

Call for papers

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The dance of conspiracy: the survivals of Jane Avril

Jean-Martin Charcot's patient at the Salpêtrière asylum, a cashier during the Universal Exposition at the Eiffel Tower, an equestrienne at the grand racetrack on Avenue de l'Alma, and ultimately, a dancer of sublime and untamed talent, a shining star of the Moulin Rouge and the Folies Bergère: Jane Avril, also known as "the Mad", "La Mélinite", or simply as herself, served as the muse for Toulouse-Lautrec, becoming an enduring icon of a unique epoch, a fragment of the 19th century that, as Stefan Zweig remarked, witnessed more profound transformations than the preceding two centuries combined. These were the golden years and preludes to war, marked by bodies that still conspired beneath the crinolines and whalebone stays. However, in the separate chambers, reserved for the discreet lunches of respectable philanderers, Isadora Duncan's bare feet officially scandalized society. And then there was the *cancon*, or more precisely, the *chabut*—a peasant contradance that had already captivated the working-class dance halls and, thanks to Offenbach's triumphs, now joined the inexorable movement whereby survival strategies forged in the crucible of hardship found their place within the paradisiacal realms of fashion and commerce. Transformed into benign spectacles, divested of their provocations, assimilated into the mechanisms of production and value extraction—yet, can Jane Avril be merely relegated to the role of a mere leading lady within this passive revolution?

Do the Maenads dance while tossing the head of Orpheus into the river, does Salome dance, seeking the beheading of John the Baptist, does Judith dance, above all, after severing the head of Holofernes, leading the "dance of all women," including Jane, who had begun to move amidst the hysterics of Salpêtrière. The hysterics, indeed, the patients of simulation and the simulation of simulation, nocturnal prey for doctors and attendants, interpreters of what Louis Aragon and André Breton would define as "the greatest poetic discovery of the 19th century." The hysterics, kin to the colonized, according to Frantz Fanon. If Jane Avril is to be regarded as a figure of revolt, she must be conceived within a perspective that strips away any foundational grounding, entirely surrendered to a contingency whose shapes and functions she takes on in turn then. Addressing Fanon's parallel, her strategy might be traced to Suzanne Césaire's "grand camouflage," where she wrote: "If my Antilles are so beautiful, then it means the great game of hide-and-seek has succeeded." A strategy of pretense and dissimulation, explosive plasticity of bodies and gestures in the execution of a program that, like any deconstructive movement, as Derrida would say, necessarily operates from within, "extracting from the old structure all the strategic and economic resources of subversion."

As Jane dances, she replicates the postures of a hysterical attack, but it's the alienists and psychiatrists who are the true performers: their need to give a face, a pose, a figurative organization to the externality of the neurological body is pure entertainment. The heads of Esquirols, Voisins, Georets, and the entire

high command of the Salpêtrière roll, along with all their arsenal of ovarian presses and forceps, moral shocks, and electrostatic baths. There is even a novel by Per Olov Enquist, *The Story Of Blanche And Marie*, in which Jane's unrestrained dance and Charcot's death are intertwined. She also repeatedly appears in Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, where Jane, the child hero, assumes the multifaceted metaphorical forms of the pig, the donkey, the reindeer, the wolf, the goat, the bear, the lamb, the bull, the owl, the mouse, the louse, the hawk, the rooster, and the cuckoo.

Because that of Mélinite is, above all, a disruptive mimicry, a dazzling ability to take on shapes, which she also holds in John Huston's *Moulin Rouge* (1952), the film in which her character played by Zsa Zsa Gábor imitates and implodes the social nature of any suitor. She's a figure of becoming a figure, and therefore, a figure of a movement internal to the form that the figure can only betray and disfigure in essence, referring to the relationship that the indeterminacy of madness and dance has always maintained with what Marx famously referred to in a youthful letter as "the dream of a thing."

Our hypothesis, therefore, is to engage with Jane Avril's mimetic talent to extract from it the trace of a possible radical tampering of the internal tensions within power dynamics. By thrusting one of the primary symptomatic manifestations of hysteria—the rainbow—into the spotlight of theatres and dance halls, Jane primarily demonstrated the deconstructive nature of mimesis as an art of survival. The art she had seen at work during her stay at the Salpêtrière asylum when she observed from the edges of the beds the inventions through which Charcot's patients, to appear genuinely hysterical and thus treatable, engaged in the simulation of their "non-existent symptoms," exposing themselves to the metamorphic and morphogenetic potency of an otherness that becomes corporeal.

In line with these general themes, we can propose some focal points for the contributions:

1. Jane Avril consistently expresses her aversion towards quadrilles, waltzes, cinematographic depictions, and pictorial or sculptural representations of dance. On the one hand, this refusal highlights the significance of the exceptions she makes for portraits by Toulouse-Lautrec (and according to her, Renoir as well), viewing them as formal solutions capable of preserving the spirit of dance. On the other hand, this spirit can be discerned in the emphasis on movement over form, resistance to the crystallization of steps and gestures, and the relative deconstruction of choreographic identity. In doing so, Jane seems to want to avert the historical emergence of a "mechanization" of dance, as Siegfried Kracauer would later term it, in which "the human figure inserted into mass ornamental configurations embarks on an exodus from lush organic splendour." This exodus represents a departure from the sensory life that aligns with the broader tendency toward abstraction inherent in the metropolis and the capitalist mode of production. Therefore, we propose to investigate the correlations between Jane's gestures and the concept that Marx would later define more precisely in the era of the *Grundrisse* as a reality "in which man does not reproduce himself within a predetermined dimension but produces his totality" and "where he does not attempt to remain something that has become but is in the absolute movement of becoming."
2. Jane Avril embodies the subversion caused by hysteria within psychoanalytic discourse. The hysteric escapes the biopolitical grasp of psychiatry, which seeks to relegate the clinical study of hysteria to the realms of nosography and medicalization. This isn't merely about subduing the

discourse of the master (the peasant and proletarian origins of the *chabut* become relevant here) but rather about disrupting every regimentation of the body, liberating it from cultural, social, and gender norms. It's about emancipating Eros from its biological limitations, emphasizing its subversive nature. The liberation of the body from the tyranny of need and the detachment of demand from the confines of satisfaction enable the hysteric to eroticize absence, to ground desire, as illustrated by Bollas, in lack, expanding the realm of erogenous zones into the non-physical domains of sight and sound, gaze and voice.

3. Hysteria would be classified by Paul Regnard, the co-author of the *Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière*, as a form of “social mimicry” or “epidemic of the spirit,” much like Aiwa Ong would later note the prevalence of “possession epidemics” among female workers in American multinational corporations established in West Malaysia. In this context, amidst the disruptions brought about by the shift from a rural economy to an industrial one, the language of possession served as a conduit for the distress associated with the erosion and dissolution of traditional family bonds. As seismographs of evolving worlds, female possession rituals thus attributed the body the role of giving voice to collective demands for survival and resistance. The ritualization of gestures borrowed from what would naturally be attributed to the repertoire of discomfort and mental illness shed light on the unexplored performative potential of simulating “non-existent symptoms” stemming from genuinely existing causes. Moreover, in the processes of decolonisation, Frantz Fanon assigns dance a crucial function. Alongside possession rituals, dreams of movement, imaginary realms populated by zombies and terrifying monsters, and fratricidal struggles, dance emerges as one of the most recurring forms of corporeal expression in the colonial condition, which reduces the colonized to being enclosed in a fence. In his famous preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre takes Fanon's ideas further, suggesting that dance could correspond to staging a “no” or the mime of the murders that the racialized subject dare not commit. While historical evidence in favour of this mimicry of resistance is not lacking, what becomes explorable from Jane Avril's perspective appears to be the grey area of indeterminacy between survival and conflict, the destituent act and the actual completion of the dance within a strategy of resistance.

4. When Jane Avril does not hesitate to describe herself as an avid reader in her memoirs, she implicitly establishes a connection with another potential patient of Charcot: Emma Bovary. On the one hand, there is documented evidence of the medical-psychiatric sources Flaubert might have consulted to construct his character. However, on the other hand, Emma's declared hysteria takes on a transformative connotation. The reference here is to the significant critical feat accomplished by Jules de Gaultier in 1892 - during Jane's rise to fame at the Moulin Rouge - when he removed bovarism from the realms of diagnostic competence to identify it as “the capacity to think of oneself as different from what one is,” about an otherness primarily characterized as contagious and mimetic. Yet, becoming other through this otherness that becomes corporeal is also what Angela Putino identifies in Virginia Woolf's literary gesture, a gesture primarily political and collective. As Putino writes, “otherness, the becoming strangers to one another, the exteriority of one to the other is the breath Virginia introduces to think political relations.” It is a breath, a breeze, that enters the body and propels it to dance towards an unknown that is the destiny of women in a patriarchal world. The proposal, therefore, is to trace the spectre of Jane and her dance in literary figures who may have shared in her furores.

Submit a proposal by November 4, 2023 (2500 characters max.)

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If the proposal is accepted, the paper must be delivered by April 19, 2024.

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