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Flânerie and the Lesbian Gaze

Female Spectatorship in the Work of Toulouse-Lautrec

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Introduction

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901) has puzzled scholars for over a century, just as he puzzled his contemporaries during his short life. In an attempt to understand this complex artist, historians have gathered a massive body of biographical information focused primarily on his bohemian lifestyle, which has become synonymous with fin-de-siècle life in Montmartre. The focus on biography has tended to overshadow the potential for studies of the art itself. This paper considers Toulouse-Lautrec's representations of lesbians and lesbianism in Montmartre's late-nineteenth-century counter-culture. Though Toulouse-Lautrec's work derived from a longstanding fascination with the topic in nineteenth-century novels and medical literature, it marks a departure from conventional representations that denigrated these women. The few studies of Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of lesbianism that exist focus on the context of prostitution.¹ Less examined are Toulouse-Lautrec's images of celebrities, like Jane Avril, who happened to be lesbians in portraits that downplay or ignore that dimension of their identity. My paper studies Toulouse-Lautrec's representations of Avril and the way they reorient traditional voyeuristic treatments of lesbian subjects. I argue that the lesbian figure of Avril provides

¹ Lesbianism in the work of Toulouse-Lautrec, particularly his representations of Montmartre's lesbian celebrities, does not seem to be a popular focus. Most studies that examine his works containing lesbians, including Hollis Clayson's *Painted Love: Prostitution in French Art of the Impressionist Era* and the exhibition catalogue for the 2005 exhibition *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre*, are focused on the seemingly broader topic of his representations of prostitutes. Likewise, studies of representations of lesbianism in the late-nineteenth-century, such as Leslie Choquette's *Homosexuals in the City: Representations of Lesbian and Gay Space in Nineteenth-Century Paris* and Dorothy Kosinski's *'The Sleepers': The Lesbian Image in Nineteenth-Century French Art and Literature*, mention Toulouse-Lautrec only in the context of his brothel scenes. I must exempt, however, David Sweetman's enlightening chapter *Sapphic Nights* from *Explosive Acts: Toulouse-Lautrec, Oscar Wilde, Felix Feneon and the art and anarchy of the fin-de-siècle*.

Toulouse-Lautrec with a new model of spectatorship in the French fin-de-siècle, a model of female absorbed looking that displaces the primacy of male flânerie.²

Toulouse-Lautrec

Toulouse-Lautrec was born in 1865 during France's Second Empire, five years before the establishment of the Third Republic in 1870, and nine years before the first Impressionist exhibition in Paris. In 1881, Toulouse-Lautrec moved with his mother from his birthplace in the South of France to Paris, where he attended school and worked in the ateliers of several prominent artists: René Princeteau (1843-1920), Léon Bonnat (1833-1923), and Fernand Piestre Cormon (1854-1924). By 1884, Toulouse-Lautrec was living on his own in Paris as a full-time artist. Although he began his study in the academic tradition under Bonnat and Cormon, his work soon began to reflect an interest in Impressionist techniques and subject matter.³ The majority of his oeuvre is comprised of an almost obsessive ethnographic recording of the Montmartre night life with which he became intimately familiar. His paintings and lithographs mostly document the revelry of Montmartre's dancehalls, cafés, and brothels. They invite the viewer into this world, providing an intimate view of a Parisian playground associated with deviance and debauchery. The theme of lesbianism registers consistently in his representations of this world.

Evolving Perceptions of Lesbianism

² Flânerie is the act of detached "looking", an exclusively male pastime, executed by a person commonly referred to as a flâneur. Flâneurs were a constant presence in popular public spaces after the Hausmannization of Paris and are commonly depicted in the work of Degas, Caillebotte, and Renoir. The figure of the flâneur is primary in the study of nineteenth-century art due to the fact that he became a symbol of modernity invariably tied to the rise of a shared popular culture in fin-de-siècle Paris. For more information on flânerie or the rise of mass culture in late-nineteenth-century France see Vanessa Schwartz's [Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris](#) or John House's chapter *The Viewer of Modern Life* in [Impressionism: Paint and Politics](#).

³ Frey, Julia. [Toulouse Lautrec: A Life](#). London: Pheonix Publishers, 1994. P.172.

Fin-de-siècle French culture had an obsessive preoccupation with lesbianism: its origins, causes, and practices.⁴ Nowhere was this more evident than in Montmartre or more regularly visualized than in the work of Toulouse-Lautrec. Though the obsessive scrutiny of lesbianism in France evolved during the last two decades of the nineteenth-century, it was first studied in-depth in Alexandre Parent-Duchâtelet's 1836 work *La Prostitution dans la ville de Paris*. Before the publication of this work, the idea of lesbianism as a real phenomenon was considered ridiculous by many. As late as 1885, for example, Queen Victoria of England refused to legally condemn female homosexual practices on the grounds she did not believe such a thing existed.⁵ Many Frenchmen were of the same mind in the early nineteenth-century. While male homosexual acts were accepted as common practice, a female homosexual act apparently seemed unimaginable. Moreover, it was considered unseemly in the early-nineteenth-century to think of women with sexual impulses of their own.⁶ If someone was attracted to a member of the same sex, they were deemed a "sexual invert" by the contemporary medical community.

The 1836 publication of Parent-Duchâtelet's work first contextualized lesbianism as a phenomenon that existed solely in the realm of the prostitute.⁷ Contemporary sources described lesbianism in Paris's brothels as the result of two situations: either brothel-keepers forced

⁴ Contemporary studies on lesbianism included Ali Coffignon's 1889 *Paris vivant. La corruption a Paris*. And Julien Chevalier's 1893 *Inversion Sexuelle*. Additionally, a great deal of literatures took interest in the subject including Zola, Maupassant, and Flaubert.

⁵ Van Casselaer, Catherine. *Lot's Wife: Lesbian Paris 1890-1914*. Liverpool: The Janus Press, 1986. P. 8.

⁶ During this time, sexual orientation was believed to be predetermined by gender. One's male or femaleness came with distinct, fixed characteristics, and sexual behavior was considered a part of these prescribed roles. Berlanstein, Lenard R. *Daughters of Eve: A Cultural History of French Theatre Women from the Old Regime to the Fin-de-Siècle*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001. P. 115.

⁷ For an excellent article on the links between prostitution and lesbianism in the mind of the late 19th century public, consult Leslie Choquette's article "Degenerate or Degendered? Images of Prostitution and Homosexuality in the French Third Republic" in *Historical Reflections*, Vol. 23 (1997), p. 205-23.

prostitutes to perform lesbian acts within *tableaux vivants*⁸ for the viewing pleasure of male clients, or brothel inmates⁹ formed lesbian relationships for emotional comfort and stability in a profession that offered none.¹⁰ Any questionable contact between brothel inmates was strictly forbidden by law. In fact, prostitutes were prohibited from sharing a bed, and police raids took place periodically to ensure these standards were being upheld.

During the Second Empire, lesbianism began to be recognized outside of the realm of the prostitute. In fact, by the 1870s and 1880s, the general public accepted lesbianism as a phenomenon possible among women of all social classes.¹¹ Ali Coffignon's *Paris vivant: La corruption à Paris* (1889) was the first published work to mention lesbianism outside the context of prostitution.¹² Julien Chevalier's *Inversion sexuelle*, published four years later in 1893, describes lesbianism as a class issue, "flourish[ing] among the rich and aristocratic, rare among the middle classes and abhorred by the proletariat; he add[s] that it was unknown in the country, being a chic urban vice."¹³ Male homosexuality, in contrast to lesbianism, was fervently condemned due to France's contemporary obsessions with male virility and national military

⁸ See Alain Corbin's *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990: "The first class tolerances thus increased the number of spectacles and tableaux vivants, in which the inmates, entirely naked, abandoned themselves to homosexual practices on a large black velvet carpet or in rooms hung with black satin to bring out the whiteness of their bodies. In other establishments the inmates were content to assume plastic poses on turntables operated by an electrical mechanism. Sometimes sexual monstrosities such as hermaphrodites or scenes of bestiality were displayed." (p. 124)

⁹ Registered prostitutes were commonly referred to as brothel *inmates*.

¹⁰ Corbin, 124.

¹¹ In the first chapter of Catherine van Casselaer's *Lot's Wife: Lesbian Paris, 1890-1914* she discusses the shift in perception among figures such as Ali Coiffin, who wondered as to "the reasons for 'this sudden development of sapphism, now widespread among all classes of society?'" He and others attributed the pervasiveness of lesbianism to equivocal literature which "'excites the woman's curiosity and makes her indulge in practice about which she certainly would never have dreamt if the perversions of her soul had not been aroused.'" Additionally, Coiffin attributes the spread of lesbianism among upper-class women to the indiscretions and immoral nature of the servants in their households and warns against leaving children in the care of these vice-ridden women.

¹² Van Casselaer, 12.

¹³ Thomson, Richard. *The Troubled Republic: Visual Culture and Social Debate in France, 1889-1900*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. P. 35.

proress.¹⁴ In the late nineteenth-century, as France strove to establish itself as a key player on the international stage, debates about the virility of the nation, or lack thereof, abound.¹⁵ As does concern that male homosexuality threatened to sap France's masculine potency and undermine the goal of population growth.¹⁶ Though lesbianism was still not seen as a threat to heterosexual culture, several factors presented themselves in the late-nineteenth-century that fueled a more negative view. The key stimulus behind this opinion shift was public backlash initially against the *femme emancipée*, associated with participation in the 1871 Paris Commune and ultimately the emerging concept of the "New Woman". In *The Body in Time: Figures in Late Nineteenth Century France*, Tamar Garb notes that the New Woman, who first appeared in Anglo-American circles in the 1880s, evolved in France in the 1890s. The typology refers to mainly middle-class women who sought to redefine their roles as wives and mothers "by asserting their own intellectual and professional independence and campaigning for the improvement of women's social and political status."¹⁷ While the New Woman remained within the roles of philanthropist, artist, or teacher, she was considered acceptable. However, the *femme émancipée*, who partook in such public campaigns and women's organizations as the international feminist congresses of 1892, 1896, and 1900, was viewed as an emasculating character: "emasculating harridan[s],

¹⁴ For more information on the differing views towards lesbianism as opposed to male homosexuality, see Catherine van Casselaer's *Lot's Wife: Lesbian Paris 1890-1914*.

¹⁵ After France's defeat in 1871 in the Franco-Prussian War, the nation sought to reclaim a national identity. The image of France as a masculine and virile nation had been severely injured, and ideologies surrounding nationalism, imperialism, and international leadership served as solutions to the countries bruised ego. For more information on the Franco-Prussian War and the development of France's national identity after 1871 see *Visions of War in France: fiction, art, and ideology* by Catharine Brosman. For information on views of lesbianism and male homosexuality during the period of defeat see Catherine van Casselaer's *Lot's Wife: Lesbian Paris, 1890-1914*, p. 7-8.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Casselaer notes that lesbians of the time period were "seldom criticized for shirking their reproductive duties – although, arguably, they were more guilty of this than their male counterparts." p. 8.

¹⁷ Garb, Tamar. *The Body in Time: Figures of Femininity in Late Nineteenth-Century France*. Seattle: University of Washington Press for the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas, 2008, p. 59.

replete with cigarette, bicycle, culottes, and cravat.”¹⁸ Damning depictions of these women as “usurpers of masculine roles who have become desexualized in the process”¹⁹ served as a strategy of containment. One of the easiest ways to undermine these women was to portray them as masculinized or unsexed creatures, associated with sexual deviance and moral degradation.²⁰

The realm of lesbianism expanded in the 1890s and began to be represented “tour à tour sous les traits de la jeune pensionnaire, de la femme mariée, de la veuve, en passant par la prostituée, la mondaine, la féministe et le bas-bleu.”²¹ In Emile Zola’s novel *Nana* (1880), the main figure is a prostitute turned demi-mondaine, whose sexual appetite is described as “omnivorous and indiscriminate: she picks up sluts off the street for quick sex in her carriage, she disguises herself as a man to attend parties of debauchery, she sleeps with so many men that her bedroom is like a crossroads...”²² Independent and ambitious women such as the actress Sarah Bernhardt embodied the French male’s fear of powerful women, and she figured among those labeled as “lesbians”, “deviants”, and “moral degenerates” due to her association with the public realm traditionally reserved for the male.²³ Women like Bernhardt became associated with contemporary theories of sexual inversion and congenital hermaphroditism, tied to lesbianism, a state labeled by German sexologist Magnus Hirschfield as the “third sex”. The

¹⁸ Garb, p. 61.

¹⁹ Garb, 65.

²⁰ For more information on misogyny and the projection of sexual deviance and moral degeneration of women in the 19th century, see Bram Dijkstra’s *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

²¹ Albert, Nicole G. *Saphisme et Décadence dans Paris Fin-de-Siècle*. Paris : Martinière, 2005. P. 10. “...under the characteristics of the young prisoner, the married woman, the widow, fleetingly by the prostitute, the worldly woman, the feminist, and the blue-stocking.” (my translation)

²² Berlairstein, 226.

²³ Garb addresses this action taken by artists such as Daumier, who had made this type famous by his depictions of these women as bas-bleus, without a trace of femininity. Garb cites the aristocrat and celebrated female painter, Marie Bashkirtseff as an example of a woman who underwent such a characterization. She also notes that “Bashkirtseff’s famous journals from this period were filled with agonizing reflections of her own appearance and an anxiety that her talent would unsex her as a woman. Painfully aware of the construction of the ambitious woman artist as one who had reneged on her role as a feminine woman, Bashkirtseff constantly compared herself to other women in terms of her physical attributes and social skills.” p. 66.

third sex represented a category outside the traditional definitions of male or female.

Contemporary society conveniently placed the New Women, *femmes émancipées*, and lesbians, whom they considered neither entirely masculine nor entirely feminine, into this group.²⁴ These notions, identified with the more conservative middle and upper classes, were challenged by the bohemian subculture of which Toulouse-Lautrec was a part. Montmartre bohemians rejected the ideals of the traditional nineteenth-century-woman as part of their broader rejection of bourgeois ideology.²⁵

Lesbianism in Paris

Paris was regarded as the capital of lesbianism in the nineteenth-century, part of its more general reputation as the stomping ground of hedonists and the morally suspect.²⁶ Although lesbianism most likely existed among all classes in all parts of Paris, the most concentrated lesbian community seems to have been in Montmartre during the 1890s. As mentioned earlier, prostitutes in many of Paris's most prestigious brothels were known to perform lesbian acts.²⁷

²⁴ In *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* Marjorie Garber connects both late-nineteenth-century transvestitism and cross-dressing to the phenomenon of the third sex. These practices appeared to actively reject the social construction of gender. Toulouse-Lautrec's many instances of cross-dressing, discussed by Julia Frey, connect him to this popular practice and ideology of late-nineteenth-century Montmartre.

²⁵ In *Body Guards*, Michael Wilson notes that bohemian men rejected bourgeois notions of proper female behavior. Bohemians encouraged the "freedom" of working class women in relation to "the liberty to work outside the home, to engage in pre- and extra-marital sexual relations, and to enter into unions libres." Ideas such as these were mandatories for bohemian artists living in Montmartre. "To be an artist in this context means more than and is not dependent upon the production of art, literature, or music; the artist is, rather, one who possesses certain philosophical and social attitudes (anti-bourgeois, anti-capitalist, favoring pleasure and spontaneity) and expresses them through particular forms of behavior (unconventional dress, irregular employment, participation in festive nightlife)." (p. 196-97)

²⁶ The introduction of Catherine van Casselaer's work opens with the following words. "Set the proverbial crow flying in a north-westerly direction from the burning city of Gomorrah and, provided that it does not look back, it would arrive at Mytilene on the island of Lesbos after a journey of some 744 miles, it would come to a third city, a city that could outmatch anything in the combined experience of Sappho and Lot's wife. The whole journey would take over thirty-nine centuries and the final destination would be Paris in the the 1890s—Paris of the Belle Époque, the undisputed *capital of lesbianism*." (my emphasis)

²⁷ Corbin cites several different types of lesbian acts that took place in the deluxe maisons de tolerance. The first type the tableaux vivant typically catered to a male audience. The performance of the tableaux vivants included

However, lesbianism in brothels extended beyond the realm of the *tableaux vivants*. Some of the sex-workers were lesbians on and off the job.²⁸

Lesbianism in Toulouse-Lautrec's Brothel Scenes

Toulouse-Lautrec depicts many scenes of lesbian intimacy in the context of the brothel (Fig.1 and Fig. 2). Several biographers have noted he actually lived in some of the more fashionable *maisons de tolerance* off and on for several years in the 1890s, renting a room and sketching at his leisure.²⁹ Art historians have focused almost exclusively on his brothel scenes in discussions of lesbianism. However, contemporary women who were lesbians appear throughout much of his oeuvre, often outside the context of the brothel. Most of his depictions of lesbian subjects occur after 1891. These works included paintings, drawings, and lithographs like his 1896 album *Elles*, which featured a variety of brothel scenes, his 1894 illustration for *Eros Vanné*, and his 1897 lithograph *Dancing at the Moulin Rouge* (or *Couple Waltzing*). The view he offers us into the seemingly private brothel scenes such as his 1894 work *Women Resting* (Fig. 1), seems raw and unsanitized. Looking at this piece, we get the impression that these were real-life scenes of specific lesbian couples, not just voyeuristic fantasy. This could very well be the case considering Toulouse-Lautrec's intimate relationship with many of the prostitutes not only

such various activities as the "inmates, entirely naked, abandon[ing] themselves to homosexual practices on a large black velvet carpet or in rooms hung with black satin to bring out the whiteness of their bodies. In other establishments the inmates were content to assume plastic poses on turntables operated by an electrical mechanism. Sometimes sexual monstrosities such as hermaphrodites or scenes of bestiality were displayed." Lesbian acts in service of female clientele also took place in these establishments, where "the keepers made it quite plain to new inmates that they 'would also be for women'." (p. 124-25)

²⁸ Contemporary theory attributed this to the demoralizing nature of prostitution itself. Popular medical discourse described the prostitutes as becoming masculinized as a result of their sexual promiscuity. Images of invert, hermaphrodites, and *clitorisme* (This is a disease caused by overstimulation of the female genitalia, commonly referred to in nineteenth-century literature relating to female prostitutes. This condition causes the clitoris to become engorged and eventually transform into a phallus.) plagued the minds of the public due to these reports and contemporary literary works such as Rachilde's *Monseigneur Venus* and Victor Margueritte's *La Garçonne*. Several upscale brothels devoted themselves solely to a unique fare of sexually deviant acts, including sodomy and bestiality. For more information consult Casselaer, 44 and Corbin, 124-26.

²⁹ Choquette, 159.

as a client, but also a friend and confidante. Despite Toulouse-Lautrec's level of access into the *maisons de tolerance*, there are indications that he posed some of these scenes in his studio.³⁰

Although many of the models may indeed have been lesbian couples, the portrayals we see in Toulouse-Lautrec's compositions must always be understood as representation, sometimes staged in the artist's studio, instead of as a picture window into reality.

Contemporary Images of Lesbianism Outside the Brothel

In art and literature, lesbianism frequently was associated with Parisian café culture. Several cafés were notorious for catering to a predominantly lesbian clientele, particularly La Souris, Le Rat Mort, and Le Hanneton.³¹ The clientele of these establishments are described by Zola as aging and degenerate lesbians, who “excited by the scent of” young and beautiful girls, unsuspecting victims brought by some middle-aged lesbian, would “surround them like a pack of old bachelors anxious to ply them with dainty tit-bits.”³² The stereotype of the older, predatory lesbian was recognizable by her virility, masculine dress, and taste for cigars and sports.³³ Leo Taxil, a prominent journalist with an appetite for scandal, made Paris's Champs-Élysée a popular rendez-vous spot for lesbian activity in his *La Corruption fin-de-siècle*, a series of stories released in 1891. He describes the bourgeois or aristocratic lesbians cruising the area between le

³⁰ Although Toulouse-Lautrec lived in the brothels for extended periods of time on and off for several years, his letters document that he often recruited models to pose in his studio. He usually made many notes and sketches in public places, such as cabarets and cafés; however, he reserved the completion of most of his paintings for the studio.

³¹ Frey, 374-75: “As an art student, Henry had also begun to frequent lesbian bars, especially two, located close to his studio in the rue Caulaincourt, called Le Rat Mort (The Dead Rat) and La Souris (The Mouse). There he observed, as Bonmariage said, ‘with a sort of troubled fascination’, the rituals, rules and relations of women who preferred the society of women.”

³² This is Zola's description of a lesbian café in *Nana* (1880).

³³ Albert, p.95.

Rond-point and la Place de la Concorde in their elegant carriages, identifiable by their pet poodles or by the “quick movement of their lips.”³⁴

Toulouse-Lautrec’s Depictions of Lesbians in the Form of Montmartre Celebrities

The most famous lesbians of Paris in the 1890s were well-known celebrity entertainers of Montmartre, the stars of the dance-halls, café-concerts, and circuses, like La Goulue, La Môme-Fromage, May Milton, Jane Avril, and Cha-U-Kao.³⁵ Toulouse-Lautrec devoted a large portion of his work during the last decade of his life to the representation of these women in the context of Montmartre’s entertainment culture. To the modern viewer, these scenes of singers and dancers make no explicit reference to lesbianism and appear benign in comparison to Toulouse-Lautrec’s overt representations of lesbian intimacy in brothels. In fact, they provide an entre into the butte’s lesbian subculture. As David Sweetman has argued, “lesbianism is the hidden subtext of much of Henri’s mature years.”³⁶

Jane Avril

Of all the Montmartre celebrities Toulouse-Lautrec depicted who were lesbian or bisexual, Jane Avril stands out as one of the most complex. It is in his portraits of Avril that Toulouse-Lautrec’s new model of absorbed female spectatorship is most apparent. Many of Toulouse-Lautrec’s images of Avril, such as *Le Divan Japonais* (Fig. 3) of 1892 and *Papa Chrysanthème* (Fig. 4) of 1895, picture her not as the object of the male gaze but as a spectator in

³⁴ Thomson, Richard. *A propos de lesbianisme clandestin en plein Paris: La décadence de la Rond-Point de Champs-Élysée de Louis Anquetin*. *Histoire de l’Art*. No. 50. (June 2002) : p. 77-84. p. 79

³⁵ Louise Weber (1870-1929) was nick-named La Goulue or The Glutton in English because of her voracious appetite and decadent lifestyle; May Milton (birth and death dates unknown); Jane Avril (1868-1943); Yvette Guilbert (1867-1944); Cha-U-Kao (birth and death dates unknown) was also referred to as The Clowness and appeared almost exclusively in a clown outfit within Toulouse-Lautrec’s work. Toulouse-Lautrec also used her as a model in his series *Elles*, and she regularly appears with another popular model of Toulouse-Lautrec’s: Gabrielle.

³⁶ Sweetman, David. *Explosive Acts: Toulouse Lautrec, Oscar Wilde, Félix Fénéon and the art and anarchy of the fin-de-siècle*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999. P. 358.

her own right. Born in Paris in 1868, the illegitimate child of an Italian marquis and a Parisian demi-mondaine, Avril was raised in an abusive environment and at the age of sixteen began to demonstrate signs of mental instability. Family friends intervened and had her admitted to La Salpêtrière, an institution for mental and nervous disorders.

It was in Salpêtrière that she realized she had an aptitude for dancing, and after her release, she began earning a living dancing at venues like the Moulin Rouge, the Jardin de Paris, and the Folies-Bergère.³⁷ It was in this context, in the early 1890s, she met Toulouse-Lautrec, and he depicted her in twenty paintings, fifteen drawings, and several lithographs and posters between 1891 and 1899.³⁸ Unlike many of the female performers of Montmartre, Jane Avril was both educated and refined. She was said to have frequented the haunts of popular artistic and literary figures of the day such as Le Chat Noir and to have socialized with such literary stars as Mallarmé, Verlaine, and Arsène Houssaye.³⁹

Though most literary descriptions of Avril emphasize her relations with male symbolist writers, she was in fact bisexual. Pessis and Crépineau describe her “ma[king] her home with certain ladies of the town,”⁴⁰ and several historians have noted she had a romantic relationship with the English performer May Milton. David Sweetman writes Avril and Milton never publicly admitted to the affair, but those in their immediate circle knew the two shared a small apartment in Montmartre.⁴¹ He also describes an excerpt from Avril’s memoirs that mention her stay with Milton’s family in London, including “a tale of how Jane and ‘Miss’ snuggled down

³⁷ Mack, Gerstle. Toulouse-Lautrec. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1938. P. 146-154. For Jane’s biographical information consult her official biography: Shercliff, Jose. Jane Avril of the Moulin Rouge. Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Company, 1954.

³⁸ Toulouse Lautrec’s letters., p. 235. Letter 341 notes.

³⁹ Pessis, Jacques and Jacques Crépineau. The Moulin Rouge. New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990. P. 28.

⁴⁰ Pessis and Crépineau, 28.

⁴¹ Sweetman, 355-57.

out of sight in a carriage one night, details which leave the observant reader with little doubt about what was going on.”⁴² Although Toulouse-Lautrec never depicts Jane Avril in a manner that explicitly identifies her as a lesbian, in many works he pictures her in settings with lesbian subtexts. These works feature famous lesbian women and lesbian couples, with whom Jane Avril is associated by the presence of her distinguishable figure in the frame. Perhaps, it was her bisexuality that inspired Toulouse-Lautrec to depict her as ‘observer’, a role traditionally reserved for the male flâneur, as well as ‘the observed’. Jane Avril’s financial independence, career outside the confines of domesticity, admission into intellectual and literary circles, and bisexuality positioned her in the realm of the “third sex.”⁴³ Three works by Toulouse-Lautrec explicitly place Avril in the role of absorbed spectator, usurping the position usually occupied by a male flâneur in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painting. *Le Divan Japonais* (Fig. 3) of 1893, *Papa Chrysanthème* (Fig. 4) of 1895, and the *Foire du Trône* tent decorations (Figs. 5 and 6) of 1895, will be the focus of the remainder of this study.

Contemporary Spectacle and Spectatorship

The ideas of spectacle and spectatorship, fundamentally related to flânerie, were not new to the 1890s, nor were they exclusive to Montmartre’s bohemian counter-culture.⁴⁴ The concept of flânerie originated during the July Monarchy and was all but institutionalized with the

⁴² Sweetman, 355-57.

⁴³ Additionally, the conflict between her obviously feminine appearance and her independent lifestyle, typically reserved for males, would have increased the likelihood that her contemporaries viewed her as a problematic figure: a member of the third sex.

⁴⁴ In *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris*, Vanessa Schwartz discusses the emergence of a shared mass culture in the second half of the nineteenth-century that centered on public spectacle. Schwartz describes how everyday realities were sensationalized through the emerging media culture, which created a shared “reality” or mass culture. Obviously, with the creation of spectacle, spectatorship is implied, and the creation of an egalitarian shared culture embodied in the grandes boulevards and other public forms of amusement meant that spectatorship was ever-present. The spectacle-spectator relationship defined modernity in late-nineteenth-century France and set a stage for figures such as the flâneur, flâneuse, and the third model for which I argue in this paper. See Schwartz’s work as well as Guy Dubord’s *Comments on the Society of Spectacle*. New York: Verso, 1990.

Hausmannization of Paris.⁴⁵ The grands boulevards, display windows, and exhibitionary culture, made the act of “looking” central to the experience of urban modernity, and the figure most closely identified with this activity was the flâneur. This man-about-town is commonly described by writers and depicted by artists of the period as ever-present and yet emotionally detached.⁴⁶ The Impressionists frequently included flâneur figures in their works, especially those depicting cafés, theatres, boulevards, and other public arenas of “looking.” Caillebotte foregrounds the flâneur, for example, in such works as *The Pont de l’Europe* of 1876 (Fig. 7) and *Paris Street: Rainy Weather* of 1877. Degas regularly incorporated the flâneur’s masculine proprietary gaze in the private backstage spaces of the Paris ballet (Fig. 8).⁴⁷

The idea of flânerie, as an exclusively masculine practice, is challenged according to John House by works like Manet’s *Olympia* of 1863, *Nana* of 1877, and *A Bar at the Folies Bergères* of 1881. In all three, a female figure stares pointedly at the viewer.⁴⁸ In some ways, these works foretell Toulouse-Lautrec’s representations of Avril in the 1890s, with one important difference. Instead of looking out of the picture plane and unsettling the viewer’s gaze,

⁴⁵ Hausmannization was contrived under Napoleon the III and executed by his Prefect of the Seine Baron Georges Haussmann. Schwartz, 3: “As an elaboration of modernization, the city’s redesign expressed its material fulfillment as a site created by and for the bourgeoisie in its transformation from an industrial to a commercial capital.” Hausmannization created a space in which everyone could engage in “looking”. Schwartz comments that “unlike the model of the Panopticon [Foucault’s theory] wherein everyone could be seen, urban spectacle, rather, urged everyone to see.” Schwartz, 3-5.

⁴⁶ For an overview of the role of the flâneur in 19th century Paris, see John House’s chapter *The Viewer of Modern Life* in *Impressionism: Painting and Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004.

⁴⁷ Degas also implies the idea of voyeurism and conspicuous spectatorship associated with the flâneur by employing awkward angles and perspectives from which we see the performers. This heightens the viewer’s awareness that they are being inserted into the space occupied by this ubiquitous spectator. This is evident in such works as *The Orchestra of the Opera* of 1870, which focuses on the musicians in the orchestra pit as the main subject instead of the on-stage dancers, who are decapitated by the upper edge of the canvas.

⁴⁸ House, 132-34. House also discusses the rejection of the masculine gaze in the work of Berthe Morisot. In many of Morisot’s depictions of women, the subjects challenge, evade, or reject the traditional access awarded to the flâneur. For example in Morisot’s *At the Ball* of 1875, the figure appears to actively disengage from the viewer, casting her gaze upon something outside of the picture plane and signaling her inapproachability by holding her fan in a manner that obstructs the spectator’s view of the left side of her face. House argues that this consistent theme in Morisot’s oeuvre indicates the intentional rejection of the male gaze and a “deliberately [...] anti-flâneurial position.”

Toulouse-Lautrec's representations of Avril show her in profile or from behind, in ways that invite both male and female viewers to identify with her.

Entrance of the Flâneuse

Art historian, Ruth Iskin, explores the idea of the *flâneuse*⁴⁹ in late-nineteenth-century Parisian culture. She attributes the appearance of the *flâneuse* to the rise of consumer culture in the late-nineteenth-century. The rise of the department store and shopping culture, primarily catering to the female consumer, gave respectable Parisian women a legitimate reason to be out on the streets engaged in the activity of “looking”. Due to the fact that these stores' clientele was predominantly female, many poster advertisements of the 1890s picture fashionable, modern women “looking” as they stroll the busy boulevards and scrutinize goods in shop windows.⁵⁰ The ideas proposed by both House and Iskin in relation to the concepts of the “New Woman” and the *flâneuse* are particularly interesting when considered in relation to lesbianism in the late-nineteenth-century.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Female counterpart of the flâneur. For more information on the flâneuse see D'Souza, Aruna and Tom McDonough eds. The Invisible Flâneuse?: gender, public space, and visual culture in nineteenth-century Paris. New York: Manchester University Press, 2006.

⁵⁰ Iskin, 113-128. Chapter entitled *The flâneuse in French fin-de-siècle posters: advertising images of modern women in Paris* in The Invisible Flâneuse?.

⁵¹ The depiction of an absorbed female spectator exists outside the realm of Toulouse-Lautrec's images of Montmartre lesbians and poster advertisements featuring the flâneuse of the 1890s. A similar model appears as early as the 1870s and 1880s in Degas's and Renoir's works depicting audiences at the Paris opera. Although Toulouse-Lautrec's works depicting females engaged in active looking appear more explicitly, frequently, and in a broader range of contexts, these earlier images seem to imply that the creation of an absorbed female spectator is not unique to the 1890s nor to the work of Toulouse-Lautrec. Additionally, Toulouse-Lautrec's own depictions of women, explicitly known to be heterosexual, such as Misia Natanson, wife of Toulouse-Lautrec's well-known friend Thadée Natanson, one of the editors, publishers, and financiers of *La Revue Blanche*, in the act of engaged looking appear to indicate that the role of the active female spectator also was not unique to the Montmartre lesbians, although I would argue that it is much more frequent and pronounced. Misia Natanson certainly represented a type of new woman of the nineteenth-century. After her marriage to Thadée Natanson, she became the queen of *La Revue Blanche* and was highly involved in its production as well as in entertaining the many unconventional and typically bohemian figures who surrounded it. Perhaps the strong admiration and infatuation, or “puppy love” as Julia Frey terms it, that Toulouse-Lautrec felt for both Natanson and Avril explains his similar depiction of the two as learned, engaged spectators.

Lesbian Spectatorship in the Work of Toulouse-Lautrec

Le Divan Japonais

Works such as *Le Divan Japonais* of 1893 (Fig. 3), *Papa Chrysanthème* of 1895⁵² (Fig. 4), and the *Foire du Trône* tent decorations of 1895 (Fig. 5 and Fig 6), which depict the decadence of Montmartre's nightlife in cabarets, cafés, theatres, and brothels, call attention to nineteenth-century conceptions of spectacle and spectatorship. These images, featuring Montmartre's lesbian celebrities, including Jane Avril, Yvette Guilbert, and La Goulue, challenge the traditional role of the male flâneur and blur the lines between spectator and spectacle. In each of these images, Avril appears as an engaged spectator in a state of absorbed "looking". Toulouse-Lautrec's placement of Avril in this role disrupts the masculine prerogative of flânerie and creates a new model for "looking", distinct from both the flâneur and flâneuse. In many of his representations of Montmartre nightlife, Toulouse-Lautrec included the figure of the male flâneur but showed him "neutralized" or preempted by the presence of a "New Woman", who assumes the primary position of spectator. Toulouse-Lautrec's 1893 lithograph, *Le Divan Japonais* (Fig. 3), for example, depicts Jane Avril at a café-concert. She sits directly in front of the orchestra, whose instruments can be seen poking out of the orchestra pit. Baron Edouard Dujardin sits beside Avril, and Yvette Guilbert performs on the stage in the upper right. Dujardin was an aristocrat and member of Montmartre's intellectual elite.⁵³ The angle Toulouse-

⁵² This date refers to the final stained glass version by Tiffany. The date of the study sketch that Toulouse-Lautrec sent to Tiffany is uncertain. Lautrec made sketches of the original performance of *Papa Chrysanthème* in 1892; however, none are an exact match for this study. It is likely that when Toulouse-Lautrec found out about the commission for the window from Siegfried Bing in 1895 that he combined several previous studies to create this final image to be sent to Tiffany.

⁵³ Frey, 264. Dujardin was a friend of Toulouse-Lautrec, who regularly shared his table at the Moulin Rouge. He was one of the first serious intellectuals to be included in Toulouse-Lautrec's circle and had a profound impact on the definition of high-culture in contemporary France. Frey describes him as "thin, with a drooping lower lip and a great deal of frizzy red hair and beard, Dujardin tried to overcome his inauspicious appearance by being something

Lautrec selects makes it appear that Avril has turned her back on Dujardin as she watches the performance, actively directing her gaze at something outside the left edge of the picture plane. Here, Toulouse-Lautrec features Avril as both spectator and spectacle. The performer, Yvette Guilbert, should be the true subject or spectacle of the work, but Toulouse-Lautrec relegates her to a very small portion of the overall composition; moreover, her head is cut off by the upper edge of the lithograph, in ways that recall Degas's decapitated dancers.⁵⁴ However, Guilbert is still identifiable by her long black gloves, the attribute Toulouse-Lautrec made famous in his posters of the singer as the sign of "Guilbert-ness." Art historian Griselda Pollock likens the gloves to the "cocked leg" Toulouse-Lautrec invoked to signify Avril.⁵⁵ In *Le Divan Japonais*, Avril holds a black fan that echoes Guilbert's glove. The fan and two ambiguous elements that are also phallic have received virtually no commentary: the yellow "sack" below the fan and one of the dark silhouettes protruding from the orchestra pit. Avril's identification with traditionally masculine attributes is consistent with her primacy as 'spectator' in the composition and Dujardin's secondary position. He is at once present, but excluded or denied access to the principle relation between spectator, Avril, and spectacle, something outside the parameters of the composition. This limited or reduced access allotted to the male flâneur is a consistent theme in Toulouse-Lautrec's depictions of lesbians at Montmartre's cabarets and cafés.

La Goulue Entering the Moulin Rouge of 1891 (Fig. 9) offers another example of the traditional male flâneur's marginalization. Here La Goulue is pictured entering the Moulin Rouge arm-in-arm with two women, who flank her on either side. Her arrogant and aloof

of a dandy, affecting a monocle and an ever-present lace-trimmed handkerchief. He had a reputation as a risk-taker, betting assiduously on horse races and getting into romantic scrapes that at least once ended in a duel." Through Dujardin Henry was exposed to a broader intellectual circle outside his artist friends.

⁵⁴ See Degas' *The Orchestra of the Opera* of 1870.

⁵⁵ Pollock, Griselda. *Differencing the Canon: Feminist Desire and the Writing of Art's Histories*. New York: Routledge, 1999.

expression asserts her primacy. The man in the top hat behind her in the background doesn't dare glance in her direction. Louis Anquetin's *Au Bar* of 1891 (Fig. 10) depicts a similar dynamic. Anquetin was a contemporary and close friend of Toulouse-Lautrec. They worked at Bonnat and Cormon's ateliers together.⁵⁶ They remained friends after they left Cormon's, and Toulouse-Lautrec would have been familiar with Anquetin's work as they exhibited together yearly at Les XX in Brussels. Belgian art critic and poet Emile Verhaeren wrote in a review of Les XX that "he found important similarities" in their observations of contemporary society.⁵⁷ Anquetin's *Au Bar* depicts two women engaged in what appears to be a flirtation at a bar. A third female figure in the background blocks the gaze of the only male figure in the work, whose form is barely visible in the right of the canvas.

The displacement of the male flâneur is further illustrated in a preparatory sketch and lithograph by Toulouse-Lautrec for his series *Elles*. The 1895 original chalk sketch entitled *Woman in a Corset* (Fig. 11) features a half-dressed woman at her vanity. Next to her sits a fully-clothed man in a top hat, who intently stares at her as she undresses. His face, obscured in the shadows, has a predatory and menacing quality. In contrast, the final lithograph (Fig. 12) of the same title, dated 1896, illustrates the two figures in an extremely different manner. The female figure still stands at her vanity removing her corset as the male gazes from a chair in the corner; however, the tone has changed entirely. The male figure sits straight up in the chair; he appears both younger and more timid than in the first depiction. The woman is depicted virtually identically to the first image, however the mirror in front of her has doubled in size, placing a

⁵⁶ Frey, 134-35: "Anquetin took Henry under his wing, protecting him from the humiliations that might otherwise have made the gross verbiage and brutal hazing typical of *rapins* an unendurable torture."

⁵⁷ Frey, 239. The quote above is Frey's interpretation of Verhaeren's observations; however Verhaeren, in examining both artists' works, noted "certain feminine types are shown with depth and decisiveness. Certain slyness, the chilly enigma of certain glances, the perversity revealed by a particular attitude or posture, are all present."

greater emphasis on her engagement with her toilette. These deviations from the original sketch stress the female figure's engagement with herself and deemphasize the male flâneur's view.

Papa Chrysanthème

In many of Toulouse-Lautrec's works the flâneur is conspicuous by his absence. The space traditionally reserved for male spectatorship has been given over to a woman. Toulouse-Lautrec's design for a stained glass window executed by the American artist Louis Comfort Tiffany in 1895 illustrates this substitution. The sketch, entitled *Au Nouveau Cirque* or *Papa Chrysanthème* (Fig. 4), depicts the show *Papa Chrysanthème* which debuted at the Nouveau Cirque in November of 1892. The upper right quadrant illustrates the performers in the circus ring, in the center of which we see the main character in the show's narrative: the European fiancée of a Japanese prince. In this scene, she presents herself to her husband's courtiers, the five male figures seated outside the center ring, in a ceremonial dance reminiscent of Loïe Fuller's performances of the same decade. The conventional display of a female body to a male audience is trumped, however, by the much larger female spectator occupying the remaining three-quarters of the image. Seen from behind, she wears a long black dress, nipped at the waist, with a full collar and sleeves. She also wears an extravagant black hat and in her gloved hand holds a pair of opera glasses, the signifier of her spectatorship. Her hair is a vibrant red, which starkly contrasts with her black attire. Her trim figure dominates the painting and distracts our attention from the anticipated subject of the work: the performers in the ring.

The unique compositional layout of this study, where the focus is on the spectators, rather than the performance itself, was common in the work of nineteenth-century artists such as Degas and Renoir. However, the marked difference between Toulouse-Lautrec's work and the others is

that Degas and Renoir reinforce the role of spectator or flâneur as distinctly masculine. In Toulouse-Lautrec's image, the female figure in the audience simultaneously performs the roles of spectator and spectacle.⁵⁸

The identity of the female spectator in *Papa Chrysanthème* has not been determined; however, I would argue that she is Jane Avril. Avril was famous for the elaborate hats she wore; they served as a hallmark of her wardrobe and an easily identifiable symbol of her person. The hair and attire of this figure support this identification as do Toulouse-Lautrec's previous representations of Avril. He sketched and painted her from behind on several occasions. Figs. 13 and 14 illustrate the similarity between the figure of the female spectator in *Papa Chrysanthème* and other depictions of Jane Avril. In *At the Moulin Rouge* of 1895 (Fig. 13), for example, the seated Avril wears an almost identical hat and a dress with a strikingly similar collar to that of the figure's in *Papa Chrysanthème*. It is probable that Toulouse-Lautrec used his previous sketches of Avril and sketches from the 1892 performance of *Papa Chrysanthème* to create the study for Tiffany. What is the significance of this work if the figure is in fact Jane Avril? One of Montmartre's most well-known bisexuals would be usurping the role traditionally reserved for the male flâneur, watching a circus performer dance in the unmistakable style of Loïe Fuller (Fig. 15), another well-known lesbian of the period.⁵⁹ A space once accessible only to the male flâneur is translated to the realm of absorbed female spectatorship. The replacement

⁵⁸ In *Suspensions of Perception*, Jonathan Crary addresses the contemporary role of spectator and spectacle. He identifies the "crisis of attentiveness" as a characteristic symptom of modernity, driven by capitalist forces, which challenge any meaningful attention and perception by encouraging the production of a never-ending splendor of products and sources of stimulation.⁵⁸ This lack of attentiveness or meaningful engagement between spectator and the object of the gaze is clearly seen in the figure of the nineteenth-century male flâneur. The flâneur always appears in a state of detached looking. This is markedly different from contemporary depictions of female spectatorship, in which the viewers appear on the opposite side of the spectrum, completely engrossed and spellbound by the subject of their gaze.

⁵⁹ Frey, 316-317. Here Frey discusses the similarity in dance style and lighting effects of the *Papa Chrysanthème* performance and Loïe Fuller's performances. She also mentions Fuller as an "avowed lesbian" as do Felicia McCarren and Garelick.

of a male flâneur with an absorbed female spectator occurs throughout Toulouse-Lautrec's oeuvre, particularly, as I have argued, in works which feature Jane Avril.

Toulouse-Lautrec actually reverses the dynamic found in the treatment of similar subjects by one of the artists he most admired, Edgar Degas, in *Dans les Couloirs* of 1899 (Fig. 16) and *La Spectatrice* of 1893 (Fig. 17). For example, not only has he omitted the male flâneur, but he has inverted the traditional spectator-spectacle relationship by making male figures the object of the female gaze.

La Foire du Trône Tent Decorations

The subordination of the male flâneur to a female spectator occurs in two pieces Toulouse-Lautrec produced as tent decorations for La Goulue at *La Foire du Trône* in 1895 (Fig. 5 and Fig. 6), where she was attempting a comeback after leaving Montmartre several years prior.⁶⁰ Each of the canvases depicts La Goulue performing at the Moulin Rouge, one with her partner Valentin le Désossé and the other with several near eastern musicians. Jane Avril appears as a spectator in both of these works, as do many other well known Montmartre personalities.⁶¹ Although, Avril appears as only one of many spectators in these images, she is both the only female and the most prominent figure depicted in Fig. 6. Her conspicuous hat and full dress, similar to her depiction in *Papa Chrysanthème*, make her both immediately recognizable and dominant. Toulouse-Lautrec placed her in the center of both canvases, each time directly aligned with La Goulue, the ostensible subject of the works. The clear emphasis given to the figure of Jane Avril highlights her position not only as spectator of Montmartre

⁶⁰ For biographical information on La Goulue, consult Gerstle Mack's book *Toulouse-Lautrec*, within which there is a brief chapter on the life of La Goulue.

⁶¹ This was likely for the purpose of lending legitimacy to La Goulue, the now aging and downtrodden former star of the Moulin Rouge. While La Goulue had lost much of her previous reputation and fame, Jane Avril continued in her success until her retirement from the stage in the first decade of the 20th century.

culture, but as a new model for absorbed “looking”, distinct from both the flâneur⁶² and flâneuse.⁶³

Conclusion

The displacement of the traditional flâneur, so prominent in Impressionist and Post-Impressionist paintings, creates a space for female spectatorship and the lesbian gaze. The members of the particular lesbian subculture to which Toulouse-Lautrec was drawn were members of the working-class and celebrities. Thus, they had the freedom to behave, and Toulouse-Lautrec the artistic autonomy to depict them, in ways that departed from late-nineteenth-century concepts of appropriate female deportment. In Toulouse-Lautrec’s

⁶² Although in images such as *Le Divan Japonais* (1892), *Papa Chrysanthème* (1895), and the *Foire du Trône* tent decorations (1895) we see Avril as a female model of absorbed looking that displaces the primacy of the male flâneur, Toulouse-Lautrec departs from that representation of Avril in *Jane Avril Leaving the Moulin Rouge* of 1892. This image shows Avril in conservative clothing as an anonymous woman strolling along the streets of Paris. The far left side of the image shows three smaller figures walking in the opposite direction. This work departs from those discussed earlier in this paper in that, here, Avril appears as a model of *detached* looking, absorbed in her own thoughts, much like the flâneurs of Degas and Caillebotte’s works from the 1870s. In comparing *Jane Avril Leaving the Moulin Rouge* (1892) and Degas’ *Place de la Concorde* of 1873, the similarity between the two figures is striking. Their posture, gestures, and gazes mirror one another. It seems that forty years after the invention of the flâneur, Jane Avril has effortlessly replaced him in fulfilling the role of *leisurely* spectator of the streets. This illustration of Avril as a figure of detached looking further complicates her role in the realm of flâneurs, flâneuses, and the third model I have presented in this paper. I would argue that Toulouse-Lautrec had the ability to cast her as a chimera of “looking” due to her dynamic roles as a female in the public sphere, a bisexual, and a participant in late-nineteenth-century intellectual society.

⁶³ Toulouse-Lautrec’s depictions of Jane Avril in conscious acts of “looking” vary noticeably from his depictions of other celebrity lesbians. In images such as *La Goulue and her Sister* of 1892 and *Quadrille at the Moulin Rouge* of the same year not only is the figure of the male flâneur conspicuously omitted or neutralized, but he is actively challenged by the lesbians of Montmartre, who seem to compete for the primacy of their spectatorship. Jane Avril is not the main figure in any of these works. This is likely attributable to the fact that she was not seen as a vicious tribade who only had repugnance for men. Contemporaries would have classified Avril as a saphiste or “lesbienne intermittente” who turned to the love of women during periods of difficulty in their relationships with men. The imposing stance of La Goulue and May Milton in these works illustrate the women of Montmartre as direct challengers of male flânerie. The personalities and lifestyles of both of these lesbian performers would have caused them to be placed, distinct from Avril, into the categories of tribade, invert, or “lesbienne persévérante”. Although represented distinctly from Avril, these figures are illustrated in a more forceful and obvious state of female engaged “looking.” For more information on lesbianism and its various classifications in late-nineteenth-century France see Albert, Nicole. *Saphisme et Décadence dans Paris Fin-de-Siècle*. Paris: Martinière, 2005.

representations of Avril—a figure he also frequently invoked as an alter-ego for the artist⁶⁴—she appears as both artist and ‘art’, masculine and feminine, supplanting the traditionally male role of spectator and masculine pastime of “looking”. Sweetman credits Toulouse-Lautrec for depicting women who were both socially unconventional and strong and for elevating their status in the nineteenth-century by giving them the ability to outwit their contemporary opponents, both male and female. He describes Lautrec’s fallen woman, Jane Avril, as “side-stepping the whole ethos of male dominance of both her life and her body.”⁶⁵ “Beyond his gang of personal male friends, which recurs as a sort of chorus in [Toulouse-Lautrec’s] paintings,” Sweetman continues, “men are only occasionally central subjects in art that is principally about women, most of whom are lesbians.”⁶⁶ My argument takes Sweetman’s observation further; lesbians not only occupied a significant amount of Toulouse-Lautrec’s oeuvre, they usually dominated the spaces they occupied, displaced the primacy of the male flâneur, and offered a new female model of absorbed looking.

⁶⁴ Lastly, the use of Avril as a foil for Toulouse-Lautrec himself could explain his continual depiction of her in such a manner. He commonly incorporated the shape of an elephant, his own symbol, into the full sleeves and narrow waist of her dress. Toulouse-Lautrec could actually be commentating on his own form of engaged looking as an artist and chronicler of the late nineteenth-century Montmartre underworld. However, the shape of the elephant does not appear in all of Toulouse-Lautrec’s works featuring Jane Avril as spectator; it is notably absent from both *Le Divan Japonais* and *L’Estampe Originale* (1893). Unless one argues that Avril always represented a stand in for the artist, which I believe would incorrectly discount her role as both a unique and learned individual in her own right, it is noteworthy that he continually chooses her, a bisexual celebrity, as a simultaneous witness of and participant in the revelry and decadence of Montmartre’s infamous nightlife. For more information on representations of Jane Avril as the alter-ego of the artist and representations pairing her figure with elephant imagery see Bergman-Carton, Janis. “Unlikely Couplings: The Gendering of Print Technology in the French fin-de-siècle.” (unpublished article)

⁶⁵ Sweetman, 366.

⁶⁶ Sweetman, 366.

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