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Jane Avril: Spectacle and Spectator in the Art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Abstract - The advent of modern celebrity and advertising culture in late-Nineteenth century Paris further complicated the already unsteady position of the female performer in regards to traditional roles and expectations for women, allowing them even greater freedom and space in the public sphere. This essay looks at a range of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's works that depict the dancer Jane Avril in order as an example of the ways this shift in gender dynamics was viewed and interpreted at the time. Toulouse-Lautrec's works with Avril play with unconventional depictions of looking and spectatorship within the context of gender, performance, and spectacle in unusual ways, while also critically examining the complicated medium of advertising, which both liberated and objectified the performers that were promoted.

The Nineteenth-century saw the birth of modern advertising and celebrity culture, especially in France, and these two spheres worked together to advance new concepts. From the start, images of women dominated poster designs, due in part to the association between them and the novelties of modern life, while also commodifying their images to promote them as just another part of the product being offered. While most of these promotional pieces created compositions in which "alluring young women sell goods, along with a vision of their own consumable bodies, in images designed to aestheticize the transaction,"¹ the iconic, eye-catching works of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec complicated this paradigm. While he by no means avoided commodified images of women, his images of Montmartre performers, which were often commissioned by the subjects themselves, critically negotiate with the potentially exploitative nature of the medium as well. By examining a range of works depicting Jane Avril, one of

¹ Elizabeth C. Childs, "City of Spectacles: The Visual Cultures of Performance, Celebrity, and Leisure in Paris, c. 1880-1900," in *Spectacle and Leisure in Paris: Degas to Mucha*, ed. Elizabeth C. Childs (St. Louis: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 30-33.

Toulouse-Lautrec's frequent subjects and a well-known dancer in Paris, I will examine the complex dynamics at play in them concerning gender, looking, and publicity that were prominent in both the artist's pieces and French society as a whole at the close of the nineteenth century.

Posters and other promotional material made for women performers were often commissioned or requested by the performers themselves, in contrast with the vague, anonymous female figures populating most other advertisements at the time, the most famous example being Jules Cheret's "cherettes", female figures with the same general appearance and lack of different details that the artist used in most of his works. In contrast, the posters and other promotional material Toulouse-Lautrec made for specific individuals were tailored to give off a specific, unique style or image that served to market and distinguish them from others and cement them as easily recognizable and memorable in the minds of the public. Building and maintaining a well-known and easily recognizable brand through a variety of mediums was crucial for performers at the time to achieve success and renown, and the most famous celebrities were actively engaged in the promotion and publicity surrounding them and their careers. Lautrec's personalized, engaging images were perfect in this regard and helped define him as the premier publicist for the Montmartre performance world.

The control and direct influence female celebrities of the period had over their image, careers, and lives was not without controversy or issue, with many being labeled as desperate for attention and publicity mongers, along with the everpresent association of female performers with prostitution and degeneracy.² This was a widely held association, as evidenced by *Femmes automatiques* (Figure 1), an 1892 comic by Ferdinand Bac which depicts a variety of working

² Lenard R. Berlanstein, "Dangerous and Influential Women: Actresses in Nineteenth-Century French Culture," in *Staging Fashion, 1880-1920: Jane Hading, Lily Elsie, Billie Burke*, ed. Michele Majer (New York: Bard Graduate Center, 2012), 50.

women, from an actress to a barmaid to a Moulin Rouge dancer, all of which are available for “purchase” through an arcade-like coin slot; despite their varying professions, they are all implied and seemingly expected to have dual employment in sex work.³ The independence, sexual appeal, visibility in the public sphere, and active agency over their lives and bodies that women performers held made them, at best, examples of the emerging concept of the “New Woman”, and at worst threats to the social order; this was especially true for women who were considered members of the “third sex” due to their intimate relationships with other women, which many performers, especially those from Montmartre, were known to have.⁴ The “New Woman” was someone who participated in traditionally masculine roles and jobs, living outside the normal bounds of proper womanhood and forging new paths. The complexities of the figure led to the concept of the New Woman being utilized by reactionary male writers and feminist activists alike and applied to the Montmartre female dance hall performer perfectly.⁵

While there is an inherent understanding of a consumer gaze in the context of advertisements and posters, this is generally not directly addressed or depicted in the works themselves; the focus is usually centered on the spectacle and performers, not the audience - Cheret’s posters are a clear example of this. However, many of the posters and prints made by Toulouse-Lautrec challenge this norm, in line with his apparent consistent interest with perspective and viewpoint throughout his career, present in a different but still notable form in his

³ Elizabeth K. Menon, “Images of Pleasure and Vice: Women of the Fringe,” in *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. Gabriel P. Weisberg (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 51.

⁴ Ashley Bruckbauer, “Flanerie and the Lesbian Gaze: Female Spectatorship in the Work of Toulouse-Lautrec” (Southern Methodist University, 2008), 8.

⁵ Michelle Elizabeth Tusan, “Inventing the New Woman: Print Culture and Identity Politics during the Fin-de-Siecle,” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 31, no. 2 (1998): 169. See article for more in-depth discussion of the term and the complexities of its use in the Nineteenth century.

later brothel works especially.⁶ This theme is present from his very first poster, depicting the famous dancer La Goulue, real name Louise Weber, in an advertisement for the Moulin Rouge (Figure 2). She is in the midst of her routine, her skirt lifted at one of the most risque parts, almost boxed in between the figures of her dance partner Valentin the Boneless at the front and a crowd of silhouetted audience members behind her. Many enduring themes in his print works are present, including the phallic imagery that Valentine's left hand creates and the aforementioned explicit depiction of spectatorship along with the advertised spectacle. Notable is the diversity of the crowd, mainly differentiated by headwear, which includes those worn by upper and lower-class men as well as women, one placed prominently in almost the center of the work; notably, the woman on the far left has been identified as fellow dancer Jane Avril, foreshadowing a consistent relationship between the performer and looking in Toulouse-Lautrec's works.⁷

The subject of perhaps the most complex depictions of spectatorship and looking among Toulouse-Lautrec's Montmartre works, Jane Avril was one of the artist's frequent models and close friends. Many of his works depicting her deal with concepts concerning women, gender, and gaze, with slightly different focuses in each one. These complex examinations are especially intriguing in conjunction with his explicitly promotional works, as many of the topics touched on directly confront or at least question many of the tropes and perspectives making up the evolving field of advertisements in the time period; even more incongruous is the overwhelming success of them despite this.

⁶ For further discussion on this topic, see Mary Hunter's "The Waiting Time of Prostitution: Gynaecology and Temporality in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's *Rue des Moulins*, 1894".

⁷ Phillip Dennis Cate, "Beneath the Words: Visual Messages in French Fin-de-Siècle Posters," in *Visible Writings: Cultures, Forms, Readings*, ed. Marija Dalbello and Mary Shaw (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 184.

In Toulouse-Lautrec's first poster depicting Avril, dated 1893, (Figure 3) she is not what is ostensibly being advertised - instead, it is the cafe-concert called Divan Japonais, from which the work gets its name. However, despite not being the official subject, the composition of the piece seems to undercut this; she is the central focus, with the cafe itself and the performer - identifiable as Yvette Guilbert from her iconic black gloves - pushed to the side to make space for her. Avril, or what she represents, seems to be the implied draw for the venue - in this case, the spectator becomes the true spectacle. This seeming objectification and commodification of Avril and her image is complicated by the other details of the work, however. Rather than being depicted as a passive thing to be looked at and admired, she is instead shown as actively gazing herself - she stares directly at Guilbert on stage, her posture sure and confident, ignoring both her companion and the viewers of the poster.

The scene is further complicated by said companion, who seems to embody the implicit message of the work, bypassing the performer on stage entirely to ogle Avril, his conspicuously phallic cane in hand. He is not the only one with suggestive symbolism, either - as Ashley Bruckbauer points out, the fan Avril holds and the conveniently placed bag underneath, while almost entirely overlooked, are more than a bit phallic in nature, as is the protruding instrument in front of her.⁸ Additionally, while most of the writing on women as purveyors of the gaze in the art of this period focuses on women looking at either commodities or men, Avril's gaze is explicitly set on a woman, and both she and Guilbert identified as sapphic women. These traditionally masculine elements embodied by Avril contrasted with her feminine qualities and state as an object of desire reflects the complex positions embodied by "liberated" women in fin de siecle France.

⁸ Ashley Bruckbauer, "Flanerie and the Lesbian Gaze", 17.

These ideas are further muddled in the artist's first official promotional poster meant to advertise Avril herself as a performer, *Jane Avril at the Jardin de Paris* (Figure 4), in which the dancer is shown mid-high kick on stage. While at first glance it may appear to fall into more traditional advertising techniques, with the focus solely on the performer and the audience undisplayed, there are more layers to it than that. While the seated audience is not shown, Toulouse-Lautrec purposefully includes the profile and hand of one of the musicians in the orchestra, the latter of which tightly grips the neck of his instrument, another instance of unsubtle sexual symbolism; additionally, while his gaze is arguably focused on his sheet music, his eye line is conveniently placed in such a way that he could easily be sneaking a peek under Avril's skirt - due to the fact that any element of his gaze being included is entirely unnecessary, the latter interpretation seems reasonable. This once again visualizes the spectatorship directed at Avril, both during her performances and at her publicity material, though in a much less obvious way than in *Divan Japonais*, and Avril's gaze is even more oblique.

One contemporary reaction interpreted Avril's expression as "...one of incredible sadness. One feels the weariness, one sees that the young woman dances for our pleasure and not for hers, one reads it as the poorly hidden desire to escape from this existence where the blase public takes too much."⁹ This depiction was based in reality, as Avril's performance style came across as "total mental and physical absorption in the movement and a refusal to acknowledge her spectators", a fact which may have been influential on the unique elements of Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of her.¹⁰ Unlike the open, enticing figures of the cherettes, Avril's depiction is

⁹ Nancy Ireson, *Toulouse-Lautrec and Jane Avril: Beyond the Moulin Rouge* (London: Paul Hoberton Publishing, 2011), 83.

¹⁰ Catherine Pedley-Hindson, "Jane Avril and the Entertainment Lithograph: The Female Celebrity and Fin-de-Siècle Questions of Corporeality and Performance," *Theatre Research International* 30, no. 2 (2005): 115.

unsettling and even off-putting while simultaneously being alluring and enticing - she embodies the tension and contradictions haunting the women who performed professionally and publicly, and the work implicates the viewer as complicit in the objectification and sexualization which contributed to the conundrum.

The Box with the Gilded Mask, made 1893 (Figure 5), created to be a playbill cover, depicts a woman dressed in all of Toulouse-Lautrec's typical signifiers of Avril - black color palette and dramatic headpiece - as an audience member at a theater, which was considered more respectable than the cafe-concerts and dance halls she and the artist frequented. Similar in concept to *Divan Japonais*, it depicts Avril watching a performance - though in this work it is entirely offscreen - while a blonde man in the same box, face framed in shadow, stares directly at her. The differences are just as prevalent, however. For one, Avril holds a pair of opera glasses, her eyes entirely hidden with only the blank frames visible. Opera glasses and similar tools were commonly used in works concerned with women looking at this time, so this addition serves to highlight the message and focus of the work.¹¹ There is also not any obvious phallic symbolism near either figure. Most important is the position and viewpoint of the piece - eye level for the viewer is depicted far below the box where the figures sit, which serves to give Avril more of a dominant, powerful impression and situate the viewer much more firmly in the voyeuristic category than in *Divan Japonais*. The position makes it seem as though the audience is also at the theater, ignoring the performance to stare at Avril just as her companion is doing - all the while she is subtly resistant to her own objectification, focusing on the performance and denying her

¹¹ Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze in Post-Haussmann Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 91.

voyeurs an unobstructed view of her face; in contrast, her blond companion is entirely reduced to his.

Avril appears again in the audience of the dancer La Goulue, this time in two pieces commissioned from Toulouse-Lautrec in 1895, called the *Foire du Trone* tent decorations, (Figures 6 and 7) to embellish said tent, which La Goulue was using as a performance space. This spectatorship further complicates the figure of Avril and her position as a liberated woman, particularly one known to have intimate relationships with women. Though the two were not involved, La Goulue openly had relationships with other women, which, similarly to *Divan Japonais*, makes the imagery and agency depicted even more subversive and potentially threatening to typical ideals of female behavior. While not promotional in the traditional sense, the pieces still functioned to entice viewers and capture attention, and the interplay between spectator and spectacle is just as prominent here as in the previous examples. Toulouse-Lautrec again depicts both the performer and the audience, though here they seem to hold about equal focus, sharing the space in a way that reflects the blending of traditional and commercial art the two works embody.¹² In *Dance at the Moulin Rouge* (Figure 6), Avril, while recognizable, is not particularly prominent among the crowd of other viewers, though her proximity to La Goulue does make her stand out despite her diminutive sizing, while in *The Moorish Dance* (Figure 7) she is placed in the center of the composition, her black ensemble contrasting with the men around her; she is nearly as much of a focus as La Goulue herself, whose bright outfit also stands out against Avril, despite all but the back of her head being completely unavailable to the viewer. In both she is not the subject of any gaze within the context of the pieces, instead solely embodying a

¹² Danielle D. Sensabaugh, "Between Painting and Poster: Artistic and Cultural Hybridity in Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's Panels for 'La Goulue'" (masters thesis, American University, 2015), 34.

consumptive role, though in the context of the external view of the works themselves she is highlighted and made to catch the eye, perhaps reflecting the inescapable nature of celebrity and notoriety even when “off duty” while her agency is equally highlighted through her spectatorship.¹³

The intentional nature of these depictions of Avril can be seen when contrasted with Toulouse-Lautrec’s fully non-promotional images of the dancer. While her facial expressions in *Jane Avril leaving the Moulin Rouge* (Figure 8) and *Jane Avril at the entrance to the Moulin Rouge* (Figure 9) are reminiscent of the *Jardin de Paris* poster, everything else about them is almost completely detached from the works previously looked at. Unlike the *Jardin de Paris* poster, in which Avril “gazes directly out of the picture... [with] no acknowledgment of the spectator, indeed [appearing] to be looking straight through the viewer,”¹⁴ in these paintings she avoids the viewers’ gaze completely, eyes trained down and away. Additionally, she is not being looked at by anyone in the scene, nor implied to by anyone out of frame - the only voyeur is the viewer, but even that presence seems less present and oppressive than in the other works, though it is not entirely absent either. The clear dichotomy between the explicitly commercial works with Avril and these more traditional ones reflects the idea that Toulouse-Lautrec “relished the indeterminate areas - between a dancer’s celebrity identity as a performer and her private life, between candor and pose,” and likely the different intensity and perspective that looking and gazes occupy in these areas.¹⁵ The transitory nature of these scenes is evidenced by the titles - in both she is in the process of switching between two sides of herself, either leaving or entering her

¹³ Avril was also known to catch people’s eyes for her unusual physique and facial twitches, which she wasn’t particularly fond of. For further discussion on this see Pedley-Hindson.

¹⁴ Catherine Pedley-Hindson, “Jane Avril”, 118.

¹⁵ Mary W. Chapin, “The Dancers of Toulouse-Lautrec: Public Lives and Private Performances,” in *The Dancer: Degas, Foraine, and Toulouse-Lautrec*, ed. Annette Dixon (Portland: University of Washington Press, 2008), 137.

place of employment and the location where the spectator and spectacle relationship is most potent. It also indicates that her avoidance of most of the voyeuristic gazes in the previous works discussed comes from a trait of the true Avril, beyond the celebrity persona she employs, as this avoidance, in a more potent form, is obvious in all of the works, regardless of context or location.

While Toulouse-Lautrec plays with similar ideas of looking, gender, and modernity in his other pieces, the specific qualities embedded in his depictions of Avril are not fully present in them. Interestingly, the most similar combination of ideas and compositional details lies not in any of his other works or his direct influencers such as Degas, but in another of the latter's acolytes - Mary Stevenson Cassatt's "In the Loge" of 1878 (Figure 10). While most strikingly comparable to *The Box with the Gilded Mask*, this painting centers on themes found in nearly all of the previously discussed works; the female subject looking out of frame towards an implied performance, binoculars in hand, while she herself is being looked at by a man in the back left of the scene. Avril even holds her fan similarly in *Divan Japonais*, and her outfit and pose are similarly reminiscent of Cassatt's figure. It is striking that this piece, with its nearly identical concepts and compositions to Toulouse-Lautrec's Avril pieces, was created by one of the few prominent, well-known women artists in the Parisian art world, and that both were heavily influenced by Degas' work. While Temma Balducci questions whether the male voyeur in Cassatt's piece acts as a reassuring dampener on the threat of the active female gaze, the dynamics discussed in Toulouse-Lautrec's similar works challenge this view.¹⁶ Although *In the Loge* is not a promotional image, the similar subject matter indicates that the unease surrounding the changing social dynamics surrounding the New Woman extended beyond the relatively small, countercultural scene to other spheres and classes of women.

¹⁶ Temma Balducci, *Gender, Space, and the Gaze*, 91.

Toulouse-Lautrec's promotional works, particularly of Avril, were deeply in conversation with contemporary preoccupations with ideas and tropes including the position of looking, the changing status of women, and the status of non-normative roles and occupations held by them. They also relate to the emerging prominence of commodification and consumerism, which women often embodied and were made subjects of themselves. By making visible and prominent the implied objectification and viewpoint of the targets of the advertisements as well as depicting women who are active and engaged in looking and consumption themselves, he is able to comment on these topics in innovative and critical ways, all while managing to create compelling and successful promotions within the same systems he is commenting on.

While it could be argued that the works reflect Toulouse-Lautrec's hypocrisy in both critiquing and propagating the commodification of women in advertising, I would instead argue that these complexities merely reflect the contradictory realities that women performers in France embodied in their actual lives - they had far more independence than most other women at the time, but that independence was still dependent on the attention and patronage of largely male audiences and spectators, as well as the mainly male poster artists and other publicists necessary to sustain and expand their careers. An examination of the way creators reacted to these issues at the time, especially one like Toulouse-Lautrec who was solidly entrenched in the culture in question, can expose us to valuable perspectives and viewpoints that give us a fuller understanding of the mindsets and culture at an influential period in Western history and culture.



Figure 1. Ferdinand Bac, *Femmes automatiques: Ce qu'on y met, ce qu'il en sort*, 1892.



Figure 2. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge: La Goulue*, 1891



Figure 3. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Divan Japonais*, 1893

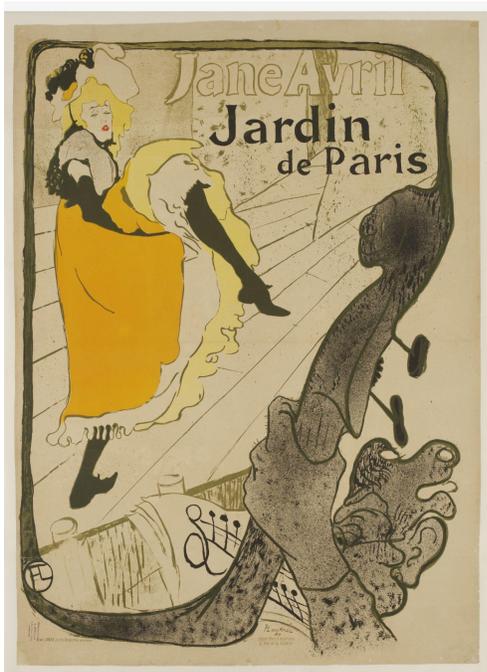


Figure 4. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril at the Jardin de Paris*, 1893

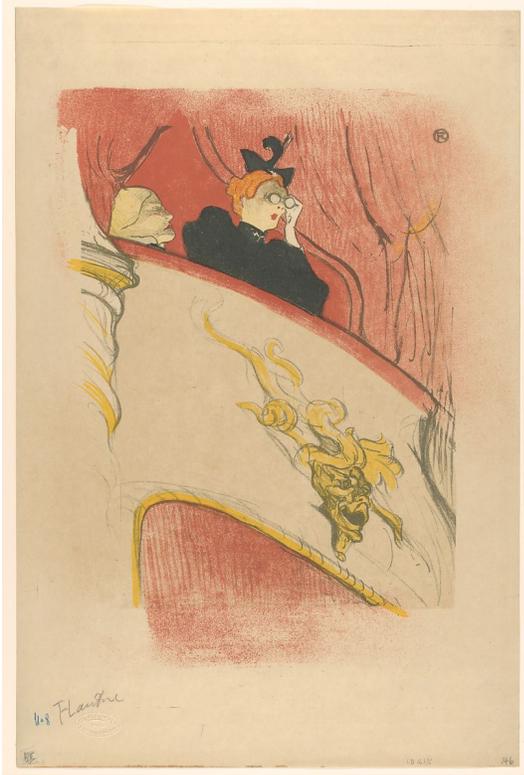


Figure 5. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Box with the Gilded Mask*, 1893



Figure 6. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Dance at the Moulin Rouge*, 1895



Figure 7. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *The Moorish Dance*, 1895



Figure 8. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril leaving the Moulin Rouge*, 1892



Figure 9. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril at the entrance to the Moulin Rouge*, 1892



Figure 10. Mary Stevenson Cassatt, *In the Loge*, 1878.

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