Popular music is one area in which postmodern appropriation successfully meets retro fashion; 1960s rock, for example, is being recycled both as a dubious gloss over that decade's events and also in the music of the latest bands. In this process, the sounds are increasingly bound to visual images, inventing \textit{a posteriori} a gigantic video clip of the past. This is a phenomenon which affects primarily Anglo-Saxon pop. Popular music that is culturally different from this model, unless (like reggae) it is oppositional or militant, becomes commodified as pure nostalgia. This has been the fate of French \textit{chanson}.

Whereas 1960s rock ends up connoting a quasi-universal past, the process is rather different in the case of nationally specific music. French \textit{chanson}, as it has become known internationally through Edith Piaf, evokes a very narrow image of France, a nostalgic - sometimes debased - notion of Frenchness, that embraces cobbled streets, the accordion, berets, and \textit{baguettes}. It is also a cultural and historical representation, closely bound up with a precise iconography. A picture of France - in fact Paris\textsuperscript{1} - comes to mind, seemingly straight out of the 1930s 'poetic realist' films of Carne, Clair, Renoir - a picture which is firmly anchored as 'French', regardless of its representativeness of actual French culture and social relations. It proposes a city of working-class \textit{faubourgs}, rainy streets, and tall buildings -

\begin{quote}
\textit{Des murs quie se lezardent}  
\textit{Un escalier etroit}  
\textit{Une vieille mansarde}  
\textit{Et me voila chez mois}  
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{2}('De l’autre cote de la rue': Piaf)

- in which proletariat and underworld, pimps and prostitutes, enact a scenario of crime and doomed passion. But if the dominant image conjured up is that of a male working-class hero (archetypally Jean Gabin), the voice that accompanies it is feminine - it is that of the \textit{chanteuses realistes}: Edith Piaf, of course, but before her many others: Yvonne George, Damia, Maria Dubas, Lys Gauty, Berthe Sylva, and the sublime Frehel. How these women came to be so closely associated with a particular image of French culture is the subject of this article, which I will discuss with particular reference to Frehel and Piaf.

Piaf was arguably the last 'genuine' representative of the \textit{chanson realiste}, a genre
which was born in the 1880s and had its heyday in the 1930s and 1940s, and which would be more accurately described as populist, focusing on working-class milieux and the underworld, in a melodramatic, pessimistic, and nostalgic mode. Its privileged topography is that of Paris - evident already in song titles: 'Elle frequenct la rue Pigalle', 'Entre St Ouen et Clignancourt' (Piaf), 'A Paris dans chaque faubourg', 'Boulevard des Filles du Calvaire' (Gauty), 'La Chanson des Fortifs' (Frehel), and so on. Areas such as the 'zone' (the originally uninhabited belt around Paris) and the 'fortifs' (fortifications) are mythologized, as well as certain neighbourhoods: Pigalle and Montmartre -

\[
On s'est mis en menage, dans le faubourg St Denis \\
Hotel du Beau Rivage, ga sentait bon Paris \\
('C'était un jour de fete': Piaf)\]

- but also Belleville, Menilmontant, Montparnasse, the banks of the canal Saint-Martin - as they are in the French populist literature of the 1920s and 1930s, the works of Eugene Dabit (whose most famous novel, Hotel du Nord, was adapted by Carne), Pierre Mac Orlan or Francis Carco. These were all writers who, in the words of Carco, displayed a profound and natural... taste for the poetry of night and rain, of absurd and dangerous lives, in a word, for a certain kind of plaintive romanticism where exoticism mingles with the merveilleux, though with a touch of humour and disenchantment.4

These works, like Brassai’s photographs of Paris in the 1930s and, before them, the melodramas and naturalist novels of the nineteenth century (often adapted to silent film), are testimonies to a voyeuristic obsession with the capital and in particular with the lives of its 'lower classes' in which proletariat and underworld mingle - classes laborieuses, classes dangereuses5 - a prurient drive to know and to see, echoed for instance in 'La Guinguette a ferme ses volets' (Damia):

\[
On voit comme sur un ecran \\
Les profils inquietants dont les ombres s'amusent, \\
On voudrait bien voir et savoir, oui mais, \\
La guinguette a ferme ses volets.\]

Paris, then, is the background on which these fantasies are projected: but it is a Paris which always belongs to the past, either that of the narrator of the song, or that of the historical city. One of Piaf’s most evocative early songs, 'Entre St Ouen et Clignancourt', nostalgically evokes the atmosphere of the zone which she (in the song) has left, and which she re-creates 'when she is blue', remembering the mingled smells of 'chips and lilac'. This area clearly exercised a great fascination, evident in songs such as 'La Chanson des fortifs' (Frehel):

\[
Que sont dev'nues les fortifications \\
Et les p'tits bistrots des barrières \\
C'était V'decor de toutes nos chansons \\
Des jolies chansons de naguère\]
even if it was occasionally mocked, as in another of Frehel's songs, 'Tout change dans la vie':

\[
\begin{align*}
J'ai sur la zone une baraque & \\
C'est du sapin tres ancien & \\
Ety'a l'usine d'ammoniaque & \\
Qui l'embaume du soir au matin & \\
\end{align*}
\]

The Paris celebrated by chanson realiste constantly deplores its own demise and does so with particular strength because the images associated with this vanished past are widely circulated in other media, especially the cinema. One film in which Frehel appears, L'Entraîneuse (Albert Valentin, 1938), exemplifies this. Frehel, like the heroine of the film played by Michele Morgan, is a singer in a cabaret aptly named La Dame de coeur. The film is structured around a series of visual oppositions: Paris/Provence, night-club/hotel, night/sunlight, which echo the two sides of the heroine's life: her 'shady' past/her (illusory) future. Frehel here stands for the heroine's - inescapable - past, both metonymically (as a colleague) and metaphorically, through her song 'Sans lendemain', a ballad with the fatalism typical of chanson realiste.

\[
\begin{align*}
Jamais l'espoir d'un autre soir & \\
Bonjour, bonsoir & \\
Adieu l'amour, & \\
Sans lendemain, sans Hen qui dure & \\
Voila ma vie depuis toujours. & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Frehel's relationship to the film is also typical of the two-way process which takes place between the poetic-realist genre in film and the chanteuses. Most chanteuses realistes (Frehel, Gauty, Damia, Piaf) acted or appeared in films. Their songs evoke cinematic images: Piaf's 'Les Amants d'un jour' -

\[
\begin{align*}
- \text{ is reminiscent of countless cafe episodes in French films, and her 'Elle frequenait la rue Pigalle' features realistic street noises. Frehel's 'Sans lendemain' starts with an evocation of canals -} & \\
Moi j'essuie les verres au fond du cafe & \\
\end{align*}
\]

- as does Gauty's 'Le Chaland qui passe', a cause celebre when it was added to Vigo's film L'Atalante after the director's death. Whatever one thinks of this juxtaposition aesthetically, it is a testimony to the closeness of imagery between films and songs of that period. A large number of songs are set also in guinguettes, those open-air restaurants on river banks much favoured in films of the time. Many, like Piaf's 'L'Accordeoniste' or Frehel's 'La Java bleue', (featured in the film Une Java) are self-referentially about singing and dancing, and evoke scenes of bals populaires. At the same time, the singers occupy a central part of 'poetic-realist' iconography. In L'Entraîneuse, a poster bearing Frehel's face and name is one of the powerful emblems of the noir look of the film.
*L'Entrainuse* (1938): Frehel (left) and Michele Morgan (centre).
Like the songs, French films of the 1930s and 1940s were predominantly set in Paris, and even if they were set elsewhere (usually in exotic locations), Paris remained the point of reference, the object of desire. Longing for Paris informs a particularly poignant performance by Frehel of ‘Oil est-il done?’ in Duvivier's film *Pepe le Moko* (1936). In this scene Frehel sits by an ancient gramophone and plays a record of her own voice while she sings along with it and cries. As ‘Tania’ in the film's narrative she is crying over what she has left behind in France (the film is set in Algiers): Paris and her friends. The lyrics also mirror the narrative as a whole: Pepe's (Jean Gabin's) overwhelming desire to go back to Paris and his feelings of being trapped in the Casbah. Furthermore, the spectator of 1936 was aware that he or she was watching the ‘real’ Frehel, crying over her past glory and lost beauty - the close community of friends evoked by the song also standing for her past popularity. From a lament for the good old days (eating chips out of paper bags, etc.), the song moves on to specific evocations of changing Montmartre as 'old houses are pulled down' and 'big banks are built to replace them'. The Montmartre of the song is not just an area of the 18th arrondissement of Paris though, it is the Montmartre of the early café-concert and cabarets - in other words, this version of 'Ou est-il done?', recorded in 1936. looks back at an earlier period, before the First World War, when the song was first recorded (the time when Frehel was 'so successful at the Scala, boulevard de Strasbourg'). But the original song itself was already singing nostalgia for the late nineteenth century - for its own origins as an entertainment form. This *mise-en-abyme* of nostalgia, which informs many other *chansons réalistes*, such as Frehel's 'La Chanson des fortifs':

*Le poete en guenilles*
*Les rodeurs et les filles*
*Les chansons d'Aristide Bruant*
*Les heros populaires*
*Les refrains d'avant-guerre*
*Sont bien loin de nous maintenant*  

- lends particular strength to the genre by implicating the listener (and film spectator) into the lost world that is proclaimed both dead and alive, by equating the lost world with the listener/spectator's own past, through the agency of the song itself. The songs connote nostalgia now, but they did so already at the time they were written and performed.

Such self-referential insistence on past tradition has been remarked on as a sign of French song's inability to 'move on', as a rearguard defence against foreign influences - the import of American jazz rapidly propagated by radio and records after the First World War, and the success of British music-hall. To be sure there is an attempt at cultural differentiation in the mythologizing of Paris in French music-hall revues which had an international audience of tourists (in the songs of Mistinguett, for instance: 'Moineau de Paris', 'Je suis née dans le faubourg St-Denis', 'Gosse de Paris', 'Oui, je suis d'Paris', etc'). The *chanson réaliste*, however, is part of a more specifically French historical and cultural process.
Poetry and songs have always been closely linked in France, determining the traditional primacy of lyrics over music in French *chanson*. In modern times, Baudelaire, Verlaine, Prevert, Aragon, have been widely sung (conversely Brassens, Brel, even Serge Gainsbourg, are published in the popular series 'poetes d’aujourd’hui'). The *chanson realiste* is heir to a more 'popular' kind of nineteenth-century poetry, that of Richepin and song-writers Beranger and Clement. One important aspect of these authors' oeuvres was political. Beranger and Clement had both been political prisoners; their stance was anti-authoritarian and populist, and thus not without ambiguity: Beranger, for instance, was anti-royalist but bonapartist, anti-conformist but patriotic. However, what the work of Clement, Richepin and others shared was a depiction of the *peuple* in its suffering dimension - as in Richepin's 'La Chanson des petiots', sung by Frehel at the Moulin Rouge before the First World War:

*Les etres en detresse*

*Les ventres creux, les gueux, les chemineaux.*

The *peuple* described by these song-writers was composed of peasants (Clement), sailors (Botrel, the popularizer of Breton folklore), and increasingly the urban proletariat and the underworld. In this representation of the 'lower classes', the work of these poets and song-writers, like the novels of Balzac, Hugo, Sue, and Zola, made use of the generic figures of melodrama, excess, and schematism to explore motifs which were fascinating for a bourgeois audience but nevertheless relevant to a popular one: poverty, disease, crime. At the same time, melodrama, from its early theatrical origins in the late eighteenth century, intended to *move* its audience. 'It is about time we reached the *peuple* and made them cry', went the preface to *Eugenie*, an early stage melodrama. The poems by Richepin, the songs by Clement, Beranger, and particularly Aristide Bruant (who started performing in Montmartre cabarets - the Chat Noir, the Mirliton - in the 1880s) participated in this dual project: to describe and at the same time to move, through the edifying spectacle of the miseries of the 'lower classes'.

Bruant was the first to crystallize these various elements of poetry, melodrama, and cabaret song into the genre of *chanson realiste*. Two of his songs, 'A la Roquette' and 'A Saint-Lazare', give a good idea of his style. The first is narrated from the point of view of a prisoner on his last night before execution; its pathos comes from the attention to mundane details - *Faut qu’on coupe le col d’ma ch’mise avant le mien* - but the evocation of the impending execution is grim enough. The guillotine itself, nicknamed 'La Veuve' - the widow - was the subject of a gruesome poem written in 1880 by another Chat Noir habitue, Jules Jouy (and later sung by Damia) which offers a *grand-guignolesque* vision of the guillotine as a bloody mistress 'hideously copulating' with her 'lovers'. 'A Saint-Lazare' is set in the women's jail, and its narrator is a prostitute dying of venereal disease who is writing to her lover/pimp. This insistence on the sordid would not have been surprising to a late-nineteenth-century audience. Still used to the spectacle of
squalor and physical pain in real life, the cabaret habitues were familiar with the
reworking of these motifs in feuilletons, romans noirs, and naturalist novels,
obsessively prying into the lower depths of brothels, prisons, and hospitals, not
forgetting the morgue.

Nevertheless, contemporary commentators and later historians deplored
Bruant's excessive miserabilisnte as well as his obsession with crime and
prostitution, accusing him - ironically since he might be said to have started it -
of causing the 'degeneration of French chanson'.17 Despite massive social and
cultural changes between the 1880s and the 1950s, and despite constant
criticism that the visions offered by the songs were increasingly at odds with the
contemporary lives of their listeners, the chanson realiste continued its portrayal
of thugs, pimps and prostitutes, orphans and abandoned women, Parisian
poorer faubourgs, and hopelessly doomed lives. The key to the resilience of the
chanson realiste is, in my view, its quasi-exclusive rendition by women.

* * *

Several factors account for the successful appropriation of chanson realiste by
women. The first has to do with changes in the legal status of song-writing and
performing. The creation in 1851 of the music copyright society SACEM
(instituting separate copyright for songs) had several far-reaching consequences
for the modern music business, but one of its immediate effects was to bring
about an increasing division between author(s) and performer which benefited
women in so far as many could make a living out of performing texts by other -
usually male - writers and composers.

Women proved to be essential to the continuation of the genre in terms of
their combination of class and gender. The chanson realiste as it emerged with
Beranger, Richepin, and Bruant, offered an obviously bourgeois representation
of the 'lower classes', and the case has been made, sometimes powerfully, for
late-nineteenth-century popular entertainment to be understood as an instrument
of class definition for the emerging middle classes of the time.18 However, the
chanson realiste cannot be understood only as 'slumming-down' spectacle for the
bourgeoisie; it was (and still is today) popular with working-class audiences in a
way that cannot be explained entirely as false consciousness. The structures of
identification at work here are complex and closely bound up with notions of
spectacle, and, to be more specific, the gendered spectacle of class. Whereas
twentieth-century male singers coded as 'popular' (Maurice Chevalier, for
example) predominantly presented their 'proletarian-ness' as caricatural through
a comic mode, the chanteuses, on the contrary, emphasized their attunement to
the melodrama of the realiste repertoire which, when sung by them, acquired
another, mythic, dimension: that of authenticity.

* * *

The lives of the chanteuses realistes, from the very beginning, entered the media
as other discourses which paralleled, commented on, responded to, and fed into
their songs. For example, Eugenie Buffet, after Theresa one of the first stars of
the genre, did time in the infamous Saint-Lazare jail before starting her career in
the *café-concert* — singing, of course, Bruant’s ‘A Saint-Lazare’. Buffet became a
national celebrity before and during the First World War, performing for
charity and soldiers - her repertoire owing much to Richepin, Bruant, and
Botrel. She appeared as Napoleon’s mother in Gance’s film (in which Damia
played ‘La Marseillaise’). Her life ended in poverty and disease, in the sordid
hospitals which had featured in her songs. This trajectory is, in many ways, a
blueprint for the *chanteuses realistes* who followed, such as Yvonne George who
died in 1930, at the age of 34, after a brief but intense career.

Frehel and Piaf continued this catalogue of proletarian gloom into the 1930s,
1940s, and 1950s. Piaf, born in 1915 in working-class Belleville (though not on
the pavement as a blue plaque would have it), spent a turbulent, motherless
childhood, including a notorious stay in a brothel run by her grandmother. Both
Piaf and Frehel sang in the streets as children, were teenage mothers, and lost
their children very young. Frehel (born in 1891) started singing under the name
of Pervenche in *café-concert* and cabarets before the First World War. A stunning
young woman, she became the darling of magazine feature writers and novelists.
Colette described her (as Jadin) in *The Vagabond:*

> In her artless way she forces her harsh, seductive contralto which goes so well
with her face, the face of a pink and sulky young apache. The public adores
her just as she is.¹⁹

Still a teenager, Frehel was crowned ‘Queen of the Apaches’ in Nice.

Rather than to these glorious beginnings, it is to a ‘second period’ that Frehel
as a *chanteuse réaliste* really belongs; this followed her return from Central
Europe where she had hit the lower depths of drugs and alcohol addiction (on
account of a broken affair with Maurice Chevalier) and from which she came
back prematurely aged, fat, and sick. Thus her life, like most of her songs,
displayed dialectics of joy and misery, beauty and destitution, and had a similar
built-in structure of nostalgia for a golden early period - as in the *Pepe le Moko*
performance discussed above. Suffering was a central element in her songs and
her life, a fact she was quick to emphasize in interviews; Maurice Verne, in *Les
Amuseurs de Paris*, a chronicle of the Paris *chanson* and music-hall world,
published in 1932, quotes her saying:

> I’ve cried, I’ve suffered, I’ve been happier than any other woman in the
world. . . . Writers have put me in their works, Colette, Mac Orlan, I’ve
earned fortunes, I’ve possessed everything.²⁰

Piaf’s life and career similarly entered other media very early on. The
colourful childhood, the ‘discovery’ by cabaret-owner Louis Leplee, the smear
campaign after Leplee’s assassination, the new beginnings under the influence
of song-writer Raymond Asso, and from then on the triumphant career in
France and abroad, are the subject of many biographies.²¹ So are Piaf’s well-
publicized affairs with a series of actors and singers and the boxer Marcel
Cerdan (the subject of a recent film by Claude Lelouch, *Edith et Marcel*), and
her two marriages. Her overnight success meant that the intertextual Jink
between her life and her film appearances was more immediate, less mediated
through nostalgia, than in the case of Frehel. Her films use her in more or less transparent form, particularly *Montmartre-sur-Seine* (Georges Lacombe, 1941), the story of a street singer who becomes a cabaret star. In *Etoile sans lumiere* (Marcel Blistene, 1945), in which she dubs the voice of a film star, the pessimism of *chanson realiste* transfers to her inability to 'make it' on her own when the star dies. It was also well known that the leading men of her films and plays (Paul Meurisse in Cocteau's *Le Bel Indifferent*, written especially for him and Piaf, and in *Montmartre-sur-Seine*, Yves Montand in *Etoile sans lumiere*) or the supporting singers in her recitals (Montand, Moustaki, Aznavour, Sarapo) were her lovers or intimate friends. Unlike Buffet, George, and Frehel, Piaf did not die in poverty and loneliness. But she spent the last fifteen years of her life fighting physical degeneration, and her health history became the main intertext to her later performances.

The interest in the vicissitudes of the singers' lives went beyond simple sensationalism - the events, and particularly the disasters, were perceived as authenticating the songs. 'It was very simple, these women brought their lives to the stage,' wrote Verne. He is speaking, in this instance, of Damia, Yvonne George, and Frehel, but the same discourses construct the career of all *chanteuses realistes*. It is evident, for example, in the way the romantic notion of doomed love (a staple of *chanson realiste*) finds a perfect echo in the singers' well-publicized past and present short-lived love affairs. The lyrics of both Frehel's and Piaf's songs are littered with allusions, such as in Piaf's 'C'est toujours la meme histoire':

> C'est toujours la meme histoire, j'ose a peine vous en parler
> Moi j'ai fait semblant d'y croire, fakes semblant de m'ecouter

or direct references, as in Frehel's 'Ou sont tous mes amants', and 'Tout change dans la vie,' where she says, with heavy irony,

> J'ai mis au-dessus de ma cheminée
> La photo de Maurice Chevalier.

Beyond specific experiences, 'authenticity' in the songs is perceived as emanating from the lived experience of these women - sometimes the *chanson realiste* is referred to as *chanson vecue*, the song of lived experience - and from their own self-knowledge. Frehel, a journalist explained, 'experiences what she sings, she loves it and she communicates it. Everything she says rings true', while the singer Sapho recently described Piaf as 'extraordinarily close to herself'.

This discourse of authenticity was put to the service of the class origins of the *chanteuses realistes*. They were *filles du peuple*, a fact well known outside the songs and carried into them by the lyrics and through appearance and accent (the way of pronouncing certain vowels, 'a', for instance); it was perceived as a guarantee of genuine experience and not indifferent to the construction of their persona - however 'constructed' the latter was. This is obvious from a contemporary comment on Frehel: 'T pity those who would be put off by a few vulgarities in the text or her elocution, who would not be deeply moved by this true voice, by the poignant tone of those laments.' Though written and

NEW FORMATIONS
Piaf as fille du peuple.
composed by others, the songs were perceived as emanating from the women themselves, who were thus seen to speak with the voice of their class, as countless testimonies attest; on Piaf: 'She is so true, she reaches deep into people to get her feelings';

Marie Dubas: 'the artist who corresponds the best to our modern sensitivity';

Damia: 'the tragic interpreter of the popular spirit'; and Frehel: 'How direct [she] is! how she knows her audience! how she is in total agreement with it!'

The combination of the women's perceived authenticity with the precise coding of their songs and personalities meant that their individual experience became collective, their 'nature' became historical. A combination of timelessness and adaptation to the period gave added strength to their songs.

The notion of class carried by the songs is no doubt an ideologically suspect one, blurring the distinction between working and criminal classes (a legacy of nineteenth-century melodrama). 'Il riait' (Piaf) is, in this respect, instructive.

The class consciousness of these songs is an archaic one, defined only by opposition to les rupins (the rich) and les gens de la haute (aristocrats). Rare are the references to contemporary lives found, for example, in Piaf's 'Y'a pas de printemps':

In their cabaret shows, most singers performed precisely for those rupins as well as bourgeois intellectuals (as in the time of Bruant), though they were also part of working-class culture, through the radio and the cinema. As in the films of the san e period, the notion of class found in the chansons, though coded as 'modern', is really nostalgic, an appeal to the almost pre-industrial, artisan-type of community metonymically evoked by the references to a vanished or vanishing (popular) Paris such as the zone or Montmartre when it was still a village.

This desire to return to an almost archaic notion of society is reinforced by the gender of the singers in a way which is crucial to the genre: the longing for the past is also a longing for archaic gender relations.

The songs appeal to a generalized notion of womanhood as suffering, dependent, and submissive, but at the same time driven by sexual passion. Piaf's songs particularly outline this aspect of powerful desire:

Il n'a pas besoin d'parler,
Il a rien qu'd m'regarder
Et j'suis a sa merci,
Je n'peux rien contre lui
Piaf: the mask-like face
Car man coeur l’a choisi.
(C’est lui que mon coeur a choisi’: Piaf)\(^{34}\)

But female desire is affirmed only to be curtailed, first by increasing the women’s vulnerability and lack of control over their own emotions. Secondly, the lack of legal and economic control is expressed through the common recourse to the figure of the prostitute.

Prostitution is of course another major element of the Parisian iconography of night life. This is one important aspect of *chanson realiste*, with its emphasis on sordid details, from Piaf’s ‘Les momes de la cloche’:

\[
\begin{align*}
D'un \ bout \ a \ l'autre \ de \ la \ s'maine \\
Siir \ les \ boulevards, \ dans \ les \ faubourgs, \\
On \ les \ voit \ trainer \ par \ certaines \\
Leurs \ guetres \ sales \ et \ leurs \ amours \\
Dans \ des \ chemises \ de \ dix \ jours . . \ . \ .^{35}
\end{align*}
\]

to the extraordinary ‘Je voudrais dormir une nuit’ by Damia:

\[
\begin{align*}
Je \ reve \ de \ draps \ sans \ souillures \\
Et \ d'une \ chambre \ sans \ luxe \\
Helas \ dans \ des \ lits \ d'infamie \\
La \ nuit \ je \ passe \ une \ heure \ ou \ deux^{36}
\end{align*}
\]

and Frehel’s ‘L’Amour des homines’:

\[
\begin{align*}
Qu'il \ pleuve, \ qu'il \ neige, \ ou \ qu'il \ vente \\
Assitot \ que \ la \ nuit \ descend \\
On \ nous \ voit \ passer \ provocantes \\
Offrant \ du \ bonheur \ aux \ passants.^{37}
\end{align*}
\]

Many more examples could be adduced here. Beyond a social type (the reference back to Bruant’s ‘A Saint-Lazare’), the prostitute in *chanson realiste* is the excessively coded expression of femininity: available, controlled and exchanged by men.

The prostitute also stands for female immobility, an inability to evolve, both social and symbolic. Time and again, the dream of change is shown to be an illusion, the woman being left behind by the man on the move.

\[
\begin{align*}
Elle \ croyait \ r’commencer \ sa \ vie \\
Mais \ c'est \ lui \ qui \ s'est \ mis \ a \ changer . . . \\
Elle \ est \ r'tournee \ dans \ son \ Pigalle \\
Y'a \ plus \ personne \ pour \ la \ r'pecher \\
('Elle \ frequentoit \ la \ rue \ Pigalle': Piaf)^{38}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
Chaque \fois \ que \ s'ouvre \ la \ parte \\
Mon \ coeur \ se \ dit, \ c'est \ celui-la \\
Oui \ mais \ le \ destin \ bientot \ l'emporte \\
Camme \ tous \ les \ sairs \ je \ reste \ la. \\
('Sans lendemain': Frehel)^{39}
\end{align*}
\]
The *mise en scène* of suffering: Piaf in later life.
The woman is kept in her (social) place and the promise opened up by the move, whether to Montparnasse or to Provence (as for the heroine of L’Entraineuse), cannot be realized. Two subgenres of chanson réaliste delineate particularly well this impossibility: the exotic song and the sailor’s song. Both the soldier (the legionnaire) and the sailor come into the woman’s life to offer promise of change, only to go again as in many of Piaf’s songs:

*Les matins ca fait des voyages* (‘Les Marins . . .’)\(^{40}\)

*Elle attend depuis 20 ans son capitaine* (‘Le Disque use’)\(^{41}\)

*Il m’avais dit je reste, mais un beau jour il est r’parti,
Il est r’parti vers son soleil . . .* (‘Mon amant de la coloniale’)\(^{42}\)

As in Pagnol’s Marius, the sea (the colonies, the war, the adventure) is the woman’s rival which drives the hero away, even if, in many cases, the lure of adventure is a dangerous one - the soldiers often die, the sea reclaims the sailors.

Nevertheless, the insistence is on the women’s immobility and male mobility, a fact which has itself wider cultural significance - the questing male hero being central to western (Oedipal) narrative. Undoubtedly the other feminine figure most associated with immobility is that of the mother who, in the chanson réaliste, is more than a literal representation of motherhood, and stands for loss (of love object, of time: often, the passing of time is equated with children growing up), as in one of Berthe Sylva’s hits ‘Si Ton pouvait arreter les aiguilles’; many songs both celebrate and deplore the impossibility of going back in time - the desire for an impossible, imaginary, reunion with a mythical mother.

It is, however, motherhood in its most sacrificial and suffering aspect (again one of the stock figures of nineteenth-century melodrama) and, of course, the mother-son pair, that are chiefly celebrated by chanson réaliste. Berthe Sylva made the maternal melodrama song her speciality. Her most famous, ‘Les Roses blanches’, features a young boy who steals white roses on a Sunday morning to take to his mother in hospital, only to find that his mother has just died. As is typical of melodramatic narrative, pathos and melancholia are evoked through missed opportunities and the manipulation of point of view (in ‘Les Roses blanches,’ given that the listener is addressed as feminine, identification is in fact with the dead mother). Mothers call in vain for their sons, as in the extraordinary ‘La Suppliante’, where Damia as a bedridden mother tries to imagine the location of the body of her son, killed during the First World War. Sons only ‘appreciate’ their mothers when they are dead. The dominant feeling appealed to is guilt, well summarized by ‘Mon P’tit Gars’ (Frehel):

*Tu verras mon p’tit gars, tu pleureras ta vieille mere*\(^{43}\)

or Damia’s hit ‘Le Petit Bosco’, where the spectacle of the victimized hunchback placing flowers on his mother’s grave shames his persecutors into contrition.

These songs may now be mostly objects of derision, like some of the most excessive ‘maternal melodramas’ in the cinema (for example, Stella Dallas), and their appeal often close to camp, but they display all the same a great emotional intensity, carried by the voice as much as by the lyrics, and, however
conventional the framework, a validation of women's experience. These songs evoke specifically feminine experiences, occasionally alluding to the mundane experiences of the housewife -

\[ \text{Et mime le dimanche, il faut faire ses affaires} \\
\text{haver, r'priser, repasser sa misere} \\
\text{('Y'a pas de printemps': Piaf)}^{44} \]

- and construct a feminine, or 'feminized', audience. The public which went to cabarets, cafe-cones' and music-halls to listen to the chanteuses was mixed, but the chanteuses themselves were always particularly popular with women. There is no doubt, for example, that Sylva's audience, at first anyway, was mostly female, and photographs of Edith Piaf's funeral show the overwhelming presence of women.

* * *

There are indications that the singers occasionally found the chanson realiste an oppressive genre. While Frehel still insisted to Maurice Verne, 'Of course I believe in my songs', Damia ironically described hers to him as 'silly ballads concocted especially for me, with stories of good prostitutes and an orgy of tears, in short all the tricks in the book!' Piaf in the 1940s became more critical: 'I don't like realist songs. . . . For me they're vulgar tunes with blokes wearing cloth caps and girls plying their trade on the streets. I hate that. I like flowers, simple love stories, health, joie de vivre and Paris.'

It is true that Piaf's repertoire evolved (a little) away from the precise social coding of chanson realiste, although not exactly in the direction of health, flowers, and joie de vivre. She went on to sing about love and sexual passion, but a kind that was still generally doomed, fatalistic, and seen from the point of view of the downtrodden, self-deprecating woman, as in 'Milord':

\[ \text{Je n'suis qu'une fille de port, une ombre de la rue}^{46} \]

and 'Les Amants d'un jour':

\[ \text{Moi j'essouie les verres au fond du cafe.}^{47} \]

Even if occasionally singing triumphant passion ('La Vie en rose'), the chanteuses realistes still connoted pessimism and suffering, through the theatricality of the spectacle they gave, to which all elements - voice, stage behaviour, costume - contributed. There are in this respect important differences between the chanteuses, but there are also remarkable consistencies.

First of all, chanteuses realistes all adopted sobriety in their outfit, with, central to it, the black dress (one of Piaf's was part of a recent Parisian exhibition on the history of clothes). Damia was described by Maurice Verne as wearing 'the blackest of black dresses. She is in mourning for all the disappointed love stories in the world.' But there is more to the black dress than this facile symbolism. It was, for a start, historically coded. As in the goualeuse (street singer) outfit of the turn of the century (black dress, red apron, and red ribbon worn like a dog's collar), the black worked in combination with white
and red - the white face and red lips, so well suited to Damia (often referred to as the 'Sarah Bernhardt of chanson'), for songs like 'La Veuve' or 'La Suppliante', with their gruesome evocations of blood and death, but adopted by all the chanteuses realistes.

The black dress was also part of a calculated ensemble effect in which lighting played a large part: the dress erasing the body, the spotlights emphasizing the mask-like aspect of the face - with or without make-up (Sylva was famous for going on stage without any). The mise-en-scene adopted by the chanteuses proclaimed itself by its very absence. The descriptions of Marie Dubas, 'alone in front of the audience, without any decor, without any mise-en-scene, without a garish costume', or of Piaf, 'She seemed even smaller, even thinner, in this immense Salle Pleyel, on this bare stage, with only her talent to create the atmosphere', are typical of others. It is a mise-en-scene which owes its techniques to the small-scale cabaret, but also to the cinema. Whereas the original caf'conc' artists (Theresa, Frehel in her youth) had to shout to get the audience's attention, after the First World War singers like Damia and Marie Dubas transformed their recitals into an ascetic spectacle, with expressionist lighting, pared-down decor and costume, all drawing the audience's attention to the face of the singer on which the emotions were concentrated, as in a film close-up.

The body also played a part in this overall mise-en-scene. Excess and disease, as in the songs, took their toll. Yvonne George, Berthe Sylva, Frehel, and Piaf all shortened their lives with a succession of drugs, alcohol, accidents, illnesses. Although these are commonly associated with show business (Rita Hayworth, Judy Garland . . .), in the case of chanteuses realistes the very diseased aspect of their bodies was integral to the show, whether they became excessively fat (Sylva, Frehel) or excessively emaciated (George, Piaf). The chanteuses' excesses and the pain they visibly inflicted also helped to highlight their femininity, polarizing them into classic motherly figures or archetypal fragile waifs - in fact to the two stock figures of melodrama. Their suffering was also narrativized into another testimony of authenticity; this is evident, for instance, in the following description by Maurice Verne: 'Yvonne George paid in kind, like Damia and Frehel. Season after season more fragile, forever prey to alcohol binges, drugs and detoxication cures.'

There is obviously something morbid, even necrophiliac, in the way these diseased bodies are consumed as spectacle. Yvonne George's last concert (organized by Cocteau) clearly precipitated her death; Berthe Sylva died while an audience waited for her at a concert. Frehel, living in poverty and alcoholic stupor at the end of her life (she died in 1951) had a few concerts also organized by friends, which she was often unable to attend; she sang Carco's 'Chanson tendre' in a cinema four days before her death, with hindsight a sad epitaph:

Tout avil l'air a sa place, mime ton nom sur la glace
Juste a la place oit s'efface, quoiqu'on fasse, toute trace
Puis avec un pauvre rire, j'ai cru lire
Apres tout, on s'enfout.

This process reached its culmination with Piaf, who in the last years of her life...
appeared increasingly wasted, her reappearance on stage acclaimed each time as a 'miracle'. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the audience half-expected the singers to die on stage. As Verne puts it in the case of Yvonne George, 'All Paris came to witness her suffering.'

It could be argued that the fate of these singers is a common lot for women performers in all cultures (this is the thesis of Robyn Archer and Diana Simmonds in *A Star is Torn*), and the trajectories of, for example, Frehel and Piaf resemble those of a number of Blues and Country & Western singers and film stars; these women's histories undeniably spell out forms of female oppression by men as managers, husbands, lovers. It would, however, be excessively reductive to see them just as that. First of all, the *chanteuses'* audience did not identify with them only on a negative, masochistic basis. Courage, strength, and tenacity in the face of mounting obstacles are also part of Piaf's and Frehel's repertoire. Some of their songs, admittedly a minority, even trade on it in a self-referential way. A couple of Piaf's songs, for instance, are a vindication of 'the little woman' who despite her humble station in life and mediocre looks wins the man ('Y'a pas de printemps', 'De l'autre cote de la rue'). Frehel carried over from her early *caf-conc*' repertoire some comic, spunky, even bawdy songs, like 'La Mome catch-catch' (a wrestler) and 'Tel qu'il est,' which plays on male weeding and macho bravado:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Il est carre mais ses epaules} \\
\text{Par du carton sont rembourrees} \\
\text{Quant il est tout nu ga m'fait drole} \\
\text{On n'en voit plus que la moitie.}
\end{align*}
\]

Secondly, and more importantly, the *raison d'être* of the *chanteuses* was, after all, spectacle: a self-display of pain, a *mise-en-scene* of suffering, adapted to the genre but nevertheless a *mise-en-scene*, made all the more powerful by its near-perfect match between songs and private life. As in all forms which foreground the autobiographical, these women as subjects were split, both 'passive' as the object of the spectacle, and 'active' as the controller of their own *mise-en-scene*, even if it was a patriarchal version of their own experience. In the last analysis, too, the weakness and devastation written on their bodies and faces and in the lyrics of their songs were dialectically and dramatically contradicted by the beauty and power of their voices - the absent signifier in this article.

Frehel and the other women mentioned here are virtually unknown outside France. Piaf, on the other hand, is integral to international commodification of Frenchness - one of the later manifestations of which is a restaurant in London's Waterloo Station, Le Café de Piaf, in which prosperous home counties commuters can sample French cuisine and the live accordion. Fortunately, it is still possible to buy records and cassettes of her voice in High Street record stores - in the nostalgia section, of course.

NOTES

1. On the subject of the Parisian topography of French *chanson*, Adrian Rifkin has written a series of programmes for radio, *The City of Light* (BBC Radio, broadcast...
November 1986). See also his article 'Musical moments', in Yale French Studies, Summer 1987. My views and approach differ in several ways from Rifkin’s, but his article offers precise historical data on aspects of French popular music and social history.

2 'Walls full of cracks / A narrow staircase / An old garret / And here is my home.'

As my interest is primarily in the songs as performed and not in their precise textual origins, I will only mention the name of the singer with the title of the song throughout the article.

3 'We set up home in the faubourg St Denis / Hotel du Beau Rivage, the very essence of Paris.'

4 Francis Carco, Montmartre a 20 ans (Paris: 1938), 195.

5 See Louis Chevalier’s classic historical study, Classes laborieuses el classes dangereuses a Paris pendant la premiere moitié du XIX e siecle (Paris: 1958), translated into English as Labouring Classes and Dangerous Classes in Paris During the First Half of the Nineteenth Century (London: 1973). More directly relevant to this article is Chevalier’s later work, Montmartre du plaisir el du crime (Paris: 1980) in which he makes specific references to chanson.

6 'You see as if on a screen / The shadows of menacing silhouettes dancing / You would like to know and see, but / The guinguette has put up the shutters.'

7 'Where are all the city walls / And the bistrots at the gates / They were the backcloth of all our songs / Our beautiful songs of long ago.'

8 'On the zone I own a shack / Made of very old pine wood / And nearby the ammonia factory / Perfumes the air all day long.'

9 'Never the hope of another evening / Hello, goodbye / Adieu to love / No tomorrow, nothing that lasts / That's what my life has always been.'

10 'Me, I wipe glasses at the back of the cafe.'

11 'In this cafe near the lock / I serve drinks to the bargees.'

12 For a further analysis of Pipe le Moko and the Gabin persona, see Ginette Vincendeau, 'Community, nostalgia and the spectacle of masculinity: Jean Gabin in two films made during the period of the Popular Front', Screen, vol. 26, no. 6, November-December 1985.

13 'The poet in rags / The prowlers and the whores / The songs of Aristide Bruant / The popular heroes / The pre-war songs / All these are far from us now.'

14 'Those in distress / The hungry, the beggars, the vagabonds.'


16 'They’ll have to cut my shirt collar before cutting my neck.'


18 T. J. Clark, The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the art of Manet and his followers (London: 1985), the chapter 'Un bar aux Folies-Bergeres'.

19 Colette, La Vagabonde, first published in French, 1911; published in English as The Vagabond, translated by Enid McLeod (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 14.

20 Quoted in Maurice Verne, Les Amuseurs de Paris (Paris: 1932), chapter on Damia. All further references to Maurice Verne are from his interviews with Damia and Frehel in the same book.


22 'It’s always the same story, I hardly dare tell you about it / But I pretended to believe in it, so you can pretend to listen to me.'

23 'I hung above my fire-place / The photograph of Maurice Chevalier.'
24 Francois Holbane, *ParisSoi*, 5 December 1940.
25 Quoted in *Paroles & Musique*, no. 31.
26 As Rifkin argues in 'Musical moments', op. cit.
27 *Comœdia*, 17 May 1932.
28 Louis Barrier, Piaf’s impresario, quoted in *Paroles & Musique*, op. cit.
31 'His eyes were those of an evil angel, fallen from an ugly paradise.'
32 'And as if by chance there was the war / And he died before he had even lived.'
33 'Never any rest, always rush / Metro, office, and back again.'
34 'He doesn't need to talk / All he has to do is look at me / And I'm all his / I can't do anything to resist him / Because my heart chose him.'
35 'All week long / On the boulevards, on the faubourgs / You see hundreds of them wander about / In their dirty gaiters and their love stories / In their ten-day old shirts . . .'
36 'I'm dreaming of clean sheets / And of a room free from lust / Alas, in beds of infamy / Every night I spend one or two hours.'
37 'Come rain, snow, or wind / As soon as night comes / You see our provocative taunt / Selling happiness to passers-by.'
38 'She thought she was starting her life over / But it’s he who began to change . . . She went back to her Pigalle / Now there’s nobody to rescue her.'
39 'Each time the door opens / My heart says "That's him" / But soon destiny takes him away again / And night after night I stay here.'
40 'Sailors travel far.'
41 'She's been waiting 20 years for her captain.'
42 'He had told me, "I'm staying", but one day he went / He went back to his sun . . .'
43 'You'll see, my boy, you'll cry for your old mother.'
44 'And even on Sunday you have to go about your business / Wash, mend, and iron out your misery.'
45 *Actualités*, 20 June 1943.
46 'I'm only a girl from the harbour, a shadow in the street.'
47 'Me, I wipe glasses at the back of the cafe.'
49 *Actualités*, 20 June 1943, referring to Piaf's recital at Pleyel in 1942.
50 'Everything looked in order, even your name on the mirror / Exactly in the place where everything fades away, whatever you do / Then with a small laugh, I thought I read / "After all, who cares".'
52 'He is broad, but his shoulders / Are padded with cardboard / When he's naked, it makes me laugh / There's only half of him left.'

**APPENDIX A**

**Edith Piaf's Filmography**

1936: *La Garçonne* (Jean de Limur)
1941: *Montmartre-sur-Seine* (Georges Lacombe)
1945: *Étoile sans lumière* (Marcel Blistene)
1947: *Neuf gargons, un cœur* (Georges Freedland) *
1951: *Paris chante toujours* (Pierre Montazel)
1953: *Si Versailles m'était conte* (Sacha Guitry)

*THE MISE-EN-SCENE OF SUFFERING 127*
1954: *French cancan* (Jean Renoir)
1958: *Les Amants de demain* (Marcel Blistene)

**Frehel's filmography**

1931: *Coeur de Mas* (Anatole Litvak)
1933: *La Rue sans nom* (Pierre Chenal)
1934: *Amok* (Fedor Ozep)
1936: *Gigolette* (Yvan Noe)
1936: *Pipe le Moko* (Julien Duvivier)
1936: *Le Roman d'un tricheur* (Sacha Guitry)
1937: *L'Innocent* (Maurice Cammage)
1938: *La Maison du Malais* (Pierre Chenal)
1938: *L'Entrainante* (Albert Valentin)
1938: *Unejava* (Claude Orval)
1938: *La Rue sans joie* (Andre Hugon)
1939: *Berlingot & Cie* (Fernand Rivers)
1939: *L’Enfer des anges* (Christian-Jaque)

**APPENDIX B**

**Selective discography**

   ‘L’Age d’or du Music-Hall’, single album Vogue, VG 201.
Piaf: Edith Piaf volume 2, Polygram distribution 826 617-1 PY 791.
   Edith Piaf- programme + Impact 824 073-1 PY 791.