

# Interpretations French Cancan (1955)

*What you are about to read is the result of an assignment that was done in the context of a graduate seminar (FMST 630D) at the Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema on the theory and practice of interpretation. In the second week of class, I asked students to produce a short interpretation (3 double-spaced pages) of Jean Renoir's 1955 FRENCH CANGAN. The film was chosen for no particular interpretive reason except that I enjoy Renoir's work, hadn't seen that film for years, and feel that students don't have a lot of opportunity to see Renoir's films anymore. In any case, I had to choose a film therefore why not this one? The idea was to gauge the student's implied knowledge of interpretation at the beginning of the course. There were two rules to follow. First, the students were free to consult any source except material written about this particular film. Secondly, they were asked to write the assignment in groups of two—that way, interpretive conflicts might come out in the open and would require taking stock of or resolving in a dialogic manner. The following week the students returned with their interpretations. We read all of them (what is presented here is a sample of the work) after which time I proposed a series of 8 questions to help us investigate and debate the presence of any implicit (or, in certain cases, explicit) interpretive theory in their work:*

1. *What was the aim of your interpretation?*
2. *Do you consider your interpretation to be correct/valid?*
3. *What is the object of your interpretation: is it the film, the filmmaker's intentions, or your own reaction to the film?*
4. *Do you consider your interpretation to be subjective or objective?*
5. *How would you consider verifying whether your interpretation is an adequate representation of its object?*

6. *Did you consider or try to reconstruct the filmmaker's intentions (or world view) in interpreting the film?*

7. *Did it matter to you that the film was French, that it was made in the 1950's, or that it was about turn-of-the-century France?*

8. *Could a 1950's audience have interpreted the film in the same way as you and is this relevant?*

*Without giving out too much information about the class, I would say that in the end, the debate showed the importance of distinguishing between what, elsewhere, I have called the cognitive/symbolic and affective aspects of the interpretive act. Whereas Renoir is an object in which I have invested affectively for a long time (I am fond even of what some consider to be his worst films), the discussion led me to see that this was not so much the case with the students. This dis-affectation manifested itself mostly in discussing the second of the 8 questions. Here, a majority of students seemed to adopt a relativistic perspective (one interpretation is as good, correct, valid as another). While the academic environment of contemporary reader-response theories as well as the sociology of the classroom may partly explain this attitude, one should not discount the importance of affect or desire in interpretive practices.*

*-Martin Lefebvre*

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**Tilting at Can Can: *French Cancan* (1955) and *Don Quixote*** by Owen Livermore and Gareth Hedges

The recurring image of windmills throughout Jean Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955) reveals something of a quixotic trope in the idealism of its central figure, Henri Danglard (played by Jean Gabin). The red windmill, of course, has a historical correlative as the defining characteristic of the actual Moulin Rouge, but Renoir's Moulin Rouge is an artistic creation and is presented as such.

The mill's construction functions within the narrative as a framing device, providing orientation as a repeated establishing shot and giving visual form to Danglard's quest. Significantly, we see only the indices of its construction in long shots assumed through associational montage to be from the perspective of the small café across from the Moulin Rouge. The entire chronicle of the Moulin Rouge is seen largely from this café which acts as the site of a reflexive critical voice, in the form of the patrons' commentary and gossip about the film itself. Danglard's own affinity for café society is established within the film twice; he is there drinking absinthe when he first sees Nini (Françoise Arnoul) after the dance at la Reine Blanche and when we learn that he had begun his career as a sommelier in a café. The back and forth between the scenes of the café patrons and the action at the theatre harmonizes with the film's utilization of backstage and audience perspectives during performances, a position best exemplified by Danglard's place in the narrative.

There are at least two other oblique references to Cervantes's *Don Quixote* in *French Cancan*. First, when Lola (María Félix) tries to fight the debtor as he presents Danglard with a summons, Danglard dissuades her by saying that she is "tilting against windmills." Danglard's reprobation of Lola does not prevent him from giving into a similar quest—building the Moulin Rouge, and his remark betrays a familiarity with Quixote's fixation. "Tilting" suggests the medieval sport of the same name in which two knights on horseback charge each other with lances in an effort to unseat one another. Second, shortly after this scene, Casimir (Philippe Clay) serenades Danglard in mock heroic fashion. One refrain calls for soldiers to "charge the windmill." This sequence occurs after Danglard has met with Nini a second time, in the scene where Danglard talks with Casimir about his plans for la Reine Blanche. Like Sancho Panza, Casimir potentially has great insight into Danglard, and this comparison comments directly on Danglard's plan.

Beyond these allusions, Renoir treats Danglard's quest to build the Moulin Rouge in quixotic terms. When he tells the Baron (Jean-Roger Caussimon) that he would rather live in a hotel than reclaim his possessions, Danglard effectively renounces worldly goods and embraces the transience implicit in quests. He defines the nature of his venture quite explicitly to Casimir, telling him that he wants to provide "a taste of the low life for millionaires—adventure in comfort." In its impracticality, Danglard's quest is quixotic rather than romantic or idealistic. This reinforced by his struggles to build the Moulin Rouge, especially those surrounding issues of finance. The financier Adrien even calls Danglard an "illusioniste." This quality in Danglard—that of dreamer, idealist, or quixotic hero—gives him a unique agency within the film, reflected in his role as mediator between the classes. In the opening sequence in the film, Danglard's movement between the backstage and audience as he tries to encourage the shy whistler he has hired is echoed by the camera. Cutting between both sides of the stage, it privileges neither audience nor the backstage but presents performances from both perspectives equally. Similarly, Danglard calls for intermingling between classes in the theatre. While his plan does not demand for a total dissolution of class boundaries, it does propose a dialectical relationship between classes. Unlike the Baron or Prince Alexandre (Giani Esposito), Danglard does not have a title and his place within society is ambiguous. Given that the film deals with these concerns explicitly, it is not surprising that Renoir was no stranger to the financial difficulties of artistic production [1]. As Danglard explains how he has bought la Reine Blanche, the camera pans back to reveal the bare walls of his home, which earlier had been opulently lined with art and other finery. This subtle cinematic gesture provides visual evidence of Danglard's financial reality and strengthens the insignificance of capital to Danglard.

The depiction of the artist, exemplified in *French Cancan* by Gabin's Danglard, can be interestingly compared to the now canonical *La Règle Du Jeu* (1939) and the character of Octave, very notably played by Renoir himself. In Octave, Renoir portrays an aging, bumbling failure that lies to himself and others about his unrealistic desires. In Danglard, we see a man determined to bring a spectacle to the stage at any cost, up to and including his own well-being. Failure is never far away from Danglard, and is all but written on the fate of his protégé Nini, whose double is Prunelle, the bygone Queen of the Can Can who now begs in the street. However, unlike Octave, Danglard remains undaunted and is the centerpiece of the film—the one in charge of establishing the Moulin

Rouge, with no money but with wealthy (yet cautious) backers at his whim. This difference is understandable, given that *La Regle Du Jeu* was conceived in a much more pessimistic time in French history when the unwillingness of Europe to intervene in the activities of the Fascists inspired Renoir to compose a tale where the bourgeois blissfully retreat to the countryside and play selfish, childish games.

As opposed to *La Regle Du Jeu*, *French Cancan* posits an optimistic view of youth with the idea of the stage as a magical, transcendent space inspired by the innocence and the energy of the young workers dancing *la chalumet* in la Reine Blanche. It is at this working class dance hall that Danglard first meets Nini, a young impressionable laundress who sucks her thumb. The dance hall is constructed as a transgressive site with its counterpoint being the unpalatable reality of the mundane. It is not surprising that there are many in the film who dream of a life as a performer, including both Casimir who, given the chance, drops his life as a public servant to become an entertainer and the whistler who goes from painting houses to painting his face. Those unhappy souls who look on from the sidelines need only join in to be caught up in the euphoria and forget their problems and fears, if only for a while.

As a technicolor studio spectacle with raucous dance numbers, the Hollywood influence is deeply intertwined with the film's incarnation of the backstage musical genre. Even the conveniently anglicized name of the reinvented new act (the "French Can Can"), suggests some degree of Hollywood pedigree. On a visual level, the elaborate sets facilitate a whimsical and nostalgic depiction of Parisian street life as opposed to a realistic one, with organ grinders, children, businessmen and workers happily mingling in the bustling street. The adoption of the musical genre is hardly surprising, due to many developments in Renoir's life, including five years spent operating in Hollywood before the making of *French Cancan*. Perhaps indicative of Renoir's psychological distance from post-WWII France, the world of *French Cancan* is not interested in a reality *per se* but a Paris of the imagination that can only exist on a backlot.

We return again to the idea in Renoir's film of a preferable or quixotic reality, residing in the imagination, and, when conditions are right, on the stage. Prince Alexandre's suicide attempt and subsequent plea for a make-believe memory of Paris invokes a similar comparison to the conclusion of *Don Quixote*, where the peasant girl admits to the aged and dying Quixote

that she is the fair maiden to whom he has pledged his life. Similarly, the final performance—a realization of a dream for Danglard—has him sitting backstage, tapping his feet and imagining the festivities, seemingly not wanting to ruin the perfect illusion in his head with the illusion he has created in the Moulin Rouge. Like the Cervantes novel, Renoir asks us to consider the perfect beauty of memory and imagination, and question the perceived folly of tilting at windmills. However, it can be said that Renoir goes one step further, cementing Danglard's fulfillment of the illusory *French Cancan* in tangible terms as Danglard joins his audience before the final curtain.

## ENDNOTES

1 See the Orson Welles' obituary of Jean Renoir ("Jean Renoir: 'the Greatest of All Directors'") from the *Los Angeles Times*, 18 February 1979: 1, 6.

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### Assumption of Intention in Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955) by Janos Sitar

Jean Renoir's 1955 film *French Cancan* is a backstage musical that depicts the events that lead to the opening of the world famous Moulin Rouge music hall. However, the film should not be taken as a strict attempt to depict the historical circumstances that caused the Moulin Rouge to open, but rather as a film that uses that historical situation to make a commentary about French cinema at the time of its production. Within the context of the film the Cancan is not only a dance, but an emblem of French popular culture that functions as a metaphor for another French product of 1896: the cinema. The return of the Cancan in *French Cancan* is a veiled cry for a return to a cinematic heritage that had fallen out of fashion as surplus Hollywood films flooded France after the turmoil of the Second World War subsided.

The emphasis on the present rather than the past can be found in the film's treatment of historical information and persons. In particular, absences force a consideration of the film's present rather than the actual past. Absent from *French Cancan's* *mise-en-scene* are two of the most famous features of the Moulin Rouge at the time of opening: the large elephant to the side of the windmill and the donkey rides out back. These changes force a consideration of the film's present and the selection of the windmill as the single piece of iconography for the period. Historical characters are also notably missing,

in particular those of Joseph Oller and Charles Zidler who co-operatively opened the Moulin Rouge in 1889. Their replacement with the single character of Henri Danglard (Jean Gabin) is significant because it enables a reading of the film that focuses on Danglard and the creation of the dance spectacle as a metaphor for French cinema in the 50s.

When speaking of absence I do not mean to denounce *French Cancan* as a film because of its historical inaccuracy like Lael Ewy does when writing about Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film on the same subject. One need not look past the title of Ewy's piece "Moulin Rouge, the Erasure of History, and the Disneyfication of the Avant Garde" in order to understand how Ewy feels about the inaccuracy of historical information in film. Rather than take the same stance, I suggest that it is important to look at how those absences work in relation to the film's content and style to comment on cinema in its own time period.

In discussing the importance of juxtaposing historical detail with fiction, it is necessary to identify that one character, Nini (Françoise Arnoul), is a historical reference to the dancer known as "Nini of the beautiful thighs." Particularly striking about the character of Nini is the way in which she is contrasted to the character of Lola de Castro (Maria Felix) throughout the film. Nini's youth and inexperience in professional dancing and sex is a sharp contrast to the older Lola who expertly wields her sexuality and professional experience from the film's opening scene. Another sharp difference between Nini and Lola is the way Nini is the source of inspiration for Danglard's revival of the Cancan. This immediately creates a sense of cultural and artistic opposition between Nini and Lola, as Nini represents the return to French culture while Lola is the ultimate presence of non-French culture in the film.

In the opening sequence Lola is the star of Danglard's "Chinese Screen" as an exotic belly dancer who flirts and teases the men in the crowd. Her presence as a non-French character is emphasized when she flies into a rage and begins yelling in Spanish at the men who serve Danglard with papers from the Baron Walter. I do not want to make a claim for a strict reading of Lola as the exotic other as per the work of Edward Said, but rather that Lola represents a general fluidity of culture that is present throughout the film. While she is central to the film through her opposition to Nini, this opposition is produced in relation to a multiplicity of cultures. Lola shifts from being a belly dancer to being the principal dancer in the Russian performance before the climactic

Cancan number. And while Lola appears as a different and sexual figure throughout the film she never fully takes away from Nini's appeal: Paulo, Danglard and Prince Alexandre are all in pursuit of Nini's affections. Probably most significant about the contrast between Nini and Lola is the fact that they resolve their differences and work together in the Moulin Rouge, but performing different types of dancing.

The title of the US release is helpful in further noting the emphasis on French culture. For the American market the film was renamed *Only The French Can*, meaning the studio replaced the English title of the film with a different English title. This new title places an emphasis on the oddity of the original title of the film that is taken from Danglard's "new" name for the Cancan as he is told that only dances with English titles are popular now. The title builds a relationship between the content of the film and the social circumstances surrounding the film's production. It appears that Renoir is making a commentary on the flood of English language films that came into the French market in the period after the Second World War. This flood of American films is not something to be taken lightly as the directors of the French New Wave like Jean-Luc Godard and Truffaut often cite the importance of American films in the development of their conception of cinema. Renoir's commentary on the cultural climate of France in 50s is evident as *French Cancan* indicates that only with an English title will a French film find an audience.

This association between the film's content and its social environment also creates an association between the character of Danglard and Renoir whereby Danglard operates as a metaphor for the film's director. Danglard throughout the film functions like a director as he seeks the financial resources, cast and space in which to create his spectacle. Most significant is the spatial relationship between Danglard and the actual performance of the Cancan during the climactic scene. Danglard sits backstage, listening to the crowd cheer as the show sweeps them away. However, Renoir unifies Danglard and the performance by cross cutting between his reaction shots and the actual performance. This absent form of seeing is significant because it creates a unity between two spaces that are physically separate. Here cross cutting functions as a metaphor for the comparison between the two time periods. The film is asking us to look back, but to a fictive and creative past in order to build an artistic future—one that is not afraid of outside influences or changes to artforms like film. In this case, the concern with dance functions a metaphor for the cinema. *French Cancan* cuts between



two disparate spaces to create a unity. These disparate spaces merge to create a new past that will create a new future that recognizes the past but has to acknowledge changes in taste regardless of how superficial they may be.

It was always there. Someone else might have changed the names and the parameters may feel a little strange, but take that step and then another. Stretch yourself. Wherever the feet go the eyes are soon to follow.

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**A Duet with *French Cancan* (1955)** by Jodi Ramer, Adam Rosadiuk

This film needs to be seen a few times. Most frames provide branching paths of attention, and we make early, clumsy choices, skewing us from clever details, and off early by degrees we can pass by miles—with only a vague memory of vertigo—life-size fireworks, whole life-defining moments. We come back to the film as crude tourists, wiser now about how easily conned we are by a little sleight of hand, by an eye line, by the flash and passing of a churning skirt. The shwoozy movement through frames composed in depth, the longish takes, can rightfully be described as hypnotic and overwhelming: so much so that an insert shot of a character looking meaningfully off screen, a sudden halt in a stream of rhythm and rests, is for the first-time viewer, tantalizingly just outside the realm of significance. The real kick in Renoir's films is the perceived struggle between a flow of images and forces of narrative and character. Because it takes effort to try to piece these things together, it can get boring, and the slip of one's mind from character and narrative into the bleeding of colours from frame to frame makes us easy victims to the shock of sharp contrasts. The first experience of a Renoir film, if we enjoy it at all, is an experience of beauty and the beauty of quiet and private oddness: details at the edge of a film, like a belly dancer who retrieves her scarf from the stage floor with a sly sleight-of-toe.

And there is also the ease and grace of the photography.

On first viewing you might remember clearly, for instance, the woman in the green dress in the back of the frame, the contentment of her complete suspension in the moment, angled against the young baker, Paulo (Franco Pastorino), in the foreground, tormented by the moment's stubborn claims upon his future. The second time you see this sequence, you might notice the woman in the green dress several shots earlier, her  $\frac{3}{4}$  profile glimpsed in the blurred background of the waltz and glimpsed again and passed between the spaces of turning and returning bodies. Indeed, it is appropriate that she should then occupy the frame with Paulo, who likewise is tumbled by the crowd into the back of the frame when Nini (Françoise Arnoul), his lover, chooses to waltz with Danglard (Jean Gabin), the distinguished gentlemen from the upper-class. That the woman in the green dress should be found in the same frame as Paulo, and remain in that frame after he leaves, might remind us of a much more successful chance encounter: when the red-haired woman and the mustachio-ed commandant at the absinthe bar are literally thrown together by the explosion of the White Queen. Unlike Paulo and the woman in the green dress, the Montmartre bar patrons are inseparable afterwards. To see the woman in the green dress, on the second viewing, earlier in the film than we expected is to experience the cleverness of this constructed world, is to feel the accidents and coincidences of aleatory beauty that suddenly become less like the careful posturing of the gorgeously selfconscious, but more like the inevitable mathematics of permutations and combinations of elements.

Renoir's figures are in circulation, are shook up, and settle where they may. The fact that particular moments become essential to significance has more to do with our linear experience of events and our crudity as viewers than calculation on Renoir's part. Thus, Renoir's films ask a lot of our abilities to interpret characters, to 'read' what people really mean. There are moments in this film that we will find ourselves drawn to, moments that seem 'important', 'significant', or just 'odd', and these are the moments that will provide us with the stuff of interpretation. That we will then find the clues to the essential moments in multiple frames—as if they were waiting for us—in the little details we missed, is the sly magic of the show. This is the experience of interpreting art like biography: when all our choices make sudden crystal sense in retrospect.

The film's climax comes when Danglard speaks in such a way and at such a time that we're awfully tempted to think he's speaking for the director: i.e. that he's speaking to theme. He's yelling at our ingénue to suck it

up and get on with the show, revealing in a very brutal way the logic of his infidelities, his nature as a creator, and the importance of art over the individual while all the while using art to affirm his personal selfishness. There are many reasons, however, that we must resist a blunt reading of this moment; not the least of which is the film's genuflection to French generic convention and to the back-stage musical's imperative to above all else go on with the show. But, nonetheless, the moment is indeed emphasized, and must be taken into account if we are going to uncover some sort of ordering principle for the film, something to guide our retrospection.

We'd argue that this climax introduces ideas that must be put to the test during the denouement, where we find real answers, and real questions. As the cancan rages on, we see in rapid succession, very near the end of the film, a series of close ups of our successfully coupled characters, all smiling. How do we read this gesture towards closure? Do we actually buy, for example, the suddenly strong indication that Paulo may couple with Nini's laundress friend? What can we assume from these last shots? Should we be content to leave these characters as they are, happy in the moment, invest nothing in them as anything more than characters? The film gives us clues to give us pause. There are at least two notable omissions from this final montage: the ridiculous soldier, the Captain (Michel Piccoli), in love with Lola; and Prunelle (Pâquerette), the faded cancan dancer now living on the street.

The absence of Prunelle from the closing moments might remind us that she very well may represent Nini's future—Danglard seems to underplay the significance of introducing Prunelle to Nini as the old "Queen of the cancan" the same evening he crowns Nini as the new. But this is not lost on Nini. And it should not be lost on us that when Danglard passes Prunelle some money she calls him a "Prince". Danglard has been called a "Duke" before: are we meant to consider the relationship between Danglard the showman who wins and tosses away Nini's affections, and the actual Prince, Prince Alexandre (Giani Esposito), who, bound by the demands of office and breeding, cannot win her? And we might be reminded that the stage 'throne' on which the Prince attempts suicide is the same throne Danglard sits upon backstage as the Cancan gets under way, and from where he seems to conduct the action. We might also be reminded of another scene, important to both Danglard and Nini, when Danglard admits he worked as a waiter before he was a showman—in this way, is Danglard also suggesting his parallelism with Paulo, who Alexandre envied, the working class nephew of a baker

and the other competitor for Nini's love? We can tease out a lot from this realization, not the least of which is the suggestion that there may be a profound fluidity with which these genre characters can move between their generic types. Thus we cannot be too certain that we *know* how to read the last images of *French Cancan*—we can't trust that genre, that the theatre, will save these characters from misery.

Because the film, by its structure, attitude, and tone complicates any experience of closure, Danglard's role as an artist figure must be reconsidered—and, by implication, our sense of the artist-figure must meet some revision. How responsible is Danglard for 'creating' Nini? Just as the paths we follow through the film are individual but out of our control, so too does the film suggest that its characters are both responsible for their lives but also blissfully sensitive to the moments when responsibility is lifted, when they can submit to the moment, when the moment is created by someone else. Indeed, the tension here is between coincidence and self creation—what does it mean to live a life self created, how much of your grand gestures are coincidence, timing, fate? How often are the most perfect moments those of the drunken man at the end of the film, outside the Moulin Rouge, who inadvertently takes the bow for the entire film, and that glory passed, totters off-screen as the credits roll? This film of small details creates characters out of constellations of memory, from which we are asked, with a palmist's touch, to divine a plausible future. Because there is nothing less at stake than the future happiness of these characters, the onus is on us to be delicate with our interpretation. The film by its structure, by the rewards of multiple viewings, and by its emphasis on the character's final moments, forces us to be fair.

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**Jean Renoir's *French Cancan* (1955): Love and Performance** by Lysandra Woods and Santiago Hidalgo

A bunch of characters from the late nineteenth century decide to get involved in complex inter-relationships, such that it results in a humorous drama revolving around dance and love. And of course, under the conventions of the musical, this admixture channels the sexual energies of attraction and desire into the dance; questions of who is a "good dancer" and who is not are loaded judgments not only of dance floor prowess but of sexual compatibility and even destiny. Good dancing

transcends the putative limitations of gender, class, and age. You either have the skillz or you don't.

*French Cancan* establishes its interest in sexuality, performance, and sexual performance in the first act. It also establishes a self-reflexive take on theatricality, spectacle, and consumption, as diffused over an assortment of personalities and types. The Paris here is an imaginary site of often American-made stereotypes, conjuring the necessary, ideal space in which love can flourish, but this sentimentalized image is undercut by a resolutely French sensibility, ensuring that bittersweet ironies and a gentle world-weariness, even a quiet perversity, will finish the day. Sex will triumph here, not love, and perhaps we are all the better off for that.

Yet, the mere mention of love provokes this reader into a state of quiet euphoria. Take one: Danglard (Jean Gabin) on the promenade, arm and arm, with his paramour. Take two: "What are your conditions," (for love?). Conditional on the response of Lola (Maria Félix), Danglard throws himself back to Nini (Françoise Arnoul), a younger version of himself (why do I say "younger version"—isn't he more like Lola?). Despite her flagrantly promiscuous persona, Lola yearns for a traditional engagement with love, characterized by singularity and marriage. Nini, on the other hand, becomes the mirror other of Danglard; indeed, he fashions her as such, and she complies, first hesitantly, then willingly: she morphs from ingénue to figurative whore, and she and we both have the more fun for it. The problem with pure, uncomplicated good love—so damn boring for those not directly involved.

As you may have noticed, the film applauds this choice. The baker and the prince should by 50s musical conventions have claims on Nini; their offer of domesticity and adoring comfort both fall short to the demands of this high-spirited lass. And we know that neither would make a fruitful match, for their image of love pales in comparison to the thrill of performance, done in the end not for Danglard, but for herself, for the sheer ecstasy of being devoured by the crowd. The crowd, the public, the mass audience are a fickle bunch, as the peripheral figure of the now dissipated and destitute ex-showgirl reminds us, but nonetheless Renoir upholds Nini's choice of their ephemeral applause over a basic heterosexual union (which is a more honest closure to the energies of the musical itself).

The musical is inherently about love and coupling, but it is also about talent and performance; or, about

positioning love as a performance, a performance in which you need a perfect and perfectly adept partner. Again, note the hilarious discourse throughout the film on the pivotal question of: "Who can dance and who cannot." Notice that the baker finally ends up with Nini's boring friend who has the dancing skills of a joint-less marionette. In *French Cancan*, performative abilities are expressed predominantly via women (Nini, Lola). Danglard's assistant, in a sort of sidekick Donald O'Connor role, is the exception, but he is also represented as effeminate and theatrical, i.e. gay. Tellingly, the unsuitables are completely bereft of authentic performative abilities such as when the prince attempts suicide as a form of publicizing his despair, but ultimately fails—he lives. Although he does manage to create for himself an aura of melodramatic excess, he is quickly pushed to the margins of the main spectacle; devoid of relevant performative skills, the prince is forced to play the role of misplaced lover, a being that holds absolutely no cache in the euphoric, sexual and therapeutic ritual known as the *French Cancan*.

And why should he be allowed to participate? Indeed, the film cannot accommodate every stereotype, though it makes a noble attempt. In doing so, role reversals are handed out like cotton candy at the fairgrounds, momentarily sweet but ultimately devoid of substance. As it has always been, female sexuality is at the center of the spectacle. But sexual hysteria is uncharacteristically transferred to the male characters. Maybe this is a French thang? At first, it appears that Nini has lost her virginity to the baker. Later, we understand that virginity is far from pure, more like a commodity to be wielded when the time is right, than a treasure to be held tight. The only character that interprets virginity as virtue is the Prince, but this interpretation only leads him astray in navigating through the treacherous landscape of fin-de-siècle Paris. Ironically, the baker is in fact the one that loses his virginity, robbed by a precocious femme fatale manqué that saw him as nothing more than a practice run. The baker is smitten and believes that they are now married; only in red state America can sex be interpreted as a sign of eternal commitment, and even there, this idea is tenuous. The entire supporting cast partakes and shares the collective American dream, only for it to be supplanted by another, the French Cancan.

Watching this film today is a double exercise in nostalgia; that is, in the 50s this film is already nostalgic for an earlier era of decadence and elegance, for an imagining of an earlier France at a time when she had irrevocably lost her position as a world power, and at a time when the film industry was saturated with American product.

*French Cancan* is obviously aware of this saturation and is attempting to appropriate it for its own ends, to ends that are specifically French, even if at times the hollow feeling of the film suggests a lack of production values in comparison to American product. From a perspective on the other side of the new millennium, this film, in all its grotesque and glorious Technicolor, is a nostalgic viewing, an elegy for a golden age of filmmaking for genres that have disappeared, and for a French auteur whose quietly ironic sensibility is not exactly equipped to deal with the global pull of American optimism. But these are the very tensions that leave the film compelling. Much like love, if all had fit together easily, the result would have been nice but bland.

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*All of the writers are frequent contributors to Synoptique.* Owen Livermore has contributed essays on the cinema of Takashi Miike in Synoptique 6, and the reception of *Starship Troopers* in Synoptique 3. In addition to his editorial duties, Gareth Hedges has supplied numerous splinters to Synoptique. Janos Sitar, principally responsible for previous Synoptique layouts, wrote on *Troy* in Synoptique 3. Jodi Ramer penned “Post-Feminism and Boredom” for Synoptique 4, “The Construction of the ‘Hitchcock Blonde’ in *Marnie*” for Synoptique 6, and “Tippi Hedren: Actress as Model” for the current edition. Adam Rosadiuk is Synoptique Editor-in-Chief and Designer and the author of “Notes on Style and Design” in Synoptique 6. He also contributes to this edition’s “Style Forum” article. Lys Woods has contributed many articles to Synoptique, including a piece “On the Geek” in the current edition. Santiago Hidalgo, in addition to a book review in Synoptique 3, has also worked in an editorial capacity for the journal.