignon, ballerinas contorted in a flurry of tutus ... infallible cinema. The trickery of surprising artificial light. The modern expressed'.
- 6 Clement Greenberg, 'On the Role of Nature in Modernist Painting', in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brien, vol. 2, Chicago, 1986, p.279; emphasis added.
- 7 Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*, trans. Alan Sheridan, Cambridge, Mass., 1990, p.4. Parent-Duchâtelet had written a treatise on the Parisian sewage system before embarking on his study of prostitution.
- 8 Literally 'submissive girls' and 'unsubmissive girls'. One should realise, however, that at this time '*fille*' had the pejorative meaning of 'whore'; a respectable girl would have been known as a '*jeune fille*'. Thus a *fille insoumise* would have translated in the contemporary vernacular as an 'unsubmissive whore'.
- 9 Corbin, p.30. This tactic of registration within a disciplinary system, of assigning numbers to subjects in an effort to dehumanise them, is an extremely effective one as the histories of the military, the penal system or even the Holocaust would attest to.
- 10 Of course, this attitude survives today in our tendency to define sexuality as a state of being rather than as a historically specific social practice. For a general overview of how sexuality has become a personal attribute, a state of being, rather than an activity in modernity, see Richard Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man*, New York, 1977. See also Michel Foucault, *The*

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- History of Sexuality, Volume One: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, 1980, and Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume Two: The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, 1990.
- 11 Corbin, p.24.
 - 12 Hollis Clayson, *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era*, New Haven, 1991, p.11.
 - 13 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, New York, 1988, p.70.
 - 14 Anthea Callen, 'Degas's *Bathers*: Hygiene and Dirt—Gaze and Touch', in *Dealing With Degas: Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, eds Richard Kendall and Griselda Pollock, London, 1991, p.162.
 - 15 Anthea Callen, *The Spectacular Body: Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas*, New Haven, 1995, pp.75–76.
 - 16 Pollock, p.70.
 - 17 Pollock, p.78.
 - 18 Corbin, pp.135–36, 171–74.
 - 19 'Un de leur procédés que chérit aussi M. Degas, c'est de couper la toile n'importe où, de supprimer les pieds ou les jambes'. Arthur Baignères, 'Exposition de peinture par un groupe d'artistes, rue le Pélétier', *L'Echo universel*, 13 April 1874; my translation.
 - 20 Paul Mantz, 'L'Exposition des peintres impressionnistes', *Le Temps*, 22 April 1877. Quoted in Carol Armstrong, *Odd Man Out: Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas*, Chicago and London, 1991, p.45.
 - 21 See George T. M. Shackelford, *Degas: The Dancers*, Washington, 1984, pp.28–35 for a more detailed account of the pictorial relationship between the masculine elements of the orchestra and the dancers.
 - 22 Clayson, pp.7, 13.
 - 23 Philippe Burty, 'Choses d'art: Exposition des impressionnistes', *La République Française*, 5 April 1880. Quoted in Armstrong, p.50.
 - 24 Clayson, p.6.
 - 25 Armstrong, p.128.
 - 26 Marc de Montifaud, 'Salon de 1874. Exposition du boulevard des Capucines', *L'Artiste*, 1 May 1874. Quoted in Armstrong, p.52. Marc de Montifaud was the pseudonym for the female critic Marie Amélie Chartreule. Although it is outside the general parameters of my discussion above, it is interesting to wonder whether Montifaud's difference in gender from the other, male, critics could account for her markedly different reaction to Degas's work. Did *fin de siècle* women in general perceive Degas's works differently? Admittedly, so often throughout this chapter the spectator is assumed to be male, primarily because I believe that the ideas of gender difference, sexuality and their role in the experience of modernity are the cultural products of bourgeois patriarchy, of men's domination of women. Another work, however, might want to interrogate the provocative question of nineteenth-century women's

spectatorship in Degas's *oeuvre* and the different perceptions of modernity this may or may not have produced. See Deborah Bershad, 'Looking, Power and Sexuality: Woman with a Lorgnette', in eds Kendall and Pollock, pp.95–105; Griselda Pollock, 'Women with Binoculars: A Question of Difference', in eds Kendall and Pollock, pp.106–30; and Callen, *The Spectacular Body*, Chapter 6, 'Privileged Sight—Sites of Privilege: Portraits, Spectators and Gender', pp.165–211, for a discussion of this question in Degas' works. See also Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Bloomington, 1989; Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Woman's Film of the 1940s*, Bloomington, 1987; Tania Modleski, *The Women Who Knew Too Much: Hitchcock and Feminist Theory*, New York, 1988; and Diane Waldman, 'Film Theory and the Gendered Spectator: The Female or Feminist Reader?', *Camera Obscura* 18 (1988): 80–94 for the problems of theorising women's spectatorship in general.

- 27 '*les anémies originelles, les déplorables lymphes des filles couchées dans les soupentes, éreintées par les exercices du métier, épuisées par de précoces pratiques, avant l'âge; là encore les filles nerveuses, sèches, dont les muscles saillent sous le maillot, de vraies biquettes construites pour sauter, de vraies danseuse, aux ressorts d'acier, au jarrets de fer.*' J. K. Huysmans, 'L'Exposition des Indépendants en 1880', *L'art moderne*, Paris, 1883, pp.115–16; my translation.