

Vasile-Ovidiu Prejmerean

DOI: 10.17234/9789531759113.6

University of Fribourg, Switzerland

## **Femininity and Self-Referentiality in Painting and Psychoanalysis: Degas' Art between the Mirror's Glimpse and the Spectator's Voyeurism**

**Abstract:** *The paper will aim to offer a new perspective on Degas' dialogue with the artistic tradition, Delacroix' The Barque of Dante being of particular interest to our analysis since it will be shown to have had an essential influence on his famous Bathers theme. Furthermore, the examination will encompass paintings which reveal the self-referential dimension of his work, such as Retiring, where Degas captures the twilight moment when the nude woman turns off the light and in so doing her control over the (male?) spectator's gaze who is to be shut out is being highlighted and Madame Jeantaud at the Mirror, where the 'young' woman, still standing, turns her face away from the viewer, whilst the mirroring 'older' one, seated, looks directly at us and in so doing, shows us that she knows. In order to decipher several of Degas's abstruse pictorial codes we have opted for the approach proposed by Lacan in his XIth Seminar, where the renowned psychoanalyst not only emphasizes the power of the Gaze over the Eye leading to the inversion between the subject and object in the act of seeing, but also conditions the woman's deriving delight from being seen on her being unaware of the man knowing she knows of his gaze having been set upon her. We contend that it is precisely the perceived fracture within the perception frames which mediates between the acts of veiling, knowing and revealing, the unification between them taking place through the emergence of the Self as both object and subject of the representation.*

**Keywords:** *Edgar Degas, After the Bath, Eugène Delacroix, The Barque of Dante, Jacques Lacan, The Gaze, anxiety, control*

### **Introduction**

Edgar Degas (1834-1917) is without doubt one of the most controversial artists of the nineteenth century.

Already legendary, his "voyeurism" and "misogyny"<sup>1</sup> make it extremely difficult

---

<sup>1</sup> For a brilliant analysis see Broude 1977, pp. 95-107.

to approach the theme of femininity in his work, the stereotype of the woman-object<sup>2</sup> being almost impossible to avoid. We do not wish to argue that such a manner of perceiving the world of the 'opposite' sex does not occupy an important part in Degas' oeuvre, but too often we tend to ignore the artistic qualities of the image by not differentiating between Degas the sadist and Degas the experimenter.

Perhaps one of the most widely known examples regarding this matter is his relationship with Mary Cassatt which has constantly been marked by mutual respect. If it is true Degas represents her holding Tarot cards<sup>3</sup> (a profession that enjoyed a rather dubious reputation at the time), he also depicts his friend as a most respectable person visiting the Louvre<sup>4</sup>, which clearly constitutes a tribute to her artistic profession and her talent, the woman thus ceasing to be

only an 'object-like' figure and becoming creative in turn.

In the present study we shall endeavor not only to track down the potential sources of inspiration for some of his compositions depicting women, but also to offer a balanced vision that will seek to detect the subtleties of the French artist's thought by analyzing several artworks where the female character triggers the self-referential dimension of the image, making it manifest itself prominently and challenge the spectator. Given the ambiguity and ambivalence that characterizes Degas' pictorial space, as well as the importance that the control/anxiety duality plays in his oeuvre, we shall analyze these works using a Lacanian interpretation matrix, which, as we shall see, will offer a most precious insight into his voyeuristic tendencies and the manner in which they shape the creator-viewer relationship.

### Mirror, mirror on the wall

The first image we wish to examine is *Madame Jeantaud at the mirror*<sup>5</sup>, who is depicted looking directly at us *from* the mirror while in the same time gazing at

---

2 See also Broude 1988, pp. 640–659.

3 Hosted by the National Portrait Gallery, Washington DC.  
[http://npg.si.edu/portraits/search?edan\\_q=mary+cassatt&edan\\_local=1&edan\\_fq%5B0%5D=p.e.danmdm.descriptivenonrepeating.unit\\_code%3A%22NPG%22&incCAP=false&op=Search](http://npg.si.edu/portraits/search?edan_q=mary+cassatt&edan_local=1&edan_fq%5B0%5D=p.e.danmdm.descriptivenonrepeating.unit_code%3A%22NPG%22&incCAP=false&op=Search) (last access: 07.11. 2017)

4 See for example the Metropolitan Museum of Art version:  
<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/19.29.2/> (last access: 07.11. 2017). For a thorough analysis of the theme see Callen 1995, especially chapter 6: *Privileged Sights – Sites of Privilege. Portraits, Spectators and Gender*.

---

5 Hosted by Musée d'Orsay  
[http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire\\_id/mrs-jeantaud-in-the-mirror-2244.html?tx\\_commentaire\\_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx\\_commentaire\\_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=841&cHash=bff3fdfbe7](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/mrs-jeantaud-in-the-mirror-2244.html?tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=841&cHash=bff3fdfbe7) (last access: 07.11. 2017)

herself *in* the mirror, thus throwing the viewer off balance and into the painting's imaginary space<sup>6</sup>, forcing him or her to switch places with the protagonist – Madame Jeantaud –, and in so doing constitutes the perfect example on how to illustrate the ambiguity of the mirror-image frame of reference which arouses the anxiety of the subject/object, who both sees and is seen simultaneously.

Berthe-Marie Bachoux, cousin of Viscount Ludovic Lepic and wife of engineer Charles Jeantaud, himself a comrade to the painter during the Commune, was depicted by Degas in 1875, more or less about the time she also sat for Jean-Jacques Henner<sup>7</sup>. Around the same date Degas also made a not at all out of the ordinary version showing *Madame Jeantaud on her Chaise Longue with Two Dogs*<sup>8</sup>.

The work we will submit to analysis is, on the other hand, much more complex. Berthe-Marie is shown dressed to go out and throwing one last glance at herself in the mirror, which we are confronted with directly. Therefore, we could say that we are dealing with 'two' Madame Jeantauds, one who looks in the mirror and the other who looks at us. The 'first' one is more delicate, as we can see especially in the white profile of her face, while the 'second' is darker, the painter having decided to use large brushstrokes of green and brown. The first one does not look at us at all, her eyes – and much of her face – being hidden, while the second looks at the viewer almost directly. Furthermore, the left eye of the reflected woman (and, therefore, the right eye of the 'first' Madame Jeantaud) is clearly figured by the artist, whilst the other is (almost) unfinished, lost in the facial features that surround it. These duality/unity, interior/exterior and reality/virtual games capture – and freeze – not only the viewer, absorbing him into this picture, but also space-time itself as the image also reveals the intersection of two different temporal segments – the "present" time of the woman who looks at us through the mirror and the "future" time announced by the woman we see dressed to go out – but who, if we look carefully 'into' the mirror, seems to actually be sitting! – and walk the streets of Paris. Moreover, the black shades characteristic of the

6 See also Farr 1996, pp. 305–325.

7 See Loyrette 1991, pp. 358–359, Boggs 1988, pp. 247–248. See also

<http://www.art.com/products/p8112358778-sa-i5197170/jean-jacques-henner-mme-jeantaud.htm?sOrig=CAT&sOrigID=255560&dimVals=255560&ui=37813223620A4B59AF05747B49FD8CB9> (last access: 07.11.2017)

8

[https://www.google.ch/search?q=madame+jeantaud+with+two+dogs&client=firefox-b-ab&dcr=0&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwigpruh96nXAhWRJewKHSRGG8Q\\_AUICigB&biw=1536&bih=756#imgrec=ffqWRfubVB1FOM](https://www.google.ch/search?q=madame+jeantaud+with+two+dogs&client=firefox-b-ab&dcr=0&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwigpruh96nXAhWRJewKHSRGG8Q_AUICigB&biw=1536&bih=756#imgrec=ffqWRfubVB1FOM): (last access: 07.11.2017)

woman who looks at us contrasts the whiteness of the 'mirror' Madame Jeantaud and so a second temporal duality is revealed: the one between the age of youth and the old age, the 'chronotopic' dimension of the painting becoming thus impossible to ignore. As we shall further see when discussing Lacan's theory concerning the gaze,<sup>9</sup> one would have to wonder if the woman knows that the (male) spectator watching her is aware that she knows she is being watched by him or not. As a master of ambiguity, Degas does not want to destroy the mystery and lets us immerse ourselves in the frozen lake of the mirror. Given the aforementioned particularities of the painting, we could argue that the "young" woman, with the hidden face, does not know it, while the "elderly" one looking directly at us does, this duality being also reflected in the difference between the eyes - the "right" one, the eye that knows is shown, whilst the "left" eye, the unseen eye, is hidden within the sea of color.

This particular example of the *voir-et-savoir* game shows us how the ambiguity of the pictorial codes and the anxiety of the gaze are unified in a perpetual effort to push back on the boundaries of space and time. Through the self-reflexivity of pictorial act, the temporal flow is being

---

<sup>9</sup> Exposed in *Du regard comme petit objet a*, part of his *XI<sup>th</sup> Seminar*. For this paper we have used Lacan 1990.

transformed into a bridge towards the spectator who is to enter the picture's space. As far as the possible sources of inspiration are concerned, the first images that came to mind are Velazquez' and Titian's *Venus at Her Mirror*<sup>10, 11</sup>, which both entice the spectator to take part in an intimate scene full of erotic implications. Given Degas' vast culture and knowledge of the Renaissance and Baroque masters - proven by both his notebooks<sup>12</sup> and his collection<sup>13</sup> - it is entirely possible he had drawn inspiration from (at least) one of the aforementioned sources.

However, we can also find a similar example when considering XVIIth century Dutch painting. In Frans van Mieris's *Woman at the Mirror*<sup>14</sup> we can see how the 'real' woman shows us her left cheek, while the woman who is 'in the mirror' reveals all her face, looking

---

<sup>10</sup> Hosted by the The National Gallery, London. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rokeby\\_Venus#/media/File:RokebyVenus.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rokeby_Venus#/media/File:RokebyVenus.jpg) (last access 07.11.2017).

<sup>11</sup> Hosted by The National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. (last access 07.11.2017) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus\\_with\\_a\\_Mirror#/media/File:Titian\\_-\\_Venus\\_with\\_a\\_Mirror\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_with_a_Mirror#/media/File:Titian_-_Venus_with_a_Mirror_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

<sup>12</sup> The authority on the matter is Reff 1985.

<sup>13</sup> See Dumas 1997 and Ives et. al. 1997.

<sup>14</sup> Hosted by Alte Pinakothek. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van\\_Mieris\\_I,\\_Frans\\_van\\_-\\_Woman\\_before\\_the\\_Mirror\\_\(detail\)\\_-\\_c.\\_1670.jpg#/media/File:Frans\\_van\\_Mieris\\_d.\\_%C3%84.\\_001.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Van_Mieris_I,_Frans_van_-_Woman_before_the_Mirror_(detail)_-_c._1670.jpg#/media/File:Frans_van_Mieris_d._%C3%84._001.jpg) (last access 07.11.2017)

directly at us – not at all unlike Madame Jeantaud. Moreover, the positions of the hands of the 'two' women are different to the point where it seems that the woman who looks at us is depicted seated rather than standing – once again reminding us of Degas' painting. So far there is no known connection between Degas and Frans van Mieris, however since he was well acquainted with Rembrandt and Dutch painting in general it is entirely possible that further research might reveal most interesting results on the issue.

So far, we have seen how the mirrors open up the picture's space, 'luring' the spectator and making him part of the artwork. A similar pattern will emerge when we shall discuss the following three images, but let us first get acquainted with Lacan's view on how the outside world is watching us – a most disquieting sensation on which his XI<sup>th</sup> Seminar offers us a fundamental key.

### The eye of the needle

In his chapters dedicated to analysing the *Gaze* (XI<sup>th</sup> Seminar, six through nine) Lacan offers a completely different version from Leon Battista Alberti's classical theory of what seeing – and being seen – is: « Je ne suis pas simplement cet être punctiforme qui se repère au point géométral d'où est saisie la perspective. Sans doute, au fond de

mon œil, se peint le tableau. Le tableau, certes, est dans mon œil. Mais moi, je suis dans le tableau. Ce qui est lumière me regarde<sup>15</sup>...Il me faut, pour commencer, insister sur ceci – dans le champ scopique, le regard est au-dehors, je suis regardé, c'est-à-dire, je suis tableau. C'est là la fonction qui se trouve au plus intime de l'institution du sujet dans le visible. Ce qui me détermine foncièrement dans le visible, c'est le regard qui est au-dehors. C'est par le regard que j'entre dans la lumière, et c'est du regard que j'en reçois l'effet. D'où il ressort que le regard est l'instrument par où la lumière s'incarne, et par où – si vous me permettez de me servir d'un mot comme je le fais souvent, en le décomposant – je suis *photo-graphié*<sup>16</sup> »

[I am not just that punctiform being which is located at the geometrical point from which perspective is captured. No doubt, deep in my eye, the picture is painted. The painting, of course, is in my eye. But I am inside the picture. What is light is watching me...I must first of all insist on this – in the scopic field, the gaze is outside, I am looked at, that is to say, I am a painting. This is the function which lies at the most intimate of the institution of the subject inside the visible. What determines me fundamentally inside the visible is the

---

15 Lacan 1990, pp. 110-111.

16 Lacan 1990, p. 121.

gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter the light, and it is from the gaze that I receive the effect. From which it emerges that the gaze is the instrument by which light is incarnated, and by which – if you allow me to use a word as I often do, by decomposing it – I am 'photo-graphed']. In order to better understand his system<sup>17</sup> – baffling at least at first to the unacquainted reader – Lacan narrates his famous sardine box story: while on a boat with Breton fishermen (he was eighteen at the time) he spots a shining point on the water and asks a young fisherman 'what is that?'; the boy answers him: 'it's a box of sardines – you can see it, but it does not see at you!<sup>18</sup> So you are seen, you do not know by whom, and you cannot see what is beyond that point that looks at you – hence the anxiety. If you are not looked at by the world, you might just as well not exist at all.

In the following images we shall see how this mechanism functions in terms of the character – spectator relationship, but let us first draw attention to a similar experience Degas has had when he was thirty-five as it is revealed in a letter by Degas to Henry Rouart (New Orleans, 1872, December 5th): « On ne fait rien ici, c'est dans le climat, que du coton, on y vit pour le coton, et par le

17 Griselda Pollock is among the first to signal that one might get a better grasp of Degas' oeuvre if he or she was acquainted with Lacan's work. See Pollock 1992, esp. pp.115–119.

18 Lacan 1990, p. 110.

coton. La lumière est si forte que je n'ai pu encore faire quelque chose sur le fleuve. Mes yeux ont si besoin de soin que je ne les risque guère. »<sup>19</sup>

[People do nothing here, it is in the climate, only cotton, they live for the cotton, and by the cotton. The light is so strong that I have not been able to do anything on the river yet. My eyes need so much care that I do not dare risk them].

All his life Degas will be afraid that he could go blind and this fear has constantly proven to be one of his most ominous causes of his anxiety. This state of continuous intellectual turbulence reveals itself once more in one of Degas' most famous quotes which explains his famous voyeurism and sheds light on his 'discrete' manner of signing his works, especially the ones representing nudes: « Je voudrais être illustre et inconnu »<sup>20</sup> [I would like to be famous and unknown]. Lacan's position on the man-woman/see-being seen dualities is also not an uncomplicated one: « N'y a-t-il pas de la satisfaction à être sous ce regard...qui nous cerne, ce qui fait d'abord de nous des êtres regardés, mais sans qu'on nous le montre ? Le spectacle du monde, en ce sens, nous apparaît comme omnivoyeur... Au niveau même de l'expérience phénoménale de la

19 Degas 1945, p. 25.

20 See Loyrette 2012.

contemplation, ce côté omnivoyeur se pointe dans la satisfaction d'une femme à se savoir regardée, à condition qu'on ne le lui montre pas. Le monde est omnivoyeur, mais il n'est pas exhibitionniste – il ne provoque pas notre regard. Quand il commence à le provoquer, alors commence aussi le sentiment d'étrangeté »<sup>21</sup>

[Is there not satisfaction in being under that gaze ... which surrounds us, which makes us first of all beings who are gazed at, but without us being shown that? The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing ... At the very level of the phenomenal experience of contemplation, this all-seeing side is manifested in the satisfaction of a woman to know that she is being watched, provided that she is not shown we are aware of it. The world is all-seeing, but it is not an exhibitionist – it does not provoke our gaze. When it begins to provoke it, then the feeling of alienation begins].

So there clearly is satisfaction in a woman's knowledge of being gazed at<sup>22</sup> as long as she doesn't (supposedly) know the man knows she knows he's watching

21 Lacan 1990, pp. 87–88.

22 One most of course point out that *looked-at-ness*, displaying the female (body) for the enjoyment of the opposite sex, may very well end up giving birth to both voyeurism (and through the control it establishes, even sadism) and fetishistic scopophilia. See Mulvey 1999, p. 840.

her (in this context let us remember the difference between the aforementioned 'young' Madame Jeantaud's perception of the world compared to the 'older' one). Furthermore, according to Lacan, usually the world is not exhibitionist, but when that does eventually happen, when the world starts to provoke our gaze, our own feeling of alienness will start emerging. The following picture will shed new light on this mechanism.

One of Degas' most famous paintings of modern Paris is *Women in front of a cafe, in the evening*<sup>23</sup>. The question that arises in this case is whether the women depicted here are indeed 'working' or not. After a very elaborate analysis to which we subscribe, Hollis Clayson<sup>24</sup> answers this question positively by showing that the image hesitates between the two interpretations (there are several women who wait, nevertheless there is only one who has a drink in front of her, while another is leaving and a man, in the background, is hurrying to go somewhere else), but in the end it is precisely this cultivated

23 Hosted by Musée d'Orsay.

[http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no\\_cache=1&zoom=1&tx\\_damzoom\\_pi1%5Bzoom%5D=0&tx\\_damzoom\\_pi1%5Bxmllid%5D=001492&tx\\_damzoom\\_pi1%5Bback%5D=%2Ffr%2Fcollections%2Fcatalogue-des-oeuvres%2Fnotice.html%3Fno\\_cache%3D1%26numid%3D001492%26cHash%3Db747419439](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no_cache=1&zoom=1&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bzoom%5D=0&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bxmllid%5D=001492&tx_damzoom_pi1%5Bback%5D=%2Ffr%2Fcollections%2Fcatalogue-des-oeuvres%2Fnotice.html%3Fno_cache%3D1%26numid%3D001492%26cHash%3Db747419439) (last access 07.11. 2017)

24 See Clayson 1992, pp. 66–69.

ambiguity which shows that prostitution becomes a permanent 'state of being' of the woman who practices it.

For the contemporary spectator who sees the work displayed on the museum's wall, the image resembles a skillfully orchestrated scenography where each character perfectly knows its place, its entrance and his exit, as in a musical or theatrical piece. The windows in the background highlight the faceless man who is hurrying (the pictorial technique might suggest that it is raining and the space is physically closed, but such an interpretation would mean that the protagonists are 'inside' the establishment and not 'in front' of it), placing his black costume in stark contrast with the women's colorful clothing. Are we looking at the scene through an invisible window - in a manner symmetrical to the man hurrying in the background might have had? Since no character looks 'beyond' the image (even when they talk to each other the women seem to have almost closed their eyes) while the viewer is completely ignored, we would seem to be "outside" the story - somewhat like the (invisible) man leaving the stage.

What is certain is that the man does not look at the women and that the women do not look at the man, the clearly defined social differences reinforcing the contrast. Eventually it does not

matter if we are "inside" or "outside" the painting, we are ignored in both cases. We will never know for certain if the women were aware of the man having stopped in front of the mirror to look at them - possibly they did, given their (imagined?) proclivities - thus inevitably turning himself into the viewer's mirror - or not. What we do know is that we are before a painting that does not look back at the viewer. This is a picture of the denied gaze.

Another image 'inviting' the viewer into the picture's space is *Dancer with a bouquet greeting on the stage*<sup>25</sup>, which, through power of physiognomy (heavily employed by Degas<sup>26</sup>), illustrates a rather shocking example of the carefully constructed artificiality present in the opera world. The lead ballerina is placed in the center of the stage/image and dominates it clearly, the other ones being illustrated in a centrifugal and sketchy fashion, towards the sides. The only character who could question her importance seems to be walking towards the center of the stage from the left, but Degas makes sure that her face - all white and without defined features - is cut off by the edge of the painting. The other ballerinas grouped

---

25 Hosted by Musée d'Orsay.  
[http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no\\_cache=1&numid=002082&cHash=2e246a55ef](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no_cache=1&numid=002082&cHash=2e246a55ef) (last access 07.11.2017)

26 See for example Schaller 1995.



around the umbrella on the right – held by a black girl, just like the other one who holds the umbrella placed in the center of the image, the ‘race code’ being thus revealed<sup>27</sup> – or elsewhere in the back seem to have a rather a decorative role.

So it would seem that the image of the world is indeed a stage and Degas wants to show us that the opera's universe that encompasses it is ontologically artificial – including the ballerinas in it. They are no more ‘real’ than the ‘beach’ or the ‘rocks’ or the ‘sea’, all present in the picture, this vision clearly illustrating his conception of the artistic act – specifically the concept of the painter as the *artifex*, who must ‘reveal’ a carefully constructed world to the viewer<sup>28</sup>.

But this painting wants to tell us more. The lead dancer's almost simian face – not at all a unique occurrence in Degas' oeuvre – greets (and thanks!) us, ultimately relying that her world is not only artificial, but also grotesque, this sad irony revealing itself both in the asymmetry of the cheeks and the distortion of the mouth and also in the ‘sharpened’ way the artist chose to delimit the empty black eyes of the ballerina, which seemingly ‘sucks in’ the

entrapped<sup>29</sup> spectator. Degas is also shown to be weary of the power of the female gaze in *Young Woman with Field Glasses*<sup>30</sup>, which is not only a metaphor of the augmented gaze, but also an inquiry into what lies behind the foregrounded lady's ‘eyes’. Through the power of the binoculars it is the woman who ‘paints’ and ‘photo-graphs’ Degas – and the viewer – to use Lacanian language. The everlasting connection between the act of seeing and its erotic connotations is clearly revealed when the woman, during the ‘aggressive’ act of gazing at us so forcefully, points the binoculars – an inverted phallus – towards the viewer. We can say that in a certain way the woman is ‘masked’ since we cannot see her eyes which in pure pictorial terms have been replaced by (and with) black blots of color – let us remember Lacan's sardine story again – and so whatever that is behind/beyond them becomes invisible to our own gaze, prompting the feeling of uneasiness in the spectator's mind.

### **The Gaze, the Barque and the Bath**

Let us now turn our attention to a woman gazing intently at the viewer without wearing her mask (or at least it's

---

27 See also Marilyn R. Brown's essay about Miss LaLa in Brown 2017.

28 Two essential works for understanding Degas' system of thought are Reff 1976 and Kendall 1996.

---

29 On the Gaze that threatens and destroys, as well as how to avert it, see Olin 1996.

30 One of Degas most famous creations which has enjoyed much attention given its unique way of confronting the viewer. For its importance in the context of the Degas–Manet dialogue see Stoichiță 2005, pp. 82–84.

not worn on the outside!). The drawing represents the wife of Frédéric Villot, curator at the Louvre Museum from 1848 to 1861, where he was responsible for a catalog of its collections organized in chronological order and by schools of painting. He was a good friend of Delacroix<sup>31</sup> – of whom he possessed numerous paintings, drawings and engravings – and he himself engraved a series of etchings based on works by the great artist.

We cannot know if this friendship or the seemingly successful marriage between Frédéric and Pauline played a distinctive role in Degas' choosing to buy this drawing<sup>32</sup>, but we can observe that the way Madame Villot looks at the spectator, as well as her costume and the position of her right hand reminds the informed viewer of another composition by Degas, his famous composition<sup>33</sup> representing Edmondo and Thérèse Morbilli<sup>34</sup> (there is also a

different version dating from the 1860s at the National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.).

The artist's sister is shown peering at the viewer next to her imposing husband – and first cousin – Edmondo and despite Thérèse's left hand on his shoulder, the distance between the spouses is clearly illustrated (just as it is in the case of the famous *Bellelli Family*<sup>35</sup>). Even if the marriage with Edmondo had apparently been based on true love in the beginning, the two eventually grew apart<sup>36</sup>. Having lost his mother at thirteen<sup>37</sup>, Degas never appeared to have quite broken free from a rather unhappy family history which later contributed to his often less than harmonious relationships with women, a fact which is more than transparent in his oeuvre.

The second Delacroix drawing owned by Degas to which we wish to draw attention to is a sketch for *The Barque of Dante* depicting a male character who

---

31 <http://www.musee-delacroix.fr/fr/les-activites/repertoire-biographique/frederic-villot-liege-1809-paris-1875> (last access 07.11.2017)

32 See Ives et. al. 1997, p. 48, Cat. No. 415.

33 Hosted by the Museum of Fine Arts Boston; (last access 07.11.2017)

<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/edmondo-and-th%C3%A9rese-morbilli-32404>

34 Let us not forget Hippolyte Flandrin's portrait of his wife, bearing a similar appearance, an important fact to consider since Degas was acquainted with his work. See for example Reff 1976, p.37.

[http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car\\_not\\_frame&idNotice=15328](http://cartelen.louvre.fr/cartelen/visite?srv=car_not_frame&idNotice=15328) (last access: 07.11.2017)

---

35 Hosted by Musée d'Orsay; (last access 07.11.2017)

[http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire\\_id/the-bellelli-family-7168.html?tx\\_commentaire\\_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx\\_comme](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/the-bellelli-family-7168.html?tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidLi%5D=509&tx_comme)

36 This portrait probably dates from the mid1860s, a period marked by her loss of child due to her poor health. See Boggs 1988, pp.118-119.

37 For a biographical sketch of the artist see for example Götz 1985.

is portrayed in a rather 'tortured' position<sup>38</sup>. In this context we must not forget that *The Barque of Dante* is also named *Dante and Virgil in Hell*<sup>39</sup>. More precisely here Delacroix represents the fifth circle of the Inferno where the wrathful sinners are condemned to forever fight Styx's waves. The character depicted in the sketch appears on the canvas at the center of the image right below Virgil in an inverted, mirrored position, with the head to the left and his leg to the right, furiously trying to climb into the boat. This sketch is important because it will establish, as we shall further see, a direct link between Delacroix's large canvas and Degas' *Bathers* theme to which he has dedicated not only an impressive amount of time reworking its variations using very different techniques and media, but also illustrate one of the reasons he was considered a 'sadist' - namely having had models pose for him in most uncomfortable positions for long periods of time.

Perhaps the closest to *The Barque of Dante's* iconography is an 1895 *After the Bath* oil on canvas<sup>40</sup> painting which

---

38 See Ives et. al. 1997, p. 36, Cat. No. 280.

39 Hosted by the Louvre.

<http://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/barque-dante> (last access 07.11.2017).

40 Hosted by the Getty Center. (last access 07.11.2017)

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/130756/edgar-degas-after-the-bath-french-about-1895/>

replaces the man with a woman and the boat with a tub. A true triumph of modernity! Moreover, what this sketch clearly shows is that it is very possible that Delacroix's large canvas constitutes the origin of many of Degas' images representing models in 'unnatural' positions. However, we must point out that it is unlikely the aforementioned sketch itself is at the origin of his paintings because it was bought by Degas in 1899<sup>41</sup> - whilst this composition dates from around 1895 - when his interest in this type of scene had already been well established. What the remarkable similarities of the sketch compared to his own compositions do show is the constant interest he held for this particular iconography. What probably happened is that after Degas had developed a special interest in *The Barque of Dante*, he started improvising - in a very modern fashion - on it and when one of the sketches used by Delacroix in the creation of the painting was up to sale, Degas bought it.

As mentioned above, the artist employed several media when depicting this theme, as his famous *Reader* monotype<sup>42</sup> showing a female character

---

41 As the date in the *Summary Catalogue* reveals.

42 Hosted by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

<https://www.nga.gov/Collection/art-object-page.39227.html>

in a similar position illustrates. What is worth mentioning is that since a monotype always reveals the 'mirror' image, Degas must have worked on this composition depicting the character with the head to the left and the legs to the right – precisely as the damned man appears in Delacroix's large canvas.

Even as a photographer he decided to 'study' the more or less the same 'tormented' position, as his 1896 gelatin silver print at the Getty Center<sup>43</sup> shows. It is thus undoubtedly clear that he had models sit for him in such 'serpentine' positions. Five years after her death, one of his former models published in *Le Mercure de France* a series of stories<sup>44</sup> where she revealed what an impossible person Degas was – impulsive, stubborn, and controlling. Of course, the fact that he was no longer young and his sight was becoming increasingly poorer made things much worse.

### The eye of the beholder

A common denominator for all of the *Bathers* examples discussed above is

---

(last access: 07.11.2017) See also Hauptman 2016, pp.160–161.

43

<http://www.getty.edu/art/collection/objects/40541/edgar-degas-after-the-bath-woman-drying-her-back-french-1896/>

44 Michel 1919. See below (last access: 07.11.2017)

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2018352/f79.image.langen>

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k201836f/f53.image.langen>

their portrayal from the back (Degas has shown bathers' faces on several occasions but on a general note, his focus was usually on the body and not on the head when portraying nudes) and this is also the case of his famous *The Tub*<sup>45</sup>. The apparently unusual position of the character and the 'synecdoches' of femininity on the table – notably the vase and the brush – have led to the idea that women are on 'display', an opinion also shared by the Degas' contemporaries, who seemed genuinely shocked when such nudes were exhibited in 1886, J.K. Huysmans even ending up accusing Degas of insisting so much on their 'animal' nature that he has entirely forsaken the femininity of his characters<sup>46</sup>. Which in turn raises concern about the status of these women. Who are they and, also important to the XIX<sup>th</sup> century viewer (only!), are they there to serve men's pleasure or not? These are questions that have proven to be extremely difficult to answer, especially for the female spectators who do not know if they need to identify themselves with these intimately exposed women or, on the contrary, repudiate them in case they highlighted the threat of

---

45 Hosted by Musée d'Orsay. (last access: 07.11.2017)

[http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire\\_id/le-tub-7086.html?no\\_cache=1](http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/search/commentaire_id/le-tub-7086.html?no_cache=1)

46 See Huysmans 1908, pp. 22–27.

prostitution. Huysmans evokes this thorny problem, but in the end his take turns into a badly hidden criticism – and even disdain – of the women's habits, who end up being blamed for their physiology<sup>47</sup>. However beyond his obviously misogynist view, a fundamental aspect which is addressed here is aimed at the idea that the woman is being watched while she is in the process of purifying herself, which in turn leads us to the highly tactile dimension of the painting, a sensation also reinforced by the technique used by Degas – namely large brushstrokes, almost sensual, highlighting the woman's body. Seeing – from outside of the pictorial space – and touching – within the pictorial space – go together.

Degas was, of course, aware of this game between the real and the substitute. The steep and almost incisive perspective clearly delimits the two (unequal) 'halves' of the composition: the 'real' half below – the woman in the tub – and its 'synecdoches', above, towards our point of view and – importantly – not far from Degas' signature (and accompanying date, '86'). A detail which so far has gone largely unnoticed is the fact that his name, placed right next to the almost

threatening scissors (again, a reminiscent of the control-anxiety duality), is of the same bluish color as they are. As mentioned above, Degas 'cuts' the image in two between the 'natural/biological' side of the woman and the (pictorial) "man"-made' world, in accordance with his belief that an artist has to be a true *artifex* and should not just 'present' nature as it appears to be.

The final image we wish to submit to the reader's attention is *Retiring*<sup>48</sup>, which displays an even less conspicuous signature – that of true voyeur –, in the bottom left, hidden between the curtain's rich colors. In this painting the main character is represented on the bed, still naked, holding a white towel in her right hand while with her left (ominous?) hand she prepares to turn off/extinguish the light (thus showing her control over the pictorial space). Her fingers are on the button of the night lamp, which is the only source of light and the only way to assign "presence" to her being, and, unavoidably, to the viewer's. The woman's face is delicate and drawn with great sensibility but, once again, not clearly visible and partially shaded. Furthermore, the chromatic richness and the details of the curtains that will eventually guard

---

47 For an in-depth analysis of the historical and artistic context see Armstrong 2003, especially the chapter *Against the Grain: J.-K. Huysmans and the 1886 Series of Nudes*.

---

48 Hosted by the Art Institute of Chicago.  
<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/31813> (last access: 07.11.2017)

and 'hide' the bed and the woman *after* everything goes dark are chiseled with much more care than the woman's features, apparently making the shell that defines the space seem more important than the pearl it is supposed to protect. But all this universe will cease to exist once she turns off the light. The space-time continuum is thus placed under the microscope of the artist-experimenter and so we can contend that this pastel is ontologically a 'photograph' that captures – and in so doing forces out the self-referentiality of the image through the anticipation of the act of switching the button – the last second of a universe that is about to die on its very own terms. The curtain has fallen.

### Conclusion

Edgar Degas was one of the most intelligent artists of the nineteenth century and, despite his "misogyny", one of the most sensitive. A proper understanding of his works requires the art historian to leave the realm of the stereotypes and examine his creations in an unbiased fashion. Our work has aimed to offer such a perspective by examining Degas' paintings through the mirror/image of self-referentiality which in our opinion offers an original and balanced vision of the artist's work. While writing this paper we realized that the most important lesson Degas teaches us is that by viewing the

relationship between sexes as a back-to-back double mirror which separates the feminine and masculine universes by showing each of them only what he or she wants will only provoke more loneliness and misunderstanding. What we need to do is walk the path towards the center and so what will be revealed before our eyes is that there is no double mirror that separates us, but in fact we are in between two all-reflecting mirrors placed face to face, each of them already behind us.

### Bibliography

Armstrong 2003

C. Armstrong, *Odd Man Out. Readings of the Work and Reputation of Edgar Degas*, The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles 2003.

Boggs 1988

J. Sutherland Boggs, *Degas (1834–1917)*, Éditions de la RMN, National Gallery of Canada, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Paris, Ottawa, New York 1988.

Broude 1977

N. Broude, *Degas's "Misogyny"*, in: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 59, I, March 1977, pp. 95–107.

Broude 1988

N. Broude, *Edgar Degas and French Feminism, ca. 1880: "The Young Spartans," the Brothel Monotypes, and the Bathers Revisited*, in: *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 70, IV, December 1988, pp. 640–659.

Brown 2017

M.R. Brown, *'Miss LaLa's' teeth: further reflections on Degas and 'race' in Perspectives on Degas*, K. Brown (ed.), Routledge, London and New York 2017.

Callen 1995

A. Callen, *The Spectacular Body. Science, Method and Meaning in the Work of Degas*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London 1995.

- Clayson 1992.  
H. Clayson, *The Sexual Politics of Impressionist Illegibility in Dealing with Degas. Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, R. Kendall and G. Pollock (eds.), Pandora, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, London 1992.
- Degas 1945  
E. Degas, *Lettres* [recueillies et annotées par Marcel Guérin], Bernard Grasset, Paris 1945.
- Dumas 1997  
Dumas, *The Private Collection of Edgar Degas*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1997.
- Farr 1996  
M.F. Farr, *Identity and subjectivity in Edgar Degas's "MME Jeantaud before a mirror"*, in: *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, vol. 19, 1996 – Issue 3, pp. 305–325.
- Götz 1985  
A. Götz, *Degas. Pastels, dessins, esquisses*, Albin Michel, Paris 1985.
- Hauptman 2016  
J. Hauptman, *Edgar Degas. A Strange New Beauty*, MoMA, New York 2016.
- Huysmans 1908.  
J.-K. Huysmans, *Certains*, Librairie Plon, Paris 1908.
- Ives et. al. 1997  
C. Ives, S. A. Stein, J. A. Steiner, *The Private Collection of Edgar Degas. A Summary Catalogue*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1997.
- Kendall 1996  
R. Kendall, *Degas: Beyond Impressionism*, National Gallery Publications, London 1996.
- Lacan 1990  
J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse*, Editions du Seuil, Paris 1990.
- Loyrette 1991  
H. Loyrette, *Degas*, Fayard, Paris 1991.
- Loyrette 2012  
H. Loyrette, *Degas. « Je voudrais être illustre et inconnu »*, Gallimard/Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris 2012.
- Michel 1919  
A. Michel, *Degas et son modèle* in *Mercure de France*, Février 1919 (No. 1–2) Paris.
- Mulvey 1999  
L. Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, L. Braudy and M. Cohen (eds.), Oxford University Press, New York 1999.
- Olin 1996  
M. Olin, *Gaze in Critical Terms for Art History*, R. S. Nelson and R. Shiff (eds.), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 1996.
- Pollock 1992  
G. Pollock, *The Gaze and The Look: "Woman with Binoculars" – A Question of Difference* in *Dealing with Degas. Representations of Women and the Politics of Vision*, R. Kendall and G. Pollock (eds.), Pandora, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers, London 1992.
- Reff 1976  
T. Reff, *Degas. The Artist's Mind*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1976.
- Reff 1985  
T. Reff, *The Notebooks of Edgar Degas, A catalogue of the Thirty-eight Notebooks in the Bibliothèque Nationale and Other Collections*, Hacker Art Books, New York 1985.
- Schaller 1995  
C. Schaller, *Edgar Degas: étude physiognomonique*, Fribourg 1995.
- Stoichiță 2005  
V. I. Stoichiță, *Ver y no ver*, Siruela, Madrid 2005.