

Foucault, Sexuality, and Manet's Visual Discourse

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Introduction

Many agree contemporary U.S. society privileges the visual—film, television, the internet, cell phones, and billboards to name a few—, that with this privileging comes the need for analytic and interpretive skills to navigate power structures imbuing these visual discourses, and that competing for resources has eliminated such humanities-related content areas as visual studies to give more to STEM and STEM-related studies. Although creating STEAM programs seems an attempt to placate arts supporters, many educators maintain STEAM programs tend feebly to connect with the arts and with visual studies in particular and that such programs may well be another ploy to justify purging public schools of arts education. Interestingly, teacher educators at least give lip service to the importance of teaching PK–12 students some aspects of visual literacy particularly within 21st-century literacies contexts, but this emphasis has not been expanded into public schools. Apparently, in PK–12 public schools, “many teachers are hesitant to address aspects of visual literacy, perhaps because they themselves had little training in the concepts” (O’Neil, 2011, p. 214).

I posit visual discourse is at least as important for students to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and engage as are other discourses and that learning to navigate power structures embedded within visual discourses is essential to PK–12 students’ learning to survive and function well in the world. To reveal visual discourse’s importance and power, I make a piece of visual art central to my argument, selecting a work that shook the Parisian art world when it went on display: Édouard Manet’s (1863) *Olympia* (Fig. 1).¹ By analyzing Manet’s *Olympia* using Michel Foucault’s (1978) concepts of secrecy, visual and sexual discourses, and power, I illuminate Manet’s painting as more than visual art—as indeed discourse that anticipates and exemplifies Foucault’s concepts. I demonstrate this painting disrupted the accepted 19th-century, French rules of visual and secret, sexual discourses; that visual discourse is indeed a significant power mechanism capable of holding the mirror of hypocrisy steadily before viewers’ eyes questioning viewers beliefs, behaviors, and values; that altering the *status quo*—calling it into

question—may result in changing accepted social conventions that merely disguise society’s seedy underbelly; and that bringing visual discourse into public schools for study is not only worthy but necessary and valuable in teaching students how to read, understand, and survive their worlds. First, I outline tenets of visual discourse and define and explain Foucault’s (1978) concepts of visual and secret, sexual discourse (repressive hypothesis), aligning 19th-century Paris with Foucault’s historical analysis. Next, positioning Manet and Manet’s *Olympia* within art history, I set the stage for describing the risqué, 4' 3" x 6' 2¼" oil on canvas that scandalized the 1865 Parisian viewing public. I then analyze *Olympia* through this Foucauldian theoretical lens elucidating *Olympia* as visual, sexualized discourse that contributes radically to shifting 19th-century Parisian mechanisms of power. Finally, I identify the meaning and value of my analysis and its implications for education.

Power, Discourse, and the Visual

Power cannot be possessed but rather exercised by various, fluctuating relations from a myriad of positions with a multitude of goals (Foucault, 1978). Origins of power often are ambiguous, but “where there is power, there is resistance” and resistance can be exercised from many areas becoming part of the network or “relations of power” (pp. 95–96). Foucault emphasizes power relations should be problematized and views power’s existence as depending upon resistance which offers a tool with which to question and resist existing practices in society (Freie & Eppley, 2014). Relational power transforms itself depending on environments, relationships, and knowledge. Power and knowledge co-exist: “there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault, 1977, p. 27). Foucault links power to knowledge—those who have it and those not allowed to have it—, but this “power-knowledge” distribution can shift, modify, and transform (Foucault, 1978). Power-knowledge distributions continually modify resisting immobility which Foucault calls “matrices of transformation” (p. 99) that should be analyzed. Power and knowledge coalesce in discourse and various discourses (accepted or resisted, dominant or dominated) that have their own objectives.

Foucault asserts: “discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart...” (p. 101). Discourse drives societal viewpoints and perceptions which provide influence that direct policy and procedures that are written down or talked about (Nainggolan, 2007). Leading discourses have alongside them subjugated discourses that can rise up when disturbances or dilemmas occur (Foucault, 1978).

Counter-discourses do not have to come from the top down, but can come from various directions and can lead to either positive or negative change (Foucault, 1978). What society discusses and does not discuss produces routine discourses—routine practices: “As practice, [routine discourses re/produce] knowledge and power simultaneously” (Thomson, Hall, & Jones, 2013, p. 158). Knowledge forms through discourses that transform and define it.

Throughout the history of western civilization, humans have used images to promote ideals even while glossing over cruel realities. Barry Sandywell (2011) explains that, although people have long created images, contemporary society's desire for attaining knowledge quickly through images and the contemporary corporate world's mass-production of alluring images has increased visual images' importance within society. Indeed, an image is “inherently communicative” (Hepworth, 2016, p. 281), for images essentially become another language, a universal language “inextricably bound together with power, knowledge and governance” (p. 281): “We now understand that such ‘visions’ were also inevitably *languages*—rhetorics, events, *discourses of power*” (Sandywell, 2011, p. 6, emphasis in original), and that institutions of power often create images. Visual discourse is a persuasive tool that produces social beliefs and attitudes and, like other discourses, can either challenge or support prevailing knowledge and discourse. For instance, culture categorizes or frames nudes depending on where one sees them—in a pornographic magazine, a medical journal, *National Geographic*, or an art history textbook—and “the way these nudes are framed help individuals to construct meaning” (Eck, 2001, p. 609). Images viewed outside the context of what society at the time considers “acceptable” become ambiguous with the potential power to change discourse.

Visual discourse analysis is a methodology that explores and reveals perceptions through visual artifacts presented as conceptual objects (Naingolan, 2007). “The distinct feature of Visual Discourse Analysis rests on its usefulness in visualizing drivers, mediating factors, processes and impacts or outcomes which are inherent to any complex and dynamic socio-environmental systems” (p. 1). Yet visual materials have taken a backseat to written materials in discourse analysis methodology in historical research despite the visual's unique possibility of serving as “direct objects of study” and the abilities to communicate “history in ways other artifacts and documents cannot” (Hudson, 2009, p. 138). Anabela da Conceição Periera (2015) extends images' power to give them agency. By analyzing the discourse the visual uniquely provides, she,

...considers the objective and subjective conditions of interpreting and experiencing images, showing how the

construction of their meaning, acceptance and artistic status is a process concerning not only certain systems of meaning, ways of seeing, and the agency of the visual object, but also human perception. (p. 34)

Moreover, philosophically analyzing visual discourses art produces stimulates understanding the power relations at play perhaps more than traditional textual discourses can (Tanke, 2008).

Sexual, Visual Discourse, Secrecy, and Censorship

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault (1978) analyzes secret, repressed, sexual discourse in western history highlighting the “repressive hypothesis,” or contemporary western society’s perception that the 19th-century bourgeoisie were sexually repressed. Foucault (1978) posits one should doubt the “repressive hypothesis” and should indeed question 1) sexual repression’s historical accuracy, 2) 19th-century, power-systems’ responsibility for repression, and 3) sexual discourse’s contribution to repression.

Although modern puritanism in the U.S. imposed against sexuality and sexual discourse the “triple edict of taboo, nonexistence, and silence” (Foucault, 1978, p. 5), puritanism never existed in France and therefore had no repressive hold over the 19th-century, French bourgeoisie. Instead, the early, 19th-century, French bourgeoisie were preoccupied with self and sought sexual knowledge to insure future class superiority (Foucault, 1978). Viewing sex as a power tool with certain rules that would lead to self-policing (Fraser, 1983), Foucault (1978) explores the fixation on and increased discussion of sexuality and the powers behind sexual discourse. In 19th-century France physicians analyzed sexual conduct for medical knowledge believing it would lead to theoretical sexual discourse and ultimately contribute to the public’s well-being. Indeed, authorities devised rules for what was normal or deviant, was allowed or disallowed, discussed or not discussed (Foucault, 1978). Confessions about sexuality were allowed and even encouraged but only to such proper professionals as doctors in professional settings: “Only in those places would untrammelled sex have a right to (safely insularized) forms of reality, and only to clandestine, circumscribed and coded types of discourse” (p. 4). Therefore, sexual discourse was constructed through secrecy, and the 19th-century, French bourgeoisie was expected to follow the rule of secrecy to the letter.

More than a go-between among power relations, secrecy is a power technique and mechanism used to dominate but also to undermine power and offer a sense of freedom, making discussing and analyzing sexuality especially appealing as one sought to uncover its secrets (Foucault, 1978). The effort to control sexuality and sexual discourse

through secrecy, silence, and prescribed circumstances in which one might engage in sexual discourse actually produced a kind of pleasure in the secret talking, listening, and resulting illicit, sexual knowledge one constructed (Foucault, 1978). Given strict rules governing sexuality and sexual discourse, censorship necessarily increased to enforce compliance to these rules and, with that, censorship, pornography, peep shows, and brothels crescendo (Weingarden, 2011). Synthesizing the visual and the sexual in 19th-century France in pornography, peep shows, and brothels supports my choice to analyze Manet's *Olympia* as visual, sexual discourse. As further support, although art in 19th-century France tended to be somewhat protected from censorship because of its elevated status (both epistemically and through its relegation to high social status), authorities nevertheless censored even the arts to determine what was or was not suitable and therefore allowed or rejected for public viewing and entering the public discourse. Indeed, by 1841 the Ministry of the Interior or the Prefecture of Police particularly targeted nude photographs for censorship deeming them either acceptable or unacceptable and therefore allowed or banned for photography market, public viewing, and public discourse (Weingarden, 2011). Consequently, the nude photography market, like much sexuality itself, went underground secretly to flourish. Even poetry, previously considered too high a form of art for most to understand and therefore left uncensored, now came under censors' review, perhaps most notably six poems from Baudelaire's (1857) collection, *The Flowers of Evil* (*Les Fleurs du Mal*) as well as Baudelaire himself (Weingarden, 2011).

Foucault on Manet

Édouard Manet (1832–1883) so intrigued Foucault that Foucault agreed to a lecture series on Manet's paintings delivered in Tunis in 1971 (Soussloff, 2011), only recently brought to light and published. Analyzing art differently than art history's analytic tradition of discovering meaning by interpreting the subject, images, and the artist's intentions (Soussloff, 2011), Foucault was interested in the artist's manner of media application and the knowledge that exercise produces. He viewed paintings historically and materially contending paintings are a type of discourse that can “use some of the notions formed in the analysis of discursive regularities to describe the stylistic patterns found in the history of art” (Tanke, 2008, p. 382), and that one can apply to ontology and epistemology: “For Foucault painting is a different discursive practice, embodied by the techniques and the effects of the painted representation, and with a theoretical shape unlike the sciences and philosophy” (Soussloff, 2011, p. 114).

Although when Foucault analyzes a painting he does not identify the subjects portrayed so recognizing and judging the subjects would not

cloud his vision, he could not effectively use this approach “without a profound knowledge of the history and theory of art from the Renaissance to his own day” (p. 117). Foucault also analyzes paintings in terms of what is absent or apparently hidden and the knowledge emerging from such an analysis: the “hermeneutical opposite of the most commonly used methods of art history” (p. 119). The viewer—absent from the painting itself—is very much an active participant—a concealed subject—in observational knowledge of *Olympia*. Foucault focuses on how art affects societal behavior and its role in the “processes of social differentiation, of exclusion, assimilation and control” (Bourriaud, 2009, p. 13).

Manet and His *Olympia* in Context

Manet, often considered the originator of modernist painting, was active in 1860s Paris where bourgeoisie and poor were separated, where censorship was prolific, and where mass consumerism was in full swing (Reed, 2003). He was one of the first artists to reject traditional painting conventions by eliminating halftones—light and shade, rather imposing bold *chiaroscuro*—, ignoring pictorial spatial traditions, and painting controversial subjects, all of which future artists emulated. “Modernist painting since Manet is an equally persistent elaboration of the medium itself: the flatness of the canvas, the structuring of notation, paint and brushwork, the problem of the frame” (Huysen, 1986, p. 54). Manet enjoyed painting’s narrative aspect along with referencing art from the past (Fried, 1996). Although customary for artists from Manet’s time to allude to previous artists’ work in their own creations, one sees “Manet’s involvement with the art of the past...in relation to some of the most important intellectual and spiritual currents in nineteenth-century France” (Fried, 1996, p. 27).

Along with other artists of his day, Manet submitted paintings for possible acceptance to be exhibited at the Salon, the government-sponsored, official venue for the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture exhibitions.² The Académie Royale set standards, policies, expectations, and recognition opportunities for artists, virtually monopolizing public taste and opportunities for official patronage in 19th-century France, serving as “the marketplace where painters could make or lose their reputations and livelihood” (Reed, 2003, p. 27). The 19th-century Académie Royale jurors possessed tremendous power and set the artistic norms concerning subject and style. “Whether in genre or history painting, subject matter was of primary importance according to both academic norms and the public eye” (p. 33).³ The time’s convention of exhibiting paintings was for artists to create and for critics and the public to interpret stories drawn from classical, historical, or everyday-life categories (Reed, 2003).

Until the 19th century, painters and sculptors of female nudes generally followed the convention of an idealized Venus, the classical female nude. The 19th-century, bourgeois society associated the classical female nude with purity, beauty, and subservience: "'She' functions as an artistic policy of (re)assurance: perfect body and distant eyes beckon the hidden owner-man beyond the frame; 'she' is his but he is not 'hers'" (Komins, 2001, p. 53). Classical, idealized, and pure, the mythological Venus, object of personal fantasy and desire, met the Académie Royale's guidelines for nudes.

Manet was one of the first visual artists to subvert the rules of female nudity—nude but pure, beautiful, subservient woman or Venus—with his 1863 submission, *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* (*Lunch on the Grass*), a nude woman eating a picnic lunch on the ground in a park with two clothed men. After Académie Royale jurors responded negatively to *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, rejecting it outright, Manet hesitated, waiting two years until 1865, before submitting *Olympia* to their scrutiny (Seibert, 1986). Concerned about accusations of unfairness toward particular artists, Académie Royale jurors accepted for exhibit and placed Manet's *Olympia* in the 1865 Salon exhibition.

Manet's *Olympia* is often compared to Titian's (1538) *Venere di Urbino* (*Venus of Urbino*) (Fig. 2)⁴ that embodies the male's fantasy of idealized female sensuality, a painting Manet copied having visited the Galleria degli Uffizi in Florence (Armstrong, 2002). This richly colored 2' 1⁵/₈" x 3' 10⁷/₈" oil on canvas (1538) features a flawless, creamy-skinned, nude woman with a sensuous gaze reclining in the painting's foreground on a lushly painted, plush maroon daybed with crumpled white sheets. Propped up on her bracelet-adorned, right arm, she clutches a few pink flowers, one of which has fallen and lies on the bed. Titian's Venus looks from the painting with what can only be described as "bedroom eyes," while her golden curls fall loosely over her shoulder accenting her softly modeled, unblemished skin. Positioned over her pubic area lies her ringed, left hand, curved and relaxed. At the foot of the bed, a small, cream-colored, spotted dog sleeps contently, seeming to mirror Venus in position, light and shade falling on the dog as the Venus, in similar locations. Two servants in the painting's middle-ground (against the back wall), one a girl on her knees and the other a woman standing seeming to supervise, retrieve or replace garments in a chest positioned in front of a large window that partly frames a serene, outdoor scene of topiary and classical column. Soft light, soft modeling, perspective, and lush glazes of color add to the painting's sensual luxury and depth of field.

Manet's *Olympia*

Housed at the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, *Olympia* (Fig.1), Édouard Manet's 4' 3" x 6' 2¼" oil on canvas, is not a nude, idealized Venus reflecting classical art and woman's purity, but a painting seemingly after Titian's *Venus* yet within which Manet replaces the idealized Venus with a nude prostitute. In the painting's foreground, the daybed takes up the canvas' width, is covered with ruffled, white sheets, and is positioned horizontally across the canvas. Reclining on the bed with her left leg casually crossed over her right, Olympia props up slightly on two pillows on the left side of the canvas as she looks straight at the viewer with an ambiguous gaze, unabashed confidence, and complete shamelessness. Her flared out left hand covers her pubic hair, seems pressed determinedly to her thigh while her right, clutched hand rests on the bed at her side. On her otherwise naked body, a pink flower adorns her pulled back hair; stylish, heeled slippers embellish her feet, one on and one off—perhaps an allusion to streetwalking (Kleiner, 2013); a gold bracelet adorns her right arm; and a slender, black ribbon graces her neck. Just one or two shades darker than the white sheets, her extremely pale skin seems to glow, to pop, because a strong, dark, modern contour outlines her figure. With consistent modeling on only her face, feet, and hands, her body appears flat, contrasting markedly with the modeled sheets upon which she lies. Standing behind her to the right, a Black maid presents Olympia a flower bouquet, presumably from a client. A small black cat, considered a symbol of sexuality, stands, back arched, at the foot of the bed. Behind Olympia and her maid, a muted, brown, floral-patterned wallpaper and pulled-back, green curtain contribute to the composition's overall flatness. *Olympia* exhibited at the Salon in 1865 as a major work of art, and is regarded as the first nude of a modern woman from this time period depicted with reality and individuality—markedly unlike the generic or mythological nudes that came before (Hughes, 2013).

The Scandal: Subverting Secrecy and Censorship through Visual, Sexual Discourse

Beyond upsetting conventions and overturning contextual expectations, through his *Olympia* Manet so shook Parisian society that Académie Royale jurors, concerned with shocking pregnant women into miscarriage, warned them not to view the painting (Northern, 2003). The painting outraged some French viewers to the point of wanting “to put their umbrellas through it” (Foucault, 2009, p. 63). *Olympia* received critical judgment not only from the public, but from critics and press. Of the 60 art critics viewing the painting, only four reacted positively (Clark, 1980). Manet broke convention not simply with accepted methods and techniques. *Olympia* incited criticism chiefly because the subject's lower

social-class as prostitute was considered a disreputable, unacceptable, and taboo subject in the art world (Witkin, 1977). For, “though serious art appreciation has always tried to rise above the reclining nude’s link with the base reality of the bedroom, some works refuse to keep quiet about it. They do this in a fascinating variety of ways” (Borzello, 2002, p. 44).

Viewers had certain expectations of paintings portraying female nudes, and paintings taking as their subject prostitutes was not among those. Of course, in 19th-century Paris, prostitution was prolific and considered necessary but not something to display openly unless perhaps as “upper-class prostitution.” For example, the French press wrote about prostitution clearly in sight, but focused only on rich and charismatic courtesans: the “parallel between the prominent, powerful courtesans of the period and the more vocal, independent feminists who were [paradoxically], spurred to action in part by the very prevalence of the courtesans and prostitutes in French society” (Flescher, 1985, p. 31). The courtesan became a symbol for many groups depending on whose needs the courtesan as symbol best could serve. Perhaps most jolting about Manet’s painting *Olympia* as prostitute is his depicting a woman in complete control of both her body and her destiny, directing her gaze at the viewer with full knowledge of exactly who looks back at her: “It is a gaze which gives nothing away, as the reader attempts to interpret its blatancy; a look direct and yet guarded, poised very precisely between address and resistance” (Clark, 1980, p. 34). Manet’s *Olympia* depicts a self-confident “contemporary female type, a courtesan-prostitute, but with perhaps a touch of the defiance and independence of the emerging Parisienne” (Flescher, 1985, p. 31).⁵

Interested in how people interpret and understand nudes, Beth Eck (2001) makes the important point that context dictates the acceptability of different categories of nudes: “It is context that helps individuals decide whether a nude image is artistic, pornographic, or informational; acceptable; sacred or profane” (p. 604). As I argue previously, the context helps determine the acceptable or unacceptable, the viewed or not viewed, the discussed or not discussed. Viewers perceived and interpreted *Olympia* within *Olympia* as sex object rather than art object. Therefore, Manet’s nude was out of context, an unfamiliar, unacceptable sight at an important, powerful art exhibition unworthy of viewing and discussing in a place established for a classical Venus.

Involving more than nudity, depicting prostitute rather than classical Venus and presenting that depiction in the inappropriate, Salon context, the scandal also included aesthetics, for in *Olympia* Manet subverts established order and undermines both convention and accepted method and technique (Tanke, 2008), even while he upholds

them. For example, in traditional nudes, artists depict hair in a particular way Manet fails to emulate; other painters are discrete while Manet places Olympia's left hand to allude to her pubic hair and reveals hair in her armpit (Clark, 1980). Critics berated not only the obscenity of Manet's painting and his failure to follow convention, but his method; they accuse him of painting Olympia with dirty hands and feet calling the painting ugly and literally dirty (Weingarden, 2011). Indeed, analyzing art through an archeological lens focuses on breaks from regularly accepted convention by comparing the elements of a piece of art—line, color, value, texture, shape, space, form—to determine whether the artist altered established rules which would ultimately mean, of course, establishing new convention (Tanke, 2008). Rather than a smoothly painted surface, Manet employs rough brush strokes—deemed crude, infantile, and primitive.

Foucault (2009) focuses on Manet's painting technique, especially on how Manet uses light, arguing light not nudity provoked public scandal. Comparing the light in *Olympia* to the light in Titian's *Venere di Urbino*, Foucault (2009) notes *Venere di Urbino* lights up softly from the canvas' upper left and from the painting's window lending the scene a natural, luminous, golden light: "Here is the nude, dreaming of nothing, looking at nothing, and there is this light, which, indiscreetly, strikes or caresses her, and us viewers who surprise the game between this light and this nudity" (p. 65). Conversely, harsh light from outside the painting "strikes [Olympia] here, full shot" (p. 65) rather than emanating from a natural source within. In other words, the viewer—or more precisely, the viewer's gaze—functionally becomes the light: "For Manet, the act of looking was never innocent or impartial, even though at first glance it may seem to have been so" (Rubin, 1994, p. 36). The viewer therefore becomes part of the scandal—an active participant, the source illuminating the nudity, the pimp and the john; "*Olympia* demonstrates how the transformation of painting's rules of formation compounds the affront contained in its subject matter, by implicating the viewer in the visual exploitation of its subject" (Tanke, 2008, p. 389). By not remaining silent to the realities of 19th-century French society, Olympia seizes power and her own sexuality with self-assurance, exposing the hidden client—bourgeois men—, the very ones who wanted to keep her out of sight and silent.

Secrecy Exploded: Visual, Sexual Discourse's Revelation

Analyzing Manet's *Olympia* through Foucauldian concepts of visual and secret, sexual discourses reveals *Olympia* as a work of visual discourse "speaking" openly to subvert imposed secrecy, silence, and artistic convention in 19th-century Paris. Painting a prostitute, a taboo subject, and displaying it in the Salon, Manet provoked change in 19th-

century Parisians' discursive practices surrounding sexuality by using the visual to force sexual discourse out of the darkness, out from behind closed bedroom doors, into the public realm, and into public discourse. Reluctant to use the word, "prostitute," to describe *Olympia*, critics chose "a vocabulary of uncleanness, dirt, death, physical corruption and actual bodily harm" (Clark, 1980, p. 23). Such allusions within the painting to prostitution as the cat, walking shoes, and a servant presenting flowers (from a client) make it difficult to deny Manet depicts a prostitute. Even the painting's title, *Olympia*, seems to reinforce Manet's desire for viewers to see the central figure as prostitute—a real woman in the real world of 19th-century France. In her analysis, Sharon Flescher (1985) notes some critics of the time thought Manet alludes to the well-known, Renaissance courtesan, Donna Olimpia Maldachini; she further postulates Manet's character, Olympia, might also allude to Alexandre Dumas' character-courtesan, Olympia, from his 1852 play, *La Dame aux Camélias*. Flescher (1985) supports her supposition by noting the French counterpart to the name "Olympia," "Olympe," was a common name among French courtesans. Perhaps wishing to ensure the public fully understood his intentions, Manet moved beyond the title including five lines from his friend Zacharie Astru's poem, "Olympia," in the Salon's 1865 catalogue (Flescher, 1985):

When, weary of dreaming Olympia awakes,
Spring enters in the arms of a gentle [B]lack messenger,
It is the slave who, like the amorous night,
Comes in and makes the day delicious to see with flowers:
The august young woman in whom the flame [of passion]
burns constantly.

(translation by Clark in Flescher, p. 21)

Although much evidence points to Manet's choosing the name, "Olympia," as a means of reinforcing the visual clues identifying her as prostitute, Flescher (1985) contends Manet's Italian rather than French name "gives [the painting] a classical or Italianate flavor" (p. 27). Perhaps the name is part of Manet's nod to classicism, his nod to Italian painting and the artist from which he models *Olympia*: Titian's *Venere di Urbino*. Similarly, Manet's nod to classicism may include the female type, Olympia, characteristic in operas (Flescher, 1985). These questions surrounding the painting's name show Manet's adherence to certain convention and public expectation even as he subverted them confused some art critics who objected to his classical connotations. Other critics simply ignored the name. I assert Manet purposely tried to confuse Académie Royale jurors, critics, and the public by choosing the name and spelling to play with his critics, artistic conventions, and discourse

itself: is she the acceptable classical nude or the unacceptable prostitute? ...is she viewable or not, discussable or not, in context or not?

Again, *Olympia* (1863) seemingly follows the convention of alluding to classical works by—in many ways—mirroring Titian's *Venere di Urbino*; however, with *Olympia* Manet does not follow the accepted convention of an idealized, submissive beauty stretched out in an idealized setting giving no resistance to those who gape leisurely over her body and whose own sexuality is owned by her alone (Borzello, 2002). Certainly, the similarities between Manet's *Olympia* and Titian's *Venere di Urbino* are obvious. Viewers accept and encourage the enticing, powerful, and persuasive fantasy Titian's *Venere di Urbino* evokes:

...the woman appears both above and below the man. On the one hand she is a goddess whose body and “favor” provide access for the man to a transcendental home in the world of values and solidary relations; on the other, she is a servant of the man with no thoughts of her own that he has not put there. (Witkin, 1977, p. 106)

Despite the similarities between *Venere di Urbino* and *Olympia*, opposition between elements of the two paintings dominates discourse. Rather than portraying a peaceful, sleeping dog, a symbol of fertility and faithfulness, Manet paints an agitated, black cat, symbol of the night and sexual wantonness. Instead of idealized, subtle, pink-modeled flesh, he paints harsh, flat, un-modeled white skin. He paints no seductively curved hand gliding over her pubic area in *Olympia*, but instead depicts her hand stretched out firmly. Unlike Titian's naturalistic perspective, Manet makes the figure of *Olympia* flat—ignores proper perspective, plays with space, only transforming Olympia from two-dimensional to three with the viewer's participation. In other words, by the viewer's very presence a third dimension is created by virtue of the one-viewing—a third dimension that otherwise does not exist in this flat, modernist depiction of a woman. No glowing natural lighting emanates from *Olympia*, but rather a harsh, exploitive torch lights her from beyond the painting's plane, implicating the viewer as pimp or john, shattering the expected conservative visual and sexual discourse among painter, painting, and viewer.

To this point, conventions of lighting in paintings were rendered in such a way as to keep with the illusion of natural three-dimensional space “...where a viewer could be displaced...” (Foucault, 2009, p. 30). Manet rejects this illusion of natural light and instead casts harsh light on nudity, keeping other parts of the painting so dark that the source of light must come from outside the picture's plane, rendering the viewer the source of illumination and, too, illuminating societies' taboo concerning sexuality and prostitution. The viewer becomes complicit in

revealing 19th-century France's dark, seedy reality—not the artist. The contrast between the two paintings' female forms angered the French public intensely, thereby inciting change in visual and sexual discourse in part by breaking the code of secrecy concerning the realities of society and sexuality and what was accepted for visual discourse at the time.

Manet shook 19th-century, French, artistic convention and, ultimately, visual and sexual discourse convention. The visual discourse *Olympia* produced resisted the power mechanisms in place (silence, censorship, and control of whom and where one could view particular visual representations of nudity) and presented a new technique of power. Manet problematized bourgeois society's power that demanded a certain type of silence concerning sexuality, prostitution, and accepted artistic conventions of how a nude was to be rendered. Through *Olympia*, Manet subverted discursive practices of the secret, the sexual, and the censored by creating a "visual" discourse born in reaction to increased censorship where the secret, sexual, and visual converged, revealing the raw reality of prostitution polite society saw fit to ignore. Such revolutionary visual discourse confirms Foucault's contention that power and knowledge exist and function in tension, and that the source of power is often unknown and ever-changing. Manet rebelled against artistic convention concerning aesthetic rendering and subjects, positioning the taboo as focal point and turning visual, secreted, and sexual discourses on their heads. He exposed the secret; revealed the hypocrisy; made visible the invisible; highlighted the forbidden—but often indulged—pleasure of bourgeois society evidencing Foucault's (1978) theory that silent discourse often leads to opposition.

Visual Discourse: Offering Tools of Knowledge

Manet shattered the fantasy, the artistic ideal, by forcing society to look at reality, not as an uninvolved observer, but as an active participant. Creating *Olympia* as work of visual discourse, Manet subverted power relations and the power-knowledge tension surrounding the 19th-century Académie Royale, its rules of propriety, aesthetics, and power-knowledge surrounding secrecy, sexuality, and the visual (that in *Olympia* as well as in pornography, peep shows, and brothels merges with the secret and the sexual). As visual discourse, *Olympia* becomes another instrument of power by revealing the secret of prostitution the bourgeoisie did not want, revealed and displayed in the Académie Royale no less, the very place the bourgeoisie assembled to view the art of their class. *Olympia* brings to light, despite or perhaps because of the scandal it provoked, the acceptance of a visual discourse in place of or over textual discourse and resistance to power mechanisms.

Analyzing *Olympia* through a Foucauldian lens provides an apt example of how critically analyzing art teaches the power of visual discourse in highlighting the embedded social power structures and the points of resistance not obviously apparent when first viewing an image. Recognizing strategic missions of visual discourses—what is visible, what is absent, what is hidden—remains a valuable tool not only for imparting awareness of present strategies of power but awareness of potential oppositional strategies as well. Educators can empower students with knowledge of how to examine images in their entirety as possible visual discourses so students can recognize not only what is seen, but, just as importantly, what is not seen—what is being kept secret—in order to make more thoughtful, well-informed judgments. Having ready the tools to analyze mechanisms of power in visual discourse allows students to decipher relational strategies at play, whether the discourse supports or resists the dominant power relations in society so they may knowingly decide, construct, and perform their role as active, passive, or resistant participant within power relations.

Analyzing Manet's *Olympia* and the public reaction to its exhibition demonstrate the power of the visual in evoking outrage, fear, and social discourse. It is at our peril we ignore the visual's discursive power in this contemporary, visually dominated world. At a minimum, teachers should be made aware of visual discourses' power (exercised freely in part because of its privileged position in contemporary society), complexity, and relation with others such as sexual discourse and secrecy; should support the visual's study in schools with the knowledge that learning how to recognize, analyze, interpret, evaluate, and engage in visual discourse is necessary, meaningful, and valuable to students' learning how to survive and succeed in the world; and should not only welcome but encourage state-, district-, and school-level changes that teach and promote such learning.

Endnotes

- 1 In the collection of the Musée d'Orsay (http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/notice.html?no_cache=1&numid=712).
- 2 The Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, established by King Louis XIV in 1667, was later referred to as the "Salon," a term taken from the Salon d'Apollon in Musée du Louvre where art exhibitions were held.

- 3 The term “genre painting” refers to paintings that take as their subject everyday people in scenes from ordinary life, most often portrayed in a realistic style and depicting domestic scenes. The term “history painting” refers to paintings usually portraying part of a narrative with biblical or mythological origins.
- 4 In the collection of Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence (<https://www.virtualuffizi.com/venus-of-urbino.html>).
- 5 “Parisienne” refers uniquely to the female Parisian.

Figures



(Fig. 1) Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.



(Fig. 2) Titian, *Venere di Urbino* (Venus of Urbino), 1538, oil on canvas, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence.

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