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## ‘Seeing’ versus ‘Perceiving’

### *The Execution of Maximilian and The Railroad* by Edouard Manet

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Both of the pictures that will be looked at in this contribution, *The Execution of Maximilian* and *The Railroad* by Edouard Manet (1868/69 and 1872/73, illus. 1 and 2), seem altogether relevant with respect to what this volume and the symposium which generated it were aimed at: the differentiation and relativization of different forms of experience.<sup>1</sup> The first of these two paintings is already pertinent via its belonging to the genre of history painting, which is dependent upon the aesthetic experience of the picture’s being bound up with the communication of knowledge,

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<sup>1</sup> Lecture and text have to do with a book by the author (*Bild und Blick in Manet’s Malerei*, Berlin 2003) published shortly before this conference, especially chapters III and V which are here partly reprinted. As far as the analysis of the railroad picture, here the publications of Michael Diers should be mentioned, which my considerations are indebted to, reference to which are inadvertently omitted in my above-named book. (Michael Diers, “Vom Zug der Zeit oder Topography und Allegorie—Manet und Monet malen die Eisenbahn”, *Neue Züricher Zeitung* 73, 28-29.3.1998, 66; and the same author and Bärbel Hedinger’s “z.B. (Dampf-)Wolken—Von der Industrie in Bildern des Impressionismus nebst einer Allegorie”, *Die zweite Schöpfung—Bilder der industriellen Welt vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*, eds. Sabine Beneke and Hans Ottomeyer [Berlin: Martin-Gropius-Bau, 2002], 72-79.

memory, or ideas. The representative function of history painting fastens aesthetic experience and the production of knowledge together: it is directed at a special perception of the object—which should be “perceived”, and at the same time “seen” in a particular way. This basic, pictorial-systematic aspect is extended in the case of Manet’s *Execution* by a pictorial-historical dimension. Within the extended history of history painting, this painting demarcates the threshold at which the representational model just sketched fell into a crisis: a crisis, from which the genre would not free itself. The aesthetic and the epistemological strive here in such a dramatic way away from one another, that the pictorial sense is left open.

The picture’s fluctuating reception confirms this. Up until the middle of the twentieth century, it served as proof for the interpretation that Manet was primarily involved in pure painting: whoever paints as dramatic an event as an execution with such disinvolvement, demonstrates in an exemplary manner how content can be sacrificed in favor of form.<sup>2</sup> Manet thereby positioned himself, as it seemed, as a decisive defender of painterly autonomy, which not only detached itself from the traditional task of history painting—serving the interests of the state—but rather, with its indifference, even rejected the obligation to say anything at all in a picture. Georges Bataille formulated this reading most radically, as he saw the specific contribution of Manet’s paintings to lie in their silencing any literary sense and any reference to standard norms and conventions: “The text,” Bataille wrote, “will be *extinguished* by the picture. *And what the picture means is not the text, but rather its extinguishing.*”<sup>3</sup> In recent decades, in contrast, the painting’s evaluation reversed direction. Above all in the Anglo-Saxon social history of art, it became a proof of exactly the opposite. A painter, who turned himself to the significant events of that time, could not be an artist only focused on canvas, brush, and paint, as seemed to be the case with his Impressionist colleagues. Manet demonstrated himself to be much more a politicized subject, as a “*peintre engagé*”. The indifference exhibited did not have the goal of

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<sup>2</sup> In this matter, see further Joseph C. Sloane, “Manet and History”, *The Art Quarterly* 14 (1951), 93-106, especially here 100ff.

<sup>3</sup> George Bataille, *Manet* (Geneva, 1994), 55: “Le text est *efface* par le tableau. *Et ce que le tableau signifie n’est pas le text mais l’effacement.*” (Emphases Bataille’s.)

producing painterly autonomy, but was rather a carefully calculated strategy.<sup>4</sup> But the two opposed valuations agreed on one decisive point, which they merely assessed differently. Apparently exactly what in Manet's picture came apart was what, in the classical model of representation, merges: namely what can be "perceived" in a picture, and what is to be "seen". This discrepancy will be examined in the following, more specifically, via an analysis of what one could call the communicative structure of the picture.

To begin with, however, the facts and the state of the knowledge should be given their due, and the historical background of Manet's paintings briefly recapitulated.<sup>5</sup> Archduke Maximilian of Austria – according to contemporaries, a loyal, well-meaning man with a romantic sentimentality—became a plaything of French power politics: the main figure in an imperial interlude, in an unsuitable location, which was doomed to failure from the beginning. The younger brother of the Austrian emperor and former general governor of Lombardy lived, following the unification of Italy, without any official position and in seclusion in a playful villa near Trieste, which Napoleon III, Emperor of the French, convinced him to leave with the promise of having him crowned emperor in far away Mexico, protected by a strong French-Austrian-Mexican alliance. As the French troops, which under the pretext of debt collection invaded Mexico, could not break the resistance of the Mexican president

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<sup>4</sup> It was Nils Gösta Sandblad who in 1954, in his then groundbreaking study, first asked the question as to what meaning the subject could have had for Manet. At the same time, he could show compared the various versions of the execution picture how strongly Manet had made use of the information available about the events in Mexico for his orientation. Since then the historical background of this picture has been illuminated many times, among them three catalogues which have devoted themselves primarily to this task. See Nils Gösta Sandblad, *Manet—Three Studies in Artistic Conception* (Lund, 1954), 109ff; *Edouard Manet and the "Execution of Maximilian"*, ed. Department of Art, Brown University (Providence RI: 1981); Juliet Wilson-Bareau, *Manet: The Execution of Maximilian—Painting, Politics, and Censorship* (London: National Gallery, 1992); *Edouard Manet—Augenblicke der Geschichte*, ed. Manfred Fath and Stefan Germer (Mannheim: Städtische Kunsthalle/Munich, 1994). Also Oskar Bätschmann, *Edouard Manet—Der Tod des Maximilian* (Frankfurt/Main, 1993) devotes itself to thoroughly examining the historical context.

<sup>5</sup> On the person of Maximilian and the French intervention in Mexico, see "Massimiliano—Rilettura di un'esistenza", *Atti di convegno* ed. Laura Ruaro Loseri (Trieste: March 4-6, 1987/1992); especially the contributions of Adam Wandruska ("Massimiliano—L'imperatore romantico", 11-15); as well as John Lubinski ("Maximilian in Mexiko—Romantische Pläne und zerstörte Illusionen", 80-87). See also Douglas Johnson, "Die französische Intervention in Mexiko. Zum geschichtlichen Hintergrund", in *Edouard Manet—Augenblicke der Geschichte*, 9-22"

Benito Juárez and his army, and beyond that France was ever more urgently demanded by the United States to withdraw their soldiers from a Mexico regarded as its own sphere of influence, Napoleon recognized the hopelessness of his colonial intervention and fetched the troops back home to France, leaving Maximilian without any defenses. The lattermost was taken into custody shortly after that, and was executed a few days later—on July 17, 1867. Napoleon's grandiose, for Maximilian fatal, foreign policy debacle presaged the downfall of the Second Empire, which was to be sealed with the defeat in the Franco-Prussian War four years later.

Shortly after these distant events became known of, Manet began an almost two-year-long period of work on the subject. Five versions were generated, from among which only the last and final one will be examined here. Already in the first sketch Manet established a representational scheme that he would not subsequently alter. It oriented itself following Goya's *Execution of the Rebels on the 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid*—a picture that he could have seen during his visit to the Prado in 1865, but with certainty was familiar with from reproductions. Manet adopted Goya's bipolar pictorial structure, divided into a perpetrator- and a victim-side. Likewise, he retained the positioning of the protagonists, which are each seen in three-quarter view from the front or the back. At the same time, he altered Goya's representational scheme in a significant way. Thus he reduced the group of victims to three figures: Emperor Maximilian, and the two generals executed along with him, Mejía and Miramón. In addition he modified Goya's differentiated time structure, which modulated the event into a before, a present, and an afterwards. In the Goya, some still wait for the gunshots, while others lie already shot on the ground; Manet, in contrast, collected everything in the culminating nowness of the discharged shot itself. With the non-commissioned officer at the picture's right-hand edge, he introduces a third section, which is to be placed on the side of the soldiers, but from its handling remains nonetheless equally isolated. Finally, the stage of the event is newly conceived. Behind the figures, Manet hoists a wall running parallel to the surface of the picture, which separates a narrow forward segment of space out as the scene of events. At the left and right sides at the edge of the picture, this wall is simply cut off without any

indication as to how the space to either side of the segment shown might be provided for. Also the upper and lower edges of image remain conspicuously unarticulated. While at the lower edge of the picture the ground appears to extend under the feet of the observer without any interruption, if the edge of the picture itself were not to be there, above the wall a view of a hill is opened up, which is however abruptly cut off. The perspective of the landscape background thereby has the effect of being peculiarly set up. It gives the semblance as if another world begins beyond the wall—or indeed another picture, since it could just as easily have to do with another picture, for it could just as well be a painted backdrop. The spatial contradictions carry over onto the picture's protagonists, who have a strange placelessness. How they got into this peculiarly inconsistent space remains just as unresolved as the where-to of their departure, when they have performed their work.

While Goya forms compact groups clearly distinguished from one another, Manet pulls particularly the group of soldiers apart from each other. A looser frieze of figures results, of which it is especially to be emphasized that it also pulls Maximilian and the two generals into it. Goya's antagonistic opposition of those shooting and their victims is thereby softened. The ornamental and rhythmic character of this figural frieze are strengthened by conspicuous repetitions of color and form. These display themselves not only within the group of soldiers—whose *képis*, ears, belts, sabers, gaiters, and shoes form an iterative structure—but rather also extend beyond that to the three being executed. This takes place via the clothing's color becoming similar and the white's strongly standing out, but above all by means of the correspondence of sweeping lines, which are to be observed as much in the belts of the soldiers as they also are in the contour-lines of the shirts of the two generals. In this it is significant that Manet—as can be seen in the paint layers—last of all added the hanging white leather straps on the foremost rifle, which constitutes a visual bridge between the groups of victims and perpetrators. A gold tone also springs from figure to figure: runs as a stripe along Mejía's pants, jumps to the brim of Maximilian's sombrero, and from there to the sabers of the soldiers. White and gold wander through the picture, equally a “floating signifier”, which possess no fixed

place and no fixed meaning, but whose meaning seems to lie in this circulation itself. In this fashion a visual rhythm is generated, which runs across the entire breadth of the picture—beginning with Mejías’ arm at the left edge of the painting, continuing over the individual figures, and culminating in the rifle of the non-commissioned officer at the right. Arrived at the picture’s right edge, the rifle (which does not so much intersect the edge of the picture as it seems to touch it) leads to the termination of the wall, where this movement flows back through the group of observers up into the lit urn-shaped grave monument in the upper left corner of the picture. This rhythmical circulation runs against the chronological culmination of the action as well as the direction of the shots. A kind of lateral drift is generated, in which the heterogenous elements of the picture enter into an oscillating interaction which has at the same time the effect of de-centering the viewer’s gaze and scattering it over the pictorial field.

It should already be evident what such a description of Manet’s history painting is directed at: the picture’s peculiar spatial shallowness, as well as something that one could call “not seeing” while all is fully visible. For although the observer stands immediately, without any spatial gap, in front of the execution event, he/she nonetheless appears in a sense not to see or hear anything. In the essay already mentioned, Bataille brings this to a culmination when he writes that one cannot escape the impression of somnolence which this picture exudes: the image reminds one of the “anesthetization of a tooth”.<sup>6</sup>

In order to approach this contradictory effect of Manet’s representational mode more closely, a distinction that Umberto Eco uses in relation to the Aristotelian conception of drama can be drawn upon.<sup>7</sup> According to Eco, each dramatic plot contains two different levels, which he calls “plot” and “action”. The “plot” represents the external organization of facts, and serves at the same time to make a more fundamental layer of the drama—the “action”—visible. He explains the distinction between them using the example of Oedipus: an Oedipus seeking the causation of the plague, discovering

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<sup>6</sup> Bataille, *Manet*, 38f: “Ce tableau rappelle étrangement l’insensibilisation d’une dent: il s’en dégage une impression d’engourdissement envahissant ...”

<sup>7</sup> Umberto Eco, *Das offene Kunstwerk* (Frankfurt/Main, 1977), 200f.

himself to be a murderer of his father and husband of his mother, and blinding himself due to that: this is the “plot” of the myth. The tragic “action” in contrast plays itself out on a deeper-lying level, that is namely the complex combination of destiny and guilt. While the “plot” is completely evident, the “action” is open to many and inconclusive interpretational possibilities. The art of drama lives, according to Eco, from precisely this tension, which is produced by the understandably constructed “plot” and the complexity of the “action” appearing by means of it.

This distinction can readily be transferred to history painting. Goya’s *Third of May 1808* stages an easily understandable plot between two opposed protagonists. Yet for Goya it undoubtably has to do with more. In order to produce this, he proffers a series of means. The picture is not only divided in two, but rather clearly differentiated into a “good” and a “bad” side. There are on the one side the victims, who defenselessly beg for pardon. The main figure, illuminated by bright light, bears wounds and with its arms stretched above reminds one of the crucified Christ. Across from him stand the dark, faceless, and anonymously lined-up soldiers, the aggressiveness of whose bodies are excessively clearly inscribed. Goya makes use of a symbolic, exaggerated mode of representation, orienting himself according to propagandistic everyday-political graphics. This value-laden opposition takes as its task the stimulation of a particular attitude on the part of the viewer in relation to these painted events. It does not only show the conflict, but rather at the same time has the solution to it at the ready, as to how this is to be evaluated. Speaking with Eco’s terminology: it shows the “plot” in such an unequivocal, almost bold and simple fashion, that the underlying “action” motivating the protagonists does not have to be figured out.<sup>8</sup>

Eco’s narratological distinction simultaneously permits us to recognize a characteristic that is significant for history painting. A history picture offers the observer a so to speak “ideal” view of the portrayed event. The ideality of this gaze expresses itself in that the viewer would not (event-logically speaking) be able to occupy any of the positions that the picture assigns him/her. This privileged situation

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<sup>8</sup> For the clarity of the differences between Goya’s and Manet’s versions, I am describing here Goya’s painting as more one-dimensional than it is; on this, see the more thorough treatment in the author’s *Bild und Blick*, 140f and 228, notes 218 and 219.

in relation to the event is possible because, among other things, he/she is not pulled into it: he/she sees, without him/herself being seen. The ideal standpoint of the observer correlates with the ideal intention of a history picture, which does not exhaust itself in showing an event, whose eye witnesses we are to be, but rather much more allows the kind of symbolical dimension to be revealed which Eco wishes to call the “action”. The maximal visibility of the “plot” never remains a goal in itself, but rather constitutes the precondition for reflection about the “action”’s taking place at all.

That Manet takes up these conventions and at the same time reflects upon them within the picture is made especially apparent by one pictorial element: the witnesses of the execution event who look over the wall. Manet is playing here with the contrast between the wall, *upon* which the eye-witnesses must climb in order to be able to see, and the picture’s surface, *through* which the observer can look at the event, but which also at the same time seems to hide him from the protagonists of the event. Thus the eye-witnesses in the image precisely do not mirror the position of the viewer in front of the picture, but rather make clear to him/her *e contrario* the uniqueness of his/her invisible present time at the scene of events.

With the construction of this ideal situation of the observer, Manet just as much urges them to adopt a reflective and evaluative relationship to the represented events as is the case with respect to Goya and his picture. But precisely this will not succeed at taking place in *The Execution of Maximilian*. Several of the reasons for this have already been mentioned: the ornamentalizing pictorial structure which dissipates the gaze, as well as the irritating shallowness of the representation, which has as much to do with the scenery-like landscape view as it does with the individual figures, which—but for the curves of their white leather belts—would be so flat and disembodied as their equally dried-up shadows indicate.

Equally significant in this regard is, however, the indefiniteness of the actors. Thus the protagonists either have no faces, or their facial expressions are empty. In this the soldiers’ facelessness differs considerably from that of Goya’s figures. Their lost profiles are, in the sense of Wolfgang Iser’s “Leerstellen” (empty spaces), which on



the basis of the conditions of the picture's reception can be filled in as being alien, cold, evil, or irresponsible.<sup>9</sup> In Manet's case, the empty spaces cannot be filled in but rather remain semantic voids. Beyond that, a process even of defiguration seems to set in. Above all, the closely pushed together subsidiary group of soldiers at the right edge of the execution platoon leads to a total distortion (illus. 4). It not only remains unclear how the dirty brown that covers parts of the face is to be interpreted, but rather the facial flesh is so unformed that (for example) in the case of the rearmost soldier, it is undecided whether the light section that is located where his chin would be supposed to be, belongs to him or rather must be viewed as the only visible piece of further soldiers which would otherwise hardly be suspected. If these figures turned towards the viewer, then they would display not caricatures as in Goya's case, but rather nothing—no faces at all. The turned-away soldiers evoke a sense of emptiness, which turns abruptly into an oppressive intensity, and display a motionlessness which turns into the fantasmatic present of quasi-subjects.

The facial expression of Emperor Maximilian, the main figure in this event, also seems emptied out (illus. 5). Manet finds himself before the problem of how the faces of people who are looking death in the eye are to be portrayed—whereby he still further intensifies this moment by representing the shot being fired. Yet instead of strong agitation, Maximilian's face becomes a flat disk, the contours of his beard and nose disintegrate, the eyes change into mere black spots. Manet dissolves the face, but so that what has been dissolved remains negatively present at the place of dissolution. Maximilian's physiognomy becomes a light spot, in which the "face" and "effacement"—face and wiping clean—merge into one another.

The perhaps most surprising figure in Manet's painting—and, at the same time, the one which has no precedent in Goya's painting—may be, however, the non-commissioned officer at the picture's right edge (illus. 6). In most cases, his manipulations are interpreted as preparations for the coup de grace, yet if observed more closely what he is doing is altogether unclear. The non-commissioned officer

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<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens—Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (Munich, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. 1994), 266ff and 284.

hardly pays attention to the moment of pressing the trigger, but rather stares beyond that into the indefinite. But this may perhaps be too positively formulated: for he appears to be mentally absent—located neither within himself nor in something outside of himself, not really altogether “there”—so that he apparently does not perceive the execution event itself, which is taking place in his immediate vicinity.

At the same time, this figure stands in a privileged relationship to the viewer. The prominent placement, the visibility of his face, and the outsider position that he has in relation to what is going on, allow him to be a hinge between picture and the observer. His position reminds one of that of the reflexive figure within the picture whose function Michael Fried has analyzed in an exemplary study.<sup>10</sup> As an example, Fried makes use of an engraving after a painting at that time attributed to Van Dyck (illus. 7). It shows Belisarius, formerly a general in the emperor Justinian’s army, whom three women are giving alms to. According to Fried, the clandestine main figure of the picture is, however, the soldier—who is standing spatially closest to the viewer, and is engrossed in observing Belisarius. Evidently he is mediating on his fate, which brought the previously famous general poverty and blindness. In the interpretation of this figure, Fried departs from a letter of Diderot’s, in which he expresses admiration for this picture. It is the figure of the soldier, according to Diderot, which makes the viewer forget all the other figures. He reiterates the position of the viewer within the picture, and thereby becomes their image-internal identification figure: one looks at Belisarius, so to speak, with the eyes of the soldier. He causes the picture to become moralistic, since he makes it clear to the observer that what is at stake has to do with contemplation of Belisarius’ destiny. One could formulate Diderot’s thoughts using Eco’s terminology: this figure embodies the transition from realization of the “plot” to reflection upon the deeper-lying action. Manet’s non-commissioned officer alludes to this inner-pictorial figure, yet reverses it into its opposite, since the non-commissioned officer precisely does not perceive the event. Nevertheless, a surprising thing that the Belisarius engraving and Manet’s

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality—Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley/Los angeles/London, 1980), 145ff. Cf. on this Werner Busch, *Das sentimentalische Bild—Die Krise der Kunst und die Geburt der Moderne* (Munich, 1993), 148ff.

execution picture have in common results. When Diderot wrote that one looks at the event represented with the eyes of this inner-pictorial reflection figure, as it were, this assertion also seems not to be misguided in Manet's case: one looks at this event with exactly the gaze dropping out of space and time that characterizes the non-commissioned officer.

At this point, the difficulty with "reading" this picture—thus to connect "seeing" and "perceiving" with one another—can be more precisely determined. For this we can again have recourse to Iser's term of the "*Leerstelle*", which is as much determinant for the generation of pictorial narration as it is for the constitution of the viewer's involvement. In Goya's case, empty spaces respond to reception indices: for example in the form of the faceless soldier, whose state of mind the viewer can imaginarily complete on the basis of the pictorial and narrative context. In Manet's case, as far as this is concerned, empty spaces and reception indices do not meet up with one another, but rather empty spaces with empty spaces. No figure helps the viewer to understand it differently, as a result of which the empty spaces do not disappear, as Iser's reception aesthetic model provides for. In Maximilian's facial expression we find no references at all to the peculiarity of the faces into which he gazes, in the non-commissioned officer's miming no commentary on the event which is culminating nearby, and so forth. The pictorial discourse is constantly interrupted, even perforated. At the same time, the generation of a pictorial context is displaced onto another level: onto the sub-semantic level of ornamental rhythm, the formal and coloristic reiterative structure. While the figures are in this fashion formally coupled with each other, the scenario context comes apart; and while the historical sense is dissolved, things push their way into the foreground—luminous gaiters, shimmering sword-handles, reddend ears. But thereby the decisive, image-determining void in the *Execution of Maximilian* thereby gapes—between what Eco defines as "plot" and that which he refers to as "action", that is between the external and the internal context of the represented event. While the plot is not only easy to take in at a glance and clear, but is downright symbol-like in its exaggerated portrayal, the viewer obtains no kind of insight into the motivational interior of the figures and the deeper significance of

the event being executed. The various modifications which Manet undertook between the first design and the final version, force precisely this discrepancy—in that they follow the contradictory course of increasing the clarity of the “plot” and the opacity of the “action” in one go. Shots are fired—yet one does not experience why, nor what will follow that, nor what constitutes its moral. The antinomy between indifference and critical engagement, content and form, pure painting and politically explosive subject—which are always eulogized as characteristics of Manet’s history picture—is based in that. We have here to do with the paradox that the significance of the *Execution of Maximilian* does not follow from what is depicted portrayed but rather from what is not.

What does Manet’s history painting recount, or turned another way: how is history represented in it? With the recourse to Goya’s meaning-laden painting, Manet stimulates expectations, however in order to change the rules in the course of the game and to entangle the viewer in a situation which he/she does not know. In this, one aspect appears significant. In comparison with Goya’s painting it becomes clear that Manet’s execution picture cancels the dialectic of history, which in each case reveals itself in the opposition between two parts and can be considered a constant of history painting since antiquity. This suspension reveals itself first of all in the protagonists, whose behavior remains too poorly defined to really emerge as dialectically connected with each other; further, in the pictorial-structural linkage of opposed figural groups into a through-going frieze: and finally in the insertion of a third part, which contradicts the duality of perpetrators and victims. In place of an historical dialectic, in Manet a dialectic of readability and unreadability, transparency and opacity appears. “*Res gestae*” and “*historia rerum gestarum*”, concrete event and sense endowed via plausible narrative, are no longer to be communicated together with one another by the picture. Either we conclude from this that the represented events submit to no reference frameworks for values and norms or no law of origin and effect, or else we acknowledge to ourselves that the reference framework and the laws of what we see remain concealed. Manet’s execution picture leads history to the boundary of its non-representability, because it is not “embodied” in the figures

shown and is not manifest in the action represented. It shows an event which refers to a whole catalogue of meanings: to the morality of good and evil, or to the conflict between individual destiny and powers above the personal level, to simultaneously come to rest where these meanings are absent. Historical transcendence changes into aesthetic immanence: in a “circle” of sense, within which the significant material composing it is continually metamorphosed, reiterated, and laterally displaced—precisely because of which it does not congeal into any fixed meaning. Aesthetic and historical sense, visual perception, and cognition come apart in such a way that the viewer is forced to continually determine them in opposition to one another. The crisis which reveals itself in Manet’s picture is certainly also that of the Second Empire, whose end began to clearly make itself felt with the Mexican fiasco. But above all, Manet’s history painting reveals the crisis of pictorial semantics. It shows history’s becoming non-viewable, which of necessity knocks the bottom out of history painting.

As far as the paradoxical pictorial structure and the contradictory image-viewer relationship are concerned, the *Execution of Maximilian* constitutes no special case within Manet’s oeuvre; we encounter it repeatedly, and indeed in the case of entirely different representational subjects. A second pictorial example should make this clear. At first glance, *The Railroad* (illus. 2) seems to have nothing in common with this execution picture: here a genre picture of Parisian “modern life”, there the portrayal of an event far away, almost exotic Mexico; here a motif for which Manet draws upon his immediate environment—in the upper left-hand corner of the picture, he causes the facade of his own atelier to appear—there a subject about which he was only informed by newspaper reports and limited photographic material, and for this composition made use of the pictorial formula of another artist. On a compositional level, in contrast, surprisingly many similarities are displayed. The wall in the execution picture corresponds to the grating of *The Railroad*, which in both divides out a narrow spatial area across the picture and at the same time allows what is behind it to be visible. Even as far as the details of bodily posture, the soldiers are comparable to the otherwise altogether different figure of the girl who looks through

the grating. Finally, in both paintings Manet contrasts the figure(s) on the left, who are turned towards the viewer, with those on the right, who are turned away, presenting a “lost profile”. Thus although both pictures are, in terms of genre and motif, considerably divergent, via a related pictorial structure they are connected with one another. This discovery can be extended beyond the two examples singled out. They demonstrate themselves to be members of a series of pictures, in which with respect to very different subjects comparable structural characteristics are repeatedly staged. What primarily interests me here, however, is the manner in which also in *The Railroad*, “seeing” and “perceiving” diverge, even come into conflict with each other—in a conflict that actually appears to be the subject of the picture.

*The Railroad* shows a governess with her charge or, equally plausible, a mother with her daughter who find themselves in a shallow spatial segment, which is defined on the one side by the iron grating and on the other by the edge of the picture. While the gaze of the woman transgresses the picture’s edge, the girl looks through the mediating space of the grating. Thereby the picture’s surface and the grating, which run parallel to one another, are analogized—as we have seen was the case with the wall in the execution picture. Both figures stand in a specific, however very different relation to the viewer. The woman looks at the viewer with a facial expression occurring very frequently in Manet’s oeuvre, one that above all signals that he has been noticed. At that same time this glance holds him at a distance, even pushes him away a bit, like a repoussoir device. The reversed figure of the girl, in contrast, repeats the position of the viewer within the picture. The girl stands at a boundary within the picture: at the border with the space behind the grating, observing it. In this fashion she finds herself so to speak both in and in front of the picture: *within* the picture she sees what the viewer sees *as* the picture. Via their antagonistic alignment, both figures together become a Janus-figure, which reflects the relationship between picture and viewer—mirroring, yet breaking with it.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> On the self-reflective qualities of the painting see the contributions of Michael Diers referred to in note 1, in which he discusses the interlacing of reflection about urban topography and about the métier of the visual artist.

But what is decisive is, however, that the “picture within the picture” is “blind”. Instead of the train which corresponds to the title, we see merely an amorphous cloud. The girl—and with her, the viewer—look at a white patch. Corresponding to that, the girl has no eyes: she is also “blind”, so that the metaphor of the “lost profile” appears to be literal here. The “blind spot” thwarts what one could call the “visibility promise” of a picture. Within the framework of the fictive coherence of visibility, which a picture normally produces, the girl must be able to “see”; or formulated the other way around, the picture must “show” the girl—and the viewer—something. On the one hand, Manet connects the viewer and the pictorial space by means of the figures’ nearness, their life-sized portrayal as well as via the visual contact with the sitting woman. But on the other hand, he severs the connection between both of the two spaces, inasmuch as he formally erases it with the white cloud. In the middle of the picture, which has to do with seeing, an essential invisibility establishes itself.

The girl in *The Railroad* belongs, like the soldiers in the *Execution of Maximilian*, to the fantasmatic figurations in Manet’s oeuvre, which are not to be fixed on the level of representation, as something in them always appears to be missing or not in its place. What has happened, for example, to the girl’s right arm and right shoulder, one might ask oneself? Their being missing is particularly noticeable due to the fleshy, perspectively unshortened, spatially extended left arm. Why does the skirt balloon out, as if it covers an enormous stomach? And is it possible that the two extremely precisely painted globes, dangling from the girl’s ear, each exhibiting their highlights, are to be understood as ersatz for the missing eyes? The girl’s bow elongated into an apron has an irritating effect in another way, as it is the only pictorial element that is turned completely frontally. Its materiality appears to clearly differentiate itself from that of the woman’s dark-blue dress. With its shiny and rawly applied blue, changing into silver, it oscillates between a piece of cloth and a piece of painting material. The impression is generated as if the representational process is here brought to a halt at a point where the materiality of the paint has not yet switched over into the materiality of the object to be represented. The brushwork—as the materiality of paint, canvas, and brushstroke—and the texture—as the surface structure of the represented cloth—

coincide. Thus the blue apron permits itself neither to be reduced to the representation of a painting-external object nor the material reality of the picture as a picture. It is much more the case that it presents itself as a place where the appearance of painting-external reality and the materiality of the painting come into contact with one another. We meet up with the painterly paradox of such a “concrete” representational means: that the beginning and the end of the process of representation, figuration and disfiguration, sign and meaningless spot, all flow into one another.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly the strangest place in the picture, however, must be another “point of contact”: that involving the girl, the grating, and the white cloud of steam. Does the girl actually look through between the bars, or does she not more likely have the grating bars directly in front of her eyes? Manet retrospectively modified this decisive spot. He changed the position of the bars of the grating, which thus exhibit narrower spacing in the middle of the picture as on the sides, in addition to which he corrected the girl’s profile, which had originally completely covered the grating bar.<sup>13</sup> He thereby created the present constellation, in which the bar appears to conceal the invisible eye. The cloud into which the girl gazes is not to be found in the open space behind the grating’s bars, but rather hangs between them. This is particularly evident immediately above the girl’s head: the white does not continue behind the bars of the grating, even does not touch them, but rather allows a narrow brown strip of the background to remain. Evidently Manet painted the cloud into the picture last, with which he filled the intervals between the bars. But that means that Manet did not so much paint something as he effaced something. Here it is not what one sees that is painted, nor what one does not see: what is painted is *that one does not see*.

Although every description of this picture almost obligatorially speaks about how the girl looks into a cloud, it is equally clear that this cloud is in the first place plain white

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Daniel Arasse, “Le détail—Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture” (Paris, 1996), 280f. Arasse is speaking in relation to a painted piece of cloth by Titian, about how a “pan de tissu” becomes a “pan de peinture”. For an analysis of a comparable oscillation between painting material and the painted in Vermeer’s *View of Delft*, see Georges Didi-Huberman, “L’art de ne pas décrire, une aporie du détail chez Vermeer”, *La part de l’œil* 2 (1986), 102-19.

<sup>13</sup> Juliet Wilson-Bareau, *Manet, Monet and the Gare Saint-Lazare* (Paris: Musée d’Orsay/Washington: National Gallery, 1998), 57.



paint. As can be understood from the title of Manet's picture, it stands for the steam which is emitted by a train pulling into the Gare Saint-Lazare station—which is located further left, outside of the picture. Yet similarly to the girl's bow, the white frees itself from this denotative function, in that it does not (or at least does not adequately) refer to a referent external to the painting. The white becomes something and simultaneously does not: becomes "no/thing". This nothing allows illusion and the violation of illusion, illusion and dis-illusion coincide—because it effaces the representation precisely where it has to do with a seeing-through. In this fashion the cloud becomes the picture's *mise-en-abîme*. It doubles the picture, in order to at the same time to trace it back to its foundations.<sup>14</sup>

The girl stands within the picture, as it was described at the beginning, for the viewer in front of the picture, as the bars of the grating also repeat the boundaries of the picture within it. The girl's "not seeing" is accordingly valid—at least partly—for the viewer as well. The paradox of painting which *The Railroad* displays is paralleled by the paradox of aesthetic experience, wherein the picture appears to "contemplate" the viewer precisely where it seems most external and material: at the places where representation collapses and the picture runs aground. In as far as the white cloud or also the blue apron manifest themselves as negatives within the picture, they partition off the speech, partition off the picture. But precisely at these moments the picture "subjectivizes" itself, we are ourselves "present" in the picture. If pragmatically oriented seeing has as its goal structuring the field of vision as plastically articulated space, then here in the picture's center any plasticity is neutralized. Seeing is traced back to its basis—to a basis that is "formless" and "inhuman".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> On the *mise en abîme* (or "abyss") as an artistic strategy—as a "game within the game" in the theater or "picture within a picture", see Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récit spéculaire—Essai sur la mise en abîme* (Paris, 1977).

<sup>15</sup> "Formless" relates back to Bataille's interpretation of the term; see Georges Bataille, "Informe", *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1970), I, 217. The adjective "inhuman" plays with a remark of Merleau-Ponty's about Cézanne: "La peinture de Cézanne met en suspens ces habitudes [which regulate human access to the world—author] et révèle le fond de nature inhumaine sur lequel l'homme s'installe". (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le doute de Cézanne", in same author's *Sens et non-sens* (Paris, 1996), 13-33, here 21.

A couple of years ago, Juliet Wilson-Bareau succeeded in identifying the building façade in the upper left corner of the picture as that of the outside of Manet's new studio in the rue de Saint-Petersbourg. This studio was located behind the window that presses itself up against the furthestmost bar of the grill-work.<sup>16</sup> This detail convinced its discoverer of the picture's realism. What it shows is what Manet, from his standpoint in the garden of his painter friend Alphonse Hirsch, in fact could exactly have seen. For from there not only the tracks running into Saint-Lazare station but the façade of his new studio are to be seen. The picture that had remained a riddle up until now seemed to be decoded. It celebrated, according to Wilson-Bareau, the new studio and at the same time his own approach to painting, which even in the case of a so obviously plein-air picture as *The Railroad* was based on work in the studio. Manet, "the most Parisian of all painters" indicated with this evidence how important to his work the connection with the urban context was. Precisely how the rest of his oeuvre it also mirrored the city's changing fabric—in this specific instance, the railroad's entry into the old Parisian city's precincts—as well as the various social and political powers which formed the city.<sup>17</sup>

In fact, just as the "nothing" of the cloud fails to reveal the railroad and everything it stands for in terms of transportation technology, and urban and social issues, the detail of the studio façade serves not so much to demonstrate the picture's realism, but rather to confirm its self-reflective character, which makes visible the painting's nature and its being experienced. If one brings to mind that between the grating and the façade lie extensive tracks, one will be aware of how the latter is represented too as too close-sighted. The extent of space is clearly noticeable on the right side, with respect to details like the switch-house and two workers on the tracks, above all in the distance of the line of buildings, which the studio façade actually continues. The outside of Manet's studio, in contrast to those, has the impact of being projected onto the picture—like the clouds of smoke, it appears to be to be another "picture within the picture". If we take notice of the painting process, then here the antagonistic,

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<sup>16</sup> Wilson-Bareau, *Manet, Monet*, 1ff.

<sup>17</sup> Wilson-Bareau, *Manet, Monet*, 1-3; 16.

turning inward and outward of the pictorial structure held clamped returns again on another level. Manet paints the outward appearance of the space, within which the picture is generated. He paints the view of the window, behind which he finds himself during painting—and from where, in reverse, the place the girl is located standing and looking out from would be visible. Thus the painter finds himself both “here” and “there”, inside and outside, in front of the picture and at the same time behind the window that appears in the picture. The blindness of Manet’s studio window appears thus as a final indication, that for Manet painting does not at all mean finding a suitable standpoint, and then to paint what one sees—as the realistic interpretation of this picture suggests, which understands it as the continuation of the sociopolitical or literary discourses of metropolitan Paris with other means.

Manet’s paintings bring into conflict “seeing” and “perceiving” by means of the incongruities of their relation within the picture, as well as between the picture and its viewer. The centrally located voids have the effect of a “painting zero”. They cancel painting out qua discourse, reason, or cognition, but at the same time throw it qua experience of the anti-semiotic, the unexpressable, and the fascination of the gaze, into relief in their potentiality. Manet’s painting is permeated with a dialectic of promise and refusal. *The Railroad* allows vision to become blind, and this by means of the motif of looking and a girl, who is lost in the act of looking. On the other hand, the provocation of the *Execution of Maximilian* lies in frustrating the expectation of a closed meaning of the image calculated with history painting as the model case of a palpable context of figures and event. The opposition between aesthetics and epistemology that is introduced into the paintings demonstrates that Manet belongs among the decided defenders of painting’s autonomy. With many other painters of his time, he shared the concern with eliminating “literature” in its broadest sense from painting. This should not be connectable with any kind of text, thus even not to a heterological “discourse” which would determine from the outside its production, and its way of being seen. This explains the increasing tendency towards “openness” and the “unfinished” that began to manifest itself in the painting of that time. For both undermine the possibility of drawing a specific meaning from the picture, and

encourage the viewer to investigate the polysemy without being able to exhaust the work.<sup>18</sup> Within this large field, Manet's uniqueness lies in not rejecting any such "discourse" from the beginning, as the Impressionists did, who understood their going into nature as an intervention against urban civilization. He calls upon these discourses in a very explicit manner, only to let them dissolve before our eyes.

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<sup>18</sup> On this, see for the details Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art—Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris, 1992), especially 185ff.



Illustration 1: Edouard Manet: *The Execution of Maximilian*, last version, 1868/69, oil on canvas, 252 x 302 cm, Mannheim, Städtische Kunsthalle



Illustration 2: Edouard Manet: *The Railroad*, 1872/73, oil on canvas, 93 x 114 cm, Washington, National Gallery of Art





Illustration 3: Francisco de Goya: *Execution of the Rebels on the 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid*, 1814, oil on canvas, 266 x 345 cm, Madrid, Museo del Prado



Illustration 4:  
detail of illus.1:  
*The Execution  
of Maximilian*





Illustration 5: detail of illus.1: *The Execution of Maximilian*



Illustration 6:  
detail of illus.1:  
*The Execution of  
Maximilian*



Illustration 7: Abraham Bosse after Luciano Borzone: *Belisarius Receiving Alms*, around 1620/30, etching, 31,5 x 35,4 cm, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale