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Manet's Mirror and Jeff Wall's *Picture for Women*: Reflection or Refraction?

ABSTRACT

Jeff Wall describes his photograph *Picture for Women* (1979) as a 'remake' of Édouard Manet's painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, (1882). The motif of the mirror reflection is fundamental to both artworks and foregrounds mutual concerns about spectatorship, the dynamics of the gaze and spatial relations. In each case, the mirror transforms pictorial space by reincorporating the off-frame zone, juxtaposing heterogeneous fields of vision and conflating multiple surfaces. Manet's mirror is most famous for its 'infidelity' to that which it reflects, but the nature of its aberrations continues to confound critics. The controversy surrounding the mirror in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* lingers in the striking construction of Wall's *Picture for Women*, which appears to be entirely composed of a mirror image. I argue that the idiosyncrasies of the mirror reflection in Manet's painting find a new articulation, inspired by the cinematic, in Wall's staged photograph. Using film theories of 'suture', I extend established interpretations of *Picture for Women* by suggesting that the ambiguous mirror in Wall's photograph performs a suturing function and evokes cinema's mobile frame. However, suture's function is not absolute, nor final, just as the presence of the mirror in Wall's photograph is assumed, but not certain.



Fig. 1. Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, oil on canvas, 97 x 130cm. Courtesy The Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, London.

Almost a century separates Canadian artist Jeff Wall's photograph *Picture for Women* (1979), from the image that inspired it — Édouard Manet's painting *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882). The motif of the mirror, fundamental to both artworks, has been extensively theorised as foregrounding concerns about spectatorship, the dynamics of the gaze and spatial representation. In both works, the mirror transforms pictorial space by reincorporating the 'off-frame' zone; by accommodating unseen perspectives in its reflection; through juxtaposing heterogeneous fields of vision, and by conflating multiple surfaces (including that of the picture plane). The mirror is a picture-within-a-picture which enables the absent, concealed and latent to become (metaphorically and literally) present, visible and exposed. Yet, in the case of the *Bar*, the mirror's revelations are more opaque than transparent: the 'infidelity' of the mirror image in Manet's painting has confounded critics for over a century. The controversy and ambiguity surrounding the mirror in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* lingers in the striking construction of Wall's *Picture for Women*, which appears to be *entirely* composed of a mirror image. What is the significance of Wall's variation on Manet's theme? It is my contention that the peculiar aberrations of the mirror reflection in Manet's painting find a new articulation, inspired by the cinematic, in Wall's staged photograph.

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère depicts a scene from 'Modern' Parisian life: a young barmaid poised behind the bar of a bustling night-club (Fig. 1). The club, its patrons, the barmaid (known as Suzon), the male customer she waits on, the electric lights, assorted liqueur bottles and other trappings of the establishment are reflected in the mirror behind the counter. While relatively inconspicuous at a glance, the discrepancies between the position and appearance of the actual objects in the 'real' space of the bar and their reflections have attracted much critical debate. Bearing these complexities in mind, Wall's *Picture for Women* offers pictorial integrity, simplicity and transparency (Fig. 2).¹ Wall strips back Manet's composition by staging his photograph in a drab, non-descript, sparsely furnished classroom. In 1981, Wall described *Picture for Women* as 'a kind of classroom lesson on the mechanisms of the erotic',² and later in 1985 as 'a theoretical diagram in an empty classroom'.³ These comments suggest that a lesson is to be learned from the picture, enigmatic as the message may be. In this elusive space of learning, the crowd of the *Bar* has disappeared, leaving only the main protagonists: a young woman, a man and the camera which, to all appearances, captures the scene reflected in apparent entirety in a mirror that shares its surface with the photograph's picture plane. Extrapolating from the central place of the mirror in the *Bar*, we assume that Wall's photograph is similarly structured by a mirror's reflection. Is this a capricious device, as in Manet's provocative original? Can an old mirror learn new tricks?

Wall describes *Picture for Women* as 'a remake [of Manet's painting] the way that movies are remade'.⁴ He continues:

¹ Fig. 2. Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979, Cibachrome transparency in light box, 150 x 234 cm., Vancouver, collection of the artist.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/jeffwall/rooms/room1.shtm>

² Campany, 2007, p. 21

³ Galassi, 2007b, p. 187–188

⁴ Wall observed *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, a painting from the collection of the Courtauld Institute in London, during his time studying art history at the institute in the 1970s. Galassi, 2007b, p. 188

The same script is reworked and the appearance, the style, the semiotics, of the earlier film are subjected to a commentary in the new version. This dialectic interests me. It's a judgment on which elements of the past are still alive.⁵

Here, Wall borrows the cultural logic of cinema to summarise his engagement with Manet's painting, and in so doing offers up a clue: what can cinema teach us about *Picture for Women*, and also (perhaps unexpectedly) about the conundrums of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*? I argue that Wall's work raises questions about how cinema transformed spectatorship and vision itself. As a means of providing a context for this claim, I will draw on Michael Fried's recent writings on the emergence of a new form of art photography in the late 1970s, and Wall's central role in these developments.

In his 2008 book *Why photography matters as art as never before*, Michael Fried argues that the late 1970s and early 1980s saw the beginning of a 'new regime' in art photography. This 'regime' was marked by two main attributes: the significantly larger sizes of the images produced (dwarfing those of previous art photography), and the expectation, or intention, for the works to be hung on a gallery wall (rather than viewed in books or otherwise as reproductions).⁶ Fried suggests that the imposing proportions of the new photographic tableaux produced by Wall and other artists such as Andreas Gursky and Thomas Struth in the 1980s engendered crucial shifts in the relationship between the viewer and artwork. These shifts were not only quantitative (in terms of the increased visual information concomitant with an increase in scale), but also qualitative, in terms of the interaction between spectator and photograph.⁷

In relation to *Picture for Women*, Fried reads the image's large scale and its references to Manet's *Bar* as indications of a pictorial ambition to be 'looked at' in the same manner as paintings.⁸ The life-sized photographic transparency provides a commanding 'to scale' representation. The woman's penetrating gaze *summons* the viewer: her look positions us in front of the image where we regard her as the 'other' that observes us, or contemplate her image as our own reflection. Here, beholding the photograph — returning the woman's gaze — we are paradoxically positioned in the firing line of the camera itself. In combining these spectatorial dynamics with themes familiar from Manet's painting, *Picture for Women* seems an ideal example to support Fried's claim, that 'issues concerning the relationship between the photograph and the viewer standing before it became crucial for photography as they had never previously been.'⁹

While it is not the intention of this article to revisit Fried's extensive and influential writings on the issue of 'beholding' and theatricality in art, I do want to draw attention here to one other point raised in *Why Photography Matters*. In addition to the shifts in the scale and presentation of photographic images, Fried further observes that art photography in the 1970s was marked by a head-on engagement with the question of

⁵ Galassi, 2007b, p. 188.

⁶ Fried acknowledges that Jean-François Chevrier was the first to point out that these 'tableau form' photographs of the 1970s were made for the wall. Fried, 2008, p. 2, 14.

⁷ It is ironic that such minute details, such as the reversed text on the camera in the mirror reflection / image of *Picture for Women*, can prove crucial to the meaning of the image as a whole (as we shall later see), yet evade representation in most reproductions of the artworks.

⁸ Fried, 2008, pp. 16–17

⁹ Fried, 2008, p. 2

cinema.¹⁰ He identifies Wall as one of the key exponents of this engagement, but acknowledges that an exploration of Wall's relationship to cinema lies beyond the scope of his book. This is a significant point of departure for my research: I will attempt to address the question of cinema left open by Fried, by considering it alongside the problem of spectatorship in *Picture for Women* and in the controversial painting it 'remakes'.

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère

In Manet's painting, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, the mirror's presence is made explicit through the doubling of objects. Art historian T.J. Clark's seminal analysis of the *Bar* in his book *The Painting of Modern Life* identifies a range of pictorial anomalies and spatial aberrations associated with a mismatch between the appearance and position of the objects (including the barmaid) in the actual space of the scene, and those reflected in the mirror behind the bar. Most puzzlingly, the man in conversation with the barmaid is 'present' as a reflection only. It would seem that this peculiarity could be resolved by the viewer occupying his position and appropriating his soliciting gaze. Here Manet ingeniously summons the spectator while enlisting their critical faculty: identifying with the man, or adopting his place, is not a simple solution.

In Manet's painting, the barmaid's frontal pose and centrally directed gaze positions the spectator straight before her, in the middle of the composition. Yet, the reflections of the male customer (whose gaze we are encouraged to adopt) and the barmaid (who returns his / our gaze) are markedly shifted to the right. As Clark notes, the oblique-angled reflections seem to 'escape' their object while the mirror's frame remains obstinately parallel to the bar, and indeed to the picture plane. But what is more, the reflections, as a point of identification, escape the spectator too. Consequently, in regards to matters of spectatorship and identification, Clark asserts:

We cannot or will not take the place of the gentleman in the top hat, but there is no other place to occupy, it seems; we are left in a kind of suspended relation — to the barmaid, to ourselves as viewers, to the picture itself as a possible unity.¹¹

Are the spectator's efforts necessarily met with a dead end? Certainly, Clark's assumption that the painted mirror should faithfully reflect the objects and scene it depicts will not lead to a satisfactory resolution of these pictorial conundrums. Clark summarises his concerns about the mirror's role as follows:

The mirror must repeat the picture's literal surface: it must be the same surface, only farther back. The thing it must *not* do is act on the matters of visual fact it shows; it must not *do* things to them.¹²

Clark's analysis illustrates that the mirror has indeed exceeded its role: it *does* things that would not be possible in reality. He concludes that these accumulating uncertainties and doubts, which start as 'a series of limited questions about

¹⁰ Fried, 2008, p. 5

¹¹ Clark, 1984, p. 251

¹² Clark, 1984, p. 252

relationships in space' are likely to end as 'scepticism about relationship[s] in general.'¹³ But as Kermit S. Champa astutely observes: 'Like all of Manet's best works the *Bar* looks right before it looks wrong, and the latter sensation never completely subverts the former.'¹⁴ The sum of a number of individually inconsistent elements creates the strong impression of a mirror: the revelation of multiple points of view; the doubled (but misaligned) objects; the painterly grey-white scumbling (which suggests the mirror's tarnish); the loose and impressionistic handling of the paint in the depiction of the mirror reflection (compared to the more tangible, finer clarity of the 'actual' objects). Nonetheless, we can easily amalgamate these conflicting elements to make sense of the composition. Even if the mirror reflection is slippery, here its presence is convincing; a claim not so easily applied to Wall's *Picture for Women*, as we shall see. Clark concludes that 'inconsistencies so carefully contrived must have been felt to be somehow appropriate to the social forms the painter has chosen to show'; the hypothesis on which his book *The Painting of Modern Life* as a whole was based.¹⁵

Ruth E. Iskin extends Clark's argument (that the painting's form must be appropriate to the social scene it represents), to consider the development of the modern crowd.¹⁶ To Iskin, the mismatch between the actual and virtual spaces of the *Bar* indicates a multitude of gazes or points of view, including that of the barmaid, the male customer and we, the audience, but also of the night-club crowd, seen in the reflection of the large room. She argues that the *Bar*'s famous spatial 'incoherence' rests on deeply ingrained cultural assumptions and visual systems:

[T]he viewer's pattern of acculturated vision expects a single viewpoint, based on well-established pictorial codes of Western art. If we perceive the painting as depicting, indeed of originating from, several viewpoints rather than one, the painting makes sense differently.¹⁷

Iskin suggests that Manet's *Bar* signifies an important shift in codes of representation: the possibility of a 'female spectatorial gaze' which accompanies the 'exclusive single male gaze', and 'a new paradigm of crowd spectatorship that includes some women alongside men'.¹⁸ To Iskin, the painting does not necessarily privilege a singular patriarchal viewpoint (the male customer being but one member of the vast crowd), or the 'binary opposition of female spectacle versus a male gaze'.¹⁹ Instead, Iskin regards the *Bar*'s dynamics as more complicated, consisting of a multi-faceted composite of views: a mode of representation appropriate to the dynamics of the modern crowd (and an aspect of Manet's painting which is conspicuously absent from Wall's *Picture for Women*).

¹³ Clark, 1984, p. 251

¹⁴ Collins, 1996, p. 108

¹⁵ Clark, 1984, p. 252

¹⁶ Iskin, 1995

¹⁷ Iskin, 1995, p. 10

¹⁸ Iskin, 1995, p. 10

¹⁹ Iskin, 1995, p. 11

The Negotiation of Multiple Viewpoints: Cinema's Mobile Frame

Where, how and why does *cinema* fit into the conundrums of the *Bar* and Wall's photographic 'remake'? Iskin argues that the multiple perspectives generated by a crowd are represented in *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* by the mirror's discrepancies. Therefore, to extend Iskin's thesis we could suggest that the painting (which we view as a unified whole) is composed of heterogeneous points of view or incongruous fields of vision: the mirror accommodates 'unseen' perspectives in its reflection. This arrangement resonates with another visual apparatus: cinema's incorporation of multiple view points, which together form the 'montage chain'.

To clarify this analogy, it is necessary to consider the fundamental principles of classical cinema. In painting and photography, the frame functions as a fixed divider of pictorial and non-pictorial fields, although it is also an ambiguous border that is neither inside nor outside the image. Likewise, in cinema the frame divides onscreen from off-screen space. But, unique to cinema is the transitory and ephemeral image which *moves*. Importantly, it is through cinema's exclusively *mobile frame* that the pictorial and non-pictorial fields of the film are continually revised. This aspect signified a radical new mode of representation and prompted the development of theories of its operation and spectatorship.

Classical or continuity editing techniques aim to facilitate a smooth transition and a sense of connection between temporally and spatially disjunctive shots. A fundamental example is the shot / reverse-shot technique. Typically, an establishing shot (for example, a long shot of a crowded nightclub with a man weaving through the crowd as he approaches the bar) is followed by a shot which orients or gives meaning to the first (such as a medium shot of a woman behind the bar looking up and leaning forward). We are guided, by convention, to assume a causal or indexical relationship between these shots (the barmaid has seen the approaching man and readies herself to take his order), even though the pair are not present in the same shot. The spectator's desire to see and contextualise the next shot helps establish an interlocking chain in the montage. With exposure and repetition, the audience's understanding of the dynamics of montage becomes established and evolves into an expectation or learned behaviour associated with film viewing.

As the audience's understanding of filmic conventions becomes more sophisticated, the conventions of film (primarily classical cinema and continuity editing techniques) are naturalised and rendered transparent in the service of narrative development. The eye-line match technique — a common variation of the shot / reverse-shot pattern — further encourages this dynamic. If, for example, we were presented with a close-up of a man smiling after a medium-shot of a barmaid looking up and leaning forward, we would assume (through learned conventions) that he is 'returning' the gaze of the barmaid. Eye contact is presumed, despite the parties being presented in separate shots. As film theorist Kaja Silverman notes: '[T]he gaze which directs our look seems to belong to a fictional character rather than to the camera.'²⁰ The image of a person 'looking' becomes the motivation or reason for the 'reverse-shot' (the view the character 'sees'), which we are subsequently presented with. This spatial and temporal continuity between shots is assumed (and desired) but not actual, yet the

²⁰ Silverman, 1983, p. 202

viewer is efficiently absorbed by the illusion. The gaze and gestures of characters directed off-screen, guide the viewer's attention to a lack, or absence: something hinted at but unavailable to the viewer, which they desire to see. The 'stitching over' of this lack — the re-incorporation of the off-screen space by the movement of the frame or through editing techniques such as shot / reverse-shot — is known in film theory as 'suture'.

The Mirror's Suturing Function

Kaja Silverman describes suture as 'the name given to the procedures by means of which cinematic texts confer subjectivity upon their viewers'.²¹ This psychoanalytic term has been adopted by film theorists to describe the methods by which viewers are encouraged to *identify* with characters and subsequently become absorbed in ('stitched' into) the film's narrative.²² Suture occurs through editing processes which foster a sense of continuity, causality or indexicality between shots; therefore suturing over the gaps in the montage sequence. The shot / reverse-shot pattern described above is exemplary in this regard: this process fosters the viewer's identification with both the characters and the filmic image, and consequently maintains the integrity of the film's spatial relations by regulating the transformations and transitions between off-screen and on-screen space. Cyclically, the spectator is distanced from the filmic image in the realisation that visual information is being withheld, then sutured back into the film with the forthcoming revelation, and back again. With every cut, fade, and dissolve, and through the movements of the camera, the viewer is confronted by the blind field – the 'absence' which accompanies the vision.

The mirror in Manet and Wall's artworks is a potential agent of the suturing process. In a single, still, fixed image like *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* and *Picture for Women*, the mirror mobilises and transforms pictorial space. Its reflection makes unseen objects or spaces metaphorically present and visible, creating symbolic stand-ins that 'suture' the lack. For example, in the *Bar* the woman's attentive gaze seems directed outwards, 'beyond' the picture itself. The image of the male customer in the mirror reflection 'grounds' this unfixed gaze ('sutures' the absence), as we identify with this character and become the recipient of the woman's look. In turn, we then identify with the barmaid as she / we receive the male customer's soliciting gaze. An ongoing oscillation is induced as we switch between points of identification, in a similar way to cinema's shot / reverse-shot scenario. What of the perspectives of the crowd that Iskin refers to? Unruly in their diversity and ambiguity, these multiple points of view simultaneously compete with each other, even as they are amalgamated within the mirror reflection. Consequently, they do not illustrate the concept of suture so neatly. As Clark suggests, when multiple view points are incorporated in a singular, still image, such as the *Bar*, the effect is disorienting. The integrity of the pictorial space

²¹ Silverman, 1983, p. 195

²² For the sake of brevity, I have limited my discussion of 'suture' to its basic filmic sense, but the term's origins should be acknowledged. Originally the term 'suture' came from surgical medicine, in which it referred to the literal stitching of wounds. The term became associated with psychoanalysis when Jacques-Alain Miller [1978] used it in relation to the Lacanian negotiation of lack and desire, through which subjectivity is conferred. Film theorists including Jean-Pierre Oudart [1978], Daniel Dayan [1974], Stephen Heath [1978], and Kaja Silverman [1983], have adopted the term 'suture' and taken up these Lacanian concepts as a framework for the subject's relation to the discourse of cinema.

and the viewer's position in relation to the image are disturbed. In contrast, multiple points of view in a filmic montage are ordered temporally: we make sense of them as they successively flow before us (recall the shot / reverse-shot scenario where two protagonists seemingly interact without being depicted in the same shot).

Cinema's suture system can then be regarded as an oscillation between view points over time. The mobile frame and moving picture allow ongoing spatial transformations and shifts of point of view within the image and through the duration of the shot and montage. Bearing these distinctions in mind, Iskin's interpretation of the *Bar* as a composite of multiple points of view generated by the crowd, could be logically extended to consider the mirror's inconsistencies as reflecting multiple temporalities. This argument is posed by Thierry de Duve and Brian Holmes in their article 'How Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is Constructed' (published three years after Iskin's work), in which the collaborating authors take up (albeit indirectly) the cinematic characteristic of duration as a means of making sense of the *Bar's* puzzling discrepancies.

Multiple Temporalities as Spatial Disjunctions or 'Jump Cuts'

By way of what they call a 'demonstration' (rather than interpretation), based on the laws of optics and using only the information offered by the finished painting, de Duve and Holmes assert (similarly to Iskin) that the *Bar* is a composite image, combined not only of multiple viewpoints but also of multiple *temporalities*:

A Bar at the Folies-Bergère is a composite image, or its spatial inconsistencies would not be explicable at all. Either the viewer or the mirror moves. In both cases the resulting image conflates two or more moments in time, unless the viewers – or, at any rate, the viewpoints – multiply simultaneously [...]²³

The authors continue, using the photographic notion of the 'snapshot', to elucidate the ways in which different temporalities are represented in the *Bar*, thus preserving the 'optical logic' of the scene:

If one presumes that the laws of optics apply, it is far more economical to make the temporal hypothesis: the painting condenses two distinct moments or phases of representation – two snapshots, if you will – between which certain things and figures have changed places.²⁴

In short, de Duve and Holmes argue for 'one viewpoint, two moments'.²⁵ Like Clark, they note the apparent (but impossible) 'rotation' of the mirror, which would shift the reflection of the figures.

However, fixed mirrors do not rotate, and people are mobile. Consequently, de Duve and Holmes regard the spatial inconsistencies in the *Bar* as representing the movements and changes that occur in a scene over time:

²³ De Duve, Holmes, 1998, p. 146

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ De Duve, Holmes, 1998, p. 148

It is the same man who addresses the barmaid from an angle and whom the barmaid addresses face-to-face, but it is not the same man *at the same time*. Only his reflection establishes the equation between two moments. By masking the movement of the mirror, Manet obliterates the irreducible interval of time that separates the man in the top hat from himself, in his two successive positions. This temporal gap [...] can never be filled by a spatial identification [...].²⁶ (Emphasis added)

This would also account for the altered positions of the bottles on the bar, indicative of changes incurred in the course of the barmaid's serving of customers. Therefore, the different moments in time are registered as *spatial disjunctions* within the painting. The resulting effect is comparable to a 'jump cut' in a film montage — as if a piece is missing from the flow of an action, leaving two disjointed fragments. These discordant temporal zones are apparently separated by the pictorial field of the mirror itself: the 'real objects' (the barmaid, the objects on the counter) in the foreground, inhabit a different temporal 'space' from the mirror image. If the *Bar* is a composite image of multiple temporalities or points of view, what is 'reflected' in Wall's mirror?

From 1882 to 1979: Picture for Women

In *Picture for Women*, the composition implies we are viewing not the 'real' space of the scene, but only the mirror reflection. The photograph depicts three figures: an attractive young woman (who shares the same slightly melancholy but calm, or perhaps bored, expression and posture of Manet's barmaid) positioned to the left of the centrally placed camera (which commands a sense of presence on a par with the human subjects), and a man (the young artist himself) standing to the right side of the photographic apparatus. The doubling of objects seen in the *Bar* is absent from Wall's image. Rather, in *Picture for Women* the existence of the mirror is implied by the central camera, combined with frontal framing, and the image of the artist cautiously holding the camera's cable release (blurred slightly by the movement of pressing the shutter) which implies his authorship of the representation.

In his article 'The Mainstream and the Crooked Path', Thierry de Duve considers the problem of spectatorship in *Picture for Women* with reference to a birds-eye diagram that depicts the dynamics between the woman, artist and camera, and the way in which the mirror mediates these internal relations.²⁷ A series of 'looks' ('desires') endlessly ricochet between the three figures and their mirror-images. Despite the illusion of the woman's eyes meeting our own, her gaze is found to be directed at the camera's mirror reflection: the apparent libidinal triangulation therefore exists independent of the spectator. In accord, David Campany argues that it is not unrealistic to read this artwork as a visual illustration of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking article on feminist film theory, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), which Wall became familiar with during his time in London in the 1970s.²⁸ Employing psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argued that filmic representations of women are organised by (and *for*) the voyeuristic male gaze, which for Mulvey epitomised the unconscious of patriarchy. However, if cinema is an *image for men*, then Wall's photograph is a '*picture for women*'. De Duve's diagram of *Picture for*

²⁶ De Duve, Holmes, 1998, p. 164

²⁷ De Duve, Pelenc, Groys, 1996, p. 30–31

²⁸ Mulvey, 1975

Women suggests Wall challenges the dynamics of patriarchal voyeurism: an argument he premises on the image as mirror-reflection. De Duve argues that by imagining the scene from a birds-eye perspective ('outside' the image), it becomes apparent that the artist is indirectly gazing at the female 'subject' via the mirror reflection, rather than at the actual woman in the 'real' space of the classroom.²⁹ His look is not reciprocated; rather, by way of the mirror-image, the woman steadily returns the camera's gaze. The woman's demeanour is calm and her attitude assured. Her look is frank and direct; her gaze assertive. She inspires the title of the photograph in being both the *subject* and *viewer* of the scene: the eye (I) that sees, and is seen.

Based on the mirror's logic, de Duve claims that Wall 'has once and for all made visible the invisibility of the picture plane in photography, while also respecting it'.³⁰ We note that the woman, the artist, the camera and the classroom space are captured in the reflection: nothing is hidden from the camera's view when the picture plane (and image as a whole) is defined by the mirror. Yet, de Duve concludes that 'everything is explicit in [Picture for Women], its entire procedure is avowed, nothing is concealed and its total visibility is blinding'.³¹ This suggests that the apparent transparency and lucidity of Wall's photograph is misleading, even recalcitrant: a challenge to the (somewhat naïve, but nonetheless pervasive) idea of photographic representation being a truthful 'mirror' of the world, whilst harnessing the intrinsic qualities it critiques.

In *Picture for Women* then, the evocation of the mirror can be read as a metaphor for photographic representation. As Campany notes, 'a photo that includes a mirror doubles the double'.³² Campany cites Craig Owens' 1978 article in which Owens considers mirrors as a photographic subject that puts the medium *en-abyme*: 'the presence of a mirror allows the image to reproduce at an internal level a fundamental quality of photography as a whole'.³³ Therefore, the 'mirror-as-subject' is a means by which the photographer can attempt to master and explore the photographic medium. But Wall's take on this theme is more complex, as the presence of the mirror in *Picture for Women* is implied, rather than definite.

In contrast to Manet's *Bar*, with its mismatched actual and reflected spaces, it seems Wall's photograph is entirely composed of the mirror's reflection. It is a challenging, but interesting (even revealing), prospect to imagine *Picture for Women* without succumbing to this assumption. I argue that the well-known inconsistencies surrounding the mirror reflection in Manet's painting are played out in Wall's photograph through the ambiguity of the mirror's presence. Campany notes that 'actual or not, the mirror is evoked here rather than revealed, yet it is so forcefully evoked that it *appears* to be revealed'.³⁴ However, despite the strong suggestion of a mirror, it is not a necessary component of Wall's image. For example, there is no doubling of figures or objects. In addition to assumptions encouraged by Manet's painting, the camera appears to function as the most discernible evidence of the mirror in Wall's photograph; even more so than the artist's own presence. Although a closer

²⁹ De Duve, Pelenc, Groys, 1996, p. 30

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ De Duve, 2002, p. 31

³² Campany, 2007, p. 23

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Campany, 2007, p. 22

inspection of the picture reveals reversed text on the camera (suggesting the presence of a mirror), this effect could be achieved through reversing the negative or transparency. Indeed, Campany observes that '[Flipping the photograph] can keep an image intact while fundamentally changing its relation to reality and foregrounding the picture plane.'³⁵ Such ambiguities in *Picture for Women* unsettle the traditional view of photography as 'mirroring' reality. Ironically, by undermining the certainty of the mirror's presence, Wall's photograph raises doubts about the nature of the reality it depicts, thus destabilising its photographic integrity.

The Framing of the Unframed Mirror

It is significant that Wall's mirror is unframed: its boundary is out of view, therefore its presence is less certain. In Manet's painting, sections of the mirror's gold frame can be seen behind the barmaid's wrists. These fragments enable us to envisage and 'complete' the frame, despite it being obscured by objects within the composition, and even as it extends beyond the pictorial space. The scumbled grey-white paint, which depicts the mirror's tarnish, illustrates that the surfaces of the mirror and the painting are one and the same. However, we may shift our attention between the mirror and the painting's surface, imaginatively delineating them as separate fields. The mirror's gilt frame in the *Bar* reminds us of what we see — a representation within a representation, and therefore enables that detachment. In *Picture for Women* this distinction collapses: the absence of the mirror's own frame (apparently cropped out by the imposition of the camera's rectangular view), is disguised as the mirror invisibly borrows this essential pictorial structure from the photograph itself.

The absence of the mirror's frame in *Picture for Women* is an important innovation that Wall introduces in his 'remake'. But a closer inspection reveals other frame-like divisions within the artwork. The pictorial space and composition of *Picture for Women* is divided into three sections and the figures that occupy each section are 'separated' by the vertical poles that were probably used to support the lighting equipment. In addition, the very material of the image itself is also divided in half (left and right) by the join between the two sheets of Cibachrome transparency. Wall explains the significance of the seam in *Picture for Women*:

With [earlier photograph] *The Destroyed Room*, awareness of the seam was minimized through the internal complexity of the image.... [The picture's] relationship to the seam was that of the commercial sign: the seam is not looked at. *Picture for Women*, on the other hand, was based theoretically on the seam passing through the reflected lens of the camera....³⁶

The seam to which Wall refers is created by an unavoidable technical limitation of Cibachrome transparencies, which have a maximum print width of fifty inches. Consequently, images which exceed this size must be created by joining separate transparencies, leaving a visible split in the image (usually undetectable in reproductions of the artwork).³⁷ As Wall notes in regards to his complex earlier work *The Destroyed Room* (1978), the seam is usually a non-intrusive or easily ignored

³⁵ Campany, 2007, p. 22

³⁶ Galassi, 2007a, p. 26

³⁷ Ibid.

aspect of his work.³⁸ But in *Picture for Women*, the seam is brought to our attention as it splits the image of the camera in two, as if a mirror had been placed perpendicular to the reflected image of the camera's lens, mirroring the other half to create the illusion of a symmetrical whole. Wall suggests that this often overlooked technical matter acts as a metaphor for the image and subject in its entirety. He again draws on cinematic concepts to refer to the division in the photograph's surface as a 'suture':

The seam, or suture or split, to which the lens is subjected... functions not only as a structural factor but as a metaphoric key to the subject as a whole. I wanted to create a structure based simultaneously on unification and division across the web of signification established by the mechanisms used to make the picture...³⁹

This fissure in the very surface of the artwork breaks the image into two planes or frames. Is the picture splitting open, or being sutured together? Unified or divided? A frame performs both actions simultaneously, but in *Picture for Women* the mirror's border is indeterminate. The frameless mirror is resistant and excessive, neither dividing nor unifying the image. Yet multiple frames are imposed on the ambiguous mirror-image, both within the composition itself and on the Cibachrome transparencies' surface. The 'de-framed' mirror is 're-framed', then de-framed, and so on: an oscillation begins.

Alternate Views

The oscillation between 'de-framing' and 're-framing' in *Picture for Women* could be summarised as the interplay of presence and absence (as defined by the frame as border / limit), or as shifts between multiple points of view (the frame indicating a specific perspective). If the mirror in *Picture for Women* is absent (or if at least its presence is ambiguous), does this oscillation cease? Even in its uncertain place in Wall's photograph, the idea of the mirror (and its curious idiosyncrasies in the *Bar*) provides the inspiration for other scenarios (or alternate views) on which we, as spectators, may focus our attention.

Based on the assumption of the mirror's presence, we would presume that the camera depicted in *Picture for Women* is the same camera that took the photo (the image of the artist pressing the shutter supports this assumption). However, the ambiguity of the mirror opens up other possibilities. It could be that a *second* camera (positioned on the opposite side of the picture plane) created the illusion of a mirror. In this case, we may expect to see the second camera reflected in the glass of the windows in the background. However, the camera in *Picture for Women* obscures our view of the central windows. The vague, dark, reflections in the other windows along the back of the classroom do not offer any clear indications of the 'truth' of *Picture for Women*'s construction. Unlike the suturing function of the mirror (which reincorporates the off-frame zone), the reflective surface of the windows ironically offer no definite

³⁸ Wall's photograph *The Destroyed Room* (1978) can be viewed as a 'remake' of Eugène Delacroix's painting *Death of Sardanapalus* (1827).

³⁹ Galassi, 2007a, p. 26

indication of whether a mirror, or another camera, is present.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, if we imagine that there is no mirror, but two cameras, we can envisage *two* photographs and *two* spaces: the one we *see* and the one that is *unseen*. Indeed, as in cinema's shot / reverse-shot scenario, the woman and camera's gaze draws our attention to a lack or absence; an image yet to be incorporated into the montage. When the scenario is imagined without the mirror, Wall's camera instead becomes aimed at the 'off-screen' view. The spectator becomes the 'subject' of the unseen image as the space they occupy (the zone that the mirror reflection would disavow) is metaphorically reincorporated or sutured. However, this second image remains withheld, and therefore hypothetical.

Let us momentarily put aside the contentious issue of the mirror's existence, function and meaning. Instead, envisage an alternative scenario: that *Picture for Women* is a triptych and its pictorial space is 'divided' by the vertical poles that support the light fittings. The subjects of the three 'frames' are the woman, the camera, and the artist, respectively. In considering the image as a triptych, it is not unreasonable (given the importance of cinema to Wall's concerns) to imagine the segments as three shots or frames in a film — as a short montage.

When we visualise *Picture for Women* in this cinematic way, the filmic editing technique of shot / reverse-shot is evoked. Independent to the question of the mirror's existence, the shot / reverse-shot scenario is nonetheless inspired by the suturing function of the mirror's reflection. In Wall's artwork, the shot / reverse-shot pattern may be played out as follows: the woman looks, and the unseen subject of her attention is revealed in the reverse-shot depicting the camera. The spectator's desire to contextualise the image of the woman looking helps to interlock the succeeding shot of the camera within the montage chain. The audience appropriates the gaze of the woman, and then identifies with the camera as the recipient and reciprocator of the gaze — here, the camera is the image's subject. The reciprocity of the exchange between the woman and camera (and spectator) is not extended to the male artist. The artist is represented as an onlooker, but his gaze is not returned or reincorporated in a reverse-shot. Consequently, the audience is not encouraged to identify with his position (perhaps this is why Wall's photograph is a '*picture for women*'). This cinematic interpretation is not dependent on the presence or absence of the mirror, as the off-frame space is reincorporated, not by the mirror reflection, but by the reverse-shot. However, the suturing function of the mirror reflection inspires this cinematic treatment of the photograph.

⁴⁰ The glass panels in the windows are too dark and indistinct to offer any clear reflections of the opposite side of the classroom. However, on the right side window, a light coloured square shape may be seen, on which three or four frame-like forms are visible. It is not clear whether this is a reflection of the *interior* of the classroom, or alternatively, something *outside* the window. But it reinforces the importance of the 'beyond the frame' in suture, and also adds to my later discussion of the multiple frames in the image

Conclusion: The Cinematic ‘Re-framing’ of the Mirror

In *Picture for Women*, the mirror’s obscured border leads us to question its existence. Yet the lack of this essential structure is compensated for by an ironic abundance of other frames and divisions within *Picture for Women*. These include not only the seam between the sheets of Cibachrome transparency and the divisions created by the light poles, but also include the window frames across the back wall of the classroom (the wall itself a frame-like structure); the three smaller panels within each window block; the grid-like pattern on the ceiling; the rectangular shapes created by the exposed pipes on the left wall of the room; the door frame to the left of the woman; and even the shape of the camera body itself. But the framing of *Picture for Women* does not end with these. The intersections and overlaps of these frame-like structures create further divisions. The Cibachrome transparency splits the image in half, and the light poles divide it into thirds. However, combine these frames and the image can be seen as divided into one, two, three or four parts from left to right. The frame shape of the back wall, combined with the divisions imposed by the light poles, divides the central panel into three parts, from top to bottom. Look closely (and imaginatively) and you will discover even more frames within this image.

If *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is a composite image, in becoming amalgamated its multiple points of view or temporalities are, in a sense, ‘de-framed’. The gilt mount of the *Bar*’s mirror, and the sum of a number of individually inconsistent elements creates the strong impression of a mirror. While discrepancies between the objects and their reflection complicate Manet’s representation of the mirror, we readily accept its presence. In spite of doubts about the presence of the mirror that arise from its indeterminate border, Wall’s photographic ‘remake’ is a composite of *frames*. The more one looks, the more frames may be counted, and points of view multiply. But, as in a film, the frame marks a lack. Each frame is a synecdoche: the fragment which stands for, or indicates, the absent or unrepresented (but latent) whole. Suture is the process of cyclically revealing and concealing the ‘whole’ — the oscillation between presence and absence — a dynamic which sustains the ongoing ‘de-framing’ and ‘re-framing’ of the ambiguous ‘mirror’ image in *Picture for Women*. But the dynamic of suture is never stilled, nor final. There is no ultimate closure or completion. It remains unresolved, just as the riddles of *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* linger over a century later, and the presence of the mirror in *Picture for Women* is anticipated, but remains enigmatic.

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Illustrations:

Fig. 1. Édouard Manet, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, 1882, oil on canvas, 97 x 130cm., London, The Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery.

Fig. 2. Jeff Wall, *Picture for Women*, 1979, Cibachrome transparency in light box, 150 x 234 cm., Vancouver, collection of the artist.

<http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/jeffwall/rooms/room1.shtml>

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