Above: Singer-poet Aristide Bruant, lithograph by Toulouse-Lautrec, on the cover of Les Chansonniers de Montmartre (No. 1, 5 March, 1906), a collection of popular songs, several by Bruant, (the Brécy Collection, the University of Melbourne Library). See article The Republic of Pleasure, page 5.

Front cover: “Kangaroo-Pouch” Method of Synchronising and Playing 8 Oscillators. Ink and watercolour by Percy Grainger, 1952 (Collection, Grainger Museum, the University of Melbourne). See article Percy Grainger’s Art, page 11.
This article has been published to celebrate the important acquisition by the Baillieu Library of the Brecy Collection of 19th century songbooks. This important acquisition has been made possible by the generosity and the vision of the Pitt Bequest, which provides for the purchase of books. The collection, which includes several hundred rare, original works, is of an international standard, and we are truly fortunate to have access here in Australia to material that the great libraries of the world would covet. At the same time, we must recognise and celebrate the vision and the professional dedication of Juliet Flesch and the members of staff who were responsible for locating, acquiring and cataloguing this extraordinary collection. They have provided rich possibilities for original research and for a more profound understanding of the world of 19th century Paris.

**INTRODUCTION**

**The Republic of Pleasure**

When we view the beautiful posters produced in France in the last decades of the 19th century, such as Chéret’s *Le Bal au Moulin Rouge*, (1889, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) we become vividly aware that the new Paris created by Baron Haussmann quickly became the site for a giddy whirl of festivity and entertainment that we still call *la vie parisienne*. This is the champagne image of Paris, one which drew thousands of foreign visitors to the capital during the 19th century and which still attracts nostalgic travellers today.

Indeed, one of the historiographic problems of the Belle Époque (c.1880–1914) is that it is almost too frothy, too attractive, and its glittering images have been perpetrated in all sorts of operas and Hollywood movies. The myth of naughty Paris still serves as a signifier for everything that is irreverent, frivolous and sexually libertarian. The very mention of “Gay Paree” conjures up the champagne image of the capital, a kaleidoscope of brilliant, fragmented images: bohemian artists drinking the fatal absinthe in seedy cafes, dancers performing the can-can in brilliantly lit dance halls, and bohemian singers gratifying songs that will shock the bourgeoisie.

In this paper, I look beyond this familiar optic of naughty Paris, to re-examine the culture of the Belle Époque and in a sense pay tribute to the men...
and women who created it. I will make two suggestions about this brilliant efflorescence of entertainment.

The first point is that this peculiarly Parisian “industry of Pleasure” was actually made to serve a very serious purpose in the crisis-ridden Third Republic of France, and I will explore how a regime in a state of crisis made political use of pleasure to negotiate its way out of trouble.

My second point will be that although the great Parisian industry of Pleasure was designed to create entertainment and frivolity, it did a great deal more than that and it ended up contributing to one of the most significant bodies of cultural production in 19th century France. I believe that it was in the years between 1880 and 1914 that politics, culture and pleasure intersected in one intense moment and produced a brilliant and distinctively modern form of artistic expression.

My theme, then, is pleasure. It is about the way pleasure is used as a political sign, as a form of social interaction, as a site for satire, for pathos and for slanginess. I have called this the “Republic of Pleasure”, partly because it occurred during the time of the French Third Republic, partly because the world of la vie parisienne seems almost to constitute a little world in itself. If
The first great site of the Republic of Pleasure we need to revisit, then, is the great Paris International Exposition of 1889. These expositions were temporary sites: they were held in Paris at regular intervals, and then dismantled. There were three such exhibitions in Paris at the end of the 19th century, in 1878, 1889 and 1900. The reader might be surprised that I should associate these grandiose displays of technology and industry with the Republic of Pleasure and might object that they served far more serious purposes. This is true: these exhibitions had, since their 18th century beginnings, been all about Progress. Historians have also argued that they can be analysed as bourgeois society putting itself on display: they provide a sort of blueprint, or a mental map, of how the bourgeois made sense of the world he or she had created. You can see how profoundly serious these international displays were by looking closely at the panoramic views that were printed at the time, such as the overview of the site by Deroy. At first glance, it appears simply to be a panorama of the vast exposition site. Debora Silverman has, however, analysed this more closely, and pointed out that the exhibition was laid out on a groundplan like a massive Gothic cathedral: people did not necessarily consciously see it as such, but the feeling they got from visiting the site would have been similar, and all the more powerful for being subconscious. Silverman affirms that the Eiffel Tower provided a sort of spire, the great open space in the middle was the nave, the pavilions of industry along the side were the aisles, and the magnificent central pavilion was like an altar to capitalist society. Without realising it, millions of French people came to “worship” the latest manifestations of Progress in a setting which, subliminally, they must have approached like a religious site.

If Progress was one key to the Exposition, Power was another. These expositions were, quite literally, dazzling. Many colour engravings, notably the famous image by Georges Garen, recaptures the splendid illumination of the Exposition of 1889, when a vast electric beacon was set atop the Eiffel Tower. The system of lights illuminated not only the tower and the sky above it, but lit up the entire 228 acre site. People began to talk of Paris as la ville lumière, the city of light. It is perhaps difficult to recapture, with our modern eyes, just how much of an impact this sort of illumination would have had upon the minds and spirits of people in 1889, when electrical illumination was still relatively new. The impression must have been one of awesome power and of boundless energy and confidence.

Indeed, that impression of enormous power was crucial to the Third Republic for a very particular reason. By the year 1889, the Third Republic was in a state of instability bordering on crisis. A part of the problem was political reality: the working classes had begun to veer away from the moderate republic, and to follow more radical leaders. The republic was threatened from the left and from the right. On the left, new political groups such as Socialists and Anarchists posed a threat of radical working class action. On the right, there was the even more disturbing phenomenon of Boulangisme, threatening to overthrow the democratic republic and to return France to the authoritarian rule of a military man, General Boulanger. People were expecting a coup d’état at any moment.

The other part of the problem was perception: people were beginning to predict that the political regime would be overthrown. There was a curious reason for this. The French had become accustomed to the fatal pattern of a century in which no single regime — the Restoration Monarchy (1814-1830), the so-called July Monarchy (1830-1848), the Second Republic (1848-1851), the Second Empire (1852-1870) — had lasted more than 18 or 19 years. Since the Third Republic had been founded in 1870, by 1889 people were gloomily speculating that it too was doomed to fall.

The great International Exposition of 1889 was therefore intended to be more brilliant and magnificent than anything that had gone before, an affirmation of the political health of the regime and of the economic strength of the nation.
When we realise that the Exposition was the showcase of a regime fighting for its political survival, we understand some of the deeper messages encoded in apparently innocent souvenir images. On one level, the exposition was an affirmation of the self-confidence and achievement of the French bourgeoisie; on another level, it was also a desperate plea to the working classes to participate in the miracle of Progress. One of the most important souvenirs was called Hommage to Monsieur Gustave Eiffel, a Souvenir of the Exposition of 1889. It was explicitly addressed “To the workers”, and is one of the most desperate pieces of propaganda in 19th century France. The image included an allegorical female figure at centre who represented France. She used to be Liberty, leading the people to revolution on the barricades. Now, she has lost her revolutionary flag and her red hat and is seated sedately amidst symbols of peace and prosperity. Her shield bears the words Peace and Labour: this signifies that the working classes need no longer consider revolution, because it is simply no longer necessary in a progressive republic. It is implicitly begging the workers not to follow radicals of the left or the right, but to join with the bourgeoisie in the great movement of Progress and prosperity. The composition images forth the bourgeoisie’s ideal of the worker: he is a skilled artisan, proud, dignified, self-respecting; he is also a more attractive alternative than a more recent types of worker, the unskilled or semi-skilled proletarian living in the industrial suburbs on the outskirts of the city. To avoid any misunderstanding, the poster bears a short poem, linking progress and democracy:

Progress! Throw out your rich seed
Into the fields of Humanity.
To make it grow, the Sun of Liberty
Shines out over the entire world.

So far we have talked about Progress and Power, and it seems difficult to see where Pleasure could come into it. What was new about the Exposition of 1889, however, was that the government did far more to draw the working classes into the republic by popularising the international expositions. Previously, it had been very much a matter of the bourgeoisie showing off to itself; any working people who attended were incidental. Now, the government placed far more importance on the involvement of workers from the industrial cities and of peasants from the provinces. The authorities ordered that the entry fee to the exposition be kept down to one franc, and that the national railway system should offer special low excursion fares, so that millions of people could come to Paris from the provinces. And legions of people responded to this invitation to have fun with the republic: while only eight million people had attended the Exposition in 1867, 16 million attended in 1878, 32 million in 1889 and 50 million in 1900. For many of these provincial peasants and petit bourgeois, their first trip to Paris revealed to them a capital city that could pride itself upon being a centre of the civilised world, courtesy of a republic that wanted them to enjoy themselves and to be a part of the nation’s glory. They came, they saw, they marvelled, and they went home convinced that the nation was in the best of hands.

There was a second new element: the government placed more emphasis upon entertainment, and ensured that the expositions had many fun rides. One of the most remarkable was an early version of the roller coaster ride; Parisians were treated to the curious spectacle of top-hatted bourgeois sitting solemnly alongside workers in little chariots, as they whizzed up and down past a huge reconstruction of the Bastille prison. At the Exposition of 1900, another distinctive feature of the fun park would appear: a giant Ferris wheel was the wonder of the crowds, and was the most dramatic feature of the Paris skyline. It seems rather quaint today, but the impact at the time was considerable: the giant wheel, too, was a demonstration of new technology of iron, but it provided a direct means of feeling the thrill of new technology.
PART TWO

The Capital of Pleasure: Paris and Montmartre

The great international expositions were impressive and memorable — and in the case of the 1889 Exposition it does seem to have helped the republic overcome the crises of that year — but they were only temporary. The Third Republic therefore looked for other ways to create a new national, specifically republican culture, in which working people could express loyalty by means of festivity. The reason it was urgent to do so was that in a system of universal male suffrage, the working people now made up a considerable mass of voters, so their support was vital to the very survival of the republican regime. To put it simply, working people assumed their full place in the art of the bourgeoisie at the same time as they entered the political consciousness of bourgeois statesmen.

The government discovered that you could win the hearts and minds of people if you combined official civil culture — ceremonies, parades and so on — with popular culture, such as singing, dancing and carnival. Until now, the popular culture of peasants and working people had for some decades been condemned as immoral by local notables and priests, who had combined forces to stamp out old customs and ancient festivities. The officials of the republic now challenged their authority, and declared that it was not only acceptable, but desirable, for people to dance and enjoy themselves. In 1888, the national holiday was moved to 14 July, Bastille Day, hence a signal that the government now acknowledged and respected the revolutionary past of working people. One painting by Steinlen depicts a quite new phenomenon: a Bastille Day dance. For the first time for some decades, working people could dance and carouse openly, without the condemnation of the church. Thanks to the Republic, their cherished culture, to which they had kept alive in secret, had suddenly become an officially-sanctioned culture.

The ploy had some success. In one anonymous image depicting the novelty of a Bastille Day holiday, you can see workers in a popular cafe in the 14th arrondissement of Paris, a solid working class suburb, happily dancing under the aegis of the massive symbolic statue of Marianne, the embodiment of the democratic republic. In a political sense, then, the Republic of Pleasure was being used as a venue upon which working people could comfortably meet with the republican ideal of democracy, and gradually acquire a commitment to republican culture.

So what I have been suggesting is the regime of the Third Republic made very clever use of various forms of pleasure as the most effective way of appealing to the vast mass of working people. In doing so, it created the right context for others to do the same. I will turn now from what the government did to create a Republic of Pleasure, to what other people did to develop it even further. The government had in effect created the right social and cultural framework for an extraordinary explosion of creativity and inventiveness, but it was a new generation of entrepreneurs, and a new generation of singers, dancers and actors, who came together to create the phenomenon known as the Belle Epoque.

The whole of Paris was the site for the profusion of artistic activity and entertainment which flourished during the 1880s and the 1890s, but there was one area in particular which became the epicentre of the swirl of Parisian life. That was the hill of Montmartre, and that is where we will take our next voyage of imagination.

The hill of Montmartre had long been a rural commune outside Paris: in views by the early 19th century landscape artists such as Michel, it appears to be a rustic community quite separate from the city proper, and dominated by cottages, fields and windmills. It was also beyond the limits of the Paris taxation system, so food and drink were much cheaper here than inside the city. As a result, many taverns, cafes and brothels sprang up here, and the site assumed a rather raffish reputation as a place of rowdy pleasures.

In 1860, Baron Haussmann finally integrated these fringe areas into the expanded city of Paris. Montmartre then became a relatively cheap place to live for thousands of workers who had been expelled from the centre of Paris. By 1871, it had become a thoroughly working class area. It was also one of the hotbeds of working class radicalism in the brief, intense revolution known as the Paris Commune.

After 1871, Montmartre assumed a new significance. France had suffered a rapid and humiliating defeat in its war with Prussia in 1870, and this was
interpreted as punishment for the immorality and frivolity of French society during the previous decades. The conservative government of the early 1870s decided that the nation must make some expiation for its immorality and irreligion. Because Montmartre was identified as a site of both political radicalism and of social degeneration, it was chosen as an example of the social evil of which the French nation had to cure itself. It was decided that the nation should build an immense church as a symbol of repentance and of a concern for moral renewal. The result was the great white basilica of Sacré-Coeur. Symbolically, it was to be built of a white stone that could not be sullied by the pollution of a modern industrial city: when rain wets the stone, it releases natural chemicals that sleet off any attached dirt, a physical equivalent of the nation cleansing itself of moral corruption. It was a bold ploy to carry the message of religion into the very epicentre of ungodliness, but it didn't work: even as Sacré-Coeur was being built, the suburb of Montmartre was resuming its life as a venue for festivity, frivolity and immorality.

Hence the vision of Montmartre as a moral beacon in the regeneration of France was not quite the vision that other people had of it. In one strange, visionary painting, Steinlen has represented Paris as a pensive but emotionless woman who watches wave upon wave of humanity coming up to throw their talents and their fortunes at her feet. He places the Hill of Montmartre in the background to symbolise this aspect of the capital as a voracious entity that consumes all the talent and wealth of the nation.

The suburb is in fact divided into two parts. The lower part, near the foot of the hill, includes the areas of Pigalle and Clichy, which since the 18th century had been a den of taverns, wine shops, low cafes and music halls, inhabited by a population of thieves, pimps, smugglers, confidence men and prostitutes.

The upper part of the hill remained curiously rustic: there were some fields crossed by country lanes, and some vineyards which have survived to the present day, and there were numerous cottages that reminded one of the area's rural past. One of them, the Lapin Agile, was to become famous as a meeting place for young artists such as Pablo Picasso.

The hallmark of Montmartre, however, was the series of picturesque old windmills which had originally been used to grind corn and wheat when this was still a rural community. One of the most famous of these was the Moulin de la Galette.

There were two main monuments in the Capital of Pleasure. The first, and most important of these was the dance hall. It was not new: it had come into existence as early as the 18th century, and had enjoyed a brief golden age during the middle decades of the nineteenth century. Now, however, they prospered as never before: there were more of them, they were more opulent, and they were the dynamo that drove the frantic pace of Parisian life. They were to be important for two reasons. First, they provided the site for social change: the dance hall was the venue for the liberation of social behaviour and of sexual mores. Secondly, there had never before been a cultural moment when the performing arts were so intensively recorded in a brilliant body of visual art. Usually, the performing arts die with the people who perform them; in the Belle Epoque, the performers were commemorated, and something of their achievement recorded, by an unparalleled group of visual artists. It is through the medium of visual art that I would like to try to reconstruct some of the brilliance of the Republic of Pleasure.

One of the earliest dance halls was the Moulin de la Galette, so named because it was held in the store-room of one of the old windmills. It was founded in 1876, and rapidly became one of the most popular places of entertainment.

These dance halls all went through a very particular process of evolution. They began as purely working-class establishments, and were simply places where local people went to dance. The crowd was made up of young labourers and working girls, with an admixture of local toughs, thieves and prostitutes. The buildings were simple in the extreme: there was one area with tables and chairs and a bar, separated by a low wooden fence from the dancing floor.

The famous image of the Moulin de la Galette by Toulouse-Lautrec captures some of this simplicity. The painting is a valuable record of what the first dance halls looked like: people are wearing the subdued clothing of working folk, and that at this stage everybody is dancing en masse; there is no special dancer, no focus of attention.

Slowly, though, the audience began to change. Members of the petit-bourgeoisie, artisans and white collar workers from the respectable suburbs began to come here to savour the sweaty vigour and the jostling democracy of it all. Because they came to spectate, the atmosphere changed slightly: dancers who were more skillful came to the fore, becoming proper performers. Soon, each dance hall had to boast a celebrity dancer, although the general public also continued to dance.

The nature of the dancing began to change too. We perhaps get a wrong impression of the dancers from the general, soft paintings of artists like Renoir; it is the work of Toulouse-Lautrec that captures the ferocious intensity of it all. The dancers who performed the “chahut” at a hall such as the Élysée Montmartre went at it with a seriousness that verged on desperation. The dancing was muscular, energetic, vital and highly improvised; it was also suggestive, often frankly erotic and occasionally indecent.

When the orchestra began playing, the dancers would move to the dance floor, start with a few simple steps, then increase the speed and complexity of their movements until they progressed to a frenzied dance, which might include turning cartwheels, spinning like tops.

continued on page 29
and giving the famous kick, which they called the “shoulder arms”. Only trained dancers could attempt this manoeuvre, which involved standing on the toes, lifting the other foot as high as possible and holding it at shoulder height with the hand. The dance had a vigour and earthiness that contemporaries, used to the more polite entertainments of the bourgeois salon, found quite primal. The dance ended with a tour de force called le grand écart, when the dancer threw themselves to the floor with their legs stretched out horizontally front and back, what we would call “doing the splits”.15 The dancers themselves were real characters. One rare photograph shows some of the dancers at the Moulin Rouge in about 1880 demonstrating their can-can kick. It gives us a good idea of the identities they constructed with outrageous and suggestive names. The man on the left has not been identified, but he is followed by a dancer called La Goulue, “the Greedy One”, who made no secret of her huge appetite for good food, for sex and for money. To her right is a woman whose name suggests urban criminality, Grille d’Égout, a metal grill for a drainpipe, a reference to her legendary thinness. The last is Valentin le Désosse, or ‘Valentine the Boneless’ famous for his contortions while dancing.16

Their skill was matched by their propensity for improvisation and outrage. Valentine the Boneless, in his tight check suit, is typical of the male dancers whom one moralistic observer described as “dubious in their skin-tight clothing”. The same observer chastised their “brazen attitudes”, and condemned the way “they contort themselves and sway their hips, giving the impression of an animal frenzy deprived by studied vice”.17

As for La Goulue, her specialty was to aim a kick at the most respectable member of the audience and knock his top hat from his head; while he spluttered a protest, she would turn around and show him her backside, a provocation which always elicited howls of laughter. Disapproving contemporaries might well pontificate about animality and vice, two qualities which the French bourgeoisie had always associated with the working classes: these qualities frightened them, but also fascinated them, and that was precisely what they came to see.

These dance halls had grown organically out of genuine working class establishments. Inevitably, though, the next stage in their development was that of the artificial creation, when an entrepreneur simply decided to set up what was really just a facsimile of the true dance hall.

One of the most famous entrepreneurs was Zidler, who realised that there was a fortune to be made by catering to a wealthy and stylish public intrigued by the vulgarity and eroticism of the dance hall. What he did was to package bohemianism and proletarianism in a more attractive form: he stole the idea of the dance hall, he stole the actual dancers, and he moved them down the hill to the Pigalle area. He called his establishment the Moulin Rouge, but the red windmill, like the rest of the dance-hall, was a fake, a reconstruction of the original dance halls of working-class Montmartre.

Zidler then embarked upon a programme of recruiting the best talent from rival dance halls, using competitive techniques which anticipate modern show business. His greatest success was to secure the services of the incomparable Toulouse-Lautrec. In one photograph that captures entrepreneur and artist together, Zidler stands behind Toulouse-Lautrec and shows him Chérét’s first poster for the Moulin Rouge; the reason for Toulouse-Lautrec’s odd expression is that he was probably looking at Chérét’s work and wondering whether he would ever be able to produce anything as good.

Zidler wanted Lautrec’s skills in order to record and to publicise the talent he was recruiting. Some of Lautrec’s finest work is in the form of dynamic and beautiful sketches executed in preparation for the more well-known posters. In highly kinetic sketches, depicting the most famous dancers such as La Goulue and Valentine the Boneless, he would capture the essence of a dance scene.18 From these superb sketches, he would work forward to the better-known lithograph posters. In general, the process was reductive: he reduces rather than adds detail, so that the yellow lamps on the left are now reduced to shapes that we cannot read unless we look back at the original sketch.19 From the same base, he could also work forward to large oil paintings. One contemporary photographer captured him at work in his studio, executing a painted version of La Goulue and Valentine dancing.

Zidler also extended the traditional boundaries of the dance hall, and appropriated some of the talent of the circus. One of the most famous paintings by Toulouse-Lautrec depicts a female clown who went by the fake Japanese name of Cha-U-Kao, spelt in such a way as to look Oriental, but which was
actually just a phonetic rendering of the French phrase, *Chahut et chaos*, meaning disorder and chaos. She brought a new degree of wildness to Zidler’s Moulin Rouge with an act that was energetic, provocative and outrageously irreverent.

If the first great monument of the Republic of Pleasure was the dance hall, the second was certainly the café artiste, or the singing café. There were literally hundreds of them, but one of the most famous was the popular Chat Noir, or Black Cat Cabaret, established by Rudolph Salis. Salis himself had been a rebellious art student who had turned to the bohemian way of life, so he had direct and real knowledge of the seedy café life enjoyed by a shifting population of aspiring young writers. Beneath his bohemianism, though, lurked a cunning entrepreneur, and he had the vision to see that there was no point in simply opening yet another bohemian bar. Instead, he planned to create a café in the Montmartre district that might attract a new public of established writers and painters, as well as the wealthy playboys and tourists who came to the area in search of entertainment.

Salis’ venture was a commercial success, but it did far more than simply secure his fortune. It was to have enormous cultural effect because it brought together and combined three powerful elements of French life. Salis brought together the bohemianism of Paris café life, the intellectual preoccupations of serious avant-garde artists, and the tradition of popular working class song, and combined them in a significant form of modern culture. He had created, in other words, a venue where high culture could meet with popular culture, and both were to emerge enriched from the synthesis.

He opened the first Chat Noir in December 1881, in what was still a rather rough area of Montmartre. He knew how to make the place seem bohemian and rough, but it was another thing to give it an intellectual atmosphere. He had heard that a literary group, the Hydropaths, had recently been thrown out of their favourite meeting place in the Latin Quarter. These Hydropaths based their philosophy, as the name suggests, upon a hatred of water; they drank wine instead, and in huge amounts. Their gatherings were not so much meetings as literary riots: they gathered to discuss poetry and did so with an almost orgiastic enthusiasm. The group included established writers such as the novelist Paul Bourget and the poet François Coppée, but it was the younger writers who set the tone. To Salis, they seemed to represent something more: they seemed to be the new generation: youthful, hopeful, talented, and impatient of the stodgy bourgeois republic of Jules Grévy. They seemed to combine popular culture and avant-garde culture into a weapon that they could use against bourgeois conformity and respectability. They were, in a word, the very types of people that Salis needed. He acted quickly, and invited them to move to the Chat Noir. In one move, he had annexed the sort of literary clientele that might have taken years to build up.

While the established artists and writers of the avant-garde were gaining new inspiration from their contact with popular culture, the reverse process was also happening. Paris had a long and rich tradition of popular song, but these singers now found that they could have closer contact with intellectuals and writers than they had ever had before. While the intellectuals savoured the gritty directness and realism of popular song, the songwriters were inspired to go beyond their traditional repertoire and to address new themes.

The most famous of these was Aristide Bruant, the very archetype of the singer-poet. He must have cut an impressive figure: he was large in stature, and always stood in an elegant, aggressive stance, as if ready to start a fight. His early success at le Mirliton was due to the fact that he did actually get down off the stage and beat up a customer who had been making fun of him. The audience loved this proletarian roughness, and came back for more; so too did the bruised customer. One of the most revealing images of Bruant is one of the less well-known lithographs by Toulouse-Lautrec for a series called *Le Cafe Concert*; we are fortunate that we can see the original lithograph in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. I think it does far more than the more famous images to capture his extraordinary stage presence and the projection of proletarian roughness. You might say that Aristide Bruant was to the 1890s what Mick Jagger was to the 1960s. Bruant also had a massive, squared face with a high forehead under thick black hair; his eyes were quite penetrating and a fierce he twisted his mouth into a sardonic smile. He usually wore much the same sombre costume: black corduroy trousers and coat, black boots, a bright red flannel shirt and a black scarf or, if he wore a dark coat, a red scarf.

One of Bruant’s most distinctive contributions to the evolution of modern culture was the dislocation of the traditional relationship between performer...
and audience. He was the first to create a more confrontational and problematic relationship, in which the performer engages with his listeners and berates them. He would subject his audience to the most scarring sarcasm and invective. If people walked in late while he was singing, he would pause, place his hands on his hips, and spit out venomous phrases such as “O Christ, what a pack of bastards”, or “Christ, look at the face on that one will you?” until they had crept to their seats. And they loved it. Famous actors, dandies, business men, high society ladies and writers flocked to the cafe to be insulted by Bruant, much as the British upper class today seems to flock to Dame Edna Everage to be ritually insulted. One image depicts him lashing out a song called Ends of Centuries. For a few moments, prosperous businessmen and elegant ladies could thrill to the idea that they were part of the decadent end-of-century culture when Bruant berated them:

You are a heap of unfinished products,  
a heap of abortions,  
Made up of putrid meat,  
Didn't your mother have tits or anything,  
That she could produce ugly little snouts like yours?

Bruant’s second great contribution to this culture was that he gave new significance to the theme of the oppressed working classes. He himself had been a railway labourer, so he knew something of working class life. Even so, he had to make a specific point of setting out like an explorer to discover the dangerous world of the new working class suburbs on the outskirts of Paris, and for protection he went with a local police informer. He was taken into dens of thieves and into the hideouts of the gangs of urban thugs. He also frequented the cafes in working class suburbs such as Belleville and Ménilmontant, where he learnt something quite new: it was the working class song which described the sufferings of the poor. Compared with bourgeois songs on the same subject, which tended to be sentimental, these songs were direct, matter-of-fact and uncompromisingly harsh. Bruant took this new style of song from the outer suburbs and brought it into the fashionable cafes in central Paris. Once again, it was a matter of new language, new emotions, new themes from a world that most bourgeoisie had never known. One image from this period depicts a cabaret performer delivering a bitter little song about strikes, which ends with the reflection that it would be better to put the bosses on a conveyor belt through a saw-mill.

Many of Bruant’s songs captured the same sense of bitterness and desperation, of living close to the edge, or beyond it. He sang:

Even lost dogs can find a hole to crawl into,  
Swans have their shelters by the lake,  
Night prowlers go to sleep in old quarries,  
And even prison is a sort of hotel for murderers.

Bruant’s third great contribution to popular culture was to transform his method of delivering songs. According to contemporaries, he seemed to grate out his words, sometimes spitting venom, sometimes dripping with morbid irony. The critic Jules Lemaitre recalled:

it was the most cutting voice, the most metallic voice I have ever heard; a voice of rioting and of the barricades which could rise above the roaring of the streets on a day of revolution; an arrogant and brutal voice which penetrated your soul like the stab of a flick-knife into a straw dummy.

The critic’s terms are revealing, because you can see how he is unconsciously making a link between working class roughness, suburban criminality and the threat of working class revolution. You can see, too, the ambivalent attitude of fear and fascination that the bourgeoisie had towards the spectacle of working class life.

Modern enthusiasts do have, miraculously, a chance to hear this remarkable voice: Bruant actually lived long enough to see the birth of early recording techniques, and between 1905 and 1914 he made a series of recordings which are now available again on compact disc. It is true that his delivery is curiously restrained, and that you might feel that he is missing the fire and venom of his heyday. The reason, I think, is that he himself had aged considerably — he was 60 years old when he made some of them — and that the recording technology itself forced the performer to be relatively restrained while they were recording. Nonetheless, they give us some idea of the power of his voice.

Amongst the many female singers of Montmartre, Yvette Guilbert was the most remarkable. She came from a poor family, and first attempted a dramatic career. When that failed, she turned to the cabarets, and developed a repertoire of sentimental and comic songs. She had three novel contributions to the standard cabaret act. First, she began to use her acting talents to act out her songs and to develop them into little dramas with spoken monologues. Second, she was inspired by the great realist novelists such as Zola to attempt more serious subjects and contemporary social issues than were usual in cabaret songs. She wrote some songs herself, but also turned to writers such as Xanrof and Bruant for more biting, realistic lyrics. Third, she developed a style of delivery that was every bit as intense and passionate as that of Bruant himself. She made dramatic use of facial expression, and learnt to express herself eloquently with her long, thin hands, which she covered with long black gloves to heighten the effect. The novelist Jean Lorrain recalled:

She is tall, so tall and thin. Her chest is of a chalky whiteness and her figure slightly rounded but she has no bust to speak of and her chest is extraordinarily narrow. She has long, thin arms clad in huge black gloves that look like flimsy streamers, and a bodice that seems to be slipping off her shoulders. The great originality of this very modern singer resides in her almost rigid immobility, the ‘English’ appearance of her long, thin overgrown body...
She was quickly "discovered" by the literary elite of Paris. Toulouse-Lautrec admired her, so did Emile Zola, the novelists Alphonse Daudet and Pierre Loti and the artists Steinlen, Willette and Forain. Even the venomous Goncourt brothers judged her as 'a great, a very great tragic actress who causes your heart to constrict with anguish'. Once again, it is fortunate that she lived long enough to make some recordings late in her life, and these too have now been releases by a French company on compact disc.

The vogue of the cafe concert and the appearance of this extraordinary new generation of singers and performers precipitated a virtual renaissance in the culture of French popular song. There were more people singing in cafe and there were more songs, new types of songs that refreshed the rather tired repertoire of mawkish sentiment and crude comedy. There was a new market for song-sheets: people wanted to buy the music and the words of the latest song and to get together to sing it as a group. The songsheet itself gradually became transformed into a work of art, creating a close synthesis between music, the poetry of the lyrics and the visual art of the illustration. One needs only to look at the songsheets created by Toulouse-Lautrec and by a host of talented contemporaries to understand how this relatively humble publication had been transformed by their artistic skills. And this brings me to a final point.

The renaissance of popular song also generated a renaissance of the visual arts, particularly of forms of art which might seem ephemeral, but which are all the better suited to capturing the spirit of the moment. For example, any self-respecting artist knew how to create an eccentric interior by painting the walls with murals and by assembling strange, outlandish objects as decorations, but up until now this tended to be something they did for their own studios. Now, they found that this skill was in demand from the new entrepreneurs, who wanted them to decorate their cafes in imitation of an artist's studio, in order to give their public the impression that they were in an arty world of bohemia. The painter Willette, for example, executed a phantasmagoria mural for the Chat Noir, which is still preserved in the Museum of Montmartre, and it is one of the few examples to have survived.

The most significant art of the Capital of Pleasure was, however, the poster, which was now being produced on a greater scale, and at a greater speed, thanks to the technical enlargement of the possibilities of the lithographic press. The commercial production of posters on huge presses at the printery of Pierre Dupont, for example, does much to explain how the printers achieved the enormous formats of the posters. The development of the colour lithograph poster was also to prove important because it allowed the emergence of a close working relationship between the graphic artist, the printer and the celebrity performer. Toulouse-Lautrec, for example, would attend the Moulin Rouge every night from 1889 to 1893 and execute deft sketches of the performers; he would then work them up into large colour lithographs suitable for posters. There was time for the performer to examine the publicity image. Indeed, one of his own lithographs depicts this process of collaborative publicity, with the dancer Jane Avril critically surveying the proofs of a lithograph. There was further flexibility in the medium of the lithograph because you can progressively alter the lithographic stone with each printing, creating a number of different versions known as states, so that one image can be put to a variety of purposes. The profusion of new dance halls and cafes, and the keen rivalry between entertainers, meant that this first modern publicity industry flourished. It created new employment and new trades; one early photograph celebrates the novelty of the first female poster sticker. Soon Paris was literally emblazoned with the vivid posters that are now the prize possessions of modern art museums. You can get a sense of their profusion, but not of their brilliant colour, from contemporary photographs of a typical Parisian street, and I think you can imagine how they must have dominated the everyday visual consciousness of Parisians. When you see these works in modern art galleries, you can get at least get a sense of their brilliant colour, but you need to remember that originally they were much more visually dominant through their endless repetition in a streetscape.
PART THREE

A Perplexity: The Working classes in Bourgeois Art

Having promised to cover just two themes in this paper, I wonder if I might break my word and at least mention a third. I have suggested that the Republic of Pleasure was a venue in which members of the bourgeoisie could seek the thrill of contact with working class and bohemian life, or at least a good facsimile of it. This begs the question: What about the working people themselves? Where did they fit into the Republic of Pleasure? Where are the voices of the working men and women who participated in this little republic of pleasure? I have to pose this problem twice, once in terms of gender, and once in terms of class. As a gender problem, the issue is this: the champagne image of Paris, however naughty and attractive, is essentially a male fantasy, as we quickly gather from naively Freudian images such one purporting to represent the “spirit of champagne”, depicting a scantily clad woman riding astride a champagne bottle as if it were a rocket being launched.

What was the experience of women amidst this giddy whirl of Parisian pleasure? If we look into some of Toulouse-Lautrec’s images, we find I think the suggestion that although the males often assumed predatory roles, the women of the dance halls were no mere victims, but managed to play the field to their advantage.

There are, however, other perspectives on the Republic of Pleasure. A less well known artist, Louis Valtat, is one of the very few painters to put the republic of pleasure in the background, and to give us a glimpse of the other side of the coin, of some of the emptiness and hopelessness of people who relied on cabaret life for their existence. His painting, Woman at the Cabaret (c.1896, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), is exceptional because it gives us a rare glimpse of what might have been the experience of working class women, who often relied upon the cabarets and dance halls as a source of supplementary income, a simple strategy for survival: the image evokes long hours of boredom and of waiting, and something of the sordid aspect of cabaret life that women had to endure.

The same question can also be posed more broadly in terms of class. If the republic of pleasure was meant to be a meeting of the bourgeoisie and the working classes, how did the latter fare in the encounter? One answer is that they were conveniently absorbed into the visual consciousness of the Parisian bourgeois by means of reassuring pictorial representations of working people.

You might be puzzled, when you review the art of late 19th century Paris, to come across large and rather sombre paintings by artists such as Jean-Jules Geoffroy, like his Resigned to Their Fate (1901, Musée d’Orsay, Paris). It strikes an odd note amongst the many festive works with which we are so familiar. It is, quite literally, a picture of grey misery, composed almost entirely in dun grey tonalities: a group of urban poor folk sits miserably in the side aisle of a church, while the rest of the congregation sits in the light-filled nave which we glimpse beyond the pillars. The painting is a set of binary opposites: the congregation has centrality, the poor have marginality; the congregation has space and light, the poor have constriction and chilly darkness. At first glance, it seems to be a very honest painting: Geoffroy was one of the first painters to admit that bad nutrition creates the unhealthy, sallow complexes that are so evident in these pale, care-worn faces.

Nonetheless, Geoffroy’s painting is an instrument with a social purpose, just like most pictures of class produced for the bourgeoisie. The emotional centre of the painting is the point that is most brightly lit: the face of the little boy who looks out of the picture space and directly at the viewer. It is not a confronting gaze: it is simply naive and a little vulnerable. If you look closely, you will notice he is a little cherub in worker’s clothing. Geoffroy has offered us an acceptable embodiment of poverty, an easy point at which to make the emotive contact of empathy. We are reassured of the passivity: they are resigned, hence they will not rebel against society.

You might feel that the neo-Impressionist painters at least attempted to enter imaginatively into the experience of working people who lived in the new and bleak industrial suburbs on the outskirts of Paris, but closer inspection reveals that there are limits to their empathy too. One of the most important neo-Impressionist works in Australia is Paul Signac’s Les Gazometres à Clichy (1886, National Gallery of Victoria). It is a bold choice of subject matter and of point of view, and it is a startling composition: we look directly into a small cul-de-sac, to a worker’s cottage and then to the massive form of the gas tanks that dominated the skyline of the...
At the Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1900, the Eiffel Tower (constructed for the 1889 exhibition) and the Globe Céleste, a sphere 46 metres in diameter, decorated with representations of the constellations.

outer suburb of Clichy. At first glance, this treatment seems more than adequate to capture a sense of the raw industrial landscape. There are, however, stylistic elements inherent in the neo-Impressionists’ very technique which limit the painter’s capacity to represent the banlieue. These paintings were executed in the technique known as divisionism or pointillism, whereby the painters used small dots and dabs of paint in pure colour to create scenes which seem to glitter with luminosity, and this virtually precluded a truly gritty representation of the industrial suburbs.

This impression is confirmed when we study the original sketch that Signac did for this painting when he visited Clichy. His cult of impersonality led him to literally depersonalise, and to depopulate, his scenes of the suburbs. The drawing shows that he had in fact observed some of the distinctive figures of working people in the suburbs, such as a ragpicker crossing the raw landscape and the rather forlorn figures of the woman and child, but that they were eliminated from the final painting. Ordinary working people have simply been written out of the scene.

It is for this reason that there are some glimpses of working class life, such as Angrand’s *Couple in the Street* (1887, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), that have a special personal meaning for me: these working people seem to be turning their backs upon us and walking away, remaining as unreadable and unknowable to the bourgeois painter — and to his viewers — as ever.

How, then, do we now make imaginative contact with the working people of Paris? One answer is that we might look to the very culture that fed the industry of pleasure, that of the working class tradition of song. We are very fortunate, in Melbourne, to have access now to the Brécy Collection of original 19th and 20th century songbooks, for they present a vast field of cultural production which has barely begun to be analysed. The collection, which will be the subject of a special exhibition and seminar in 1998, is currently being catalogued for the Rare Book Collection of the University of Melbourne Library. The Brécy Collection contains anthologies of the works of major artists such as Bruant and Guilbert, but also contain books of songs by a myriad of lesser artists who seem to have been largely forgotten. For those interested in the almost limitless opportunities for original research into this important body of cultural production — particularly academics who are seeking significant and original material, and students who are seeking a fresh area for research — the Brécy Collection offers material without parallel anywhere in Australia. Insofar as Australian scholarship, like many other aspects of Australian life, suffers from the so-called “tyranny of distance”, scholars present and future will be profoundly grateful to the Pitt Bequest for making possible cultural research which could otherwise simply not have taken place in the context of existing Australian collections.
Footnotes


2. Ibid, p 74.


7. Ibid, p 129.

8. There had been, as Rearick points out, an earlier, half-hearted attempt by conservative monarchists to institute an alternative, and politically neutral, national holiday: they had refused to select July 14, which would have been a recognition of the revolutionary traditions of the urban working people of Paris and chose instead June 30, to re-situate the holiday amidst the ‘healthy’ (traditional) rituals of the rural world, notably the festival to celebrate the end of harvests. Ibid, p 5.


12. Ibid, p 45.


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid, p 47.


20. See Barbara Shapiro, Pleasures of Paris: Daumier to Picasso. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1991), especially the chapter “Cafés, Café-Concerts, and Cabarets”. This beautifully-produced catalogue to the recent exhibition of the same name remains one of the most accessible and clear accounts of the Parisian industry of pleasure.


23. Rudorff, Belle Époque, p 76.

24. Consult; Shapiro, Pleasures of Paris: Daumier to Picasso, p 147.

25. Rudorff, Belle Époque, p 75.


27. Aristide Bruant, À Monmartre, (EPM, 1992). Distribution by ADÉS. The address of the manufacturer is EPM, 188 Boulevard Voltaire, Paris 75011, France.


30. Ibid, p 89.


33. See, for example, Miriam Levin, When the Eiffel Tower Was New. French Visions of Progress at the Centennial of the Revolution. (South Hadley, Massachusetts: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum 1989), p 101.