

Boje

***Empire Reading of Manet's Execution of Maximilian:  
Critical Visual Aesthetics and Antenarrative Spectrality***

David Boje

**Abstract**

I am researching the five versions of the Manet series on the Execution. Believe it or not, the paintings (and a lithograph I am still searching for) are the subject of heated debate in visualization, historical narrative, and painting research. My contribution is to argue that Manet's visual aesthetics is coming into vogue, and a two traditional aesthetics (empire and traditional monarchy) are declining, being revised, and the official aesthetic is resisting with acts of censorship because of Manet's critique of empire. There are competing aesthetics theorists, such as Bataille (1955), Larsen (1990), and Wilson-Bareau (1992) who argue different ways of viewing the aesthetics of Manet's 4th painted version of "*The Execution of Maximilian*" (see Version 4).

**Figure 1 - VERSION 1 - Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, Version 1, Édouard Manet, 1867, 196x259cm, Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, A50846; Note nationality of the firing squad**



In the first version, the firing squad is dressed in rebel republican uniforms of the Juárez Mexican army. Wilson-Bareau (1992: 61) argues that "the first, unfinished version was

an immediate response to the event, a 'romantic,' largely imaginative construction." But in the three other oils and a lithograph version, the soldiers are French. For Bataille

(1955), Manet went against the trend, and did not romanticize or sentimentalize the execution of the young emperor of Mexico.

Manet's was not the only version. Fulfilling the traditional visual narrative of empire, more iconic images that appeared in the press and

circulated as postcards presented Maximilian as a hero, in some renditions being pulled into heaven by angels.

**Figure 2 - Lithograph - *The Execution of Maximilian*, by Goineau -Source Wilson - Barea, 1992: 49**



The lithography by Goineau (above) is a romantic aesthetic, centering the attention and the viewing spectators (including the gallery spectator) on Maximilian, with spiritual narrative elements, such as congregates in

the foreground, a bishop (stage left), and crosses and a mission in the background, as the bell tolls.

## Boje

**Figure 3 - Apotheosis of H. M. Ferdinand Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico, assassinated at Queretaro on 19 June 1867. An anonymous lithograph (source Wilson -Bareau, 1992: 49).**



This is another of the traditional romantic lithographs that circulated after Maximilian's execution. In this depiction, the focus of the viewer is on the spiritual ascent of Maximilian into the afterlife, the ships of empire, the heavenly ascent of the emperor of Mexico into his crowning glory in the afterlife. Note the caption says "assassinated" rather than executed (a empire reading).

The above renditions are examples of what Sartre (1966: 90) in his book, *Essays in Aesthetics*, calls "cherished visual habits." Manet's painting, on the other hand, is

breaking with the cherished visual habit of venerating empire in a narrative construction of tragic heroic and sacred aristocratic episode.

Let us put the series of Manet renditions in their historical context. Édouard Manet (1832-1883) painted a series of four canvases, and one lithograph depicting the execution of the Emperor Maximilian of Mexico in 1867. Chronological listing of the five versions is based on Wilson-Bareau (1993) x-ray analysis of the compositions:

1. **Execution of the Emperor**

**Maximilian, [First Oil Version](#)**, Edouard Manet, 1867, 196x259cm, Oil on canvas, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, A50846

2. **Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, [Second Oil Version](#)** (survives only in fragments) Edouard Manet, 1867-68, Photograph by Fernand Lochard, c. 1883, National Gallery, London, CD#1155.058 [showing the 2nd version mostly intact]

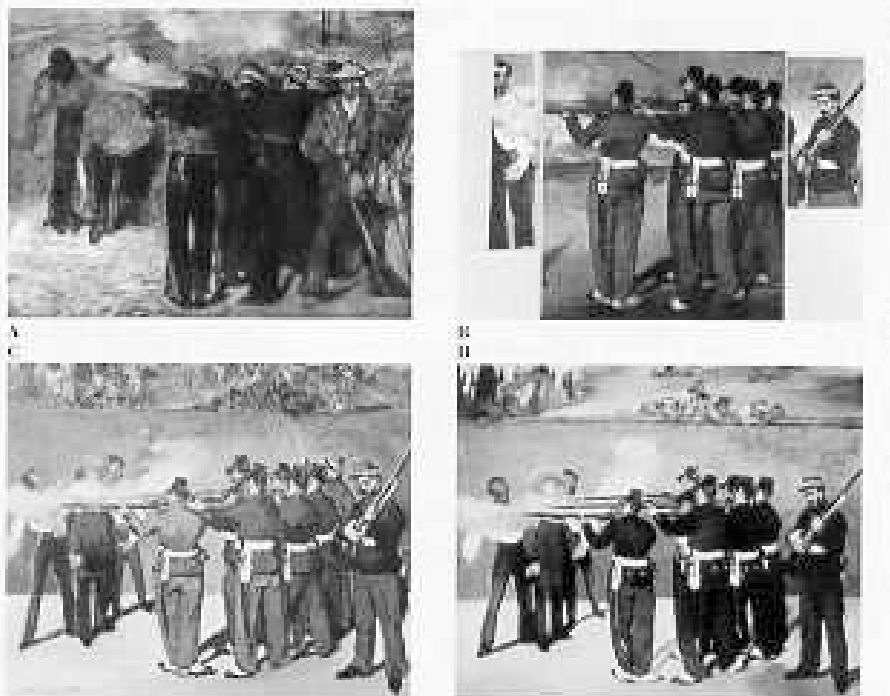
3. **Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, Third Oil Version**, Preparatory oil sketch for 4th & final large oil picture, Edouard Manet, 1868-69, 50x60cm, Oil on canvas, Ny

Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

4. **Execution of the Emperor Maximilian**, Edouard Manet, 1868, 33.3x43.3cm, [Lithograph](#), Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; NYPL, A98458

5. **Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, [Fourth Oil Version](#)**, Edouard Manet, 1868-69, 252x302cm, Oil on canvas, Stadtische Kunsthalle, Mannheim, 24029

**Figure 4 - Four Oil Versions of *The Execution of Maximilian***; Top left is Version 1 (Boston); Upper right is Version 2 fragments (London); Lower Left is Version 3 (Copenhagen); and Lower Right is Version 4 (Mannheim)



The five versions (4 oils & 1 lithograph) of Maximilian's execution, tell the story of Manet. For example, none of the versions were shown in France during Manet's life time, and

the lithograph was banned by the authorities. The story of Manet's paintings represents an accumulation and incorporation of news accounts.

## Boje

I will assert that the series says something critical about Napoleon III's fiasco in Mexico, and the death of Maximilian, Emperor of Mexico, and his generals. Manet based his historical painting *Execution of Maximilian* on eyewitness reports printed in European newspapers. The execution happened in the

June 19th 1867 when Maximilian was murdered/executed/assassinated alongside two of his generals, Tomas Mejía and Miguel Miramón. Miramón, shown below set up a rival government to Benito Juárez.

**Figure 5 - Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, [Version 2](#) (fragments) Edouard Manet, 1867-68, Photograph by Fernand Lochard, c. 1883, National Gallery, London, CD#1155.058 [showing the 2nd version mostly intact].**



Copyright © 2000 National Gallery, London. All rights reserved.

In the second version, the uniforms of the soldiers have become more French than Mexican, and they are painted with realist detail. The second version is based more on journalistic evidence that was being circulated in the newspapers, a month after Maximilian's execution. The London National Gallery painting is in four fragments (which may have been cut up by Manet). The left section shows General Mejía. Degas assembled the fragments in a reconstruction of the original. The emperor (off canvas left) dressed in black, is holding General Mejía's

hand.

"But why was it cut up? Was the subject of the execution of the Emperor of Mexico - who had been elected at the instigation of Napoleon III of France but then abandoned to his fate - thought to be too politically disturbing as well as too distasteful to sell well? Or had Manet himself come to feel that the composition was not entirely successful? The pieces all look fragmentary but then that was an effect which artists at that time deliberately pursued. A daring cropping of the

image will be found in many paintings by the Impressionists.”

**Figure 6 - Manet's 3rd Version in Oil of Execution of the Emperor Maximilian, Third Oil Version, Preparatory oil sketch for 4th & final large oil picture, Edouard Manet, 1868-69, 50x60cm, Oil on canvas, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen**



The 3rd version, in Copenhagen, is described as a preparatory sketch for the 4th version. The officer with the sword in the third version is omitted in the 4th. A wall appears in the 3rd oil version, and remains in subsequent ones. This could indicate historic detail that circulated in the press, or it can be read more critically as the wall of empire. Before the final (4th) version of the painting, Manet did a

lithograph, and Mexicans, some in sombreros, are looking down at the execution. In the lithograph (below), appears a lieutenant with his sword raised; he disappears in the final oil version.

## Boje

**Figure 7 - Execution of the Emperor Maximilian**, Edouard Manet, 1868, 33.3x43.3cm, [Lithograph](#), Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris; NYPL, A98458



In the 3rd version of oil, and in the above lithograph, we see that Manet has placed a sombrero on Maximilian's head (and on spectators looking down from the wall). The sombrero invites an iconic interpretation to the painting. For example, it sets up a liminal, betwixt and between space of ambiguity. As Wilson-Bareau (1992: 107) notes, the sombrero could be read as an iconic symbol of martyrdom, especially since Manet (differing from eye witness accounts), places Maximilian between his two generals, as in Christ's crucifixion. On the other hand, such an interpretation is ambiguous, given the

sombrero can be read more ironically, as a critique of Napoleon III's failed Mexico conquest. The sombrero is less halo-looking in the Lithograph, than in the 3rd oil painting (and becomes more realistic in the final version # 4). Manet was no doubt aware of "the French government's false propaganda about his initial reception in Mexico as 'a messiah awaited by the population' (Wilson-Bareau, 1992: 107). There is a change from earlier versions; the facial features of General Mejia are also more pronounced than earlier versions.

**Figure 8 - VERSION 4 of painting - Edouard Manet. Execution of the Emperor Maximilian,**

Final Version, Edouard Manet, 1868-69, 252x302cm, Oil on canvas, Stadtische Kunsthalle, Mannheim, 24029



Georges Bataille (1955) did a critical aesthetics study of Manet's 4th oil version of *The Execution of Maximilian*. Bataille sees Manet, breaking ranks with the prevailing visual aesthetic that "merely filled its appointed parts in a system of rhetoric" (1955: 44). The dominant aesthetics was to glorify tradition and bourgeoisie values. Bataille argues that Baudelaire (Manet's contemporary critic) is trying to preserve the traditional aesthetic, "the monumental order of things, that guarantee of unity and lasting tradition: (p. 42).

I see in Manet, a different break with visual traditional aesthetics, than what Bataille poses. I see a break away from the aesthetics that privileges empire. At the time

of Manet's painting the decline of the French empire and the rise of the American empire were underway. The U.S. civil war is winding down, and Seward is sending Benito Juárez mercenaries, munitions, and money to fight the French in Mexico. I think Manet is bucking an aesthetic and censorship imposed by powerful French state and imperial authorities on all artists. It was OK to glorify the individual, or to escape into vivid colors, but not OK to overtly poke fun at Napoleon III. If Manet has any hope at all of actually exhibiting his paintings, he has to strategically be covert and ironic in his critique.

Bataille (1955), on the other hand, misses the covert critique, seeing in Manet, only a celebration of the decline of traditional



## Boje

aesthetics (also in Delacroix, Courbet, Ingre, Wagner, & Chateaubriand), and a Manet's determination to be artistic and not political. It is a decline that Baudelaire sneers at in his letter to Manet, which Bataille (1955: 45) cites, "You are only the first in the decline of your art." Bataille sees in Manet, an attempt to radically break with the rhetorical aesthetics in history painting, which is "opening the way to a new form of painting" (p. 49). To bring forth the new aesthetic Bataille argues that art had to be purged of the metaphysical passions that ravaged Goya. Quoting Malraux, Bataille (1955: 49, italics Bastille's), "it had to become *an end in itself*."

I am saying the Bataille revealed in Manet's transition from narratological to pure modernist (end in itself) painting, but missed Manet's antenarrative. An antenarrative (Boje, 2001) is a bet and a pre-story that is constructed to take flight and have social influence as it takes on more coherence.

I want to analyze Empire as a Eurocentric aesthetic in opposition to Manet's counter-aesthetic rendition of the Indigenous Mexican. What is beauty is defined in not only Western Eurocentric terms, but can be defined in neo-colonial terms (Prasad & Prasad, 2003: 285-6).

I think Manet does not submit to the aesthetic of bourgeois torpor or spiritual transcendence of the elite class. This is a painting about whiteness, opposed by the color of the peasants (observing across the wall), the two generals, and the mostly white firing squad. The white blue-eyed, blonde haired emperor is fading and alienated from the multicultural world of Mexican-Indian.

Bataille see the "temple of the past" being violated by Manet, an indifference to the meaning of the subject the painter is painting (p. 50). Manet says Bataille (1955: 51) uses a painter gesture that has "rendered a man's death with the same indifference as if he had chose a fish or a flower for his subject." My own reading is that Manet is not as

unconcerned with the incident of Maximilian's death as Bataille depicts. I think Manet puts it in a more revolutionary context. The blond-haired, blue-eyed Emperor of Mexico is denied empire's eloquent narrative of a tragic and yet heroic death at the hands of the indigenous and colonized rebels.

I agree with Bataille, that there is a negation of the eloquence of historical narrative aesthetic. It is just that I read, as well, antenarrative eloquence in the painter's moves. I think this antenarrative is apparent in the five renderings Manet crafted.

As noted above, there is tension in the painting between an iconic reading (e.g. the sombrero as halo, the central position of Maximilian between his generals), and the critique of empire (making the uniforms of the squad more French). There appears to be an indifferent gaze of the painted spectators, which invites our own indifference.

Immersing myself in the viewing and in this historical context of visual military painting narrative methods of painters, I see something interesting; something other critics have not noticed. The painting is titled *The Execution of Maximilian*, yet, who is it that is being executed, at the moment of the firing? I think it is General Tomas Mejia, a pure Indian blood (like Benito Juárez), and (unlike Juárez) Maximilian's most loyal general, who, if you follow the directing gaze of the rifles, is the central image of the painting (not Maximilian).

In eye witness accounts of the executions, Maximilian insists that General Miguel Miramón, not General Tomas Mejia, be given the honor of standing in the traditional center of the trio. In Manet's painting, Maximilian is in the center of those to be executed, but the more dramatic of the three is Mejia. There would be historical rationale in placing Miramon at the center; and the journalistic accounts of eye witnesses were available to Manet. There are reasons for Manet to have put Miramon at center of the three. Miramon, for example, set up a rival government to Juárez in 1859-1860, but in June 1861

Juárez became President of the Mexican Republic (Wilson-Bareau, 1992: 20). And “General Miramon made a lightning raid on Zacatecas in central Mexico and nearly took Juárez prisoner” (1992: 28-29). Manet, however, abides by cherished visual habits of iconic tradition by putting Maximilian in the center of the trio, but he denies both Maximilian and General Miramon, their visual centrality by executing General Mejia.

Manet also gives Mejia the more dramatic pose of the three. In Manet's painting, Mejia is dramatically staged, with an out flung arm, and bowed head in the first oil painting and in the lithograph. At the same time, the blue-eyed, blond-haired young Emperor of Mexico is physically linked, in grasped hands, to his Mexican Indian general, Mejia and to General Miramon. Mejia dramatic pose and style resembles the central figure in Goya's *Third of May* painting.

I have a second key insight. Manet's painting can be read from a Marxist aesthetic, as revolutionary art. Marcuse (1969: xi) puts it this way:

A work of art can be called revolutionary if, by virtue of the aesthetic transformation, it represents, in the exemplary fate of individuals, the prevailing unfreedom and the rebelling forces, thus breaking through the mystified (and petrified) social reality and opening the horizon of change (liberation).

In the 4th version of the painting, the ascending class looks over the wall with indifference as the men in French uniforms fire their rifle. Read as colonial warfare, the oppressed class have killed their oppressor in an act of revolution against empire. In Manet's painting, there is also indication of the unfreedom of the rebelling forces, and of the French depicted as doing the shooting. Yet, Manet does not open up a horizon for change, except in the subversive potentiality of his techniques and the compositionality of his estranged subjects. There is some relation to praxis, in the modified Marxist aesthetic, Marcuse seeks to establish, a relation between the power of estrangement and praxis. Marcuse's critical theory aesthetic, is

subversive, and is oppositional to the art-for-art's sake aesthetic that Bataille (1955) sees in Manet's work. In sum, I view the visual language of Manet's painting as a critical aesthetics, partly estrangement, and partly Manet as a secret agent resisting and dissolving Eurocentric aesthetic. A secret agent is someone from the bourgeois class who is critical of their own (Marcuse, 1979: 21). Manet, it is true, did claim that he was doing art for art sake, creating fictions with no socio-historical or political significance. However, this may be the only way to get subversive art past the French censors.

While Bataille (1955) is critical of Baudelaire, Marcuse (1978) praises Baudelaire repeatedly for using the aesthetic of estrangement, which uses art-for-art sake as the first step in an emancipatory project (p. 19-20).

Baudelaire's poems (suggests Marcuse as well as Walter Benjamin) are able to express the consciousness of crisis, and less dramatically than Manet, the rebellion of the bourgeois against their own class aesthetics. My point here is that aesthetic modalities (Marxist, neo-Marxist, traditional) compete for monopoly over dominant reality, and the fictitious space opened by art-for-art-sake can be “more real than reality itself” (Marcuse, 1979: 22).

In Manet's paintings two worlds, the aesthetics of empire, and the aesthetics of revolutionary self-liberation collide and each has its regime of truth.

Many art critics have remarked that the spectators in the two paintings are also done in similar Goya style. Contrast the Manet depictions of the execution with Francisco Goya's “The Shootings of May Third”, an 1808 Oil on canvas, at Museo del Prado, Madrid. Manet's is the less romantic of the two.

Figure 9 - Francisco Goya's “The Shootings of May Third,” 1808 Oil on canvas, at Museo del Prado, Madrid

## Boje

In Goya's painting, then gaze of the painted spectators and the firing squad is on the victim. Goya says Bataille (1955: 50) is crying out, painting "the temple's incapacity to give him peace... the absurdity, the lunatic cruelty, the rottenness of the whole structure" of traditional narrative eloquence. Bataille resonates with what he calls Goya's positive side -- show the emptiness of death, and the decline of traditional painting aesthetic (p. 51). Goya paints a man about to die, who is "flinging up his arms with a shriek" showing the "instantaneous flash of death, a thunderbolt of sight-destroying intensity, brighter than any known light" (p. 51).

Bataille argues that Goya gives painting a narrative eloquence that has never been surpassed, while Manet who has seen the painting in 1865 and 1867, treats death with indifference, seemingly unconcerned with the incident, and is negating the eloquence of historical painting narrative aesthetic. I have a different reading. Manet treats Mejia's death with visual narrative eloquence, but is indifferent to Maximilian's death, denying it Empire's cherished visual habit of sentimental and spiritual fiction.

There is indifference throughout the compositionality of the painting. The center of the gaze is the General Mejia, not on Emperor Maximilian or General Miramón. The spectators (the peasants & the sergeant cocking his rifle should the coup de grace be needed) look indifferent. Maximilian and Miramon look indifferent. We are being invited, as gallery spectators, to take an indifferent gaze.

At the same time, amidst the indifference of compositionality and spectator gaze, there is an antenarrative that Manet eloquently achieves. The subject, Maximilian, is not altogether dissolved in this fourth version (as compared to the 1st) by the modernist impressionistic aesthetic of end-for-itself painting. The painting is not quite purged as Bataille would have it of a "centuries-old ailment: chronic eloquence" (1955: 52).

I think Bataille's (1955: 53) aesthetic reading

self-deconstructs, in his own abstract, inserted above the painting, in his book on Manet.

"The death sentence passed in a far-off land on this Habsburg prince - whom the reckless ambitions of the French emperor Napoleon III had inveigled into a hare-brained scheme for the conquest of Mexico - came as a shock to the 'civilized' world. No one imagined that the execution would really be carried out, but the Mexicans disregarded the concert of protest raised by many nations and Maximilian courageously met his death on June 19, 1867."

My analysis is that Manet has rejected the "pompous rhetoric: of historical painting, as Bataille observes, but also rejected the narrative project of both American and French empire. His inveigh is to make a radical visual satirical attack on Napoleon III. His antenarrative bet is that by using detached style, and tension between strategically placed iconic image and impressionistic detachment, Manet can slip his critique of Napoleon III past the ever vigilant censors. Manet, in my view, paints the abjection, the degraded quality of a struggle of empire that has brought Juárez to a point where he must execute, not Maximilian, but Mejia, while all the spectators (including us) look in with indifference. Manet does not show the gaze respect or the solemnity of the death of an emperor.

In a move similar, I think, to Brecht's epic theatre, Manet does not succumb to the proscribed visual habit of empathetic spectator. Yet, antenarratively, there is an eloquent empathy, not with the Divine Christian idealism, nor with the Royal aristocratic hero worship, but with the farce that is two empires, French and U.S, struggling over the remnants of the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Manet is an anarchist, and his painting is read as a seditious threat to empire.

His antenarrative bet fails; the oil versions and his lithograph were censored, banned

from public viewing, by the French authorities. "Manet was never allowed to exhibit the painting [or lithograph] in France in his lifetime." This turned into a crusade against censorship (Wilson-Bareau, 1992: 69). The soldiers in the firing squad in versions 2 to 5, were wearing the uniforms of French troops. This was seen as a criticism of Napoleon III (Wilson-Bareau, 1992: 112).

My dialectic treatment of aesthetics runs into the classic problem of other aesthetics. For example, in Marxist aesthetics, the problem is if there is a such an aesthetic, then how is it attached to the consciousness of a particular social group, in this case to the proletariat? (See Marcuse, p. 30). It is easier to see that the elite and bourgeois aesthetic has its museum goers. But, is what Manet paints the art of the ascending class, or is it the more spiritualized, iconic renditions that privilege empire and aristocrats (such as the romantic versions of the Maximilian Execution)? Finally, there is an indigenous aesthetics, a way of depicting the execution that is beyond Manet. Marcuse (1979: 22) has a hypothesis "the more the exploited classes, 'the people,' succumb to the powers that be, the more will art be estranged from 'the people.'" In this sense, the revolutionary class does not have art that hangs in the Louvre or the National Gallery.

Next, I examine the historical context of the clash of U.S. and French empire over the former Spanish, Mexico colony.

### **How did the struggle of the Empires for Mexico begin?**

In 1844 and 1856 Napoleon entertained detailed proposals to put a European prince in Mexico (Johnson, 1992: 18-19). This way Mexico could turn to Europe, instead of the U.S. for diplomatic and economic support.

In 1853, Napoleon III was approached by General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna, who had made himself dictator of Mexico; he asked Napoleon III for French protection, and indicated he would step down in favor of a

European prince (Johnson, 1992: 19). Ferdinand Maximilian (1832 - 1867), an Austrian Archduke and brother to the emperor of Austria, was installed in Mexico as a puppet emperor by Napoleon III in 1863. The Mexican people, led by Benito Juárez, had been organizing to overthrow the French occupation of Mexico. It took a turn for the worse when Maximilian ordered the execution of Juárez' soldiers when they were captured.

Juárez became president of the Mexican Republic in 1861. The French campaign was not that successful; French troops were defeated at Puebla in May 1862. Reinforcements were sent the following year, and Puebla was taken by the French. In fact some 38,000 French troops had been sent to Mexico since 1861. Napoleon gave order to pacify Mexico, rather than conquer it. A provisional government was hastily formed in Mexico, and the offer went out for Maximilian to wear the crown. Napoleon III and Maximilian met in Paris in March 1864 to work out the terms of the emperorship. Napoleon III agrees to keep 25,000 troops in Mexico until they are replaced by native forces; Foreign Legion would leave another 8,000 in place for six years. In return Maximilian would insure that Mexico paid its outstanding debts to France. 32 year old Maximilian and his 24 year old wife Charlotte arrived in Mexico City on 12 June 1864. 6,000 Austrian and 2,000 Belgian troops came to join the French forces. In 1865, Napoleon III began to withdraw French occupation troops from Mexico. The first withdrawal was a few thousand troops to show that Mexico was independent. IN January 1866, Napoleon III told his generals to withdraw more French troops with a year to eighteen months. As U.S. civil war ceased, the military support to Juárez increased. American Secretary of State, William H. Seward demanded the French speed up the withdrawal. It was clearly time for the Emperor and Empress to abdicate the throne and withdraw. By 13 March 1867, All French troops had withdrawn, leaving 7,000 dead behind.

## Boje

Maximilian wanted to leave with the French troops, but his wife, Charlotte, daughter of the King of the Belgians (Leopold I), and also first cousin to Queen Victoria, convinced Maximilian to stay, asserting that he had the support of the Mexican people, and to withdraw was dishonorable. Instead Empress Charlotte returned to Europe and sought support from Napoleon and the Pope. The Empress became convinced people were trying to poison her, perhaps going insane in her futile attempt to get Napoleon III and the pope to intervene. Three times she went to the pope saying someone was trying to poison her, and was soon insane, and never left Europe.

Maximilian went to Queretaro to meet Juárez' army. But his Imperial forces, led by Colonel Miguel Lopez, betrayed the young emperor.

And on 15 May 1867 Maximilian and his entourage surrendered (Johnson, 1993: 29). Maximilian and his two general stood trial before a military tribunal, with the outcome already decided.

Johnson (1993: 31) writes, "If Maximilian is a martyr, Juárez is a national hero.... He personified the struggle against the French and the fight for Mexican nationalism." In Mexico, the decision by Juárez to execute Maximilian was seen as prudent, observes Johnson, and upon entering Mexico City, Juárez was elected president in 1871.

This is a staging of the execution to give you an idea of what a staging of real could have looked like:

**Figure 10 - Scene from 1867: Manet's "Execution of Maximilian" - Photo: Simon Sully**



However, the photo portrayal has a number of problems. First, while it replicates the painting by Manet, it is a distortion of eye witness accounts of the execution. For

example, Maximilian stood on the right, not in the middle of the three, having given the place of honor to General Miramon. The three apparently stood well apart, with three

squads doing the firing. Finally, it is Mejia, not Maximilian who throws his head back. The rifles appear to be pointed at Maximilian, not Mejia. I want to turn next, to some of the romantic and tragic historical fiction about Maximilian.

**Romantic Accounts of the Execution** - I picked a sampling from the scores of Maximilian novels to give some discursive context to Manet's work. Smith (1973), for example writes a tale of romance and tragedy, as does Prince Michael of Greece (1998).

In Michael's (1998) novel, U.S. Secretary of State William Henry Seward could have told Benito Juárez to not execute the Emperor of Mexico. Prince Williams (1998: 339) quotes him as saying, "Don't worry, Maximilian is in no danger. His life is as safe as mine." Seward did send the U.S. ambassador Campbell to Mexico to see Juárez, but the man delayed, then refused to go and instead resigned. The historical record suggests the following: "Seward wanted the U.S. to forge a vast empire, including Canada, the Caribbean especially Cuba, Hawaii and other Pacific Islands, Greenland, Iceland and Mexico." On February 12 1866, Seward sent General Schofield to Paris to request "definitive information" on the date of French withdrawal, and sent General Sheridan to the Texas border with 50,000 troops to the Rio Grand to make his point. Napoleon III announced February 22 his decision to withdraw French troops from Mexico.

Maximilian was ready to abdicate, but Empress Charlotte, thought it suicidal to their career, "an admission of one's own incompetence: (Michael, 1998: 257). Empress Charlotte, on July 9 1866 sailed to Europe to beg Napoleon III and Pope Pius IX to assist Emperor Maximilian. Maximilian stayed to face Juárez. By September, it is clear that neither Napoleon III or the Pope is going to help, and Empress Charlotte's mind snaps. She tells the pope on September 27, 1866 that people are poisoning her food. She keeps returning to the pope to eat food from his plate. Finally she

is committed to a mental institution. Maximilian and his Mexican generals fight a losing battle.

June 19 1867 is the date of the execution. Both Smith (1973) and Michael (1998) describe how Maximilian got out of the coach taking him to his execution, and handed his watch to Father Soria. "Send this as a souvenir to my dear wife. Tell her that my eyes will close with her image before them, and that I will bring it with me to heaven" (Michael, 1998: 341). Maximilian gave each soldier in the firing squad a gold coin, telling them in a loud voice:

I forgive all of you, may all of you forgive me. May my blood that is about to flow be shed for the good of the country. Long live Mexico! Long live independence! (Michael, 1998: 341).

Basch (2001: 252), in a forensic study, reports the notes from Dr. Reyes, a Mexican physician present at the execution; Maximilian is reported to have said:

May my blood be the last to be spilled as a sacrifice for the country. And if it did require some of its sons, may it be for the good of the Nation and never to betray it.

Maximilian hands each soldier in the firing squad a gold coin and tells them to aim for his heart. Smith (1973: 264) says that Maximilian wore a white felt sombrero and tucked six handkerchiefs in his shirt to stop blood from spilling out. In his novel Smith reports Maximilian as saying, "what a glorious day! I have always wanted to die on just such a day" (p. 277). The troops were divided into three firing squads, with 6 or 7 men in each. And his dying words, writes Prince Michael, "Poor Charlotte" as he slid to the ground (1998: 341). Basch (2001:251) in a forensic study of the evidence, says that six bullets passed through the body, three were chest wounds and one through the heart. "The nature of the three wounds indicates that the Emperor's death struggle must have been extremely short. The story is told that he moved his hands trying to give the command

## Boje

for a second volley.... However, such motions are nothing but convulsions.”

Michael (2001) tells the story of how Maximilian had dictated a letter to his murderer, Benito Juárez, “I lose my life gladly if my sacrifice can contribute to the peace and prosperity of my new homeland: (p. 342-3). Juárez refused the letter, “I never had contact with this man during his life, I will not start now after his death” (p. 343).

Doctor Leieve, writes Michael, did such a poor job of embalming that Maximilian's blue eyes liquefied, and his body began to rot. Other doctors took over the embalming.

At a loss, the only solution they could think of was to go into the nearest church and tear out the black glass eyes from a statue of the Virgin, and shove them into the dead emperor's empty sockets. (p. 341).

In Michael's novel, U.S. Secretary of State Seward made an official visit to Mexico to reap the benefits of U.S. support for their protégé Benito Juárez (Michael, 1998: 342). Mexico, though not in name, was virtually an American colony, “at least that was what Seward thought” (p. 342). In Smith (1973) the romance tragedy of Maximilian and Charlotte upstages the tale of empire.

In closing, I have analyzed four aesthetic readings of Manet's work, which I can summarize. I see these as occurring in dialectic opposition, in the discourse among art critics about the paintings (and lithograph).

**1. Modernist Impressionist Painting** - Bataille (1955: 52) sees it as a revolutionary deconstruction of the subject. Maximilian becomes an absence, an indifference. “*Maximilian* reminds us of a tooth deadened by Novocain; we get the impression of an all-engulfing numbness, as if a skillful practitioner had radically cured painting of a centuries-old ailment: chronic eloquence” (p. 52). And the result is Maximilian does not attain his place in (painting) history, as the hero that his backers would like him to attain. Meaninglessness

becomes a radical aesthetic effect (See Mannheim version of painting). What everyone is saying is tragic death, in Manet, the heroic/tragic is denied. The painting violates general rules of visual perspective that are authoritative ways to narrate, since the Renaissance (i.e. the squad, not the victim is the focus; the victim is not given iconic meaning or traditional visual priority; it is an inversion that does not deliver expected/anticipated narrative closure). The traditional master narrative is presented, minus what it is supposed to signify. Bataille notes just how casual and indifferent are the poses of the characters in the painting, the emotional reaction that people would expect, is not there.

**2. Historical Narrative Realist/Idealism Painting** - Nils Sanblad (1954) says that the 5 versions done by Manet correspond to increasingly detailed information about the execution that became available in the media. For example, there was a photo of the actual firing squad published ([see video](#)). Sanblad shows how Manet followed the news account to get at the reality of the event as news. First news of the 19 June execution reached France on 30 June 1867. In his first version, the firing squad has sombreros and Mexican uniforms. In later versions the uniforms are Copenhagen versions. In short the series of Manet paintings is increasingly realist, which is contrary to Bataille.

**3. Mediatized Painting** - Neil Larsen (1990) follows an Adorno aesthetic, negating history by showing a spectator reading. The depiction is that the execution is becoming information, a passage of meaning from event to mass reproduction. Maximilian is dissolved into a “particle wave of information” (Larsen, 1990: 38). In the information perspective, violence is newsworthy; violence is fetish. There is in the painting a dialectic of two historical codes, “the informational/journalistic versus the traditional/experiential” (Larsen, 1990: 380).

**4. Maximilian is farce** - Maximilian's wife, Charlotte, goes mad, after she returns to

Europe, and her pleas for support for her husband with the people and Napoleon, go ignored. The farce continues, after the execution, when the proper materials for embalming could not be found, so his damaged face was fixed up with "a pair of brown glass eyes plucked from a mannequin of the Virgin in a local Queretaro church." There is a long list of such nuances that blur the edges of nationalist symbolism and it becomes carnivalized subplot out of *el día de los muertos*. And Maximilian, is denied "His real death" says Larsen (1990: 37) "under unexpectedly 'heroic' circumstances cannot produce the tragic 'place in history' that his embarrassed backers desire for him - and for themselves."

### Conclusions

I contend that the four visual aesthetics are in dialectic relation, a battle of the art world to provide a stable interpretation of Manet's *Execution of Maximilian*. Manet is breaking with the cherished visual aesthetic habits of historical painting narrative realism and its idealisms to paint something that both farce and a mediatized and a modernist constructivism. There are elements of Goya's painterly style in the peasants, and in the heroic pose of Mejia, but the poses of Maximilian and Miramon, as well as the gaze of the painted spectators are exhibit indifference.

I have applied antenarrative theory to the visual aesthetic. Manet while deviating from the eloquent narrative of empire and realist historical and idealist painting, does brush stroke an antenarrative of the fall of French Empire and first stirring of the U.S. Empire. It is not the tragic heroic celebration of empire. It is the construction of a carnivalesque farce, and satire against Napoleon III, and as I imagine, against the U.S. Empire.

Manet assembles a collage of inconsistencies in his use of aesthetic positions, and there is antenarrative eloquence, not narrative coherence in his visual method. There are a variety of spectral positions that can apply to

Manet. This is what I term a 'dialectic of spectral Visualities':

1. Antenarrative Spectator - sees Manet's bet he can tease Napoleon III
2. Aesthetic Spectators - clash of traditional & critical aesthetics (i.e. Adorno, Bataille) with the disruptions to expected views
3. Historical context of spectator expecting reference for Christian idealism, royalist empire, & aristocratic class
4. Theatric Spectator - estranged poses of characters, improbable costuming, dramatic gestures of Miramón
5. Marxist Aesthetic Spectator
6. Post-colonialist Spectator indifference

In closing, Manet's paintings are not the tragic heroic celebration of empire; it is the construction of a carnivalesque farce, and satire against Napoleon III, and as I imagine, against the U.S. Empire. It is part of the dialectic of carnivalesque resistance to spectacle of empire. It is why Manet's renditions were censored during his lifetime

### References

- Bataille, Georges (1955). *Manet: Biographical and Critical Study*. Translated by Austrn Wainhouse and James Emmons. Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company.
- Basch, Samuel, M.D. (2001). *Recollections of Mexico: The Last Ten Months of Maximilian's Empire*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc.
- Manet: The Heroism of Modern Life (2003) Roland Collection of Filmes & Videos on Art <http://www.roland-collection.com/rolandcollection/section/12/394.htm>
- Larsen, Neil (1990). *Modernism and Hegemony: A Materialist critique of Aesthetic Agencies*. Foreword by Jaime Concha. *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 71. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.



### **Boje**

Michael, Prince (1998) *The Empress of Farewells* The story of Charlotte, Empress of Mexico. Translated from the French by Vincent Aurora. NY: Atlantic Monthly Press.

Prasad, Anshuman & Pushkala Prasad (2003). *The postcolonial imagination*. Pp. 283-295 in A. Prasad (Ed) *Postcolonial theory and organizational analysis: A critical engagement*. NY & Hampshire, England: Palgrave/MacMillan

Smith, Gene (1973). *Maximilian and Carlota: A Tale of Romance and Tragedy*. NY: William Morrow & Company, Inc.

Wilson-Bareau, Juliet (1992). *Manet: The Execution of Maximilian: Painting, Politics and Censorship*. NJ: Princeton University Press.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1966). *Essays in Aesthetics*. Selected and translated by Wade Baskin. NY: The Citadel Press. 2nd edition. 1st edition, 1963.