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The Artist and the Opera: An Analysis of Gaze, Spatiality, and Women's Labor in Degas's *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage, 1874*

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Abstract

This paper examines Edgar Degas's *The Rehearsal of the Ballet Onstage* (1874) through the lens of gaze, spatiality, and women's labor within the context of 19th-century Parisian modernity. Degas's depiction of ballet dancers, who were often subject to sexual exploitation by wealthy patrons of the Paris Opera, extends beyond a mere aesthetic rendering of performance. Instead, the painting highlights the Opera's backstage dynamics, where class and gender intersect through power imbalances. By analyzing the gazes of the Opera's male patrons and ballet master, the paper explores the implicit commodification of the dancers, drawing on Mulvey's theory of the male gaze and its manifestation in the portrayal of working-class women. Degas's positioning of these figures, coupled with his perspective as both artist and patron, reveals his engagement with the spatial layout of the Opera and the modern social hierarchies it embodies. The painting serves as a microcosm of broader sociocultural transformations, where Degas reflects on the labor of ballet dancers as both private toil and public spectacle, connecting his artistic process to the gendered and classed politics of modern Parisian society.

Keywords: Male gaze, Spatiality, Sexual Exploitation, Private Labor, Public Spectacle, Commodification, Class Dynamics