

INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION
THE LONG CENTURY
LECTURE 16: PLEASURES OF THE BELLE EPOQUE

"The economic successes of the Third Republic during the 1880s and 1890s and right through to the outbreak of war in 1914 were enjoyed by a larger spectrum of Parisians than at any other time in history. Dubbed the Belle Epoque (or the "Banquet Years" or the Miraculous Years"), it felt like a period that would last forever. This age of excitement, of fear combined with optimistic expectation, saw the dawning of the consumer society in what one author dubbed the *nivellement des jouissances* [the leveling of pleasures].... As Paris assumed once more her eminence as the world's center of culture and pleasure, with every passing year it seemed increasingly impossible that the humiliation of 1870, let alone the Commune, had ever happened."

—Alistair Horne, *Seven Ages of Paris*

1. BEFORE THE GREAT WAR

How "belle" was the Belle Epoque (the period just before the First World War)? For the affluent and even the middle classes it was indeed a good time: the absence of an income tax made it possible to live well on a salary or pension, an inheritance or investments. But low taxes meant that social programs for workers and the poor could scarcely be contemplated. Moreover, at the turn of the century hardly more than 35% of the country's population could be found in towns of more than 5,000. Houses were still badly built, lit, and, especially, plumbed. Washing was rare and bathing rarer: clean linen remained a luxury, even among the middle classes. Into the 1930s waiters remained just about the only members of the petty bourgeoisie who could boast of having freshly laundered shirts. The multiplicity of household chores—doing the laundry, fetching water, coal, or logs, mending clothes, taking care of poultry, horses, fireplaces, floors, furniture—meant that everyone who could afford one had a servant, or several of them. Household servants—maids, butlers, coachmen, cooks—represented 8% of the nation's labor force, and formed a link between the countryside from which they tended to be recruited and the towns where they worked.

In the last half of the century the quantity of bread, wine, and potatoes annually consumed in France grew 50%, while that of meat, beer, and cider doubled, that of alcohol tripled, and that of sugar and coffee quadrupled. Bread, which had accounted for 20% of the average household budget in 1850, counted for only 9% in 1900. Working-class families were just beginning to buy wine to drink with their meals. There were 27,000 cafés in Paris in 1900; if you add wine shops and cabarets, Paris had "more drinking places (11.25 for every thousand residents) than any other major city in the world" (Charles Rearick, *Pleasures of the Belle Epoque*).

Electrification of street railways, begun in the United States in the 1880s, spread to Europe in the 1890s, cutting costs and fares by half or better and tripling the number of riders. In 1900 the first Paris Metro line, with its Art Nouveau ironwork at the entrances of its stations, opened and proved phenomenally

successful, despite somber warnings, the great historian Eugen Weber tells us, about electrocution, asphyxiation, and pickpockets. The cost of electricity in France remained high, however, ensuring that light bulbs would be few, weak, and turned on as seldom as possible. And the French telephone network was for a long time under-funded, so that it was the worst in Western Europe.

One of the reasons women did not become enfranchised in this period is that republican men believed (with some reason) that the views of conservative Catholic priests would influence women's votes. But in 1884 divorces was made possible; in 1886 women could open savings accounts with their husbands' consent; in 1893 single or separated women were granted full legal capacity; and in 1897 women were recognized as eligible witnesses in civil actions. In 1900, 45% of all women worked outside the home, though most at dreary, repetitive labor.

French labor unions remained relatively weak, though their rhetoric was radical. Strikes and sabotage were common, and some workers thought of them as the prelude to revolution. Economic growth from the late 1890s brought not only more jobs but also higher prices and more strikes. "Whatever else it was, the Belle Époque was a fine time for ferments, flare-ups, rampages, riots, turbulence, tumults, barricades, and bloodshed" (Weber). Politics in the era of the Dreyfus Affair was bitter and full of resentments, and words like betrayed, tricked, sold out, trapped, ensnared, and duped were common in the political vocabulary of the day.

A law of 1881 established freedom of the press, while new technologies and a burgeoning advertising industry made possible the rise of the mass circulation daily papers, with their insatiable need for sensations and scandals. The 1881 law also regulated posters, which, in the hands of Toulouse-Lautrec and his colleagues, became a form of popular art. "Whereas the Impressionists had wanted to catch the moment on the wing, advertising artists had to capture attention at a glance: bright colors, stylized forms, and whenever possible the erotic appeal of the feminine image" (Weber).

Another new technology created new possibilities: the bicycle spawned cycling clubs, "vélodromes," and races, of which the famous Tour de France is the direct descendant. As Dunlop's pneumatic tires began to replace solid rubber ones in the early 1890s, prices began to fall and working-class men could afford to buy bicycles. In contrast to horse-racing, long a preserve of the wealthy, cycle races were the first popular sporting entertainment of modern times in France. And some of the cycling enthusiasts would turn to the manufacture of automobiles and, after 1903, airplanes!

From 1873 to 1896, the French index of wholesale prices fell from 124 to 71, while securities doubled and tripled in value. That is why it was possible for wealthy donors to fund little magazines for the avant-garde in this period. Meanwhile the socialist movement consolidated itself under the leadership of the great tribune Jean Jaurès. But socialism in France, as elsewhere, was not as strong as nationalism, as the events of 1914 were to prove.

If French elites were increasingly nationalist in their rhetoric and ideology during the years before 1914, the artists of Montparnasse were extraordinarily cosmopolitan. Picasso, Chagall, Modigliani—the artists of Montparnasse came from all over the Western world and as far away as Japan. Perhaps the most cosmopolitan of all the members of Picasso's circle was his great friend, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, whose career we will investigate in a future course on modern European intellectual history.

2. PARIS, 1900

In 1989, on the two hundredth anniversary of the French Revolution, the great historian of France Eugen Weber published an article entitled "Paris: Le Belle Epoque," in *National Geographic*. Even after Haussmann's renovation, Weber suggested, France's capital, now home to 2.5 million people, still suffered from a cleanliness deficit. "Streets, air, food, homes, people, all are tainted: breath, clothes, courts and buildings reek. The model of the bourgeois apartment that is the center of Zola's *Pot-Bouille* reveals no taps or sinks, let alone lavatories. The superior cleanliness of prostitutes was a commonplace—presumably confirming the dangers of ablution."

The city was still unfinished. Beyond the Etoile lay areas still close to the countryside. The great avenues Napoleon had laid out around his Arc de Triomphe, like that where Victor Hugo died in 1885 and that bears his name, ran through orchards and past chicken roosts. A lot of the avenues that Haussmann had planned were still not finished by 1900; some of the most familiar (the Boulevards Saint-Michel and Saint-Germain on the Left Bank, for instance) would not be finished until just before and after World War I. The single subway line apart, would-be travelers depended on cabs trams, or buses, all of them horse drawn. A cab ride cost about the equivalent of a workman's daily wages, disputes with cab drivers embittered many an outing, and romantic trysts in cabs figured in a song the popular chanteuse Yvette Guilbert launched about this time, called 'Le Fiacre.' Each horse dropped six to seven tons of dung a year: hence the cheeky *moineau de Paris* (Paris sparrow) flourished."

On the other hand there was novelty: "By 1900 tailored suits suggested a more streamlined humanity, bodies more slender and more free to move. Skirts and petticoats had to adapt to new means of transportation. Or simply to the need of perfectly respectable women to ambulate in the urban environment, to trot and window-shop, without sweeping up too much mud or dust in the process. And beneath the dress boned corsets began to give way to more elastic girdles, bodices, and bras.

"Much that was new was alleged to be American. Brash transatlantic females, assertive and 'feminist,' threatened to Americanize French women; American gold perverted French taste; American scale sapped the French sense of measure. The Eiffel Tower was denounced as 'American'; so were traffic jams and 'politicians'—a new word for the oldest profession, imported from the US in the 1870s. American prosperity and transatlantic steamers began to funnel in a stream of visitors. Now foreigners by definition were American, flourishing

gross cigars, calling for ice water, demanding unfamiliar creature comforts like baths or phones that worked. International exhibitions spurred the rise of grand hotels like the Ritz (1898). Telephones, typewriters, the electric telegraph, and the tailored suit all came from across the ocean."

Above all, the city offered a variety of entertainments, the "leveling of pleasures" that Alistair Horne cites as the principal characteristic of the Belle Époque: "for the eye and the mind, Paris was stimulation. The strolling, ambling, rambling pedestrian could gaze for hours on the theater of the street and boulevard and the brash posters of Toulouse-Lautrec, Willette, Chéret. Half a million Parisians went to the theater once a week. For spectators it meant an evening's entertainment, available to even the lower classes, perched in the gallery, throwing their orange peels or peanut shells over the railings and proffering comments that could make or break up a show. Entertainment was not confined to the stage. Built in a horseshoe shape, their lights undimmed or only slightly lowered while the show went on, theaters were designed to give the public the spectacle of itself.

"When people stopped looking at one another and looked at the stage, they could enjoy *féeries* like Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* (1908); vaudeville and melodrama, vehicles for sophisticated, witty repartee; or performances in the grand style by Bernhardt and Duse. Rostand's brilliant, romantic *Cyrano* was a great success in 1899, but no greater than the soft porn of bedroom comedies that featured heroines dressing, undressing, being undressed, or searching for a flea in suggestive places. New plays, more sober, more demanding, featuring minimal scenery, truculent language, and shocking ideas, attracted tiny minorities.

"The theater of the poor' and of the not so poor, was to be found in music halls and in their more modest counterparts, café-concerts or café-chantants, of which the capital boasted nearly 300 at the turn of the century. Between 1893 and 1913, while the population of Paris grew by 18%, attendance at such festive halls more than doubled: evidence of popular favor but also of more people with more free time, more money to spend, more choice about how to spend it. The can-can was only one offering in a broad menu designed to tease the senses and to display women's bodies."

3. BOHEMIANS AND THE AVANT-GARDE

Why Paris in 1900 still the center of the arts? Modernist art often seems to emerge out of situations of displacement and marginality, and Paris has always attracted not only ambitious characters but displaced and marginal ones as well. Especially students and artists—the student tradition goes back to Abelard and Villon in the Middle Ages. Whereas in England (until recently) the universities have been far from the capital, in France they are at its center. Student poverty mingling with the ferment of the town yields the will to *épater le bourgeois*, and there is a direct link between Villon's humor and that of modern bohemians like Baudelaire and Apollinaire. The term *bohemian*, however, is an invention of the mid-nineteenth century, and it's contemporaneous with the phenomenon of the "dandy" imported from Regency England. The dandy adopts an image of aristocratic fastidiousness above the urban crowd; the bohemian on the other

hand looks downward rather than upward along the social scale for models of deportment. (Baudelaire, by the way, somehow contrived to be both a dandy and a bohemian.) The bohemian life is an artist's or intellectual's version of the gypsy image (gypsies were supposed to have originated in Bohemia)—a community of self-selected outcasts, claiming the spontaneous gift of creativity and the martyr's will to undergo privation in order to preserve it. The key to bohemianism, Jerrold Seigel has argued, is the appropriation of marginal or eccentric life-styles by young renegade bourgeois to dramatize their ambivalence toward bourgeois identity. Bohemianism is the theatrical expression of a willed marginality.

Late nineteenth-century Paris, as we have seen, had undergone modernization and was more a magnet than ever, drawing ambitious young people from all over the Continent. This new Paris, with its grand boulevards and monuments, was a commercial rather than an industrial city. In dominating the life of the provinces and becoming the main center for every sort of interest from politics and journalism to business and entertainment, Paris was bound to attract not only the upwardly mobile, but also many people whose existence was essentially improvised and unconventional.

And there were new spaces to accommodate these people. From the 1830s Parisians had used the street to blur distinctions between outside and inside, public and private: sidewalk cafés and entertainments, pavement stall, and arcades (ancestors of the shopping mall). The café and the boulevard became stages that turned everyday life into spectacle and tied pleasure to consumption. First the Impressionists and then the Cubists painted these new spaces and spectacles, fascinated by the social ambiguity of the new kinds of commercialized entertainment.

The bohemian style was aggressively plebeian. In the late nineteenth century the headquarters of Bohemia shifted to Montmartre, the hilly region that had escaped the redevelopment of the western part of Paris. Montmartre, as we saw in our discussion of the Impressionists, was an area of small workshops, tenements, little houses and pleasure gardens, circuses, laundries, dance-halls, and cabarets, frequented by artists, workers, gangsters, prostitutes, and people of all classes who came there to be amused and shocked.

Montmartre, writes Alistair Horne, "became something of a year-long carnival, where anyone abandoning bourgeois respectability could submerge his identity for a few hours, disappearing into an alluring milieu of Bohemians, prostitutes and criminals. For the artists it represented cheap and congenial living—with plenty of motifs to paint all round them. Slowly arising above them was the sugary white cupola of the Sacré-Coeur—the monument to reconciliation after the bloodletting of the Commune, loathed by some but painted by many others, and eventually to become as integral a part of the Paris skyline as its opposing pinnacle, the Eiffel Tower."

When Montmartre became too commercialized, artists and writers migrated to Montparnasse, in particular to the intersection of the boulevard Montparnasse

and the boulevard Raspail, where there were four great cafés—the Dome and the Select, the Rotonde and the Coupole—and cheap artists' studios nearby. Here writers and artists could mix with painters. Another constant was that the rich and the poor, the bourgeois and the working classes, shared a common night life here. The city was tolerant of the pursuit of pleasure in all of its forms: music, theater, gambling, dancing, drinking, dining, and of course sex.

Meanwhile bohemians developed ever more ingenious techniques of social provocation, an etiquette of nonconformism, eccentricity, and exhibitionism. The painter Pelletier went on walks accompanied by a pet jackal. De Nerval took a lobster on a leash through the Tuileries gardens: "It does not bark," he said, "and knows the secrets of the deep." At the Lapin Agile, a group of Montmartre artists concocted the celebrated hoax of a canvas, brushed entirely by the twitching, swishing tail of Lolo, the proprietor's unhousebroken donkey. The resulting work, "impressionist" in style, was hung at the Salon with the title "And the Sun Went Down Over the Adriatic," signed Joachim-Raphael Boronali, and praised by a number of critics. Bohemians tended to be fascinated by the grotesque, the absurd, and by deadpan humor.

Avant-garde is another important term in the lexicon of modern art: its origins go back to 1925, when the Saint-Simonians appropriated it from the military vocabulary to distinguish artists as captains of the new consciousness of a modern century. Avant-gardists aggressively reject conventions and consign previous art traditions to the dustbin of history. Shock and surprise are typical strategies of the avant-garde, the goals being to explode the complacent consensus of realism or tradition, to clear the senses of compositional sludge, to make possible freshness of vision and response. Like bohemians, they often develop techniques of provocation to alienate the wider society while enjoying an intense form of sociability with each other.

4. TOULOUSE-LAUTREC AND STEINLEN

Montmartre, Charles Rearick tells us, became "the bastion of pleasure from which attacks were launched on dull and somber guardians of workaday order. Aristide Bruant [the satirical singer and cabaret proprietor for whom Toulouse-Lautrec made a famous red and black poster] was one of the most combative, celebrating the outlaw and the prostitute and jeering the propertied and the moralizers.... In the rise of Montmartre as the leading belle-époque pleasure district, we can see most clearly the fruitful consequences of a marriage between cultural rebellion and capitalist innovation in entertainment. The Bohemians rejected and mocked the bourgeoisie; yet bourgeois Frenchmen flocked to their cabarets and applauded their humor. As a refuge from the workaday world, the cabaret imported the illusions of theater, but with much more spontaneity and interaction between audience and spectacle, clients and performers."

The success of the cabarets and dance halls of Montmartre inspired the next mutation in popular entertainment: the Moulin Rouge, which opened in 1889. It was less intimate and more commercialized than the cabaret, but offered a similar variety of entertainments. Its predecessor, the Moulin de la Galette (the subject of a masterpiece by Renoir) had been the last rustic dance hall in Paris,

where workmen in their Sunday best joined men of the lower middle class in the pursuit of women. The old threshing ground was an earth dance floor, where visitors could mingle with professional dancers, some of whom became Toulouse-Lautrec's models. The most famous of them was Louise Weber, La Goulue (The Glutton), who made her debut there, before moving over to the Moulin Rouge. Her act derived from the cancan: the dancer had to place her leg behind her head and end (with a shriek) in the splits. Lautrec portrayed her in a dozen canvases, posters, and lithographs, some of which are among his masterpieces. He was inspired also by the dancer Jane Avril, whose nickname was "la Mélinite" (after an explosive resembling dynamite), and the chanteuse Yvette Guilbert, whose elongated silhouette and black elbow-length gloves were her trademarks.

His great works rely on a cocktail of bright colors—green, yellow, red—ruthless cropping, bold reductions, and improbable proportions. His "bravura command of surface design, equal to that of the Japanese printmakers from whom he learnt so much, is perfectly married to his caricatural skills, and results in images of such striking economy and originality that they possess an iconic power" (Elizabeth Cowling). With his love of bold, eye-catching effects, he became the master of poster art, and in his best work he revealed the cold, mirthless reality beneath the surface of the Belle Epoque's most popular forms of entertainment.

In a review of a Toulouse-Lautrec exhibition of 1893, the journalist and novelist Gustave Geffroy summed up the artist's achievement brilliantly: "Using varying colors, sometimes rich and subdued, sometimes muddy, almost dirty, according to his subject, Lautrec, painter and pastelist, shows equal skill in capturing a figure's sudden appearance, the spontaneity of a gesture or a movement, the to and fro of a woman walking, the whirl of a person waltzing. In each case there is something unexpected in the aspect of life he shows us... There is mockery, cruelty mixed with complicity in the work of Lautrec, when he is engaged in visiting dance halls, houses of ill repute, unorthodox establishments. But his artistic integrity rests intact, his pitiless observation captures the beauty of life, and the philosophy of vice which he sometimes displays with a provocative ostentation assumes, in the forcefulness of his drawing, in the seriousness of his analysis, the status of a lesson in practical morality."

Théophile Steinlen is not as famous as Toulouse-Lautrec, but he too emerged out of the milieu of the cabarets: in particular, the most famous of them, Rodolphe Salis's *Le Chat Noir*, which soon became Bruant's *Le Mirliton*. As Gordon Wright shows, Steinlen became a regular contributor to Bruant's satirical magazine and then moved on to posters and to the most widely read such magazine of the period, *L'Assiette au Beurre*. Unlike Toulouse-Lautrec, he was a political artist, active in the Dreyfus Affair, and his great achievement was to capture the seamier side of belle époque Paris with a Zola-like intensity.

5. GEORGES MELIES AND MAGICAL CINEMA

Georges Méliès (1861-1938) was the other great pioneer of early cinema. Like the Lumière brothers, he came from a well-to-do bourgeois family, but rather than enter the family business (luxury footwear), he became a (liberal) political

cartoonist and a stage magician. He used the camera to amplify his magic tricks. So his was the first cinema to rely primarily on special effects, and where the Lumière brothers went out into the street to capture everyday reality, Méliès constructed his own studio to facilitate his trick photography.

His films lack the beauty of the Lumières', but they still pack a comic punch. He loves to take an ordinary situation and reduce it to chaos. He's a satirist of the stuffy bourgeoisie, as we'll see in his wonderful *Voyage to the Moon* (which also has a colonial subtext). His favorite device, of course, is "stop action," that is, stopping the camera, having the actor (often himself) enter or leave the scene, then starting the camera again to create the illusion that the character has suddenly materialized or vanished. It's the equivalent of the stage magician's favorite device of the trap door. He discovered this trick by accident in 1897 when the film jammed in his camera.

Together, the pioneers of early cinema exhibit two of the principal potentialities of the medium: its ability to create intensely realistic images of everyday life (the Lumières), and its capacity to manufacture fantastic images, and to make them proliferate to the point of surrealism (Méliès).

The cinema, as we have seen, is the best example of the democratization of entertainment, the "leveling of pleasures," which was so strong a feature of the Belle Époque. Who would have guessed, in 1900, that the era would end in a war that would consume the lives of French men at the rate of 1,000 per day—and this in a country where the population (40 million) had scarcely grown at all since the middle of the nineteenth century?