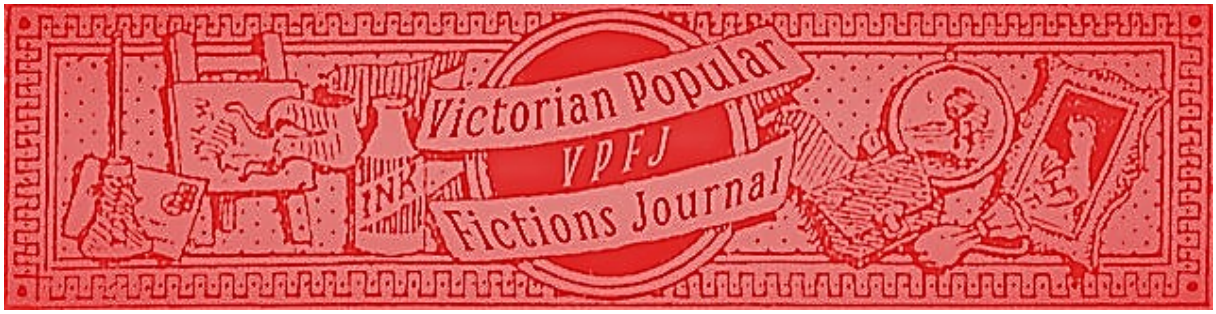

Material Girls: *Moulin Rouge!*'s Neo-Victorian Spectacle and the Real Courtesans of Paris

Helena Esser

Abstract

This article discusses Baz Luhrmann's 2001 juke-box musical film *Moulin Rouge!* and how, despite its effective post-modern remix and re-mediation of a *fin-de-siècle* mass media spectacle for modern audiences, it fails to productively re-think Victorian gender outside of established stereotypes. Through the example of Satine as archetypal courtesan figure, the article examines the lasting influence and patriarchal politics of male-authored courtesan narratives, such as *La dame aux camélias* (1848) by Alexandre Dumas *fils* and *Nana* (1880) by Émile Zola. It contrasts these stereotypes with the lives and experiences of real celebrity courtesans of the French Second Empire and *fin de siècle*, considering how real women self-fashioned within a Victorian society of spectacle and became adept social players in a gendered economy. By examining the multifaceted experiences of celebrity courtesans and courtesan narratives in the context of Luhrmann's film, this article interrogates how enduring gender stereotypes inform the popular imagination. Whereas the film intuitively sources and re-articulates late-Victorian media practices, its reliance on conservative clichés both undermines its potential for meaningful engagement with the past, and also silences and obscures real women and their narratives.

Keywords

courtesan, female celebrity, Liane de Pougy, Cléo de Mérode, Cora Pearl, Marie Duplessis, *Moulin Rouge!*, postmodernism, neo-Victorianism, gender, feminism.

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Material Girls: *Moulin Rouge!*'s Neo-Victorian Spectacle and the Real Courtesans of Paris

Helena Esser

The Zu-Zu is fact; the moralists' pictures are moonshine.
(Ouida [1867] 1995: 54)

Spectacular, Spectacular: Setting the Stage

Baz Luhrmann's 2001 juke-box musical *Moulin Rouge!* is a staple in discussions of postmodern popular culture, but has seldom been discussed from an explicitly neo-Victorian perspective.[1] This is perhaps because, while it undeniably actively engages, as do all neo-Victorian texts, with "what it means to fashion the past for consumption in the present" (Mitchell 2010: 3) and is notably "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians*" (Heilmann and Llewelyn 2010: 4, original emphasis), the exuberant, spectacle-driven story is an outlier in terms of neo-Victorianism's engagement with and re-signification of the legacies of the Victorian age. Neo-Victorian texts, often conceptualised as Gothic hauntings (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4) or the working through of historical traumas (Kohlke and Gutleben 2010), centre on marginalised groups and exploration of taboo topics. They usually take the form of "searching out [the past's] dark secrets and shameful mysteries, insisting obsessively on the lurid details of Victorian life" (Kohlke and Gutleben 2012: 4), *Moulin Rouge!* plays with this convention to celebrate the world of bohemian artists and courtesans which it inherits from selected stereotypes inherited from the nineteenth century.

This article will show the complex and sometimes paradoxical ways in which *Moulin Rouge!* both succeeds and – from a feminist perspective – fails in its representation of *fin-de-siècle* Paris, its demimonde and courtesans. While only a full length study could fully explore how nineteenth-century celebrity courtesans – among them Marie Duplessis, Giulia Barucci, Blanche d'Antigny, Cora Pearl, 'La Païva' (Esther Lachmann), Apollonie Sabatier, Alice Ozy, Céleste Mogador, Caroline Letissier, Leonide Leblanc,

[1] Scholars of film and opera in particular have examined the film's re-working of its operatic inspirations, namely Verdi's *La Traviata* (1850) and Puccini's *La Bohème* (1896), through its postmodern narrative layering and remixing with contemporary pop songs (Kehler 2005, Yang 2008, van der Merwe 2010, Hudson 2011), and debated its integration of Bollywood aesthetics (Gopal and Moorti 2011).

Valtesse de la Bigne, Caroline 'La Belle Otero,' Liane de Pougy, Emilienne d'Alençon, Cléo de Mérode, and Mata Hari – constructed and navigated their celebrity, this article later provides some brief case studies to illustrate how these women exerted agency or otherwise defied male-authored stereotypes. In so doing, it highlights the narrative pathways that *Moulin Rouge!* failed to take in its embrace of postmodern pastische.

It has many times been claimed, and rightly, that *Moulin Rouge!* epitomises Frederick Jameson's definition of postmodernism as "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past" (Jameson 1991: 16-17). It creates a hyper-real, theatrical space centring on the Montmartre nightclub, "positioned centrally as a representation of the commodification of culture, of expression, and of desire" (Hudson 2011: 264), emphasising excess, sex-appeal and spectacle. It presents the nineteenth-century cabaret as a mirror of itself: just as the Moulin Rouge is embedded within *fin-de-siècle* Paris's "new order of mass-media celebrity, predicated upon ubiquitous, compelling, but fleeting images" (Garval 2012: 4), so *Moulin Rouge!* does the same in 2001, borrowing filmic techniques from advertising and pop music videos, mashing up pop songs and narrative tropes from twentieth-century Hollywood as well as nineteenth-century fiction and opera. In characteristic Luhrmann style (evident also in his 1996 *Romeo+Juliet* and 2013 *The Great Gatsby*), the film's irreverent collage eliminates hierarchies between high- and low-brow culture, past and present, local and global, and collapses the narrative into an achronic postmodern spectacle that presupposes that popular forms of entertainment (music, performance, dance, film, etc.) transcend historical and geographical contexts while remaining legible to global audiences in consumer societies. Popular forms become a *lingua franca* between past and present as the film engineers the (imagined) sensation of attending a late Victorian variety performance.

However, the success of the film's innovative remediation of the nineteenth century as primarily captured by and imagined through twentieth-century popular culture also depends on hyper-real melodrama and familiar stereotypes, especially where gender is concerned. On the one hand, it skilfully conjures an immersive historical fantasy by activating a stylistic collage of nineteenth-century Paris' media landscape, such as Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's lithograph posters, photography, magazines, and cartoons which advertised performers of variety theatres, operettas, and music halls. On the other hand, its unquestioning re-iteration of a familiar plot, and its portrayal of the courtesan figure in particular, also embodies neo-Victorianism's stark ethical failures by exploiting "already accepted ideas about the Victorians for the sake of period authenticity" (Primorac 2018: 13). This is particularly true for its treatment of its female lead: *Moulin Rouge!*'s Satine falls prey to the same post-feminist trappings which Antonija Primorac's study identifies through neo-Victorian screen portrayals of Irene Adler which encode an imagined female empowerment, positioned against "the proverbially prudish Victorians" through the spectacle of her sexualised body as the source of her alleged power, while at the same time eroding her agency (Primorac 2018: 90). Whereas Adler, in Doyle's source text, is cosmopolitan, independent, and eludes the great detective, neo-Victorian iterations of her in both BBC's Sherlock (2010-2017) and Guy Ritchie's films (2009 & 2011) are first "sexed-up" for the male gaze, then "safely neutralised" (Primorac 2018: 99) through humiliation and threats of violence, and so re-assimilated into a patriarchal meta-narrative. Satine, as this article demonstrates, is likewise entangled in fundamentally conservative sexual politics.

More than failing to empower its female lead, the film's reliance on popular stereotypes inherited from nineteenth-century authors obscures those historical courtesan celebrities whose image dominated and epitomised the visual legacy that *Moulin Rouge!* seeks to evoke: real women whose lives and agency would, if represented, challenge and undermine established neo-Victorian clichés. This obscuration is largely owed to the film's re-telling of a

stereotypical story about the courtesan with a heart of gold who dies of consumption, and the middle-class man who falls in love with her. Scholars have criticised the film's failure to "challenge the conventions [which] demand that the female die so that the male can create artistically" (Bennet 2004: 114), its re-iteration of the "misogynistic tendencies inherent in Victorian representations of the common prostitute or courtesan and our continued devaluation of her precisely because she remains useful to a patriarchal structure" (Kehler 2005: 147).

While this article contributes to the growing field of neo-Victorian screen studies (see, for example, Sadoff 2010, Whelehan 2012, Kleinecke-Bates 2014, *Neo-Victorian Studies* 11:1 (2018), and Primorac 2018), it is concerned to go beyond that: it examines *Moulin Rouge!* as a case study through which to interrogate neo-Victorianism's relationship with a variety of popular forms, focusing on popular (meaning widely read) nineteenth-century fiction, and nineteenth-century popular culture (meaning present in the public consciousness), not just twentieth-century film. It accordingly outlines the ways in which the film stages and re-mediates *fin-de-siècle* Paris as spectacle through postmodern media techniques, and how its engagement with nineteenth-century popular culture suggests interconnections between art and commerce and how the courtesan becomes a potently coded figure. However, despite its foregrounding of the courtesan, *Moulin Rouge!* obscures a variety of historical women whose success was predicated on and exemplified by their skilful self-fashioning within popular culture. This article accordingly explores Alexandre Dumas fils' *La dame aux camélias* (1848) and Émile Zola's *Nana* (1880), and re-contextualises the male-authored codification of the courtesan figure derived from them against the lives of real women, both those of the Second Empire who inspired Dumas and Zola, and of the *fin de siècle*, when celebrity courtesans and popular media existed in a symbiotic relationship.

'Here We Are Now, Entertain Us:' Putting on the Past

From the much-discussed opening, including even the 20th Century Fox logo, *Moulin Rouge!* frames itself as a self-consciously constructed, achronic and amusingly ironic theatrical experience: as it fades from black, we hear an orchestra tuning up, an audience whispering, and we see a red theatre curtain, an orchestra pit and a male conductor who 'conducts' through an extreme version of expressive dance. The title sequence of the film proper assumes the grainy black-and-white aesthetic of early films, and the overture plays "The Hills are Alive" from Rogers and Hammerstein's smash-hit 1965 film *The Sound of Music* – which was also distributed by 20th Century Fox. The overture then mingles twentieth-century pop music themes with Offenbach's Cancan ("Galop infernal" from *Orphée aux enfers*, 1858), until a scene card reminiscent of silent film introduces us to "Paris, 1900." It leads into a black and white sequence that introduces Paris and Montmartre though the figure of a sad clown (who we later discover to be Toulouse Lautrec) singing the proto-hippie eden abhez's 1946 song "Nature Boy" (made famous by Nat King Cole in 1947), before zooming in on a distraught Christian (Ewan McGregor) and slowly blending into colour. Such techniques, including the camera's focus on Christian's typewriter and the act of typing, as well as McGregor's voice-over, exemplify the film's postmodern frameworks of story-within-stories that constantly take place on theatre stages, in rehearsal spaces, behind and in front of curtains and props. From the outset, the film draws attention to its own influences, its hyperreal collage and constructedness, all of which are intrinsic features of neo-Victorianism: "in a sense, the neo-Victorian is by definition hyperreal, since it has no direct access to the Victorian real, instead relying entirely on Victorian texts and documents, that is, on signs of the past" (Kohlke & Gutleben 2012: 41).

The film immediately conjures up the "eclecticism of a media-saturated civilization [which] comes through in a collision of fragments, filling the screen with print and image" (Lahr [2002] 2014: 87), in which it recognises parallels to the present, equally media-saturated moment. Whereas a large variety of neo-Victorian films and TV series, including, among others, *Ripper Street* (2012-2016), *The Alienist* (2018-2020), *Colette* (2018), *Enola Holmes* (2020), or *The Essex Serpent* (2022), foreground a mimetic and immersive period aesthetic, *Moulin Rouge!* belongs in a tradition of media that follows 1990s' postmodern neo-Victorianism, such as *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (dir. Coppola, 1992), *From Hell* (dir. Albert Hughes and Allen Hughes, 2001), Guy Ritchie's Sherlock Holmes films (*Sherlock Holmes*, 2009; *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows*, 2011), and, more recently, AppleTV's *Dickinson* (2019-2021). These foreground artificiality through montages, impossible tracking shots, extreme angles, quick juxtapositions of panoramic shots and close-ups, voice-over narration, comedic sound effects, and, in the case of *Moulin Rouge!*, musical numbers. "And from moment one," says director Baz Luhrmann, "you're being let in on the deal. You're being told that we're going to manipulate you" (Pride [2001] 2014: 74).

However, far from being employed as a Brechtian distancing device, these postmodern devices seek to create "emotional immediacy, through a mediatized performance that ceases to try to evoke the metaphysics of presence" (Hudson 2011: 257). That is, they stage the sensation of attending a variety theatre and engineer wonder, curiosity, a suspension of disbelief, and a genuine affective response, even as the film tells the audience exactly how to feel. Luhrmann "describes how he uses melodramatic devices (often visual signs, such as blood on a handkerchief) to substitute for narrative explanation, in order to be able to focus dramatic attention on the extended musical numbers" (Hudson 2011: 263). In this emphasis on sensational effects and overt emotional cues, veering always between such dramatic extremes as delight and doom, ecstasy and despair, the film echoes nineteenth-century melodramatic theatre, and such sentimental strategies as Pamela Gilbert has identified in Victorian popular fiction's "management of sympathy," particularly the works of Ouida. "The point" Gilbert explains, "was not to surprise, intellectually engage or educate in the first instance, but to move by appealing to familiar emotions and structures of feeling" (2016: 47, 48). Ostensibly, this is what Luhrman means when speaking of attaining "the authentic through the inauthentic" (Pride [2001] 2014: 68).

That the story's narrative arc is entirely secondary to its spectacular effects is exemplified by the fact that Christian reveals from the outset how the story ends with the death of the woman he loves, the courtesan Satine (Nicole Kidman). Luhrmann, in various commentaries on the DVD, claims that the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is foundational to the story, thus configuring the Moulin Rouge nightclub as a heterotopic underworld. Luhrmann's strategy is to activate "simple, mythic stories, which he can update in order to make their subliminal emotional essence accessible" (Lahr [2002] 2014: 87). By drawing inspiration from two operas, Puccini's 1896 *La Bohéme,* itself adapted from Henri Murger's 1851 novel *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, and Verdi's *La Traviata* inspired by Alexandre Dumas *fils*' *La dame aux camélias* (1848), he taps both into what Pierre Lévy has termed a culturally transmitted "collective intelligence" (Lévy 1997, 13-14) and into what Henry Jenkins calls "convergence culture" in which knowledge is fostered within and transmitted through the ever-present transmedia flow (2008: 3-4):

> There is a reason why we reference very directly Emile Zola's *Nana* and *Lady of the Camellias* and *La Bohème* in *Moulin Rouge!* They are all drawing on the same, recognizable, well-worn story structure. It's not that you expect people to go, "Aha! A beat out of *Nana*." I expect them to recognize a story about a middle-class boy meeting a prostitute who's dying of consumption and that what follows is going to be a tragic story. Shorthanding gives us poetic resonance and that's valuable, y'know."
>
> (Luhrmann quoted in Pride [2001] 2014: 75)

Luhrmann enhances his "mass hallucination of the half-remembered tropes of the turn-of-the-century Parisian bohemian epoch" with popular music, creating an "absinthe-drenched reimagining of pop opera and the American musical comedy" (Pride [2001] 2014: 67-68). By remixing, that is "leveraging the meaning created by the reference to build something new" (Lessing 2008: 76), the film mobilises "frameworks and presuppositions that prod a viewer towards a given interpretation of text, so that mixing genres results in the displacement of one readily recognisable set of possible meanings for a more complex dialogue of divergent meanings" (Yang 2008: 270). It engages its audience in a participatory exchange in a way that enhances Rick Altman's notion of musicals as inherently demanding audience participation (Altman 1989: 94) by re-contextualising popular music within an already remixed and hyper-textual neo-Victorian collage. In this way, the film engages the audience's transmedia literacy on multiple levels by utilising pop culture references.

How this medley of ideas works is exemplified through the frenzied, disorienting, music-video-style introduction to the Moulin Rouge theatre: "just as we think we are in for a night of Offenbach highjinx," declares the script, "the music soundtrack lurches forward a hundred years into a super sexual fat funk" (Luhrmann and Pearce 1999: 3). A medley of "Lady Marmelade" by Christina Aguilera, P!ink, L'il Kim, and Mýa, overlaid by a fictionalised Moulin Rouge co-founder, Harold Zidler (Jim Broadbent), that blends into Fatboy Slim's "Because We Can" accompanies a dizzying, frivolous sequence of painted female faces, swirling skirts, and top-hatted men dancing as if on a military march. Lighting cues, synecdochic impressions, speed, repetition, camera movement, and music all serve to imitate the feeling of being in a nightclub. Instead of contemporary nightclubs, however, the sequence links the sensation to the cancan, "which has been remembered and represented as even more sexual than it was perceived at the time," constructing the Moulin Rouge as a "sexually charged venue" (Visconti 2013: 109). The dancers', or "Diamond Dogs,'" costumes, "based on the sexual iconography of the times," are likewise hybridised. Like most costumes in the film, they draw on "allegorical tropes that would be recognisable within a nineteenth- and a twenty-first century context" (Visconti 2013: 115). For Satine's wardrobe, costume designers Catherine Martin and Angus Strathie blended nineteenth-century aesthetics with that of 1940s Hollywood, to characterise the Moulin Rouge's star attraction as fashionable and a diva (Litson 2001: 5).

The film conjures up a Moulin Rouge that "lent itself to fluidity and crossover between forms of play, and created a sense of ambiguity and melding of the ludic and lewd, as well as enhancing the interplay of looking and being looked at" (Visconti 2013: 108). But the fluidity and crossover hides how the film picks and chooses which aspects to amplify. As with its incorporation of postcard backgrounds or silent film aesthetics, *Moulin Rouge!* shows itself aware of *fin-de-siècle* Paris's newly emerging mass media landscape: photography, print posters, postcards, early film, and magazine cartoons. Yet it effaces,

for example, the historical "garden with sideshow booths, games, tame monkeys, and donkey rides" and "outdoor stage and café concert area," and prioritises the imagined promiscuity of the cancan dancers over other acts such as clowns, magicians, and belly dancers which, though they were important in historical reality, appear only peripherally (Visconti 2013: 108-9).

Sometimes, referencing seems designed more for film students rather than for general consumers. An interesting example of the latter is the remixing of Nirvana's grunge, teen-angst anthem "Smells Like Teen Spirit" into the Moulin Rouge sequence, where a multitude of men in spotless evening wear declares: "Here we are now/ entertain us./ We feel stupid/ and contagious." Scholars have read this remix, complete with emblematic, dissonant rock timbre, that may suggest "the cultural dirtiness of the place," as parodying "the most problematic contradiction of the song – its overwhelming popularity with a broad audience" (van der Merwe 2010: 34) by giving it to exactly those bourgeois, male representatives of the establishment against whom the song rebels (Bennet 2004: 114). However, the film also conjures up something of what Arthur Symons diagnosed in "The Decadent Movement in Literature" (1893) as the "*maladie fin de siècle*": ennui, over-saturation, and disillusionment with an urban modernity, symptoms of "a civilization grown over-luxurious, over-inquiring, too languid for the relief of action, too uncertain for any emphasis in opinion or conduct" (Symons, reprinted in Desmarais and Baldick 2012: 252, original emphasis). The inclusion of "stupid" certainly suggests this, while that of "contagious" may be intended as a comedic quip towards venereal disease. In its very obvious invitations to film students (whether in formal education or the fan) and hence future purchase and multiple watches, the film is seeking longevity and hence more income. It was a very high-budget film and needed to maximise returns. That in turn means it had to capture diverse audiences with diverse viewing strategies. In 2001, that meant not only film critics and students but also global audiences.

Attempting to appeal to audiences across the world can backfire. For example, Gopal and Moorti (2011) regard the staging of the film's play-within-play, *Spectacular, Spectacular*, through intended as a homage to Bollywood aesthetics, as cultural appropriation: they see it as an another example of the kitsch orientalism prevalent in 1990s western pop culture. In fact, though, the appeal to Bollywood fans worked: most Indian cinema-goers in 2001 received the film enthusiastically and it was only in hindsight that the appropriation of Bollywood became ethically problematic for Indian audiences (Mohan 2021). Film critics have also not been interested in how the film's appropriation also recalls the Orientalism with which Paris staged the colonial Other during its International Exhibitions, epitomised not least by celebrity dancer Cléo de Mérode's erotically charged "Cambodian" dance (see Garval 2012: 130-1, Guigon 2012: 61), as well as by exotic dancer Mata Hari (see Guigon 2012: 58-62).

Even more problematic is the film's treatment of the only black character, Chocolat, whose sole purpose is to save Satine, once catching her when she faints, once preventing her from being raped by the film's antagonist, the Duke. Chocolat's only agency, according to Gopal and Moorti, "is in the service of the white woman" (2011: 55). "Even his name reduces him entirely to his ethnicity," notes Kathryn Connor Bennet, accusing the film here of re-enacting "nineteenth-century colonialism in its ugliest and most stereotypical form" (2004: 116). Indeed, while Chocolat is most likely inspired by Rafael Padilla, a professional clown of Afro-Cuban descent, who gained fame and success as one half of Footit and Chocolat - "perhaps the most famous interracial slapstick duo in nineteenth-century France" - and was famously painted by Toulouse-Lautrec (Gopal and Moorti 2011: 55), he

"encapsulates the problematic position offered to Third-World subjects and spectators of color in the commodification of exotica" (Gopal and Moorti 2011: 55). Like the dominant culture of the nineteenth-century west that is its origin, the film fails to critically engage with race or colonialism as a factor within networks of commodification.

Even more crucial is its inheritance of gender stereotypes and heterosexual relations. "Christian's dual desires to become an artist within the economy of the Moulin Rouge and to believe in the power of 'real' love […] are set out as the ultimate unrealistic fantasy, the basic conflict of the film" (Hudson 2011: 265). Through the "Elephant Love Medley," Christian seduces Satine, whose initial outlook is practical ("A girl has to eat. […] Or she'll end up on the streets"), into believing in love as a pure, monolithic ideal untouched by worldly concerns. He does so by quoting iconic pop songs such as Elton John's "Your Song," David Bowie's "Heroes," "Kiss" and "I Was Made for Loving You," Phil Collins' "One More Night," U2's "Pride (In the Name of Love)," The Beatles' "All You Need is Love," and Whitney Houston's "I Will Always Love You" – all of which the audience may perceive as emblematic expressions of "true love" precisely because they are widely disseminated, commercial successes. The film thus sets up and explores the dilemma between sincerity and commercialism inherent in popular culture, concentrated in and codified through the courtesan figure, whom it deploys

> as a metaphor of a culture of consuming in part to evaluate current uses of the commercial. In *Moulin Rouge!*, the diseased prostitute who sings affecting music references the very seductiveness and trap of consumer culture, which paradoxically attempts to purchase that which lies outside of symbolic exchange: 'truth, beauty, freedom, and, above all, love' (to cite the credo of *Moulin Rouge!*'s bohemians).
>
> (Kehler 2005: 147)

Zidler and Satine convince the Duke to invest in *Spectacular, Spectacular*, a musical supposedly written by Christian which, as the story about a courtesan in love with a poor musician and betrothed to a maharadjah, mirrors and re-stages the main plot and conflict. The film, self-aware that it is produced by and embedded in the same conflicting networks of production, commerce, entertainment, and artistic expression, in which it sees itself mirrored, is therefore perfectly set up to explore "whether artistic expression is possible within mediatized culture, and whether the emotive response evoked in film and sold through commodified culture can be anything other than a form of prostitution – desire aroused and fulfilled for a price" (Hudson 2011: 265).

However, in its focus on this dilemma, the film centres on the suffering male artist as the most compelling figure, whose pain eclipses that of the tragic courtesan. In so doing, it depends on simplistic, even stereotypical and entirely patriarchal codifications through which Dumas *fils* and Zola, and then Verdi and Puccini, achieved that selfsame artistic expression, recognition, and commercial success. Considering that they did so by using real courtesans as inspiration and by casting them as passive, melodramatic catalysts for the dilemma between love and commerce, while also silencing their voices and obscuring their agency, it is worthwhile examining more closely firstly how the courtesan narrative has been codified by the original, male-authored texts, and then by noting its difference from the real courtesans.

Moralists and Moonshine: The Male Voice

Moulin Rouge!, as Grace Kehler observes, repeats nineteenth-century narratives' "intent scrutiny of a woman whose sexual employment and cultural identity have been conflated, focussing on the prostitute as a means to interrogate contemporary society's fraught treatment of the commercial" (2005: 147). In so doing, it also conflates the prostitute with the courtesan, and in so doing conceals that nineteenth-century Paris knew several classes of demi-mondaine, from the *grisette* to the *cocotte* to the *lionne*, a term which described the top-most dozen celebrity courtesans (Rounding 2003: 20). In the Second Empire, these *lionnes* rivalled Empress Eugénie and her set when it came to setting fashions and exerting social influence; it was claimed at the time that neither group would have been displeased to be mistaken for the other (see Bentzon 1877: 33). At the *fin de siècle*, *lionnes* employed skilful self-fashioning through mass media and celebrity at a historical moment when "the fascination with female beauty was bound up with the rise of commodity culture, including the development of department stores, and of the fashion, advertising, and entertainment industries" (Garval 2012: 54). Still, even though, beside sex workers, they were also performers, models, salon hostesses, fashion icons, and spies, they have received little attention outside of their depiction in male-authored literature (see Bernheimer 1998; Bell 1999). With few exceptions (Garval 2012), their stories are told in non-academic – dare one say popular? – non-fiction (Richardson 1967, Rounding 2003, Corvisier 2007, Guigon 2012, Authier 2015).

Marie Duplessis (1824-1847) was one of the first such celebrity courtesans, a woman whom wealthy men desired enough to finance her life of luxury apartments, opera, theatre, and pleasure gardens, of gambling, spa towns, fine dining, and high fashion. Between 1844 and 1845, Alexandre Dumas *fils* became her *amant de coeur*, meaning their relationship was not transactional since he could not afford it, but a matter of mutual attraction (see Rounding 2003: 40). Unable to negotiate between her lifestyle and his pride, Dumas *fils* ended the affair and, when Duplessis died of consumption, wrote *La dame aux camélias*, which has become the dominant representation of her life. In the novel, Dumas assumes the role of Armand Duval who attempts to save Marguerite Gautier from her fallenness.

The symbolic role of the woman in the "moral world of Victorian melodrama" as "persecuted innocence and representative of virtue" (Gledhill 1992: 110), as well as the patriarchal meta-narrative of reining in the "promiscuous, greedy, potentially dangerous" courtesan whose self-directed existence as a woman in the public sphere threatened "bourgeois order, morality, health, and finances" (Garval 2012: 49) have been subject to extensive scholarly analysis in the past (see, for example Anderson 1993, Bell 1999, Bernheimer 1998, Nead 1988). *La dame aux camélias* and *Nana* exemplify how such attitudes were codified in popular fiction, and *Moulin Rouge!* follows their example. Like the film, which begins with Christian's mourning, Dumas' frame narrative begins after Marguerite's redemptive death of consumption and focuses for seven chapters on Armand's grief, his exhumation and relocation of her body, and his brain fever. In both Christian's and Dumas' cases, the story supposes that male suffering is the most compelling part of the story (cf. Åström 2011: 135). Both stories then flash back to recount the young, middle-class protagonist pursuing a beautiful, much-desired woman under the patronage of wealthier men. In both cases, the chief rival is called "the Duke." In line with contemporary feminine ideals, Marguerite is presented as naively innocent: "one could detect in this girl a virgin who had been turned into a courtesan by the merest accident of chance, and a courtesan whom the merest accident of chance could have turned into the most loving, the most pure of virgins" (Dumas [1848] 2000: 60-1). *Moulin Rouge!* ironically parodies this idea, first by letting Satine demonstrate her exaggerated seduction skills on Christian and the Duke, then through the camp

rendition of Madonna's "Like a Virgin," through which Zidler sells the Duke a fantasy of possessing the "virginal" Satine. Yet Satine is also presented, as Primorac notes, as a "caged bird on a swing, complete with a sumptuous feather tail" and "objectified by an all-male, visually uniform audience clad in tuxedos and top hats," "longing to fly away to a better life somewhere else" (Primorac 2018: 111-12; see also Stevenson 2015). As such, she mirrors Marguerite who, whisked away from the temptations of luxury, childishly marvels at butterflies and dreams of Armand's pure love. That the ideal of true love remains implicated in economies of commercial desire is the central conflict of the film, and brings about the tragic end in the novel. Realising their life is financially unsustainable, Marguerite returns to the Duke and writes to Armand from her deathbed, sacrificing herself to save his reputation. How unlikely this narrative could be understood by mid-century readers is suggested in a satiric comment by Ouida in her 1867 novel *Under Two Flags* which contemporaries would have understood as a reference to "Skittles," a courtesan very visible in the press (and London) in the early 1860s:

> As for the pathetic pictures that novelists and moralists draw, of vice sighing amid turtle and truffles for childish innocence in the cottage at home where honeysuckles blossomed and brown brooks made melody, and passionately grieving on the purple cushions of a barouche for the time of straw pallets and untroubled sleep, why the Zu-Zu would have vaulted herself on the box-seat of a drag, and told you "to stow all that trash"; her childish recollections were of a stifling lean-to with the odor of pigsty and straw-yard, pork for a feast once a week, starvation all the other six days, kicks, slaps, wrangling, and a general atmosphere of beer and wash-tubs; she hated her past, and loved her cigar on the drag. The Zu-Zu is fact; the moralists' pictures are moonshine.
>
> (Ouida [1867] 1995: 54)

Nonetheless, both Dumas and *Moulin Rouge!* construct a narrative designed to render the courtesan's subversive potential safe by re-integrating her into a patriarchal logic. Their narrative strategies include the attempted rescue of the doomed, beautiful girl by the morally virtuous hero, his struggle with jealousy over her other suitors, a dramatic falling-out in which the threat of payment risks corrupting and invalidating the purity of their love, and the courtesan's redemptive death which purifies the "corrupt and corrupting body" into a "memory of spiritual love" (Kehler 2005: 150).

In the novel, Armand's love ostensibly entitles him to the role of saviour, and the reader is invited to sympathise with his jealousy as he monitors the comings and goings of Marguerite's patrons. *Moulin Rouge!* equally puts into play what Berit Åström has identified as Lévi-Strauss' kinship system, in which women's value is defined by their relation to the men around her: Zidler, the Duke, and Christian all feel they have "rights" to Satine, to her talent and commercial value, her sexualised body, or her love and loyalty. Nowhere is this more evident than in the film's "El Tango de Roxanne" sequence, when Satine must placate the Duke by sleeping with him. In an expertly engineered emotional climax, the Argentinian's (Jacek Koman) rendition of the Police's song is intercut with Satine's Gothically-lit dinner with the Duke and close-ups of Christian's face, until the latter begins to voice his pain, anguish and rage through the line "Why does my heart cry?" Satine meanwhile, only narrowly escaping being raped by the Duke, remains silent, and later even consoles Christian, assuring him that she "couldn't go through with it."

Like Dumas and Zola's' novel, the film portrays male anguish over a desired woman as the most compelling emotional drama. This is also evident in Zola's *Nana*, a realist exploration of the Second Empire's moral corruption. Portrayed throughout through a voyeuristic male gaze and presented as both a childish, vapid, avaricious ingénue and a voluptuous temptress, Nana becomes a fantasy whose agency Zola is at pains to deny.

Nana's introduction as Venus on stage warrants detailed exploration of her nakedness, especially her "firm breasts with their hard, erect, pink nipples" and "broad hips rolling and swaying voluptuously," which, in the eyes of the narrator, turns "the good-natured girl" into a disturbing woman offering frenzied sexuality and a "man-eater" (Zola [1880] 2009: 25). Her lovers' obsessive intrusion and possessive gestures, even desperate self-harming (380), and financial ruin are all laid at the door of the "fiery red of her pubic hair" which "glowed triumphantly over its victims […] like a rising sun shining in triumph over a bloody battlefield." Nana herself remains "a superb, mindless animal, oblivious of what she'd done, never anything but 'a good sort of girl,' a big, fat wench bursting with health and the joy of life" (409). While the novel occasionally acknowledges her subversive potential as "magnificent and untamed" (277) or as avenging the world of the under-privileged (409), it also configures "this tart whom all Paris was itching to have" (279) as carrying "foul infection" (398): "[W]ith the smell of her body fermenting in the stuffy air, Nana was turning this whole society putrid to the rhythm of her vulgar tune" (364). In the end, such corruption, evidently moral as well as physical, turns on Nana. As the emblematic scapegoat of Second Empire excess, she dies at the outbreak of war. The narrative voice that initially objectified her sexualised body now glories in lurid descriptions of blood and pus, "festering sores […] all puckered and subsiding into a grey pulp," "discharging ulcers," and "thick yellowish fluid" (425). Nana's horrible demise is obviously very different from the beautiful deaths of Satine and Marguerite, but its apparent medicalisation is in its own naturalist way heavily aestheticized through its obvious symbolism.

In short, the paradigmatic novels of Dumas *fils* and Zola, like *Moulin Rouge!*, configure the courtesan as a sensual, beautiful object to possess or to which their male heroes are in some way entitled. She is made responsible for the desire she arouses in men, while she is simultaneously denied agency either by emphasising her naive innocence and childish vapidity, or by relegating her repeatedly to a commodity. All three texts maintain a tradition that prioritises male anguish over their uncertain position in regards to the woman they desire to possess over these women's health and happiness. In addition, their transgressive potential is punished by the loss of their beauty and life. In so doing these narratives silence and obscure the ways in which real nineteenth-century celebrity courtesans actively shaped their lives.

"Material Girls in a Material World:" Paris' *Demi-Mondaines*

Moulin Rouge! introduces Satine through a re-imagined rendition of Marilyn Monroe's "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" from the film *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (dir. Hawks, 1953), a song that updated and reframed the tradition of the mistress so common in nineteenth-century France for classic Hollywood. Lyrics such as "A kiss may be grand/ But it won't pay the rental/ On your humble flat" or "Men grow cold/ As girls grow old/ And we all lose our charms in the end" playfully encapsulate women's dependent and uncertain status in a patriarchal commercial world. While the inclusion of lyrics from Madonna's "Material Girl" ("'Cause we are living in a material world/ And I am a material girl") provide a link to the contemporary (postfeminist) context, what is more interesting is how the film opens up the possibility of another narrative very different from that of Zola and Dumas *fils.* By recommending women leverage their fleeting capital (youth and beauty) to attain financial certainties (jewellery, properties), the song captures how Paris *lionnes* purposefully self-fashioned their bodies within a patriarchal capitalist economy as self-aware objects and players in the marketplace. What follows presents some case studies of historical possibilities that *Moulin Rouge!* did not take up.

One of the key aspects of the *lionne* was her active cultural agency. The Parisian courtesans Apollonie Sabatier and La Païva, for example, both hosted salons which fostered cultural networks, especially of the decadent avant garde. Sabatier's guests included Théophile Gautier, Gustave Doré, Victor Hugo, Édouard Manet, and Charles Baudelaire whose *Fleurs du Mal* (1857) she partly inspired. She was immortalised in a scandalous sculpture by Auguste Clésinger (1847, Musée d'Orsay), which less depicts its title "Woman Bitten by a Snake" than a female orgasm (see Rounding 2003). La Païva's regular vistors to her salon were Gustave Flaubert, Zola, Eugène Delacroix and the Goncourt brothers, and she was friends with Gautier, Hans von Bülow, and Richard Wagner (see Rounding 2003, Authier 2015). Her long relationship and marriage to Prussian industrialist Count Guido Henckel von Donnersmarck illustrates that many *lionnes* married, some several times, and usually to great advantage. After 1871, La Païva was suspected to have been a spy, an allegation often levelled at mistresses and courtesans such as Virginia Oldoini, Countess of Castiglione, and Mata Hari. Cora Pearl, on the other hand, demonstrated her agency by opening her house as field hospitals during the Franco-Prussian War and Paris Commune (Richardson 3003: 259).

One of the reasons that *Moulin Rouge!* fails to take up these alternative narratives was almost certainly due to their relative invisibility in authoritative twentieth-century accounts of nineteenth-century popular culture. It is true that Pearl exemplifies that memoirs authored by courtesans were not assured of success during the Second Empire, but they did enjoy popularity at the *fin de siècle* and afterwards. Exiled from Paris after a young lover had broken into her home to kill her and seriously wounded himself (the Affaire Duval, retold also in Zola's *Nana*), Pearl published *Mémoires de Cora Pearl* in 1886, but it did not sell well. The venture, however, does suggest there was a perceived market for, or at least an interest in, such a memoir, and that she sought to shape and control her image.

An earlier memoir by Céleste Mogador (*Adieu au Monde*, 1854) likewise counted on the public's fascination with celebrity courtesans' luxurious and fashionable lives, but was banned after causing a scandal. It nonetheless endures as a historical document attesting how Mogador saw herself, or at least how she wished to present herself, as well as a female, socially critical *Bildungsroman* in its own right (see Marrone 1997, Sullivan 2016). Possibly written to aid her in a legal case against her deceased husband's powerful family, the memoir gained acclaim from Emile de Girardin and Alexandre Dumas *père* (Nagem xii). Chronicling her often physically demanding rise through the public dance garden, the Bal Mabille and the Hippodrome, as dancer and equestrienne, it foregrounds how hard it was for female performers to rise through the entertainment industry. Despite the banning of *Adieu au Monde*, Mogador remained involved in the world of entertainment and popular culture throughout her life as a novelist, playwright, and theatre director (Sullivan 2016: 17).

The *fin-de-siècle* celebrity *lionne* Liane de Pougy, was more successful in publishing a number of autobiographical novels. Courtesans from Pearl onwards patronised high fashion houses such as Worth, Pingat, Doucet, or the Soeurs Callot, becoming models and advertisements much like today's celebrities on the red carpet, and de Pougy capitalised on her glamour and allure as a public beauty, fashion icon, and courtesan through long evocations of "snowy lacquers, the Louis XV trinkets, the pale silks, the fur rugs, and the Meissen and Sèvres" (de Pougy [1901] 2021: 15), "rich goat skin from Mongolia, white and silky" (15), a "Callot dress" (34) and "a little jacket in mauve silk which, very thin, clung to her skin and traced her deliciously sinuous outline" (213). Notably, *Idylle Sapphique*, from which these excerpts are taken, chronicles de Pougy's affair with American heiress and avant-garde salon hostess Natalie Clifford Barney, and, although de Pougy altered the ending in order to be published at all, the novel contains such explicit passages as: "She came closer … their breasts pressed together, they played a game, touching their nipples against each other, firm and pink

and swelling. Flossie quivered, her eyes drowning in a dream" (33). The novel, as Courtney Sullivan notes, "responds to the stereotypes in *La dame aux camélias* by suggesting that it is not a naïve young man's love that will rehabilitate a fallen woman, but rather the tenderness between two women who love and understand one another" (Sullivan 2016: 45). Indeed, several *fin-de-siècle* female celebrities had affairs with women and may have been lesbian or bisexual in today's understanding: de Pougy also had affairs with Mathilde de Morny (also lover of Colette) and Emilienne d'Alençon, who in turn romanced Louise "La Gouloue" Weber (see Guigon 2012, Visconti 2022).

The courtesans Caroline Otéro, d'Alençon, and Cléo de Mérode published memoirs in the twentieth century, both for financial gain and to take control of their lives' narrative. These memoirs foreground and sell glamour, beauty, and their audience's desire, cleverly exploiting their position in "the period's simultaneous idealization and denigration of women" (Garval 2012: 50) but they also depict danger, harassment, humiliation, and psychological stress of the *demi-mondaine* sympathetically, if unromantically (Sullivan 2016: 42), instead of crafting moralistic tragedies. In addition to words and stage performances, Otéro, Mata Hari, and de Mérode all proved skilful at shaping their public image through visual media. The former two crafted distinct personae and styles as dancers, Otéro as "The Spanish Dancer," Mata Hari as an exotic dancer claiming to have been inducted into secret Hindu ceremonies (see Guigon 2012: 34-41, 58-59). Cléo de Mérode is relevant here because she *posed* as a courtesan, while apparently she never was one. Understanding that such a pose would catapult her into the spotlight, she "learned to cultivate this role, to capitalize on public expectations," including a rumoured, yet non-existent affair with King Leopold II of Belgium (Garval 2012: 53, 61-68). In reality, de Mérode was a dancer, photographic model, and fashion icon who constantly performed the spectacle of her own beauty. Photographed by such well-known names as Nadar and Napoléon Sarony, de Mérode "took charge, controlling and crafting her persona" (Garval 2012: 46). She would pose with her signature hairstyle and wear a "strikingly blank expression," appearing chaste, proper, and confident, as well as "sphinx-like" (Garval 2012: 46). Like actual *demi-mondaines* de Pougy, d'Alençon, or Otéro, she was constantly discussed by the press: the daily literary newspaper *Gil Blas* (1879-1938), which serialised several of Zola's novels, famously discussed the lives of *demi-mondaines* (see Hewitt 2015, *passim*). She was also depicted in illustrations. A famous *Vanity Fair* print by Jean Baptiste Guth (3 June 1897) shows a group of fashionable lady cyclists in the Bois de Boulogne, among them de Mérode, Liane de Pougy, La Belle Otéro, as well as Princess Brancovan, and the Duchess of Doudeauville. It was above all through the medium of postcards, a relatively new mass medium, that de Mérode enjoyed enduring fame: "Young, photogenic, already famous, she was the ideal subject for a medium coming into its own as a mass-cultural phenomenon and a means of promoting celebrities" as they offered "a new way to disseminate her image worldwide, inexpensively, efficiently, with a seductive illusion of intimacy intensified by frequent close-ups" (Garval 2012: 133).

These examples suggest that Parisian *demi-mondaines* portrayed and proved themselves to be intelligent social agents who approached their careers with practicality, even calculation, so as to enjoy luxury. They set fashions in dress, hairstyles, leisure, even dining (celebrity chef Auguste Escoffier once dedicated a dish to Cora Pearl, see Authier 2015: 24), and were vividly present in the public imagination and the public press. Their writings and other active participation served to shape their image, but also to "bear witness to the physical and emotional toils inflicted upon them by their clients and protectors and underscore the gumption it takes for these women to market themselves and perform in front of hostile audiences" (Sullivan 2016: 44). This is not a narrative that *Moulin Rouge!* chose to tell.

"The Show Must Go On:" Conclusion

Moulin Rouge! expertly activates and mediates the experience of nineteenth-century spectacle and uses it to explore the fundamental question that commercial culture poses about whether it is essentially conservative and therefore commercially safer, or willing to take risks with novelty: what seems like the latter may often turn out to be the former. The film may remix Victorian aesthetics with present-day pop culture references to charge it with new meanings, but it also highlights the perceived need for the commercially successful to engage with the past in ways that continue stereotypes. Female identity, and the female body in particular, become the battlefield onto which conflicted contemporary sexual politics are projected. Enshrined in a safely distant and static past, Victorian gender stereotypes may be conjured up, prodded, and remixed, and become a model against which a progressive feminist identity may pride itself, but such stereotypes are not challenged through the alternative narratives available in their own historical context. The feminist narrative possibilities that Satine's initial song opens up are closed down by a plot which centres on, explains, and thereby justifies masculine anguish. Nineteenth-century celebrity courtesans provide real examples of women who repurposed heterosexual male desire for their own ends. Unlike Dumas *fils*' and Zola's moralistic, canon-forming depictions of asinine ingénue temptresses, courtesans' own lives and testimonies demonstrate that their success was contingent on clever self-fashioning, stamina, and an understanding of their own role within a visual economy and gendered marketplace. They exemplify much of the interconnections between self-commodification, media, and desire which *Moulin Rouge!* claims to examine.

Eckhart Voigts-Virchow notes that "it is less painful to attack, and easier to understand, the patriarchal orthodoxies of the Victorians than it is to achieve understanding for or to pass judgement on existing contemporary moral fundamentalisms" (2009: 113). It is a conservative gender fundamentalism that *Moulin Rouge!*'s dazzling aesthetic brilliance and narrative choices finally endorses.

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