

MODERN ART
PRACTICES AND DEBATES

Modernity and Modernism
French Painting in the Nineteenth Century

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paintings demonstrated different interests and commitments. While it's mythology to regard the Impressionists as unified in their artistic production, it is the case that their exhibition contributed to a shift in the status of artists who wished to distance themselves from Academic or official art. Were these works of art, which have traditionally been regarded as 'breaking with the past', doing any more than meeting an economic transformation of the 'art market' and conforming to an official ideology of individualism – of the 'self' with its narcissistic implications?

Modernization: spectacle and irony

We can begin to address this question by examining *The Boaters, Argenteuil* (Plate 100), a large, ambitious painting that Manet produced during the summer of 1874, which was his sole submission to the Salon of 1875. Why this painting? One reason is that, as with *The Old Musician*, or *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, it exemplifies criteria of competence for a self-consciously modern practice – this time for the 1870s. It was produced in the same year as the first Impressionist exhibition and it demonstrates an indebtedness to some of their technical interests. Manet never exhibited with the Impressionists, always insisting that the Salon was the only true testing ground; yet he was often characterized as their mentor.

This painting has had particular significance in the historiographical terrain of the social history of art. Robert Herbert for example, points to a major characteristic of the painting in relation to Manet's work of the 1860s:

In effect, Manet, perhaps owing to his association that summer with Monet and Renoir, has brought up to date his own *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. In 1863, he had been thinking primarily of the history of painting and of modernizing it by the irruptive presence of his contemporary figures. By 1874, he has become much more the naturalist, drawing upon a well-known, not an imaginary setting, and one that had distinctive resonance in the contemporary mind.

(Impressionism; Art, Leisure and Parisian Society, p.236)

It has a central importance, too, in a chapter of T.J. Clark's *Painting of Modern Life*:

here, I believe, the main elements of the matter are assembled: the middle class and its pleasures, the countryside organized to attend to them, and the answering presence of industry. This is the picture, it seems to me, in which the most literal effort was made to put such things in order and insist they belonged together.

(p. 164)

Already we can begin to speculate on the types of knowledge that the contemporary spectator was likely to need when looking at this painting. As Herbert says, it does not require a knowledge of the 'history of painting' as well as of 'contemporary figures', as Manet's paintings of the 1860s often did. Realism for Courbet and for Manet, in the 1860s, necessitated reference to historical artistic conventions and themes, such as 'the reclining nude', the 'fête champêtre' or 'the public execution', *as well as* to contemporary class specific codes. It's as though the Franco-Prussian War and the suppression of the Commune in 1871 had marked a watershed for artists concerned with Realism and the modern subject.

Contemporary reaction to *The Boaters, Argenteuil* is provided by Jean Rousseau, a young Belgian artist, who wrote as art critic of *Figaro*:

The heads and costumes have a certain liveliness. That is all. Behind the figures, there is an indigo river, hard as iron and straight as a wall. In the background, a view, or rather a



Plate 100 Édouard Manet, *Argenteuil, les canotiers* (*The Boaters, Argenteuil*), 1874, oil on canvas, 148 x 115 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tournai. Photo: Giraudon.

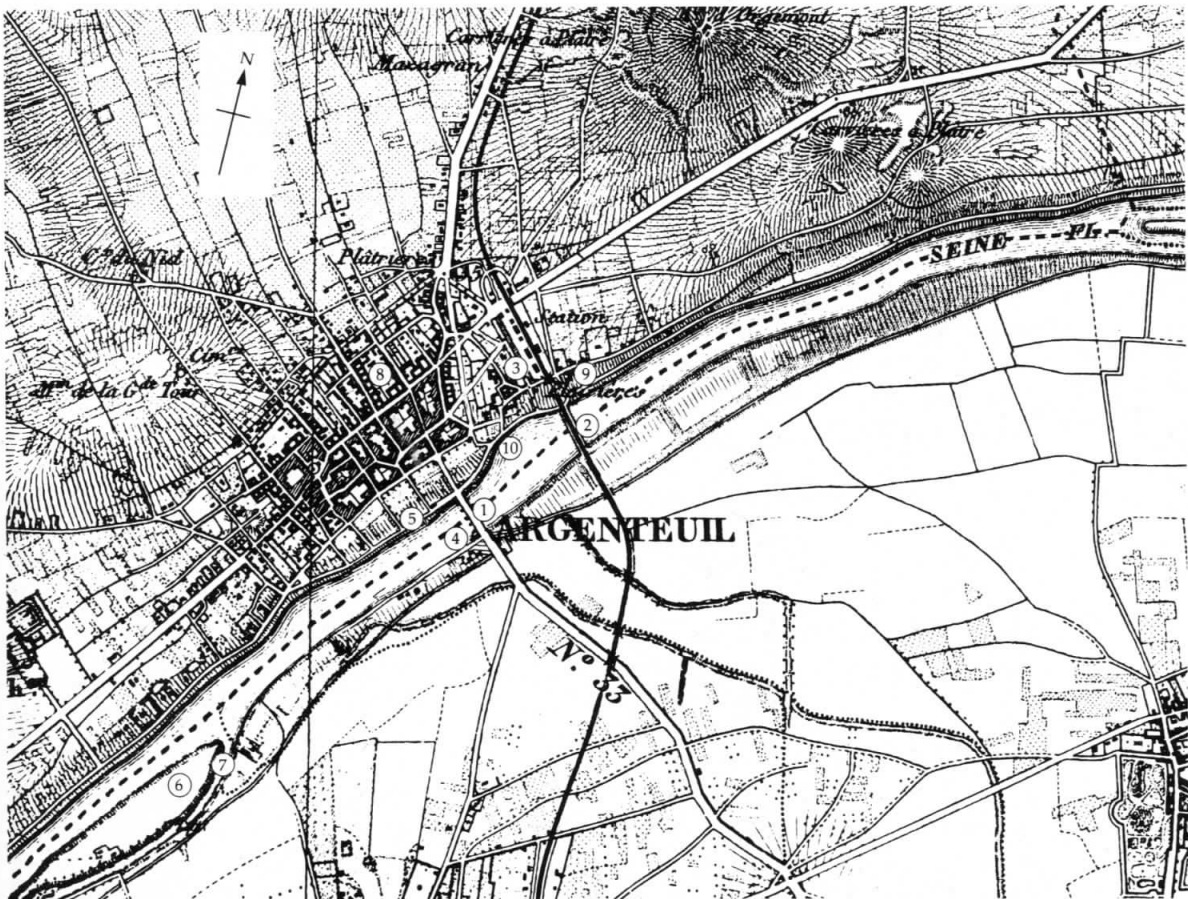
stew of Argenteuil; not a line, not a plane, not a shape carried out. The master has reached the stage of a twenty-year old student.

(quoted in Hamilton, *Manet and his Critics*, p.189)

There were other references to 'that blue wall' or to 'the background ... executed by the son of the house, aged four, who has a taste for landscape', or to the painting being 'incomplete'. And T.J. Clark quotes Maurice Chaumelin writing in *Le Bien Public* in 1875:

Under the pretext of representing nature and society just as they present themselves, the realists dispense with balance in their pictures of both. But let that pass. There are at least, in this nature and this society, aspects which are more agreeable than others, and types which are more attractive. Monsieur Manet is deliberately setting out to choose the flattest sites, the grossest types. He shows us a butcher's boy, with ruddy arms and a pug nose, out boating on a river of indigo, and turning with the air of an amorous marine towards a trollop seated by his side, decked out in horrible finery, and looking horribly sullen.

(quoted in Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, p.168)



KEY

Seine = Over 200 yards wide;
flowing towards Ile Marante (6)
Carrières à Plâtre = Gypsum/plaster quarries
Plâtriers = Plaster works

- | | |
|--|---|
| 1 Road bridge | 6 Ile Marante |
| 2 Railway bridge | 7 Petit Bras |
| 3 Monet's rented houses | 8 Joly iron works |
| 4 Boat rental area | 9 Loading docks, warehouse, crystal factory and from 1876 the town's third iron foundry |
| 5 Promenade, at the end of which the town's second iron works opened in 1874 | 10 Port of Argenteuil with docks (see also plate 110) |

Plate 101 Map of Argenteuil, based on information kindly provided by Professor Paul Hayes Tucker. The key provides details of the combination of industrial and leisure sites characteristic of the area.

What seemed to concern many critics was, firstly a 'lack' of technical and compositional 'finish' in the painting. When compared to the modest size of many Impressionist works, this is on the scale of a modern Salon history painting. It's posed 'snap-shot' quality might have been acceptable in an *étude* or *esquisse* or even in a small-scale landscape work. Here, though, the preparatory sketch or the worked *ébauche* is elevated, alongside the landscape/genre theme, to the format expected of history paintings. Secondly, critics had no option but to identify the class of these two characters. Unlike Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* where class associations *could* be lost in dreaming about the art historical references to Titian, Marcantonio Raimondi, Raphael, Watteau etc., here no such option was available. Who, then, were these two boaters? Thirdly, the exact location of Argenteuil was important. This was not an unspecific landscape, as in *The Old Musician*, but a particular identifiable view at a place with a reputation in the popular imagination. What do we make of this specific location? Are there any significant differences between this work and other artists concerned with similar themes? If there are, what implications can we draw about the conditions for producing 'modern' works in the early 1870s?

Argenteuil was several kilometres outside Paris, half an hour's journey on the relatively recent railway line (inaugurated in 1851) out of Gare St. Lazare (Plate 91). If we look at a detailed map of the area (Plate 101), Manet's viewpoint is from the boat rental area on the south bank (see key to plate 101), slightly downstream from the highway bridge looking west across to the river bank north of the Île Marante. The buildings in the background can be seen in several of Monet's paintings from the period, such as *The Promenade along the Seine* and *Sailboats in the Boat Rental Area* (Plates 102, 103). They can also be seen in the distance in his *Effet d'automne à Argenteuil* (Plate 104), but from the other direction – that is, from the Petit Bras (17 on the key), to the south of the Île Marante, looking upstream to the north bank. We will have more to say about the latter painting shortly.

The two figures prominently depicted in the foreground of Manet's painting are seated near the pleasure boats, not with any of the steamboats used both for industrial purposes and as pleasure craft (Plate 105). This may be because they were regarded by many sailors as 'stinkpots', but more likely because it was only 'young men of fortune' who could afford to buy a steamboat (15–25,000 francs) or to rent one (75–100 francs a



Plate 102 Claude Monet, *Argenteuil, The Promenade along the Seine*, 1872, oil on canvas, 50 x 65 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Ailsa Mellon Bruce collection.



Plate 103 Claude Monet, *Sailboats on the Seine, Argenteuil*, 1874, oil on canvas, 54 x 65 cm. The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Bruno and Sadie Adriani 1962.23.

day): 'To buy a sailboat, on the other hand, was also beyond the means of many, but at least the rate of three to four francs a day allowed the majority of the middle to lower classes to pass a few Sunday afternoons gliding up and down the Seine' (P. Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil*, p.105).

The identification of boating with the 'middle to lower classes' happened in the 1850s and 1860s; it was a sport which contemporaries did not see as dependent on wealth:

these scruffy pleasure-seekers [students, workers, artists, etc.] still existed in the 1870s and many frequented the basin at Argenteuil. The town was the weekend hangout of people like Guy de Maupassant, who in the 1870s was a 'penniless clerk leading his life between the office in Paris and the river at Argenteuil'. His existence was 'carefree and athletic, a life of poverty and gaiety, of noisy rollicking fun'.

(Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil*, p.106)

The period saw a transformation of many activities in Haussmann's Paris from commercial to leisure usage. At Argenteuil, commercial sailing became pleasure-boating, with older river craft transformed into yachts for pleasure and traditional river boatmen displaced by 'gentleman amateurs'. The man in Manet's painting can be identified as an aspiring 'gentleman amateur' by his clothes, sportsman's straw hat and the presence of a female companion. This is Chaumelin's 'butcher's boy', dressed up to observe the 'right' codes for someone with mobile class aspirations. Comparing this painting with *Boating* (Plate 106), it's clear that Manet used his brother-in-law Rodolphe Leenhoff as a model in both. However, in *Boating* he is wearing the colours of the prestigious 'Cercle nautique' (white shirt, white flannel trousers and straw boater with blue border), whose headquarters were at Asnières. In the Argenteuil painting, the male figure is clothed as a pleasure-seeking 'amateur' of a different class. It was well known that Argenteuil was associated with amateur yachtsmen of indifferent morals who favoured similar female companions (Chaumelin's 'trollop'):

Art critics of the period and Manet's male friends alike assumed that the blank-faced woman was such a one, and surely the boatsman is assiduously soliciting his companion's

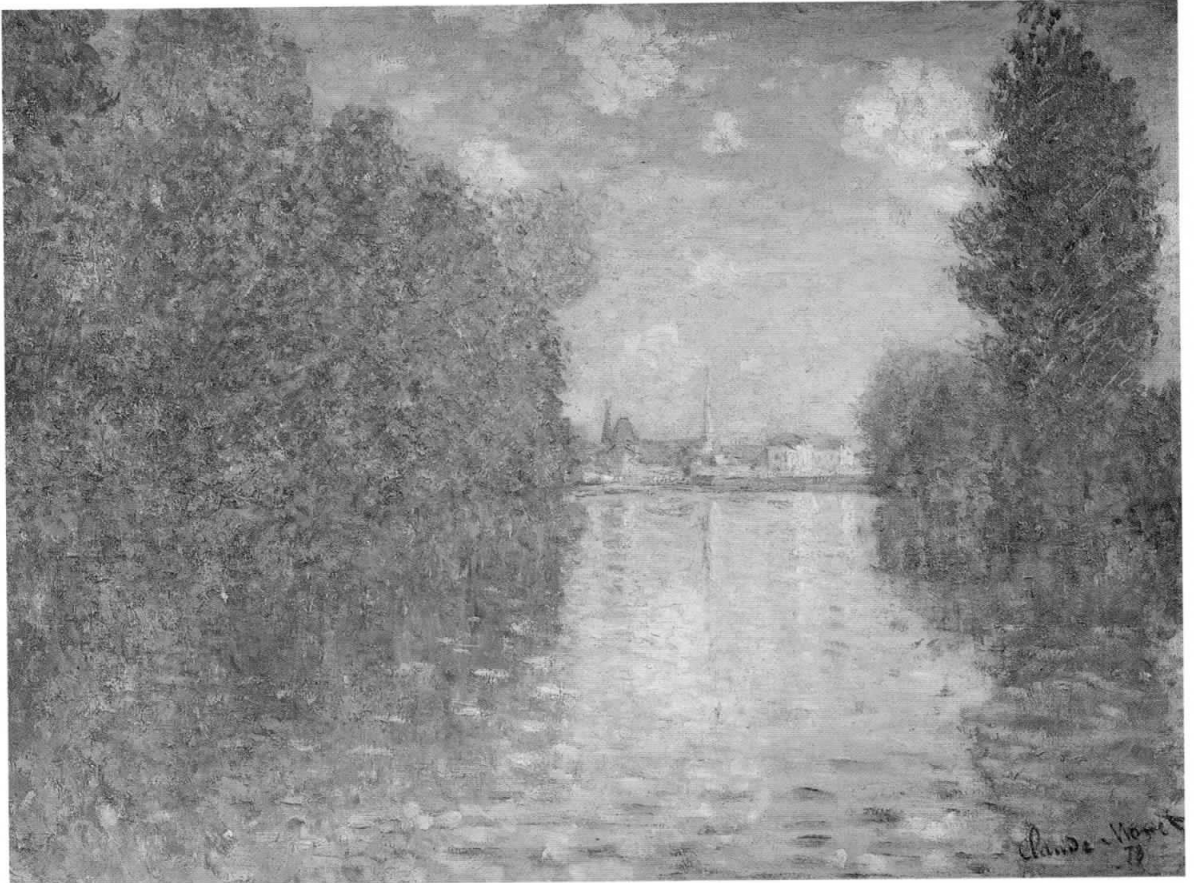


Plate 104 Claude Monet, *Effet d'Automne à Argenteuil* (*The Effect of Autumn at Argenteuil*), 1873, oil on canvas, 56 x 75 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London.

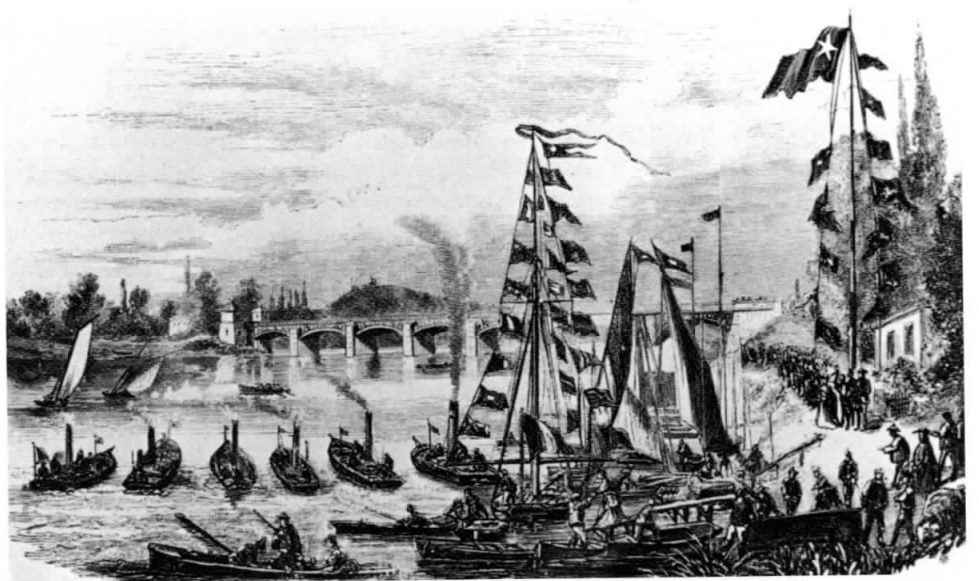


Plate 105 Anonymous, *Course de canots à vapeur à Argenteuil* (*Steam-boat Race at Argenteuil*), 1874, wood engraving. Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Dessins, Paris.



Plate 106 Édouard Manet, *En bateau* (Boating), 1874, oil on canvas, 97 x 130 cm.
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The H.O. Havemeyer collection (29.100.115)



Plate 107 Berthe Morisot, *Jour d'été* (Summer's Day), 1879, oil on canvas, 46 x 75 cm.
National Gallery, London. Lane bequest 1917. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees.

attention. She is, further, dressed in the showy clothing of lower middle-class women, rather than the more elegant and restrained dress of the woman in *Boating* [Plate 106] or in Morisot's later *Summer's Day* [Plate 107].

(Herbert, *Impressionism*, p.236)

And this Argenteuil, on the outward fringe of the city, what was it like? By the 1870s it could no longer be regarded as an example of 'Nature' unspoilt by the ripple effect of Haussmann's redevelopment in central Paris. One of the numerous signs in Manet's painting is the smoke belching out of a chimney to the top left of the painting. While Argenteuil was still indebted to agriculture, which had been geared since the eighteenth century to the Parisian market, in the 1870s it was modernizing fast. As Tucker (pp.15–18 and pp.35–42) and Clark (*The Painting of Modern Life*, pp.173–4) have detailed, there was extensive industrial development and suburban building during the period. In 1851, the population was 4,757, almost doubling by 1871, when there were 8,046 inhabitants; in 1882 a Paris handbook gives a figure of nearly 12,000. Some of this increase was due to a growth in commuters for whom Argenteuil meant a suburban house with a garden, a pleasurable contrast to their place of work in the city. However, there was also the effect of industrial growth in the town. In the 1860s, both the gypsum quarries and plaster works and the Joly iron foundry were large employers. The latter forged the parts for the railway bridge when it was rebuilt, in 1872, having been destroyed in the Franco-Prussian War (Plates 108 and 109), and was renowned in Paris for building the Palace of Industry for the Exposition Universelle, and the famous market hall, Les Halles. To the tannery, tallow shop and distilleries there were added a factory producing phosphate extracts, a dye factory, starch works, a machine-made lace premises, a gas-works, a large saw-mill and construction operation, a chemical plant, a works making mineral and carbonated water, a cardboard-box factory and one making fine crystal. To the south, Bezons boasted a rubber factory, which by 1869 had killed off the local fish with its dumped waste. Not surprisingly, the municipal and departmental authorities keen to encourage capital investment ignored residents objections to all these transformations and approved factory construction even in picturesque areas of the town. If we compare contemporary photographs of Argenteuil with engravings, the contrast between the *real* industrial life of the town with its *image* as a boating haven is startling (Plates 109, 110, 111, 112). By 1884, the



Plate 108 Photograph of the Argenteuil railroad bridge destroyed during the Franco-Prussian War, c.1870–71. Photo: Roger Viollet, Paris.



Plate 109 Anonymous, *Argenteuil – Le Pont du chemin de fer (Argenteuil – The Railway Bridge)*, c.1895–1900, postcard photograph. Musée de l'Île de France, Château de Sceaux.

place had become a well-known location for a designated day out, when 'pleasure' could be conspicuously 'enjoyed', as Louis Blairet observed in 'Autour de Paris' in June 1884:

Come Sunday, there is an invasion at the Gare St. Lazare, lady fruit-sellers from the Rue Saint Denis, cabinetmakers from the Rue de Cléry, girls who make chocolate in the Rue de Vivienne – there is not one of them who does not descend on the banks of the Seine, beneath the Moulin d'Orgemont or in the Auberge des Canotiers. And wherever there trots a Parisienne, a Parisien is sure to follow ... There is singing, shouting, dancing, running about, falling down and going astray. It all begins with *entrecôtes au cresson* and ends with aching limbs. The banks of the Seine are full of mysteries that day, mysteries of the private and pastoral life ... Here we serve lobster salad on the grass, messieurs!

(quoted in Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life*, pp. 177–8)



Plate 110 Anonymous, *Argenteuil, Bords de la Seine (Argenteuil, Banks of the Seine)*, c.1895–1900, postcard photograph. Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.



Plate 111 Paul Renouard, *Les Régates d'automne à Argenteuil* (Autumn Regattas at Argenteuil), wood engraving by M. Moller, 1879, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Dessins, Paris.



Plate 112 T. Weber, *Environs de Paris, Argenteuil* (The Outskirts of Paris, Argenteuil), 1869, wood engraving, Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

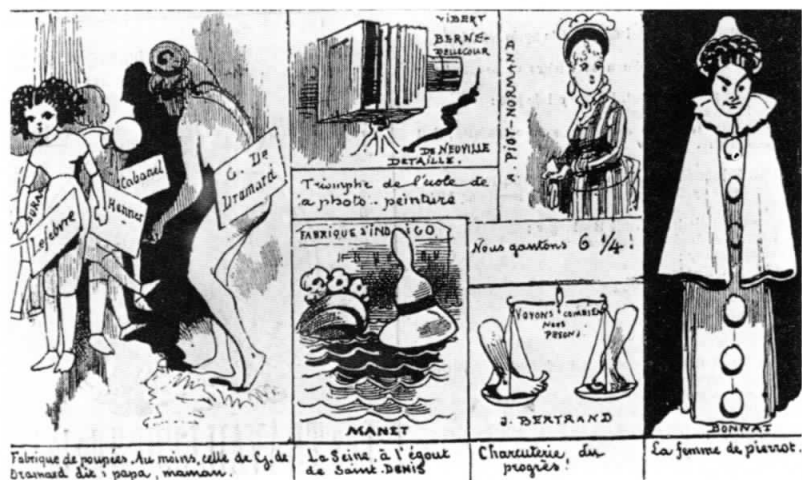


Plate 113 Paul Hadol, *Le Salon comique*, wood engraving in *L'Eclipse*, 30 May 1875. Cartoons of Salon exhibits, including a suggestive caricature of Manet's *Boaters, Argenteuil* as a pair of hats floating between an indigo dye factory and the sewer at Saint-Denis. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

There is one further piece of significant information contributing to local knowledge of Argenteuil. As we have seen, Jean Rousseau wrote of Manet's 'indigo river, hard as iron and straight as a wall'. Cartoonists, too, made the river a central part of their caricature of Manet's Salon work. As Clark shows, Hadol's cartoon in *L'Eclipse* (Plate 113) draws attention to the 'indigo factory' and is captioned 'the Seine at the sewer of Saint-Denis'. If we look at a more detailed map of the area (Plate 114), and to a plan of Haussmann's new sewer system (Plate 115), we can see what filled the river in the area. A few miles upstream from Argenteuil, at Saint-Denis there were chemical dye factories which poured their waste into the sewers. It's important to note that Haussmann's updating of the medieval system with two hundred miles of pipe relied on the construction of two large collector sewers which carried the waste away from the city to flow into the Seine at Asnières and at Saint-Denis:

These collectors were not processing plants, however; the untreated waste was simply dumped in the Seine. Government studies in 1874 estimated that over 450,000 kilograms of waste was flushed into the river every day, five sixths of it at Asnières and one sixth at Saint-Denis. The Seine at both these points was, according to these reports 'a cauldron of bacteria, infection and disease'. The stench was frequently unbearable and the banks of the river were often littered with solid waste.

(Tucker, *Monet at Argenteuil*, p.151)

In the 1860s, the government had tried to alleviate this problem by pumping waste into an irrigation system in the area of Gennevilliers in the loop of the river. By 1874, the area irrigated by this waste amounted to one hundred and fifteen acres. In July 1875, it was proposed that this be increased to twelve hundred acres (shaded area on the map, Plate 101). By the time that the waste and indigo dye had passed downstream to Argenteuil, pleasure-seekers could both see and smell the effects of modernization. In the heat of the summer, and judging from the shadows in Manet's painting, it's at the height of such a day, a foetid stench rose from the fields at Gennevilliers, and from the stinking waters of the Seine (not to mention the solid waste). All this would have been known by many Parisians who flocked to the Salon.

In Manet's painting there is a juxtaposition, or mixing, of codes about the modern. Think for instance about the specific detailing of the two models' contemporary clothes or the 'solid wall' of indigo blue signifying paint *surface*, 'flatness', and the polluted river Seine. The woman's hat signifies both an elaborately pinned item of contemporary fashion



Plate 116 Dominique-Louis Papety, *Le Rêve de bonheur*, (*The Dream of Happiness*), 1843, oil on canvas, Musée National de Palais de Compiègne et Musée du Second Empire. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

and a concern with acknowledging the surface of the canvas, the *means* by which the hat is suggested. As Clark has it,

It is a black straw oval, hardly seeming to belong to the head underneath it. It is a simple surface; and onto the surface is spread that wild twist of tulle, piped onto the oval like cream on a cake, smeared on like a great flourishing brushmark, blown up to impossible size. It is a great metaphor, that tulle: and it is, yes, a metaphor of paint and painting.

(*The Painting of Modern Life*, p.164)

The blue of the river serves a similar function. Symbolic of 'nature', it is also a textured insistence of paint *as paint* and a sign of capital, of the presence of the effects of modernization and modern factory labour. For Manet, there was no settled way of doing the 'modern', only characteristic sites which he could attempt to represent in their burgeoning complexity. At Argenteuil there was a spectacle of mixed codes for all those prepared to read the ways that 'pleasure' and 'modernization' uneasily coalesced. In his painting we have two particular individuals out for a day of conspicuous pleasure at this ambiguous modern site. Their 'proper' fashionable decorum, however, is still in the process of formation by members of the 'new social stratas' of Haussmann's *modernized* Paris.

But, as critics noted, the woman looks 'horribly sullen' or has 'the air of being tolerably bored, as far as the wilful impasto on the faces allows one to judge' (quoted in *The Painting of Modern Life*, p.168). For Clark, the 'deadpan', the 'uncertainty' which he sees offered in Manet's depiction is suppressed in the critics' response which stresses 'vulgarity and grossness'. We might say that the pleasures of a *fête champêtre* (Plates 116, 117), those real and idealized pleasures consistent with the rituals of a rural landscape untouched by iron-works, dye factories or urban sewer outlets, are no longer uncompromisingly available to Sunday visitors. Nor are they to the new inhabitants of Argenteuil, one of whom was the painter Claude Monet (Plate 118). His representations of the locale offer a very different image to that which interested Manet.