The Self-Conscious Chanson:

Creative Responses to the Art versus Commerce Debate

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Submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of PhD

The University of Leeds, School of Modern Languages and Cultures (French)

September 2005

The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank my supervisor, Professor David Looseley, for his support throughout the PhD process, as well as for his honest, critical and detailed feedback on each stage of the thesis. Staff and students in the French department at the University of Leeds also played an important role in shaping my research through post-graduate seminars, informal talks and conferences, and, for this, I am extremely grateful.

Thanks also go to Irene Ouimet and Rob Bridgett for reading drafts of the thesis and providing useful editorial feedback. Rob Bridgett also supplied crucial advice on musical terminology, assistance in locating albums and general support throughout this project, and, as such, deserves special thanks.

I would also like to thank the many students on my Literature courses at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada, for helping me to interpret song texts with new eyes and for introducing me to music from a variety of different countries.

Lastly, I wish to thank family and friends, in the UK, Lille and Vancouver for their ongoing support over the course of this project as well as for their invaluable answers to my many musical questions. Special thanks to Sophie Cartigny for sending me articles and taped television programmes on Renaud.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of Herbert Henry Harrison.

Abstract

This thesis investigates self-consciousness in *chanson*. It examines, in particular, French popular songs that question and problematise the *chanson* form and the role of the *chanson* artist. While certain forms of self-consciousness can be traced back to the troubadours, this thesis will argue that the specifically self-interrogatory nature of self-consciousness found in modern French *chanson* can be attributed to artists responding to the 'art versus commerce' debate. It is precisely through their responses that a particular conception of *chanson* is constructed. *Chanson*, in this self-conscious discourse, differs from both *variétés* and Anglo-American pop music as well as from governmental and institutional definitions of the genre. The thesis examines the diverse, and at times ambiguous, effects of this self-consciousness. Moreover, it argues that reading *chanson* from a self-conscious perspective suggests a redefinition of *chanson*'s relationship to cultural debates. It also provides a new interpretative grille for its analysis, and enables the researcher to find different and possibly deeper meanings than those revealed through an examination of overriding thematic preoccupations.

The thesis is in three parts. Part I comprises two introductory chapters: an Introduction and a Literature Survey and Methodology (Chapter 1). Part II consists of a thematic investigation of the guises self-consciousness takes in *chanson*. It focuses, in particular, on the conscious evolution of a *chanson* genre (Chapter 2); the constructed role of *chanson* (Chapter 3); and the figure of the *chanson* artist (Chapter 4). Part III comprises three case studies: Serge Gainsbourg, Renaud and MC Solaar. Each artist in Part III was chosen because, on the one hand, his work is especially self-conscious in nature, and, on the other, he makes an original contribution to the art versus commerce debate.

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Introduction

Mes disques sont un miroir
Dans lequel chacun peut me voir
Je suis partout à la fois
Brisée en mille éclats de voix[1]

Ça se chante et ça se danse
Et ça revient, ça se retient
Comme une chanson populaire
L'amour c'est comme un refrain[2]

French popular music, and indeed popular music in general, is often described as a 'mirror'. Christian Leblé, in an article for *Libération* marking the tenth anniversary of the death of Georges Brassens, for example, asserts: '[Brassens] ne s'appelle pas une vedette, c'est un miroir'.[3] And Frédéric Dard, in the preface to Renaud's song anthology, *Mistral gagnant*, suggests that young people 'se reconnaissent en toi comme dans un miroir, Renaud, mon fils'.[4] Much has also been written on French song's mirror-like qualities, its ability to reflect the customs of its time, and even on its communication of social and political issues. While I would not dispute French *chanson*'s capacity for reflecting both the general mood of the French people or the socio-political and cultural events it witnesses, in the way popular music generally does, my broad premise in this thesis is that the mirror allusion can be opened up—or indeed *brisé*—further. There has been a trend in France particularly evident from the 1960s onwards (and the reason for this date will be explored in the main body of the thesis) for *chanson* to be a mirror both of the society in which it exists and of itself within that society. Many *chanson* artists have, in fact, been narcissistically examining their own role as 'singers' as much as—and, in some cases, more than—the

1 'Poupée de cire, poupée de son', written by Serge Gainsbourg and performed by France Gall. The song won the 1965 Eurovision Song Contest; it will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.
2 'Une chanson populaire' performed by Claude François, with words and music by Jean-Pierre Bourtayre and N. Skorsky; the song will be explored in more detail in Chapter 3.
3 Cited in Sara Poole, *Brassens: chansons*, Critical Guides to French Texts, 125 (London: Grant & Cutler, 2000), p. 10.
4 Frédéric Dard (San-Antonio) in the preface to Renaud, *Mistral gagnant* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1986).

world around them. Through their songs, they have been raising questions about the *chanson* form, its ability to communicate ideas and 'realities', its place in contemporary French society; and they have been hypothesising as to the future of this particularly French form of popular music. In this way, many French songs can be described as self-conscious.

My overarching aim in this thesis is to examine this self-consciousness and the different forms it takes. The broad hypothesis I shall investigate is that the 'invasion' in France of Anglo-American pop in the late 1950s and 1960s prompted *chanson* artists to look inward as well as outward, in order to respond to the cultural problematic spawned by this influx of 'new' music. Rather than, or, sometimes, as well as, writing *about chanson* in the press, journals or books, *chanson* artists—for the most part quite independently of each other, it would seem—have explored the *chanson* medium in, and through, their songs. This study, then, does not intend to apply a particular theory of self-consciousness to *chanson*; rather, it will suggest that self-consciousness has been not only a predominant trait of *chanson* since (at least) the 1960s but also a defining feature of the genre, and is, therefore, worthy of further empirical investigation. Similarly, I do not wish to suggest that 'the self-conscious *chanson*' is a school of thought, or that the artists whose songs can be described as self-conscious were in some sense working together collectively to revolutionise the French music industry. Although there are many similarities to movements like the *Nouvelle Vague* in film, there are also very real differences, and the absence of a coherent critical body of work about song issuing from the artists themselves is clearly one of the most important of these.

A number of commentators have noted certain aspects of a self-conscious trend in *chanson*, including self-referentiality, intertextuality and parody, though no book-length study in either French or English has been carried out on self-consciousness to date. Peter Hawkins, for example, highlights *chanson*'s intertextual nature,[5] and Chris Tinker, in his short case study of the female *chanson* artist, Zazie, notes: 'the *chanson* form is a highly self-referential one,

5 Peter Hawkins, 'How Do You Write about *Chanson*?', *French Cultural Studies*, 4 (1993), 69–79. Hawkins' arguments will be examined in more detail in the main body of the thesis.

and Zazie is conscious of her role as a socially committed artist'.[6] Ginette Vincendeau points to the self-referentiality that exists in the songs of female *interprètes* such as Piaf and Fréhel,[7] while David Looseley similarly calls for more research to be done on 'a self-conscious *chanson* discourse'.[8] This thesis, then, is responding to precisely this call for further research. But what, in particular, will such a study contribute to French (cultural) studies and popular music studies? The answer lies, in part, with *chanson*'s embroilment in the notions of French identity and a French 'cultural exception'. Self-consciousness reveals *chanson* artists' ongoing desire to achieve cultural legitimacy in an increasingly globalised world where Anglo-American popular music dominates the airwaves in spite of governmental initiatives to preserve 'French' song.[9] The effects of this yearning for legitimacy, however, suggest a redefinition of the *chanson* genre itself. Indeed, I want to argue in this thesis that self-consciousness reveals a definition of *chanson* that is simultaneously the polar opposite of pop and yet its binary partner, sharing more common features, especially in its desire to appeal to 'the man on the street', than may be initially thought. Studying the constructions of *chanson* found in songs themselves thus suggests new methodologies that are based not on arbitrary criteria or the imposition of a particular theory, but on the values and themes suggested by *chanson* itself. It consequently allows the (re-)examination of songs that hitherto may not have been considered of sufficient 'quality' to lend themselves to the more conventionally literary type of textual analysis, and suggests new criteria by which songs can be evaluated.

The thesis comprises three parts. This Introduction and Chapter 1 (Literature Survey and Methodology) make up Part I and are introductory and theoretical in nature. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an exploration of the notion of 'self-consciousness', and in Chapter 1, I examine work that has already been undertaken on *chanson* and suggest reasons for the approach taken here.

6 Chris Tinker, 'Music', in *French Popular Culture: An Introduction*, ed. by Hugh Dauncey (London: Arnold, 2003), pp. 90–103 (p. 101).
7 Ginette Vincendeau, 'The *Mise-en-Scène* of Suffering', *New Formations*, 3 (1987), 107–28.
8 David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France: Authenticity, Politics, Debate* (Oxford: Bern, 2003), p. 84.
9 The 1996 government imposition of a 40 per cent quota of French music on all radio stations is one example of this, as is the introduction, in 1982, of the 'Fête de la musique'.

Part II is a thematic investigation of the guises self-consciousness takes in *chanson*. The aim of this part of the thesis is to explore ways in which '*chanson*' is constructed discursively, but by singer-songwriters and performers rather than by French government bodies or institutions.[10] Chapter 2 deals with the conscious evolution of a *chanson* genre, examining, in particular, those songs which explicitly make allusions to previous songs or artists. This chapter equally explores the notion of the construction of a mythical *chanson* community and the key figures who are members of this *chanson* club. Chapter 3 probes the constructed role of *chanson*, analysing the differences suggested in songs between *chanson* and *variétés*, as well as the former's function as both entertainment and didacticism. Chapter 4, the final chapter in Part II, focuses on the figure of the *chanson* artist, and how he or she (mostly he) is portrayed in *chanson*; it explores, in particular, notions of a mask of stardom, legitimacy versus celebrity, authenticity and the art versus commerce debate. In all of the chapters in Part II, I use songs that are generally classified as *variétés* as well as those termed *chanson*. As well as underlining the fluidity that exists between such terms, this choice also illustrates how *chanson* is constructed as a specific genre, and allows an analysis of the differences between self-consciousness in French popular music in general and *chanson* in particular. Part III comprises three case studies: Serge Gainsbourg, Renaud and MC Solaar. The work of each of these artists is especially self-conscious in nature. Moreover, each artist questions the *chanson* form and his role as a *chanson* artist in a unique way, finding original responses to the art versus commerce debate while alluding to the general concerns raised in *chanson*. The chronological structure I have adopted here (from Gainsbourg through to the present-day work of MC Solaar) allows the development of conceptions of the *chanson* form to be seen. Each artist can, in fact, be said to be taking up the baton of the former, and responding to the challenges he raised. In each of the chapters in Part III, then, I look at the ways in which self-consciousness manifests itself in the work of the artist in question, as well as at how these artists respond to the problems identified in Part II. I also

10 When I say *chanson* discourse or rhetoric in this thesis, I mean exactly this kind of self-conscious discourse from within the songs themselves, unless otherwise stated.

provide a brief biographical and bibliographical study of each artist at the start of the individual chapters for the purposes of contextualisation.

Self-Consciousness

The Origins of the Term Self-Consciousness

This part of the Introduction in no way claims to provide an exhaustive history of self-conscious art; its purpose is rather to provide a brief survey of how self-consciousness has manifested itself—and has been studied—in art forms relevant to *chanson*. There has been a general trend in twentieth century art and literature in France, especially from the 1950s onwards, towards self-consciousness. While self-consciousness in *chanson* shares common features with that found in other art forms, it also differs from it in important ways. My aim here, then, is to summarise the manifestation of self-consciousness in art forms other than *chanson* in order to better comprehend both the similarities and differences, and to more fully understand the concept of self-consciousness itself.

Like others, Madelyn Jablon, in her study of self-consciousness in African-American literature, credits William Gass with the invention of the term 'metafiction', which he describes as 'fiction which draws attention to itself as artefact to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'.[11] Metafiction is today a fairly commonplace term in literary theory to describe literature (the novel, mainly) that is self-conscious on some level. Gass employed the term in his book *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, published in 1970, and since then a substantial number of scholarly texts have been published on self-consciousness in literature. Robert Alter's *Partial Magic* (1975), for example, considers self-consciousness in the novel from the beginning of the seventeenth century. Alter provides a definition of what he sees as a self-conscious novel which is very close to Gass' definition of metafiction: 'a self-conscious novel, briefly, is a novel that systematically flaunts its own condition of artifice and that

11 William Gass, *Fiction and Figures of Life* (New York: Knopf, 1970), p. 25. Cited in Madelyn Jablon, *Black Metafiction: Self-Consciousness in African American Literature* (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 1997), p. 7.

by so doing probes into the problematic relationship between real-seeming artifice and reality'.[12] Following this logic, then, the self-conscious novel is one which does not seek to reflect its subject matter (society) with *vraisemblance*, as a Balzac or a Zola text might be thought of as doing, striving to efface signs of the author in favour of a 'scientific' naturalness. Rather, it seeks to draw attention to the *un*-naturalness of the text, and encourages the reader to question its existence, purpose and the validity with which it describes its subject matter. Alter equally contends that the novel is not the only art form which can be considered self-conscious, arguing that:

> The phenomenon of an artwork mirroring itself as it mirrors reality is of course by no means restricted to the novel; and in literature it could be traced back as far as the bard within the epic in the Odyssey and Euripides' parody of the conventions of Greek tragedy. Renaissance theatre, to cite a central instance, offers many striking examples of such artistic self-consciousness: two of the most memorable for English readers are the Induction to *The Taming of the Shrew* and Ben Jonson's stage-keeper in *Bartholomew Fair*. Pirandello's self-conscious theatre had abundant predecessors, including, [...] the plays of [...] Denis Diderot. And it goes without saying that the poem that explores and exposes itself as a structure of words has had a recurrent fascination for modern poets, from Mallarmé and Valéry in France, to Wallace Stevens in America, to Osip Mandelstam in Russia.[13]

Other scholars, such as James Mellard, Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh, also trace self-consciousness in literature as far back as the eighteenth century or earlier.[14]

In the case of *chanson*, the roots of self-consciousness can be traced as far back as the time of the troubadours. Although, until fairly recently, the troubadours' output had been considered by scholars as serious, devoid of irony or intertextual play, and delivering both heartfelt messages of love and political commitment with a straight face, recent work has dispelled this myth. It has read the troubadours' songs as being imbued with play, irony, intertextual references and self-referentiality. Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay, in their study, *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, for example, refer to the effect on medieval

12 Robert Alter, *Partial Magic: The Novel as a Self-Conscious Genre* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. x.

13 Alter, p. xi. The 'Induction' to *The Taming of the Shrew* is a two-scene introductory segment.

14 Jablon makes this observation in *Black Metafiction*, p. 179.

studies of the new approaches in the study of literature from 1969 onwards, in particular structuralism:

> Although the main Structualist studies of medieval vernacular lyric were in fact devoted to the lyrics of Old French poets (the *trouvères*), their influence upon troubadour scholarship is discernible in a number of major publications [...] that take as given Zumthor's notion of *la circularité du chant*: that is, the view that medieval lyrics are self-referential formal displays dependent on the recycling, within the closed world of the genre, of a limited repertoire of formal constituents.[15]

The editors go on to describe more recent scholarship from the 1980s to the present day as being characterised by

> a period of demystification: concentrating either on irony and play [...] or subjectivity and gender [...], and armed with the findings of Structualist and poststructualist scholarship, critics continued to turn away from taking the ostensible subject matter (i.e. love) of the courtly *canso* seriously and sought to reveal [...] the underlying aesthetic, psychic and political dynamics of the tradition. If, until this point, troubadour lyric had often been held up as the most refined and moving celebration of civilised heterosexual love (Lewis, Topsfield), prevailing wisdom by the late 1980s saw it as a sophisticated game men played with each other.[16]

Although a certain form of self-consciousness, then, can be detected in the work of the troubadours, its effects differ greatly from those of the self-consciousness in the work of post-war *chanson* artists, largely because the socio-political and cultural dynamics have changed considerably since the former's time, as I will illustrate throughout the thesis. The self-consciousness that is such a salient feature of *chanson* from the 1960s onwards is inextricably linked to a process of self-questioning, and it is this self-questioning that has, as Alter contends, characterised much of modern intellectual culture.[17] Elisabeth Bügler, for example, provides a good general description of what she names 'métachanson', which is closer to Gass' definition of metafiction than to the self-consciousness of the troubadours:

15 *The Troubadours: An Introduction*, ed. by Simon Gaunt and Sarah Kay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 5.
16 Gaunt and Kay, p. 6.
17 Alter, p. xv.

> Il s'agit là de chansons qui, en priorité, mais souvent en relation avec d'autres thèmes, traitent du genre de la 'chanson' et de tous les aspects qui s'y rapportent: des chansons qui parlent de la manière dont on fait des chansons, du rôle, du métier du chanteur et de la façon dont il se comprend; des chansons sur le contexte médiatique du genre et sur les conditions de production et de réception qui sont souvent examinées également dans une perspective historique.[18]

Although her essay takes a broadly socio-linguistic approach to *chanson*, and, as such, is limited in both its range and breadth of songs studied as well as in its analysis of the effects of these 'métachansons', the definition she provides here is useful for this thesis. Put at its simplest, then, self-conscious *chanson* is song which explores the nature of song itself, and is therefore a way for artists themselves to redefine and question the genre in which they are working.[19]

Rise of Self-Consciousness in France and Europe: Theatre, Film, Novel

In France, three key areas (other than *chanson*) of artistic production have been influenced by a post-war trend in self-consciousness and self-questioning: the theatre, in the form of what is sometimes called the *Nouveau Théâtre*; the films of the *Nouvelle Vague*; and the novel, in the form of the *Nouveau Roman*. The effects of self-consciousness in *chanson* can be compared to that of all three art forms on some level at least, which is why I want briefly to introduce here the guises that self-consciousness takes, as well as its effects, in these three art forms.

The term *Nouveau Théâtre* was coined, like many of the terms which describe an art 'movement', not by the artists themselves, but by a critic, in this case, Geneviève Serreau. The three main exponents of New Theatre in France were Adamov, Beckett and Ionesco, although, as David Bradby points out, the three did not know each other when they started writing plays, which prevents

18 Elisabeth Bügler, 'Stars et antistars: comment le chansonnier actuel comprend-il son métier? Conceptions et mise en pratique dans la métachanson', in *La Chanson française et son histoire*, ed. by Dietmar Rieger (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1988), pp. 363–392 (p. 363).

19 As well as the term self-conscious, I also employ the related terms (self-)reflexive and self-referential in this thesis. By (self-)reflexive, I mean songs which specifically draw attention to the means of their own construction. I use self-referential mainly when discussing practitioners of *chanson* in the sense of a song that makes reference to its creator or performer.

their work being described as a 'school'.[20] Bradby also suggests that a self-critical trend in French theatre had begun during the inter-war years, and cites the work of Pirandello, one of the most frequently performed authors at that time, as challenging traditional notions of theatre. The characters of the New Theatre 'almost always share the same [as Pirandello's characters in *Six Characters in Search of an Author*] inability to make sense of their own characteristics or situations',[21] and, as such, challenge the notion of character as much as theatre's ability to create 'real' characters. Bradby suggests that the 'salient fact about New Theatre [...] is that these plays provoke reflection about the nature of theatre', and he argues that New Theatre was 'aimed at Liberation, and what was to be liberated was, in the first place, the theatre, which was to be cleansed of its reliance on all the outworn conventions of the European cultural heritage'.[22] The work of Bertolt Brecht is also important here. In his book, *Brecht and Ionesco: Commitment in Context*, Julian Wulbern compares the work of the two playwrights who seem, on the surface, to have little in common, given Brecht's 'overt commitment to communism' on the one hand, and Ionesco's 'unequivocal rejection of any form of political commitment', on the other. Furthermore, Wulbern argues that:

> Brecht, on the one hand, saw the theatre as an instrument for the effectuation of social change (and thus he stands firmly rooted in the German tradition [...] of the theatre as an institution for moral education), while Ionesco persists to this day [Wulbern was writing in 1971] in his insistence that theatre can only be theatre (and thus he stands rooted in the French tradition of *l'art pour l'art*).[23]

Although the two men's objectives in writing a new kind of theatre are opposing, the overall effects of their plays are similar. Wulbern contends that both 'share a common view of the incapacity of man to control his own destiny' and that both express a sense of frustration 'with regard to the capacity of language to convey

20 David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 56.
21 Bradby, p. 57.
22 Bradby, pp. 59–64.
23 Julian H. Wulbern, *Brecht and Ionesco: Commitment in Context* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 8.

the condition of man in the modern world'.[24] Brecht, himself, in his extensive writings on the theatre, points to a similar problem to that identified by the writers of the *Nouveau Roman* with the 'naturalness' of a work of art, and suggests that the epic theatre is a way of challenging this uncritical acceptance of art as *vraisemblance*:

> The spectator was no longer allowed [in the epic theatre] to submit to an experience uncritically (and without practical consequences) by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding. When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up. What is 'natural' must have the force of what is startling. This is the only way to expose the laws of cause and effect. [...] The dramatic theatre's spectator says: yes, I have felt like that too—just like me—it's only natural—it'll never change—the sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable—that's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world—I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.
>
> The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it—that's not the way—that's extraordinary, hardly believable—it's got to stop—the sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary—that's great art: nothing obvious in it—I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.[25]

The filmic 'equivalent' of the New Theatre in France is the *Nouvelle Vague*; the term coined by the journalist Françoise Giroud. Phil Powrie and Keith Reader, in their introduction to French cinema, contend that the first New Wave film was Claude Chabrol's *Le Beau Serge* in 1959.[26] The films by New Wave directors were, Powrie and Reader argue, 'frequently self-referential [...] as though to assert the value of film as a form of artistic expression on a par with the novel or

24 Wulbern, pp. 6–7.

25 Bertolt Brecht, 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction' (1957). This essay was unpublished in Brecht's lifetime and its exact date and purpose are unknown. Cited in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willet (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974).

26 Phil Powrie and Keith Reader, *French Cinema: A Student's Guide* (London: Arnold, 2002), p. 21. Richard Neupert equally reminds his reader that 'by the time of the first New Wave movies, the term "nouvelle vague" was already being applied to everything from juvenile attitudes to a style of living, including wearing black leather jackets and riding noisy motor scooters around Paris.' (source: Richard Neupert, *A History of the French New Wave Cinema* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), p. xxi.)

the theatre'.[27] Comparisons between the *Nouveau Roman* and the New Wave films are also highlighted, especially in terms of Godard's often fragmented narration. Moreover, Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram, in their study of the New Wave director François Truffaut, point to the transition from the importance of the script-writer and the tackling of social issues in the films of the *tradition de qualité* to the importance of the director (the *politique des auteurs*), and the conception of film 'as a medium with its own specific codes of meaning' in the *Nouvelle Vague*.[28] Although the glorification of the director is problematic in that a film is always a collaborative effort rather than the work of one sole person, Holmes and Ingram rightly stress the progressive nature of the *politique des auteurs*:

> The *politique* provided a useful corrective to dominant critical and film-making practices in its emphasis on the specifically visual and aural language of film as the key to a film's meaning and its quality: the insistence that the medium was itself the message, aligned 'New Wave' theory with modernist thinking on literature and painting.[29]

Indeed, the shift from meaning being found in the 'content' of a work of art to the meaning being the work of art itself was particularly evident in the *Nouveau Roman*. Stephen Heath suggests that the idea of the New Novel was developed in the 1950s and that, although the first usage of the actual term is uncertain—the usage by Maurice Nadeau in 1957 is considered by some to be the first—the special edition of *Esprit* in 1958 confirmed the phenomenon of the *Nouveau Roman*.[30] Heath, in his study of the *Nouveau Roman*, contends that, with the emergence of the New Novel, 'the series of forms of realist writing, naturalised as writing "without thickness", as non-formal, miming "Reality" as its direct expression, is now deconstructed, grasped as production'.[31] As Roland

27 Powrie and Reader, p. 21.

28 Diana Holmes and Robert Ingram, *François Truffaut* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), p. 24; based on the ideas in Truffaut's 1954 essay 'Une certaine tendance du cinéma français', republished in François Truffaut, *Le Plaisir des yeux Paris* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1987).

29 Holmes and Ingram, p. 25.

30 Stephen Heath, *The* Nouveau Roman*: A Study in the Practice of Writing* (London: Elek, 1972), pp. 40–41; the *Esprit* article referred to is: 'Le Nouveau Roman', *Esprit*, 7–8 (1958); the Nadeau quotation appears in 'Nouvelles formules pour le roman', *Critique*, 123–124 (1957), 707–22.

31 Heath, p. 23.

Barthes puts it: 'le réalisme, ici, ce ne peut donc être la copie des choses, mais la connaissance du langage; l'œuvre la plus "réaliste" ne sera pas celle qui "peint" la réalité, mais qui [...] explorera le plus profondément possible la réalité irréelle du langage'.[32] In the *Nouveau Roman*, there is also a shift away from the author as 'God' and away from the importance of 'man' as the central theme of the novel. In this sense, there is a contradiction between New Wave cinema and the New Novel, in that, in the former medium, the director still holds a central, God-like place. The writings of Barthes, Derrida and Foucault as well as the works of the *Nouveau Roman* novelists themselves, such as Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute and Claude Simon, help to explain this radical move away from Balzacian realism towards a more 'reflexive consciousness'.[33] In describing the *Nouveau Roman*, Robbe-Grillet contends:

> Si j'emploie volontiers, dans bien des pages, le terme de Nouveau Roman, ce n'est pas pour désigner une école, ni même un groupe défini et constitué d'écrivains qui travailleraient dans le même sens; il n'y a là qu'une appellation commode englobant tous ceux qui cherchent de nouvelles formes romanesques, capable d'exprimer (ou de créer) de nouvelles relations entre l'homme et le monde, tous ceux qui sont décidés à inventer le roman, c'est-à-dire à inventer l'homme.[34]

Possible Effects of Self-Consciousness in Art

Self-consciousness in post-war art, literature and *chanson*, then, is manifest in many different ways. Those novelists, film-makers or playwrights working within the 'new' forms identified above, while sharing some similar goals, produced work that has differing, and at times, contradictory effects. Rather than contending that self-consciousness has one unifying aim or effect, therefore, I would suggest that there are multiple effects, but that they are all concerned in some way with a redefinition of the art form in question. The ideological self-consciousness of Brecht or Godard, for example, not only questions the medium in which they are working, but also suggests that theatre or film respectively

32 Roland Barthes, *Essais critiques* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1964), p. 164.
33 The term 'reflexive consciousness' is employed by Heath.
34 Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1963), p. 9. Cited in Heath, p. 40.

should have a political and didactic purpose. Each artist was reacting to the socio-political and cultural conditions of his time: for Brecht, Nazi Germany, and for Godard, the 'threat' of Hollywood, and each used Marxist theory to his own ends.[35] Their two counterparts, Ionesco and Truffaut, can be considered apolitical by comparison, but both, like Brecht and Godard, radically call into question the purpose and validity of the art form in which they are working, and this, in itself, can be deemed a political act. As Heath argues in a response to criticisms of non-political commitment in the *Nouveau Roman*: 'criticisms of the supposed non-commitment of the *Nouveau Roman* are based on the idea that commitment can be judged at the level of *content* and that what is to be challenged, therefore, is not the mode of writing, which is to be retained, but traditional realms of content which are to be replaced, this being the area of radical literary *engagement* [author's italics]'.[36] Similarly, Sartre described the *Nouveau Théâtre* as a 'théâtre critique' in the sense that the dramatic process is the subject of the plays, suggesting that the 'political' is seen less in the content and more in the form and language.[37]

One of the themes present in much self-conscious art, especially in New Wave cinema, is an attempt to create a nationally specific art. Holmes and Ingram, for example, argue that Truffaut's *Les Mistons*

> is an attempt to define what a new French cinema should be. Put simply, it should be French: it should hark back to French sources, it should present a contemporary France, it should broach themes of interest to French audiences. Though displaying awareness of and respect for the achievements of North American cinema, it should not seek to emulate Hollywood.[38]

This trait can also be seen in the country that gave birth to Hollywood, in the form of African-American self-conscious literature, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. contends: 'the black tradition has inscribed within it the very principles by which it can be read. Ours is an extraordinary self-reflexive tradition, a tradition exceptionally conscious of its history and the simultaneity of its canonical

35 James Monaco, *The New Wave: Truffaut, Godard, Chabrol, Rohmer, Rivette* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), p. 217.
36 Heath, p. 32.
37 Cited in Bradby, p. 58.
38 Holmes and Ingram, p. 4.

texts'.[39] (Further links between Black self-consciousness and popular music will be explored in Chapter 7 on the 'rap' of MC Solaar.)

Asserting and exploring 'Frenchness' is also a clear concern in *chanson*, as I will illustrate throughout the thesis. Self-consciousness, then, is not only a prominent trait of *chanson* but it is also one that relates to other twentieth century art forms. Furthermore, the diverse, and at times contradictory, effects of self-consciousness in art and literature are mirrored, to a certain extent, in *chanson*. Ideology is undeniably an outcome of the self-conscious *chanson*, but so too is apolitical theorising. These contradictions as well as the ways in which self-consciousness in *chanson* differs from that seen in other genres will be explored in the following chapters. As already said, one of the aims of this thesis is to investigate what the term *chanson* means for artists, but it is also useful to look at commentators' and critics' definitions and usage of the term in order to make comparisons with the artists' definitions and suggest reasons why the artists themselves may feel a redefinition is necessary. In the following chapter, then, I will discuss the usage of the term '*chanson*' as well as exploring broader problems of terminology. I will also provide a survey of those studies that have been carried out to date, including an analysis of the different approaches taken, and I will clarify the methodological approach to be adopted in this thesis.

39 Cited in Jablon, p. 4.

Chapter 1

Literature Survey and Methodology

Introduction

French popular music in general, and *chanson* in particular, have been studied by scholars working in a variety of academic disciplines in France, as well as in Britain, Ireland and North America. The academic output on French popular music is still a relatively small body of work, however, compared to the proliferation of books and articles devoted to the subject by journalists, biographers, or family and friends of music 'stars'. The predominance of non-academic texts and the relative shortage of scholarly material can, in part, be explained by the 'popular' status of music. Indeed, Anglo-American popular music was also studied by a variety of scholars and journalists—in often unrelated fields—in its early years and is still not completely accepted as a valid area of academic inquiry, according to some critics. Philip Tagg, co-founder of the IASPM,[1] for example, points to reactions to the first International Conference on Popular Music Research, held in Amsterdam in June 1981, citing the headline in *The Times Diary* about the conference: 'Going Dutch—the Donnish Disciples of Pop' (*The Times*, 16 June 1981), and arguing that,

> judging from the generous use of inverted commas, *sics* and 'would-you-believe-it' turns of phrase, the *Times* diarist was comically baffled by the idea of people getting together for some serious discussions about a phenomenon which the average Westerner's brain probably spends around twenty-five per cent of its lifetime registering, monitoring, and decoding.[2]

Similarly, Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss, in their introduction to *Putting It into Words: Key Terms for Studying Popular Music*, point to the poor treatment of popular music by academics 'even in fields otherwise committed to the study of "popular" culture, such as cultural and media studies', suggesting that when

1 International Association for the Study of Popular Music, founded in 1981.

2 Philip Tagg, 'Analysing Popular Music: Theory, Method, and Practice', in *Reading Pop: Approaches to Textual Analysis in Popular Music*, ed. by Richard Middleton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 71–103 (p. 71).

popular music has been studied it is either from the point of view of a 'mass market commodity' or as an extension of a different genre, i.e. poetry. The study of popular music, Horner and Swiss contend, presently lies between 'a number of disciplines: musicology, literary study, communication studies, sociology, and anthropology', and 'while each of these disciplines has contributed to the study of popular music, all have operated under specific disciplinary delimitations producing specific "constructions" of what constitutes popular music and how to study and evaluate it'.[3] Hawkins makes a similar point concerning the study of *chanson* specifically which, he argues, 'positions itself uncomfortably somewhere between literary criticism and the sociology of the mass media, between musicological and ideological analysis'.[4] And Looseley, in the introduction to a recent special edition of the journal *French Cultural Studies* devoted to popular music, asserts:

> Although popular-music studies is a flourishing interdiscipline worldwide, France rarely enters its field of vision [...]. French studies has done little to correct this assumption [that French popular music comprises chiefly 'derivative' pop or 'the canonised *chanson*']. Although it has happily legitimated cinema [...], the discipline has failed to embrace popular music other than as a quasi-literary form (Brassens and co.)—at least, until recently.[5]

Even if popular music studies generally has gained academic validity, in some quarters at least, it seems that French popular music specifically is still struggling to be taken seriously by the academic world.

This literature survey, then, will provide a brief, critical analysis of the kinds of texts that are available on French popular music, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches that have been taken. It will equally look to more established Anglo-American models, especially modern cultural studies and popular music studies, in order to ascertain whether the approaches taken within these disciplines can help with the exploration of French popular music, particularly one that focuses on self-consciousness. Before examining the

3 *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture*, ed. by Bruce Horner and Thomas Swiss (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 2.

4 Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 15.

5 David Looseley, 'Introduction', *French Cultural Studies*, 16 (2005), 115–119 (p. 115).

different approaches that have been taken to (French) popular music, however, I want to focus briefly on some of the linguistic problems that exist regarding the terminology available for talking about *chanson*.

Problems with Terminology

Definitions of Chanson

Hawkins, in his book *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter, from Aristide Bruant to the Present Day*, provides a clear and succinct definition of *chanson*. He suggests: 'the term *chanson* refers to a tradition of popular songs by identifiable authors and composers which has existed since the late eighteenth century.'[6] The succinctness of this definition may well be problematic, however, as he himself later suggests, through comparisons between *chanson* and classical music, poetry and theatre, as well as through the contention that *chanson* is a hybrid form:

> *Chanson* is not just a popular variety of poetry, not just a commercial product of the mass media industry, not just a reflection of popular taste, nor even a variety of folk-song. [...] Precisely because of its ambiguous, hybrid status, and despite its apparent naturalness, *chanson* is a deceptive and elusive phenomenon.[7]

Looseley similarly points to the problematic nature of the term: 'on the surface, *chanson* is a straightforward generic category; but it also connotes a web of assumptions and expectations relating to the core notion of authenticity'.[8] And Tinker, in his student-focused introduction to French music, makes a distinction between French song (*variété française*) and *chanson*, without providing a specific definition of either, but suggesting that it is *chanson*'s lyrical importance that sets it apart from other genres.[9] The editors of *Cent ans de chanson*

6 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 32.
7 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 4.
8 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 65.
9 Tinker, 'Music', in *French Popular Culture* (see Dauncey, above), pp. 92–3. Tinker's introduction to French music is intended for an undergraduate audience, which may explain the lack of a detailed examination of *chanson* terminology.

française, on the other hand, remind the reader of the importance of studying *chanson* in a holistic manner, and the danger of privileging only the written text; although, they too, neglect to provide a definition of the term itself.[10] Sara Poole, in her study of Brassens, points to the disparaging nature of many dictionary definitions of *chanson*, including the *Hachette encyclopédique*'s, which defines *chanson* as a 'petite composition chantée, de caractère populaire, au rythme simple, d'inspiration légère, semtimentale ou satirique'.[11] Poole is mostly concerned with the differences (and similarities) between *chanson* and poetry, especially Brassens' own views on how to label his work, but her brief examination of the term *chanson* further reveals the ambiguity and contradictions that exist in the usage of the term in the press and dictionaries, as well as scholarly texts.

The contradictions found in these definitions are indeed mirrored by the *chanson* artists themselves, and, in Chapter 4, I will explore how the artists describe their work and use the term '*chanson*'. The ambiguity can also be explained, in part, by the relatively small body of work on *chanson* in Britain and France, compared to other 'popular' art forms like film. Such ambiguities also apply to the study of popular music in general, and for French popular music specifically, '*chanson*' is not the only term that is problematic.

General Terminological Problems

Horner and Swiss highlight the importance of establishing a critical vocabulary and discourse in order to describe and analyse popular music, arguing that 'the discourse used to describe popular music has material consequences for how that music is produced, the form it takes, how it is experienced, and its meanings'. Their book, then, they argue, 'is informed by a poststructuralist view of the relationship of language to knowledge and material life'.[12] Following this argument, Horner and Swiss note that the term music is already value-laden and

10 Chantal Brunschwig, Louis-Jean Calvet and Jean-Claude Klein, *Cent ans de chanson française: 1880–1980* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), pp. 7–8.
11 Poole, p. 61.
12 Horner and Swiss, p. 18.

that categories within the term music, such as rock, folk, popular, and so on are value-laden too, based on our experience of these terms. In French popular music specifically, terminology is, at times, even more problematic. Hawkins, for example, explores the usage of the terms *chanson* and *chansonnier*, contending that, although the latter may seem to suggest a practitioner of the former (and is indeed often used as such), it is, in fact, an outmoded term, dating back originally to the eighteenth-century tradition of the *Caveau*. *Chansonniers* would perform songs that were often satirical or subversive and this tradition, according to Hawkins, lasted for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and indeed, continues today as a form of political satire. However, towards the end of the nineteenth century, new genres of popular song, derived from the *Chansonnier* tradition, began to flourish, such as the music hall song, and it was at this time that *chanson* as a genre and the *chansonnier* tradition first began to separate.[13]

The terminology used to describe a practitioner of *chanson* is, in fact, particularly problematic. The term 'auteur-compositeur-interprète' (abbreviated henceforth as *ACI*), or its English equivalent singer-songwriter, is generally used when the artist in question fulfils all the roles suggested by the term, and I will indeed employ this term when it is appropriate. '*Chanson* artist' also seems to me an acceptable way of describing writers, singers or performers of *chanson*. But, of course, it must be remembered that the term artist is itself loaded with connotations of authenticity, especially when used as the binary opposite of (pop) star. A further, related problem is that the singer-songwriter and the first-person speaker in a song are often confused by commentators, who take anything the 'je' figure of the song says as evidence of the songwriter's own opinions and beliefs. More recent scholars of *chanson* have made good cases for why this is reductionist. Tinker, for example, in his doctoral thesis examining Brassens, Brel and Ferré, favours the term 'implied author', arguing that it can be usefully borrowed from literary theory to describe the first-person narrative voice in *chanson* in order to avoid such confusion. He cites the definition of 'implied author' given by Katie Wales in *A Dictionary of Stylistics*:

13 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 31.

> [The implied author is] a textual construct, created by the real author to be the (ideal?) image of him—or herself, and also created anew by the reader; who may or may not intrusively address the reader directly, and whose opinions and point of view as narrator may or may not coincide with those of the author.[14]

Undoubtedly, an appropriate term needs to be found for instances when the grammatical first-person is employed in a song, but 'implied author' may also be reductionist in terms of *chanson*, as the singer-songwriter is not only an 'author', but also a performer. The term 'persona' therefore seems more acceptable, as it encapsulates not only the sense of a constructed 'textual' image, but also of an entire system of complex codes and signs that accompany a song text, in the form of the look and *media* image of a singer-songwriter; signs that cannot be dissociated from the projection of the lyrical voice heard in the first-person narrative. When, in a song, it is clear that the speaker is a character, or that there is more than one voice speaking, I shall borrow standard literary terminology such as protagonist, characters, and so on as well as, occasionally, the more general 'first-person speaker' when the 'je' does not seem concerned with the projection of a particular image or persona.

Approaches to the Study of French Popular Music

Non-Academic Writing

At the time of writing, the majority of works about French popular music are by non-academics. Numerous biographies of individual *chanson* artists and performers exist, as well as general histories of French *chanson* from different periods. Often, the tone taken in these books and articles is informal, the implied audience being fans or those with a general interest in the subject area. The writers will often, therefore, implicitly include the reader in the story being told by using, in French, the informal plural form, 'nous'. Thierry Séchan, Renaud's brother and co-author of the biographical and contextual *Renaud: l'album*, for

14 Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 239; cited in Chris Tinker, 'The Songs of Léo Ferré, Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: A Study of Personal and Social Narratives' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Birmingham, 1999), p. 2.

instance, describes the beginning of the Vietnam war in the following terms: 'puis la guerre arriva. La nôtre. Celle du Viêt-nam. Nous la gagnâmes, mais ce fut une amère victoire'.[15] And Pierre Saka contends that 'ces chansons-là ['Ça ira…' and 'Temps des cerises'] sont à tout jamais gravées dans notre mémoire et notre cœur'.[16] Similarly, the 'histories' of individual periods, written by journalists, while lively and readable, tend to treat popular music in a simplistic and unproblematic manner, and fail to explore concepts or the construction of personas, images or terms. Clearly, the quality of these non-academic texts varies, and there are books which provide analysis as well as description of the subject in question. The rock journalist, Sylvie Simmon's biography of Gainsbourg, *A Fistful of Gitanes*, for example, explores his art as well as his life, and includes, at times quite detailed musical analysis. Claude Duneton's sizeable two-volume history of French *chanson* is similarly detailed and provides useful information about song texts and the practitioners of the form from its 'origins' to 1860.[17] While impressive in its length and breadth of the subject, however, it tends to treat song unproblematically as a sentimental and emotional reflection of society or as a way for the 'populations laborieuses' to use 'un langage élaboré'.[18] While Duneton does acknowledge that the music and lyrics of a song cannot be separated for the purposes of deriving meaning, he does so on the basis of the music bringing the emotions in the song to life, suggesting that having any musical accompaniment will suffice, not necessarily the one originally chosen for the lyrics. Clearly, *chanson* up to 1860 is significantly different from the songs of today that this thesis is concerned with, and, up to a point, Duneton's assumptions are understandable. However, the work, partly because it is not an academic text and therefore does not have to be as rigorously accountable, does not provide very much enlightenment as to how to study more modern *chanson*.

15 Thierry Séchan and Dominique Sanchez, *Renaud: l'album* (Paris: Messidor, 1987), p. 10.
16 Pierre Saka, *La Chanson française à travers ses succès* (Paris: Larousse, 1995), p. 9.
17 Claude Duneton, *Histoire de la chanson française*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998). Duneton is himself a fairly prolific writer, and is known for his books on *chanson* as well as the French language. He is also a regular contributor to the *Figaro littéraire*, and describes himself as a writer, historian, and (ex-)teacher.
18 Duneton, I, p. 22.

Academic Writing

Academic writing about *chanson* has emanated, as Hawkins suggests above, from departments such as sociology, linguistics, literature and, more recently, French studies. Traditional approaches have tended to apply standard subject-specific methods to the study of *chanson*, without fully accounting for its complex hybridity. Projects such as Linda Hantrais' two volume study, *Le Vocabulaire de Georges Brassens*, for example, while exceptionally detailed, applies a statistical linguistic approach to his song lyrics, thus focusing on only one aspect of his work. Hantrais does, in her introduction, discuss the differences between poetry and *chanson*, and argues that:

> Plusieurs collections des chansons de Brassens ont été publiés, et son œuvre a bien supporté cette épreuve malgré les réserves qu'on peut exprimer à ce sujet, à savoir qu'on ne devrait pas séparer les paroles de la musique et s'attendre à ce qu'un poème écrit pour être chanté soit encore de la poésie lorsqu'on le lit.[19]

However, the aim of her project, she asserts, is to 'examiner le vocabulaire de Brassens afin d'en déterminer les caractéristiques, et comment, vu les limitations imposées sur le genre par les besoins de la brièveté et d'un effet immédiat, il l'exploite pour exprimer des sentiments et des attitudes'.[20] Hantrais' vocabulary analysis is limited, then, in the sense that it finds meaning in only one area, and is concerned only with the expression of emotions and attitudes.

More recent studies of *chanson*, however, are evidence of the need for an interdisciplinary and more diverse approach. Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon's edited volume, *Popular Music in France: From Chanson to Techno*, for example, combines a variety of approaches based on the premise that 'music is irreducibly social'.[21] Their book, they argue,

> tries to demonstrate how the French understand and approach popular music, how popular music in France has reflected and helped shape French society

19 Linda Hantrais, *Le Vocabulaire de Georges Brassens*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1976), I, p. 7.
20 Hantrais, I, p. 10.
21 Richard Middleton, 'Music, Modernization and Popular Identity', in *Popular Music in France: From* Chanson *to Techno*, ed. by Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 1–6 (p. 1).

> and culture since the Second World War, and how French popular music and culture have engaged culturally, cinematographically and commercially with the dominance of 'Anglo-Saxon' music in an increasingly globalised world.[22]

The diversity of approaches in this book, from the cultural politics of pop music in France (Looseley's contribution) to writings about popular music found in the music press (Mat Pires' chapter), reflect the current trend to study French popular music as part of a wider social and cultural dynamic, and one that is often constructed by discourse—be it governmental, fan or press-based.[23] Such diversity is also echoed in recent single-author studies. Looseley's *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, for example, explores the 'naturalisation' of Anglo-American styles of pop music in France and the 'musical, industrial, social and political ramifications' of this process, as well as the 'discourses and debates it has generated'.[24] While Looseley concentrates mainly on popular-musical forms other than *chanson*, Hawkins' *Chanson: The French Singer-Songwriter* thoroughly examines the *chanson* form itself, as well as what he sees as the principal exponents of the form: the singer-songwriters. Hawkins devotes the first part of his book to an investigation of theoretical approaches to *chanson*, while later chapters concentrate on those individual singer-songwriters who have, in his eyes, made an 'original' contribution to the genre.[25] Tinker's book, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War Chanson*, similarly focuses on singer-songwriters firmly placed within the *chanson* tradition, exploring their work through song texts, as well as examining the wider social and political impact of their songs.[26] Tinker has also produced a number of academic articles, looking principally at Brassens, Brel and Ferré, and exploring their work from a variety of different angles (from the political commitment found in song texts by Brassens and Ferré to television

22 Hugh Dauncey and Steve Cannon, 'French Popular Music, Cultural Exception and Globalisation', in *Popular Music in France* (see Dauncey and Cannon, above), pp. 243–256 (p. 243).

23 David Looseley, 'In from the Margins: *Chanson*, Pop and Cultural Legitimacy', in *Popular Music in France* (see Dauncey and Cannon, above), pp. 27–39; Mat Pires, 'The Popular Music Press', in *Popular Music in France* (see Dauncey and Cannon, above), pp. 77–96.

24 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, pp. 1–2.

25 Hawkins, *Chanson*.

26 Chris Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War Chanson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005).

representation of all three *ACIs*).[27] Barbara Lebrun's work, on the other hand, moves away from *chanson* and investigates French rock music, analysing ways in which contemporary French rock musicians create and articulate alternative identities to those found in mainstream rock.[28]

Chanson: *The Relationship between Words and Music*

While such recent approaches to French popular music in general, then, suggest the need for a theoretical approach that takes into consideration not only the song texts themselves, but their mediation and wider processes of articulation, it must also be remembered that *chanson*, specifically, is a predominantly text-based form of popular music. Indeed, one of the central concerns of *chanson* artists themselves, as I will show throughout the thesis, is the relationship between *chanson* and poetry. Given this preoccupation, and the fact that I will be closely analysing song texts, including printed lyrics, in this project, it is important to spend some time exploring the similarities and differences between *chanson* and poetry, and investigating how these can influence methodology.

Hawkins gives a good sketch of the origins of poetry and highlights the similarities and differences between *chanson* and verse. He suggests that 'the *chanson* tradition can [...] be seen to be a re-emergence in a modern urban milieu of the original oral form of poetry, with many of the same characteristics: rhyme, rhythm, dramatic presentation, stylised narration, and so on.'[29] He similarly suggests that both *chanson* and verse share the tradition of French prosody, and that song lyrics still tend to be based on traditional verse metres (alexandrine or

27 See, for example, Chris Tinker, '*Chanson Engagée* and Political Activism in the 1950s and 1960s: Léo Ferré and Georges Brassens', in *Popular Music in France* (see Dauncey and Cannon, above), pp. 139–152; Chris Tinker, 'Léo Ferré, Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Television Representations, Past and Present', *The Web Journal of French Media Studies*, 1 (1998) <http://wjfms.ncl.ac.uk/tinkerWJ.htm> [accessed June 2003]. See the Bibliography for further details.

28 See, for example, Barbara Lebrun, '"Mind over Matter": The under-Performance of the Body and Gender in French Rock Music of the 1990s', *French Cultural Studies*, 16 (2005), 205–221; Barbara Lebrun, 'A Case Study of Zebda: Republicanism, *Métissage* and Authenticity in Contemporary France', *Volume!*, 1 (2002), 59–69; Barbara Lebrun, 'The Construction of an "Alternative" Music Culture in French Rock Music, 1981–2001' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Southampton, 2003).

29 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 24.

octosyllable, for example).[30] However, he also notes that the modern milieu provides means of communication which enable *chanson* to be distributed and heard nationally and internationally, and that it is, therefore, mediated in a way poetry is (or was) not.

While similarities between the two forms do exist, so too do important differences. 'Song texts are not written to be interpreted when read from the page; the written text is merely an adjunct to the complete performance of the song', Hawkins argues, insisting that melody, orchestration and voice are 'equally as much the criteria for aesthetic judgements about the merits or otherwise of a song. It makes little sense to hive off the printed words and privilege them as the repository of "poetry" by applying in a mechanical way the criteria of another very different art form, that of verse.'[31] Simon Frith's writing on song words in popular music in general similarly acknowledges their importance, while drawing attention to the fact that they cannot be analysed in isolation to the other elements of the song as a whole:

> In songs, words are the sign of a voice. As song is always a performance and song words are always spoken out, heard in someone's accent. Songs are more like plays than poems; song words work as speech and speech acts, bearing meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character.[32]

Certain forms of textual analysis, especially those taking a cultural studies approach, can, in fact, be limited. Richard Middleton, for example, argues that in the past those scholars trained in the social sciences tended to use content analysis of lyrics, as this was the easiest approach to textual interpretation in the early days of cultural studies. This, he (and, he argues, most scholars today) describe(s) as simplistic. Due to the limitations of this kind of approach, many writers abandoned the textual as such, although some recognised that 'a more adequate approach to pop lyrics required the development of an awareness that they function not as verbal texts but as song words, linguistically marked vocal

30 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 25.
31 Hawkins, *Chanson*, pp. 26–7.
32 Simon Frith, *Music for Pleasure: Essays in the Sociology of Pop* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1989), p. 120.

sound-sequences mediated by musical conventions, and this', he argues, is the principle that governs the collection of essays in his 2000 book, *Reading Pop*.[33]

The application of traditional poetic study methods to popular song can be compared to the early application of musicology to the study of popular music, which many commentators have also critiqued. Middleton, in his 1990 book, *Studying Popular Music*, for instance, suggested that the terminology employed by musicologists, which emerged in the late nineteenth century in Germany and Austria and was initially used to analyse European concert music, leads to a devaluation of popular music simply because it was never intended to describe it. His argument is that if the same criteria and terminology are applied when studying popular music, 'the results will be problematical. In many kinds of popular music, for example, harmony may not be the most important parameter; rhythm, pitch gradation, timbre and the whole ensemble of performance articulation techniques are often more important'.[34] David Brackett similarly points to the 'specific historical and geographical circumstances' of the emergence of musicology, the fact that it 'developed in tandem with a whole panoply of beliefs about what the musical experience should provide, and about the relationship between performers, audiences, and composers. Audiences and scholars developed an aesthetic of distanced appreciation and a belief in the autonomous art work'. Brackett argues that these beliefs have encouraged the development of a canon, and have consequently cast aspersions on music that does not fit the requirements of the canon. Popular music, he suggests, has fared particularly badly since it is intrinsically linked to commercial enterprise, which 'makes claims for its autonomy seem ludicrous to those attached to the idea of a canon of masterpieces that transcend commerce'.[35] Lucy Green also points to the canon of masterworks, arguing that they are all 'notated, they have all been published in printed form, they are thought to be innovative in relation to the era in which they were composed, and they have all been composed by an individual,

33 Middleton, in the Introduction to *Reading Pop* (see Middleton, above), p. 7.
34 Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990), p. 104.
35 David Brackett, 'Music', in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (see Horner and Swiss, above), pp. 124–140 (p. 125).

Western male'.[36] Middleton, writing ten years after his first criticisms of the application of traditional musicology to popular music, suggests that musicology has adapted and evolved in order to study popular music:

> The best 'new musicology' of pop has grasped the need to hear harmony in new ways, to develop new models for rhythmic analysis, to pay attention to nuances of timbre and pitch inflection, to grasp textures and forms in ways that relate to generic and social function, [and] to escape from 'notational centricity'.[37]

If new musicology has responded to the specific needs of popular music, so too have recent studies in textual analysis. John Shepherd, in an attempt to understand how the term text can be used in relation to music, looks in the first instance at Barthes, and in particular his writings on textuality. Barthes' importance, argues Shepherd, lies in extending textuality to 'include, in principle, any cultural process or artefact that could give rise to meaning'.[38] Shepherd also comments on the centrality of song lyrics to popular music and argues that it is accurate 'to think of popular music's texts as being comprised not just of sounds but of musical sounds in conjunction with words, images and movement'.[39]

Approaches which favour one aspect of popular music at the expense of all other aspects, then, do not seem to have much credibility for scholars of both *chanson* and popular music in general today. For Middleton, for example, the popular music 'text' can well be the music, and a new musicology can, in his view, go a long way in analysing that text, but only when there is an acknowledgment that the music is one part of a multifaceted phenomenon that is the whole song. In this sense, lyrics are important, as they form part of that whole. Obviously, for *chanson* the equation becomes even more complex due to the dominance of the lyrics and the *chanson à texte* tradition. However, Louis-Jean Calvet, in his book *Chanson et société* (1981), which aims to establish a critical framework in order to talk about *chanson* in the same academic way as

36 Lucy Green, 'Ideology', in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (see Horner and Swiss, above), pp. 5–17 (p. 9).
37 Middleton, in the Introduction to *Reading Pop* (see Middleton, above), p. 4.
38 John Shepherd, 'Text', in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (see Horner and Swiss, above), pp. 156–177 (p. 158).
39 Shepherd, 'Text', in *Key Terms in Popular Music and Culture* (see Horner and Swiss, above), p. 171.

literature or film, also contends that words and music cannot be separated. He argues: 'la rencontre entre les mots et les notes, [n'est] pas une simple juxtaposition mais, au contraire, faisait du sens. Un sens que la langue seule ne pouvait pas transmettre, ni la musique bien sûr'.[40] And, throughout the book, he advances the theory that *chanson* cannot be studied by focusing on only one aspect, but its meaning is to be found in, among other things, the geographical context (the street, music hall, television, and so on) and the socio-political context of the time.

Clearly, then, more recent approaches to the study of popular music are exploring the subject holistically rather than applying strict criteria originally meant for other disciplines. In *chanson*, such a holistic approach is also favoured by many scholars today. The recent special edition of *French Cultural Studies* referred to above is particularly useful here, as it allows an overview of some of the most recent approaches to French popular music by scholars working in the UK, France and America. As Looseley says in his editorial introduction, 'the seven essays collected here have been chosen not in order to provide panoramic coverage of musical style [...] but primarily to convey something of the range of approaches currently being adopted within French cultural studies, and the new directions they open up for research'.[41] The diversity of the approaches in this journal, and the different focuses they take, from the audience to the means of communication of song texts, underlines the need for diversity when studying *chanson*. Given the current predominance of a holistic view in popular music studies, the converse danger must also be avoided though, especially where French *chanson* is concerned. That is, the attention paid to music and performance should not be to the detriment of the lyrics. As Peter Winkler, for example, in his study of Randy Newman's songs, suggests: 'most studies of Randy Newman's songs tend to focus on his brilliant, ironic lyrics and the meaning of the stories they tell. But though it is a mistake to assume that the

40 Louis-Jean Calvet, *Chanson et société* (Paris: Payot, 1981), p. 33.
41 Looseley, 'Introduction', *French Cultural Studies*, 16 (2005), 115–119 (pp. 115–6).

meaning of his songs lies entirely in the lyrics, it would equally be a mistake to ignore them'.[42]

An Inductive Approach

Clearly, then, a holistic approach to *chanson* is called for in a French studies thesis such as this. What this means in practical terms is that I will define the song text as the lyrics, music, performance elements and cultural capital attached to it, and will strive to take account of all these when finding meaning. Obvious limitations will apply, however, as I am not a musicologist, and will not, therefore, be able to discuss the effects of music in as much depth as a musicologist would. A holistic approach also means that I will be looking to a wide range of theorists in order to make sense of the meanings found in the songs I deal with. As I made clear in the Introduction, though, this thesis is not concerned with the imposition of theory onto *chanson*, but, rather, with the empirical identification of concerns raised in French popular song in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which have connections to particular theories or schools of thought. I am therefore taking an inductive approach to *chanson*, allowing the texts themselves to suggest my theoretical framework. Such an approach implies an exploration of the questions contained in the songs themselves about the role and function of *chanson*, about how meanings are produced and understood in French popular music, and about the reasons for newer generations of singer-songwriters moving away from a traditional *chanson poétique* model and looking for recognition of their songs on their own terms, as an aspect of popular culture. In this sense, cultural studies has an important role to play in this project, in that the very trends identified by the artists themselves through their self-consciousness can be compared to the evolution of cultural studies, with its emphasis on studying all types of cultural texts as being imbued with meaning, rather than comparing popular culture to high culture in some form of hierarchical relationship. In the final part of this Literature Survey, then, I will

42 Peter Winkler, 'Randy Newman's Americana', in *Reading Pop* (see Middleton, above), pp. 27–57 (p. 28).

briefly examine the evolution of cultural studies in order to more fully explain the parallel between this school of thought and the evolution of a self-conscious *chanson*.

Cultural Studies

Hawkins suggests that 'the most promising avenue for the student and researcher [of *chanson*] would seem to be to adapt the approach of the Anglo-American school of cultural studies'.[43] Cultural studies was indeed one of the first academic interdisciplines to concern itself with popular music, especially as an area of study in its own right. The work of Theodor Adorno is possibly the best known of the early theorists of popular music. In his essay, *On Popular Music* (1941), Adorno argues that all popular music is standardised, whereas serious music 'derives its musical sense from the concrete totality of the piece'.[44] The importance of details does not exist in popular music, he argues, asserting:

> [In popular music,] it would not affect the musical sense if any detail were taken out of the context; the listener can supply the 'framework' automatically, since it is a mere musical automatism itself. The beginning of the chorus is replaceable by the beginning of innumerable other choruses. The interrelationship among the elements or the relationship of the elements to the whole would be unaffected. In Beethoven, position is important only in a living relation between a concrete totality and its concrete parts. In popular music, position is absolute. Every detail is substitutable; it serves its function only as a cog in a machine.[45]

Adorno, then, is clearly making a close correlation between standardisation and the music industry. His rhetoric when describing how popular music is standardised is interesting in this respect. He describes the details in popular music as functioning only 'as a cog in a machine', thus implicitly comparing music making to car making or the manufacture of any other product of an

43 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 15.

44 Theodor Adorno, 'On Popular Music', *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, 9 (1941), 17–45; repr. Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *On Record: Rock, Pop, and the Written Word*, ed. by Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 301–314 (p. 303).

45 Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *On Record* (see Frith and Goodwin, above), p. 303.

industrialised consumer society. This concept is made more explicit and complex in Adorno's argument when he asserts that 'though all industrial mass production necessarily eventuates in standardisation, the production of popular music can be called "industrial" only in its promotion and distribution, whereas the act of producing a song-hit still remains in a handicraft stage'.[46] By this, Adorno implies that the structure of the song is not per se part of the mass industrial society, only the means to take the song to the general public. He therefore goes on to question why the song form itself should be standardised if it is not industrial and concludes that, on one level at least, imitation is the key: 'the musical standards of popular music were originally developed by a competitive process. As one particular song scored a great success, hundreds of others sprang up imitating the successful one. The most successful hit types and "ratios" between elements were imitated, and the process culminated in the crystallisation of standards'.[47] Adorno also identifies pseudo-individualisation as the process by which popular music is made to appear to be different and original. He explains the concept thus:

> The necessary correlate of musical standardisation is pseudo-individualisation. By pseudo-individualisation we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardisation itself. Standardisation of song hits keeps the customers in line by doing their listening for them, as it were. Pseudo-individualisation, for its part, keeps them in line by making them forget that what they listen to is already listened to for them, or 'pre-digested'.[48]

While Adorno's work has certainly had an important impact on the academic study of popular music and on cultural studies generally, many cultural studies scholars following him have critiqued him for judging popular music by standards created for the study of classical music, and therefore not accounting for the genre specificities of popular music. Adorno also made implicit value judgements about what he considered to be good or bad music: standardised (popular) music was bad whereas non-standardised (classical) music was good. Given Adorno's criteria, it would be difficult for popular music to be judged as

46 Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *On Record* (see Frith and Goodwin, above), p. 306.
47 Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *On Record* (see Frith and Goodwin, above), p. 306.
48 Adorno, 'On Popular Music', in *On Record* (see Frith and Goodwin, above), p. 308.

good, regardless of its melodic complexity or its cultural impact. In this sense then, Adorno's theories are reductionist and limiting.

Although similar critiques of mass culture have been made by cultural studies pioneers such as Richard Hoggart, later scholars such as Raymond Williams, John Berger, or Roland Barthes, have tended to take mass culture as their object of study, concentrating on the exposition of meaning in contemporary cultural signs and artefacts, such as advertising, magazines, activities and events. This change in focus from the classification of cultural products as either good or bad, to the study of the products themselves in order to find meaning, has important consequences for popular music. It implies that popular cultural forms need to be judged on their own specific criteria, rather than by standards meant for more classical forms (cf. the criticisms of traditional musicology). It also implies that meaning in popular cultural texts is inextricably linked to the texts' cultural function as well as their content and form. The work of both Barthes and Dick Hebdige is important here. Hebdige, referring to Barthes, asserts:

> Barthes' application of a method rooted in linguistics [semiology] to other systems of discourse outside language (fashion, film, food, etc.) opened up completely new possibilities for contemporary cultural studies. [...] Under Barthes' direction, semiotics promised nothing less than the reconciliation of the two conflicting definitions of culture upon which cultural studies was ambiguously posited—a marriage of moral conviction (in this case, Barthes' Marxist beliefs) and popular themes: the study of a society's total way of life.[49]

Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is itself a key text in terms of the progression of cultural studies as it explores, also through a semiological analysis, 'the decorations, styles and adornments of subgroups as "signs" to be decoded—in the examination of counter-hegemonic resistance and subversion'.[50]

Both Hebdige and Barthes, then, study aspects of popular culture without comparing those aspects to a higher culture, or 'art'. Their contributions, and the work of scholars using similar approaches, have ensured the evolution of cultural studies as a medium where popular culture can be examined on its own terms. Although cultural studies is not, as John Storey points out, 'a monolithic body of

49 Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 10.
50 Will Brooker, *Teach Yourself Cultural Studies* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1998), p. 65.

theories and methods'[51] but is constantly changing to meet the needs of the subjects studied, it is important for the study of French popular music because *chanson* reproduces the very distinction traced in the evolution of cultural studies, from Adorno's high-culturalist position to Barthes and Hebdige: that is, between *chanson* as 'serious art' and as 'worthless popular entertainment'. *Chanson* artists themselves in fact question whether their work can be turned into 'art', and pose questions about the nature and worth of their genre. However, interestingly, more recent artists do not always appear to want their work 'legitimated' as 'art', but want it appreciated and interpreted as an aspect of popular culture, as *both* entertainment and intelligent musings. In the next chapter, I will examine the conscious evolution of a *chanson* genre, exploring how the artists distinguish their work from both poetry and Anglo-American pop.

51 John Storey, *Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), p. 1.

Part II: Manifestations of Self-Consciousness

Quand j'écoute béat un solo de batterie
Y'là la java qui râle au nom de la patrie
Mais quand je crie bravo à l'accordéoniste
C'est le jazz qui m'engueule me traitant de raciste

(Claude Nougaro, 'Le Jazz et la java')

Chapter 2

The Conscious Evolution of a *Chanson* Genre

In this chapter, the first in Part II, I focus on distinctive features of self-consciousness from the inter-war period to the present day. My contention here is that one of the most striking examples of self-consciousness in French song is the allusions to past or contemporaneous musical styles and/or musical (and literary) figures. In this way, French song, I would argue, has evolved in two distinct, though overlapping, channels. First, there are artists who adapt the work of others and who copy previous or current styles, often with a distinct awareness of the genre in which they are working. These artists also often attempt to translate (both literally and metaphorically) non-French—mainly Anglo-American—song for a French audience. Second, there are artists who take this self-conscious referencing further, subverting musical styles rather than mimicking them, and also alluding to key musical and literary figures. The artists in this second category, I would argue, are constructing a sense of a *chanson* tradition, and are placing themselves within it. Moreover, they are deciding which artists have played a crucial role in the development of *chanson* through consistent and continual allusions to central figures.

Section 1 of this chapter, then, will explore self-consciousness in the songs of artists from the 1950s and 1960s, looking in particular at the adaptations of rock and roll and pop music. Section 2 will identify conscious allusions to a *chanson* tradition, first investigating musical allusions—songs which may well adapt non-French sounds and music but still refer to *chanson* in some way. It will then explore allusions to *chanson* found in performance styles (the creation of an 'auteur' figure and the use of 'audience asides'), and in the allusions to literary texts and figures. Section 3 will argue that *chanson* artists themselves create a mythical *chanson* community and lineage through references to themselves and other *chanson* artists. Here I will focus on three of the key figures most often referred to in French songs: Boris Vian, Charles Trenet and Georges Brassens.

1: Song-Family Extensions

David Hatch and Stephen Millward, in their analytical history of pop music, suggest that 'pop music self-consciously combines continuity with change', and that in the evolution of pop music there are at least 'three possible stages available to new generations of pop musicians in the development of their musical competence':

> A recognisable first stage is that of song/performance reproduction (or copying) of examples taken from selected musical types. A second stage requires the competence to improvise on given patterns (usually manifested as song-family extensions). A third involves the writing of new songs composed of elements derived from the material in 'stage one', which thus can be described as *musical* family extensions. This appears to be a generally applicable model in pop song development, as stages one to three are constantly repeated [author's italics].[1]

In this section, I will argue that the songs of Eddy Mitchell and Johnny Hallyday, among others, while often self-conscious, adapt new music in a way that follows the pattern of song-family extensions as identified by Hatch and Millward above. In this sense, Mitchell's and Hallyday's work can be seen as following a 'generally applicable' model, and also has much in common with the adaptations made by Anglo-American bands. The ways in which *chanson* distinguishes itself from this model will, however, be explored from Section 2 onwards.

1a: Rock and Roll

Cover versions and adaptations of rock and roll songs in France appeared as early as the 1950s, not long after the rise—and distribution—of rock and roll itself. Bill Haley and Elvis Presley both released key singles in 1954, Haley 'Rock around the Clock' and Presley 'That's All Right Mama', as well as 'Blue Moon of Kentucky'. Just two years later, Boris Vian and Michel Legrand wrote rock and roll parodies for Henry Cording (Henri Salvador) and his Original Rock and Roll

1 David Hatch and Stephen Millward, *From Blues to Rock: An Analytical History of Pop Music* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), p. 4–7.

Boys. In 1957 Pierre Delanoë released his first adaptations of Elvis into French followed in 1958–9 by attempts by Richard Anthony, Claude Spiron and others, to create French rock music.[2] Two singers are of particular interest here: Eddy Mitchell and Johnny Hallyday. In 1960 Eddy Mitchell (born Claude Moine) and his band Les Chaussettes noires became an instant rock and roll success, releasing six singles and selling two million records the following year (1961). In 1963, after his military service, Mitchell started to pursue a solo career, recording an album in London of cover versions of songs by Eddie Cochrane, Elvis Presley, Gene Vincent and Bill Haley, entitled, rather appropriately, *Eddy in London*. It included the songs 'Peggy Sue', originally by Buddy Holly, 'Te voici', a cover of 'Mean Woman Blues' by Roy Orbison, 'Blue Jean Bop', originally by Gene Vincent and 'Jolie Miss Molly', originally 'Good Golly Miss Molly' by Little Richard.

Self-consciousness in Mitchell's work manifests itself in two ways. First, in the manner identified by Hatch and Millward as a general trend in the evolution of pop music (although, of course, Mitchell's work is not pop). That is, in its continuity coupled with change: Mitchell adapted American rock and roll songs into French, copying the music and the rock and roll image, but changing the lyrics. Second, Mitchell's songs self-referentially place himself—his persona—within the lyrics, suggesting and reinforcing his own rock and roll label throughout his career. In 1961, for example, his group Les Chaussettes noires released 'Eddie sois bon', an adaptation of Chuck Berry's 1958 hit 'Johnny B. Goode', and then, in 1974, Mitchell released 'Bye Bye Johnny B. Goode', referring to the Chuck Berry original as well as implicitly his own earlier work.[3] In both songs Mitchell portrays himself as a rock and roll musician, using much the same imagery as found in the original American songs. In 'Eddie sois bon', the youthfully rebellious 'Eddie' spends his time sleeping in, drinking whisky and playing guitar instead of finding work and getting married. In this way, he is shunning traditional French values and is asserting the 'new' values of youth

2 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, pp. 216–7.

3 Mitchell wrote the lyrics to 'Eddie sois bon' which appeared on the 1961 album, *100% Rock*. The quasi-autobiographical 'Johnny B. Goode' was written by Chuck Berry and produced by Leonard and Phil Chess in 1958. 'Bye Bye Johnny B. Goode' is from Mitchell's solo album, *Rocking in Nashville*, recorded with Nashville musicians.

culture.[4] This image was also reinforced in the music press at the time. One of Mitchell's colleagues at the Crédit Lyonnais branch where he worked in the late 1950s, for example, describes Mitchell's 'real-life' rock and roll lifestyle thus:

> La journée était supposée commencer à huit heures, mais nous n'arrivions généralement que vers dix heures. On portait quelques paquets, puis on jouait au flipper. Et l'après-midi se passait surtout en face, au Golf Drouot. Là, il y avait plein de copains dont Johnny Hallyday.[5]

In Mitchell's songs, associating himself with other rock and roll musicians is also an important concern. In 'Bye Bye Johnny B. Goode', for example, he refers to Chuck Berry as 'mon ami', thus creating an intimate connection between himself and Berry, as well as implicitly suggesting he is part of the same rock and roll fraternity. This kind of self-consciousness, where a singer confidently confirms his or her own place within a particular genre, is a common trait of rock and roll, as Berry's own 'Johnny B. Goode' illustrates. In Mitchell's case though—and in Hallyday's—the self-consciousness also produces nostalgia for the rock and roll genre in France. The endurance of his rock and roll image, for example, is suggested in 'C'est un rocker' (1974), in which he self-referentially describes his 'rocker' label in a nostalgic assertion:

> Tu sais, parfois, la vie me réserve des choses drôles.
> Les gens oublient, puis redécouvrent le rock and roll
> Et si je chante l'amour ou bien n'importe quoi,
> Qu'importe le sujet, les gens disent de moi:
> 'C'est un rocker, c'est un roller.'[6]

Johnny Hallyday's work also contains similar examples of self-consciousness as those identified in Mitchell's, as well as in nostalgia for his own rock and roll persona. Hallyday, like Mitchell, started his career by singing rock and roll adaptations, such as 'T'aimer follement' (1960), a French version of 'Makin' Love', adapted by André Salvet and Jacques Plait.[7] As well as his rock

4 These 'new' values of youth culture had also been dispersed in France via films such as László Benedek's *The Wild One* (1953, known as *L'Équipée sauvage* in France) starring Marlon Brando.

5 Jean-Pierre Orfino, member of the Pirates, cited in François Jouffa, Jacques Barsamian and Jean-Louis Rancurel, *Idoles Story* (Neuilly: Alain Mathieu, 1978), p. 12.

6 Written by Mitchell in collaboration with P. Papadianmandis.

7 Music by Floyd Robinson.

and roll style songs he co-wrote himself such as 'Je cherche une fille' (co-written with Jil & Jan), he also released rock and roll songs in English, such as 'Be Bop a Lula', 'Hello Mary Lou' and 'Maybellene' (1962). Although he has changed his image copious times throughout his career, his rock and roll persona is one which he self-referentially refers to at various points.[8] The 1981 single, 'Excusez-moi de chanter encore du rock'n'roll', is an example of this.[9] Through a supposed apology for continuing to sing rock and roll songs, an affirmation of his desire to continue in this tradition is in fact made, underlined by standard rock and roll arrangements. The song also highlights the perceived supremacy of Anglo-American rock while asserting Hallyday's Frenchness and ability to succeed in this musical genre:

> Excusez-moi de ne pas être américain
> Anglais de Liverpool et même pas canadien
> Pardonnez-moi d'encore chanter toujours du rock'n'roll
>
> Y a pas que l'Amérique qui fait de la musique

At the time of this song's release French music was again (as it had in the late 1950s and 1960s) undergoing changes in style due to Anglo-American influences. Although rock and roll itself was originally seen as a foreign import, this song posits it—and Hallyday's image—as still being authentically French, thus nostalgically flattering both Hallyday and his fanbase:

> J'suis un rocker maudit
> Ouais, c'est la haine d'être à Paris
> Quand Jerry Lee Lewis et Elvis
> Faisaient les beaux jours de Memphis
>
> Tant pis si l'écho français de mon ramage
> Quelques fois fait pâlir un peu leur plumage

8 I am using the term self-referentially here although Hallyday did not generally write his own songs, and purists may, therefore, dispute my usage. I am referring to Hallyday's self-conscious image and persona, constructed through a combination of lyrics, music, stage clothes and delivery, and am, therefore, using the term self-referential in a wide sense. This usage is consistent with my argument that the speaker in a song is a constructed persona however autobiographical the lyrics may appear (see the Introduction).

9 Words by Michael Mallory, music by Mort Shuman, first released on the 1981 album *En pièces détachées* and re-realised in 2000 by Mercury.

The song's assertion of Hallyday as a French rocker is in keeping with, what Looseley describes as, a 'certain revisionism' in his status as an inauthentic American 'wannabe'.[10] Looseley points to 1980 as the beginning of a turnaround in critical representations of Hallyday, arguing that a new wave of '"le rock français", outcome of an increase in amateur or semi-professional bands, the rise of punk and the birth of a new independent record sector' allowed 'Hallyday's rock of some 20 years before to be interpreted less pejoratively'.[11]

In the early 1960s, however, Hallyday's rock and roll image was not seen in such a positive light by critics or record companies alike, as Looseley argues:

> French record companies were keen to clean up their protégés and avoid alienating parents. As had already happened in the USA and the UK, it was time for rock'n'roll to be brought to heel. […] Like Hallyday and Mitchell, the first French rock'n'roll fans were mainly boys aged between fifteen and twenty with conscription into the Algerian War hanging over them. Danyel Gérard, Hallyday and Mitchell were all called up just as Elvis had been, creating much the same photo opportunities for a new look of clean-cut solemnity before the flag. […] Adolescent girls were attracted to the music and female singers were duly launched, helping retrieve rock'n'roll from its associations with male delinquency. […] This in turn produced a wave of equally innocuous-looking boy singers, like Claude François, Adamo or Frank Alamo. Thus eviscerated, rock'n'roll could be safely transmitted to a wider youth constituency as a consumer style. French pop was born, known as *le yéyé*.[12]

1b: Pop

With the transformation of rock and roll into *yéyé*, and the 'copinisation' of music, French song looked to new (although still Anglo-American, for the main) music to adapt and assimilate.[13] Indeed, the *yéyé* period saw a large number of cover versions and adaptations, including much of Françoise Hardy's repertoire at that time; for example, 'L'Amour d'un garçon' (1963), originally released by Timi Yuro as 'The Love of a Boy' in 1962, written by Burt Bacharach and Hal

10 David Looseley, 'Fabricating Johnny: French Popular Music and National Culture', *French Cultural Studies*, 16 (2005), 191–203 (p. 195).
11 Looseley, 'Fabricating Johnny', p. 195.
12 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 27.
13 The sociologist Edgar Morin employs the term 'copinisation' in his article 'Salut les copains', *Le Monde*, 7–8 July, 1963, p. 12.

David and 'Avant de t'en aller' (1963) originally written and performed by Paul Anka with the title, 'Think about It', also in 1963. Although the Anglo-American influence on *yéyé* stars was clear, many were deliberately marketed as more 'French', and therefore more authentic, than the rock and roll stars of the 1950s and early 1960s. Christian Victor and Julien Regoli, in their history of French rock, for example, point to Claude François' (self-)presentation as 'French' in spite of the fact that most of the songs on his first album were cover versions: 'un jeune chanteur se présente ainsi sur la pochette de son premier disque: "Il n'a pas cherché à s'inventer une biographie *made in U.S.A.*: Il n'est pas le fils du shérif de Kansas City. . . Il s'appelle Claude François tout simplement"'.[14] Although dismissed by the majority of critics and academics, the terms 'originality' and 'innovation' are often used in the French press or music 'fanzines' to describe François' contribution to French popular music, and indeed, Dario Salvatori, writing a short biography of François for an Italian publisher in the rather kitsch series 'Disparus trop jeunes' claims:

> Claude, l'idole du yéyé, réussit à mettre au point un spectacle en direct, tout à fait original pour un artiste français. Excellent danseur, présentateur et animateur, il fut le premier à présenter un genre de spectacle complet, intéressant, original et riche en coups de théâtre. [...] Claude était un novateur, le premier qui avait introduit en France le spectacle dit 'à l'américaine', avec des 'gimmicks' et des jeux de scène.[15]

François' songs and performance style certainly brought change to French music. Through self-consciousness he can also be argued to have brought, like Mitchell and Hallyday before him, a nostalgic assertion of his own place in French musical history. In 'Cette année-là' (1976), for example, a cover, in translation, of Frankie Valli & The Four Seasons' disco hit, 'December, 1963 (Oh What a Night)', François changes the year in question to 1962 and replaces the lyrical romantic nostalgia with a self-referential allusion to his first night on stage, as an unknown figure.[16] The image created here is of a singer consciously choosing a different path to rock and roll and consequently pleasing his French public. There is also a

14 Christian Victor and Julien Regoli, *Vingt ans de rock français* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1978), p. 61.

15 Dario Salvatori, *Le Mythe de Claude François*, trans. by Françoise Ghin (Rome: Gremese, 1998), pp. 24–5.

16 'December, 1963 (Oh What a Night)' was written by Bob Gaudio and Judy Parker in 1975.

thinly veiled criticism of rock and roll in the form of a contention that being 'l'idole des jeunes' is certainly pleasing for a fanbase who 'cassaient les fauteuils' (Johnny Hallyday was, of course, referred to as 'l'idole des jeunes' in the early 1960s):

> Cette année-là
> Je chantais pour la première fois
> Le public ne me connaissait pas
> Oh quelle année cette année-là !
>
> Cette année-là
> Le rock'n'roll venait d'ouvrir ses ailes
> Et dans mon coin je chantais belles belles belles
> Et le public aimait ça
>
> Déjà les Beatles étaient quatre garçons dans le vent
> Et moi ma chanson disait marche tout droit
> Cette année-là
> Quelle joie d'être l'idole des jeunes
> Pour des fans qui cassaient les fauteuils
> Plus j'y pense et moins j'oublie

The intertextual references in the song—'Marche tout droit' (1963) was the title of one of François' songs, an adaptation of Gus Cannon and Hosea Woods' 'Walk Right In' and 'Quatre garçons dans le vent' is the French title of the Beatles film *Hard Day's Night* (1964)—add contextual detail to the year in question and also firmly place François in a pop tradition, rather than rock and roll or, indeed, *chanson*. Self-consciousness in the above songs, then, serves to reinforce a rock and roll or *yéyé* label. It also allows artists to nostalgically highlight their own contribution to, and place in, French musical history.

2: Allusions to a *Chanson* Tradition

The songs I will examine in this section have similarities to the rock and roll and *yéyé* adaptations discussed in the previous section in the sense that many refer to non-French music and thus contribute to the evolution of French song. These songs, however, go beyond adaptation and inscribe themselves in *chanson* history. Indeed, Hatch and Millward's theory of song-family extensions cannot be

easily applied to the evolution of *chanson* as a specific genre because, in *chanson* history, artists frequently look back to their predecessors with an awe that is without irony, something which is rarely seen in Anglo-American music. *The Guardian*'s Rupert Smith points to this feature of *chanson*, and cites the dance band Cassius (Hubert Blanc-Francard and Phillipe Zdar) who extol praise for Gainsbourg, Brel and Brassens. He argues: 'this is not ironic appreciation; this is genuine worship', and also suggests that it is 'hard to imagine a British dance act having the same filial relationship with artists of earlier generations [...] all French musicians have to make their peace with their predecessors, either by reinterpreting them or rejecting them'.[17] By highlighting specifically *chanson* features, I would argue that artists are not only genre aware, but, through various forms of self-consciousness, make the audience aware of their *chanson* lineage and 'filial relationship' with their predecessors.

The term 'genre' is itself a complex one, both as used in this thesis and in popular music studies generally. Dominic Strinati, for instance, in his discussion of the Frankfurt School and of criticisms of it by later theorists, explores, through a comparison with film, the different approaches to the notion of musical genre taken by Adorno, and later, by Bernard Gendron, finding:

> Genres help audiences sort out what they want to see or hear from what they do not. Individual genres, and these include such forms as art-house films, are popular with their audiences to the extent to which standard themes and iconography are combined with variations and surprises within a recognisable narrative. [...] Genres are more prone to change than Adorno implies since they arise out of, and deal with, specific historical conditions.[18]

To stay with the film comparison for a moment, Barry Keith Grant, in the introduction to his book *Film Genre Reader II*, expands on the ideas concerning genre referred to in the above quotation, first making the point that: 'stated simply, genre movies are those commercial feature films which, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar

17 Rupert Smith, 'Les Misérables', *Guardian* (4 November 2002) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/features/story/0,11710,825474,00.html> [accessed 4 November 2002], para. 10–12 of 12.

18 Dominic Strinati, *An Introduction to the Theories of Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 78.

situations'.[19] He then goes on, via a discussion of the first critical writings that appeared on film genre, to suggest, '[genre is] a system of conventions structured according to cultural values, an idea not dissimilar to what structuralists would more recently call the "deep structure" of myth'. Genre, then, is a construct, and I would argue that self-consciousness allows artists to reinforce the myth of *chanson* as a specific genre of French song, through allusions to values traditionally associated with it (*chanson à texte* tradition, the accordion of the *chanson réaliste*, and so on).

2a: Musical Allusions

In the previous section, the introduction of rock and roll and Anglo-American pop music to French song was explored. Here, I will start by focusing on the introduction of similarly new and exotic music into French song that nonetheless retains features of *chanson*. I will then briefly examine the revival of the accordion as a self-conscious *chanson* motif.

Charles Trenet's, and later Claude Nougaro's, work makes extensive use of traditionally non-French music. Many of Trenet's songs borrow American jazz and swing orchestration, yet he is, unlike Mitchell, generally referred to by critics and *ACI*s alike as a *chanson* artist. While there are, of course, many reasons for this, one of the most salient is his way of combining the newer orchestration with traditional *chanson* elements rather than simply 'copying' it. The most noticeable of these elements is the importance of the lyrics in Trenet's work. Many singer-songwriters point to lyrical quality as distinguishing French *chanson* from other forms of music, even when French artists are strongly influenced by outside musical sources. Recently, Zazie, for example, has argued that 'en France, on a une vraie culture du texte, des artistes qui font toujours attention à leurs textes, qui ont le souci de l'écriture'.[20] The lyrics, in Trenet's songs, generally take precedence over the music, although, in many instances, the music plays a vital

19 *Film Genre Reader II*, ed. by Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), p. xv.

20 Cited in 'Le Grand Forum de l'an 2000', *Chorus*, 30, 1999/2000, p. 95.

role in reinforcing the sentiments expressed in the lyrics. Boris Vian, writing for Henry Cording, and Nougaro similarly inscribed themselves within a *chanson* tradition through emphasising the importance of lyrics while introducing non-French music. Nougaro's 'Le Jazz et la java' (1962), for example, suggests that, ultimately, both styles of music referred to in the title can have a place in France—and in Nougaro's work specifically—in spite of the apparent contradictions in the values they represent:

Chaque jour un peu plus y a le jazz qui s'installe
Alors la rage au cœur la java fait la malle
[…]
Quand j'écoute béat un solo de batterie
Y'là la java qui râle au nom de la patrie
Mais quand je crie bravo à l'accordéoniste
C'est le jazz qui m'engueule me traitant de raciste
[…]
Jazz et java copains ça doit pouvoir se faire
Pour qu'il en soit ainsi, tiens je partage en frère
Je donne au jazz mes pieds pour marquer son tempo
Et je donne à la java mes mains pour le bas de son dos[21]

Nougaro is thus contemplating the arrival of jazz and its relationship to more traditional musical styles in France, in this case, the popular waltz (known in France as *la java*), while simultaneously combining jazz orchestration with the French language in his work. This song, for example, is written in traditional waltz ¾ time, yet also uses electric and acoustic pianos in addition to a double bass in the style of a small jazz combo. Nougaro's vocal style is equally evocative of non-French singers; but the choice and distinctive sound of the French language ensures the song makes reference to French *chanson*.

Self-reflection (either explicitly, like Nougaro's song above, or implicitly like Vian's rock and roll parodies) coupled with the introduction of new musical styles may go some of the way to explaining how Vian's and Nougaro's work is interpreted as *chanson* even when it is heavily experimental. Other artists, though, use more explicit musical allusions, in order to place their work squarely within a *chanson* tradition. Two musical instruments are particularly associated

21 Lyrics by Nougaro, music by Jacques Datin, based on a theme by Joseph Hadyn. Music performed by Michel Legrand and his orchestra.

with *chanson*: the accordion and the guitar. The accordion is traditionally associated with the *chanson réaliste*, as well as popular dance music like *la java*, and is often cited by Anglo-American journalists as the quintessential *chanson* marker. Renaud, from the 1970s onwards, makes extensive use of the accordion, and groups like Pigalle, Têtes raides and Paris combo later employ it in their songs. Renaud's musical allusions will be explored in Chapter 7, but here I want to briefly examine the use of the accordion by groups such as Pigalle and Têtes raides. Bruno Lesprit, writing in *Le Monde*, describes Pigalle as the precursors of the *néoréaliste* movement in France, largely because of the reintroduction of the accordion at a time when, according to Pigalle's creator François Hadji-Lazaro, 'il était considéré comme de la sous-merde'.[22] Similarly, Christian Olivier, the lead singer of Têtes raides, points to the accordion (as well as the written text) as symbolic of French *chanson*: 'I started out doing Clash and Stones covers, in English, and then I started to write songs in French, and the importance of the poetry of the text drew me into the traditions of French song. The accordion came later'.[23] 'Je chante' (2000), by Têtes raides, features both the accordion and guitar and thus, along with other songs on the album *Gratte poil*, inscribes itself within the *chanson* tradition. The song begins with Christian Olivier's strong vocals accompanied by a single acoustic guitar, later joined by an accordion. Similarly, 'Les Poupées', from the same album, features a complex and fast-paced accordion and piano rhythm as well as a flute melody to accompany equally fast-paced, comic lyrics.[24]

22 Bruno Lesprit, 'François Hadji-Lazaro, garçon douché', *Le Monde*, 19 November 2002, p. 33. The term *néoréaliste* was first applied to the songs of Brel and Brassens in the 1960s, but was used again to describe bands who, in the 1980s, following in the footsteps of Renaud, referenced a French tradition through the use of the accordion as well as covers of *chanson réaliste* songs. In her research on (the role of) French popular music as a *lieu de mémoire*, Mairéad Seery, a PhD candidate at National University of Ireland, Galway, will address questions such as the use of the accordion by groups such as Paris combo, Sanseverino and Têtes raides.

23 Cited in an interview with Philip Sweeney, 'Vive la chanson!', *The Independent Review*, 1 November 2002, p. 16.

24 Both song titles, it can be argued, make reference to previous songs. 'Je chante' is, of course, one of Trenet's most famous titles, and Gainsbourg, among others, uses the image of the *poupée* in many of his songs (and song titles). Gainsbourg's usage of the term *poupée* will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.

The guitar became associated with the *chanson* tradition largely because of the physical constraints imposed on *chanson* artists by their performance space.[25] *Chanson* artists, as opposed to music hall performers, tended to occupy small cabaret stages where only a limited musical accompaniment was possible. The guitar was the ideal, compact, portable instrument, and a favourite, of course, of Brassens. The guitar, especially when used by those artists in the *rive gauche* cabarets, also reinforced the lyrical tradition of *chanson* as it was not loud enough to muffle the performer's voice, and was used, generally speaking, as an accompaniment to the written text.[26] Calvet suggests that 'good' *chanson* has, since the *rive gauche* tradition, been associated with lyrical predominance and competence, and that France had to wait for singers such as Alain Souchon and Bernard Lavilliers for the music to be used in more of an Anglo-American sense, that is, for the lyrics to work with the music and harmonies, rather than simply being propped up by them.[27] In this sense, then, whenever contemporary singer-songwriters and performers favour the guitar (or the accordion) as their musical accompaniment, especially at the expense of other instruments, they are referencing, either explicitly or implicitly the *chanson* (*rive gauche*), and are thus distancing their work from Anglo-American traditions, and securing a stamp of Frenchness.

2b: Performance Allusions: Auteur *and Audience*

As well as musical allusions, performance allusions can also help to construct *chanson* as a specific genre, and in this section I will begin by briefly examining how self-consciousness allows singer-songwriters to construct themselves as *auteurs*, in a similar vein to *nouvelle vague* directors, and how *auteurism* consequently becomes a specific feature of *chanson*. I will also look at the relationship between the *chanson auteur* and the audience, arguing that audience complicity can reinforce a *chanson* label.

25 Calvet, p. 72.
26 The importance of performance space will also be explored in relation to Gainsbourg's work in Chapter 5.
27 Calvet, p. 72.

One of the ways in which the construction of an *auteur* is manifest is through the self-conscious (and often comic) 'sequels' made by singer-songwriters. There are many instances of a singer-songwriter picking up in one song a theme or character s/he has already introduced in another, ranging from Renaud's brief allusions to his physical appearance from song to song (see Chapter 6), to the invention and repetition of Gainsbourg's alter-ego 'Gainsbarre' (see Chapter 5). If a *chanson* artist's regular audience has a good knowledge of the artist's work, further layers of meaning are created through the audience's informed responses to the singer's use of characters or themes already presented. On a simple level, a comfortable familiarity is bred when the audience's expectations are met and reinforced. At the same time, complicit humour can be created when those same expectations are undermined or challenged in some way by the singer's alteration of either a character or a theme. An example of this can be found in the two versions of the Brel song 'Les Bonbons' (the first released in 1964, which I shall refer to henceforth as 'Les Bonbons 64', and the second in 1967, which I shall call 'Les Bonbons 67'). Both songs are comic portrayals of a maladroit protagonist waiting for a romantic date, presented in a circular plot construction: the end of 'Les Bonbons 64' refers to its own beginning as well as pre-empting the opening of 'Les Bonbons 67' by finishing the song ('Les Bonbons 64') with the same scenario it opened with, and repeating the first four lines of the song. The story is continued in 'Les Bonbons 67', when the protagonist comes back to pick up the sweets he gave to Germaine, the object of his affections:

> Je vous ai apporté des bonbons
> Parce que les fleurs c'est périssable
> Puis les bonbons c'est tellement bon
> Bien que les fleurs soient plus présentable…
>
> (Opening and closing lines of 'Les Bonbons 64')

> Je viens rechercher mes bonbons
> Vois-tu, Germaine, j'ai eu trop mal
> Quand tu m'as fait cette réflexion
> Au sujet de mes cheveux longs
> C'est la rupture bête et brutale
>
> (Opening lines of 'Les Bonbons 67')

The latter song's ending equally refers to its own opening, as well as to the opening and closing of the previous song, through a repetition of the line 'je vous ai apporté des bonbons…'. There is a comic development of the main character in the second song—through whose eyes we see the action unfold but who is never named—when he becomes a heavily pastiched version of his former self. Hongre and Lidsky argue that 'comme dans le théâtre de boulevard, le personnage a changé de statut social: indifférencié dans la première, il appartient ici à une famille aisée, parle de son père et de sa mère. La charge se fait lourde, le trait féroce: Brel pointe l'oreille, de façon cabotine'.[28] The male character's superficiality is also emphasised in both versions through the music and Brel's performance. The character's platitudes are delivered to a xylophone backing with mockingly dramatic breath pauses and culminating in a pantomime grotesque gleeful giggle when the protagonist spots Germaine's younger brother to whom he decides to give the sweets he has brought. There is thus a knowing continuity between these two versions and also a self-conscious humour in the tradition of the 'audience aside'. In the pastiche of 1967, Brel is writing for an audience familiar with the characters in 'Les Bonbons 64'. This kind of self-conscious interaction with the audience is reminiscent of the music hall tradition, and the earlier *café concerts*. Pascal Sevran points to the intimacy of the *caf'conc*, for example, and to how the generally small space allowed interaction between the performer and the audience.[29] Jacques Damase similarly remarks on the number of theatrical 'character' singers in the music hall, arguing that 'there were no "straight" singers, in the modern sense, relying mainly on charm'.[30] Brel, then, is working within this same theatrical music hall tradition, but is also subverting it through self-consciousness.

On the one hand, the use of sequels and audience asides gives the impression that a *chanson* artist or performer is in control of the stage, the audience and his or her own body of work, and that as such, he/she is both aware of the genre in

28 Bruno Hongre and Paul Lidsky, *Chansons: Jacques Brel*, Profil d'une œuvre, 52 (Paris: Hatier, 1976), p. 72.

29 Pascal Sevran, *Le Music hall français: de Mayol à Julien Clerc* (Paris: Olivier Orban, 1978), p. 13.

30 Jacques Damase, *Les Folies du music-hall: A History of the Music Hall in Paris from 1914 to the Present Day* (London: Spring Books, 1970), p. 61.

which he or she is working and is keen for the audience to know that too. On the other hand, the ways in which meaning is created through the asides and sequels are a reminder of the importance of the audience or listeners in the meaning-making process of *chanson*. When the sequels and asides are seen in the context of an ongoing process of demonstrating an awareness of the genre in which they are working, these traits can also be seen as giving the singer-songwriters a certain *auteurist* legitimacy, which in turn helps to posit *chanson* as an art form. Hawkins, for example, describes Brel's songs as 'the pieces of a jigsaw which fit together to form a coherent Brelian universe, unified in the same way as the works of certain great literary figures. [...] In this respect they are comparable to those of Brassens and Ferré'.[31] And as Hongre and Lidsky point out in their study of Brel, many of his later songs are pastiches of earlier dramatic songs by him, like 'Vesoul' or 'Les Bonbons'.[32]

Brassens, whose collected songs Hawkins describes as an *œuvre*, also used and played with the audience's expectations, resulting in both humour and a self-conscious awareness of his own *chanson* style. In 'Le Pornographe' (1958), for example, the Brassens persona explains his particular lyrical style to the audience, in an ironic way, telling them that:

> Autrefois, quand j'étais marmot
> J'avais la phobie des gros mots
> Et si j'pensais 'merde' tout bas
> Je ne le disais pas
> Mais
> Aujourd'hui que mon gagne-pain
> C'est d'parler comme un turlupin
> Je n'pense plus 'merde', pardi
> Mais je le dis

The implication here is that the Brassens persona has built a reputation (and has achieved financial stability as a result) on his vulgar style of storytelling, and it is for that reason that he continues in the same vein. It is his job to be the farcical joker and therefore he continues to carry out that job. The complicit nod to the audience suggests that Brassens is aware that they expect a certain style from him

31 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 144.
32 Hongre and Lidsky, p. 72.

and are familiar with the content of his *œuvre*, and he is, in this way, letting them in on the joke. In the chorus to this song, he is overtly stating his position within the *chanson* fraternity, and again making it clear that he is aware of the musical styles associated with him, in a humorous way. The image of him as a roguish child is also significant here as it suggests a juvenile sense of humour but also a cheeky innocence which contrasts importantly with the explicit vulgarity, suggesting a playful ambiguity:

J'suis le pornographe
Du phonographe
Le polisson
De la chanson

Being self-aware and letting the audience know that the singer-songwriter is self-aware is an important preoccupation in *chanson* discourse. Drawing attention to the *chanson* artist's role as a writer and creator of a text and performance, within a *chanson* tradition, is equally important in the construction of *chanson* as a legitimate art form. Another way in which *chanson* has evolved as a specific genre is through the proliferation of literary allusions, and it is to these that I will now turn.

2c: Literary and Artistic Allusions

Many examples of singer-songwriters setting poems to music are present throughout *chanson* history. The songs of Yvette Guilbert include musical settings of poems by Baudelaire, Fagus, Jammes, Richepin, Verlaine and others. In 1957 Ferré produced an album of versions of poems from Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, entitled *Les Fleurs du mal chantées par Léo Ferré*, and in the 1960s, brought out a series of albums comprising poems in a popular music setting, including works of Aragon, Verlaine and Rimbaud. Similarly, Brassens included poetic texts set to music on most of his albums including Aragon's wartime poem 'Il n'y a pas d'amour heureux', Francis Jammes' 'La Prière',

Victor Hugo's 'Gastibelza' and Villon's 'La Ballade des dames du temps jadis'.[33] Jean Ferrat is probably the most well-known singer to put Aragon's poems to music, releasing *Ferrat chante Aragon* (Barclay, 1974) and a two-volume compilation of poems set to music, volume one in 1992 and volume two in 1995, as well as releasing many singles of Aragon poems. In addition to Aragon, Baudelaire's poetry has been a popular choice for musical settings, with Gainsbourg producing a version of 'Le Serpent qui danse' and later, Lavilliers setting 'Promesses d'un visage' to music.

Setting poetry to music places an emphasis on the written text and therefore reinforces the *chanson à texte* tradition. As music, generally speaking, takes precedence over lyrics in Anglo-American rock and pop, it is also a way for singer-songwriters to distinguish French *chanson* from both outside sources and *variétés*. *Chanson*, as a genre, thus becomes imbued with a literary stature, and each subsequent poem set to music both refers to this stature and perpetuates it.

This *culture écrite* is further reinforced through *chanson* artists borrowing literary and artistic styles in their songs (rather than, say, rock and roll tropes). Jean Ferrat's 'Complainte de Pablo Neruda' and 'Federico Garcia Lorca', for example, both refer to the literary figures in the titles. Similarly, Ferrat uses Aragon's verse to allude to the artist Marc Chagall in one of his songs through both the title, 'Chagall' (1994), and the lyrical and musical style, which transposes Chagall's painting technique into song form:

> Tous les animaux et les candélabres
> Le violon-coq et le bouc-bouquet
> Sont du mariage
>
> L'ange à la fenêtre où sèche le linge
> Derrière la vitre installe un pays
> Dans le paysage

Both the dream-like quality and the unexpected placement of objects with people or animals, found in many of Chagall's paintings, are captured here, through the melange of objects and the consistent alliteration. The music, and in particular, the ¾ dance time signature and the combination of brass, woodwind, guitar and

33 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 128.

percussion in a major key, also create the carnivalesque mood so reminiscent of many of Chagall's paintings.[34]

Many other literary and artistic figures are referred to in modern *chanson*. Gainsbourg, for example, alludes to Prévert in 'La Chanson de Prévert' (1960); Renaud cites Robert Doisneau in 'Rouge gorge' (1988) and in 'Mon bistrot préféré' (2002); and Zazie refers to both Verlaine and Rimbaud in 'Adam et Yves' (2001).[35] As well as references to literary and artistic figures, the *chanson* label is also reinforced through allusions to other singer-songwriters.

3: The Creation of a Mythical *Chanson* Lineage

Hawkins makes use of the term 'intertextual' to describe the kinds of lyrical, musical and performance-based references to other singer-songwriters that appear in French songs, arguing that, 'the persona of an artist can often have clear intertextual references, such as Renaud's allusion to role models such as Gavroche and Aristide Bruant. The opportunities for scholarly footnotes are endless'.[36] The term 'intertextuality' was coined by Julia Kristeva in the 1960s but is now common currency in literary theory.[37] Worton and Still describe intertextuality as follows:

> The theory of intertextuality insists that a text cannot exist as a hermetic or self-sufficient whole, and so does not function as a closed system. [...] The writer is a reader of texts (in the broadest sense) before s/he is a creator of texts, and therefore the work of art is inevitably shot through with references, quotations and influences of every kind. [...] This repetition of past or of contemporary texts can range from the most conscious and sophisticated elaboration of other poets' work, to a scholarly use of sources, or the quotation (with or without the use of quotation marks) of snatches of

34 The lyrics are from Aragon's 'Marc Chagall: celui qui dit les choses sans rien dire', available in the collection, Louis Aragon, *Les Adieux et autres poèmes* (Paris: Messidor/Temps Actuels, 1982). The music was composed by Ferrat, with orchestration by Alain Goraguer.

35 The specific allusion in Gainsbourg's 'La Chanson de Prévert' is to the song 'Les Feuilles mortes', written by Prévert and set to music by Joseph Kosma; it has been performed by, among others, Yves Montand. The lyrics to 'Adam et Yves' were written by Joëlle Kopf, and the music by Zazie. It appears on the album, *La Zizanie*.

36 Hawkins, 'How Do You Write about *Chanson*?', p. 78.

37 See Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

> conversation typical of a certain social milieu at a certain historical moment.[38]

In this sense, the theory of intertextuality owes a great deal to Bakhtin's theory of 'dialogism'. Bakhtin understands dialogue as having two, connected meanings, and it is the first of those meanings that is useful to this thesis. Gary Morson defines Bakhtin's theory of dialogue thus:

> 'Dialogue' is a description of all language—in effect, a redefinition of language. Bakhtin understands discourse to be not an individual writer's or speaker's instantiating of a code but, instead, the product of a complex social situation in which real or potential audiences, earlier and possible later utterances, habits and 'genres' of speech and writing, and a variety of other complex social factors shape all utterances from the outset. Utterances address an 'already-spoken-about' world and arise out of a socially constituted 'field of answerability'. The only way in which the individual speaker can be sole author of an utterance, according to Bakhtin, is in the purely physiological sense.[39]

The implication here is that discourse—or any text—automatically enters into a dialogue with past, present and future speech and ideas. This implies 'dialogue' is a natural, unconscious phenomenon and, indeed, much of the theory and application of intertextuality looks at the text(s) as un-self-consciously containing references to other works, as part of a natural process of reading and writing. Worton and Still though, when discussing intertextuality in the written text, make the important point that:

> While all authors rewrite the work of predecessors, many post-Renaissance writers *consciously* imitate, quote and/or plagiarise extensively (as somewhat arbitrary examples we would propose Hazlitt, Lautréamont, Joyce, the French Surrealists, T.S. Eliot, Borges, D.M. Thomas, Michel Tournier, A.S. Byatt). In various ways these writers are thereby inscribing themselves in *Tradition* and making public a loving gratitude to ancestors—but their works are equally witnesses to an agnostic impulse to demarcate and proclaim their own creative space.[40]

38 *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices*, ed. by Michael Worton and Judith Still (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991), pp. 1–2.
39 Gary Saul Morson, 'Dialogue, Monologue, and the Social: A Reply to Ken Hirschkop', in *Bakhtin: Essays and Dialogues on his Work*, ed. by Gary Saul Morson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 81–88 (p. 83).
40 Worton and Still, pp. 12–13.

Arguably, French *ACI*s similarly both 'inscribe themselves in *Tradition*' and 'proclaim their own creative space' by referencing poets, authors and artists. However, the tradition is also one they themselves are constructing both consciously and unconsciously, through the copious references to past and present French *chanson* artists. While there is some variety in the references to *chanson* figures, certain names do seem to dominate. The following sub-sections will explore the allusions to three of these key figures: Boris Vian, Charles Trenet and Georges Brassens, focusing, in particular, on the way(s) in which, through song texts, a certain myth of each artist is constructed.

3a: Key Figures: Boris Vian

Boris Vian is a *chanson* artist that many *ACI*s coming after refer back to. Allusions to Vian take two principal forms. First, implicitly, through cover versions, tribute albums or re-makes of his songs, and second, through lyrics within songs talking to him or about him.

Various cover versions of Vian's songs exist. Jacques Higelin and Bernard Lavilliers, for example, have released cover versions of 'Huit jours en Italie' and 'J'voudrais pas crever' respectively, and Serge Reggiani and Henri Salvador have released albums of his songs, *Serge Reggiani chante Boris Vian*, and *Salvador Chante Vian*.[41] These cover versions and tribute albums are a way for singer-songwriters and performers to show their gratitude for Vian's artistic output, and to ensure Vian's work continues to be heard. Cover versions are also though, according to Middleton, 'the most striking example of a widespread "practical

41 Other cover versions and tributes include an 11-track tribute album, entitled *Rendez-vous à Saint Germain des Près/ Hommage à Boris Vian*, released in 1990 and recorded at the Studio de la Grande Armée at the Palais des Congrès, Paris (4–5 July 1990) by Christiane Legrande, Annette Banneville, and Maurice Vander, among others. A performance, *Et Vian! En avant la Zique!* written by Agathe Mélinand and Laurent Pelly, based on Vian's songs and writings and produced by the Centre Dramatique National des Alpes with the Parc de la Villette in Paris has also been staged. Vian's book, *En avant la zizique... et par ici les gros sous* (first published, 1958), is a discussion of the music industry in France and makes some rather disparaging conclusions about the state of events in the late 1950s, while highlighting the role of education in the advancement of 'quality' song. Vian places importance on the lyrics and cites *ACI*s like Trenet and Brassens as producing songs with lyrical complexity.

criticism" pursued through musicians' exploitation of stylistic intertextuality'.[42] Such criticism, then, implies not only an urge to pay tribute to Vian (or other singers), but also a desire, on the part of newer musicians, to construct their own work as an original—and analytical—continuation of previous styles.

Renaud's version of 'Le Déserteur', for example, uses Vian's original text (inspired by the start of the Indochina conflict) as the basis to make a political commentary on contemporary issues. Similarly, Ferrat's 'Pauvre Boris' (1966) speaks directly to (the deceased) Vian in the familiar second-person, referring, in particular, to 'Le Déserteur'. Ferrat uses the references to question the state of *chanson* in France and also to draw attention to political issues: 'il paraît que "Le Déserteur"/ est un des grands succès de l'heure/ quand c'est chanté par Anthony/ Pauvre Boris/ voilà quinze ans qu'en Indochine/ la France se déshonorait'.[43] Towards the end of the song, Ferrat connects himself with Vian by using the 'nous' form, thus projecting himself in a similarly anti-establishment—and iconoclastic—light:

> On va quitter ces pauvres mecs
> Pour faire une java d'enfer
> Manger la cervelle d'un évêque
> Avec le foie d'un militaire
> Faire sauter à la dynamite
> La bourse avec le Panthéon
> Pour voir si ça tuera les mythes
> Qui nous dévorent tout au long
> Pauvre Boris

The image of Vian created in this song, then, is one of a *chanteur engagé* who correctly identified injustices perpetrated by France, but who was not appreciated during his lifetime: 'voilà quinze ans qu'en Indochine/ la France se déshonorait/ et l'on te traitait de vermine'. Both songs (Ferrat's and Renaud's) are also in keeping with the style of Vian's original texts which were often parodic, ironic, or anti-establishment in nature. Referencing Vian thus allows newer singer-songwriters to acknowledge their inspiration while also carving their own

42 Middleton, *Reading Pop*, p. 11.

43 'Anthony' here refers to the watered-down version of 'Le Déserteur' performed by Richard Anthony, which was not banned because many of the words were changed to avoid anti-establishment sentiment.

creative space: in both songs, Vian is the inspiration, but the composition and particular take on the subject in question is distinctly Renaud's or Ferrat's own.

Other songs that allude to Vian in some way also echo his inspirational effect on younger singer-songwriters. Such allusions also, however, stress certain traits that help to construct *chanson* as a specific—and specifically French—genre. Vian's close connection to Paris and his literary leanings are often referred to, for example. George Chelon's 'Montmartre' (1979), for instance, places Vian in the 'real' Montmartre, a 'village' distanced from the rest of Paris as it was before the Thiers fortifications and its transformation into the eighteenth *arrondissement*:

> On croise Boris Vian venu nous dire un petit bonjour en passant,
> On échangerait bien, si ça pouvait se faire,
> Un bout du Sacré-Cœur contre Ménilmontant.
> Tiens, tiens, un Parisien se promène,
> Avec l'accent de la Seine,
> Que vient-il faire dans nos murs?
> [...]
> Et si l'on dit partout que Paris c'est Montmartre,
> Nous on dit que Montmartre n'est pas vraiment Paris.[44]

Vian here, then, is seen to be as authentic as the Montmartre that is still on the outskirts of Paris, distanced from the pollution and unfriendliness of the city: '[Montmartre] c'est tout simplement l'air pur/ tant pis pour vous si les gamins chez vous ne courent plus dans les rues/ si, malgré les années, la dame du café vous reste une inconnue'. Similarly, Philippe Clay's 'Place Blanche' (1982) places Vian in the company of Prévert, both of whom are projected as intellectuals living in Montmartre: 'Place Blanche c'est là aussi que Prévert et Boris/ demeuraient tous deux là haut à l'ombre du Moulin/ Place Blanche quel drôle d'endroit pour dire un De Profundis'.[45] And Yves Simon's 'Les Gauloises bleues' equally focuses on Vian's music, while again connecting him to a nostalgic vision of Paris: 'Boris inventait le jazz/ tous les soirs au bal des Laze/ les beaux jours'.

44 Words and music by Chelon; the song appeared in the television film *Le Crime des innocents* by Roger Dallier (1979).

45 Words and music by Jean-Luc Morel and Dominique Pankratoff.

The general image of Vian from these songs is of a man of the people yet also an intellectual, a great literary and musical figure, as well as an anti-establishment *chanteur engagé*, whose authenticity stems from his distance to central Paris and its values. Henri Salvador also affirms many of these myths in an interview for *L'Express*. Describing Vian as one of 'les grands auteur' (Trenet, Brassens and Ferré are his other examples), he suggests that although Vian uses 'popular' language in his songs, they are nevertheless of a high quality: '"Le Blues du dentiste", de Vian, c'est du langage parlé [...] ce sont bien des mots de tous les jours, mais la chanson a fière allure. "Populaire" ne signifie pas rabaisser le niveau'. Salvador equally portrays Vian as a workaholic, who worked 'très très vite. Mais il n'était pas finisseur. Je lui répétais: "au music-hall il faut une chute." Vian travaillait tout le temps, il ne voulait pas dormir car il savait qu'il était condamné. À 4 heures du matin, lorsque je m'écroulais, il partait doucement et s'en allait réveiller un autre pianiste'.[46] The combination of the popular and the intellectual, attributed to Vian, then, is also emblematic of *chanson* as a distinct art form, and similar traits are consistently evoked in allusions to Trenet.

3b: Charles Trenet

Trenet's 'popular' style is, like Vian's, referred to by singer-songwriters, who cite him as being influential. Vian himself, writing in 1954, points to Trenet's ability to combine quality *chanson* with commercial popularity: 'l'arrivée sur scène de Charles Trenet confirmait avec éclat ce que l'on savait déjà: il était possible, avec des chansons intelligentes de remporter un succès populaire massif'[47] and Henri Salvador, in an interview with Gilles Médioni, comments that Trenet 'a apporté la poésie du quotidien'.[48] Many artists have highlighted Trenet's influence by devoting both albums and performances to his songs. Jacques Higelin, for example, undertook a live performance tour in 2004/5 devoted to Trenet's songs,

46 Henri Salvador in an interview with Gilles Médioni, 'Il faut donner des ailes aux mots', *L'Express* (12 April 2001) <http://lexpress.fr> [accessed 12 June 2002] (para. 18 of 32).

47 Boris Vian, 'Charles Trenet à la rose rouge', *L'Humanité* (20 February 2001) <http://www.humanite.fr> [accessed 11 January 2005] (para. 3 of 7); first published in *Arts*, June 1954, 469.

48 Médioni, 'Il faut donner des ailes aux mots'.

entitled *Higelin enchante Trenet*, and the gypsy jazz band, Les Pommes de ma douche, released a tribute album, *J'ai connu de vous ... Monsieur Trenet* (2004), in which they interpret fifteen of Trenet's songs in their own manner.[49] Individual songs which capture Trenet's lyrical style include 'Chocorêves' by Les Wampas and Gainsbourg's 'À Charles Trenet', both of which evoke Trenet's surreal use of language.

At the time of his death, French journalists, politicians, as well as singers, paid homage to Trenet, (re-)affirming his popularity and his Frenchness. In Britain, Patrick O'Conner described Trenet as 'the most influential popular French songwriter of the mid-twentieth century. [...] He created [...] a style veering between wistful nostalgia and exuberant bravado that withstood the bombardment of American pop music for more than 30 years'.[50] Wistful nostalgia, exuberant bravado and 'Frenchness' are also qualities alluded to by many singer-songwriters and performers, both in interviews and through song texts. Moreover, Trenet's 'eternal' presence is highlighted: his name or the name of his songs are often used in song texts as if they are common knowledge and a general point of reference for French people. In 'Un clair de lune à Maubeuge' (1962) performed by Bourvil, for example, Trenet's 'La Mer' is used as a comic point of reference: 'je connais toutes les Mers, la Mer Rouge, la Mer Noire/ la Mer-diterranée, la Mer de Charles Trenet'.[51] As well as being a humorous pun, this allusion also underlines the importance of Trenet's work. Gérard Lenorman, in 'Vive les vacances' (1983), also uses 'La Mer' as a shared point of reference: 'la mer est bleue on croirait une chanson de Trenet'. Jean Ferrat, speaking at the time of Trenet's death, similarly points to his comforting presence: 'j'ai connu

49 Other *chanson* artists whose style has been connected to Trenet's include Thomas Fersen, 'a modern-day fabulist', and M (Mathieu Boogaerts, son of Louis Chédid) whose style of music has been termed 'chanson buissonnière' and described as an example of 'a lighter, playful *chanson*, whose post-modern bias is in keeping with a form of fantasy barely cultivated since Charles Trenet. A welcome mischievous tone in an industry where seriousness is often *de rigueur*'. (source: Anne-Marie Paquotte, 'A Pleaid of Authors' *Label France*, 36 (July 1999) <http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/label_france/ENGLISH/ DOSSIER/ musique/09pleiade.html> [accessed 11 January 2005].)

50 Patrick O'Conner, 'France's Favourite *Chanson* Serenader', *Guardian* (20 February 2001) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/obituaries/story/0,,440232,00.html> [accessed 14 March 2001].

51 Words and music by Pierre Perrin and Claude Blondy.

ses chansons à l'âge de cinq, six ans. On vivait avec à la maison. J'ai été élevé au Trenet, comme d'autres sont élevés au lait de vache ou au lait de leur maman'.[52]

Trenet is also closely associated with Paris and the music hall tradition; and his enthusiasm and exuberance are also often referred to in songs. In Pierre Perret's 'C'est ainsi qu'on vit à Paris', for example, Trenet is remembered when the speaker in the song is arriving in Paris after a long flight. The pleasure he feels on his return to the capital inspires him to think of Trenet: 'comme l'a dit monsieur Trenet que c'est bon de revoir Paris'. Robert Charlebois also, self-referentially, compares his love of the music hall to that of Trenet's: 'moi aussi j'aime le music-hall/ comme Chevalier et Charles Trenet'.

One of the characteristics most frequently associated with Trenet is freedom—freedom from the strains of daily life and the 'freeing up' of French *chanson*. Michel Sardou's 'La Maison des vacances' (1990), for example, alludes to Trenet's work, and his music in particular, in order to create a similar sense of freedom and pleasure as found in Trenet's own songs:

On vient quand on y pense
Depuis qu'on est tout p'tit
On vient pour les vacances
En famille entre amis
[…]
J'espère qu'le vieux Trenet
Ne me f'ra pas d'ennuis
Cette musique, il est vrai
Ressemble à ce qu'il fit
S'il exige un procès
Je le perdrais: tant pis
La maison s'en irait
J'n'ai pas payé crédit[53]

The whimsical music and whistling are certainly reminiscent of Trenet's own songs, but here a rock and roll style ballad and chorus is heard interspersed with Sardou's distinctive vocals. Thus, in a similar way to the songs of Ferrat and Renaud above alluding to Vian, here, Sardou is acknowledging Trenet's musical

52 'L'Âme du poète s'est envolée: hommage unanime, hier, des politiques et des artistes', *Libération*, 20 February 2001, p. 12.

53 Words by Sardou and Didier Barbelivien; music by Barbelivien. From the album, *Le Privilège*.

inspiration while exploring his own unique musical style. Alain Souchon also refers to freedom in Trenet's work. Quoted at the time of Trenet's death, he asserts 'quand il est arrivé, dans les années 30, il a donné envie aux pieds de bouger. Il a réinventé la musique, réinventé la langue française. Gainsbourg a fait pareil dans les années 60. Ces deux-là ont créé quelque chose d'unique'.[54] And in the song 'Nouveau' (1978) he also connects Trenet with Gainsbourg, and cites them both as having invented a new style of *chanson*:

> Dans le sac de la belle dame
> Y a un nouveau carnet de bal
> C'est une bombe lacrymogène
> Elle croit qu'elle a tout inventé
> Pauvre Gainsbourg, pauvre Charles Trenet

Thomas Fersen equally contends 'ses chansons sont intemporelles. Il a réinventé le genre. Réinventé la langue aussi, parce qu'il avait la sienne, une langue libre'.[55]

As in the allusions to Vian, Trenet's popular, 'new' style is also coupled with lyrical importance. Charles Aznavour and Claude Nougaro, for example, both speak of Trenet's 'poetic' qualities, with the latter also referring to his openness to US rhythms:

> Il est celui qui a introduit la poésie et la qualité dans la chanson. (Aznavour)
>
> C'était un poète qui n'avait pas choisi le papier pour s'exprimer mais qui avait choisi le disque noir. C'est lui qui a ouvert la scansion de la langue française à des rythmes venus des États-Unis. (Nougaro)[56]

The image of Trenet, constructed by *chanson* artists, then, is one of a timeless, enthusiastic singer and of a poet who introduced new elements to *chanson* in the form of US rhythms and jazz in particular. This constructed myth of Trenet thus reinforces *chanson*'s own status as both popular and poetic.

54 Alain Souchon cited in a special *Télérama* supplement honouring Trenet, 'Charles Trenet: 1913–2001', *Télérama*, February 2001, p. 6.
55 *Télérama*, 'Charles Trenet: 1913–2001', p. 8.
56 *Libération*, 'L'Âme du poète s'est envolée: hommage unanime, hier, des politiques et des artistes', p. 12.

3c: Georges Brassens

Balancing the poetic with the popular is also a skill frequently attributed to Brassens, by commentators and singer-songwriters alike. Hawkins, for example, argues that 'Brassens allowed [*chanson*] to incorporate the resources of poetic rhetoric and allusion, whilst maintaining the characteristics of the form as popular, accessible, oral, entertaining'.[57]

One of the ways the Brassens myth is propagated today is through his official website, owned by Universal Music. In the section 'Témoinages', modern groups and singers discuss Brassens' influence on their lives and work. The most striking feature of these witness statements is their shared emphasis on Brassens' skill as a songwriter, his 'artisanal' image and the need to re-read his texts in order to fully comprehend them. In this way, Brassens is constructed as a great writer (rather than simply a lyricist) and, implicitly, as an anti-star:

> Ces chansons-là s'écoutent et plus on y prête attention, plus on en profite, plus on y découvre des choses. Elles sont d'une telle profondeur que je n'ai jamais pu toucher le fond et ça fait pourtant un certain moment que je m'y emploie en les visitant et les revisitant! […] Il a apporté à la chanson ces enjambements, les rimes au milieu des vers et toutes ces trouvailles littéraires. C'est tout de même jouissif. (Joël Favreau)
>
> [Brassens c'est] celui qui vous fait découvrir la poésie, la saveur des mots, le bon vivant. (Subway)
>
> Replongeant dans toute l'œuvre de Brassens, on s'est rendu compte qu'on connaissait une très grande partie des chansons quasiment par cœur, sans en avoir jamais compris le sens. […] Les textes sont, à mon avis d'une exigence rare, et la musique, sous des apparences simples, est terriblement complexe, travaillée, élaborée et beaucoup plus proche harmoniquement du jazz que de nos souvent basiques accords de rock. (Cornu)
>
> [in response to the question, 'préférez-vous le Brassens "irrévérencieux"? "l'ami fidèle"? "le coquin"? "le poète"?'] Je préfère le Brassens artisan, ouvrageant ces chansons comme un compagnon son 'chef-d'œuvre'. (Tanger)[58]

57 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 133.

58 All quotations taken from <http://georgesbrassens.artistes.universalmusic.fr/> [accessed 28 July 2005].

This *artisanal* nature, as well as the non-star qualities of Brassens, are equally emphasised in references to him in song texts. Maxime Le Forestier, in 'La Visite' (1988), for example, describes the cemetery in Sète where Brassens is buried as calm, un-extravagant and therefore ordinary: 'le calme anonymat qui réside en ce lieu/ est celui que l'on voit chez les morts de banlieue/ on chercherait l'extravagance'. Similarly, in Jean Ferrat's 'À Brassens' (1963) the narrator talks directly to Brassens in the familiar 'tu' form about his *chanson* style and his success: 'est-ce un reflet de ta moustache/ ou bien tes cris de "Mort aux vaches!"/ qui les séduit'. Ferrat is, in this way, paying tribute to his predecessor, but he is also depicting Brassens as an ambiguous *chanson* 'star'. He evokes Brassens' rather clumsy stage presence ('tes grosses mains maladroites') and his particular style of versification: his archaisms mixed with vulgarities:

> Les filles de joie les filles de peine
> Les margotons et les germaines
> [...]
> Comme dans les histoires anciennes
> Deviennent vierges et souveraines
> Entre tes doigts
> [...]
> Même quand tu parles de fesses
> Et qu'elles riment avec confesse

In 'Les Amis de Georges' (1974), Georges Moustaki brings out Brassens' shyness tinged with anti-conformity: 'les amis de Georges étaient un peu anars/ ils marchaient au gros rouge et grattaient leurs guitares/ ils semblaient tous issus de la même famille/ timides et paillards et tendres avec les filles'. Tinker suggests that Brassens himself 'cultivates a star as ordinary image' through the 'repeated use of visual motifs: the pipe, the moustache, the cats, the guitar, which are rich in connotative meaning. They help to reinforce and authenticate Brassens' Southern working class identity, and contribute generally to creating his gentle, avuncular image'.[59] Similarly, Looseley argues that Brassens is 'an icon of the non-iconic'.[60] René Fallet, writing in *Le Canard enchaîné* in 1953, also contributes to the non-star image of Brassens by describing him during his first

59 Tinker, 'Léo Ferré, Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Television Representations, Past and Present', para. 21 of 28.

60 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 79.

performances as 'timide, farouche, suant, mal embouché, grattant sa guitare comme on secoue des grilles de prison'.[61]

The Brassens myth posits him not only as a non-star, but also a great writer (as alluded to by the young artists on his website). In 'Une chanson d'amour',[62] performed by Anne-Laure Sibon, for example, Brassens is inferred to be a competent wordsmith, 'Brassens toi qui savais/ jouer avec les mots/ souffle-moi en privé/ même en Espéranto', and the first-person speaker in 'Toutes' (2005) by Les Wriggles disfavourably compares his own lyrical ability to that of Brassens, thus suggesting the latter's skill: 'il n'était pas Rimbaud et moi loin d'être Brassens/ j'ai quand même fait l'aller-retour pour pouvoir lui chanter'. Brassens is used here, like Trenet, as a shared reference point for quality *chanson*. He is also a reference point for younger artists to look back to, and is often portrayed as an early 'French' influence. Joe Dassin in two of his songs, for example, 'Le Temps des œufs au plat' and 'Les Plus Belles Années de ma vie', nostalgically refers to listening to Brassens in his younger days.

Brassens' influence is clearly seen through these references as it is through the many tribute albums that have been released, including Renaud's *Renaud chante Brassens*, released in 1996, as well as *Le Forestier chante Brassens* (1979) and *Le Brassens des Frères Jacques*, first released in 1977 and reissued in 2002.[63] All of these 'tribute' songs and albums suggest the importance of Brassens in the construction of a *chanson* tradition.

The influence of key figures such as Trenet, Brassens and Vian on future *chanson* artists is clear; the effect of artists referencing these key figures is to publicly show an awareness of the contribution made to the *chanson* genre, and to acknowledge the part played by such figures in the formation of a nationally specific *chanson* heritage. The references at once allow the newer artist to include him/herself within a *chanson* fraternity and to find his/her own artistic space and

61 Michel Barlow, *Chansons: Brassens*, Profil d'une œuvre, 71 (Paris: Hatier, 1981), p. 14.

62 Words by Phil Datcher and Sibon, music by Patrick Liotard. The song features on an album that is due to be released in 2005. The full lyrics and an excerpt of the song itself are available on Sibon's website.

63 Le Forestier also released *12 nouvelles de Brassens: petits bonheurs posthumes* in 1996, and following his live tour, 'Brassens', released, *Le Cahier: 84 chansons de Brassens en public*; *Le Cahier: 40 chansons de Brassens en public* and *Le Cahier récré: 17 chansons de Brassens à l'usage des garnements* in 1998.

personal style. Holding up certain figures as examples of *chanson* also suggests analysis on the part of the newer artists as to what *chanson* is and what it is not. *Chanson* is constructed, thanks to the propagation of the myths of Vian, Trenet and Brassens, as popular yet intellectual, open to new influences yet specifically French in nature, familiar but certainly not overtly seeking fame.

Conclusion

As I have illustrated in this chapter, modern French *chanson* has evolved, since the inter-war period, as a distinct sub-genre of French popular music. Although *chanson*'s development shares similarities with the general development of popular music, as illustrated by Hatch and Millward's 'song-family extensions' argument, *chanson* has also carved out its own unique space in French culture. *Chanson* artists have consciously highlighted traits that set the genre apart from *variétés* or Anglo-American pop music, such as the importance of both the *auteur* and of lyrics in the *chanson* tradition. Moreover, through self-consciousness they have made the audience aware of their personal creative input and the fact that they are in control of the songwriting process. It is in this way that they have constructed their work as an *œuvre* rather than products or here-and-now commodities. Indeed, chanson artists have even included the audience in this process by playing with their expectations as well as the singer's perceived image. Self-consciousness also highlights the fact that certain key figures have been referred to time and again in order to single out their contribution to the *chanson* genre, and to allow newer artists to find their own creative space while acknowledging the debt of their predecessors. Thus, constructing *chanson* as a distinct art form implies an examination of the role of *chanson* in France, and in the next chapter I will examine the ways in which *chanson* artists question the genre in which they are working and construct *chanson* as having a specific role in French culture.

Chapter 3

The Constructed Role of Modern *Chanson*

Much *chanson* rhetoric is concerned with an exploration of the role of popular music in contemporary France, as well as the uses of music on a universal level. This chapter will examine how self-consciousness leads to a specific conception of *chanson*, one which is often in direct contrast to *variétés*. In order to understand that contrast, it is necessary to briefly examine the conception of song found in a standard *variétés* discourse. Section 1 will, therefore, explore songs that, while self-conscious, suggest a simplistic notion of song, offering song only as entertainment or reflection of emotions. Section 2 will then examine the '*chanson* difference', analysing those songs that suggest *chanson*, specifically, has a role that goes beyond pure entertainment or distraction, and has a political (in the widest sense of the word) function. *Chanson*, in this discourse, is didactic, serious and socially responsible.

1: Song as Entertainment and Reflection of Emotions

The proliferation of songs about the personal and cultural function of popular music in France reflects its importance as a contemporary art form. Beaumarchais' heavily cited observation about the importance of song in France, 'tout finit par des chansons', has become a cliché precisely because of the truth that lies at its centre: song is important to the French.[1] That importance is frequently alluded to in the songs themselves. Many songs refer to the musical or dance style they are written in and many refer to the ability of that music or dance to both entertain and fuel or echo emotions such as desire or loss. In this way, song is seen as a mirror, and the self-consciousness in the songs in this first

1 In 1973, for example, 66% of French people aged 15 and above listened to a record at least once a week, and in 1988 the percentage rose to 73%, with 21% listening every day. Similarly, in 1988, 96% of 15–19 year olds had played records or tapes over the course of the previous year. (Source: Olivier Donnat and Denis Cogneau, *Les Pratiques culturelles des français: 1973–89* (Paris : Découverte/Documentation Française, 1990), pp. 59–64.)

section helps to reinforce those mirror-like qualities. Of course, references within a song itself to the ability of popular music to reflect desires and emotions are quite common. Similarly, songs that, through their lyrics or music, echo their own function as a source of entertainment are equally abundant in popular music history. Numerous cases exist in Anglo-American music, for example, from Fred Ebb's and John Kander's 'Cabaret' (1966) to Elton John's 'Your Song' (1970),[2] and the consistent recycling of the themes of entertainment and desire mean that such themes have become part of a standard pop—or, in particular in France, *variétés* or *yéyé*—rhetoric. As predictable as some of these songs and themes may be, they are useful for this survey in that their (at times contrived) self-reflection allows an insight into both the importance of song in French culture and the conception of song by *chanson* artists themselves, rather than through other discourse. More importantly perhaps, the conception of song here can be used as a point of contrast with songs which posit *chanson* as a genre with its own particular role in French culture.

1a: The Magical Mirror

One particular sub-discourse of song (especially *variétés*) as a reflection of emotions perceives song and music as magical; both can inspire emotions for their duration and can cast a spell over those listening, or dancing, to them. This rhetoric is persistent, from Alibert's 'Le Plus Beau Tango du monde' (1935) and Fréhel's 'La Java bleue' (1939) to Claude François' 'La Musique américaine' (1974).[3] In spite of the differences in musical style (in the actual music as well as references to a style of music), in each song, narratives that centre on the particular dance being referred to—a *java*, a tango, or an 'American number'—evoke the magical yet transient qualities of music. In 'La Java bleue', there is an

2 Lyrics by Bernie Taupin.

3 'Le Plus Beau Tango du monde' was first performed by Alibert as part of the operetta *Un de la Canabière* in 1935 and written by Vincent Scotto and René Sarvil. A version was also released in 1961 by Marcel Amont. 'La Musique américaine': music composed by Jean-Pierre Bourtayre, and released on the album *Le Mal Aimé*. 'La Java bleue': words by Géo Korger and Noël Renard and music by Vincent Scotto; it appeared in the film *Une java* (1938).

implication that time stands still for the duration of the dance, and life's realities are suspended as the couples are given the freedom to act as lovingly as they wish, thereby being enchanted by the music:

> La java la plus belle
> Celle qui ensorcelle
> Et que l'on danse les yeux dans les yeux
> [...]
> Que de promesses, que de serments
> On se fait dans la folie d'un moment
> Mais ses serments remplis d'amour
> On sait qu'on ne les tiendra pas toujours

The fixed temporality of song thus contributes to an intensification of loving feelings while it is being danced to. Similarly, in 'Le Plus Beau Tango du monde' the male narrator talks directly to his lover, insisting that this tango is the most beautiful because he is dancing it with the one he loves: 'le plus beau de tous les tangos du monde/ c'est celui que j'ai dansé dans vos bras/ j'ai connu d'autres tangos à la ronde/ mais mon cœur n'oubliera pas celui-là'. Love and the tango become synonymous for the protagonist here, as even the memory of the music is enough to provoke powerful sentiments. The tango, it is suggested, allowed the protagonist to experience love, and continues to have the ability to control his emotions:

> Son souvenir me poursuit jour et nuit
> Et partout je ne pense qu'à lui [le tango]
> Car il m'a fait connaître l'amour
> Pour toujours
> [...]
> Il est si tendre que nos deux corps
> Rien qu'à l'entendre tremblent encore
> Et sans attendre pour nous griser
> Venez! venez danser[4]

4 The tango was popular in Paris from the 1910s onwards. Rich Argentineans visited the city in the 1910s and 1920s principally for the meat trade but also to enjoy Montmartre and Montparnasse. After them, the first tango orchestras arrived and, due to a French law stating that 'foreign' musicians must wear traditional clothing, the tango musicians dressed as (stereo)typical 'gauchos', wearing 'la bombacha' (the traditional puffed trousers) and white scarf. After the Second World War, the tango had reached such heights of popularity that it was played in all the ballrooms in Paris. (source: Claude Fléouter, *Un siècle de chansons* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1988), pp. 19–22.)

In 'La Musique américaine', music is also posited as having both the ability to reflect emotions and to provoke them. It is American music here, rather than a tango or *java*, that becomes a form of interactive soundtrack to the protagonist's life. It allows him to escape his reality, to dream of a different life and to re-live past events, as listening to music instantly transports him back to a certain time and place:

J'avais 17 ans
Et dans ma chambre
J'écoutais l'après-midi
Toutes les musiques que j'aimais
Et de temps en temps
Quand une fille restait chez moi
Jusqu'à minuit
Entre ses bras le temps passait
Et je lui parlais
Du ciel bleu de Californie
Elle me regardait et l'on rêvait d'une autre vie
Avec un disque, une chanson

C'était sur une musique américaine
Qu'on dansait tous les deux
Mes doigts dans ses cheveux
C'était une musique américaine
Qui nous a fait passer nos plus belles années
Et tous mes plus beaux souvenirs
D'amour et d'amitié
Les jours passés dans la joie ou dans la peine
Me reviennent sur une musique américaine

The lyrical contentions that music can provoke and reflect feelings are further emphasised through each of these three songs alluding to—and using—music that was popular at the time of its release. Arguably, teenagers could, in this way, use the disco-inspired 'La Musique américaine' to create their own sentimental soundtrack, just as dancing to a tango in previous decades was a way for couples to silently express their feelings for one another.

The entertainment value of song, combined with its ability to evoke and echo emotions, can also be understood in two particularly self-reflective songs, 'L'Accordéoniste', performed by Édith Piaf in 1942,[5] and 'Une chanson

5 Words and music by Michel Emer.

populaire', performed by Claude François (1973). On one level, 'L'Accord-éoniste' is typical of the melodramatic realism of the *chanson réaliste* genre, as the narrative centres on a beautiful prostitute who works hard and who is in love with an accordionist, 'un drôle de petit gars [...] qui sait jouer la java'. The accordionist goes off to war, never to return, leaving the heroine alone and sad, unable to earn a good living any more and incapable of forgetting her lost love. On a second level, however, this song illustrates the cultural and personal significance of accordion music. It echoes the fact that accordion-playing is a regular feature of the bars and cafés at this time, in this particular social milieu (the working class *faubourgs*), and the song can be taken, in this sense, as a simple, unproblematic kind of social document. Reference is also made to the music itself, and to the fact that it has the ability to provoke extremely strong emotions and physical reactions:

> Elle écoute la java [...]
> Ça lui rentre dans la peau
> Par le bas, par le haut
> Elle a envie de gueuler
> C'est physique
> Alors pour oublier
> Elle s'est mise à danser, à tourner
> Au son de la musique…
>
> ARRÊTEZ!
> Arrêtez la musique!

This is echoed in Piaf's performance of the song and, in particular, in earlier recordings and live renditions when the music would stop for the delivery of the final two lines, thereby producing a powerful, albeit unsophisticated, dramatic effect. For the heroine of the song, the power of the music has negative connotations as it continually reminds her of her own lost accordionist. However, near the beginning of the song, when she is happier, a more positive function of music is alluded to: '[elle s'en va] chercher un peu de rêve/ dans un bal du faubourg'. Moreover, the music is intrinsically linked to the lyrical content: during the choruses, and in moments when the heroine is thinking about her lover and the powerful effect of his music, there is a string quartet augmented by a showy accordion flourish, in a ¾ waltz time, reflecting musically the happy and

inspirational lyrical descriptions. However, when the narrator describes the prostitute's grief and sorrow, the ¾ waltz is stopped and instead there is a melancholy, soft piano melody, indicating a less jovial mood. The conception of popular music here, then, is that it intensifies working-class emotions, for both good and ill. The heroine calls for the music to stop because she can no longer sustain this intensification of her pain.

'Une chanson populaire' similarly treats the subject of lost love but by highlighting the male protagonist's suffering at the loss of his partner. The two verses of the song describe, in a standard way, his lover's departure, which makes his life stand still: 'la pendule de l'entrée/ s'est arrêté sur midi/ à ce moment très précis/ où tu m'as dit: 'je vais partir' [...]/ j'ai vécu comme un robot'. The protagonist cannot escape from the image of his lost love, but the song ends on a characteristically hopeful note with the protagonist being reassured that one day he will find true love. Despite such bland recycling of popular conventions, the real interest of the song lies in the chorus and the comparison made between love songs and popular, or hit, songs:

Ça s'en va et ça revient
C'est fait de tout petits riens
Ça se chante et ça se danse
Et ça revient, ça se retient
Comme une chanson populaire
L'amour c'est comme un refrain

This comparison is, in a sense, illustrating the method or formula of a hit song: one should be able to dance and sing to it; it should have staying power and be easily remembered. Furthermore, the song is itself a good example of such a hit song—the music is indeed catchy, the chorus is easily memorised and is made up of many small details: the change in pace between the chorus and verse, the theme of lost love mixed with hope, along with the reference to *chanson* as well as to love. The comparison also implies, in a similar way to the previous songs analysed, that both love and popular song have the ability to take the listener out of everyday existence and allow him/her to dream: 'ça vous accroche des ailes blanches dans le dos/ ça vous fait marcher sur des nuages'.

A similar self-reflexivity can be found in 'Trois petites notes de musique' (1961) which, on a first level, portrays the power of music to evoke memories, especially those supposedly forgotten ones, either good or bad:[6]

Trois petites notes de musique
[…]
Du fond des souvenirs
Lèvent un cruel rideau de scène
Sur mille et une peines
Qui n'veulent pas mourir

The song, however, reveals deeper levels as it also draws attention to the creation of a love song through its rhyme scheme and structure. It refers to the construction of many older styles of love song and their emphasis on style over content, in particular the use of rhyme to make the song likeable and popular, even if the words are somewhat trite:

La,la,la,la, je vous aime
Chantait la rengaine
La,la, mon amour
Des paroles sans rien de sublime
Pourvu que la rime
Amène toujours

[...]
La,la,la,la tout rêve
Rime avec s'achève

In the last two lines the content is being echoed by the structure in the sense that the reference is to dreams always coming to an end, but the rhyme scheme, combined with the fact that the word 'rêve' does indeed rhyme with the word 's'achève', also highlights the fact that this is how many 'broken heart' love songs are constructed.

6 Words by Henri Colpi, music by Georges Delerue. It has been performed by both Yves Montand and Cora Vaucaire, among others.

1b: Songs to Inspire and Heal

Within the standard discourse of *variétés*, song is seen as being able to inspire dreams, fantasies and feelings of well-being in a variety of personal and cultural settings. In 'Le Loup, la biche et le chevalier',[7] for example, the protagonist simultaneously reminisces about a 'chanson douce' his mother used to sing to him and retells the story, a standard fairy tale, to his own child. In this way, both the fairy tale and the act of singing such a story soothe and inspire feelings of well-being. 'Avec une chanson' (1965), performed by Johnny Hallyday, also echoes the conventional rhetorical insistence that song can improve one's mood in times of unease ('quand la vie vous fait la tête/ ne vous fâchez pas/ chantez alors à tue-tête'), while highlighting its social and convivial function: 'avec une chanson/ on devient vite de bons amis'. There is a glimpse here, however, of a self-referential *ACI* rhetoric (this concept of self-referentiality in French song will be further explored in the next chapter and throughout Part III), in an allusion to the constructed nature of Hallyday's personality: both brooding and timid: 'avec une chanson/ on oublie sa timidité/ avec une chanson/ on s'adresse au monde entier/ j'aime chanter pour ça/ et ça me donne bien des joies'. Here, the self-referentiality is a means of alluding to and confirming this construction, and therefore, a means of drawing a comparison between the Hallyday persona and his fans: Hallyday, a metaphor for the popular (here, *yéyé*) singer, is, like many of his fans, shy and in search of friendship. The construction of music as a way of bringing fans together with their peers and their *copain* singers is thereby effectively reinforced.[8]

Indeed, the act of singing and its convivial and healing abilities are often referred to in *variétés* discourse. 'Un refrain courait dans la rue' (1946), for example, on a first level treats the subject of lost love and coping with having

7 Often known as 'Une chanson douce', words by Maurice Pons and music by Henri Salvador; first performed by Salvador in 1950, with several later versions including one by Nana Mouskouri and more recently Céline Dion.

8 As seen in the previous chapter, the word *copain* has particular connotations here. *Salut les copains* was the name of the extremely successful radio programme, then magazine, launched by Europe 1 in the summer of 1959 aimed at the teenage market, and hosted by Daniel Filipacchi and Frank Ténot. Hallyday was himself a regular contributor to the magazine, and also starred in the infamous 1963 Place de la Nation concert organised to mark the first anniversary of the magazine.

one's heart broken.[9] This is in keeping with Piaf's songs generally as some of the above examples illustrate. However, on a second level, the means by which to overcome a broken heart are inextricably linked to *chanson*. It is song which can heal wounds, and if one joins in with the song it can have positive effects:

> Si cet air qui court dans la rue
> Peut chasser vos tourments
> Alors entrez dans la cohue
> 'Y a d'la place en poussant

Within the song there is a self-reflexive internal dialogue inviting the heroine to enter into a song in order to heal her unhappiness, and a subsequent commentary on what a song must have in order for it to heal such wounds. In this way, the song is simultaneously promoting music as a way to heal pain and commenting on the construction of a 'healing' song type:

> Un refrain courait dans la rue
> [...]
> Il s'arrêta devant moi
> Et me dit d'être sage
> 'Tu es triste, mon Dieu, pourquoi?
> Viens, et rentre dans ma chanson'
> [...]
> Il faut que ton couplet soit gai
> Alors parlons du mois de mai

'Chanter pour rien' (2000), by the Quebec country singer, Patrick Norman, [10] 'Chante, la vie chante', by Michel Fugain,[11] and 'Chanter',[12] performed by Florent Pagny, also promote song as curative. All three are almost rallying cries to encourage people to participate in and enjoy singing as a way of escaping everyday life and forgetting about the problems it brings. All three songs, like Trenet's 'Je chante' before them, also encourage the listeners to sing merely for

9 Words by Édith Piaf who also performed it, and music by Robert Chauvigny.
10 Words and music by Norman and Pierre Bertrand.
11 Words by Pierre Delanoë, music by Fugain, released on the 1973 album, *Fugain et le big bazar*, vol. 2; also known as 'Chante' and 'Chante comme si tu devais mourir demain'.
12 Words and music by Lionel Florence and Pascal Obispo. The song was first released in 1998 and later formed part of the *Enfoirés en 2000* album. It was also sung by the finalists of 'Star Academy'—a discussion of this performance follows.

the pleasure of singing, as it is a free and enjoyable way to achieve a general sense of well-being:

> Chanter pour rien
> Pour le plaisir, pour l'aventure
> [...]
> Parce que ça fait du bien
> Et ça ne coûte rien
> ('Chanter pour rien')

> Pour un amour un ami ou un rien
> Pour oublier qu'il pleut sur tes vacances
> Chante oui chante
> ('Chante, la vie chante')

> Chanter, pour oublier ses peines
> Pour bercer un enfant, chanter …
> Pour pouvoir dire 'Je t'aime'
> Mais chanter tout le temps
> ('Chanter')

These three songs, in their seemingly wholesome encouragement for a return to the 'traditional' pleasure of singing, are reminiscent of the kinds of attitudes promoted by the Vichy regime, attitudes Christian Faure describes as xenophobic and racist. He argues that the Vichy government interpreted the gradual replacement in France of traditional 'folk' dances with newer and 'black' sounds like the jazz of Josephine Baker, as immoral and harmful to its ideology, and that these new musics were seen by the regime as 'musiques sauvages'.[13] Looseley also identifies the racial element in the institutional distaste for jazz (and later, pop): 'the otherness of jazz for the France of the 1920s, when racial essentialism was common, had a dual aspect in that the music was represented as both American and black'.[14]

While the above songs may not consciously be reaffirming Vichy's musical ideologies, they do, I would argue, echo a simplistic and universalistic notion of what song can be. This may be one of the reasons why 'Chanter' was chosen as the 'group' song in the final of the first 'Star Academy' (2002), and

13 Christian Faure, *Le Projet culturel de Vichy: folklore et révolution nationale, 1940–1944* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 1989), pp. 144–5.

14 David Looseley, '*Frères ennemis*: French Discourses on Jazz, *Chanson* and Pop', *Nottingham French Studies*, 43 (2004), 72–9 (p. 75).

encouragement in the form of prompts was given to the performers and audience to join in with the song.[15] Music, in this way, helps to restore a sense of national togetherness and, from this perspective, these songs—as well as 'Star Academy' itself—echo Vichy's insistence on restoring an 'authentically French' folk tradition. What that specifically French authenticity means to government bodies and to music practitioners themselves, however, is not necessarily congruous, as a self-conscious *chanson* discourse reveals.

2: The *Chanson* Difference

Simon Frith, quoting from Stuart Chase on the pop and love song formula, makes the point that 'popular songs [...] express "commonly held values" and speak for "the millions who treasure them"'. Frith goes on to contend, 'if pop songs are narratives of love, and we do indeed fall in love, then songs are in this respect narratives of our lives, of the ways in which we engage in—and realise—fantasies.'[16] This hypothesis would seem to endorse the function of French song found in the above analyses. Song is an unproblematic mirror; it can reflect universally-experienced emotions, and can become a lifelong soundtrack, echoing and helping to make sense of life's events. While self-consciousness in these songs reinforces their mirror-like qualities, in other songs, it is a tool which allows singer-songwriters to discuss and question the very ability of song to act as such a mirror, and it is to these songs that I now turn. Here, certain *chanson* tropes are created and reinforced in relation to song's function in French culture and society. The mirror, in *chanson* discourse, becomes problematic, and does not only reflect emotions, but educates the listener about them also. Frith makes a critical judgment about pop songs by contrasting what he calls 'the standard pop

15 'Star Academy' is on TF1 and M6 hosts the equivalent 'Graine de Star'. The idea of 'Star Academy' is itself interesting here as it promotes the explicit fabrication of pop stars while simultaneously suggesting that music is a trade to be learned and practised. The show encourages members of the public to audition in front of cameras, and a panel and/or the audience chooses their favourite 'pop stars' who are then given tuition in singing and dancing. The ultimate prize for 'Star Academy' is 1 million Euros, a tour, and a record deal with Universal Music.

16 Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 161–165.

account of love and something else, something more real and complex and individual'. In his account, Frith contrasts the blues with more standard love songs, finding that, as a musical style, the blues is perceived to portray feelings of love and reflect society in a more realistic and multidimensional way. However, he also makes the point that both styles of song once had a different function in a different 'cultural setting', and in particular that 'black song had different lyrical possibilities open to it because it served different purposes than white song, because it circulated in a different sort of cultural economy'.[17] Blues or black music do not feature in the discussion here but the wider implications of Frith's argument are relevant. The cultural economy of popular music in France is important, and, generally speaking, the audience for Claude François' songs would probably not be (or have been) the same as for, say, Jean Ferrat's. Similarly, the function of the songs may not be the same: the main thematic threads in François' music reflect, to some extent, its function, that of entertainment and of 'fun' pastimes. Ferrat's music (which I will discuss in the following sub-section), on the other hand, refers to more serious events, and his self-referential songs discuss the value of *chanson* as a popular art form in contemporary France. Similarly, love songs released by, for example, Jacques Brel or Jean Ferrat (and in Part III I will examine those written by Gainsbourg) are indeed more multidimensional and complex than those performed by Piaf or François. In this way, self-consciousness allows *chanson* artists to implicitly create value judgements about different forms of French popular music by positing *chanson* as, among other things, multidimensional and didactic.

2a: Didacticism

One of the main differences between *variétés* and *chanson* discourse is didacticism. Love songs by *chanson* artists, for example, tend to see song as able to teach something about the emotions being described. In this way, a song does not only reflect emotions, it actively works to allow the listener to understand

17 Frith, *Performing Rites*, pp. 161–163.

those emotions with more clarity. The plots also tend to be more complex, more varied and less predictable, without the standardised, unproblematic 'happy ending'. A closer examination of 'C'est si peu dire que je t'aime' (1965), by Jean Ferrat,[18] will enable the differences between *variétés* and *chanson* to be seen. This love song has, superficially, much in common with 'L'Accordéoniste' or 'La Musique américaine'. The description of love is seen from the perspective of an older person simultaneously looking back and commenting on his current situation. Here, though, Ferrat's music lends a dramatic melancholy to the song, with classical orchestration including strings and flute echoing the fragmented emotions found in the lyrics. The *chanson* staple, the guitar, keeps the rhythm throughout and Ferrat's voice, though not as powerfully dramatic as the orchestration, is quietly yet strongly emotive. The maturity of perspective allows for didacticism: love does not necessarily last forever, it can have a sad ending, and, moreover, song is sometimes an inadequate means of expression:

Comme une étoffe déchirée
On vit ensemble séparés
Dans mes bras je te tiens absente
Et la blessure de durer
Faut-il si profond qu'on la sente
Quand le ciel nous est mesuré
C'est si peu dire que je t'aime
[…]
Lorsque les choses plus ne sont
Qu'un souvenir de leur frisson
Un écho de musique morte
Demeure la douleur du son
Qui plus s'éteint plus devient forte
C'est peu, des mots pour la chanson
C'est si peu dire que je t'aime
Et je n'aurai dit que je t'aime

The conception of *chanson* in this song is, at times, in direct opposition to that found in the 'love' songs discussed in Section 1. While, in a *variétés* discourse, music keeps memories alive, here, music, like love itself, does not last forever. The complexity of both notions of love and music are further emphasised through

18 The lyrics are by Louis Aragon, from *Le Fou d'Elsa*, 1963, and Ferrat put them to music and released the song in 1965. It has also been performed by Isabelle Aubret, who is well known for her versions of Ferrat songs.

the repetition of the title line, and its suggestion that words—as well as the *chanson* medium—are themselves futile, therefore reflecting a much more problematic reality: if words are futile, so too, by extension, is the reality they reflect. Song here, then, is simultaneously powerful and impotent. Music, sounds, and words can linger as a reminder of the past, and, by consequence, the unhappiness of the present situation.

A similar didacticism and complexity can be seen in Charles Trenet's multidimensional view of the entertainment and 'magical' value of popular music, 'Moi, j'aime le music-hall' (1955). Trenet describes the music hall scene through references to other singer-songwriters and performers of the period and the preceding years (Piaf, Tino Rossi, Brassens, etc.). The song is almost a call to arms in favour of the music hall as an art form, the opening verse conjuring up the atmosphere of the music hall, of Paris and its occupants as they prepare to delight in the evening's entertainment. This can be heard through the music as well as seen through the lyrics. There is a bright and punchy musical introduction and swing tempo provided by the rhythm section, consisting of an upright double bass, drums and rhythm guitar. The humour of the music hall is also reflected in the music through the unusual and comedic effect achieved by the percussive sound of the actual drum sticks, as well as the brass (trombone, oboe, etc.) stabs at the end of certain lines. The fact that it is written in a distinct major key (E flat major) similarly gives it a 'happy', up-beat sound.

The multiple descriptions of the different acts to be enjoyed also have the effect of enticing and enchanting the audience, and are as such persuasive. Equally, Trenet makes references to the power of music hall entertainment to stimulate the senses and give the audience something new, as well as to its didactic qualities. A music hall performance can teach the audience to see and hear better, and to feel emotions more acutely:

> Moi, j'aime tous les samedis
> Quand Paris allume ses lumières
> [...]
> Et déjà voilà le rideau rouge
> Qui bouge, qui bouge, bouge
> L'orchestre attaque un air ancien du temps de Mayol
> Bravo, c'est drôle, c'est très drôle

[...]
Mais ça restera toujours toujours l'école
Où l'on apprend à mieux voir,
Entendre, applaudir, à s'émouvoir[19]

There is also a close connection made between music and the city of Paris itself ('j'aime les boulevards de Paris/ quand Yves Montand qui sourit/ les chante et ça m'enchante'). The comparison made between music and the city of Paris—and indeed the celebratory tone when discussing the city itself—are not unusual in French *chanson* of this period. Pierre Delanoë, for example, refers to specific periods in French cultural history when Paris was celebrated through *chanson*:

> First came the Belle Époque, followed by the heady years between the two World Wars, which together take us from around 1900 to the death of De Gaulle—two-thirds of the twentieth century. It was a time of joyous, over-the-top celebration of *la ville lumière*—the city of lights. This Golden Age started with the folkloric fare of Aristide Bruant, whose Paris was Montmartre, a somewhat guttersnipe and beggarly place. [...] Next came the two troubadours of *paname* (the argot-speaker's Paris)—Mistinguett and Chevalier, the crowned heads of French music hall.[20]

Similar descriptions can be found in more contemporary French *chanson* also; for example, many of Renaud's songs describe the power of music to create a certain image of Paris as well as the inextricable links between Paris and music (see, for example, 'Rouge-gorge' and 'Amoureux de Paname'). A comment on the changing face of *chanson* is equally apparent in 'Moi, j'aime le music-hall', making it more self-interrogatory than the songs in a similar vein discussed in Section 1; Trenet places himself in a specific style, that of the *chanteur poète* whom he associates with the French music hall ('moi, j'aime le music-hall/ c'est le refuge des chanteurs poètes'), but he also gives thanks for the newer singer-songwriters that have appeared on the scene and to whom he is implicitly passing the *chanson* baton:

Les chansons ont connu d'autres modes
Et s'il y a toujours Maurice Chevalier,

19 Félix Mayol (1872–1941) was an extremely popular performer in the *caf'conc'*s and music halls of Paris, perfecting the 'chanson de geste' and comic song.
20 Pierre Delanoë, *La Vie en rose: The Singers and the Songs of 20th Century Paris* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 36.

Édith Piaf, Tino Rossi et Charles Trenet
Il y a aussi et Dieu merci
Patachou, Brassens, Léo Ferré.

Music hall, then, takes on a specifically French role here, and lyrics are (implicitly) revered as the predominant attribute of the music hall song. This, again, is in contrast to the songs explored in Section 1, where lyrical quality is not a preoccupation. The label of quality and authenticity that Trenet gives to the music hall here, though, is problematic. As Looseley points out, the rise of the music hall and the *café-concert* in Paris 'marks the transformation of French popular song from craft into product' rather than ensuring authenticity, as is often claimed through a Hollywood myth focusing on the Moulin Rouge, Pigalle and Montmartre. Indeed, the term *variétés* evolved from the variety acts commonly associated with the music hall.[21] Trenet, it can be argued, then, is attempting to reclaim the authentic spirit of French popular song here by associating the music hall with traits that are usually reserved for *chanson*. Indeed, venerating the lyrics, through highlighting the importance of the *chanteur poète*, suggests that *chanson* (whether sung in the music hall or the cabaret) is a more serious art form than *variétés*.

2b: Serious Art

Some songs actively investigate the differences between *chanson* and *variétés* and discuss the function of *chanson* as both entertainment and 'art' song. In so doing, they enter into a debate surrounding the role and value of *chanson* as a distinct artistic genre. In 'Les P'tites Casquettes' (1977) by Yves Duteil, for example, *chanson* is ironically posited as an amusement rather than an artistic medium which can deal with serious or political matters, or educate. The irony here stems from a tone of regret in that *chanson* is seen (and perceived by the public) in contrast to high-cultural genres; yet the narrator—and Duteil himself—seems to long for artistic recognition as well as public notoriety:

21 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 14.

> On n'apprend pas nos chansons dans les écoles,
> On mettra pas nos refrains dans les musées.
> Les paroles, on les écrit pour qu'elles s'envolent.
> Les musiques, on les écrit pour s'amuser.

Ferré's 'Le Conditionnel de variétés' (1971) underlines a similar concern that *chanson* is more an amusement than a medium through which one can explore serious issues. The opening lines of the song suggest that the narrator is stuck in a popular genre, and as a popular performer, does not have the right to sing about anything of a serious nature. In this way, Ferré is using irony to question the nature of *chanson* and examine the difference between *chanson* and *variétés*:

> Je ne suis qu'un artiste de Variétés et ne peux rien dire qui ne
> Puisse être dit 'de variétés' car on pourrait me
> Reprocher de parler de choses qui ne me regardent pas

The following lines of the song, however, do discuss more serious concerns, all introduced by 'comme si' indicating the hypothetical nature of the discussions—the narrator is suggesting what it would be like if he did discuss more serious topics. In this way, he is, ironically, challenging the notion set up in the first verse that a popular performer cannot discuss serious issues, as he is indeed doing just that in this song (and Ferré, is, of course, well known for his songs about serious issues). Furthermore, the serious nature is magnified when the narrator alludes to the potential power of song through a call to arms for a revolution, thus using the song as political incitement: 'comme si je vous disais d'aller faire tous ensemble la révolution'. The implication here is that such matters do, in fact, concern the singer, that song does have a social responsibility, as we all do individually, and here Ferré is encouraging us all to reflect on the value of *chanson* as an art form.

The differences between *chanson* and *variétés* as alluded to by Ferré are also apparent in many of Jean Ferrat's songs. 'Je ne chante pas pour passer le temps' (1965), for example, discusses the purpose and value of *chanson*, challenging the view that it is only there for amusement. For Ferrat, there is a more political or intellectual reason for singing than simply passing the time. Like other art forms, the Ferrat persona argues, *chanson* needs to explore the world, react to it and try and change it, and songwriting for him is a compulsion that he cannot ignore rather than an enjoyable job:

Il se peut que je vous déplaise
En peignant la réalité
Mais si, j'en prends trop à mon aise
Je n'ai pas à m'en excuser
Le monde ouvert à ma fenêtre
Que je referme ou non l'auvent
S'il continue de m'apparaître
Comment puis-je faire autrement
Je ne chante pas pour passer le temps
[…]
Le monde ouvert à ma fenêtre
Avec son deuil ses horreurs
Avec ses armes et ses reîtres
Avec son bruit et sa fureur

Chanson defined here reflects reality in a different way to *variétés* songs, and the *chanson* artist has a duty to mirror the world's cruelties in order to change them by drawing attention to them. Self-consciousness here is being employed for ideological ends, much like in Brecht's epic theatre, as *chanson* becomes an instrument of social and political change. Indeed, through his songs, Ferrat constructs his persona as that of a *chanteur-poète engagé* who feels it is his duty to comment on and protest against issues with which he disagrees. In 'Quand on n'interdira plus mes chansons', for example, the Ferrat persona ironically promises the audience, and presumably the music industry, that he will no longer be subversive, but will conform to popular tastes:

Je serai plus l'affreux jojo
Qui met ses rimes où il faut pas
Qui fait d'la peine aux collabos
[...]
Quand on n'interdira plus mes chansons
Je serai bon bon bon bon bon bon bon

The irony here, of course, highlights the fact that if French television and radio stations ever did stop banning his songs, his career would be over as it would mean he had compromised his convictions: the simplistic repetition of the word 'bon' serves as ironic illustration that pandering to the desires of the industry in order to get his songs played again will essentially equate to a 'dumbing down' of his music. This is further explored when he states that he will even conform to

such an extent that he will become the 'enfant chéri des monopoles', but, of course, because of this transformation, will become 'bon à jeter sous les ponts'. Essentially, this song reinforces Ferrat's image as a *chanteur engagé* and, by extension, strengthens *chanson*'s role as an art form that has a responsibility to address serious issues. It is also an obvious, and therefore political, reference to the struggle endured by *chanson* artists who are (and must be) both individual intellectuals and members of a commercialised and globalised industry. The ways in which *chanson* artists have dealt with this dichotomy will be more fully explored in the three case studies in Part III, but it is clear from the above discussion that *chanson* artists construct their own genre as an art form that has more in common with poetry or visual arts than 'entertaining' pop music.

2c: Social Responsibility

Chanson, then, is posited as different from *variétés* in that it can have a more 'socially active' role. This assertion, like the espousal of the music industry, is problematic. Many songs claim to have a more serious social or political function; many singers, for example, are involved with fundraising or benefit concerts to highlight the plight of groups who are 'in need' or 'excluded' from society. Michel Berger's 'Chanter pour ceux qui sont loin de chez eux' (1986), for instance, describes the plight of young children in distress and highlights their suffering so that, it is asserted, society will not continue to ignore them as it is beginning to at the moment:

> Je veux chanter pour ceux
> Qui sont loin de chez eux
> Et qui ont dans leurs yeux
> Quelque chose qui fait mal
> [...]
> Qu'on oublie peu à peu

The songs written especially for benefit concerts are in a similar vein. 'La Chanson des restos', written and composed by Jean-Jacques Goldman in 1986, at

the bequest of Coluche for the charitable organisation Les Restaurants du Cœur, for example, presents a personal (first-person) vision of exclusion and injustice:[22]

> Aujourd'hui, on n'a plus le droit
> Ni d'avoir faim, ni d'avoir froid
> Dépassé le chacun pour soi
> Quand je pense à toi, je pense à moi
> Je te promets pas le grand soir
> Mais juste à manger et à boire
> Un peu de pain et de chaleur
> Dans les restos, les restos du cœur

This song has been sung at 'Les Enfoirés' benefit concerts every year since 1986. Similarly, Renaud's 1985 song, 'Ethiopie', written for an Ethiopia benefit concert and performed by Chanteurs Sans Frontières, suggests the ability of song to raise consciousness of serious global issues like famine:[23]

> Rien qu'une chanson pour eux
> Pour ne plus fermer les yeux
> C'est beaucoup et c'est bien peu
> C'est bien peu[24]

While these songs do draw attention to serious world issues, they seem to do so by recycling conventional discourse surrounding the poor and needy rather than presenting a more multi-dimensional or analytical view of the persons described or the situations they find themselves in. Jean Ferrat's 'Nuit et Brouillard' (1963), however, engages with a serious subject matter, war, in a multi-dimensional way. Like Ferré's 'Le Conditionnel de variétés', Ferrat discusses a serious subject matter while simultaneously examining whether *chanson* should indeed do this. The nine-verse song is about, as the title suggests, the holocaust, 'Nuit et Brouillard' being the French equivalent of 'Nacht und Nebel', the Nazi code for extermination of Jews in deathcamps, and an obvious

22 More information can be found at: http://www.restosducoeur.org/index.htm. The original performers of this song were Nathalie Baye, Coluche, Catherine Deneuve, Michel Drucker, Jean-Jacques Goldman, Yves Montand, and Michel Platini.

23 The *chanteurs* were united by Renaud and all profits from the concert went to the Médécins Sans Frontières. 'Ethiopie's' 'precursor', 'Do They Know It's Christmas' written by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure, was performed by Band Aid in November 1984.

24 Other songs written by Renaud which address serious social issues will be discussed in Chapter 6.

reference to Alain Resnais' documentary film bearing the same name, released in 1955, written by Jean Cayrol, himself a Holocaust survivor. Jean Ferrat has explained his own reasons for writing the song, in addressing school-age children, as follows:

> J'avais votre âge quand mon père a été arrêté, interné puis déporté au camp de concentration d'Auschwitz où il est mort en 1942. Il était juif…Je me suis demandé comment, moi, petit auteur-compositeur-chanteur, je pourrais contribuer dans mon domaine à garder et à transmettre la Mémoire de l'holocauste en souvenir de mon père et de tous les déportés. En 1963, en m'adressant à la génération nouvelle et aux futures générations, j'ai écrit 'Nuit et Brouillard'.[25]

The (regretful) irony in the above quotation ('moi, petit auteur-compositeur-chanteur') adds to the ongoing examination in Ferrat's work of his own role as a *chanson* artist, but the most salient notion expressed is that song can teach younger generations about the past. It can be didactic and can also be a timeless work of art, something which can be looked back to in the future, rather than simply a reflection of current tastes. The song does indeed pass on historical and emotional information about the Holocaust to a new generation as well as discussing *chanson*'s political role. In the seventh verse, for example, the style changes from highly-charged political narrative to a self-referential questioning of *chanson* as an art form. Ferrat challenges the received notions that *chanson* should not be a political device but should only be there for amusement, or that song is not and cannot be a powerful weapon:

> On me dit à présent que ces mots n'ont plus cours
> Qu'il vaut mieux ne chanter que des chansons d'amour
> Que le sang sèche vite en entrant dans l'histoire
> Et qu'il sert à rien de prendre une guitare
> […] Mais qui donc est de taille à pouvoir m'arrêter?

Given the date of its release in the 1960s as French song was moving away from seriousness into *yéyé*, a youth version of *variétés*, Ferrat here is insisting on continuing to use song didactically even if it means changing his style to appeal to the *yéyé* generation ('les enfants'):

25 'Le Concours national de la résistance et de la déportation 2002 et 2004' <http://www.cnrd58.com/index2.php?page=nuit> [accessed 31 January 2005].

> Je twisterais les mots s'il fallait les twister
> Pour qu'un jour les enfants sachent qui vous étiez

Although the above lines hint at a compromise between *chanson* and newer musical styles, Ferrat does not, of course, 'twist' his words in a *yéyé* sense. Nor does his music and delivery suggest a concession to popular taste. His vocals are initially accompanied by a bass drum, underlining the sombre tone and evoking a slow, steady march, later joined by a guitar, flutes, brass and strings. In fact, in an open letter published in *Le Monde* in 2002, almost forty years after 'Nuit et Brouillard', Ferrat explicitly raises the problems he sees with *chanson* that he implicitly evokes in his songs. Indeed, his interviews are telling of his desire to keep the *chanson poétique* (*engagée*) alive in France:

> Ces responsables divers et variés, je les interpelle. Est-ce qu'ils se rendent compte que les petits marquis qui font la loi dans la programmation réduisent totalement au silence des pans entiers de la création française? Ont-ils conscience de cette aberration: dans notre pays dont on peut écrire l'histoire par la chanson, le seul fait de prononcer actuellement ce nom vous ferait passer pour un homme des croisades? Est-il venu à leurs oreilles, à leur conscience que, s'il est bon de s'enrichir des musiques et des cultures du monde, nous sommes un certain nombre à dire non au rouleau compresseur, au monopole imposé du métissage totalitaire et du raz de marée anglo-saxon? Enfin, ne croient-ils pas que l'exception culturelle qui a sauvé le cinéma français et dont certains veulent la disparition devrait aussi s'appliquer à la chanson?[26]

Ferrat's outspoken frustrations with the current state of the music industry and his calls for a 'cultural exception' tie in with the rhetoric that is apparent in his own songs. *Chanson* can be an instrument in consciousness-raising; it can discuss serious issues in much the same way as 'serious' cinema. But, it can only do this and survive if radio stations and music promoters are willing to allow it to be heard, and this is the problematic crux of the issue for Ferrat and for the three case studies in Part III. The *chanson* artist must make his or her music heard, which inevitably means working with some kind of intermediary (usually record companies), but at the same time, s/he wants to continue to use the *chanson* genre

26 Jean Ferrat, 'Qui veut tuer la chanson française?', *Le Monde*, 8 January 2002, p. 1.

in the same way as poetry or art, as a way of responding to and expressing views on the world.

Conclusion

While similarities between the function of song in *variétés* and *chanson* discourses do exist, then, important differences are also apparent. *Variétés* rhetoric tends to posit song as a reflection of (usually romanticised) emotions and events: listening to music contributes to feelings of happiness and love as well as also mirroring those feelings. *Chanson* rhetoric shares *variétés*' aim to reflect emotions and events, but in a more complex and problematic way. *Chanson*, rather than popular music in general, it is claimed in this rhetoric, can be something more than purely entertainment; it can engage with social and political issues and, in fact, has a responsibility to do so. It is at this point that the argument becomes particularly problematic because, in order for a *chanson* artist to express his or her opinions through song, s/he must compromise to some extent with the economic realities of the music industry. The ways in which singers attempt to do this, and an exploration of their own role as the *chanson* performer, will be discussed in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

The *Chanson* Artist: Poet or Product?

Coming to terms with the identity of the '*chanson* artist' is as much of a concern in commercial French song as what *chanson* itself is. This is, of course, perfectly natural: reflections on the 'job' one is doing inevitably lead to reflections on one's own role as the doer of that job. As in the previous chapter, several overriding themes or preoccupations, here concerning the role of the *chanteur*, can be identified as common to both *chanson* and *variétés*. In particular, discourse on the 'singer' can generally be understood as being constructed around a series of binaries or dualities: the (*chanson*) artist and the (pop) star; the ordinary person and the public figure; the poet and the commercial product. These binaries lead to a preoccupation with the notion of authenticity and with how to balance the singer's self-constructed desire only to communicate on the one hand, with the industry's desire to make money on the other. Through the analysis of a wide range of songs, a construction of the *chanson* artist as someone different from a *variétés* singer is revealed. This construction, and the inevitable problems it entails, will be explored here. Section 1 of this chapter, then, will examine the mask of stardom, and the public figure versus 'real' person duality. Section 2 will investigate the closely related binary of legitimate profession or star life. Finally, Section 3 will focus on the complex notion of authenticity, exploring, in particular, the 'art versus commerce' debate. Before turning to the analysis of song texts, however, I will begin with a brief exploration of the ways in which *chanson* practitioners describe themselves outside of their songs.

The terminology used by *chanson* artists, both in their songs and in interviews, to describe themselves and their work is important here. Looseley, in his excellent discussion of non-artistic *chanson* discourse, refers to the written works of commentators like Calvet, Dillaz and Lucien Rioux as well as 'performer-commentators' like Vian, Marcel Amont and Jacques Bertin in order to understand the ways in which the term '*chanson*' is understood in France. He concludes:

> The term *chanson* is promiscuously used, its meanings forming a kind of palimpsest. Beneath its common-sense surface meaning can be glimpsed a much less comprehensive sense of a national genre, a chain of prescriptions and expectations of what *French* song *ought* to be. [...] Assumptions about *chanson* in its purest, Platonic form prioritise lyrics, critical listening, live performance, creativity and sincerity, and consciousness-raising or even education. Conversely, they demote sound, dance, technological mediation, and entertainment for its own sake [author's italics].[1]

These underlying assumptions about what *chanson* is and the values accorded it are at the heart of this thesis. A review of the ways in which singer-songwriters and performers refer to themselves and their job is therefore pertinent at this point. In the special millennium edition of *Chorus: les cahiers de la chanson*, Fred Hidalgo collected quotations from *chanteurs* that he collated into a question and answer, *(faux-)table-ronde*. Among the questions theoretically posed by Hidalgo were ones focusing on the definition of *chanson* and the *chanson* artist. The responses were, at times, inevitably perhaps given the diversity of 'interviewees' and the journalistic collage, contradictory. Nevertheless, an overarching vision of the *chanson* artist was put forward. Joël Favreau, for example, suggests that 'on [les chanteurs] est peut-être là en tant qu'émetteur-récepteur pour cuisiner et ressortir ce que transmet la vie ou ce qu'on va chercher? Recevoir les choses, les transformer, s'élever un peu au passage et les redonner aux autres, c'est peut-être à ça que ça sert'. And Serge Lama, agreeing with Anne Sylvestre's assertion that 'on est des écrivains publics' further contends that 'l'interprète essaie de tirer les gens de leur fauteuil et l'auteur essaie d'expliquer aux gens qu'il vit la même chose qu'eux'. Both Jean-Marie Vivier and Bernard Lavilliers point to the political dimension of the singer:

> Je crois également que c'est le rôle de l'artiste d'éveiller les consciences. (Vivier)

> Le rôle de l'artiste est de bousculer la société [...] on ne peut pas se contenter d'être simples spectateurs, il faut témoigner, proposer, avoir des colères visibles, qui influencent. Les artistes ont toujours la responsabilité de montrer la voie. (Lavilliers)

1 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 81.

Frequently referring to themselves as 'artistes' or 'auteurs', many of these singers differentiate their own jobs from that of a 'chanteur de variétés', and shun the 'public' world of show-business in favour of a more private, personal (and self-indulgent) interpretation of their role:

> Mes chansons, ce sont mes créations. Lorsque j'écris, je le fais pour moi, avec ma vérité, je ne songe pas au public. (Axelle Red)

> J'ai toujours écrit pour moi. Je n'ai pas cherché à inventer des petits bout de bonheurs pour les autres. (Leny Escudero)

> Je considère que le devoir de l'artiste, son travail essentiel, est de parler de lui. (Boulat Okondjara)

The television, as a medium through which the *chanteurs* communicate their songs, is also portrayed in negative terms here. Jeanne Mas, for example, describes television as 'une frustration', and Michel Jonasz prefers the live stage to the television: 'il n'y a plus rien de digne à la television, parce que c'est l'argent qui prime, l'obsession de la rentabilité. Mais de toute façon, à la télévision, les gens ne voient jamais les chanteurs comme on les voit sur scène'. A lack of real, spontaneous emotion in a television performance is cited as one of the reasons why the stage is a superior ground for communication:

> Parce que la chanson, c'est un échange physique de vibrations; c'est sur scène que les chansons naissent vraiment, qu'elles prennent vie. (Jonasz)

> Le public a déserté l'image de la chanson à la télévision parce qu'à force de play-back on l'a déshabitué de l'émotion. (Yves Duteil)

> Depuis la privatisation, le PAF (paysage audiovisuel français) me fait vomir. Il faut signaler aussi ce directeur de chaîne qui a su dire: 'nos émissions de variétés ne servent qu'à mettre en valeur nos spots publicitaires!' (Renaud)

> Je ne vois pas non plus l'intérêt de faire des télés qui ne servent à rien, qu'à cautionner à chaque fois un connard et son émission bidon! (Bernard Lavilliers)

Television, then, is unequivocally linked to commerce, and if *chanson* artists are anti-television, this implies a conception of a more *artisanal* profession. Indeed, many *chanson* artists make the point that they did not set out to become singers, and, in fact, are not trained as singers; they simply had 'envie de dire des choses'

(Zazie). This sense of compulsion to communicate with a wider public through the song medium, as well as a desire to reflect personal realities can equally be seen in *chanson*—and *variétés*—discourses themselves. Indeed, one of the most predominant 'realities' singers feel the need to reflect is that of 'themselves'; and the revealing of the singer's 'real life' is a common concern in French popular song.

1: The Mask of Stardom

The first binary to be explored in this chapter, then, is that of public figure and real person. The hidden and supposedly 'real' life of a singer forms an important part of *variétés* (and of international pop music in general) discourse, with many songs suggesting the differences between the singer's on-stage and off-stage lives. Inevitably, the off-stage singer is lonely, sad and, more importantly from a marketing viewpoint, constantly searching for true love. In this conventional trope, the (financial) success of pop stardom counts for little, as all the singer really wants is love and happiness, as Antoine's (Pierre-Antoine Muracioli) 'Qu'est-ce que je fous ici?' (1966) demonstrates:

> J'ai tous les trésors que je veux
> Tous les trésors de la terre
> Pourtant il me manque deux yeux
> Deux yeux où je pourrais me perdre
> Pour sortir de ma tour d'ivoire
> Et je suis seul, je suis perdu!

Hallyday's, 'L'Idole des jeunes' (1963), paints a similar portrait: 'dans la nuit je file tout seul de ville en ville/ je ne suis qu'une pierre qui roule toujours/ j'ai bien la fortune et plus et mon nom partout dans la rue/ pourtant je cherche tout simplement l'Amour'.[2] The singer here asks his fans directly if they realise 'combien tout seul je suis'. And, despite fame and glory, true happiness escaped the singer Dalida according to the posthumous song 'Dalida mon amour' (1989) by G. Debat, P. Sevran and J. Barnel: 'sa gloire fut immense/ à titre de revanche/

2 Lyrics by Ralph Bernet.

la vie ne lui offrit le vrai bonheur'.[3] The rhetoric in both the above songs ('L'Idole des jeunes' and 'Dalida mon amour') is seemingly supported by biographical detail: Hallyday attempted suicide in 1966 and Dalida killed herself in 1987. In a complex semi-biographical fusion, the artist in question becomes morphed into the character in the song and, as such, becomes a simple metaphor not only for the unhappy artist but also the universal amorous condition. Moreover, celebrity is given as the reason for Dalida's suicide, thus leading to a convenient comparison with Marilyn Monroe: 'semblable aux Martine, aux Marilyn/ elle préféra le sommeil éternel/ aux feux trop souvent cruels de la célébrité'.[4] The use of the plural article in these lines transforms the women into types, thus adding weight to the 'death by stardom' argument in that death (or suicide) seems inevitable for women who become so famous and yet are still so unhappy on the inside. (Death as the ultimate 'romantic' sign of authenticity will be explored in Section 3b.)

The emphasis on the concealed 'real' life of the singer also suggests the mechanics of concealment and the props that create the star image. Here the star accoutrements can be put on and taken off like a 'performance mask' in order to transform the 'normal' person into the on-stage singer. Indeed, the notion of a performance mask or stage uniform is common in both popular music history and in other cultural forms, such as cinema. Piaf's look, for example, has been the subject of some academic discourse: Ginette Vincendeau discusses the 'mask-like aspect' of Piaf's (and other *chanteuses réalistes*') face(s) and the emphasis provided by the spotlights, especially given the way her black dress would erase the body.[5] Similarly, Hollywood stars such as Marlene Dietrich or Joan Crawford had a certain mask of perfection, a fixed look created by their make-up artist, Max Factor, termed 'maxfactorisé' by Edgar Morin in *Les Stars* in 1957 and

3 This song has been performed by various *interprètes*. The 45 r.p.m. single recording (see Bibliography) features the voice of Bernard Estardy.

4 Martine, I am presuming, refers to Martine Carol (Maryse Louise Mourer), the French film star whose failed suicide attempt in the late 1940s brought her renewed popularity as an actress. She died in 1967, aged 46, from a cardiac arrest, although many newspaper reports at the time speculated about a drug overdose. Elton John's 'Candle in the Wind', written originally for Marilyn Monroe and then re-worked for the funeral of Diana, Princess of Wales, promotes a similar notion of female celebrity somehow inevitably leading to death.

5 Vincendeau, p. 124. Vincendeau is usually associated with writings on cinema and indeed her article discusses *chanson* from a theatrical perspective. See also, *Chanter Made in France*, ed. by Brigitte Kernel (Paris: Michel de Maule, 1987) for Piaf's mask-like face.

evidence of 'la presence de l'idéal au sein du réel'.[6] This make-up which, according to Morin, had its origins in the Ancient Greek masks, became for these Hollywood stars part of a process of confusion between the star and the off-screen person where the star 'doit, en permanence, être identique à elle-même dans sa perfection rayonnante'.[7] Indeed, this confusion is such a necessary part of being a star that the mask must always suggest the ideal—and the idealised—body, regardless of changes in the star's actual appearance. As Roland Barthes, discussing Greta Garbo's face in *Mythologies* (also 1957) puts it 'il ne fallait pas que l'essence se dégradât, il fallait que son visage n'eût jamais d'autre réalité que celle de sa perfection intellectuelle, plus encore que plastique. L'essence s'est peu à peu obscurcie, voilée progressivement de lunettes, de capelines et d'exils; mais elle ne s'est jamais altérée'.[8]

In *variétés* discourse this performance mask tends only to cover up the 'real' person, and references to the stage, make-up, clothes, and so on are used to show the conventional distinction between the singer during a performance and afterwards:

> Sous son corsage de pierres précieuses
> Battait le cœur d'une femme meurtrie
> Qui ne fut jamais comprise
> ('Dalida mon amour')
>
> Il me faut rire et danser et le spectacle terminé
> S'en aller ailleurs au lever du jour
> ('L'Idole des jeunes')

Serge Lama's 'La Chanteuse a vingt ans' (1973) draws attention to this process of concealment, describing the female singer before, during and after a performance; how, when she has put her make-up and costume on for the show, she is transformed into a 20-year-old again, even though she is much older.[9] The song also refers to her stage clothes being a kind of uniform, indicating that when she changes out of them 'elle s'habille en civil' (this notion of a uniform will also be explored in the next section). Hallyday's narrator, in 'Le Chanteur

6 Edgar Morin, *Les Stars* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1972 [first published 1957]), p. 42.
7 Morin, *Les Stars*, p. 43.
8 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1957), p. 78.
9 Co-written with Alice Dona.

abandonné', also reveals the behind-the-scenes areas of the stage as well as his 'own' behind-the-scenes life that the audience does not usually see, thus expressing a layer of reality beneath the stardom mask.[10] The *chanteur*, the narrator says, is scared when his life is not a production or a performance, 'quand sa vie n'est plus mise en scène/ ça lui fait peur'. The implication is that the singer needs to keep performing as performance acts as a kind of protective cushion for him.

2: Legitimate Profession or Star Life

A closely linked rhetoric that is also apparent in French popular music discourse is that of legitimate profession and star life. As in the above binary, an emphasis on revealing the hidden truth to the public is present here, and many songs portray the difficulties of a singing career as opposed to the received notion of the singer having endless leisure time or finding stardom easy. In relation to cinema, Richard de Cordova argues that discourses on film actors began around 1907, and that, before this date, the profession of 'acting' was confined to the theatre.[11] People who appeared in moving pictures before this time were referred to as 'picture performers' and were thought to be more in the photographic tradition than actors. More importantly, before and around 1907, de Cordova argues that acting in films was very different from 'legitimate' acting as early genres of cinema 'such as the chase film relied wholly on action, casting performers only in broad social types (the policeman, the green goods man, etc.)'.[12] Although the evolution of the star body is problematic in different ways in *chanson* history and in film history, a similar dichotomy between legitimate profession and star (or 'performer') is apparent. Indeed, the value placed on the written text in *chanson* history implies that performers (as opposed to singer-songwriters) are automatically perceived as less legitimate, in a similar way to cinema's 'picture

10 Written and composed by Michel Berger, 1985.
11 Richard de Cordova, 'The Emergence of the Star System in America', in *Stardom, Industry of Desire*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 17–27 (pp. 17–9).
12 Cordova, p. 21.

performers'. Acting and songwriting are considered professions whereas performing, in either art form, is considered simply a job.

In *chanson* discourse, legitimacy is intimated through an emphasis being placed on the difficulties inherent in a singing career. Ferrat's persona in 'Chanter' (1980), for example, highlights the fact that the public are only ever shown the positive side of show-business, therefore implying that there is a negative side: 'on ne leur montre évidément/ que le bon côté des paillettes'. Fans want to believe in the stardom myth and singers need the fans to believe in it in order to survive financially. This idea is qualified by the suggestion that fans, mainly adolescents, have a very simplistic, excessively rosy vision of the life of a singer: 'le monde est beau et souriant/ et notre vie n'est qu'un rêve/ dans leurs têtes d'adolescents'. However, this image of a singing career being a 'dream' is then challenged by revealing the 'reality' of what it takes to succeed as a songwriter/performer:

> [Il faut] avoir une santé de fer
> De la chance avec le talent
> Et cette faculté de faire
> Un sourire en serrant les dents
> En écoutant claquer les portes
> Sur votre nez à deux battants

This is where this song differs from other less sophisticated ones dealing with stardom. Ferrat shows the reality of what it is like trying to be a success; he reveals the very real drawbacks which tend to precede stardom which relatively few singers overcome, and the critique here is as much of the industry making even a talented singer's (like Ferrat himself?) career problematic as it is of the ignorant 'wannabes'.

The difficulties of maintaining a singing career are equally highlighted in songs such as 'Star' (1974), by Serge Lama, in which the less-than-perfect 'real' existence of a star performer is described: 'avoir toujours le teint blafard/ à force de se coucher tard/ voilà ce que c'est d'être star'. Daniel Balavoine also refers to the pain and nervousness a singer feels before a stage performance in order to convince the audience a singer is not a hero in spite of what is said in the press ('Je ne suis pas un héros', 1980). Similarly, Charlebois addresses his audience

directly, recycling their views on the singer, 'vous voulez que je sois un Dieu', before challenging these views and the singer's God-like status, by describing his anxieties:

> Si vous saviez comme j'me sens vieux
> J'peux pu dormir, j'suis trop nerveux

Boby Lapointe takes a more sarcastic perspective on the notion of stardom in his song, 'L'Idole et l'enfant' (1967), telling a young woman that she cannot be his girlfriend because, 'je suis une idole et tu n'es qu'une enfant/ ne me touche pas'. A deliberate deterioration of the lyrics into nonsense rhymes towards the end of the song confirms the ironic tone and undermines the self-importance of the 'idol' character. The vocabulary in the songs above suggests a certain iconolatry, or 'divinisation' as Morin puts it in *Les Stars*: fans are projecting a god-like status onto these star performers who are in turn attempting to reflect this idolisation because, for whatever reason, it is more appealing to the performers to present themselves as average humans.

Although many songs simply recycle the well-worn generic (*variétés*) convention when referring to the woes of a singing star, others investigate a performer's fragmented identity and his relationship with the music industry in a more complex and original manner. At this point, a closer look at Léo Ferré's 'L'Idole' (1969), with some comparison to Charlebois' 'Ordinaire' (1970), will help to illustrate *chanson*'s complexity.[13] Both songs exemplify an artist versus *artisan* discourse, and with some irony, describe their professions through the eyes of others. In so doing, they reveal a confusion between on-stage and off-stage selves, which Morin, in relation to cinema stars, terms 'dédoublement', contending: 'la star est en effet, subjectivement déterminée par son double d'écran. Elle n'est rien, puisque son image est tout. Elle est tout puisqu'elle est aussi cette image. La psychologie des stars exige une incursion préalable dans la psychologie du dédoublement'.[14] Morin's arguments are based on cinema stars

13 'Ordinaire' was written by Claudine Moufette ('Mouffe'), with music by Pierre Nadeau and Charlebois.

14 Morin, *Les Stars*, p. 63.

rather than popular music stars, but the psychological notion of the 'double' is readily applicable to music, because of its human quality:

> Le double s'est plaqué sur notre peau, il est devenu notre 'personnage', ce rôle prétentieux que nous jouons sans cesse aussi bien pour nous-mêmes que pour autrui. La dualité enfin est intériorisée: elle est dialogue avec notre âme, notre conscience. La star au contraire voit ressusciter, se détacher d'elle et se déployer le double archaïque: son image d'écran, sa propre image, omniprésente, envoûtante, rayonnante. Comme ses admirateurs la star est subjuguée par cette image en surimpression sur sa personne réelle: comme eux, elle se demande si elle est bien identique à son double d'écran.[15]

While much *variétés* rhetoric is concerned with convincing the audience the singer is not a God but just an average person, *chanson* discourse, I would argue, is concerned with an investigation of the notion of the star double and a preoccupation with the complexity of *dédoublement*, as an analysis of 'L'Idole' will illustrate.

Although Charlebois' song title, 'Ordinaire', is the antithesis of Ferré's, 'L'Idole', both songs have a similar structure in that at the end of the first verse of each song, an assertion regarding the narrator's idol or popular status is made:

> Regarde-moi bien
> J'suis une idole
> ('L'Idole')

> Mais faut que j'pense à ma carrière
> Je suis un chanteur populaire
> ('Ordinaire')

The remainder of each song qualifies the initial irony through, on the one hand, a demystification of the role of the music star, and, on the other, an almost bitter self-proclamation based on other people's (fans and the industry) perceptions of the singers' roles:

> Regardez-moi bien
> J'suis qu'un artiste
> ('L'Idole')

> J'suis pas un chanteur populaire

15 Morin, *Les Stars*, p. 63.

> Je suis rien qu'un gars ben ordinaire
> ('Ordinaire')

Charlebois' assertion is in keeping with a *variétés* discourse in both its simplicity and its desire to portray the singer as an 'ordinary chap'. Ferré's, however, reveals a more complex exploration of his own role as a '*chanson* artist'. His assertion comes at the end of the song preceded by a pre-emptive, self-referential statement, 'en disant tout bas la fin de ma chanson'. The change of form from the familiar (or singular) to the formal (or plural, '*regardez*-moi bien') underlines the sentiments expressed throughout the song, that the audience does not really know the person, Léo Ferré, only his image. And it is the validity of this image that is called into question here. Ferré draws attention to the behind-the-scenes banalities of his everyday existence, his preparations for a show, the performance, and after the show, 'Je suis arrivé à huit heures et quart/ j'ai grillé une sèche en lisant le courrier'. The language employed in the above lines and throughout the song is familiar and blunt, echoing the sense of the banal with which Ferré appears to want to endow the job of the performer. This banality becomes problematic, however, when it is tinged with conformity. Ferré describes, again in a matter-of-fact way, his choice of footwear for the performance:

> J'ai mis mes souliers tantôt bottillons
> Tantôt mocassins ça dépend des fois
> Et quant à marcher entre deux chansons
> J'irais bien pieds nus seulement ça se fait pas

This footwear dilemma reveals a dual reflexivity at work in this song. On one level, it suggests that the artist needs to choose his footwear in order to conform to the audience's tastes. On a second level, though, it highlights how Ferré, through this song, is constructing (or 'fabricating' to use Richard Petterson's term) his own bohemian image ('J'irais bien pieds nus'). Conformity and fabrication become further confused when Ferré—or, rather, Ferré's persona—argues:

> Si j'ai fait mes yeux c'est pour agrandir
> Les deux petits quinquets que maman m'a donnés
> Je les voudrais bien verts d'ailleurs je le fais dire
> Mais ils sont châtains en réalité

Ferré's persona here, as an artist who has become an idol, is obliged to adopt a concern for vanity and appearances. At the same time though, Ferré himself is adopting a similar concern, while attempting to undermine such vanity, through his insistence on being an anti-commercial singer-songwriter.

Furthermore, conformity is also closely linked to the classic pop theme of *récupération* in this song. The commercial aspect of the music business is alluded to through a description of the rationale for the singer to shave (again, another everyday male banality, 'j'ai passé mes joues au fil du rasoir'):

> Quand on vend sa gueule sous des projecteurs
> On peut pas se permettre d'avoir les cheveux noirs
> Et une barbe toute blanche même pour trois quarts d'heure

The artist—or, here, the idol—is sold as a product on stage for consumption by the audience and fans; he must always 'look like' an idol, 'même pour trois quarts d'heure'. And the extent to which the singer (Ferré) feels as though he has 'sold out' is made apparent with bitter irony:

> Un chanteur qui chante la révolution
> Ça planque sa cravate ça met le col Danton

As Henry Torgue puts it in *La Pop-musique*:

> Jamais le rock n'est sorti du champ commercial. Par exemple le slogan *Pop-Musique Révolution*, lancé par CBS en 1968, a signifié exactement l'inverse: pop-music certes, mais à vendre, achetée, consommée. La musique ne doit pas sortir de son rôle de divertissement et il est impensable de laisser passer les profits qu'elle peut engendrer.[16]

The *chanteur* then, given the extent to which he must conform to both the music industry's and his audience's expectations, becomes alienated. The apparent duality between his stage life and his 'personal' life fades as it becomes more difficult to separate the mask and the real:

> Et je retrouve mon corps celui que je rencontre
> Les matins civils quand je me prends pour moi

16 Henry Torgue, *La Pop-musique et les musiques rock* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997), p. 99.

> Le même que l'on voit le même que l'on montre
> À je ne sais plus qui pour je ne sais plus quoi

The bitter resignation displayed in the final two lines of the above quotation illustrates the singer's loss of self. Like Abbé Pierre's signifying charitable appearance, the singer's body becomes a sign and a substitute for the star persona, resulting in a permanent confusion between the on-stage and off-stage selves, with the latter's survival becoming eternally dependent on the former, and the mask forever set in place.[17]

3: Authenticity

One possible outcome of the blurring between a singer's on-stage and off-stage selves is alienation, yet another, ironically, is authenticity. Richard Dyer discusses the notion of authenticity with relation to film stars, arguing that,

> outside of camp appreciation, it is the star's really seeming to be what she/he is supposed to be that secures his/her star status, 'star quality' or charisma. Authenticity is both a quality necessary to the star phenomenon to make it work, and also the quality that guarantees the authenticity of the other particular value a star embodies (such as girl-next-door-ness, etc.). It is this effect of authenticating authenticity that gives the star charisma.[18]

With reference to Hollywood film stars of the 1930s and 40s such as Greta Garbo, Dyer makes the important point that

> the roles and/or performance of a star in a film were taken as revealing the personality of the star (which then was corroborated by the stories in the magazines, etc.). What was only sometimes glimpsed and seldom brought out by Hollywood or the stars was that that personality was itself a

17 See Barthes, *Mythologies*, pp. 57–60 and also Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 79. Barbara Lebrun also discusses this notion of the 'real-life' versus stage personas of French rock and 'retro rock' artists, arguing that 'French rock artists make a point of appearing in the same clothes on and off stage, creating a sense of continuity between their position as stars and their supposedly "real-life" persona, and thereby debunking the "specialness" of their stage performance'. See Lebrun, 'Mind over Matter', p. 211.

18 Richard Dyer, 'A Star Is Born and the Construction of Authenticity', in *Stardom, Industry of Desire*, ed. by Christine Gledhill (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 132–40 (p. 133).

> construction [like Ferré's bohemian image] known and expressed only through films, stories, publicity, etc.[19]

This illustrates that, while the film audience did not, perhaps, believe that the actress and the role she played were one and the same, they did believe that the actress embodied the same values as her on-screen character. In popular music a similar set of values is accorded the notion of authenticity as Richard Peterson in his discussion of country music contends: 'in 1953, informed outsiders understood the genre [Country and Western] as expressing authenticity, and that authenticity was not contrived or copied but was based in the history of a people and was drawn from experiences of those who lived in the everyday world'.[20] This interpretation of authenticity can also be detected in *chanson* discourse. The narrator in Serge Lama's 'Star', for example, claims that all the 'faiblesses' and 'excès' of the star 'fera partie de ton succès'; all the things the star does outside of being a singer-songwriter and performing artist add up to his stardom. Ginette Vincendeau, in an article on *chanteuses réalistes*, has similarly argued that 'authenticity in the songs [performed by the *chanteuses réalistes*] is perceived as emanating from the lived experience of these women'.[21] Fréhel's 'Où sont tous mes amants?' (1935), for example, which is not explicitly self-conscious, but is, if Vincendeau's thesis is to be believed, self-referential, is a good example of such an 'authentic' and authenticating song.[22] It evokes, through a combination of nostalgia and sentiment, a woman looking back to former, happier times when her youth and beauty brought friends and lovers who have since disappeared:

> Où sont tous mes amants
> Tous ceux qui m'aimaient tant
> Jadis quand j'étais belle?
> Adieu les infidèles
> Ils sont je ne sais pas où
> À d'autres rendez-vous
> Moi mon cœur n'a pas vieilli pourtant
> Où sont tous mes amants

19 Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute), p. 20.
20 Richard A. Peterson, *Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 210.
21 Vincendeau, p. 116.
22 Written by Charlys and Maurice Vandair.

Indeed, Fréhel performed the song in 1935 when she was 43 years old and certainly past her prime in the fickle world of show-business, and the lines can be understood as metaphorically suggesting the disfavour of the older female star. Vincendeau argues that Fréhel's songs and her life had much in common: '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 [...]. Suffering was a central element in her songs and her life'.[23]

3a: Art versus Commerce

Authenticity can also be understood in *chanson* discourse as singers being 'independent' and having *auteurist* control over their work. As in the last chapter where *chanson* was constructed as different from *variétés*, here *chanson* artists set themselves apart from pop stars in their unwillingness to compromise with the music industry. The 'art versus commerce' binary is indeed apparent in Anglo-American music as well as French *chanson*, as Deena Weinstein explores in her article, 'Art Versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (Useful) Romantic Illusion'. Writing from the point of view of a rock journalist herself, she maintains that,

> the second commandment for rock journalists is to elicit and dutifully quote musicians' proclamations of their artistic integrity. Rock styles and tropes forever change, but more constant than the guitars and drums is the understanding that rock is, or should be, art, and that commerce is inimical to art. From its inception this opposition between art and commerce has been a central, even defining, feature of rock discourse.[24]

Chanson—and *variétés*—discourse similarly contains many examples of singers proclaiming their artistic integrity, which is one of the reasons the notion of authenticity is so complex in popular music terms. A song in which the singer posits himself as independent of the industry and an 'artist' is itself a construction of a persona, and is, as the title of Weinstein's article observes, a very useful

23 Vincendeau, p. 115.

24 Deena Weinstein, 'Art versus Commerce: Deconstructing a (Useful) Romantic Illusion', in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky, Music and Myth*, ed. by Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 57–67 (pp. 57–8).

illusion and ultimately a successful marketing tool. She also makes the point that 'the art-commerce binary erupted in youth music in the sixties through the counterculture (the last major romantic movement in the West), which nurtured a quest for authenticity: "Do your own thing." "Let it all hang out."'[25] However, Weinstein equally discusses the complexities of the 'art-commerce binary', especially the times when it is deconstructed due to the artist's authentic output coinciding with popular tastes. She cites the example of the Beatles, whose work was critically acclaimed and considered authentic but whose music also appealed to a mass audience.[26] Defining authenticity, then, is tricky for commentators and the song-makers alike, as the Beatles example illustrates. Roy Shuker discusses the differences between the common-sense usage of authenticity and the connotations and significations it has been awarded since the 1960s, arguing that:

> Authenticity is imbued with considerable symbolic value. In its common-sense usage, authenticity assumes that the producers of music texts undertook the 'creative' work themselves; that there is an element of originality or creativity present, along with connotations of seriousness, sincerity, and uniqueness; and that while the input of others is recognised, it is the musicians' role which is regarded as pivotal.[27]

This definition of authenticity echoes many of the statements made by the French *chanson* artists cited in the introduction to this chapter, as well as the meanings of *chanson* explored in the previous one. *Chanson*, it would seem, posits itself as a particularly authentic form of popular music because, among other things, it constructs itself as the binary to commerce and instant gratification. Shuker himself discusses the pop/rock binary that emerged in the 1960s and that saw rock as being more authentic than pop music, with its authenticity being 'underpinned by a series of oppositions: mainstream versus independent; pop versus rock; and commercialism versus creativity, or art versus commerce'.[28] *Chanson* can, then, be argued to have fabricated its own image of authenticity in a similar way to rock, yet it is further complicated by French definitions of

25 Weinstein, p. 58.
26 Weinstein, p. 62.
27 Roy Shuker, *Key Concepts in Popular Music* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 20.
28 Shuker, p. 21.

authenticity, which are inextricably bound to republicanism's monocultural and universalist ideals.[29]

Authenticity as understood by an art versus commerce binary is a common preoccupation in French popular music. Johnny Hallyday, for instance, in 'Le Chanteur abandonné', 1985, delivers the simplistic moral that one has to do what one loves, in this case singing, even if it means paying a price for it: it is better to have been abandoned than to abandon what one loves doing, 'vivre, c'est comme aimer/ vivre c'est partager/ jamais abandonner'.[30] Jean Ferrat, however, in 'Chanter', delivers a less cheerful message, suggesting that if one does want to succeed in the music industry, one has to pay a price, but it is worth it if this is one's chosen career path: 'il faut vivre ce que l'on aime/ en payant le prix qui convient', thus hinting at a compromise. Similarly, in 'Pour être encore en haut de l'affiche', Ferrat comments, with his usual irony and political perspective, on the power and role of the mass media, and how it can force a singer into compromise if he is to make a living from his art. Here, a particularly French interpretation of authenticity is evoked, positing *chanson* as more authentic than both pop and rock. Singing in English is, this song claims, 'le seul moyen ici-bas/ d'intéresser les mass média/ je n'veux pas finir en loque/ je pourrai braire en amerloque'. The wordplay used in these lines suggests that the Ferrat persona is indeed unwilling or at least very unhappy to compromise and sing in English. This is further emphasised by the use of the word 'braire' and its allusion to the singer simply making animal noises rather than real songs with meaning. However, an ironic positive side to having to sing in English is also evoked. If he is singing in English, no-one will be able to understand the singer so he can defy the industry through his songs, as indeed, Ferrat is doing here. The importance of the French language—and, therefore, the *chanson à texte* tradition—to the notion of authenticity is thus reinforced. *Chanson* is more authentic than pop not only because it is inimical to commerce but, more importantly perhaps, because it places itself firmly within the French *culture écrite*.

29 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 205.
30 Words and Music by Michel Berger.

3b: Death

Media pressures, however, are sometimes too intense for compromise, whereas death, in both Anglo-American and French musical terms, is a guaranteed stamp of authenticity. Weinstein comments that:

> Death is a great career move, in part because rock journalists provide the dearly departed with more exposure than even the most ample publicity budget could provide. Critics celebrate romantic rock deaths because they affirm the myth of the artists. A drug overdose, a shotgun suicide, or a gangland gangsta slaying: these deaths show, rhetorically, that the romantic artist was authentic, not merely assuming a (Christlike) pose. The right kind of death is the most powerful authenticity effect, the indefeasible outward sign of inward grace.[31]

The press articles that appeared after the death of Trenet, as discussed in Chapter 2, illustrate that Weinstein's point can be equally applied to *chanson*, as do the deaths of the *chanteuses réalistes* like Piaf and Fréhel which can be seen as evidence of the authenticity of suffering and death in their song lyrics. As Vincendeau contends: 'there is obviously something morbid, even necrophiliac, in the way these diseased bodies are consumed as spectacle. Yvonne George's last concert (organised by Cocteau) clearly precipitated her death; Berthe Sylva died while an audience waited for her at a concert'.[32] Tinker similarly comments on the media representation of the deaths of Ferré, Brassens and Brel, arguing that '[their deaths] represent a crucial moment in the history of their television presentation as they effectively enter the pantheon of French song, and their iconic status is conferred. While their funerals constitute huge media events, so do the successive anniversaries of their deaths'.[33]

If the right kind of death can be a sign of authenticity, the wrong kind of death, either literal or metaphoric, can be just the opposite, as Daniel Balavoine's narrator Henri, in 'Le Chanteur' (1978), testifies.[34] He refers to what he considers to be the natural lifecycle of a star: after a time of being a famous idol, the singer will make his grandiose farewells:

31 Weinstein, pp. 66–7.
32 Vincendeau, p. 124.
33 Tinker, 'Léo Ferré, Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Television Representations, Past and Present', para. 24 of 28.
34 Words and music by Balavoine.

Puis quand j'en ai assez
De rester leur idole
Je remont'rai sur scène
Comme dans les années folles
Je f'rai pleurer mes yeux
Je ferai mes adieux

However, the retirement will not last long and he will, in fact, make a comeback, which the narrator describes in rather unflattering terms: 'je me prostituerai/ pour la prospérité'. This time around, the younger generation will not respect him, indeed, they will label him a 'pédé' and he will become a drunkard, thereby tarnishing the memory of his former glories.

Conclusion

From these analyses certain conclusions, at times contradictory, can be drawn concerning *chanson* artists' preoccupations with their own status as singers and performers. They are concerned with revealing the 'reality' behind the performance or stardom mask, which, paradoxically, keeps an image of stardom and their own star status alive through the construction—or fabrication—of authenticity. This paradox leads to an exploration, in *chanson* discourse, of the alienation felt by the singer who must either 'sell out' and compromise with the music industry or risk losing his career. In Part III of this thesis I will examine the ways in which my three case studies, Serge Gainsbourg, Renaud and MC Solaar, have coped with this potential alienation and how they have found different solutions to the art versus commerce debate.

Part III: Case Studies

Throughout Part II, I have illustrated ways in which self-consciousness manifests itself in modern French *chanson*, and have discussed some of the effects of this self-consciousness. Here, I want to briefly underline the importance of these effects and their relationship to the art versus commerce debate in order to clarify the choice of case studies in the following three chapters.

Self-consciousness suggests that *chanson* has evolved as a distinct genre, different from *variétés* and Anglo-American pop. The distinctness of *chanson* is represented as emanating from singer-songwriters constructing and then disseminating myths of key *chanson* artists as well as traits that have become associated with *chanson* (literary allusions, etc.). Equally, its distinctness resides in its being constructed as the polar opposite of both *variétés* and pop: *chanson* is timeless, whereas pop implies instant gratification; *chanson* continues the French tradition of *la culture écrite*, whereas *variétés* favours catchy music. Such dualities also apply to the persona of the *chanson* artist: the *chanson* artist is an individual, *artisanal* creator and member *only* of a *chanson* 'in-club', whereas the pop star is a puppet of a globalised, commercialised industry; the *chanson* artist, like artists generally, has a responsibility to change society through social observation, whereas the *variétés* performer is content to un-analytically observe. *Chanson* is thus constructed as an art form, and self-consciousness plays a vital role in this construction. Like the *Nouvelle Vague*, *chanson* wants to be legitimated 'as a form of artistic expression on a par with the novel or the theatre'.[1] However, where *chanson* is concerned, this analysis proves too simplistic. While self-consciousness highlights *chanson*'s complexity and lyrical importance, it also underlines a desire, on the part of *chanson* artists, to create a popular art form for 'the man on the street'. Being popular is not necessarily antithetical to being learned and serious in *chanson* discourse. This, of course, is problematic. *Chanson* artists want to be able to discuss serious subject matters while still appealing to a wide public. Many of the artists whose work was

1 Powrie and Reader, p. 21. First quoted on page 14.

explored in Part II raise this concern, yet few appear to have adequately resolved the dilemma this poses. Each of the following case studies does, I would argue, succeed in proposing a solution to the art versus commerce dilemma, and is able to produce work that is both serious and popular. This attempted resolution comes at a price, however, as each has to compromise in his own particular way, resulting in differing conclusions as to the future of *chanson*.

Chapter 5

Serge Gainsbourg

Introduction[1]

Self-consciousness can be seen in three main areas in Gainsbourg's work. First, implicitly, through the use of similar techniques to those identified in Chapter 2 as belonging to a distinct *chanson* genre: *auteurist* control, literary references, and so on. Second, more explicitly and reflexively, through genre subversion and commentary in his songs on the genre in which he is working, be it *chanson*, pop, or reggae. Lastly, through the symbolic exploration of his personas and their connection to his musical output.

Gainsbourg's self-constructed image, as well as the actual content of his songs, mirror, to a large extent, the dualities and contradictions that have been apparent in French popular music discourse for most of the twentieth century. Gainsbourg fabricates an image of 'himself' and his work, then simultaneously reinforces and subverts that image throughout his career. This fabrication and subversion have the effect of questioning his artistic output and raising larger questions concerning the value of *chanson* as an art form. A conscious playfulness seems apparent in both his work and interviews from the very start of his career through to the end, but genre subversion, ironic distance and a critical exploration of stardom and the music industry seem particularly evident from the mid-1960s onwards. The seemingly polar opposites of 'Gainsbourg' and 'Gainsbarre', the two principal Gainsbourg personas, can also be understood on

1 All lyrics are taken from Serge Gainsbourg, *Mon propre rôle*, 2 vols (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1991). All song lyrics in these volumes, with the exception of the ones written close to his death, were revised by Gainsbourg and correspond to his wishes. As Gainsbourg wrote songs for other performers for most of his career, I have detailed the main performers and dates (usually the first recording unless otherwise indicated) of the songs I mention. For a more complete discography see either, Gilles Verlant, *Gainsbourg* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000), Sylvie Simmons, *A Fistful of Gitanes* (London: Helter Skelter, 2002) or Gainsbourg's official website (see Bibliography). Gainsbourg's original albums also appear in the Bibliography to this thesis. As Gainsbourg's song titles are often English, or a combination of English and French, I adopt the appropriate capitalisation conventions of whichever language dominates the title in question.

many different levels, but are always linked, in some way, to *chanson*. Moreover, from the late 1950s onwards, Gainsbourg's songs can be seen as reflecting his own split persona, at once frivolous, obscene and commercially-focused (Gainsbarre), yet serious, contemplative and self-interrogatory (Gainsbourg). The former elements, the frivolity and the obscenity, are often emphasised to such an extent that the listener needs to work to discover the more complex hidden layers of meaning embedded in the songs. In much of his work, these hidden layers of meaning question his own role as a singer-songwriter and the role of *chanson* in contemporary French culture. Indeed, through the dualities in his work—the surface gloss and the deeper meanings—larger questions concerning *chanson* as a cultural form are raised, and the ways in which value is placed on songs are also brought into question. While Gainsbourg succeeds, it can be argued, in marrying commercially-successful (pop) music with serious *chanson*, the underlying irony in his work is that there is a continual subversion of the different genres he adopts throughout his career, and the ever-present suggestion that popular music—and indeed art in general—is an inadequate tool with which to express emotion or any kind of deep meaning.

This chapter will begin with a critical biographical and bibliographical study, exploring, in particular, the changes in Gainsbourg's style at different points in his career. Section 1 of the chapter will then discuss traits in his work that are similar to those identified in Part II as belonging to a distinct *chanson* genre. Section 2 will explore the subversion of musical and cultural genres, from pop culture and Pop Art to pop (*yéyé*) and love songs. It will argue that one of the reasons Gainsbourg's work is so complex is that it succeeds in simultaneously being both a form of popular entertainment and 'serious' art. The songs that, on the surface, appear to be standard pop records, illustrate this duality. Section 2, then, will explore the relationship between his songs and the Pop Art movement, the ways in which many of his pop songs reveal underlying criticisms of the world of pop stardom, and how his portrayal of the female *interprète* can be read as complex, and ultimately pro-feminist. Section 3 will focus on the fabrication of the Gainsbourg and Gainsbarre personas, arguing that both personas are closely linked to the development of Gainsbourg's musical output, and that they

symbolically represent the potential crises faced by the *chanson* artist in his quest to respond to the art versus commerce debate.

Biographical and Bibliographical Study

Lucien Ginsburg, nicknamed 'Lulu', and his twin sister, Liliane, were born into a Jewish family of Russian descent on 2 April 1928, to a musician father and vocally talented mother. In 1944, just after the Liberation, Lucien left high school in pursuit of an artistic career, and, in 1945, he enrolled at the École supérieure des beaux-arts where he met, and had relationships with, both Olga Tolstoy (granddaughter of Leo) and Elisabeth Levitsky (a Russian aristocrat who worked as a secretary to Georges Hugnet, Surrealist poet and friend of Salvador Dali). The influence of this early connection to literary aristocracy and the visual arts, especially Surrealism, can clearly be seen in many of Gainsbourg's songs, filmed performances and choice of stage clothes. Although he eventually chose music over painting as a career, many of his songs refer to artistic movements, and contain much visual imagery. A one-year course at music school, in 1947, studying composition, notation and theory, marked the beginning of his musical career. He married Elisabeth Levitsky in 1951, and taught painting to young survivors of the Holocaust before earning money as a stand-in for his father, playing the piano in bars and nightclubs in Paris. In 1954, he passed the SACEM exam, started playing the summer season in Le Touquet, and changed his name to Serge Gainsbourg.[2] Elisabeth filed for divorce in 1957, the same year that Gainsbourg heard Boris Vian and Michèle Arnaud performing at Milord L'Arsouille where he was playing the piano during the intermissions. Gainsbourg showed Arnaud some of his songs, which she sang at Bobino, and Denis Bourgeois, working for Philips, arranged for Gainsbourg to have a publishing contract with the record company.[3]

2 The SACEM is an acronym for 'La Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique'. It was founded in 1850. Further information can be obtained via its website: www.sacem.fr.

3 Biographical information taken from, Simmons; Verlant; *Rfi musique* website. See bibliography for full details.

Gainsbourg's first album, *Du chant à la une!*, was released in 1958, and won the 'grand prix de l'Academie Charles Cros'. Musically and lyrically, this album follows in the footsteps of Charles Trenet and Boris Vian, among others, with a combination of jazz-inspired tracks (today commonly referred to as 'lounge' music) and narratives accompanied mainly by piano, percussion and brass. There is the kind of sardonic humour present here that typifies much of his work ('La Femme des uns sous le corps des autres', 'Douze belles dans la peau'), as well as well-drawn, narrative portraits of certain sections of society ('Le Poinçonneur des Lilas'), and the playful imitations of musical genres ('Charleston des déménageurs de piano'). His second album, *Gainsbourg No. 2*, appeared in 1959, the same year as Juliette Greco's Extended Play, *Juliette Greco chante Serge Gainsbourg*. Gainsbourg's first commercial success came with his film soundtrack album, *L'Eau à la bouche*, in 1960. He then released *L'Étonnant Serge Gainsbourg* (1961), *No. 4* (1962), and *Gainsbourg confidentiel* (1963). These early albums, like *Du chant à la une!,* contain elements that are recognisable in all of Gainsbourg's work. There are parodies and playful imitation, in the style, for example, of rock and roll ballads ('Le Rock de Nerval',[4] 'Le Sonnet d'Arvers'), Surrealist wordplay and references to artistic movements and literary or musical figures ('La Chanson de Prévert', 'Le Rock de Nerval', 'La Chanson de Maglia'). There are many themes too that Gainsbourg would continue to explore throughout his career: women, love, language, beauty, as well as hints that the *chanson*/jazz style would soon start to give way to a more 'modern' sound. 'Requiem pour un twister' (*No. 4*), for example, features a Hammond organ and, as the title suggests, is written in praise of those rock and roll singers who introduced the 'twist'.

Gainsbourg Percussions (1964) marked a definitive change in style, both musically and lyrically, and was described by the music journalist and presenter, Denise Glaser, as Gainsbourg's first real album-level success.[5] While, musically, there are still the jazz-inspired songs ('Machins choses', 'Ces petits riens', 'Coco

4 The significance of the allusion to Nerval will be explored in Section 3 of this chapter.

5 Denise Glaser, in an interview with Serge Gainsbourg, *Discorama*, 3 January 1965; re-published on the DVD, *Serge Gainsbourg: d'autres nouvelles des étoiles* (Universal Music & Mercury, 2005).

and co'), there is also the introduction of newer rhythms and instruments: in 'Couleur café', for example, there is an African drum rhythm underscoring the origins of the female protagonist in the song, whose skin is described as being 'coffee-coloured'. Gainsbourg, who, in an interview with Glaser, describes this rhythm as coming from Nigerian folklore, agrees with her suggestion that the marriage of African rhythms and the French language is a new departure for *chanson*.[6]

The albums following *Gainsbourg Percussions* reinforce his change in style, and become, progressively, more experimental, taking current musical styles and adapting them for his own purposes. He continued to write film soundtracks, releasing *Anna* in 1967, *Je t'aime moi non plus* in 1976, and *Madame Claude*, in 1977. He also continued writing for other performers, and started performing less himself, although he continued to both star in and direct films (*L'Inconnue de Hong Kong*, *Slogan*). In 1965 his success as a pop songwriter was secured when his song 'Poupée de cire, poupée de son', performed by France Gall, won the Eurovision song contest (for Luxembourg, as France refused the song). Subsequent songs written for Gall reinforced this pop success, and, in 1968, he released *Bonnie and Clyde*, featuring his own performances of songs set to a pop arrangement.

In 1969, the album *Jane Birkin et Serge Gainsbourg* was released, and featured two autobiographical songs that play on his 'celebrity' relationship with Birkin ('Elisa' and '69, année érotique'). In 1971 he released his first concept album, *Histoire de Melody Nelson*; a second concept album, *L'Homme à tête de chou* followed in 1976. *Histoire de Melody Nelson* is also auto-biographical in nature, taking inspiration from his relationship with Birkin. Like many of the songs on the *Gainsbourg Percussion* album, the music and lyrics here are inseparable, and combine to create impact and emotion. In 'Valse de Melody', for example, both music and lyrics work seamlessly together in terms of timing and rhythm, thus adding to the melodrama and tragedy of the piece. The accompanying film to this 'disque-roman' highlights the combination of pop and high culture that is illustrative of much of Gainsbourg's work at this point in his

6 *Discorama*, 3 January 1965.

career. The fourth film sequence (to accompany the song 'Ah! Melody'), for example, sees Gainsbourg and Birkin in front of a wall of synchronised kaleidoscope hearts and, later, the letters making up the word 'Melody' are over-layered in the centre of the screen in yellow boxes, with letters randomly fading out to show either Gainsbourg or Birkin, the former singing and the latter dancing, all to a backdrop of multi-coloured hearts.[7]

This combination of high-cultural references and modern playful experimentation is also a feature of subsequent albums, such as *Vu de l'extérieur* (1973) and *Rock Around the Bunker* (1975). Experimentation with reggae resulted in the controversial 1979 album *Aux armes et caetera*, the title song of which sets the 'Marseillaise' to reggae music. When asked in an interview with Gérard Holtz whether or not he thought this song was provocative, he replied: 'je pense pas, je pense que le reggae c'est une musique révolutionaire et "La Marseillaise" est un chant révolutionnaire' and equates dancing to the 'Marseillaise' with dancing to the 'Carmagnole'.[8] *Love on the Beat* was released in 1984 and *You're under Arrest* in 1987, both of which reflected current production trends by using electronic instrumentation, and the latter, on the title track, also incorporates a rap chorus. Since his death in 1991, various compilation albums have been released, and recently, a limited edition double DVD set, *Serge Gainsbourg: d'autres nouvelles des étoiles* was issued by Universal Music and Mercury in France. It comprises over four and a half hours of music, video clips and interviews.

Gainsbourg's musical output, then, was prolific and varied. From his first album to those produced shortly before his death, self-consciousness plays an important role in his work. The nature of his self-conscious inquiry evolves, though, as his career progresses and he is forced to respond to the art versus commerce debate. In the following section, I will examine ways in which he self-consciously inscribes himself in a *chanson* tradition.

7 Music orchestrated and arranged by Jean-Claude Vannier.

8 Serge Gainsbourg, in an interview with Gérard Holtz, *Actualités*, 17 March 1979; re-published on the DVD, *Serge Gainsbourg: d'autres nouvelles des étoiles*. Gainsbourg later bought the original hand-written script by Rouget de L'Isle of the 'Marseillaise' at auction for 135,000FF.

1: Inscription within a *Chanson* Tradition

Gainsbourg inscribes himself within a *chanson* tradition in a similar way to those *chanson* artists examined in Chapter 2. He draws attention to himself, for example, as the *auteur* of his songs, and he alludes to literary and artistic 'precursors' in a similar way to Ferré and Ferrat, among others.

1a: Auteurism*: Repetition and Remake*

In Part II, I argued that *chanson* artists like Brel, make their audiences aware of their *auteurist* control through devices such as the self-conscious 'remake' or allusions to their own persona and previous work. Gainsbourg's *auteurist* control is equally manifest in a number of ways in his work. Simple examples of this include the repetition of the same name, the same theme, or allusions to his own previous works. The name 'Samantha', for example, appears and reappears, becoming almost fetishised. It features in five songs on the *Mauvaises nouvelles des étoiles* album, carefully placed there, like a conscious leitmotiv. In a similar way, like many of the other artists examined in Part II, he makes allusions either directly or indirectly to his own previous works throughout his songs, and, at times, reworks the same song with certain changes. 'La Javanaise remake' (1979), for example, is precisely that: a remake of his song, 'La Javanaise' (1963), yet here the song is set to a reggae accompaniment and includes the English word 'love' in the place of the French word 'amour' from the original. There are also more subtle examples of Gainsbourg recycling motifs from previous songs, in the sense that the allusions are to lines within songs rather than song titles. For example, the opening line of the song, 'Haine pour aime' (1983), performed by Jane Birkin: 'amour hélas ne prend qu'un M' is almost identical to the penultimate line of his song 'Digital Delay' (1981), performed by Catherine Deneuve: 'amour hélas ne prend jamais qu'un seul M'. Similarly, the opening lines of 'Pour ce que tu n'étais pas' (1986), performed by his daughter Charlotte Gainsbourg, 'J't'ai pris pour ce que tu n'étais pas/ t'ai laissé pour ce que tu es', are also similar to the opening lines of 'Digital Delay': 'prendre les hommes pour

ce qu'ils sont pas/ et les laisser pour ce qu'ils sont'. The consistent use of remakes and recycling of earlier lyrics has the effect of highlighting his role as the *auteur* of his songs. This, in turn, posits Gainsbourg's work, like Brel's, as an *œuvre* rather than a series of unconnected hit singles. In Gainsbourg's case, it also reflects his desire to keep his music up to date and modern through continual revision, an argument I will pick up towards the end of this chapter. Equally, though, it underlines the importance of lyrics and, as such, inscribes Gainsbourg's work in the *chanson à texte* tradition. This tradition is further emphasised through literary allusions.

1b: Artistic and Literary Allusions

There are numerous references to inspirational figures—literary, historical and musical—in Gainsbourg's work: in 'Hmm hmm hmm' (1984) he alludes to three literary figures: Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Rimbaud and Antonin Artaud. Poe also appears in 'White and Black Blues'; Baudelaire appears in 'Hey Mister Zippo' (1989). There is a brief reference to Schumann and Stravinsky in 'Hey Man Amen' and in 'Je suis venu te dire que je m'en vais' there is an allusion to Verlaine and a line 'au vent mauvais' from his poem 'Chanson d'automne'. Charles Trenet set this poem—which itself plays with musicality—to music in 1940, and it was later sung by Léo Férré on his album, *Férré chante les poètes*. These allusions reveal some of Gainsbourg's inspirational figures and also posit his work in a high cultural genre, alongside the work of his referents.

Gainsbourg also devotes entire songs to parodying the work of other writers, which has the effect, again, of elevating his songs to a high literary status. An audience, for example, would need to recognise the original work being parodied, and comprehend the complexities of the parodies themselves in order to understand, and enjoy, his songs. In this way, the songs become works of art that must be studied rather than enjoyed passively, a quality often attributed to the work of Brassens, as shown in Chapter 2. The song 'Exercice en forme de Z', for example, contains numerous overt intertextual references to the writer Raymond

Queneau without actually mentioning his name.[9] The title can be seen as a reference to Queneau's *Exercices de style* and the letter Z to the initial letter of the eponymous protagonist of his novel *Zazie dans le métro*. Throughout the song, Gainsbourg plays with the name Zazie and the letter Z through alliteration in order to create wordplay, humour and irony. The content and narrative of the song can also be compared to a Queneau work—the seemingly non-sensical words and the bizarrely coincidental, almost surreal plot:

> Zazie
> a sa visite au zoo [...] quand zut! Un vent blizzard
> Fusant de son falzar
> voici zigzaguant dans les airs
> Zazie et son Blazer

Similarly, in 'La Cigale et la fourmi'(1957), Gainsbourg plays with the original La Fontaine version of this story, cleverly keeping close to the original structure, but the hungry 'Cigale' of the original becomes an equally hungry and destitute nameless girl in 'Pigalle'. Gainsbourg has kept the same tense as La Fontaine, the past historic, throughout and a very similar syntax:

> La Cigale, ayant chanté
> Tout l'Été,
> Se trouva fort dépourvue
> Quand la Bise fut venue.
> (La Fontaine)

> A Pigalle ayant chanté tout l'été
> Désirée se trouva fort dépourvue
> Quand sans habit se vit nue
> (Gainsbourg)

There is, in fact, a double allusion in this song: to La Fontaine's fable, but also to Charles Trenet's 1941 version of the song, on which he is accompanied by Django Reinhardt in a whimsical jazz style.[10] Such literary parodies and allusions, then, suggest that Gainsbourg's work inscribes itself firmly within a French *chanson à texte* tradition. Throughout his work as a whole, the same playful humour found in the above parodies persists, but Gainsbourg is not

9 Queneau also wrote songs, for Juliette Gréco, for example, in the 1950s.
10 Trenet's song sets the original La Fontaine verse to music.

content to play only within the confines of the *chanson poétique*. Rather, his range of reference grows to include American popular culture, and instead of inscribing himself within one particular genre, he plays with many.

2: Genre Subversion

2a: Subverting Pop Culture

There are continual references in Gainsbourg's work to Anglo-American popular culture, be it in the form of allusions to popular art forms (cinema, film stars, cartoons) or objects which were fetishised and reached almost iconic status in their original culture, as well as, at times, globally (Zippo lighters, Ford Mustang, Mickey Mouse). In 'Love Fifteen', for example, there is a reference to James Dean and in '32 Fahrenheit' to both Vivian Leigh and Greta Garbo and also to the film, *Stranger in the Night*. There is mention in 'Bubble Gum' (1965) to the confectionery of the same name and reference to Mickey Mouse in the song of almost the same name, 'Mickey maousse' (1981). In 'Ford Mustang' there are references to comics ('Un numéro de Superman'); billboard advertisements for consumer goods, cosmetics and fashion items (Coca-Cola, 'fluide make-up', 'un écrou de Paco Rabanne') as well as movie stars (Marilyn).[11]

What can be made of this continual desire to allude to American popular culture? Like Pop Art, or the New Realism as it is sometimes referred to, Gainsbourg's songs take popular cultural icons and objects and re-package them in a new context. This re-packaging disconnects the objects and figures from their expected environment, and thus highlights the objects themselves as existing, in most cases, purely as vehicles for commercial gain. Lawrence Alloway, critic and one of the founding members of the Pop Art movement, argues that,

11 Coco Chanel called Rabanne the 'metallurgist'. He launched his first experimental and unwearable dresses made from contemporary materials including metal and plastic in 1964. Tinker also points to Gainsbourg's usage of US popular cultural referents in his article 'Serge Gainsbourg and *le défi américain*', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 10 (2002), 187–196.

> the term [Pop Art] was, in the first place, part of an expansionist aesthetics, a way of relating art to the environment. In place of an hierarchic aesthetics keyed to define greatness and to separate high from low art, a continuum was assumed which could accommodate all forms of art, permanent and expendable, personal and collective, autographic and anonymous. From about 1961 to 1964, the term *Pop Art* was narrowed to mean paintings that included a reference to a mass-medium source.[12]

Mario Amaya, in his book, *Pop as Art*, contends that the title 'Pop Art' is misleading because, 'although it began as a highly sophisticated art comment on some visual facts in the world of mass-media, it was never intended for the masses themselves or made specifically to be understood by the many rather than the few'. Preferring the term, The New Super Realism, he goes on to argue that, in spite of its beginnings, it 'is one of the few contemporary art phenomena—if not the only one—that has filtered down to the "plebs" almost immediately'.[13] Ironically, then, the art that began by commenting on mass consumerism and the commercialisation of culture, itself became a mass consumer durable. Some of the artists quickly recognised and played with this irony, such as Andy Warhol whose studio became known as 'The Factory' in 1963, and, from 1967, used this 'Factory' to create mass-produced saleable art: 'commercial souvenirs of the avant-garde that Warhol called "Business Art"'.[14] This overt commercialism, according to Jonathan Fineberg, in his study of art since 1940, 'forced into the open the growing sense of alienation that people felt as mass culture came into its ascendancy'. Fineberg quotes Warhol as saying, 'playing up what things really were was very Pop, very sixties'.[15]

Mass culture and consumer durables also had an impact on France in the 1960s. In fact, a divided response to American cultural values existed as early as the 1940s, following the 1946 Blum-Byrnes Agreement, in which, in exchange

12 Lawrence Alloway, *American Pop Art* (New York: Collier Books, 1974), pp. 18–19.
13 Mario Amaya, *Pop as Art: A Survey of the New Super-Realism* (London: Studio Vista, 1965), pp. 18–19.
14 Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), p. 257. Warhol employs the term 'Business Art' in Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1975), p. 92.
15 Fineberg, p. 257. The quotation by Warhol is taken from, Andy Warhol and Pat Hackett, *Popism: The Warhol 60s* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1980), p. 24.

for American economic aid, French cinemas were required to show a greater number of American films:

> The fervour of anti-Americanism in some quarters was in direct proportion to the enthusiasm which all things American elicited in other quarters. Audiences flocked to watch *Gone with the Wind*, *Casablanca*, and many other Hollywood productions: children were entranced once again by Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck; and the intelligentsia became jazz buffs, quarrelling bitterly over the challenge of bebop to traditional swing.[16]

On the one hand, then, Gainsbourg's frequent use of US popular-cultural references reflects 1960s culture and society, and can be viewed, like the work of many of the artists involved in Pop Art, as apolitical experimentation. On the other hand, however, his references to Pop Art itself, as well as to the original objects that inspired it, emphasise art's fascination with cultural debates and commercialism. From the perspective of *chanson*, the allusion to Pop Art draws attention to the transition that was happening in the 1960s from 'serious' *chanson* to pop (and I will explore Gainsbourg's 'pop songs' in more depth in the next section). The allusion allows Gainsbourg, in the words of Warhol, to 'play up' what popular music in France really had become, and, by placing himself as both a character within his pop narratives and the distanced creator of them, to pass comment on the commercial nature of popular music. The clearest illustration of this self-conscious commentary can be found in the song, and accompanying film to, 'Comic Strip'.

Gainsbourg wrote 'Comic Strip' for a special television programme celebrating Brigitte Bardot, the 'Brigitte Bardot Show', broadcast on 1 January 1968, and the song was released the same year on the album, *Bonnie and Clyde*. The song was broadcast in the form of a pre-recorded colour film featuring both Gainsbourg and Bardot, and directed by Eddy Matalon (who also directed the

16 Michael Kelly, Tony Jones, and Jill Forbes, 'Modernisation and Avant-Gardes (1945–1967)', in *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction*, ed. by Jill Forbes and Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 140–182 (p. 142).

other fifteen songs and films that featured in the 'Brigitte Bardot Show').[17] As the title suggests, the song is, essentially, both about a comic strip and in the style of a comic, with two principal characters, played by Gainsbourg and Bardot. It features standard comic strip words capitalised in the printed lyrics (CRASH!, CRACK!, SMACK!, etc.), sung by Bardot, and printed onto multi-coloured balloons in the accompanying film. Lyrically, Gainsbourg's character is the archetypal cartoon strip (*bande dessinée*) hero: he swings punches in order to protect the 'petite fille' (Bardot) whose heart he wins at the end of the narrative:

> N'aie pas peur bébé agrippe-toi
> Je suis là CRASH! pour te protéger TCHLACK!
> Ferme les yeux CRACK! embrasse-moi SMACK![18]

The song is explicitly self-conscious in the sense that Gainsbourg plays the role of both the male protagonist in the narrative and the creator of the comic strip, and, as such, the song plays with the conventions of *chanson* as much as it tells a story: the opening lines of the song invite the 'petite fille' to take part in the comic strip creation:

> Viens petite fille dans mon comic strip
> Viens faire des bulles, viens faire des WIP

The film opens with Bardot, dressed in a Barbarella-style[19] outfit: tight pink one-piece suit, long dark-brown wig, black cape and thigh-high boots, and adorned with heavy gold jewellery on her torso as well as her thighs, breaking through a paper wall, with a picture of her painted on it, thus, literally and metaphorically, entering the comic strip. Gainsbourg is dressed in a simple black suit and walks slowly, without any undue movement, throughout the film. His visual

17 The making of the 'Brigitte Bardot Show', 'Faces of Paris', was also released in 1968 by BBC Worldwide, under the title, 'Matalon Directs B.B.' and produced by Michael Houldey. This short programme (28 minutes) shows behind-the-scenes footage of the making of 'Comic Strip', and the artistic involvement of both Gainsbourg and Bardot in decisions. It was recently re-released on the compilation DVD, *Brigitte Bardot: Divine B.B.*, issued by Universal Music with Mercury and BBC (2004).

18 There is no direct indication, either in the song or the film, as to whether this 'SMACK!', delivered by Bardot, is in fact a rebuff of the hero's amorous intentions, but this interpretation is obviously a possibility, and would humorously suggest that the hero does not, in fact, get the girl!

19 The film *Barbarella*, directed by Roger Vadim, was released in 1968. It was based on the comic book stories by Jean-Claude Forest, originally published in *V-Magazine* in 1962.

dissimilarity to the cartoon protagonist he is portraying again suggests his distance from the character, and highlights instead his role as writer and director of the fiction. Moreover, he uses his right hand to keep time when he delivers his lines and also, in a similar way to a conductor, cues Bardot with an emphatic finger gesture, which equally suggests his control of the whole scene and breaks down the illusion that what the audience is seeing is a straightforward comic strip narrative. The lyrical and visual self-consciousness here also reveals a common *chanson*/pop dichotomy. Bardot's physicality is portrayed in stark contrast to Gainsbourg's, whose dark suit erases his body from the film in a similar way to the *chanson* artists whose body language was limited by the confines of the cabarets where they performed. As Barbara Lebrun puts it: 'the effacement of the body in *chanson*, in contrast to the particularly physical performances developed in the music-hall [...], gives pride of place to such non-bodily elements as witty poetic lyrics, the "grain of the voice" or the subtleties of musical orchestration'.[20] Here, then, Gainsbourg's witty lyrics, as well as his voice which carries with it connotations of both male sexuality and nonchalance, are highlighted, as is the artificiality of the early music video (and performances), in Bardot's exaggeratedly sexualised persona. Lebrun notes that later 'retro rock' artists also highlight the superficiality of pop videos and performances through an insistence on visual 'realism' and 'an apparently home-made simplicity, which stands in contrast to the slick body-oriented images of mainstream pop'.[21] Rather than challenging the constructs of mainstream pop by producing work that seemingly opposes it, Gainsbourg, here, is questioning it from the inside: he is both working within the confines of the pop music idiom and alluding to its artificiality.

The style of both the song and the film is also clearly suggestive of the paintings by pop artists such as Ramos or Lichtenstein, especially given the former's use of Batman as his referent; he drew a Batman series starting in 1962, taken from Bob Kane's originals, and rendered in paint.[22] Indeed, this song, in many ways, can be compared to the Batman cartoons of the 1960s, the first of which was broadcast on the ABC network in America on 12 January 1966. The

20 Lebrun, 'Mind over Matter', p. 209.
21 Lebrun, 'Mind over Matter', p. 208.
22 Alloway, p. 16.

vocalised sound effects, for example, are highly reminiscent of the Batman cartoon when the fighting scenes would be accompanied by speech bubbles with the words POW! CRACK! and so on in them. The television series of Batman was extremely popular in the US, itself profiting from Pop Art and the enthusiasm for comic books that was strong there in the mid-sixties. One of the reasons for its popularity, for both the general public and artists, was its apparent tongue-in-cheek humour. Amaya, for example, in a discussion of the reasons for, and effects of, Pop Art, contends:

> Since many of the younger generation feel that all the battles of modern art have been fought and won by their elders, they seem determined to have fun with their art—to play with it and even make jokes about it. Like the Surrealists before them, they rely to a large degree on humour for startling effect—but it is a mid-twentieth century brand of twisted or ironic humour called 'Camp'. A sort of stylish wit, accepted and exchanged by in-groups, this mode of expression has been taken up in a pseudo-fashion by the world of advertising and glossies, which treat seriously what is surely meant to be done light-heartedly and with tongue in cheek.[23]

Just like Pop Art, and the original Batman cartoons, Gainsbourg's 'Comic Strip' can also be described as 'Camp' humour, with its stylised film, exaggeratedly deadpan delivery and vaudeville musical accompaniment: the use of the piano, brass, especially the tuba and jazz symbols, reminiscent of the Brecht and Weill cabaret style, for example:

> J'distribue les swings et les uppercuts
> Ça fait VLAM! ça fait SPLATCH! et ça
> fait CHTUCK!
> Ou bien BOMP! ou HUMPF! parfois même PFFF!

This camp humour does have a startling effect as it both reflects the artistic mood of the time and hyperbolically draws attention to it. The humour also allows Gainsbourg to keep a distance from the style of song he has written while performing it: he is simultaneously highlighting the commercial 'pop' nature of the song while profiting commercially from exactly that 'pop' nature. Gainsbourg discussed his current views on the *yéyé* generation during an interview with Glaser in 1965, arguing that he had changed his mind since his earlier comment

23 Amaya, p. 20.

('ils ont acheté des wagons de sucettes'), and that now: 'j'ai retourné ma veste [...] parce que [...] je me suis aperçu que la doublure était en vison'. He goes on to contend that the newer musical styles—*yéyé* and rock—have had a positive effect on French music in the sense that they have forced musicians to move away from tired, 'intellectual' songwriting, and have stopped the large number of bad songs with literary aspirations: 'je trouve qu'il est plus acceptable de faire du rock sans prétention littéraire que de faire de la mauvaise chanson à prétention littéraire. Ça, c'est vraiment pénible'.[24] While these comments certainly help to put Gainsbourg's pop experimentation into context, I think they need to be understood, as all of his interview material does, as emanating from the constructed Gainsbourg persona, and therefore a mixture of both 'Gainsbourg' and 'Gainsbarre'. The self-made suggestion that his songs are now only pop or rock music without any kind of 'higher' cultural aspirations is contentious, for example. In the following section, I will explore those *yéyé* songs in more depth, arguing that they too, like the Pop Art-influenced ones above, are more complex than may be first thought.

2b: Subverting the Pop Song

Many of the songs written by Gainsbourg in the 1960s and early 1970s, and sung by other performers, do indeed appear, on the surface, to be in the style of standard 'pop' or *yéyé* music. 'Baby Pop' (1966) and 'Teenie Weenie Boppie' (1967), both written for France Gall, for example, while satirically exaggerating the pop idiom through their titles, feature quintessential 1960s pop orchestration and foot-tapping melodies. There are guitar, drums, keyboards, for example, and a, at times painfully, high-pitched, naïvely exuberant delivery by the young Gall, as well as the compulsory 'yé yé' chorus provided by young female voices, on the former song. 'Qui est in qui est out' (1968) is similar in its sound and delivery, with a female chorus shouting rather than singing the repeated title line throughout the song. However, beneath the surface, these songs, and many more

24 Serge Gainsbourg, *Discorama*, 3 January 1965. Gainsbourg's songs 'Le Temps des yoyos' and 'Chez les yé-yé' (both 1963) also implicitly criticise the *yéyé* singers.

that appear to be trite throw-away numbers, are commenting, in a complex and reflexive way, on the nature of the music industry, the difficulties faced by young people, and, at a deeper level, the classic existential question: what is the purpose of this art and life?

The 1960s were, of course, a time when France was swept by the *yéyé* phenomenon, and the pre-war 'traditional' French *chanson* was losing out to singers and performers imitating American styles, like Johnny Hallyday and Claude François. It is, therefore, with deliberate irony that Gainsbourg passes comment on the 'inauthenticity' of 'performers' and popular music in songs set to extreme 'pop' music and written for commercial *yéyé interprètes* such as Gall. From a lyrical point of view, many of these songs equate the glamorous, easy, 'everlasting' imagined nature of both the pop star and the pop fan with a fickle, ephemeral, shallow and false 'reality'. They also explore the way in which young women use pop music as a form of escape, and the way youth and pop music represent a part of one's life which is quickly over before the 'reality' of a lonely, banal existence takes its place. 'Qui est in qui est out', for example, cleverly places the words 'in' and 'out' within other words in the song referring to styles and ages which are 'fashionable', and is, as such, a comment on the mutable nature of popular fashions and musical tastes. 'Baby Pop' and 'Teenie Weenie Boppie' express this duality with added irony given the up-beat and 'cutesy' titles and vocal delivery by the young singer. In the former song, the world of pop music is seen hand in hand with a portrait of a young, happy woman. The narrator uses the second person singular to talk directly to the girl and, consequently, the implied audience, who are also, it can be assumed, young women. The message here is that young love will not last:

> sur l'amour tu te fais des idées
> un jour ou l'autre c'est obligé
> tu s'ras une pauvre gosse
> seule et abandonnée

Once youth and love are gone, the reality of being an adult in an unhappy marriage with a banal existence remain. The chorus, sung as cheerfully as the rest of the song with an intermittent female refrain of 'yeah yeah yeah' and an up-beat

rhythm, implores the listener to: 'chante danse BABY POP/ comm'si demain BABY POP/ au petit matin BABY POP/ tu devais mourir'. Dancing to pop music is a way of keeping youth and joy alive before the reality of adulthood kills them. In this way, the song can be said to reflect a more complex reality than that usually found in pop songs, in a similar way to the 'complex' love songs explored in Chapter 3. 'Teenie Weenie Boppie' similarly describes a young pop fan, but here one who has taken LSD, and the effects this has on her, ultimately resulting in her death. The reality of the situation is seen in contrast with the fantasy lifestyle of this kind of fashionable pop fan. The first three verses describe the drug-inspired delusions which all centre around the rock stars and the lifestyle she adores: 'une Rolls la frôle de son aîle/ un prince du rock est au volant'. However, the song ends in a rather deadpan and shocking way with the death of the 'teenie weenie boppie' described in the final chorus. Gall's delivery remains unchanged throughout the song, delivering it in an up-beat rhythm and major key, resulting in an audience who is not necessarily aware of the morbid lyrics. The later song 'Baby Boum' (1981), performed by Alain Chamfort, also explores audiences for pop music by discussing the 'Baby Boomers' and the shallowness of the pastimes of that generation with their eternal parties, and also the threat of rock to the baby boom era which is neatly expressed with a deceptive enjambment in the third verse:

> Le rock est un hors-la-loi
> Il tue baby boum
> Le temps, mais le vrai n'est pas
> Que dans les surboums

This song was written and performed after the baby boom era in France and almost 15 years after the three previous songs discussed, and is as such imbued with a certain nostalgia for the period at a time when the threat of *variétés*, or pop music, to traditional *chanson* was still very much present.

What today might be termed the 'wannabe' pop star is equally explored in Gainsbourg's work. In 'Sea Sex and Sun' (1978), as in 'Baby Pop', the narrator addresses an imaginary young female in the second person singular, ensuring her that with her 'p'tits seins de bakelite', 'c'est sûr tu es un hit'. This comment

expresses the notion that it is a female singer's body rather than her talent that will both secure success with the music industry, and become fetishised. As Lebrun argues, 'the search for profits [in the music industry] often leads to a fetishisation of the face and body that is squarely situated within the pervasive codes of consumer culture'.[25] The self-consciousness, here, then, allows Gainsbourg to draw attention to the female body as a consumer durable and, through a narrative directed at young women, to empower them. The song itself, which later appeared on the soundtrack to the film *Les Bronzés*, was a big hit in France but a flop in England where it was also released. Similarly, 'Babe Alone in Babylone' (1983) also tells the story of a 'wannabe' star in Los Angeles—possibly a prostitute at the time—in a post-modern vision of the city and 'la nuit métallique' due to all the shiny cars (Pontiacs, Cadillacs, Bentleys) and electronic music.[26] The wannabe is described as a lost soul in this fragmented and false ('les strass et le stress') environment: 'de rock'n'roll tu cherches un rôle'. She wants to become a star in order to gain a kind of eternal stardom; a dream which is undermined in the song with a description of the brutal reality:

Tu rêves d'éternité
Hélas tu vas la trouver
Petite star inconnue
Tu n'as vu que l'étoile
De la police fédérale

The star/real-life dichotomy is thus explored and, ultimately, quashed here, as neither stardom nor real-life is depicted as desirable.

Gainsbourg's critiques of the female wannabe or performer, and her treatment by the music industry, are surprisingly feminist in nature in the sense that they highlight the music industry's manipulation of women, and I will explore this feminism further in the following sub-section. Moreover, male performers are portrayed as manipulators in Gainsbourg's work rather than manipulated. In 'Yes Man' (1977), the song text, delivered in the female vocals

25 Lebrun, 'Mind over Matter', p. 206.

26 Performed by Jane Birkin and released on the album, *Baby Alone in Babylone*. The word 'babe' rather than 'baby' is used in the printed lyrics published in *Mon propre role*, II. Tonton David also uses Babylone as a point of reference in 'Peuples du monde' (words and music by R.D.G. and J.Boudhouallal, 1990).

of Zizi Jeanmaire, criticises a male performer, the 'yes man' of the title, who is described as 'une brute infame', a megalomaniac rather than a music lover, and is compared to a primate who has 'rien dans le crâne'. The criticism here is harsher and more personalised than the critique of the female performer as it places blame with the male performer himself rather than the music industry. Given the actual make up of the French music scene in the 1960s and 1970s, such critical observation appears based on the reality of the time and, again, through his songs, Gainsbourg can be said to be 'playing up' the musical realities of the time. Women were—and still are to a large extent—cast as performers rather than *auteurs*, and while it seemed relatively easy for (untalented) men to succeed in the music world given the right backing, for women to be taken seriously as an *ACI* was a much more difficult task. For example, of the ninety-two best-selling albums released in France in 1973, only five were by Francophone female artists, compared with twenty-eight by Francophone male artists. Of those five women, only two (Véronique Sanson and Jeanne-Marie Sens) wrote the song lyrics and/or music as well as performing the songs, compared with twenty-three authors and/or composers of the twenty-eight male artists.[27] Moreover, because there were (and are) so many more male *chanson* artists than female, songs about women tend to be from a male perspective which has lead to much criticism concerning male dominance of *chanson*, and macho, misogynistic views being dispersed via *chanson*.

2c: Poupée de cire

Gainsbourg's portrayal of women may also, at first glance, appear to be misogynistic, and the frequent eroticism or references to sexuality in his work may lead to the impression that Gainsbourg's female characters are treated as sexualised play objects. However, as I have already alluded to, Gainsbourg's treatment of women is more complex than a first reading of his songs may suggest. One of the recurring images in his songs, for example, is that of the

27 Statistical data taken from Infodisc: <http://www.infodisc.fr/B-CD_1973.php> [accessed June 29 2005].

'poupée', but instead of Gainsbourg's female characters being drawn like dolls, the *poupée* is very often linked to the world of music, and is presented as the music industry's puppet or, moreover, the fetishised 'performing' object for the male gaze. From this angle, Gainsbourg can be seen as occupying a feminist viewpoint on the music world and the fate of the female *interprète*. From the 1965 Eurovision song contest entry performed by France Gall, 'Poupée de cire, poupée de son' for example, to the 1989 single written for and performed by Bambou, 'China Doll', the image of the doll is present in Gainsbourg's work. The Eurovision entry, described by Simmons as 'catchy, and on the surface pretty annoying—perfect Eurovision fodder in other words'[28] has a cheerful pop arrangement with a simple rhythm and easy melody which becomes, upon closer analysis of the lyrics, a commentary on pop stars who sing about love, for example, without ever having experienced it, and who are consequently the songwriter's or the music industry's puppets. The portrait is of a naïve 'poupée de cire' who sees 'la vie en rose bonbon' and who is compared to a 'poupée de salon'. The song defies its Eurovision status through poignant lyrics which probe and explore the status and the role of the pop star. The *interprète*, and in particular the young female *interprète*, which France Gall indeed was when she sang the song, adding another layer of irony to it, especially given her babyish, doll-like voice and delivery, is seen as shallow and ultimately a hollow, interchangeable object ('poupée') on which songwriters place their songs:

> Seule parfois je soupire
> Je me dis à quoi bon
> Chanter ainsi l'amour sans raison
> Sans rien connaître des garçons
>
> Je ne suis qu'une poupée de cire
> Qu'une poupée de son

The young *interprète* is depicted as being stripped bare and put in the public eye for everyone to see and take a part of. She is swallowed up by her stage image and the songs she sings and then fragmented, torn apart, as everyone who listens

28 Simmons, p. 57.

to her feels that they own a part of her. In this sense she is prostituted in the same way as a 'poupée de salon':

> Mes disques sont un miroir
> Dans lequel chacun peut me voir
> Je suis partout à la fois
> Brisée en mille éclats de voix

She, like the singer in Ferré's 'L'Idole', becomes alienated as she is publicly exposed and thereby lost to herself.

The notion of the *poupée* reappears in 'Poupée poupée' (1981), but here the doll is presented as a fragile, protected woman living safely in her 'maison de poupée' into which the narrator attempts to break, in order to gain access to her heart and her mind.[29] Like Nora, in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the 'poupée' here is described as 'précieuse fragile' and the 'maison de poupée' is 'coupée/ d'un monde trop hostile'. In a further comparison with Ibsen, although the (male) narrator here wants to control the 'poupée' and believes that he is capable of doing that, the coldness and artificiality of his love for his 'doll' suggest that such control is impossible:

> Poupée de chair et d'argile
> Maison de poupée
> Poupée cruelle indocile
> [...]
> Tu te crois la plus forte
> Mais ton cœur bat à l'aorte
> Tu es de porcelaine
> Et c'est pour ça que je t'aime

The doll's partner, like Nora's husband Helmer, has built his love on a sense of control and dominance rather than an equal relationship, and is only in love with the fragile, needy, but ultimately lifeless, version of a woman that he has created for himself. The doll metaphor, then, is working on two levels in this song. First, like in Ibsen's play, it is a way of allowing the audience to question love, the male-female relationship and women's roles and rights. The doll can also be seen in a similar way to Gainsbourg's other doll images, however, in that these dolls

29 Performed by Alain Chamfort.

(the porcelain doll here and the wax doll of the previous song) metaphorically suggest a person who is trapped within a hard, plastic exterior, and, given the self-referentiality of much of his work, this exterior could be interpreted as a vinyl record, and, again, the woman trapped inside is the abused *interprète*. The doll's, and the female performer's, existence is dependent on the record itself as she becomes encased within it.

Furthermore, 'Shu ba du ba loo ba' (1968, from the LP: *Initials BB* with Brigitte Bardot) uses the metaphor of a stuffed toy rather than a doll to explore, in a humorous manner, the artificiality or the mechanisation of pop songs and by association the pop singer. The narrator says he has bought the toy for his—one assumes—girlfriend that, every time she pulls a string, chimes: 'SHU BA DU BA LOO BA'. The narrator hopes that one day his girlfriend, Anna, will become fed up with the toy, and that he will be able to replace it as her closet companion, but he ponders, 'comment lui dire/ SHU BA DU BA LOO BA/ que je l'aime/ SHU BA DU BA LOO BA'. The repetition of the phrase 'SHU BA DU BA LOO BA', written in capitalised italics in the printed lyrics and sung by Brigitte Bardot—herself something of a 'baby doll'—in a soft, husky voice on the original recording, seems to stand in for deeper feelings that the narrator wants to express and the soft toy seems able to express through the phrase, thus ultimately resulting in a comment on pop love songs that use similar phrasing to express emotions such as love and desire but without linguistic aptitude. Like the France Gall songs above, this also features an up-beat, pop rhythm and easy melody reinforcing the superficiality of the title lyric, and ultimately, the failure of language to contain potentially subversive human emotions.

All of these songs suggest the artificiality and inherent irony of the young pop performer, and also of the inability of pop songs themselves to examine human nature in any great depth. They also, however, once more underline the constant duality running through Gainsbourg's work. These songs are simultaneously 'throw-away' pop numbers and intelligent, distanced commentary on 'throw-away' pop numbers, and, as such, subvert the genre in which they are working. These songs, then, seem to succeed in uniting French *chanson* with pop in a way alluded to by artists such as Ferrat, but never actually achieved by him.

Gainsbourg's critiques of the new pop world of the 1960s are, at times, just as scathing as those of, for example, Ferrat's, yet Gainsbourg also manages to produce financially and critically successful music. Pop, however, is not the only genre Gainsbourg subverts in his work; his 'love songs' also play with the definitions and limitations of the genre.

2d: Subverting the Love Song

Many of Gainsbourg's songs appear to be about love or sex. They cannot, however, be described, unproblematically, as love songs. Gainsbourg continually subverts the love song genre through, on the one hand, his inclusion of perverse or fated love stories, and, on the other, explicit, reflexive commentary on love songs.

Love is described in many songs not as romantic love in a conventional, *variétés* sense but love which is unrequited, perverse or fated in some way. And it is often linked to allusions to historical or fictional figures who have experienced such 'abnormal' love, or authors who have written about love in an unconventional way, with many self-referential allusions being interwoven. Tragic love is alluded to, for example, through references to Tristan and Isolde and Orpheus and Eurydice, the former in 'Leur plaisir sans moi' (1973) performed by Jane Birkin on the album *Di Doo Dah*; the latter in 'Love Fifteen', also performed by Birkin, from the album *Amour des feintes* (1990). The impossibility of love is evoked with a reference to Balzac in 'Digital Delay': 'en amour il y en a toujours un qui souffre/ et l'autre qui s'ennuie comme dit Balzac'. Impossible or perverse love is the theme of Gainsbourg's film 'Je t'aime moi non plus' (1976), badly received in the UK at the time of its release and branded by many critics as pornography, and only slightly better received by French audiences. Johny Jane, played in the film by Birkin, is a woman dressed as a boy with whom a homosexual truck driver falls in love and sodomises. The song 'Ballade de Johny Jane', which appears on the soundtrack, makes a self-referential allusion to the film in which it is appearing: 'hey Johny Jane/ te souviens-tu du film de Gainsbourg je t'aime/ JE T'AIME MOI NON PLUS un

joli thème', thus emphasising the 'non-love' elements of both the song(s) and the film. Those songs which contain explicit sexual imagery and language also play with the definition and boundaries of the love song genre. For example, 'Classée X' (1978) sung by Jane Birkin contains many explicit references to sex and 'Glass Sécurit' (1987) one of his later, more sexually graphic songs, contains a reference to Mallarmé, in the form of a quotation at the end of the song taken from the latter's poem, 'Une négresse'. The poem dates from 1864–1865 and was originally published in *Le Nouveau Parnasse satyrique* under the title 'Les Lèvres roses' describing the 'overt eroticism' of the 'négresse'; a mildly shocking subject matter for the audience of the time.[30] The use of this allusion by Gainsbourg highlights both the original eroticism of the poem and that found in his song.

The distanced, and pessimistic, portrayal of love in Gainsbourg's work also extends to self-referential songs in which the 'characters' are people Gainsbourg had relationships with in one form or another. In these songs, although a more tender view of love is glimpsed, it is still problematic and ultimately a distanced exercise in style rather than a heartfelt emotional outpouring à la Piaf. 'Lulu' (1986), for example, is a song for his son Lucien, nicknamed, as he himself had been, Lulu. Bambou, Lucien's mother and Gainsbourg's partner at the time, performed the song, in which an autobiographical, touching portrait of the newborn—similar in style to Renaud's songs about his child, 'En cloque' and 'Morgane de toi'—is distanced through wordplay and humour: 'tu es comme moi/ comme moi-/ tié chinois'. Similarly, 'Hey Man Amen' is also for his son, but this time Gainsbourg is asking Lulu to remember him when he dies: 'ouais lorsque j'aurais disparu/ plante pour moi quelques orties/ sur ma tombe mon petit Lulu'. The song plays with the letters 'i' and 'u', rotating them so that 'Lulu' becomes 'Luli' and 'Paradis' becomes 'Paradus'. Although this song has a seemingly serious subject matter, the childlike wordplay and the line breaks (the word 'nuages' breaking after 'nu', a word often used in his songs with different imagery) undermine the seriousness and confirm Gainsbourg's distanced attitude to love. This wordplay, as well as the themes of perverse and impossible love

30 *Stéphane Mallarmé: Collected Poems*, translated and with a commentary by Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 155.

running through Gainsbourg's work, prevent his songs from being classified as *variétés* or even *chanson* love songs in the same way as those by artists such as Piaf or Brel, as discussed in Part II. Gainsbourg also draws attention, in a more explicitly reflexive manner, to the standard, sentimental love song.

Gainsbourg's self-conscious allusions to, and criticisms of, love songs suggest not only the impossibility of love, but, rather, the impossibility of the love song to adequately express complex emotion. As Hawkins argues, 'eroticism is, for him, a meaningless and endlessly repeated aspiration, symbolic of the human condition'.[31] Both romantic love, and the songs which express romance, are shunned, for example, in 'Merde à l'amour' (1977), performed by Zizi Jeanmaire, in which the banality of love songs is suggested: 'merde à l'amour et à ses mélodies/ qui gueulent gueulent dans les chansons d'amour'. A similar, though more implicit, criticism is made of love songs in 'La Décadanse' (1971), a sexualised parody of dance music made for couples. In the lyrics, the narrator explains how to dance the 'décadanse':

> Tourne-toi
> — Non
> — Contre moi
> — Non, pas comm'ça
> — …Et danse
> La décadanse.
> Oui c'est bien
> Bouge tes reins
> Lentement
> Devant les miens
> — Reste là
> Derrièr' moi
> Balance
> La décadanse
> Que tes mains
> Frôlent mes seins

The eroticism of the dance was further emphasised at the time of its release by photos and a televised illustration by Birkin and Gainsbourg.[32] Similarly, a press

31 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 159.

32 Gainsbourg discussed the song in an interview with Pierre Bouteiller, during which Gainsbourg and Birkin, along with other dancers, illustrated the dance on the television programme, *Télé-midi*, 7 January 1972, for instance (re-published on the DVD, *Serge Gainsbourg: d'autres nouvelles des étoiles*).

statement issued for the launch of the song described it thus:

> Une danse un peu érotique mais quand même moins vulgaire que le paso doble où le mâle ressemble à un coq de basse-cour. 'La Décadanse' est faite pour les couples intimes, couples existants ou couples qui ont envie de se former. Quand on danse un slow c'est consciemment ou non avec une arrière-pensée. On a envie de mettre le ou la partenaire dans son lit.[33]

The double-layered reflexivity in this song—the lyrical commentary on the dance moves and the claim that the song itself reflects the desire to 'mettre le ou la partenaire dans son lit'—distances the song from the realm of the romantic love song, but also from such erotic dance songs as the paso doble or the tango. Gainsbourg is thus making playfully transparent the sexual elements in many dance songs and drawing attention to their cultural function: to evoke and reflect sexual opportunities. The title pun also reflects the eroticisation found both here and in many love songs generally. The 'Décadence' (rather than 'décadanse') movement, that happened in France and England during the late nineteenth century, used eroticism as a central theme, not only to shock audiences and challenge the Victorian belief that art has a moral duty to educate, but also in order to subvert that morality and proffer the notion of 'l'art pour l'art' (art for art's sake).[34] 'La Décadanse', then, can also be interpreted as both shocking and rebelling against the notion that *chanson* has a didactic role—a notion put forward by *chanson* artists such as Jean Ferrat (as seen in Part II) and MC Solaar (to be seen in Chapter 7). This interpretation may itself seem strange, given Gainsbourg's subversion of commercialised pop music and the serious, intelligently executed themes present in much of his work. An exploration of Gainsbourg's personas will help to shed light on this apparent contradiction by arguing that, as Gainsbourg's career progresses, the suggestion that *chanson*, and art in general, are incapable of expressing human emotions is linked to the increased number of references to the proponents of the Decadent Movement as well as an increased negativity in the portrayal of his own persona(s).

33 Cited in Verlant, p. 424.

34 Normally accredited to Théophile Gautier, who wrote the 'Notice' to Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1868, which has since been recognised as a 'definition' of decadence.

3: The Gainsbourg Personas: Duality and Destruction

As I have shown, there is a constant duality in Gainsbourg's work which has the effect, on a first level, of keeping his listening public and critics off-balance, and unable to firmly categorise him or his music. On a second level, however, this duality is both reflexive and self-referential in that the serious/pop juxtaposition is echoed through his exploration of his personas, and is closely linked to a wider argument concerning the value of *chanson*. Perhaps the most obvious self-referential division is the construction of his alter-ego 'Gainsbarre', who is implicitly portrayed as the binary to Gainsbourg. 'Gainsbarre' first appears in the 1981 song 'Ecce homo': 'et ouais c'est moi Gainsbarre/ on me trouve au hasard/ des night-clubs et des bars/ américains c'est bonnard', but is alluded to as early as 1968 in 'Docteur Jeckyll et Monsieur Hyde'.[35] Gainsbourg's personalised Hydean figure, Gainsbarre, is seen in a series of songs depicting diametrically opposed split personalities ('Docteur Jeckyll et Monsieur Hyde', 'Monna Vanna et Miss Duncan' (1981), 'Ecce homo'), and also, more implicitly, in songs which treat the theme of obscenity or destruction ('Des laids des laids'). 'Docteur Jeckyll et Monsieur Hyde' and the 'sequel', performed by Catherine Deneuve, 'Monna Vanna et Miss Duncan'[36] explore, in a similar manner to Robert Louis Stevenson's original work, both the duality that exists in every person and the seedier side of the human psyche which bourgeois society is happy to ignore. J. R. Hammond describes Stevenson's work as encapsulating 'as no other nineteenth-century novel does the fundamental dichotomy which lay at the heart of Victorian man: that between outward respectability and inward lust, between a veneer of decorum and a raging inferno of evil' and argues that '*Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde* has exercised a profound impact on our literature, most notably on such tales as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*'.[37] (The latter work is also

35 Renaud echoes this binary construction in 'Docteur Renaud, Mister Renard', on the 2002 album, *Boucan d'enfer*, to be explored in Chapter 6.

36 'Monna Vanna et Miss Duncan', a later version of the song, features a female character who, here, is a movie star who likes the seedier side of life by night: 'Monna Vanna est une movie star/ qui vit sur le Sunset Boulevard/ la nuit toute nue sous son pékan/ elle se déguise en Miss Duncan'.

37 John R. Hammond, *A Robert Louis Stevenson Companion* (New York: Macmillan, 1984), p. 125.

referenced by Gainsbourg, and will be explored in the following sub-section.) In Gainsbourg's 1968 version of the Jeckyll and Hyde story, the Gainsbourg persona attempts to connect himself to the 'inward lust' of Hyde, but fails: the female chorus, chanting as a cheerful greeting, repeats the line 'hello Docteur Jekyll' thus undermining his suggestions that he is, in fact, Hyde, 'non je n'suis pas le Docteur Jekyll/ mon nom est Hyde, Mister Hyde'. On one level, this failed attempt produces humour, reinforced by an up-beat rhythm and 'chirpy' female chorus. On a second level, though, it creates ambiguity which is reflected in much of his work. Metaphorically, the insistence that he is Hyde emphasises the destructive qualities of his persona (Gainsbarre) and of his songs. However, although the Gainsbourg persona is being linked to Hyde, ultimately, the association fails, and it is instead linked to Dr. Jeckyll. This, in turn, creates the impression that the Gainsbourg persona is more similar to the 'genius' creator than the destructive outcome, a seemingly positive assertion, and yet, given the insistence on being Hyde, the listener has the impression that Gainsbourg wants himself—and his songs—to be seen as having the power to be destructive. To take this analogy further, I would argue that the destructiveness here can be linked to songs such as 'Poupée de cire, poupée de son', discussed above, in which the surface meaning suggests that a 'genius creator' has succeeded in producing a commercially-successful record, sung by his own puppet, while the deeper layers of meaning in the song can be understood as leading to the potential destruction of the un-critical French pop song. The irony, though, as evidenced in 'Docteur Jeckyll et Monsieur Hyde', is that Gainsbourg's pop songs did not, at the time, succeed in their destructive impulses, and the complexity of the songs were not fully appreciated.

The destructive power of Gainsbourg's work is also discussed in a self-referential manner in songs such as 'Des laids des laids' (1979). The Gainsbourg persona describes the irony, and the sadness he feels, for his dog dying of liver cancer when he is the one who drinks, 'peut-être était-ce par osmose/ tell'ment qu'il buvait mes paroles'.[38] Furthermore, in this song, Gainsbourg again attempts to connect himself to a Hydean figure, here, Henry Miller, 'le spécialiste du

38 Gainsbourg's bulldog Nana did indeed die of a cirrhosis of the liver.

hardcore', referring to both Miller and himself as 'nous les affreux'. The awfulness or 'ugliness' of both Gainsbourg and Miller is at once constructed and deconstructed here, as beauty, it is argued, is hidden beneath the ugly veneer: 'quand on m'dit que j'suis moche/ [...] la beauté cachée des laids des laids/ se voit sans délai délai'. The notion of hidden beauty works on two levels. Gainsbourg, described by Marianne Faithfull as 'ugly-beautiful',[39] described himself as (physically and metaphorically) ugly in both his songs and in interviews. In a televised interview to discuss the concept album, *Melody Nelson*, for example, Gainsbourg tells Glaser, 'ils disent que je suis laid, bof [...], je sais, je m'en fous', and describes him and Birkin as 'la belle et la bête'.[40] The allusion in this song, then, can be understood as self-referentially exploring his own self-image. On a deeper level, however, the chorus also makes reference to his works—and those of Miller—in the sense that they both used fairly shocking, sometimes obscene, often graphic, sexual and 'bodily functions' imagery, and yet there is a beauty beneath these images. 'Obscenity', argues Ihab Hassan, in his work on Miller and Beckett, 'is also a mode of purification, a way of cleaning human sensibilities from the sludge of dogma, the dross of hypocrisy'.[41]

3a: Miller, Huysmans, Wilde: Decadently Destructive Predecessors

The above allusion to Henry Miller in 'Des laids des laids' is not an isolated incident: Gainsbourg frequently references Miller as well as Joris-Karl Huysmans, Oscar Wilde and other nineteenth-century authors associated with the Decadent Movement (Mallarmé, Edgar Allan Poe, Gérard de Nerval, Rimbaud). 'Rocking Chair' (1978), for example, performed by Jane Birkin on the album *Ex-fan des sixties*, contains a reference to Miller's *Tropique du cancer* (Miller also appears in 'Zéro pointé vers l'infini' and in 'Des laids des laids'); there is a reference to Huysmans' novel *À rebours* in 'Litanie en lituanie', again performed

39 Cited in Simmons, p. 68.
40 Interview with Denise Glaser, *Discorama*, 23 May 1971; re-published on the DVD, *Serge Gainsbourg: d'autres nouvelles des étoiles*.
41 Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1967), p. 37.

by Birkin, and references to Wilde appear in 'Love Fifteen' and 'Beau oui comme Bowie' (1983). All three writers are known for having produced work deemed shocking at the time of publication, and Gainsbourg's consistent allusions to these figures emphasises the lyrical assertions that his songs also have destructive or obscene qualities. Indeed, Miller's use of 'obscene' imagery and language resulted in his novel being banned in America until 1961 and then in him being sued for creating a pornographic text. *À rebours*, published some years earlier in 1884, was greeted by a similarly shocked public who declared it a work of depravity and Emile Zola described it as 'delivering a terrible blow to Naturalism'.[42] In *A Picture of Dorian Grey*, Lord Henry Wotton lends the protagonist a 'yellow book', 'the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him'. This allusion to Huysmans' novel caused scandal for Wilde and the British public when Wilde refused to comment on the morality or immorality of the novel at the Queensberry Trial.[43] As well as direct allusions to the obscene work of the three literary figures, Gainsbourg also uses obscene language in his own songs. His 1973 album, *Vu de l'extérieur*, for example, contains slang, and often childish words, to describe sexual body parts such as breasts and buttocks. 'Sensuelle et sans suite' is the story of a one-night stand with a young girl containing comic strip vocalised sound effects: 'ça fait crac ça fait pschtt' to a rather innocent sounding gentle piano accompaniment. The album, with its cover featuring a shot of Gainsbourg surrounded by pictures of apes, explores, like *Dr. Jeckyll and Mr. Hyde*, duality and humanity's closeness to the animal kingdom with base instincts and primal needs on the one hand and the ability to create beauty on the other, further reinforced by 'primal' lyrics set to quite beautiful music.

Destruction and obscenity, then, are not only included for shock value. To return to the Miller comparison, Hassan argues that 'obscenity seeks to recover the original power of language; it searches for the sexual and sacramental roots of

42 Cited in Robert Baldick's Introduction to the English translation of *Against Nature* by J.-K. Huysmans (London: Penguin, 1959), p. 10.
43 Baldick in Huysmans, *Against Nature*, p. 5.

metaphor'.[44] Uncovering the roots of metaphor also seems a concern in Gainsbourg's work, which can further be seen in allusions to Dada, Surrealism and Absurdism, as well as to the Decadent Movement. 'Le Cadavre exquis' (1975), for example, contains sexual references and is, in its form and content, an allusion to the Surrealist game of the same name:

> si l'on jouait au jeu du cadavre exquis
> histoire d'nous passer un peu notre ennui
> tu écris un mot n'importe quoi
> et moi j'en écris un autre après toi
> la petite mouche à merde
> a mis les bouchées doubles

As in the original Surrealist game, here, the words unconsciously written down are released from their usual associations and, as such, new meanings, created by the 'spark' between words not normally seen together, are achieved. André Breton, in the *Manifeste du surréalisme* (1924) argues that 'la valeur de l'image dépend de la beauté de l'étincelle obtenue; elle est, par conséquent, fonction de la différence de potentiel entre les deux conducteurs', and that '[l'image] la plus forte est celle qui présente le degré d'arbitraire le plus élevé'.[45] In 'Le Cadavre exquis', as in many of Gainsbourg's later songs, powerful images are indeed obtained by the seemingly random wordplay used. 'Par hasard et pas rasé', from the *Vu de l'extérieur* album, for example, plays with sounds, emphasised by Gainsbourg's close to the microphone style of singing, which allows the similar phonemes to sound even more confused: 'par pas tombe bombe'. A similar kind of sound-play is found in 'La Poupée qui fait', a song about Charlotte as a baby. There are many examples of similar onomatopoeic sounds: 'pipi' 'caca' 'papa', which are also echoed in other songs on this album: 'teuf teuf teuf' in 'Panpan cucul' and 'voum-voum badaboum poums' in 'Des vents des pets des poums'.

Wordplay and sound-play have been consistent features of Gainsbourg's work from his first published album, but, towards the end of his career, the wordplay becomes a more prominent feature and leans towards primal 'nonsense' rhyming more than in his earlier songs. This nonsense wordplay gains

44 Hassan, p. 37.
45 André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), pp. 49–51.

prominence at a similar pace to a more negative depiction of the Gainsbourg, or, rather, Gainsbarre, persona. Images of the 'ugly' side of Gainsbourg become more apparent, for example, from the later 1970s onwards. One such instance is found in 'L'Éthylique' (1980), which, as the title suggests, is about an alcoholic, but, in this case, the alcoholic is 'Gainsbourg', and the song, though written by Gainsbourg, is performed by Jacques Dutronc:

> J'ai pas de paroles
> Gainsbourg s'est fait la paire
> [...]
> pauvre alcoolo
> faut toujours qu'il se cuite
> pourquoi
> pauvre éthylo
> éternellement en fuite
> de quoi

The picture here is of a songwriter dependent on alcohol to write his songs and using alcohol to escape something, but what that something is, is left to the audience's imagination. Although Gainsbourg had consistently (and, at times, metaphorically) portrayed himself as distanced from both society and the songs he was writing, through both genre subversion and character choices, the alcohol-induced escapism described here seems indicative of a less playful and more despondent construction of his own role as a *chanson* artist. In earlier songs, he had linked himself to outsiders such as the unlawful Clyde Barrow, in 'Bonnie and Clyde' (1968), and had, in the films made to accompany his pop songs performed by France Gall, always situated himself outside of the main action, both physically, by standing at the edges of the camera shots, and more symbolically, through knowing smiles directed at a (colluding) audience. In later songs, however, this playful distance turns into self-interrogatory musings on the ability of *chanson*—and art in general—to say anything meaningful.

3b: Machin des choses

Much of Gainsbourg's work, especially his later work, is about 'nothing'. That is, his songs explore the notions of meaning, logic and nothingness, how they are created, and how language is an inadequate tool with which to express meaning. 'Machins choses' (1964) is a good example of an early song dealing with these themes. The song takes the words 'machin' and 'choses' and plays with them, changing their meaning in a seemingly spontaneous way, and questioning the use of language:

Entre Machine
Et moi Machin
Il s'passe des choses
Des machins
C'est quelque chose
Ces machins-là

Comm' dit Machin,
Comment déjà?
Heu…Y'a des choses
Qu'on n'dit pas
Ou quelque chose
Comm' ça

Three songs from the 1980s similarly illustrate his later preoccupations with the failure of language. 'Humm humm humm' (1984) 'What tu dis qu'est-ce que tu say' (1981) and 'Malaise en Malaisie' (1981) are all based around nonsense rhymes and, in a comparable way to Ionesco plays such as *La Cantatrice chauve*, illustrate the limitations and illogicality of language:

Hmm hmm hmm
Comprenne qui veut
Pas si con
Hmm hmm hmm
('Humm humm humm')

What tu dis qu'est-ce tu say
On s'comprenait yesterday
What tu dis qu'est-ce que tu say
('What tu dis qu'est-ce que tu say')

J'ai comme un
Malaise en Malaisie
[…]
Tu m'as dit
Je vous aime allez-y
Étranger je suis
Mal à l'aise en Asie
('Malaise en Malaisie')

If language cannot really say anything then, by extension, *chanson* also fails in any ambition it may have had to express complex meanings, or engage with serious political debates. From this perspective, the references to proponents of the Decadent Movement (and to Pop Art) suggest that, rather than setting out as a follower of an art for art's sake non-philosophy, Gainsbourg alludes to it when the realisation that serious *chanson* is impossible sets in. This also, of course, sheds a new light on his 'pop' songs.

Conclusion

Gainsbourg's decision to 'retourner' his metaphorical jacket, and seemingly move away from serious *chanson*, then, can be further understood in the light of the above analyses. On the one hand, as we shall see with Renaud, this apparently cynical compromise with show business is redeemed by his skill as a songwriter and performer in subverting superficial meaning. On the other hand, it suggests disillusionment with *chanson*, as an art form that is perhaps just as incapable as pop of expressing complex, intellectual ideas or emotions. In this sense, a singer might as well turn his or her hand to newer styles of music, and keep experimenting, rather than trying to find ways to make *chanson* work as an intellectual medium. From this viewpoint, Gainsbourg's remarks about *chanson*'s un-poetic and un-intellectual form seem less like cynical, reactive comments hiding his latent desire to be seen as an intellectual himself, and more like part of a convincing argument that *chanson* is not the same as its high-cultural

counterpart, poetry.[46] Moreover, in order for *chanson* to survive, it too, must *retourner sa veste*, and adapt to, integrate, and play with newer musical styles. While the underlying negativity in this argument is that language, in whatever form it is packaged, be it *chanson*, pop, or, indeed, poetry, fails in its ability to truly make sense of the human condition, Gainsbourg's work can ultimately be seen as leaving a positive legacy for both French *chanson* and (the French) language. Gainsbourg continued the tradition of *la culture écrite* in France while also introducing English words and music, in a successful melange. His self-consciousness allowed *chanson* to develop as an art form, and encouraged subsequent generations of *ACI*s to play with the boundaries and limitations of the genre. In the next chapter, I will explore how Renaud effectively takes up Gainsbourg's banner, experimenting with his own interpretation of both *chanson* and the *chanson* artist, looking in particular at how his own version of self-conscious play also questions the limitations of the genre, and once again re-defines what *chanson* is and can be.

46 In addition to the comments already cited in the main body of the chapter, the Gainsbourg persona has also (famously) described the *chanson* form as 'un art mineur', and has often alluded to and played with this description. The most well-known instance is in a dispute with Guy Béart on the television programme 'Apostrophes', 26 December 1986, presented by Bernard Pivot.

Chapter 6

Renaud

Introduction[1]

Like Gainsbourg's work, and much of the material explored in Part II, self-consciousness in Renaud's songs questions the role of *chanson* and the *chanson* artist. More than any of the singer-songwriters discussed previously, Renaud begins his career by emphasising *chanson*'s dual purpose of entertainment and 'political' weaponry. His songs thoroughly investigate the *chanson* form, alluding to past *chanson* styles in order to both inscribe himself within a *chanson* tradition and to try to make connections between *chanson*'s past and contemporary roles. Perhaps because Renaud is representative of a newer generation of *chanson* artists working with the changes in production and mediation of music and culture, his songs look backwards as well as forwards in order to interrogate whether *chanson* can be both social observation and a weapon capable of changing the society it observes. Similarly, his songs raise the question as to whether the singer-songwriter himself can be both an entertainer and an 'artist'. A clear progression of Renaud's thoughts on this question can be seen in his work, and will be explored here.

This chapter will begin with a brief biographical and bibliographical study, looking in particular at the changes in Renaud's style over his career. Section 1 will then investigate how Renaud inscribes himself within a *chanson* heritage, looking, in particular, at his allusions to the *chanson réaliste* and the *chanson de contestation*. Sections 2 and 3 will explore the ways in which Renaud draws attention to and questions *chanson*'s role as both popular entertainment and social observation, arguing that, in Renaud's hands, audience, music and voice become

1 All song lyrics written before 1993 are taken from Renaud, *Dès que le chant soufflera* (Paris: Librairie Générale Française, 1993). Lyrics written after this date are taken from the album sleeves to the relevant CDs and cross-checked with the recording in question. As Renaud is still releasing new material, the most up-to-date source of bibliographical information is the website *L'HLM de Renaud*, published by 'fans': <http://www.sharedsite.com/hlm-de-renaud/>. This website also contains a number of articles on Renaud written, for the most part, by graduate students.

reflexive devices. Finally, Section 4 will investigate the image of the *chanson* artist in Renaud's work, suggesting that he uses a child's perspective to symbolise the alienated artist, and that his self-referential songs reflect, in a similar way to Gainsbourg's exploration of persona, the dilemma faced by the modern-day *chanson* artist confronted with the art versus commerce dilemma.

Biographical and Bibliographical Study

Renaud Séchan was born some twenty years after Gainsbourg, on 11 May 1952, in southern Paris, where he spent most of his childhood. His brother, Thierry Séchan, suggests that historical events of the time had an influence on him from a young age; de Gaulle returned to power when he was six, and when he was ten years old violent demonstrations against the OAS (Organisation de l'armée secrète) took place in Paris, followed by a series of bombs placed by the Organisation (two of which were planted in the Séchans' close neighbourhood). By the time the Algerian war ended and Renaud started at high school, the Séchan children had 'acquis l'embryon d'une conscience politique', according to Thierry.[2] This embryo quickly grew in Renaud's case and, at the age of sixteen, he participated in the May 1968 protests at the Sorbonne, where he spontaneously composed his first public song, 'Crève salope'. Between 1968 and the release of his first album in 1975, Renaud travelled, doing a variety of 'petits boulots', turned his hand to acting alongside Miou Miou and Coluche, and busked on street corners with his friend and accordionist Michel Pons.

His first album, *Amoureux de Paname*, takes, as the title suggests, Parisian myths as its main theme, and includes two songs in ardent support of the city: the title song and 'Écoutez-moi les gavroches'. The album also includes the political 'protest' song, 'Hexagone', and an early hint of Renaud's preoccupation with the role of the *chanson* artist, in the form of 'Société tu m'auras pas'. His following two albums released in the 1970s, *Laisse béto*n (1978) and *Ma gonzesse* (1979), include playful references to older musical styles ('Le Tango de Massy-

2 Séchan and Sanchez, pp. 5–8.

Palaiseau', 'Jojo le démago'), a concern with youth culture ('Laisse béton', 'Je suis une bande de jeunes'), and, as in his first album, an exploration of the *chanson* genre, delivered with humour ('Peau aime', 'Sans dec''). He released six original albums in the 1980s. The first two, *Marche à l'ombre* (1980) and *Le Retour de Gérard Lambert* (1981), are similar in their themes and preoccupations to his first three albums, but *Morgane de toi* (1983) marks a change in style that is echoed in *Mistral gagnant* (1985) and *Putain de camion* (1988). The youthful exuberance of his pre-1983 albums gives way to a more mature, softer style with *Morgane de toi*, in part, influenced by changes in his own life: the album is dedicated to his new daughter, Lolita. While some of the same themes are present in these albums (exploration of the *chanson* genre, political protest), many of the songs are touching, narrative portraits ('Morgane de toi', 'Doudou s'en fout', 'Putain de camion'). It is also from 1985 onwards that self-referential doubts concerning the power of *chanson* and of the *chanson* artist to change French society creep into Renaud's songs. Partly, no doubt, because of these concerns, his musical output in the 1990s slowed considerably. He released *Marchand de cailloux* in 1991, followed, in 1993, by *Renaud cante el nord*, a collection of songs written in the traditional language of the north of France (and home of his maternal grandfather), chtimi. *À la Belle de Mai*, a tribute to the working class neighbourhood of the same name in Marseille, came out in 1994, and in 1996, he released an album of Brassens' songs, entitled *Renaud chante Brassens*. His last original album to date is *Boucan d'enfer* (2002), in which the self-referential concerns about his own role as a *chanson* artist, first alluded to in the mid-1980s, are made concrete. Self-consciousness in Renaud's work, then, takes the form of both an exploration of his own role as a *chanson* artist, and an examination of *chanson* as an art form. Like Gainsbourg, Renaud does not equate *chanson* with poetry or other high-cultural forms, but looks at *chanson* as a unique, popular art form, and investigates its value and its potential to survive. Renaud's concern with the *chanson* form is apparent from his very first album as he projects an image of himself as, above all else, a *chanson* artist.

1: A *Chanson* Heritage

Renaud, perhaps more noticeably than any other contemporary French singer-songwriter, highlights a *chanson* heritage in his work, and places himself firmly within it at the start of his career. In particular, Renaud emphasises two types of *chanson*: the *chanson réaliste* and the *chanson de contestation*. In the following two sub-sections, the effects of referencing both these styles will be explored.

1a: Chanson réaliste

One of the most prevalent themes in Renaud's songs is the re-working of Parisian myths and musical styles associated with the *chanson réaliste* of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *The French in Love and War*, Charles Rearick describes how songs focusing on 'the humble inhabitants of the Parisian *faubourgs*, old working-class neighbourhoods just outside the central city', and on pimps and prostitutes, 'had become a favourite folklore of popular audiences during the late nineteenth century':

> These stories—myths of the little people—unfolded in the Paris popularly known as Paname, also affectionately called Pantruche. Within the great city of Paname the populo (population) were Parigots, speakers of Parisian French. Parigots knew their neighbourhoods and stamping grounds by terms that never appeared on city maps: Sébasto (the boulevard Sébastopol), for example, and Ménilmuch' (Ménilmontant), Popinque (Popincourt), and la Bastoche (Bastille). The Parigots themselves went by such names as Dédé, Toto, and Jojo. In songs, these nicknames made for piquant alliteration and easy rhymes. Bouboule of Sébasto would fall in love with a *môme* from Ménilmuche, a woman called Bibi or Nini.[3]

It is to this lost world that Renaud turns at the start of his career, projecting an image of himself as a 'Parigot' by busking on street corners, accompanied by his friend Michel Pons on the accordion, and dressing up as a *gavroche* with a red

3 Charles Rearick, *The French in Love and War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 95–6. Rearick's argument, and Renaud's references to the *chanson réaliste*, first appeared, in an altered form, in Kim Harrison, 'A Critical Introduction to the Work of the Singer-Songwriter Renaud' (unpublished master's thesis, University of Leeds, 2000), pp. 48–56.

scarf, cap and cigarette butt. Moreover, for his first major concert, at Bobino in 1980, he sang Aristide Bruant, Montéhus and Fréhel for the first half and his own songs in the second, bringing out an album of these realist songs after the concert, nostalgically entitled *Le P'tit Bal du samedi soir*. Furthermore, Renaud's self-penned realist songs also feature many of the traits associated with the original *chanson réaliste*, with plots often evocative of the melodramatic realism of the era. Three of his early compositions, all written in 1974 and performed at his first concert, are good examples of this: 'La Java sans joie', 'Le Gringalet' and 'Gueule d'aminche'. In all three, Renaud employs *Parigot* references and names as well as mid-to-late nineteenth-century slang. 'La racaille', 'Dédé', 'Julot d'Ménilmontant' all feature in 'La Java sans joie', for example, as does the word 'gringalet' which, although originating in the seventeenth century, was used in popular French from the 1880s to mean a small, weak, feeble man, as it is in Renaud's tale. All three songs follow working-class Parisian heroes, who either try to climb their way up the social ladder using their romantic charms, as in 'Gueule d'aminche', or who meet a typically melodramatic, untimely end, as in the first two songs mentioned. Such tales are recounted to the music of the accordion—the archetypal accompaniment of the original *chanson réaliste* and still a favourite among modern-day Parisian buskers—and to the tango, *valse musette*, or *java* rhythms of the pre-rock era.

Such styling is, of course, a deliberate statement. Claude Fléouter, when reviewing Renaud's Bobino concert for *Le Monde* in March 1980, commented importantly that

> la fidélité et la modernité, la tendresse légèrement ironique avec lesquelles il restitue cet héritage du début du siècle, lui permettent d'affirmer avec panache les racines de ses propres chansons et de dire au passage qu'il a repris naturellement le flambeau d'un genre qui semblait s'éteindre depuis la mort de Piaf.[4]

Renaud's revival of a lost genre is thus a conscious claiming of his *chanson* roots. But the effects of referencing this particular period (late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) and geographical location (Montmartre) are also

4 Claude Fléouter, 'Renaud à Bobino', *Le Monde*, 15 March 1980, p 30.

important. Renaud wrote and first performed these songs in the 1970s, by which time the image of Montmartre was, for many people outside France, synonymous with art, literature and a very 'French', libertarian way of life. Karal Ann Marling, in the foreword to *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, explores some of the possible reasons for this image in American minds. She points to the interwar years when 'Americans uncomfortable with what they took to be the unreformed Puritanism of their fellow citizens had taken up residence in France with a vengeance'. She describes how Hemingway and Scott Fitzgerald frequented La Coupole in Montparnasse and Les Deux Magots in Saint-Germain-des-Prés, and how they climbed the steep streets around Montmartre and the Sacré-Cœur, seeking 'Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, Juan Gris, Josephine Baker, and a thousand other free spirits who haunted the district where *la vie bohème* and modern art were born'. More importantly, she argues that:

> To Americans in the fifties, Paris signified every new thing, everything missed from the drab uniformity of the previous decades. Love and lust. Style. Art and artfulness. Romance on a grand scale. And above all, liberation. The meaning of Paris was Montmartre, or what Hollywood and the department store and the dime store and the tourist took to be Montmartre. [By the fifties] the image of Montmartre crafted at the end of the nineteenth century had become the basis of a thriving popular culture industry devoted to the dissemination of its own icons. Apache dancers in striped tee-shirts, a soulful Édith Piaf and Maurice Chevalier all headlined the *Ed Sullivan Show* in the 1950s.[5]

In a way, then, Renaud can be seen to be reclaiming a *chanson* heritage at a time when the 'authenticity' of the *chanson réaliste* period had already been lost to an over-romanticised image. Renaud is referencing the *myth* of the *chanson réaliste* as well as the music, and he does so consciously, with a certain ironic tenderness or distance, which sets him apart from performers such as Piaf and Fréhel.

Moreover, Renaud's initial exploitation of a Hollywood, tourist version of Montmartre steadily evolves and allows him to make signifying parallels between the working-class Paris of the 1900s and the working-class Paris of the late 1970s and 1980s, the Paris of the *exclus*. In the 1980s, for example, Renaud updates the

5 Karal Ann Marling, 'Americans in Paris: Montmartre and the Art of Pop Culture', in *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*, ed. by Gabriel P. Welsberg (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), pp. 13–17 (pp. 14–16).

typical realist song and reworks the myths to make them more appropriate for his present-day audience. In this way Belleville changes into a 'banlieue rouge' or an HLM, and the characters similarly evolve. 'Dédé le surineur' or 'Julot d'Ménilmontant' become 'des anciens d'soixante-huit', 'la Doudou', or 'Slimane', the 'deuxième génération' of post-war immigration. As with the songs in the realist tradition, however, here Renaud describes the changing Parisian landscape in acute, local detail, making references to familiar figures, buildings, or areas of Paris identifiable to the inhabitants. In this way, he also reflects the social and geographical changes to the city and the new *zone* and *faubourgs* rather than simply nostalgically reminiscing about a bygone era. (Examples of Renaud's realist songs will be discussed in Section 3.)

1b: Chanson de contestation

As well as the *chanson réaliste*, Renaud also places himself within a *chanson de contestation* tradition at the start of his career. In his first published album, *Amoureux de Paname* (1975), for example, he self-referentially depicts the *chanson* artist as an anti-establishment commentator on political and social events. This portrayal is indeed echoed throughout much of his later work, although with a wider and more problematic scope, as the next two sections will illustrate. In 'Société tu m'auras pas' (1975), for instance, the 'je' of the song represents an enthusiastic, almost 'gung-ho' singer, who has travelled through the country (France) and witnessed what he perceives to be 'l'absurdité de ta [French society's] morale et de tes lois'. Song, here, by extension, is seen as capable of overturning society and its values, and the singer is portrayed as coming from an imagined community of *chanteurs de contestation*, some of whom have sold out, but others are still waiting to attack. The threat of song is therefore continual and determined, and the singer is vehemently and vocally defending his anti-establishment position:

> Y'a eu Antoine avant moi,
> y'a eu Dylan avant lui,
> après moi qui viendra?

Après moi, c'est pas fini.
On les a récupérés,
oui, mais moi on m'aura pas.
Je tirerai le premier
et j'viserai au bon endroit.
[…]
J'ai chanté dix fois, cent fois,
J'ai hurlé pendant les mois,
J'ai crié sur tous les toits
ce que je pensais de toi,
société, société,
tu m'auras pas.
[…]
Demain, prends garde à ta peau,
à ton fric, à ton boulot,
car la vérité vaincra,
la Commune refleurira.
Mais en attendant, je chante
et je te crache à la gueule
cette petite chanson méchante
que t'écoutes dans ton fauteuil.

Society and the music industry here are closely linked as Renaud adopts the role of the politically-committed troubadour, and the adamant though ambiguous assertion that 'on m'aura pas' is seemingly directed at both. The singer—Renaud—will not 'sell out' and pander to mainstream and commercial tastes, but will continue to attack social structures through the medium of popular *chanson*. In this sense, Renaud is continuing a *chanson* tradition in France, following in the footsteps of singer-songwriters like Béranger, Ferrat and Ferré. Reflexivity, here, allows his songs both to try to make a difference and to comment on the fact that they are doing just that. They thus draw attention to *chanson*'s function as a weapon, but, of course, a non-violent one. One such song, from this first album, does indeed attack social structures while also achieving popularity. 'Hexagone' is a visceral attack on a French way of life and the country's 'centralised' values and traditions. Each of the twelve verses focuses on a calendar month, and describes, in grim detail, a tradition or event associated with it, from the 'sang qui coula rouge et noir/ d'une révolution manquée' in May, to the grape harvesting of October and the export of 'leur pinard'. Renaud self-referentially defends such an attack in his 1980 song 'Où c'est qu'j'ai mis mon flingue?' by his assertion that,

J'veux qu'mes chansons soient des caresses,
ou bien des poings dans la gueule
À qui qu'ce soit que je m'agresse
j'veux vous remuer dans vos fauteuils
[…]
J'suis pas chanteur pour mes copains,
et je peux être teigneux comme un chien

This contention reinforces his *chanson de contestation* image and his placement in non-commercial song. 'Tant qu'il y aura des ombres' (1991) seemingly confirms this image while proffering reasons for the desire to attack social structures through song. The speaker refers to himself and others ('nous') as 'les chevaliers de l'onde' who will always be there to fight injustices: 'tant qu'il y aura des ombres/ des truites et des vandoises/ croule la terre, craque le monde/ nous irons dans les eaux turquoise/ les rivières profondes…'. This metaphorical claim is tinged with cynicism, however, as the speaker suggests that these *chevaliers* 'oublierons pour quelques secondes/ qu'il ne changera jamais de base/ cet abominable monde…'. Here, the suspicion that the *chanson de contestation* may not, in fact, have the power to change society, is hinted at, and the evolution from intimation to overpowering argument will be explored in Section 4. Connections are also often made in the press between Renaud's songs and the 'causes' he fights for off-stage. Véronique Mortaigne, writing in *Le Monde* in 1992, for example, comments on the petition that accompanied his concert programme at the Casino de Paris to stop the planned motorway in the Aspe Valley in the Pyrenees, as well as his AIDS-benefit compilation, *Toute seule à une table*, describing his song, 'J'ai voulu planter un oranger', as 'une ballade nord-irlandaise, juste une cause en plus'.[6]

By adopting and re-working both the *chanson réaliste* and the *chanson de contestation* traditions, then, Renaud is able to explore the form and function of contemporary *chanson*. As his career progresses, he updates his borrowed styles to make them more relevant to a contemporary audience, which, in turn, allows him to interrogate his current style of *chanson* and the function of *chanson* in French culture on a wider scale. *Chanson*'s responsibility to address and attempt to change social ills is also alluded to in his borrowings of both the *chanson*

6 Véronique Mortaigne, 'L'Homme qui plantait des arbres', *Le Monde*, 20 May 1992, p. 17.

réaliste and the *chanson de contestation*. Renaud also, though, consistently borrows from diverse, 'entertaining' stage traditions.

2: Popular Entertainment

One of the ways in which Renaud plays with and explores the *chanson* form in his work is through consistent allusions to its role as popular entertainment. Throughout his work, Renaud plays with musical stage conventions, borrowing past performance styles from previous eras and drawing attention to those styles. In so doing, he highlights his own role as performer, entertainer and storyteller, as well as making evident the significance of the performance for the full meaning of *chanson* in general. Although the role of the lyrics is stressed in Renaud's work, the *chanson* discourse contained within his songs equally suggests that the music, voice and performance also have a crucial part to play in transmitting the full meaning of a song to an audience. This section will examine how Renaud stresses both performative elements of *chanson* through allusions to the storyteller and his audience, and the role of music and voice in song texts. It will argue that looking back to past performance styles allows him to interrogate *chanson*'s current cultural role, and whether it can be both a serious and popular medium, both art and commerce. In this sense, although Renaud also borrows from Anglo-American popular culture, he concentrates on looking to French styles for inspiration as to *chanson*'s future. Here, he differs from Gainsbourg, whose musical influences were more frequently Anglo-American in nature.

2a: The Storyteller and his Audience

Renaud consistently highlights his role as storyteller, and frequently borrows from popular oral storytelling traditions, which themselves have a long lineage in French musical and literary history, from the troubadours to the *chanteurs(-euses) réalistes*. There is a prevalence in Renaud's borrowings throughout his career in this respect, where he consciously draws attention to the storytelling element of a

song. Even in songs that are highly self-referential (rather than strictly 'reflexive'), like 'Docteur Renaud, Mister Renard' (2002), the speaker takes on the role of the storyteller: 'c'est ce que nous allons voir'. Renaud also borrows from, and draws attention to, the music hall and the tradition of storytelling as a kind of theatre. 'Près des autos tamponneuses' (1983), for example, can be seen as a mini-drama, with the music and sound effects acting as background scene setting, while the lyrics echo the storytelling traditions of the comically childish music hall singer. Here, however, there is an added layer of reflexivity and self-referentiality, as the speaker—the storyteller—continually adds comic asides while also telling the story. In this sense the song itself is very visual, taking the audience in and out of the story, with continual 'winks' to keep them entertained and feeling part of the adventure:

> On a mangé ensemble
> Une glace au chocolat,
> Elle, elle a pris framboise
> Et moi, j'ai rien mangé,
> J'voulais une glace à la viande
> Oui, mais y'en avait plus,
> Ou alors viande hachée
> Mais ça coule le long du cornet.

Similarly, in 'Jojo le démago' the narrator begins his story by speaking directly to the (modern-day) audience, telling them: 'attachez vos ceintures/ éteignez vos mégots/ car voici l'aventure/ de Jojo le démago'. This opening stanza is reminiscent of older storytelling styles such as tales told by the troubadours, as well as the social realism and melodramatic tragedy of the *chanson réaliste*, and Renaud has updated the references to apply to his car-driving, cigarette smoking, contemporary audience. Moreover, later reflexive references woven into the main body of the story ('surtout les gars d'Garges-les-Gonesses/ qu'étaient là que pour faire rimer') illustrate an overall awareness of, and desire to draw attention to, the distance between the storyteller and the story. Similarly, in 'La Java sans joie' (1975, discussed above) Renaud simultaneously adopts the persona of the *raconteur* of tragic songs and draws attention to the song to highlight the fact that this is a sad song in the tradition of past musical styles: 'écoutez-là, ma java sans joie/ c'est le java d'un p'tit gars'. In this way, while Renaud's reflexive play

borrows certain qualities from older, and diverse, forms of popular entertainment (troubadours, music hall), it also deviates from these models in its post-modern ironic distance. Renaud is deliberately making his audience aware of the role he is playing and is thus using role playing as a reflexive device in order to simultaneously underline the importance of storytelling, and performance in general, in the *chanson* tradition and question its role in present-day *chanson*.

Renaud also draws attention to the relationship between the storyteller and the audience in his work. This can particularly be seen in the context of Renaud telling the story of his 'own' life, and again here he looks back to older stage traditions. Many music hall stars, for example, used their own 'star life' as a way of drawing in and drawing back audiences who were eager to be entertained by the next instalment in the performer's saga. Jacques Damase comments that three music hall performers in particular, Damia, Yvonne George and Fréhel 'brought their own lives to the footlights',[7] and Ginette Vincendeau illustrates the relationship between the 'star life' and the 'real life' of female music hall performers such as Piaf and Fréhel.[8] Mistinguett's 'C'est vrai'[9] is a good example, since here the song playfully discusses her own life and her stage persona:

> On dit que j'ai la voix qui traîne
> En chantant mes rengaines
> C'est vrai
> Lorsque ça monte trop haut moi je m'arrête
> Et d'ailleurs on n'est pas ici à l'Opéra
> On dit que j'ai l'nez en trompette
> Mais j'serais pas Mistinguett
> Si j'étais pas comme ça

Renaud similarly wrote and performed many songs in which, as the performer and therefore the personification of the 'speaker' in the song, he makes playful reference to his own 'star life', and consciously toys with his audience by this means. The difference, however, between Mistinguett's and Renaud's revelations is that Renaud's songs are also commenting on the tradition he is borrowing

7 Damase, p. 8.
8 Vincendeau, pp. 107–28.
9 Written by Oberfeld and Willemetz, 1933.

from, and there is thus a double distancing strategy employed: he is describing his self-constructed persona rather than his real life, and, through reflexivity, he is also letting the audience know precisely what he is doing. 'Sans dec'' and 'Peau-aime' (both 1978), for example, sound like stand-up comedy routines where one would not normally expect the 'truth' to be told, but the illusion is standard in that the audience believes it is true for the duration of the show because that is the comic stage convention. With these songs, Renaud is both looking back to the music hall stage and sideways to the *café-théâtre*. Jill Forbes argues that the *café-théâtre* 'flourished after May 1968 as a kind of sardonic running commentary on politics, current affairs, and social change' and that:

> The *café-théâtres* were not unlike the turn of the century cabarets which had flourished in Montmartre, small-scale venues without numbered seats, where the audience sometimes drew lots to see what price they would pay. The enforced intimacy created a bond of complicity between audience and performers.[10]

This 'bond of complicity', as well as humour, is clearly seen in Renaud's songs. The repetition of 'sans dec'', in the song of the same name, for example, coupled with increasingly frivolous and childish claims of sincerity creates playful humour:

> Avec mon frère jumeau on s'ressemble vachement,
> mais faut dire que d'nous deux
> C'est lui le plus ressemblant.
> Le jour de notre naissance, deux scarabées sont morts,
> dès qu'un enfant rentre dans la vie,
> un vieillard en sort.
>
> J'ai un pote qu'est plein de fric,
> il est musicien,
> y joue d'la guitare électrique
> avec moi sur scène.
> Quand y joue trop fort, il fait du larsen,
> alors j'lui dis: 'tu fais du larsen-rupin'

10 Jill Forbes, 'Popular Culture and Cultural Politics', in *French Cultural Studies: An Introduction* (see Forbes and Kelly, above), 232–263 (p. 248). Coluche (Michel Colucchi) was one of the most famous comedians to come out of the *café-théâtre* tradition. Renaud acted with him and Miou-Miou in the early 1970s before embarking on his singing career. Coluche was Lolita's—Renaud's daughter's—godfather; he died in a motorcycle accident in 1986, and Renaud wrote the song 'Putain de camion' in homage to him.

Sans dec'
('Sans dec'')

Similarly, in 'Peau-aime', a spoken-word track, which, in itself, blurs some lines between popular performance poetry and *chanson*, the Renaud persona consciously plays with the truth, and consequently, the audience. He laughs at himself in a similar way to stand-up comics in the *café-théâtre* tradition and music hall singers, drawing attention to his well disseminated flaws:

Non, maint'nant j'ai une Harley,
[...] elle est faite pour épouser la forme
de mes jambes arquées.
Sans blague. T'avais pas r'marqué?
Avec elle j'suis un cow-boy,
j'suis shérif dans mon quartier.
Porte d'Orléans, j'fais la loi,
par ici on y croit pas.
Dans l'quartier, on m'traite de goy
(c'était pour rimer avec cow-boy),
et tous les apaches de Paris
qui m'voient passer sur ma bête,
y s'fendent la gueule, c'est pas gentil.
Laisse béton,
J'démystifie!

The absence of music in this song is also significant. Not having music means that the voice is the main aural transmitter of meaning, and Renaud's intimate, 'chatty' style not only suggests a close connection between audience and performer but also highlights how that intimacy is created. As Frith says, '[the voice] is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we're not, deceive people, lie.'[11] In 'Peau aime' Renaud plays with the 'truth' both lyrically and vocally, and the one technique complements the other. Like Brel, then, in the two versions of 'Les Bonbons', as discussed in Part II, Renaud is simultaneously borrowing stage traditions and subverting them through self-consciousness.

Audience complicity also highlights the importance of the audience in a song, and, in particular, the importance of a regular audience who becomes familiar with a singer's work. Such an audience, it is implicitly claimed in

11 Frith, *Performing Rites*, p. 197.

Renaud's work, will be able to easily understand humour and irony in his songs. Examples of Renaud's interaction with his audience during concert performances, for instance, point to the complicitous nature of this relationship. During his most recent concert tour, Renaud again adopts the persona of a comedian, playing with the audience while referring to his self-constructed personas. Introducing the song 'Germaine', for example, he contends: '[la chanson est] tellement démodée musicalement que Patrick Bruel, il voulait la prendre pour son dernier album'. This fictitious claim, accompanied by considerable cheering from his audience, alludes not only to Bruel's recent 'nostalgic' album, but also to Renaud's previously constructed persona of a singer who satirically—yet affectionately—attacks the work of his contemporaries (as seen in songs such as 'Ma chanson leur a pas plu').[12] Similarly, Renaud asks the audience at the start of his concert, 'c'est Renaud ou Renard que vous applaudissez là?', thus alluding to his most recent personas.[13] In this sense, the audience allows extra layers of meaning to become apparent, as without them, while the irony and humour may still be present in his work, it would not be recognised, which makes the performer-audience relationship a mutually beneficial one on many levels. And this beneficial, yet, at times, ambiguous, relationship is in fact the subject of many songs.

In 'La Ballade de Willy Brouillard' (1994), a narrative portrayal of a policeman, for example, Renaud pre-empts his regular audience. As might be expected from the anti-establishment stance taken in many of his earlier songs, the portrait of Willy Brouillard, here, is ambiguous. The protagonist became a police officer because, given the choice between becoming a 'bandit' and a cop, 'il a choisi entre deux galères/ celle où tu bouffes'. Renaud highlights the surprise that his audience may well feel at the subject matter of the song, by asking the rhetorical question: 'où t'as vu qu'j'allais faire une chanson/ à la gloire d'un

12 Hawkins makes a similar point when discussing this aspect of Renaud's persona (Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 184). The Bruel album in question is most likely, *Entre deux* (2002) in which Bruel re-works 'mythical' *chansons* from the inter-war period, often in the form of duets with other well-known artists. Renaud himself is featured on the album, delivering a version of 'Comme de bien entendu'. A recorded version of the concert during which Renaud made these remarks can be found on the DVD, *Renaud: tournée d'enfer* (see bibliography for full details).

13 *Renaud: tournée d'enfer* (DVD). The song 'Docteur Renaud, Mister Renard' in which Renaud introduces these personas will be discussed in the conclusion to this chapter.

poulet?', and further inviting the audience to ponder on the question of the subject matter of songs in general: 'est-c'qu'on peut mettre de la musique/ sur la vie d'un flic?'.

The performer-audience relationship is further explored in songs such as 'Petite' (1988), which examines the themes of mutual need between performers and their fans. Here, Renaud plays the self-referential role of the performer, and expresses his love for his young fans, 'je t'aime/ comme j'aime le jour petite qui se lève'. The suggestion here is that, as a performer, having fans is both necessary and desirable in that they allow the singer to continue working, both financially and spiritually. Renaud raises both the ambiguity and the complexity of performance in this song, by exploring the way in which fans make sense of songs during a concert:

> Un briquet allumé dans ton p'tit poing levé
> Ton regard qui se noie dans mes yeux délavés
> Un keffieh un peu louche jeté sur tes épaules
> Mon prénom dans ta bouche, ma photo dans ta piaule
> Tes lèvres qui murmurent ces futiles refrains
> Qui rouvrent des blessures dans ton cœur et le mien

On the one hand, the contention here is that even though the lyrics to songs are often banal and trite, the fans know them by heart and can repeat them verbatim, and that this singing along is part of the concert experience, allowing the songs to make sense to both fans and the performer. On the other hand, the fans' knowledge of the words of a song constantly breathe new life into it: even a song that may have been written quickly or carelessly, and which the singer may feel has 'futiles refrains'. The act of fans singing these words back to the singer allows the latter to find a new appreciation for the song, and thus find new meaning. In this sense, the audience is a powerful component in understanding the meaning of a song, and his or her interpretation is just as important as that of the reader of a piece of literature. Simon Frith argues that, during a concert performance, a singer is always conscious of the different roles to be played:

> The way singers put roles on and off—'the next song is a slower number'—works differently in different genres, but all methods (irony, earnestness,

> virtuosity, craft pride, humour) draw attention to the singer's knowledge of what is going on, to their knowledge of our knowledge of what is happening.[14]

While Renaud, like all other performers, may be aware of the roles he is playing during the concert experience, he is also consciously making that knowledge transparent, and breaking down any illusions the audience may have that the roles he is taking on are 'real'. Indeed, during a recent concert performance he took out his own lighter and waved it in the air with the audience, while he gave them a complicitous smile.[15] This unmasking of the role of performance, here, has two principal effects: it highlights the performance element itself as a crucial component of *chanson*, and it challenges both the audience and the singer to investigate the medium in which they are participating, thus inviting debate as to the form and function of the *chanson* genre.

2b: Music and Voice

Louis-Jean Calvet makes reference to the ways in which the voice, as well as the music, give meaning to a song. He argues that:

> Ce jeu de la voix apparaît donc comme fondamental dans le passage de la chanson écrite à la chanson chantée, comme déterminant dans la constitution de la chanson reçue: le spectateur ou l'auditeur décode-t-il le texte tel qu'il est écrit ou le perçoit-il filtré par l'interprétation vocale? Les deux, bien sûr […]. On pourra trouver par ce biais de la voix l'introduction de l'ironie, de l'agression, de la caresse, de la même façon qu'un violon ou une batterie peut venir soudain modifier la perception du texte: la voix est un instrument parmi les autres.[16]

While Renaud may, at times, use music and voice in similar ways to other *chanson* artists, that is, in ways outlined in the above quotation by Calvet, he also uses them as reflexive devices. Music, for example, is not only frequently used ironically in his work, but that irony is exaggerated to such an extent that it

14 Frith, *Performing Rites*, p. 211.
15 *Renaud: tournée d'enfer* (DVD). The song in question is 'En cloque'. Renaud also frequently directed his microphone at his audience during this concert, allowing their singing of the songs to be heard rather than his own.
16 Calvet, p. 97.

becomes a rhetorical ploy, or 'ironic double take', as Hawkins puts it.[17] In 'Buffalo débile' (1978), for example, the comic lyrics are made even more comic by the fact that the music is, ironically, 'serious' piano music, and in 'Ma gonzesse' (1979),[18] the music adds an extra layer of irony as it sounds like a standard sentimental love song whereas the lyrics are self-consciously the opposite of this—the poor grammar and childish references consolidating the idea that the speaker is a young person, and that it is perhaps the first infatuation for him. It is, therefore, comic in the sense that the audience expects a love song and is not given it. In 'Chanson pour Pierrot', orchestrated melancholy music (simple piano chords in a minor key, over which an accordion plays a single line, as well as sombre string orchestration and a fretless electric bass) adds a further sense of ambiguity to the lyrics in the form of implied sadness:

> T'es pas né dans la rue
> T'es pas né dans le ruisseau
> T'es pas un enfant perdu
> Pas un enfant d'salaud

Similarly sad music provides the accompaniment to the lyrics in the love song, 'J'ai la vie qui pique les yeux' (1979), while supposedly tragic lyrics are being constantly undermined by asides and add-ons: 'dans ma tête, j'crois bien qu'y pleut/ pas beaucoup, mais un p'tit peu', thus creating ironic distance; this is not a lost love song in the tradition of Piaf, further evident through reflexive comments: 'dans mon dictionnaire de rimes/ avec amour y'a qu'déprime'.

Renaud also uses his weak singing voice as a rhetorical ploy, and consistently creates humour through pastiche voices. In 'C'est mon dernier bal' (1979), for example, which borrows from 1950's music, Renaud imitates an Elvis (or Hallyday) tremolo on words such as 'garçons boucher', 'bouffer' and 'bouger', to further add to the context of the song by transporting the listener to the 1950s, as well as to create humour. Similarly, in 'Le Blues de la porte d'Orléans', Renaud's voice emphasises the blues style he is consciously imitating by holding the final syllable on words like 'arrondiss'ment', 'usure' and 'porte

17 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 185.
18 Renaud did not write the music for this song himself but, like all his songs, collaborated with the composer, in this case, Alain Brice.

d'Orléans', and pitching his voice a note or two higher than the previous syllable, allowing the notes to fall at the same time as the harmonica accompaniment. Renaud also uses his voice caricaturally to present an aural image of the people he portrays in his songs. For example, in many of his early songs, where he adopted the persona of a Parisian *gavroche*, as discussed in the previous section, he also, frequently, changes his accent on certain words. An exaggerated Parisian rolled 'r' is one of the clearest examples of this accent change, and can be heard in 'Le Gringalet' on the words, 'causer' and 'Mozart', in 'La Coupole' on the word 'boire', and frequently in 'Le Tango de Massy-Palaiseau' on words such as, 'trémolo', 'Marlon Brando', 'roi', 'Rudolphe'. Renaud is thus, vocally, switching between the different characters he is playing in the song: between the protagonist or speaker of the fictional story, the adopted persona of the Parisian street singer, 'Renaud' who is aspiring to be the street singer and 'Renaud' the distanced author of the song who is making his audience aware of all his other roles within it.

In pop music, singers have imitated other singers' voices, both in terms of parody and pastiche and also in what Gendron describes as caricature: 'the taking on of another voice not as homage or mockery or pretence, but in order to draw attention to its specific characteristics'.[19] Frith, taking up this argument, gives the example of white singers using black voices in rock and roll history; for example, Jerry Lee Lewis' 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On' and Mick Jagger's 'I'm a King Bee', which he describes as 'white-boy-lasciviously-slurring-and-playing-black-sex'. He concludes: 'no listener could have thought that either Lewis or Jagger was black; every listener realised that they wanted to be'.[20] I would argue that Renaud, in songs such as 'C'est mon dernier bal', is not so much wanting to be Elvis or even Hallyday, but his voice, through its own weakness, creates a distance between the style being imitated and his imitation. It thus draws attention to the voice *as* imitation, as it is impossible for an audience not to notice the comic impersonation. In this sense, Renaud is again using his voice in a similar way to a comedian, and in the process, is both pointing to and questioning *chanson*'s role as comic entertainment. Self-consciousness, then, allows Renaud

19 Discussed in Frith, *Performing Rites*, pp. 197–8.
20 Frith, *Performing Rites*, p. 198.

to draw attention to *chanson*'s role in contemporary culture. Like many of the *variétés* songs discussed in Part II, Renaud's work seems to suggest that part of *chanson*'s function is to entertain the French public. However, his consistent use of pastiche and allusion mean that his work, like Brassens' and Gainsbourg's, needs to be studied in order to be fully understood and, therefore, fully appreciated. This dual role assigned to *chanson* (to entertain and to intellectually stimulate) is further complicated by Renaud's exploration of *chanson*'s role as social document.

3: Social Observation

One of the functions that Renaud highlights in the songs of the *chanson réaliste* era is their ability to mirror the society in which they exist. In Part II, the mirror-like qualities of songs by Piaf, amongst others, were discussed, and deemed to be a kind of unproblematic social document. Renaud's songs can also be described as a social document, but of a more complex kind. His songs suggest that the mirror is, like Brecht's and Ferrat's before him, an ideological one, and that *chanson* is capable of changing the world through observing it. Paradoxically, the *chanson* artist is a social observer who, rather than being overtly political, is a marginal figure, documenting problems and areas of concern from a distance. Renaud's choice of characters reflects the ambiguity of the distanced *chanson* artist in two ways. First, he often chooses to portray characters who are not normally given a voice in mainstream culture, thus symbolically empowering them. Second, his characters themselves often inhabit a marginal place in society and therefore symbolically reflect Renaud's own position as an alienated artist.

Some of Renaud's characters are kept on the outskirts of society both physically or geographically and emotionally, like the 'p'tit voleur' in the song of the same name (1991), where the speaker is writing from prison, and thus quite literally on the margins of society:

> J'avais déjà purgé ma peine
> Avant même d'être ici, toute ma vie,
> Z'ont pas compris ça, les teignes

Qui m'ont puni

Other characters in Renaud's work are kept on the outskirts by other people's prejudices. 'La Tire à Dédé' (1979), for example, plays up stereotypical racist sentiments by referring to them in a song that also provides a more complex and multi-dimensional view of an immigrant to France: 'Dédé l'avait fait r'peindre [une voiture] en bleu métallisé/ y disait qu'ça lui rappelait le ciel de son pays/ on n'a jamais bien su où qu'c'est qu'il était né/ vu qu'il était menteur comme tous ceux de sa race'. By making transparent one of the received assumptions about certain groups of immigrants, Renaud is humorously challenging the French public's perceptions and prejudices. Moreover, he is forcing those prejudices, and the immigrants themselves, into mainstream culture by making them the subject of his songs, thus, metaphorically removing them from the margins. This is an effective way of compromising with the music industry, and of using song didactically while also reaching a wide public. Similarly, in 'Deuxième génération' (1983) a voiceless character is again given voice, as the song follows the life of a fifteen year-old second-generation immigrant, Slimane, living in France. Behind the protagonist's presentation of violence there is a touching portrayal of a young boy who is hiding his insecurities and fears with bravado, something with which a young audience will be able to identify: 'j'ai rien à gagner, rien à perdre/ même pas la vie/ j'aime que la mort dans cette vie d'merde/ j'aime c'qu'est cassé/ j'aime c'qu'c'est détruit'. Moreover, music, in this song, is presented as capable of helping the young protagonist feel accepted, part of a community; and can bring a source of hope to his future:

Y'a un autr'truc qui m'branche aussi
C'est la musique avec des potes
On a fait un groupe de hard rock
On répète le soir dans une cave
Sur des amplis un peu pourris
Sur du matos un peu chourave

'n a même trouvé un vieux débile
qui voulait nous faire faire un disque
Ça a foiré parc'que c'minable
Voulait pas qu'on chante en kabyle

On y a mis la tête contre une brique
Que même la brique, elle a eu mal

This hyperbolic, and childlike, depiction of violence against a music industry representative here echoes Renaud's own self-referential claims of autonomy and non-compromise. Slimane's hard rock band will not compromise the use of their mother tongue (*kabyle*) in order to make a record, and possibly achieve the financial stability required to create better lives for themselves. From a self-conscious perspective, this assertion reflects Renaud's own refusal to abandon his mother tongue and his inscription into a French *chanson de contestation*. But it also reflects that it is possible to make successful records that broach a serious subject matter.

A connection between the Renaud persona and the young people who feature in his work can also be seen in other songs. Renaud subverts stereotypical images of young people found in popular culture, for example, and gives young people a voice with which they can more realistically identify. 'Marche à l'ombre' (1980), for instance, contains many character 'types' who appear regularly in Renaud's work: the 'petite bourgeoise', the 'tough' gang leader, and the young speaker who rejects all the people he meets because, he claims, they are not good enough for him, or of the same mind-set. These claims keep the speaker distanced from other members of his community and essentially conceal his own feelings of insecurity and needing to find his own place in society.[21] Similarly, the young characters in 'Laisse béton' (1975) and 'Je suis une bande de jeunes' (1976) both humorously symbolise the alienation felt by many young people, and give those same young people a reference point to identify and empathise with. In the latter song, the difficult transition from youth to adulthood is explored, with the protagonist desperately wanting to keep youth alive even if it means he is the only person who cannot face maturity: 'je suis une bande de jeunes/ à moi tout seul/ je suis une bande de jeunes/ j'me fends la gueule'. In the former song, the protagonist employs slang to describe a series of unfortunate incidents. Each of the three verses begins with the assertion that, 'j'étais tranquille, j'étais peinard', when a 'type' approaches him, admires an item of clothing he is wearing and proceeds to

21 See Harrison, 'A Critical Introduction to the Work of the Singer-Songwriter Renaud' for more on the representation of youth culture in the work of Renaud.

forcibly relieve him of the item in question. One of the underlying images in this song is the insecurity many young people feel to fit in and conform to a 'fashionable' way of dressing and living, and how this can sometimes mask a true sense of self. From this perspective, the thief in the song, who enters the speaker's 'terrain' from the outside, steals the clothing in order to fit in and feel 'cool':

> T'as des bottes, mon pote, elles me bottent!
> j'parie qu'c'est des Santiag'
> [...]
> T'as un blouson, mecton, l'est pas bidon!
> moi j'me les gèle sur mon scooter,
> avec ça j's'rai un vrai rocker,
> [...]
> T'as l'même blue-jean que James Dean,
> t'arrête ta frime!
> j'parie qu'c'est un vrai Lévi-Strauss,
> il est carrément pas craignoss,

The items that are stolen are also self-consciously connected to Renaud's own persona—at this point in his career his stage clothes comprised 'Santiag'' boots, a black leather jacket and jeans. This self-referentiality further suggests that the singer, like the insecure young person, needs a mask of sorts (here, fashionable clothes) in order to feel accepted and hide his insecurities. However, when his mask is stolen, all that is left is his imagination:

> Quand à la fin d'une chanson
> tu t'retrouves à poil sans tes bottes,
> faut avoir d'l'imagination
> pour trouver une chute rigolote.

Self-referentiality, at the end of the song, then, creates humour in that the audience can now imagine a naked singer delivering this final, comic ending to them. It also, though, values imagination, and therefore songwriting skills, over a mask or image (the stolen clothes), thus placing Renaud, like those artists explored in Chapter 4, firmly in a *chanson à texte* tradition.

While writing songs about marginal figures or alienated youth suggest that Renaud's work is an effective tool in fighting social injustices, other songs reflect

Renaud's traditional standpoint as a marginal *chanson* artist.[22] Like many of the artists and writers of the early twentieth century who chose alienated outsiders as subject matter for their art (cf. Picasso, Dali), Renaud's characters, then, can also be seen to reflect his own position as the artist—and especially the musical performer—in society. This brings into question the political commitment alluded to in many of his songs. 'Le Retour de Gérard Lambert' (1982), for example, ambiguously portrays urban—and suburban—violence, with Renaud's characteristically distanced irony. The 'hero' in the song is described as driving into Paris from the suburbs in search of violent adventures. One such adventure results in Lambert viciously assaulting a woman before driving off into the night. Reflexivity in this song leads to ironic distancing on different levels: away from the violent character, away from the violence itself, and away from songs or aspects of popular culture that use such 'images' of violence. One such example of this reflexivity is when the narrator states 'voilà l'brouillard qui tombe': the audience naturally expects sinister consequences due to the standard associations in popular culture and especially crime fiction between fog and violence. However, the narrator immediately demystifies this connection by adding: 'c'est normal, c'est l'hiver'. The self-conscious and humorous construction is further exploited through the narrator's admission that 'pour l'ambiance d'la chanson faut des intempéries'. Equally, Renaud provides a constant commentary on the plot (on the recorded version rather than in the printed song lyrics) and uses a typical child's dramatisation device: 'da-da-daaaa' to create mock suspense. Wolf howls can also be heard in the background, and the song fades out with the sound of a church bell ringing slowly and ominously. The choice of musical quotation is interesting also. He uses Wagner's 'The Ride of the Valkyries' from *Die Walkure* towards the beginning of the song which was also used referentially in the film *Apocalypse Now*, thereby referencing both the original work and the film.[23] The extreme self-consciousness and reflexivity in this song, then, certainly produce humour, but they also reinforce Renaud's position as the marginalised artist. While the distance ensures that he cannot be seen as condoning Lambert's

22 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 186.
23 Francis Ford Coppola, 1979. Coppola used Wagner's 'The Ride of the Valkyries' during the Helicopter Attack scene.

violence, it also prevents him from critiquing it in any kind of real sense either. Such ambiguity reflects Renaud's evolving opinions on the role of the *chanson* artist and whether he—himself and the artist in general—can really make a difference through the medium of *chanson*.

4: The *Chanson* Artist

The *chanson* artist is represented in two related ways in Renaud's work: through his own self-referential persona and through the use of a child's perspective. It is within the discourse on the *chanson* artist that an evolution of Renaud's thoughts on the form and function of *chanson* take place. In particular, the exploration of *chanson*'s role as both social document with the power to change society and popular entertainment, as examined in Sections 2 and 3 respectively, is further questioned, and tentatively answered here, through the evolving projection of the *chanson* artist from politically *engagé* to alienated social observer who can only document society.

4a: A Child's Perspective

The image of the child, or a childlike perspective, in Renaud's work, represents both innocence or vulnerability and the detached vision of the artist. 'Mort les enfants' (1985), for instance, can be interpreted as a discussion on the potential power of song as well as part of a general argument that a child, or a childlike vision, is able to change society. Although this song was written at a time when many singers were involved in humanitarian events, often using the 'child' as a symbol of governmental neglect, here lyrical complexity distinguishes this song from many of those from the same time period.[24] In Renaud's portrayal, children are dying as a result of bombs or of being pushed into wars they did not have any say in, as well as by drunken fathers driving home from the August vacation in

24 See Chapter 3, Section 2c. I am making a distinction here between songs such as Renaud's 'Éthiopie' and 'Mort les enfants' in that, although they have a similar subject matter, the latter is far more complex and self-conscious than the former.

France. The injustices are thus happening nationally as well as internationally. Renaud also describes the redressing of power imbalances in (and through) the song. In the final two verses, the speaker relates that the child in him has died because he has seen the 'reality' of life—the childhood vision of a peaceful, beautiful world has given way to a harsh truth. At the same time, a play on the word 'bal' turns the party ('bal') that was happening at the Embassy at the beginning of the song into bullets being fired at the building by the end ('balles sur l'ambassade'). Given the speaker's pessimistic realisation, the final lines can be interpreted in different ways: on the one hand, the child can be understood to have been corrupted to such an extent by the violent society in which he lives that he too has turned to violence as the only answer he can find, that is, he is the one responsible for firing the bullets. However, from a more reflexive viewpoint, these last lines describe the speaker now taking up an 'arme' through this song and metaphorically attacking the Embassy, and the power imbalance in his world, through *chanson*. The speaker (and by association Renaud) is therefore symbolically shaking up those in power in much the same way as in previous songs ('Société tu m'auras pas', 'Hexagone'), and again, those in power are here seen as ultimately power*less* as they are 'bed-ridden' or sitting, as in previous songs also, in their 'fauteuils':

Bal à l'ambassade
quelques vieux malades
imbéciles et tortionnaires
se partagent l'univers

mort l'enfant qui vivait en moi
qui voyait en ce monde-là
un jardin, une rivière
et des hommes plutôt frères

Le jardin est une jungle
les hommes sont devenus dingues
la rivière charrie des larmes
un jour l'enfant prend une arme

Balles sur l'ambassade
attentat, grenade
hécatombe au ministère
sous les gravats, les grabataires

The child is also used symbolically in many other songs by Renaud to suggest innocence, but also a lack of comprehension of the corrupt and irresponsible adult world. In 'Marchand de cailloux' (1991), for example, where traditional Irish music gives a sense of time and place, the speaker is a child who does not understand the adult world: 'avec mes copines en classe/ on comprend pas tout/ pourquoi des gros dégueulasses/ font du mal partout'. And in 'Le Sirop de la rue' (1994), nostalgia allows the speaker to explore childhood memories. The music, written by Julien Clerc, features an accordion, drums and guitar. It contains a cheerful major-key melody which at once complements the nostalgic childhood memories and also acts as a counterpoint to the, at times, darker realities. The innocence of childhood memories, naïve make-believe, and the impression that childhood will either last forever or will be followed by 'death' in the form of adulthood, are interspersed with an adult's (the speaker who has now grown-up) more cynical view:

aujourd'hui les moineaux
évitez d'tomber
le nez dans le ruisseau
la gueule sur l'pavé
à moins d'pas trop craindre
les capotes usées
et les vieilles seringues
et les rats crevés.
[…] L'jour où j'mourirai
puisque c'est écrit
qu'après l'enfance c'est
quasiment fini.

Similarly, in 'C'est pas du pipeau', a song with autobiographical references in which the speaker is giving his daughter, Lolita, lessons in life, telling her that adults are 'bad' ('n'ouvre pas la porte/ y'a sûr'ment un loup/ faudrait pas qu'y sorte/ du fond de son trou'), children are again depicted as superior because they are not afraid of the unknown. Adults, on the other hand, are afraid of anything different and are happy to conform to avoid standing out. The symbolism here suggests that the child, and, by association the singer, is not a conformist, and the ending to the song, 'fais gaffe à jamais suivre le troupeau', nods to the dangers of

following the herd, as illustrated in Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* and, as such, supports such non-conformity. Children, then, because they are not adults, can see the world around them with fresher, less corrupt eyes, and can identify and comment on political and social absurdities. In a similar way, the artist, who, like the child, is also removed from society, can present a new and challenging vision of the world. Self-consciousness helps to draw this parallel between the artist and the child. The childish, 'silly' word-games of both Renaud and Gainsbourg, for instance, are conscious reminders of the artist's responsibility to see the world with childlike, and therefore uncorrupted, eyes.

A child's perspective is also used by both Renaud and Gainsbourg to self-referentially, and often humorously, pass comment on their own personas. In 'Mon amoureux' (1994), for example, Renaud hands the narrative voice (though she does not actually sing the words) over to his daughter Lolita, to express a touching, tender portrait of a father's anxiety when his child is involved with her first serious boyfriend. The portrait is, however, tinged with comedy as it humorously reveals 'Renaud's' own weaknesses as well as compounding his self-asserted influences:

> T'en fais pas Papa, mon amoureux tu l'aim'ras
> Il écoute que Brassens et toi
> […] Il a tatoué Guevara sur le bras
> […] Il est dernier en gym toujours prem' en rédac'
> […] T'en fais pas Papa, mon amoureux tu l'aim'ras
> Au bras d'fer l'est aussi nul que toi

Similarly, Gainsbourg gives his daughter, Charlotte, the words to describe him (she does actually sing the song), in 'Oh Daddy Oh' (1986). Here, Gainsbourg is aptly compared to writers and famous historical figures: 'comme Rudolf Valentino/ tu baises tu fumes tu bois trop/ […] tu te prends pour Allan Poe/ Huysmans, Hoffmann et/ Rimbaud'. As explored in Chapter 5, Gainsbourg deliberately alluded to many of these figures in order to both draw his work closer to theirs in the minds of his audience and to use Decadence, for example, as a cover when the realisation that *chanson* was an inadequate art form was made. Here, then, the implicit self-referential comparisons and influences are being made explicit, in much the same way as Renaud's. While giving their

daughters the words to describe them can be interpreted as humorously tender, it could also be symptomatic of the inability to confidently portray themselves. This is further reinforced through the distance created by the child's voices being female (their daughters) and theirs male. In Renaud's case, handing the narrative voice over to a child—either his own or a generalised, symbolic child—can be compared to the self-referential assertion in his later work, to be explored in the next section, that the *chanson* artist is unable to successfully bridge the art versus commerce divide: the *chanson* artist (Renaud) can no longer speak for himself so gives his words to others. 'L'Aquarium' (1991) confirms these suspicions as it uses a child's voice coupled with a sense of escapism. The young child speaker, here, illustrates sentiments of fatigue and frustration with the world, but, instead of pro-actively seeking a better society, he chooses to remove the sources of his frustration from his personal, immediate environment. In the first verse, for example, he is annoyed with his television set and throws it out of the window hoping to kill a 'militaire', and in later verses he throws a bible and a radio out of the window. The speaker is, therefore, passively longing for something better in the world and is happy to hide from his problems, as the final verse illustrates when he compares himself to both a 'scaphandrier' searching for lost treasure, in this case 'l'amour et la liberté', and the 'poisson rouge' who is happy being 'tout seul' to 'f'sait juste un peu la gueule'. The speaker is, however, self-consciously aware that he has only succeeded in escaping from these people/problems on a superficial level and that they still exist:

Libérée, enfin, ma tête
A rejoint l'scaphandrier
D'l'aquarium
Qui cherche un trésor planqué
Sous les cailloux bariolés
Pauvr' bonhomme …

J'suis un peu comme l'scaphandrier
D'l'aquarium sur la ch'minée
J'suis un peu l'poisson rouge
Et c'est chouette
Je cherche un trésor planqué
L'amour et la liberté
Sous les cailloux bariolés

D'la planète

Libérée enfin ma terre
Des curés des journaleux
Des militaires
De tous les preneurs de tête
Qui provoquent sous ma fenêtre
Ma colère…

Even though the speaker is aware his solution is an inadequate one, there is no noticeable desire to fight or to come up with a better answer to his problems. This lack of energy distinguishes the song from previous ones, such as 'Société tu m'auras pas', and the only hope here that a better solution may be forthcoming is the three dots at the very end of the song which suggest some kind of continuation.

4b: 'Fatigué de parler, fatigué de me taire': The Chanson *Artist in Crisis*

If the use of a child's perspective hints at the crisis of faith in the power of the *chanson* artist to change French society, songs from the mid-1980s onwards more explicitly confirm this fear. As Renaud's career begins to blossom and he achieves commercial success, his references to the role of the *chanson* artist become more self-referential with less ironic distance, and suggest anxiety and self-doubt. The projected dilemma faced by the *chanson* artist is also closely connected to that faced by artists in general: to espouse commercialism in order to be heard by a larger public or stay on the margins and risk silence. 'Fatigué' (1985) sums this dilemma up well, in that despair and fatigue replace the aggressive nihilism of his earlier songs:

Fatigué, fatigué
Fatigué de parler, fatigué de me taire
Quand on blesse un enfant, quand on viole sa mère

Here, the impossibility of the artist's task is made clear: he no longer has the energy to use his art as a 'weapon', yet he cannot stop writing and performing. Like Gainsbourg, and Beckett before him, Renaud here is hinting at the

realisation that 'failure is inevitable for the writer, as for the artist in general, since the impossible is required of him'.[25] The 'impossible' for Renaud would seem to be the ability to produce 'art' while working within the confines of the music industry. Many other songs from 1985 onwards similarly point to the frustrations felt by the artist and his inability to solve his dilemma. In 'Triviale poursuite' (1988), for example, the speaker asks a series of questions targeting social ills but is unable, in a comparable way to Dylan's 'Blowin' in the Wind', to proffer any answers. And in 'Cent ans', the speaker wants to be one hundred years old so he does not have to deal with the world but can escape to the park and use his age as an excuse for not really living.

In Renaud's most recent album, *Boucan d'enfer*, several songs suggest the failure of the *chanson* artist and, by extension, Renaud's own failure as a 'committed' artist. In 'Je vis caché', for example, the speaker is frustrated with the crass and disgusting world (the world of 'la jet-set et du show-biz', 'fake' pop music, 'des Stars Académiques/ et des Pop Stars de mes deux/ qui sont un peu à la musique/ ce que le Diable est au bon dieu', terrible television shows, 'des animateurs blaireaux', and politics), but instead of fighting he chooses to hide from the world. The portrayal in this song is particularly negative in that no hope is given as to a solution to the troubles facing the artist:

> Pour vivre heureux je vis caché
> Au fond de mon bistrot, peinard
> Dans la lumière tamisée
> Loin de ce monde de ringards
> De ringards…

Two explicitly self-referential songs from this album suggest, in no uncertain terms, Renaud's own inability to respond to the art versus commerce dilemma. In 'Cœur perdu', where the repetition of 'mais hélas' sums up the feelings of resignation, a love song gives way to the suggestion that Renaud's love affair with the power of music is coming to an end, and that he has now given up the fight:

25 Hannah Case Copeland, *Art and the Artist in the Works of Samuel Beckett* (The Hague: Mouton, 1975), p. 214.

Il a chanté
L'a battu pendant vingt ans
Pour un amour à présent
Envolé
[...]
Il a plein d'idées rebelles
Mais hélas

The music, written by Alain Lanty, is a gentle piano and accordion accompaniment, a combination Renaud had, in previous albums, composed himself. The fact that he has handed over the musical composition, featuring two of his favourite instruments, further suggests that the one-time hope in the power of music, and in his own talent, has diminished.

'Tout arrêter' confirms these sentiments, and explicitly makes clear that Renaud's enthusiasm and energy for social protest through song, and perhaps songwriting and performing itself, have been exhausted. He uses metaphors based on mythical sides of his characters, as presented by the speakers in his songs (the sailor, the troubadour, and so on), coupled with explicit self-referential nods to himself as a songwriter, to suggest the fight is over:

J'ai rangé ma guitare et coupé mon micro
Arrête la musique et arrête les mots
Tout arrêté, terminé! Finies les chansonettes, ma voix
Enfumée
Le troubadour est fatigué
Mais jamais j'n'arret'rai de t'aimer

Here the second-person pronoun 'te' is directed at the audience and his fans, suggesting that, while he is giving up because he is totally 'burnt-out' and tired of the fight, he will still love his audience. This omnipresent negativity towards his own role as a *chanson* artist, towards the end of his career, is, perhaps, a disappointing response to the art versus commerce debate, suggesting he has reached an impasse and is unable to *retourner* his own metaphorical *veste* in order to progress.[26]

26 Renaud is, of course, still performing music, and is rumoured to be making a new album, in spite of the self-referential concerns raised in *Boucan d'enfer*. In fact, he entered into an unprecedented level of publicity for the release of this album, again reached the top of the best-selling French artist list, and has also been regularly featured in the popular press over the past two years, often with his new wife, Romane Serda, whose own eponymous debut

Docteur Renaud and Mister Renard: Conclusion

Renaud himself offers a useful conclusion for this chapter in the form of a song on his latest album, 'Docteur Renaud, Mister Renard'. Through a comparison with Gainsbourg, in both the title and the opening line, Renaud provides his audience with a brief history of his evolving personas, and his professional angst:

> Comme y'a eu Gainsbourg et Gainsbarre
> Y'a le Renaud et le Renard
> Le Renaud ne boit que de l'eau
> Le Renard carbure au Ricard

The Renard persona here, it is suggested, is suffocating Renaud, and is, as such, projecting his pessimistic, anarchistic, side onto Renaud's musical output. Le Renard is, in this way, a (useful) scapegoat:

> Renaud a choisi la guitare
> Et la poésie et les mots
> Comme des armes un peu dérisoires
> Pour fustiger tous les blaireaux,
> Renard, c'est son côté anar
> Crache sur tous les idéaux
> Se moque du tiers comme du quart
> Des engagements les plus beaux

The pessimism in the role of the *chanson* artist, and indeed in the *chanson* form itself, that has been a predominant theme in Renaud's work from the mid-1980s, then, can be attributed not to Renaud, but to le Renard. The implication, from a self-conscious viewpoint, is that if Renaud manages to overcome his 'côté anar' he will once again be able to change society through his songs. The desperately hopeful simplicity of this hypothesis, unwittingly perhaps, illustrates the *chanson* artist's impossible condition: without le Renard, Renaud's songs can only ever be 'de jolies histoires/ pour séduire les gens, les marmots/ pour amuser, pour émouvoir'. The *chanson* artist is, ultimately, reduced to the role of entertainer rather than artist, and cannot seemingly be both. The destructive side (le Renard)

album, co-written by Renaud, was released in November 2004. The song, 'Anaïs Nin', a duet with Renaud, featured on the album, was also released as a CD single in March 2005.

cannot live harmoniously with Renaud: his songs cannot be both touching social portraits and weapons capable of changing the society they observe. Like Gainsbourg, Renaud here is implicitly pointing to the futility of language, and the *chanson* form; yet, unlike Gainsbourg, he cannot seem to offer a 'new' solution. His ability to compromise with the music industry through skilful songwriting is not, it seems, sufficient. Although this may appear pessimistically negative, the pervasion of self-consciousness on *Boucan d'enfer* is itself political (in the widest sense), and therefore, constructive. Interrogating, in rigorous detail, the dilemmas faced by the *chanson* artist allows Renaud's contemporaries and successors to respond to these dilemmas, and helps them find their own unique solutions. In the next chapter, I will explore MC Solaar's response to the 'crisis' facing *chanson* and the *chanson* artist in the commercial age, and investigate whether the future success of *chanson* lies, in fact, with rap.

Chapter 7

MC Solaar

Introduction[1]

MC Solaar is considered by the majority of journalists and music historians who write about him as a 'rap' artist or 'rappeur', and his albums are generally found—in France as well as the UK and North America—in the rap section of record stores. This raises the question of why his work should be studied here. Hawkins, who also poses this question in his chapter on MC Solaar, suggests that Solaar's rap 'has many links with its predecessors in the *chanson* tradition and [therefore] constitutes a further development of some of the resources of the genre'.[2] This contention is undoubtedly true, and can, in fact, be taken further. As explored in the Introduction, the term *chanson* is today used with considerable fluidity and no longer connotes a rigidly specific style of French music, either in lyrical or musical terms. One of the reasons MC Solaar is so relevant to a study of self-consciousness in French *chanson* is precisely because, through the rap genre, he draws attention to the similarities and differences of both musical forms: rap and *chanson*. The rap genre is a reflexive form par excellence in its constant self-referencing, its sampling, its one-upmanship and its commentaries on peers and rivals. Georges Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot, for example, contend that 'un des traits essentiels du rap, c'est qu'il se montre très souvent en train de se faire'.[3] But, the real interest of Solaar's work lies in the way in which he uses—and plays with—all these rhetorical devices to comment on his place in the history of French popular song and to proffer his music as a successor to the *chanson de contestation* tradition, following in the footsteps of, for example, Jean Ferrat and

1 All lyrics are taken from album sleeves or the website *paroles.net* (see Bibliography). Solaar's official website can be found at: <http://www.solaarsystem.net/>. Published by Warner Music France, it contains clips from upcoming releases. Another good source of online information about Solaar (in English) is 'Dave's MC Solaar Archive': <http://www.rncb.ac.uk/dl8004/home.htm>. This website also contains a full discography.

2 Hawkins, *Chanson*, p. 204.

3 George Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot, *Le Rap; ou, la fureur de dire* (Paris: Éditions Loris Talmart, 1996), p. 96.

Renaud, and taking up many of the questions raised by Renaud and explored in the previous chapter. Furthermore, Solaar comments himself that his music is not (or no longer) wholly 'rap', but transcends the normal boundaries of the genre to become something much more complex:

> Mon style n'est pas identifiable, je n'ai aucun équivalent américain, c'est une chose dont je suis assez fier. Ça veut dire que je n'ai pas copié et que j'ai toujours cherché à faire mon truc à moi. J'ai du mal à me considérer rap français. Bon j'en fais partie, mais j'ai pas envie de le revendiquer. Je joue avec des musiciens maintenant. Il y a eu un temps où on faisait tourner un sample, et on posait des paroles dessus, maintenant on fait notre musique, avec nos arrangements: violons, orchestre, etc.[4]

Solaar's work does indeed change in style over his career as he evolves into a mature artist, and the way in which his songs can be deemed self-conscious also changes, with the focus for this thesis coming in the later albums.

This chapter, then, will highlight the ways in which Solaar comments on the genre in which he is working through his songs and interviews, and will draw comparisons with the previous case studies in Part III—Gainsbourg and Renaud. It will begin with a brief examination of the rap genre and its development in France, before exploring Solaar's background and musical output to date. Section 1 will then examine the use of sophisticated sound, word and musical play in Solaar's work, and discuss how this play forms part of a wider reflexive narrative that re-defines the style of rap, and, consequently, *chanson*. Section 1 will also explore the creation of personas in his songs, how they contribute to the fictional universe he creates, and how the shift to character songs in his latest album has opened the door for a new style of rap song in France. Section 2 will examine more explicit references in Solaar's work to ways in which his style of rap differs from the mainstream, commercial variety, and will discuss the quality judgements he makes about rap and popular music in France in general. Section 3 will go on to explore Solaar's own style of rap, analysing, in particular, his 'responses' to the problems he himself raises about the quality of popular music (to be explored in Section 2). It will concentrate on how Solaar's work challenges the stereotypes

4 Solaar, cited in Richard Bellia, 'Le Monde selon MC Solaar', *Routard Magazine* (2003) <http://www.routard.com/mag_invite.asp?id_inv=145> [accessed 8 June 2004] (para. 6 of 14).

found in mainstream rap, while suggesting that his particular musical style is capable of continuing the French *culture écrite* tradition in music while remaining a popular, youth-oriented genre. In this sense, Solaar questions rap in much the same way that Gainsbourg and Renaud question *chanson*, asking whether it can be both entertainment and an intellectual art form.

'L'Histoire de l'art': Rap Music

The majority of rap historians trace the genre in its contemporary form to the mid-1970s hip-hop culture of African-American and Afro-Caribbean youth living in the South Bronx and upper Manhattan districts of New York City. It is also widely agreed that the commercial origins of rap began with the 1979 hit recording 'Rapper's Delight' by the Sugarhill Gang.[5] Tricia Rose, a significant contributor in this area, contends that hip-hop culture comprises rap music, graffiti writing and break dancing, and that it emerged 'as a source for youth of alternative identity formation and social status'.[6] In this sense, hip-hop was very much a 'live practice', a culture emanating from the youths themselves rather than from record companies or outside sources, and Greg Dimitriadis makes the point that the Sugarhill Gang 'was not part of the early hip-hop scene in any real sense', largely because 'Rapper's Delight' 'ruptured the art form's [rap's] sense of continuity as a live practice known to all its "in-group" members—largely poor, black, and Latino youth in ghettoised urban areas like Harlem, New York'.[7] This 'rupture' lead the way for rap to enter the commercial and popular realms, and for people other than the creators of rap themselves to hear the music and be a part of hip-hop culture. In fact, KRS-One, an important figure in the American hip-hop movement, has made a distinction between rap and hip-hop: 'rap is something we do [...] hip-hop is something we live. The living of hip-hop produces rap. [Current rappers] are imitating what they see. They aren't

5 Guthrie P. Ramsey, Jr., *Race Music: Black Cultures from Bebop to Hip-Hop* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 165.

6 Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), p. 34.

7 Greg Dimitriadis, *Performing Identity/Performing Culture: Hip Hop as Text, Pedagogy, and Lived Practice* (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), pp. 1–2.

creating'.[8] While hip-hop, then, began as a live practice to meet the specific needs of disenfranchised youth, rap music specifically has a relatively long and complex line of precursors and influences. Ramsey argues that 'rapping itself denotes a vocal performance in which a rapper uses spoken or semispoken declamation, usually in rhyming couplets', and points to a variety of influences on the rapping style:

> The idea of rapping had deep roots in African American culture. Its stylistic and thematic predecessors are numerous: the dozens and toasting traditions from America and Jamaica; sing-song children's games; double-dutch chants; black vernacular preaching styles; the jazz vocalese of King Pleasure, Eddie Jefferson, and Oscar Brown, Jr.; the on-the-air verbal virtuosity of black DJs; scat singing; courtship rituals; the lovers' raps of Isaac Hayes, Barry White, and Millie Jackson; the politicised storytelling of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets; and the preacherly vocables of Ray Charles, James Brown, and George Clinton, among many others.[9]

Rap music and its evolution as a genre in its own right has attracted considerable attention over the past twenty years. Much academic work has been carried out on hip-hop culture in America, studying it from a variety of perspectives, from textual analysis to cultural studies and sociology, and concentrating for the most part on young people's usage of hip-hop culture and/or the representations of (black) youth in rap.[10] While academic work on rap in France may be limited by comparison, important research has nonetheless been carried out, especially from a sociological perspective. *La Culture hip-hop*, by the social scientist Hugues Bazin, for example traces the history of hip-hop through an examination of three of its constituent parts: 'une culture, un mouvement, des expressions artistiques', and *Des jeunes et des musiques: rock, rap, techno*, edited by Anne-Marie Green includes a chapter focusing on the usage of rap by young

8 'KRS-One: His Take on History and Tradition', *Rap News Network* <http://www.rapnews.net/News/2004/04/20/KRS.1.Hist.Trad/> [accessed June 29 2005].

9 Ramsey, p. 165. A 'toast' is a 'lengthy, recited narrative or poem describing a series of exploits by a central character. Focusing on the main character's heroic acts and exercises of wit, the toast presents values through actions' and '"The Dozens" are an elaborate insult contest'. (source: Mona Lisa Saloy, 'African American Oral Traditions in Louisiana' <http://www.louisianafolklife.org/LT/Articles_Essays/creole_art_african_am_oral.html> [accessed 19 June 2005].)

10 Tricia Rose is an important name here as is Paul Gilroy (*The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*; *'There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack': The Cultural Politics Of Race And Nation*): see the bibliography for further references.

people living in a Z.U.P. (*zone à urbaniser en priorité*) in Beauvais.[11] Antoine Hennion also explores the way in which people listen to, use, and understand rap (and techno) in his article 'Musiques, présentez-vous!', based on research from seminars in which fans listen to and discuss a number of rap (and techno) songs.[12] *Le Rap; ou, la fureur de dire*, by Georges Lapassade and Philippe Rousselot, provides a brief, critical history of rap in America and France, and explores some of the main themes that have characterised rap music since the late 1970s. There are also a small number of guides, essays and anthologies of French rap available; for example, *Le Rap français: anthologie*, edited by Jean-Claude Perrier and *Rap ta France*, edited by José-Louis Bocquet and Philippe Pierre-Adolphe, which collate rappers' opinions about the rap form and issues affecting them.[13] The late André Prévos also wrote a series of articles on hip-hop culture for the educational journal *French Review*, concentrating, for the most part, on the adaptation of American music and culture by French artists, and on the similarities and differences between the genres in America and France.[14]

Rap in France

It is, in fact, rap's hybridity and its emphasis on vocals and lyrics that makes it such a significant part of French musical history. Looseley refers to rap's hybrid form and the ease with which it became assimilated into a France that had already opened its doors to musical *métissages* in the form of alternative rock and world music in the 1980s. Rap's acceptance was such, he argues, that by the end of the 1990s France was its second largest market after the USA. Importantly, Looseley also stresses rap's 'natural' continuation of the importance of lyrics in French

11 Jean-Raphaël Desverité and Anne-Marie Green, 'Le Rap comme pratique et moteur d'une trajectoire sociale', in *Des jeunes et des musiques: rock, rap, techno*, ed. by Anne-Marie Green (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 169–213.

12 Antoine Hennion, 'Musiques, présentez-vous!: une comparaison entre le rap et la techno', *French Cultural Studies*, 16 (2005), 121–134.

13 *Rap ta France*, ed. by José-Louis Bouquet and Philippe Pierre-Adolphe (Paris: Flammarion, 1997); Hugues Bazin, *La Culture hip-hop* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2001). See also: Lapassade and Rousselot; *Le Rap français: anthologie*, ed. by Jean-Claude Perrier (Paris: Table Ronde, 2000).

14 See the bibliography for further details.

popular music, as well as how the genre easily became associated with 'France's troubled suburbs' in much the same way as it had been in America's urban ghettos:

> It [rap] slotted just as neatly into French cultural tradition, much more in fact than did pop or rock. Its semi-spoken nature allows the stresses and cadences of French to be accommodated somewhat more comfortably since they are not constrained by a melodic line. Furthermore, its foregrounding of words sits more happily with the *chanson* tradition than do genres like rock or world music oriented towards dance.[15]

André Prévos places the actual introduction of rap in France between 1982 and 1983, with B-Side's recording of the song, 'Change de beat', on the back of a Fab Freddy 12" record issued in New York City. European tours by American rappers, as well as press coverage of rap in *Libération* in 1982, then paved the way for the popularity of Chagrin d'Amour's rap-inspired album of the same year which, according to Prévos, marked the first example of French rap on a long-playing record.[16] Lapassade and Rousselot also point to this period as the first phase of the introduction of rap to France, while pointing out that French rap, unlike its American predecessor, did not start on the street as a live practice, but was transported to France as part of the culture industry.[17] 1984 then saw the first show dedicated to hip-hop on French television ('H.I.P. H.O.P.'); broadcast by TF1 and presented by former DJ and dancer Sydney, the show was a considerable success with young people, comprising interviews and dancing lessons as well as rap music. Before working on this programme, Sydney was a DJ at L'Émeraude Club in Paris and presented a radio programme, 'Rapper Dapper Snapper' on Radio 7.[18] Chris Warne, in an article on the representation of hip-hop on French television, points to the opening greeting consistently employed by Sydney, 'Bonjour les frères et les sœurs', and the tone which this greeting set for the programme:

15 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 55–56.
16 André Prévos, 'The Evolution of French Rap Music and Hip Hop Culture in the 1980s and 1990s', *The French Review*, 69 (1996), 713–725 (p. 714).
17 Lapassade and Rousselot, p. 10.
18 *MC93 Bobigny*, 'Back to Hip Hop: Sydney' <http://www.mc93.com/public/artistik/saison/02_hipho/> [accessed 7 June 2004] (para. 2 of 2).

> What was emphasised was the playful, ludic side of hip-hop, its ability to unite young people of all cultures and colours in a new international family, celebrating their 'natural' energy and inventiveness. [...] The programme, then, is strictly located in the genre of light entertainment, and bears all the hallmarks of youth pop music television from the period (use of a warehouse-like studio, active audience participation from the surrounding scaffolding/stage set).[19]

The notion of 'copains' of the 1960s, then, is updated by the equally communal connotations of sibling identity with this programme. In the same year (1984), Dee Nasty released *Panam City Rappin*, widely considered to be the first French-language rap album.

The early popularity of hip-hop culture in France was bound up to some extent with Afrika Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, a branch of which was established in the Parisian suburbs in the 1980s:

> Cette période [1983, the introduction of rap] est marquée notamment par l'influence d'Afrika Bambaataa et la fondation d'une branche française de la Zulu Nation. C'est aussi le temps du hip hop, avec le Break Dance dans les rues—où se forma l'actuelle génération de rappeurs. On appela *smurf* cette danse, et l'on peut dire qu'à cette époque le smurf a occulté l'importance du rap américain, qui lui était cependant nécessaire en tant que base musicale et rythmique de la performance.[20]

Although rap did not start as a live practice in France, the early years were similar to those in the USA in the sense that hip-hop culture, and rap music, were largely confined to ghettoised youths. A year before Solaar's first album was released, however, *Rapattitude*, a compilation originally issued by Labelle Noir, appeared in France, showcasing new rap and reggae artists such as Tonton David and Assassin, thus marking an important commercial entry for French and Francophone rap.[21]

19 Chris Warne, 'Curiosity, Fear and Control: The Ambiguous Representation of Hip-Hop on French Television', in *Group Identities on French and British Television*, ed. by Michael Scriven and Emily Roberts (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), pp. 108–118 (p. 110).

20 Lapassade and Rousselot, p. 11.

21 *Rapattitude*, Labelle Noir, 1990, ASIN: B00004UJ5R; *Rapattitude 2*, Labelle Noir, 1992 (re-edition, 1996, Delabel); The compilation *Rapattitude volumes 1 & 2* was released by EMI/Virgin in 1996, ASIN: B00001NFMK. Labelle Noir, the French hip-hop label, has been licensed, since 1990, to Virgin.

'Solaar Power': Biographical and Bibliographical Study

Solaar was himself one of the ghettoised youths living in the Parisian *banlieue* in the 1980s. Born in 1969 as Claude M'Barali in Dakar, Senegal, he moved with his parents to Paris when he was six months old, living in Saint-Denis before moving to Villeneuve-Saint-Georges where he spent his childhood and adolescence. Sent for nine months to live with his uncle in Egypt where he attended the French high school in Cairo at the age of 12, he then returned to Paris and applied himself enthusiastically to his studies, passing his *baccalauréat* in 1988, and moving to study languages at the Jussieu campus of the University of Paris I. While there, he met the DJ Christophe Viguier—alias Jimmy Jay—at a concert in Marly-le-Roi and recorded a series of demo tapes with him in the summer of 1990, including the song 'Bouge de là' which persuaded Polydor to sign the duo and which subsequently became a huge hit.[22] His first album, *Qui sème le vent récolte le tempo*, came out in October 1991, selling 400,000 albums and going platinum as well as earning him a 'Victoire de la Musique' award. This album, as one may expect for a debut, is not as complex in terms of lyrical competence or musical experimentation as his later efforts. Many themes are, however, present here which Solaar would pick up on and play with in subsequent works: money, the importance of language and references to popular and high culture. Musically, the album fits more easily than his later works into the rap genre, in the sense that he is working with a DJ, Jimmy Jay, and is 'rapping' rather than singing the songs. Similarly, a semi-autobiographical first-person pronoun is used to express 'Solaar's' views and rap identity (I will examine this persona in more detail in Section 1c). The album was followed by a successful tour in 1992 which took in the Transmusicales de Rennes, the Francofolies de la Rochelle, and twelve West African countries, as well as Russia and Japan.

His second album, *Prose combat*, was released in February 1994 and was even more commercially successful than the first: it sold over 800,000 copies and

22 Biographical information taken from: *L'Encyclopédie de la chanson française*, by Jean-Dominique Brierre and others (Paris: Éditions Hors Collection, 1997); *Le Hall de la chanson* website; *Rfi musique* website. See bibliography for full details.

was released in twenty countries outside France. The sound of this album is fairly similar to the first, but with one or two more complex musical moments: he nods to *chanson* heritage by sampling Gainsbourg's 'Bonnie and Clyde' on his track 'Nouveau Western', for example, and the wordplay on this album is also more complex than his first. He was awarded 'artiste de l'année' at the Victoires de la Musique ceremony in 1995 and again toured in France and Europe. His third album, *Paradisiaque*, was released at the start of 1997, but this was the first not to feature Jimmy Jay: Zdar (Philippe Cerboneschi) was his sound engineer and Boom Bass (Hubert Blanc-Francard) his composer. This album has a positive, almost whimsical quality to it, with intelligent wordplay and musical variation. Solaar himself described the album as 'une note d'espoir' for the turn of the century where 'le climat général indique que tout va exploser, mais non, il faut avant tout rester positif'.[23] In 1998 Solaar toured Europe with a stage performance featuring choreographed hip-hop dancing and an on-stage DJ, produced with his friend Bambi Cruz. An eponymous shorter album comprising just eleven songs was also released in 1998, and featured many of the same themes as his previous albums, while also playing with persona in a more noticeable way. A live album, *Le Tour de la question* came out in 1999 and the studio album *Cinquième As* appeared in February 2001, featuring young composers such as DJ Mac, DJ Cruser and DJ Sample, with Solaar taking the lead as artistic director. The music channel MCM, in an online review of the album, called it 'un rap plus rude et plus engagé que les précédents', and argued that, 'avec ce nouvel opus à l'humour narquois et à la critique aiguisée, MC Solaar devrait enfin clouer le bec aux rappeurs enragés et virulents de la nouvelle génération qui depuis quelques années jugeaient son verbe trop calme et trop consensuel'.[24] His latest album at the time of writing, *Mach 6*, was released in 2003. Musically, this album has a much more mature sound, mixing different styles of music to complement or undermine the lyrics, in more of a *chanson* than rap tradition. Solaar also introduces more character songs on this album, rather

23 'Tempête Solaar: entrevue avec MC Solaar', *Buzz*, 21 (1997) <http://wsrv.clas.virginia.edu/~cgf2d/solaar.html> [accessed 8 June 2004] (para. 7 of 9).

24 'MC Solaar, plus rap que jamais' <http://www.mcm.net/news/index.php/21364/> [accessed 8 June 2004] (para. 1–2 of 2).

than the quasi-autobiographical 'je' used in many earlier songs. While there is a clear evolution in Solaar's work, then, from a predominantly US-style rap to one that borrows significantly from the *chanson* tradition, self-consciousness has always been an integral theme in his songs. In the following section, I will trace, in more detail, this evolution, focusing on the ways in which Solaar plays with both the rap and *chanson* genres.

1: Playing with a Genre: From Rap to *Chanson*

In Solaar's use of wordplay, music and personas, there is a distinct evolution from rap to a rap/*chanson* hybrid. In the following three sub-sections I will explore this evolution, arguing that the conscious move away from Anglo-American wordplay reflects Solaar's desire to create a specifically French form of popular music that is both entertaining and learned.

1a: Wordplay

Wordplay is a common feature of rap music in general. Potter, for example, discusses the centrality of rhymes and homophony to hip-hop culture:

> Whether at the level of names (Souljah, Gang Starr, Spinderalla), metonymic shifts (Patrick Swayze plays a ghost in the film *Ghost*, so hip-hop lingo shortens 'I'm out of here (like a ghost)' to 'Swayze!'), or acronymic codes (NWA, BWP, BDP, HWA, LL Cool J),[25] it is this kind of continuous linguistic slippage and play that drives the verbal engines of rap. [...] One can spin the wheel of grammatically and logically possible terms (e.g., 'The cat sat on the: mat, car, tree, grass, chair') and/or the wheel of sounds ('The cat sat on the mat, the rat, the hat, the bat, the gat'); the trick of [signifying] is to do both at once, to find homonymic connections that serve either to

25 The initials of Niggas With Attitude, Bytches With Problems, Boogie Down Productions, Hoes With Attitude, and Ladies Love Cool James. The most obvious French equivalent would be NTM: nique ta mère.

> undermine, parody, or connect in a surprising way the underlying connotations of language.[26]

As Simon Frith also notes in relation to rap's origins as lying in long-established rituals of insult: 'if, in rap, rhythm is more significant than harmony or melody, it is rhythm dependent on language, on the ways words rhyme and syllables count'.[27] Wordplay, similar to that found in US rap, is also an important component of Solaar's early work. On his first album, *Qui sème le vent récolte le tempo*, 1991, for example, he uses wordplay in some form in almost all the songs with varying degrees of sophistication. 'Caroline', for instance, contains rather simplistic wordplay in the form of end rhymes, assonance and 'signifying' plays on particular words ('Il faut se tenir à carreaux/ Caro, ce message vient du cœur'). In other songs there is slightly more sophisticated wordplay as well as good rhythmic play, very much in keeping with US rap. 'L'Histoire de l'art', for example, is rhythmic, fast paced when sung by Solaar, and even when simply read from the page, as it contains so much alliteration: 'les salauds salissent Solaar cela me lasse mais laisse'. 'Qui sème le vent récolte le tempo' uses wordplay to illustrate one of the messages of the song, which is that the good rap artist is a master of language and tempo: 'chaque mot, chaque phrase dit avec emphase/ fait de Claude MC le commando de la phrase'. (The assertion that it is through linguistic skill that rap becomes powerful will be explored in Section 3.) Solaar's wordplay also borrows heavily from cultural references: both popular and high. He mixes references to lipstick brands and golfers with Greek mythology and art movements, for example. As Hawkins observes, Solaar's work is 'an intellectual form of rap, aimed at a sophisticated urban audience who can juggle with a wide range of cultural references both traditional and modern, who

26 Russell Potter, *Spectacular Vernaculars: Hip-Hop and the Politics of Postmodernism* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 81–2. Signifying is equally understood as the development of distinct meanings for certain words in a rap context, the meanings being derived from the kind of linguistic slippage referred to by Potter: 'dope' can mean 'great' and 'dog' can be a male friend, for instance.

27 Frith, *Performing Rites*, p. 175. French rap cannot, however, follow the exact same patterns as US rap due to an obvious difference in the way French rhythm works and the differences in the poetic traditions in the two cultures: the basic unit of the line is the syllable, for example, in traditional French verse, and not the foot or stress as in English. (source: *Anthology of Second World War French Poetry*, ed. by Ian Higgins (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1994), p. xxxvii.)

are at ease with the proliferation of the modern media as well as the educated literary heritage'.[28]

As Solaar's rap develops, however, his wordplay transcends the usual conventions of US rap and inscribes itself within a specifically French tradition. In this sense, his work evolves in a similar way to those *chanson* artists discussed in Chapter 2 who adapted and played with US influences (Trenet, Nougaro) rather than simply copying them in the model of song-family extensions (Mitchell, Hallyday). There is a marked change, for example, in sound and verbal play from his 1997 album onwards: the sound-play and wordplay become more complex and striking in the sense that they start to differ from expected rap/hip-hop styles, and the music begins to add an additional layer of meaning, be it complementary or in counterpoint. The music, thus, adds a new layer of self-consciousness to the songs. In this sense Solaar's words and music work together more. The shift in style coincides with, and can in part be explained by, Solaar parting company with his DJ, Jimmy Jay. In 'Daydreamin'' (1997), for example, Solaar's vocals and accompanying orchestration are laid-back and sulky in style, and this is echoed lyrically with a stream of consciousness built around 'daydreamin'' and sound and rhythm play based on this pastime: 'j'ai vu une fille dansant le new-jack swing/ avec le swing, d'Ali sur le ring/ elle était vase Ming, pas cruche'. Similarly, in 'Tournitcoti' there are nonsense rhymes and obvious wordplay as well as childish melodies in the chorus 'tralalalalere' which echo the lyrical sentiments of the song. Here Solaar, like Gainsbourg and Renaud before him, seems to undermine the intellectual dimension of his songwriting and emphasise instead the humorous, whimsical qualities. *Cinquième as* similarly contains much word and vocal-play, as in 'La la la, la', where Solaar uses a Jamaican accent when delivering lines about 'ragamuffins', in a similar way to Renaud's use of accents, to give contextual meanings to songs.

In his later albums, then, wordplay moves away from US-style linguistic manipulation adapted to the French language, to become a reflexive device in its own right. This transition can be understood, in part, by Solaar's own views on

28 Hawkins, *Chanson*, pp. 206–7.

the French language, and the following quotations go some way to explaining these:

> On exprime dix fois plus avec elle [la langue française] qu'avec n'importe quelle autre langue, notamment l'anglais. Elle est belle, cette langue! Tu as plus de mots, plus de nuances. La langue française, je la découvre tous les jours. J'apprends sans arrêt de nouveaux mots. L'orthographe? Il faut à tout prix la défendre. Ça peut également donner envie d'écrire. Si on fait du français une sorte d'espéranto, ça augmentera les problèmes des gens à communiquer entre eux, parce qu'il y aura perte d'histoire. Les glissements de sens, l'étymologie, c'est quand même ça une langue. (MC Solaar)[29]

> On peut tout faire avec les mots. Il y a 26 lettres dans l'alphabet. [On] parle de milliards de combinaisons, et l'on peut aussi jouer avec les sons dans ces combinaisons. C'est ce que rend le rap fatalement différent d'une simple lecture de livre. Il faut choisir ses phrases, faire rebondir les mots. Il faut que ce soit joli, il faut que ça pète, pour que notre héritage, tous les trésors de la langue française et de la poésie soient au service de la musique et du groove. Même s'il n'y avait aucune lutte à faire passer dans la musique, même s'il n'y avait qu'à parler de rien et de tout, juste pour prendre des mots pour leur beauté, je le ferais quand même. Je ne parlerais de rien, je serais peut-être un peu fou, mais je le ferais quand même. Car la musique, même si on l'oublie trop souvent, c'est aussi cela: jouer. (MC Solaar)[30]

The assertion that correct spelling should be preserved may appear conservative, especially for a rapper, but is consistent with the general claim made in Solaar's work that language and education are important and powerful tools, that can be used to fight injustices or create a better world for oneself. (This argument will be explored in Sections 2 and 3.) Moreover, the emphasis he places on the French language rather than all languages inscribes himself firmly in the specifically French *chanson à texte* tradition. Solaar is not the only rap artist to defend the French language either: IAM (Imperial Asiatic Man) also point to the richness of the language: 'nous utilisons le français parce que c'est une langue riche et complexe. Les possibilités de rime sont innombrables. Certains nous reprochent même la complexité de nos paroles, c'est un comble!'[31] The use of wordplay to reveal surprising linguistic connections and connotations is prevalent among

29 Jean Théfaine, 'Le Maître des mots', *Chorus*, 23 (1998) <http://www.chorus-*chanson*.fr/HOME2/NUMERO23/rencontressolaar231.htm> [accessed 14 June 2004] (para. 19 of 25).

30 *Buzz*, para. 3 of 9.

31 First cited in *Libération*, 28/29 July 1990, p. 33; reproduced in Lapassade and Rousselot, p. 110.

chanson artists, drawing on traditions that stem back to the *troubadours* and, more recently, the Dadaists and Surrealists. Compared to the verbal and linguistic skill of artists such as Gainsbourg, US rap music seems a poor cousin of *chanson*. Here, then, and in his later albums, Solaar is fusing the rap genre with the lyrical conventions of *chanson* to create a nationally-specific genre that is at once cultivated and popular.

1b: Music-play

As previously noted, the arrangements on Solaar's songs move away from sampling to become more orchestrated, and therefore, more in keeping with the *chanson* tradition. Solaar's latest album, *Mach 6*, is possibly the most interesting in terms of how the music works with the lyrics to add meaning. In 'Sauvez le monde', for example, Solaar uses a child's voice in the second part of the song to reinforce the sense that the lyrics here are being delivered by a child. In the latter part of this song, there are three verses in which a question is posed by a young female voice (a child) and answers are given by Solaar implying that he cannot save the world with his music and lyrics but hopes that the new generation might be able to. In 'Bling bling', again children's voices can be heard, adding to the lyrical notion that Solaar is passing on the gauntlet to the younger generation. Two overtly self-conscious songs from *Mach 6*, 'Today is a Good Day' and 'Souvenir', further illustrate how the music becomes a reflexive device in its own right to pass comment on the reception of rap in France. In the former song, the protagonist is a young, unemployed man, living with his mother. The song recounts a day in his life, starting with a visit to the 'ANPE' (L'Agence nationale pour l'emploi), where he informs the employment agent that he wants to become a musician. He then returns home to dance along, 'comme un automate', to music video clips, but, after being reprimanded by his mother for wasting time, he chases butterflies, hoping to find inspiration 'comme les poètes'. He is later arrested for accepting a joint ('la beuh') from an undercover policeman, but still dreams of being 'dans le Top 50'. The final verse of the song repeats the opening

except that now, instead of wanting to be a musician, he decides to be a physician:

> Je me lève le matin et puis j'ai le sourire
> Arrive à l'ANPE et je me mets à rire
> Derrière le bureau la fille fume un joint
> Elle me dit: 'qu'est-ce que tu veux faire ?', j'lui dis: 'musicien'
> (Opening verse)
> Je me lève le matin et puis j'ai le sourire
> Arrive à l'ANPE et je me mets à rire
> Elle me dit: 'qu'est-ce que tu veux faire?', je réponds: 'physicien'
> J'viens d'rêver d'être musicien, mais ça ne rime à rien
> (Final verse)

The ironic reflexivity in this last line emphasises the protagonist's casual attitude towards a musical career. The protagonist, then, is comparable to 'part-time' singers Solaar explicitly criticises in other songs, as Section 2 will illustrate. Although, here, the nonchalant 'wannabe' is being portrayed through a first-person narrative, the criticism is still apparent and is further emphasised by the choice of music. Indeed, the music lends an ironic twist to the song in much the same way Renaud's music often does—the catchy, up-beat chorus, half in English and half in French, sung by female voices, illustrates precisely the kind of song such 'casual' singers often record in order to secure a place in the 'Top 50':

> Ce matin, tout va bien
> 'cause today
> Today is a good day

Similarly, 'Souvenir' also uses orchestrated music (guitar, vocal harmonies, a string quartet) in a reflexive way to underline lyrical assertions. The first-person pronoun in this song embodies, in fact, two separate personas: a victim of police harassment and 'MC Solaar'. The song is a way, it is suggested by 'MC Solaar', of allowing victims to tell their versions of an incident, and, as such, becomes a kind of social document (in much the same way as Renaud's, or Piaf's, songs):

> C'est pas d'la fiction, c'est pas d'la télé, c'est la réalité
> [...]

Le témoin de la scène était outré
Mais des histoires similaires j'en ai des dizaines à te raconter
Du fond du cœur 'Peace' aux orphelins de la Police
Ainsi qu'à ceux qui entendront ce chant anecdotique
Je ne donne pas tous les détails, je souhaite la concorde
MC Solaar, un beat, une voix, des cordes

Tout va, tout vient, tout s'en va… Un soupir vient souvent d'un souvenir

Although the notion of rap as a form of attestation is common to US rap, the real interest of the song for this thesis lies in the playful ambiguity of the witness statement, further reinforced by the choice of orchestrated musical accompaniment.[32] Solaar seems to be playing with the notion, forwarded by rappers and rap audiences alike, that rap can be, in fact, social document.[33] The music is clearly dissimilar to that generally employed by rap artists and, as such, becomes a way of questioning the validity of 'testaments' delivered in rap songs, and in popular music in general. The song thus questions its own realism, while also provoking a wider debate concerning how 'reality' is understood in popular culture: will an audience be more willing to believe a story if it is accompanied by classical orchestration rather than popular, rap devices (sampling, scratching, rapping, and so on)?

1c: 'L'As de trefle': Pseudonyms and Personas

Reflexivity can also be seen in Solaar's use of multiple pseudonyms which have the effect of drawing attention to himself as the creator of his songs, and also to the creation of his own fictional universe in which his personas exist. As in the work of both Gainsbourg and Renaud, MC Solaar refers to himself in his songs, calling himself different names throughout his career including, 'l'as de trefle', the anagrammatic 'Laarso', 'MC Solaar', 'Claude MC'. As Lapassade and Rousselot point out, 'le nom du rappeur est bien plus qu'un nom d'artiste, bien

32 Lapassade and Rousselot, for example, point to the quasi-apocalyptic usage of the term 'witness' in US rap (pp. 81–2).

33 Desverité and Green, for example, cite young people asserting that rappers 'disent la vérité', which is why, according to these young people, rap is such a powerful genre compared with other forms of music (pp. 186–7).

davantage qu'un simple plaisir ou qu'un désir de discrétion. C'est un masque, et il est obligatoire'.[34] While Solaar's mask-like pseudonyms are to some extent interchangeable, he does make implicit distinctions between them. For example, in 'La 5ième saison' (1998), he states: 'j'ai en moi plus de Claude que de Solaar' suggesting a difference between his stage persona and his non-stage self. As with most rap or hip-hop songs there is a proliferation of self-referencing in his work on a fairly simple level, mentioning his name or one of his pseudonyms in practically every song, without any further investigation or illumination. In this sense, his pseudonyms are simply another rhetorical device belonging to the rap genre. There are fewer, yet more interesting, instances, however, when the persona in the song is humorously self-parodic in a similar way to Renaud's personas—although this explicit self-parody is not as common in Solaar's work as it is in Renaud's or even Gainsbourg's. Humour in 'Bouge de là' (1991), for example, can be found in the way the persona deliberately misunderstands his interlocutors in a similar narrative sequence to Renaud's 'Laisse béton':

> Ma voisine de palier, elle s'appelle Cassandre,
> Elle a un petit chien qu'elle appelle Alexandre.
> Elle me dit: 'Claude M.C. est-ce que tu peux le descendre ?'
> J'ai pris mon Magnum, j'ai dû mal comprendre.
> Elle m'a fait: 'Bouge de là!'

Other than parody, the Solaar persona is seen in two broad, distinct ways in his work. First, as noted in the introduction, there is a speaker who uses the first person and whose voice seems to be connected to the singer's through either biographical data or views expressed which correspond to those expressed by him in interviews. This semi-autobiographic voice is heard in most of his early songs and in the majority of his songs in general. Second, there are those character songs from his later period where the first-person speaker is in no way connected to Solaar. This is interesting in itself, as the speaker in rap songs is generally, although not exclusively, associated with the person singing the words, and this connection is expected by fans and the general public alike. Indeed, the MC in rap is sometimes related to the griot, the West African travelling storyteller or

34 Lapassade and Rousselot, pp. 90–91.

troubadour, and, as such, is closely linked to the stories he is telling. Lapassade and Rousselot, for example, trace the origins of rap to the oral poetry of the griot and the *majdoub* (the North African 'fou de Dieu en état de transe permanente'), arguing that:

> Il [le majdoub] se décrit, indique les conditions de sa production poétique et parle de la vie quotidienne de ses contemporains, dans un monde en crise: trois thèmes que nous allons retrouver et explorer dans le rap.[35]

What image do we get of the persona presented in the first area? This persona is complex and three-dimensional, with many nods to Solaar's own upbringing and background. He is portrayed as an outsider, somebody who does not really fit in anywhere ('Bouge de là', 1991; 'Dévotion', 1994) which can be explained in part by his background and his childhood to which he also makes reference. In 'Je me souviens' (1998), for example, Solaar provides, in a quasi-autobiographical manner, a portrait of his childhood, alluding to the time spent in Egypt and his impressions of France. This quasi-autobiographical persona is also portrayed as a defender of children's and human rights and a fighter of crime (using song as his weapon, as I will show in Section 3) and also the defender of traditional values and styles of music when the rest of the world is selling out to US-imported culture ('Dakota', 1997). He is therefore seen as powerful, mythical almost, like the product in the title of his 1997 song, 'Wonderbra'. There are, however, contradictions in the portrayal of this persona: he is a star in songs like 'Hasta la vista' (2001) and an 'anti-star' in 'Galaktika' (1998).

In the 'character' songs, the speaker takes on different roles; for example, in 'Nouvelle genèse' (1998), he acts out a biblically inspired character paying for former sins; in 'La Vie est belle' (2003), he is in a war-torn city devastated by missiles; and in 'T'inquiète' (2003), he plays the part of a lovesick pilot. Talking about his decision to move away from using the first-person, he comments:

> Au départ, je racontais, *je m'appelle Claude, je viens de tel endroit, et ici c'est comme ça et j'aime pas ça.* C'était avant que je fasse de la musique. Maintenant, je me laisse aller à de la féerie, à de la lettre. Je fais voyager les gens par les mots. Autre chose importante, j'ai enlevé le 'je' de mes

35 Lapassade and Rousselot, p. 15.

> chansons, pour être un acteur, qu'on ne sache pas si c'est moi ou un personnage qui parle.[36]

Much like Renaud played with the myth of the politically committed troubadour, here, Solaar is playing with the roles of both the MC and the storyteller in *chanson* history. By moving away from the first-person, he consciously adopts different roles in his songs, and makes this adoption clear to his audience. This, in turn, like his wordplay and use of orchestrated music, challenges and redefines the rap genre, allowing a cross-fertilisation with the *chanson* tradition to flourish. In parallel to his work evolving into more of a *chanson* style, Solaar also makes explicit comments in his work about popular music in France.

2: Rap versus Commerce

2a: Quality Judgements

The state of the music industry in France, and the rap scene in particular, are frequently alluded to in MC Solaar's work. In many songs, distinctions are made between 'good' and 'bad' rap, and between practitioners who see rap as a legitimate profession and those who treat it more like a hobby. In two songs from his 1991 album, *Qui sème le vent récolte le tempo*, direct comments about the quality of rap music are made. In 'L'Histoire de l'art', for example, the first-person speaker suggests awarding 'Solaars' to the best rap artists in the same way one would award Oscars for films. Similarly, in 'À temps partiel' the professional, full-time status of the rap artist and his or her collaborators is emphasised, as is the skill required to succeed in this profession: 'Jimmy Jay perfectionne son style, les mains sur le vinyl/ maître de son art, aujourd'hui il excelle, il n'est donc pas un DJ/ à temps partiel'. In the same song, Solaar also describes himself as a 'maître du swing linguistique', a 'musicologue' and shuns 'les rebelles à temps partiel'. The implied reference to Charles Trenet, the original 'maître du swing', suggests Solaar is both looking back to Trenet's

36 Richard Bellia, 'Le Monde selon MC Solaar', *Routard Magazine* (2003) <http://www.routard.com/mag_invite.asp?id_inv=145> [accessed 8 June 2004] (para. 2 of 14).

influence, as the majority of post-Trenet singer-songwriters have done, and connecting his own work to that of Trenet's. Commentators have also noted the relationship between Trenet's musical style and Solaar's. Hawkins, for example, points to Solaar's rhythmic syncopation, a technique first introduced to French *chanson* by Trenet;[37] and Trenet's scat style of singing can also be interpreted as a precursor to the rap genre. As illustrated in Part II, Trenet's introduction of newer styles of music, like jazz and swing, has had a lasting impact on the development of *chanson*. In a similar way, I would argue, Solaar here is alluding to the influence of rap music on the development of *chanson*, in that he is continuing the tradition of lyrical importance put to music ('swing linguistique') but in a newer form, rap.

The quality judgements made of other rappers in Solaar's work are also extended to include the French music industry in general. A song worth exploring in more detail at this point is 'À dix de mes disciples' (1994), a diatribe in three verses about popular music and culture in France. There is an attack here on the current state of French music and the decline of the politically committed song: 'la chanson engagée laisse place à la variet''. The blame is deemed to lie with the industry who awards 'Jordy'[38] a 'disque d'or' and who, 'dort d'un profond sommeil' while 'la plèbe plébiscite et s'excite', listening only to the music on 'les radios F.M.'. A clear similarity can be seen here with Renaud's songs in which 'les radios F.M.' are also cited as having had a detrimental effect on musical output in France ('Allongés sous les vagues', 'L'Aquarium', 'Je vis caché'). In 'Les Boys bandent' (2001), the decline in quality music is also seen through a connection to the Surrealist game Gainsbourg wrote about, Cadavre exquis:

> Donne-moi un bic, un thème et un tempo
> Laisse-moi dix minutes et on te ramène un morceau
> Cadavre exquis style à la demande
> Les trois mots choisis étaient les boys bandent

The suggestion here is that creating a 'boy band' is as easy as playing the game, 'le cadavre exquis', in the sense that members of the band can be picked

37 Hakwins, *Chanson*, p. 206.
38 Jordy Lemoine, born 14 January 1988, was a 'child star' in France; his aptly named song 'Dur, dur, d'être un bébé' stayed at the top of the French charts for 15 weeks in 1992.

randomly (by record producers) with no reason or logic and thrown together to create a band. It is thus posited that boy bands are the opposite of talented music professionals like Solaar.[39]

The criticism of the music industry is further extended to include the world of show-business in general and, more specifically, the transformation of the singer when s/he becomes part of the show-business industry. Using similar metaphors to the ones found in 'Poupée de cire, poupée de son', by Gainsbourg, Solaar compares those singers who have entered the show-business ranks to wax dummies and 'fakes' and it is these wax models who are in favour with the industry and the wider public:

> Les rebelles bilingues parlent la langue de bois
> Entrent dans le show-biz et ensuite ne parlent pas
> Je pèse, soupèse leur kilos de foutaises niaises,
> En fait la synthèse, pour dire qu'en 93,
> C'est le consensus de Madame Tussaud.
> Les blaireaux et les mimes ont la faveur des gogos
> Les stars du show-biz font de l'audimat
> ('À dix de mes disciples')

As in the work of both Gainsbourg and Renaud, here, the espousal of show-business is portrayed as creating artistic silence, and preventing the singer from any longer making his voice heard. This is especially true of those 'rebelles' (in an ironic sense) who begin their careers by copying American rappers and thus use English rather than (or as well as) French, and who are, therefore, doomed from the outset: they start off speaking gibberish and end up a 'silent', automated industry puppet.

The notion of the 'automate', or the 'fake', is common to Solaar's work, and is often used as a general metaphor for the music industry. Like Gainsbourg, Solaar also uses women to express this idea of the 'fake', but here they are portrayed less as victims of the music industry and more as part of the general problem of the artificiality in music and society in general.[40] In 'La Fin justifie les moyens' (1994), for example, the speaker concludes: 'j'évite les Paola

39 The homophonic pun on the word 'band' ('bandent') here also casts a disparaging shadow on such 'boy bands', who seemingly spend much of their time in a sexually aroused state ('bander').

40 Women will also be discussed in relation to Solaar's work later in the Chapter.

silicone et minous synthétiques'. The fake and artificial are also connected to the 'copy'. In 'Zoom' (1997), the speaker asserts that 'si le mime Marceau mime Marceau dans la Boom/ c'est clown'. That is, if the person dressed up as a mime artist then proceeds to mimic that mime artist (Marceau), he becomes comical and foolish ('clown'). Here, mime is being used as a metaphor of the music industry, and the preoccupation with the 'copy' and the inauthentic in Solaar's work suggests that the same value judgements apply to music, especially as he sets himself up as being in opposition to the inauthentic and copied models he portrays by representing himself as enduring and authentic. In 'Solaar pleure' (2001), for example, he describes the testament he wants to leave in the event of his death, underlining the sense that he is authentic rather than artificial: 'j'veux des fleurs et des gosses, que ma mort serve leur avenir/ peut-être comprendront-ils le sens du sacrifice/ la différence entre les valeurs et puis l'artifice'. He similarly refers to his non-conformist approach to songwriting in his interviews: 'je ne suis pas consensuel, non. Regarde un titre comme "Gangster moderne". Je cherche toujours autre chose, que personne n'a fait'.[41] He also makes allusions to the differences between his style of music and his values, and those of other rappers in the lyrics of his songs. 'La vie n'est qu'un moment' (1998), for instance, refers to the purpose of the whole rap genre in a form of personal philosophy on what he does and why he does it. Solaar presents himself as not being a *gangsta* rapper, not an American-style rapper, but his own person and persona: 'j'opte pour un style que personne n'a looké/ qu'est-ce qu'on en a à battre de l'audimat?/ dans le monde du rap, je suis le Claudimat/ je représente la rime hexagonale,/ populaire, littéraire pur scandale'. Similarly, in 'Lève-toi et rap' he establishes a difference between himself and other rappers, here choosing examples like his verb tenses and his poetical style to illustrate those differences: 'un style qui m'était propre et le verbe au plus-que-parfait'. Solaar, then, through his songs, is passing comment on the state of the music industry in France, and criticising what he sees as the inauthenticity of many of those involved in the industry. In many ways, his comments are in keeping with a rap rhetoric in the sense that it is quite usual for rappers to promote their own personal style while

41 Théfaine, para. 23 of 25.

criticising their peers (cf. the dozens tradition). However, his comments also echo the criticisms made of the industry by *chanson* artists such as Ferrat, Gainsbourg and Renaud, in the sense that inauthenticity is conflated with an espousal of the industry, and a lack of individual creativity. Authenticity, on the other hand, emanates from both independent originality and the inscription in a musical style that has legitimate roots.

2b: Authentic Roots

Qualitative judgments are also related to traditional musical values and their relationship to outside, and in particular, US, influences, as well as being linked to a certain self-conscious nostalgia, often manifested in allusions to the simplicity of school days. This nostalgia can be seen, for example, in 'Les Temps changent' (1997), where the speaker describes his school days and, as the title suggests, draws attention to the changes between that past era and contemporary society with self-conscious nostalgia:

> Tu peux me nommer rappeur nostalgique
> Néo-romantique aux actions bucoliques
> Avant pour les gosses les grands étaient des mythes
> Regarde, maintenant c'est les parents qui flippent

In 'Le Free Style d'obsolète' (1994) there is also an implied contrast between former and modern times and attitudes, the emphasis being placed here on the detrimental effects of new US imports and their consequences on popular music in France:

> Y'a des films de série B que j'estime à quinze centimes
> Les States nous plaquent ces films de trois piécettes
> [...]
> La variet' est sa cible SOLAAR l'arbalète

These self-consciously nostalgic references simultaneously draw attention to the possible deterioration in the quality of 'authentic' French popular song and culture, and have the effect of distancing Solaar from one of the sources of this deterioration: US-influenced *variétés*. One of the ways in which Solaar advocates

his genre of rap music as an authentic challenge to the 'fake' styles and exponents seen above is through references to its origins in jazz. In 'À dix de mes disciples' (1994) the speaker links rap to its jazz roots and extols the virtues of jazz as an authentic music, which in turn suggests that rap too is authentic and has historical and contextual validity. Rap is, therefore, constructed as a potential challenge to the threat of *variétés*. As I have shown throughout the thesis, finding a way of challenging the 'threat' of *variétés* or pop music has been a preoccupation with *chanson* artists since the 1960s, and here, Solaar can be seen to be following in the footsteps of artists like Ferrat, Gainsbourg, and Renaud who all proposed their own solutions to the *variétés* problem.

Rap, however, is not only projected as a challenge to *variétés*, but is argued to be the *only* way the *chanson engagée* can have a comeback:

> Je l'avais dit jadis à dix de mes disciples:
> L'esprit de 68 aujourd'hui se dissipe.
> On jette l'éponge, tandis qu'ils lançaient des pavés.
> La chanson engagée laisse place à la variet'
> [...]
> Je laisse parler mon âme. Le rap avait besoin d'aide.
> Il sort de la sclérose grâce au J.A.Z.Z.,
> Pousse les limites de la boîte à rythmes.
> Ternaire sont les rythmiques et naissent les mêmes mythes.
> Le jazz exprime depuis ses origines
> Un feeling non mercantile, une profondeur de style
> C'était de la musique humaine évolutive,
> Une révolution musicale, une résistance active
> Les milices musicales nous balancent à l'époque
> Que c'est la dépravation, les négros et la dope
> Alors je pèse soupèse ces kilos de foutaises niaises,
> En fait la synthèse, pour dire qu'en 96,
> Si le rap excelle, le Jazz en est l'étincelle

That rap could be a natural continuation of the *chanson engagée*, especially because of its close relationship to jazz, is not an argument that would be easily accepted in France. Indeed, the introduction of jazz in France was problematic due to its own American provenance and the way in which it was seen as just another type of dance music threatening French 'civilised' culture.[42] Solaar's

42 See Looseley, '"Frères ennemis"? French Discourses on Jazz, *Chanson* and Pop', *Nottingham French Studies*, 43 (2004), 72–9. See also, Chapter 3, Section 1b.

reference to jazz as rap's 'étincelle', then, is connected less to a view of authenticity as 'legitimate' art and more to the notion of authenticity as a non-commercial art that stays 'true' to its roots. Russell Potter argues that

> hip-hop's authenticity, like that of jazz, is continually posed against that which it is not, and there is a hair's breadth of such difference between innovation and repetition. Hip-hop, like jazz, is fundamentally improvisatory, and must be reinvented from moment to moment, out of a dynamic mix of re-citation and signification.[43]

In this sense, it is rap's—just as it was jazz's—*attitude* that is perceived to be authentic, because it is innovative and non-conformist. Discourses surrounding 'authenticity' have been examined in previous parts of this thesis, and the personal battles *chanson* artists have fought in order to adhere to a perceived and/or self-imposed definition of authenticity have been explored. Solaar reveals his own theoretical perceptions of what 'authentic' quality rap music should be through observations of rap's precursors and through his references to problems with more commercial music. He also, however, offers 'practical' solutions to the problems he finds with current French (rap) music and the inauthenticity he highlights.

3: 'Le SOLAARSENAL': The Solaar Difference

Practical solutions to the problems Solaar himself has highlighted are manifest in two broad areas. The first emanates from the unmasking and challenging of stereotypical images found in mainstream rap songs, especially those influenced by US popular culture. Solaar's songs, in this respect, become more authentic in that they reflect a more local and complex French reality as opposed to the fictionalised and often glamorised worlds portrayed in other mainstream sources of popular culture. The second, closely related solution, is in the positing of Solaar's style of rap as a non-violent weapon with which to fight both social injustices and perceived inauthenticity, and, in this sense, rap does indeed become, in practice, the successor of the *chanson engagée*.

43 Potter, pp. 71–2.

3a: Challenging Rap Stereotypes: Women

The portrayal of women in rap and popular song in general is frequently explored and then challenged in Solaar's work. In 'C'est ça que les gens veulent', for example, the speaker indirectly addresses women, as well as other rap artists, asking them if they are happy with the negative female portrayals seen in rap songs: 'demande aux filles si elles aiment/ qu'on les traite comme des pouffes superficielles'. In other songs, women are directly addressed and given 'positive' messages concerning the way they should be living their lives. In 'Baby Love', for example, the speaker encourages a woman to take her time and find the right man for her, and in 'Victime de la mode' (1991) and 'Dévotion' (1994), the female audience is advised not to place too much faith in appearances or allow 'image' to rule one's life: 'l'essentiel est d'être vraiment bien dans sa peau/ la quête de l'image la laisse dans le stress'. On the one hand, the messages to, and about, women in Solaar's work are a positive change from those found in many rap—and *variétés*—songs, and suggest a pro-feminist stance. On the other hand, though, ambiguity still exists in Solaar's work, and the depiction of women is less complex and risks being more patronising than that found in, for example, Gainsbourg's. In both 'Baby Love' and 'Perfect' (1998), for instance, the speaker tells the implied female listener that she is wonderful whatever she does. In the latter song, the speaker describes the falseness of fashion and the dangers in becoming caught up in the pursuit of an imposed ideal of perfection, extolling instead the virtue of imperfections through the acknowledgment that all women are 'perfect', not just those who conform to a media image of perfection:

> Alex anorexique, pour son physique, pleure
> Elle marche avec le flash mais le flash n'est que leurre
> Y'a pas de recette, toutes uniques en fait
> Je m'adresse aux femmes vous êtes toutes: PERFECT
> [...]
> On sait que l'essentiel est d'être bien dans sa peau

This assertion is, of course, paradoxical, and the deification of all women, suggested by the claim that they are all perfect, is, in fact, another form of objectification. Similarly, in the former song, the title, repeated in the chorus, and

modified to 'petite baby love' at the end of the first two verses, suggests the infantilisation of women.

However, while the songs may fail to clearly offer an unambiguously positive image of women, they do succeed in playing with other popular cultural female portraits. The borrowing of the phrase 'baby love', for example, hints at past 'baby' songs and both the representation of women found therein and the way in which black artists were boxed in by such songs. Guthrie Ramsey, for example, draws attention to Stevie Wonder and his album *Songs in the Key of Life*: 'he [Wonder] wanted his work to be relevant to his Black Power movement-era audience, stating as early as 1973 that "we as a people are not interested in 'baby, baby' songs any more"'.[44] The original 'Baby Love', a Motown classic and hit single in 1964–5, performed by the Supremes, is a prime example of this kind of stereotyping. Solaar's nod to past 'baby, baby' songs, then, with his title 'Baby Love', at once plays with and attempts to challenge stereotypical portrayals of women and of 'black' music.

Similarly, the portrayal of women in 'Perfect' is in direct opposition to NTM's 1998 music video, 'Ma Benz' which was restricted to a post-10pm timeslot by the Conseil Supérieur de l'Audiovisuel (CSA) on the grounds that it 'degraded the image of women'.[45] The video shows black models in sexually provocative poses on a Mercedes Benz car, with the rappers at first 'fighting to get a better view of the spectacle' and later 'entwined in a sexual pose with one of the models'. Warne argues that

> from being outsiders, spectators at a party to which they were not invited, they are now participating in the realisation of their own fantasy, a participation enabled by commercial success in general, but by the material acquisition of a car, in particular. The provocative side of this celebration is the implication that the female models are simply another aspect of this material acquisition, and it was this objectification of women that brought the judgment of the CSA.[46]

While this video may well be provocative, and, as Warne argues, an example of the group NTM 'simply pushing to an exaggerated extreme one logic of

44 Ramsey, p. 2.
45 Warne, p. 117.
46 Warne, pp. 117–8.

television discourse, that is, the commercial promotion of a product via a blatant association with male sexual desire',[47] the fact remains that women are seen as objects to be fetishised and bought. Dimitriadis, in his study of young people's use of hip-hop, suggests that young males take the 'messages' they hear in rap songs seriously as lessons to help them in their interactions with women. If young people do indeed use rap songs as a means of seeing and understanding the world around them and their relationship with women, Solaar's positive images are a welcome change from NTM's and other rap groups' portrayals, both for a female rap audience and their male counterparts.

3b: Challenging Rap Stereotypes: Money

The image of money seen in Solaar's work similarly differs from that seen in rap songs in general. He refers to the false value of money and the power it has to corrupt, often linking the notion of commercialism and the falsity of money to stardom, religion and the wider dangers associated with the brash, modern, consumer society. 'L'Argent ne fait pas le bonheur' (1998) is, as the title suggests, a song in which money is portrayed as not bringing happiness. The song deals with the idea many young people living in the suburbs or *quartiers* of Paris have that money is all important; a status symbol and a way of escaping their everyday reality. The speaker in the song warns those young people, as well as the audience, that material wealth can often be a shallow substitute for real happiness:

> Parler de voitures, les meufs d'aventure
> Manucure, pédicure, vernis à base d'or
> Ils ne veulent plus de ce couplet
> L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur, ils veulent essayer

There is also a criticism of a commercial, money-based society which is depicted as brash and ultimately false in both 'Quand le soleil devient froid' (1997) and 'Cash Money' (2003). In the latter song, the criticism is of both women and men,

47 Warne, pp. 117–8.

suggesting a more balanced view of both sexes in his songs: women are not simply objects for male rappers or audiences to manipulate (as described above); nor are they exempt from making the same mistakes. In 'L'Homme qui voulait 3 milliards' (2001), there is a contrast between the value placed on the wealth and riches seen in the US ('Beverley Hills', 'Bill Gates') and the value in some of the poorer suburbs in France ('J'accepte Francs Suisses, Yens et Deutsch Marks/ pour faire construire dans ma cité un putain de skate park'). The inflated status of money in parts of the US is reflected even in the poorer parts of France, and indeed of the world, which in turn leads to a general exaggeration of the real and perceived values of money. In 'RMI' (2001), for example, there is a comment on the seeming necessity for young people to purchase merchandise, even if the reality is that 'les familles sont souvent proches du RMI'. Solaar's challenges to the glamorisation of money and the exploitation of women as seen above are indeed a new departure for the rap genre in France. The images he challenges, however, may be more complex than is first thought. Potter uses his study of black vernaculars and the notion of 'signifying' to suggest that seemingly offensive images—and he examines images of violence in particular—in rap songs, are, in fact, a means for otherwise marginalised members of society to 'frame and mobilise larger questions of power relations':[48]

> Ignorant of black vernaculars and the [signifying] mode, many [...] listeners have reacted against what seems to them an obscene and violent discourse, and yet in their discomfort what they also don't hear is the real political polemic which speaks through this mode. Or, in a no less problematic manner, other listeners have taken rap as a safety-sealed packet of titillating hostility, its imagery feeding their stereotypes of black culture as intrinsically violent.[49]

Potter makes a convincing case for using the theory of 'signifying' to explain the violent, anti-women and pro-money images in rap songs. However, the theory is only truly effective if the rap audiences are also privy to the strategies employed by the artists to whom they are listening, and if, through this complicity, artist and audience can indeed challenge, and possibly undermine, power imbalances in society. Self-consciousness is, therefore, an effective strategy in making

48 Potter, p. 82.
49 Potter, pp. 83–4.

audiences aware of the potentially powerful messages contained in rap songs, and Solaar exploits its effectiveness by making his strategies transparent, as well as by offering new solutions for his listeners.

3c: Rap as a Non-Violent Weapon: Authentic Voices and Didacticism

Solaar's rap is portrayed as a weapon for empowerment through the projection of more authentic voices than those found in other, more mainstream, rap music. Similarly, his work offers a voice to members of society who are not usually represented in the mainstream media. Many of these songs can be considered more 'narrative' than obviously 'reflexive' or self-conscious, but, as in Renaud's work, the fact that Solaar's songs consistently present characters in different ways to other songs in the same genre *is* reflexive in that his songs challenge notions of what rap is, in terms of both content and style.

'Armand est mort' (1991), for example, gives a human view of, and a voice to, a social outsider who dies, as the song follows the bad luck that put him on the streets. There is a reproachful tone at the end of each verse aimed at both the listener and the social institutions who are responsible for taking care of vulnerable members of society: 'il est trop tard pour s'intéresser à son triste sort/ Armand est mort'. On the one hand, this song gives people in a similar situation a voice, but it also emphasises the individual's and government's role in listening to people like 'Armand' before it is too late. Similarly, 'Dégâts collatéraux' (2001) gives voice to the French 'ghettos' in a similar way to Renaud's 'Dans mon HLM' did in the 1980s. The voice heard through the lyrics, and through the voice of the singer in the form of Solaar, is an authentic one in the sense that it is coming from within rather than from the outside and simply looking in. As further proof of the speaker knowing the neighbourhood, there are frequent allusions to popular culture in the form of names of drinks, play-things, graffiti, that can be found in the ghetto ('tables de ping-pong', 'murs lézardés Art Déco tendance Viêt-cong', '1664, 33, pastis et 8.6').

At times, this 'authentic' voice not only helps promote rap as a peaceful weapon to combat social ills, but also challenges the glamorisation of violence

through painting a more realistic picture of the perpetrators of circumstances surrounding urban violence. 'Arkansas' (2001), for example, is a character song in which the speaker takes the voice of Steve Carter, an eight-year-old boy who shoots and kills two people. There are obvious similarities between the characters and situation in the song and the events at Columbine High School, Colorado, in 1999. In what is now widely termed the Columbine High School Massacre, two students, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, shot dead 12 of their fellow students as well as one teacher, and injured a further 24, before committing suicide. The shootings were widely reported in the media, and violent video games and music were suggested as possible triggers for the attack. While Solaar's song refers directly to violent shootings, and the first-person narrative seems to allow listeners to engage with the child perpetrator, the direct, deadpan delivery does not suggest any kind of support for the attack, or for violence in general. Rather, it stops both the events and the child responsible from being deified, and challenges the listener to see him as a real person with whom they need to have empathy. In this sense, the song is didactic in that is encourages the listener to try to understand the motivation for such an attack, and to understand how this fictional event can be prevented from turning into reality:

> À l'âge de six ans. Mon cadeau de Noël
> Une arme en plastique réplique industrielle
> […]À l'âge de sept ans, il m'en fallait une autre.
> Malheureusement, je l'ai trouvée à qui la faute
> […] Mon père avait des armes et on tirait devant la maison
> Sur des bouteilles vides comme dans les films de John Ford
> […]
> Avec mon pote John. On patiente on boit de l'alcool
> Tapis dans les feuillages j'attends la sonnerie
> Avec un genou à terre non c'est pas des conneries
> Porté par l'adrénaline. J'arme la M16
> Rafale de balles. J'ai eu ma première victime
> [...]
> Deux morts. Onze blessés CNN parlant
> De moi Steve Carter. Enfant de huit ans.

Didacticism, as explored in Part II, is one of the ways in which *chanson* artists differentiate their genre from *variétés*. Solaar also uses didacticism to posit his variety of rap as superior to more commercial styles, while drawing attention to

the songwriting aspect of his work. There are many references, for example, to the idea of conforming to—or rebelling against—a particular scholastic model of performance and/or songwriting. In 'Dévotion' (1994), for instance, there is a comment on the structure of the song in relation to standard text-book or essay writing; the kind one learns at school: 'après le développement voici la conclusion', and in 'Zoom', the speaker asserts: 'j'entre slow sans faire de scolastique'. Scatterings of vocabulary throughout his work equally suggest this scholastic standardisation: 'il a douze phases et chaque thèse apaise', ('Nouvelle genèse',1998); 'deuxième acte', ('L'Aigle ne chasse pas les mouches', 2001); 'voilà la réalité, d'une étude pédagogique sans démagogie' ('Perfect', 1998). While many of these allusions link education with standardisation which may be seen in negative terms, in an interview with Margo Berdeshevsky, Solaar refers to the importance of his academic education in relation to his songwriting: 'I know that by the eighth phrase, there has to be shock, poetry, even the excessive. My professors taught me that there must be structure, a situation, a thesis, an antithesis, a point of view, a climax.'[50] Similarly, the importance of good scholarly writing is also echoed in the weight Solaar places on school, education and autodidacticism. In an interview in *Chorus*, for example, he discusses the importance of education in his own life and in the lives of young people in general:

> Les études, c'est hyper-important. A âge égal et à situation égale on va dire la moins bien: le chômage, celui ou celle qui a étudié saura mieux apprécier la vie, y trouver des plaisirs malgré la difficulté. Les études, qu'elles soient scolaires ou autodidactes, ça permet aussi l'autonomie. Et l'autonomie, c'est un peu de liberté.[51]

The value of education is also self-consciously alluded to in his songs. In 'Lève-toi et rap' (discussed above), for example, he tries to explain why he raps: he wants to make a difference and show young people that rap can help them

50 Margo Berdeshevsky, 'The Age of MC Solaar', *Rattapallax*, 3 (2003) <http://www.rattapallax.com/fusebox_03mcsolaar.htm> [accessed 14 June 2004] (para. 6 of 30).

51 Théfaine, para. 20 of 25.

progress in the world: 'rap, bac, fac'.[52] Education, be it through formal schooling or autodidacticism, is essential if young people want to make the most of their lives, and this is the message Solaar is transmitting with his songs. Rap can be a powerful weapon, if it is created by well-educated, linguistically skilful artists. Didacticism, then, is a way of empowering young people and, rather than imposing a standardised normality on them, it gives them a sense of independence and freedom. Sociological studies similarly suggest the autodidactic nature of rap. Desverité and Green, for example, in their study of the usage of rap in the lives of young people, suggest that rap is 'populaire, autodidacte' and that it reflects 'une volonté d'une jeunesse de se faire entendre et reconnaître, dans notre société'.[53]

3d: Rap as a Non-Violent Weapon: The Outlawed Artist

Rap music as a 'weapon' was a common leitmotiv in many early US rap songs, as Dimitriadis comments: 'there was a clear link early on in rap between the power to communicate orally and the power of a weapon. The microphone was often metaphorically referred to as both a gun and as a phallus'.[54] Lapassade and Rousselot equally suggest that one of rap's main motifs is its use as a weapon, and connect the focus of rap's attack to the struggle for racial equality in America.[55] Dimitriadis also points to the gangsta rapper's identifiable narrative:

> The violent outlaw, living his life outside of dominant cultural constraints, solving his problems through brute power and domination, is a character type with roots deep in popular American lore. Indeed, the gangster holds a very special place in [the] popular American imagination. He embodies such capitalist values as rugged individualism, rampant materialism, strength

52 The title of this song, 'Lève-toi et rap', can be interpreted as part of a complex intertextual thread. Zazie, for example, published a song entitled, 'Tais-toi et rap' (2001), in which the title line is delivered by a father in response to his son's pleas for a better life, thus similarly suggesting rap's power to change social ills. Zazie's title can itself be said to borrow from Gainsbourg's song, 'Sois belle et tais-toi' (1960), which is also the name of Marc Allegret's 1958 detective film and Delphine Seyrig's 1977 documentary film about female actresses.

53 Desverité and Green, p. 178.

54 Dimitriadis, p. 29.

55 Lapassade and Rousselot, p. 108.

> through physical force, and male domination, while he rejects the very legal structures defining that culture.[56]

Similarities certainly exist between the image of the violent outlaw painted here and those images found in both Renaud's and Gainsbourg's work. In the work of both these artists, the outlaw is closely linked to the image of the artist, as both live on the boundaries of society and see their role as commenting on and attempting to change problems they see with a society they are not fully part of. Like Renaud's portrayals, however, Solaar's work suggests that the connection between the musician and the outlaw—as drawn in US popular culture—is problematic, and Solaar does not associate himself, as a rap artist, with the violence and 'rugged individualism' of the outlaw, or indeed, the US gangsta rapper. Instead, he offers the image of rap as a non-violent weapon, and himself as a commentator and critic with a social conscience.[57] Rap music, then, can highlight social problems and in so doing give its listeners a sense of recognition and, therefore, power. Metaphoric allusions to song as a weapon can be found in many songs. 'La Concubine de l'hémoglobine' (1994), for example, highlights ignorance and fascism as two main causes of war and offers a more peaceful solution in music: 'le SOLAARSENAL est équipé de balles vocales', the self-consciousness here allowing Solaar (in a similar way to Renaud in many of his songs) to both try to make a difference and comment on the fact that he is doing just that. In this way, the comment becomes, in fact, a way of making more of a difference. Similarly, as the title suggests, 'Prose combat' (1994) also offers 'prose', songwriting and words, as a weapon to solve problems which could otherwise be dealt with through violence:

> Mon bic pratique un esthétique constat
> Une technique unique nommé le prose combat
> [...] Occasionnellement pourtant mon bic se bat
> Avec l'art subtile du prose combat
> [...] Le papa gaga a pour dada des thèses cacas
> Laarso néo-dada fait du prose combat

56 Dimitriadis, p. 29.

57 Hakwins also makes this point about MC Solaar, contending that he is a marginal 'independent observer and commentator [...] concerned about the evils of the contemporary world but not usually offering any easy solutions to them' (*Chanson*, pp. 207–8).

The connection to Dada (through the wordplay started by 'papa': 'dada' can be understood as both 'dad', spoken by a baby, and the pre-Surrealist movement), and the assertion that Solaar is, in fact, a neo-dadaist (Laarso is one of the synonyms Solaar uses for himself), suggests his wordplay has similar, artistically destructive qualities to the original movement. There is a clear connection, then, to Gainsbourg (and Renaud) here, and Solaar is, effectively, inscribing himself in the *chanson* tradition of using wordplay to both shock bourgeois sensibilities and question the ability of language to disrupt society. The power of words, music and rap, in particular, to solve problems is seen throughout Solaar's work. In 'Dakota' (1997), for example, the Solaar persona contends that, 'je suis cent fois plus dangereux qu'la vente pyramidale/ simple, social et sérieux mon idéal est cérébral/ [...] Je danse la Rumba face au K.K.K.', and in 'Les Boys bandent', the assertion is made, via a drug metaphor, that the Solaar persona has a powerful weapon in his use of the microphone: 'mon atout principal est le microphone/ mais si le verbe est herbe, je crois que j'ai de la bonne/ [...] je baigne dans la musique/ elle devance le monde, pure vibe antistatique'.

Conclusion

From the start of his career, Solaar has shown an awareness of the French popular music industry, and the place of rap within contemporary French culture. His frequent allusions to quality rap song, and his criticisms of 'fakeness' within the rap genre, suggest he is not only a music creator but also a commentator on the industry in which he is working. His work is, therefore, reflexive on many levels, in that it consciously draws attention to that industry and also to the artist's role and purpose as a 'songwriter'. Solaar offers rap as an answer not only to social problems and disenfranchised youth, but also to the waning popularity of the *chanson poétique (engagée)*. He follows very much in the footsteps of Gainsbourg and Renaud with his use of sophisticated sound, music and wordplay, and through the way he draws attention to the aesthetics of songwriting within his songs. Moreover, he inscribes himself in a specifically French *chanson* tradition in his assertions that his variety of rap has a didactic quality, and that this is what

makes his particular form of rap/*chanson* different from 'lesser' models. This can, therefore, be linked to the distinction traced in this thesis between *chanson* and *variétés*. *Chanson* artists have tried many different strategies in order to keep the *chanson* form alive and well, but one of the overriding themes in modern *chanson* is its ability to make the audience work at it. Whereas *variétés* and pop songs can appeal to a mass audience because their meaning resides on only a superficial level, *chanson* contains meanings that can be discovered by the audience with intellectual effort. Solaar, then, through his didactic, and yet, still popular and intelligent form of rap, has leapt through the door opened by Gainsbourg and is confidently asserting himself as the response to the art versus commerce dilemma. The effects of Solaar's brand of rap on the future of *chanson* in France will be more fully explored in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted ways in which self-consciousness is manifest in contemporary *chanson*, and suggested effects of that self-consciousness. Here, I want to sum up those effects, focusing, in particular, on the ways in which self-consciousness has helped to shape both notions of authenticity in *chanson* and approaches to the study of French popular music, while also suggesting the inherent limitations of my own approach.

The aim of this thesis has not been to provide the definitive work on the 'self-conscious *chanson*', as the subject is too vast for one study. Rather, its intention has been to make clear the need to examine *chanson* from a self-conscious perspective, and to inspire further research in this area. Given the fact that the study of *chanson* is still in a relatively early stage, I hope to have contributed here to the emerging body of work on the genre and to have added to the methodological tools available for its analysis. The research contained in this thesis, then, provides an insight into the self-conscious *chanson*, but does not purport to be exhaustive. The chronology chosen meant that I was able to provide a wide picture of the evolution of self-consciousness, and to suggest that certain themes are enduring within *chanson* discourse: it did, however, prevent me from examining some of those themes in more rigorous detail. The place of women, for example, within a self-conscious *chanson* discourse, is certainly worthy of further attention. Similarly, the case studies in Part III were chosen because of their original contributions to the art versus commerce debate, but they are certainly not the only artists whose work can be effectively studied from the perspective of self-consciousness. Indeed, one of my aims here is to suggest that the work of many artists would benefit from such an approach.

Self-consciousness, then, is clearly a dominant trait of modern French song: *chanson* has frequently been mirroring itself while also mirroring reality. Moreover, songs which, on the surface, seem to hold little interest for the academic because of their apparent superficiality, have contributed, through their self-consciousness, to the conception of *chanson*. *Chanson* artists are thus

entering into a dialogue, in the Bakhtinian sense, with fellow (as well as past and future) artists, audiences and critics. They are asserting their interpretation of what French song is and can be, and, ultimately, how it should be interpreted. Self-consciousness directs the critic—and the audience—away from judging artists by old standards of quality and authenticity, and invites them to listen to and analyse songs with newer, more relevant methodologies.

As Looseley has convincingly shown, *chanson* is constructed through public discourse as part of French national identity, and labels of authenticity and so on have been duly awarded to artists who seem to fit this construction (from Piaf to Hallyday). However, *chanson* artists have also been constructing their own conception of *chanson* and this does not always fit with the one promoted by the French government or academics and critics. In particular, 'authentic' *chanson* is not, in a self-conscious discourse, always connected to the 'poetic' qualities of the lyrics, nor is there a natural divide between popular song (and therefore mediocre and inauthentic: *variétés*, *yéyé*, etc.) and 'art' song (and therefore authentic: *chanson poétique (engagée)*, etc.). In fact, being popular in this discourse is seen as necessary and desirable: the trick, it would seem, is to find a way to produce songs that are both popular and meaningful. Although certain artists like Jean Ferrat and Léo Ferré, through their songs and interviews, promote *chanson* as a legitimate and timeless form of French culture, to be held up in the same way poetry is, other artists are more interested in adapting the form to respond to new public tastes. In Part III of the thesis, I showed the 'dialogue' between three of the most self-conscious artists of the past and present centuries. Each artist responds to questions raised by his predecessors and the evolving form of *chanson*, and each raises new questions himself. Many of these questions will no doubt never be fully answered, but it is through their creative responses that *chanson* artists acknowledge the debt of predecessors as well as carving out their own artistic space. In so doing, they construct an image of what *chanson* is, where it came from, and who the *chanson* artist is.

Through self-consciousness, then, an ambiguous image of *chanson* is created, at once French and worldly, intelligent and entertaining. Contemporary

chanson has thereby evolved as a distinct genre, separate both from 'Anglo-Saxon pop' and from *variétés*, as Looseley identifies:

> In the early 1960s, as *chanson* was steadily acquiring legitimacy with Brel, Brassens and Ferré, it also began to be threatened commercially by Anglo-Saxon styles of rock'n'roll, then pop. As a result, *chanson* discourse arguably began to harden into a defensive, 'distinctive' stance in which these three gifted singer-songwriters were enlisted as a national gold standard against which the 'authenticity' of other forms of popular-musical production might reliably be gauged.[1]

The 1960s is indeed a key period here, as self-consciousness from this decade onwards is a way for singer-songwriters to respond to the challenges imposed on the *chanson* genre by the influx of Anglo-American music and the related art versus commerce debate. The evolution of *chanson* as a distinct genre, then, has been brought about partly by critics, academics and governmental institutions, as Looseley has shown, but partly by *chanson* artists themselves. As made clear in Chapter 2, *chanson* artists frequently look back to a particular 'gold standard' in order to acknowledge their debt to their predecessors and carve out their own artistic space. This has resulted in a number of them being held up as '*chanson* greats', their status being reinforced with every new song dedicated to them. *Chanson* artists, though, do not seem as influenced by the holy trinity of Brel, Brassens and Ferré as critics may suggest. Although Looseley's contention that these three are revered as emblematic of French *chanson* is undoubtedly true, its truth lies in discourses found outside—and about—*chanson*. Artistic self-consciousness reveals that Charles Trenet, for instance, is a more prominent figure in the construction of *chanson* than Leo Ferré and, while Brassens is revered in both discourses, *chanson* artists refer to his musical brilliance and his 'popular' language and subject matter more than to the complexity and imagery of his lyrics.

While differences may exist in the choice of '*chanson* greats', the role of *chanson* in both a self-conscious discourse and an institutional one is posited as distinct from the role of *variétés* or pop music. Within a self-conscious discourse, *chanson* is represented as sharing one general function of popular music in its

1 Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*, p. 203.

desire to entertain, but it can also have a more serious—and didactic—role. Indeed, because of its ability to reach a wide listening public, *chanson* is represented as having a responsibility to address issues of concern to a French audience, and to attempt to deal with realities in a complex and multi-dimensional way. If *chanson* is constructed as both entertaining and didactic, the *chanson* artist is equally portrayed as embodying a certain split personality. He (or occasionally she) is not a 'star' in the same way that pop singers or movie actors are stars, but he does need to perform to an (adoring) public. However, through performance, the *chanson* artist becomes alienated from himself, and this process is further complicated by the pressures placed on him from the music industry and his fans to conform to an image that, very often, he himself has fabricated.

The singer's relationship with the music industry is, in fact, a major concern in *chanson* discourse, and often becomes an extended metaphor to sum up the artist's, or indeed the human individual's, relationship with the consumer/ capitalist society which commodifies creativity and individuality. It is the music industry, for example, that prevents the artist from being able to produce work that can be deemed 'art' while still commercially successful. Self-consciousness in the work of artists such as Ferrat portrays an ultimately negative picture of the *chanson* artist's ability to remain an autonomous yet successful artist, and suggests no practicable response for the future of the committed artist. However, the self-consciousness in the work of the three case studies reveals a different conception of the very notion of 'the committed artist'. Gainsbourg, for example, created music that would seem to encapsulate the values associated with *chanson* while remaining commercially successful: he created popular, entertaining, didactic, and serious work, often all in one song. MC Solaar, following in the footsteps of Gainsbourg and learning the lessons provided by Renaud, is also producing work that is both entertaining and didactic. His work, too, embodies *chanson* values while differing from the songs of the 'holy trinity' in many respects. MC Solaar, in fact, goes further than even Gainsbourg or Renaud in his ability to produce song that is at once popular and politically committed, and he is still at a relatively early stage in his career. At the same time, self-

consciousness in *chanson* suggests, like the work of Brecht and Ionesco, a sense of frustration with the ability of language—and the *chanson* form—to express the human condition, which further problematises the notions of 'political' and 'committed' in this respect. Self-consciousness can, then, give the contemporary singer-songwriter an alternative, aesthetic form of 'political' action, when traditional forms of action (political parties, Sartre's *littérature engagée*, the committed songs of Ferrat, etc.) have failed, and when conventional (non-reflexive) song is revealed as an inadequate art form, as it is in both the work of Gainsbourg and Renaud. In this sense, the political can be understood in two broad ways in relation to *chanson*. First, self-consciousness points to an ideological construction of *chanson*, similar to the work of Brecht or Godard. Second, and more importantly, it suggests, like Sartre's description of New Theatre, that the aesthetic can, in fact, be political, and that challenging the *chanson* art form is, in itself, a political act, regardless of the form's potential impotence. This has important ramifications for the study of *chanson*.

Studying *chanson* from a self-conscious perspective, then, allows a new way of reading modern French songs and provides a new interpretative *grille*. New, and possibly more complex, interpretations of songs can be reached when analysing them from a self-conscious standpoint, and therefore going beyond the obvious thematic preoccupations. The issues raised by *chanson* artists also imply that new methodologies are necessary when approaching *chanson*. Self-consciousness, for example, suggests that seeing *chanson* as a high-cultural form is inadequate because it is ultimately a popular art form, and that trying to 'elevate' it to poetic status simply does not work. That is not to say that lyrical competence should be ignored: *chanson* artists certainly place value on the written text, but to compare the lyrics to poetry and thus impose an already-established criterion onto *chanson* simply misses 'the point', to borrow Hebdige's words.[2] *Chanson* is first and foremost a sub-genre of popular music not of poetry and needs to be judged as such. As the Gainsbourg persona implies in his dislike of 'pseudo-intellectual' left-bank *ACI*s, being an intellectual singer-songwriter is

2 Hebdige, p. 129. Hebdige is discussing certain critics' insistence on trying to elevate cultural texts to the level of 'art' and says that 'one cannot help but feel that this misses the point'.

not the aim here: being a successful popular 'artist' is.[3] All three artists in the case studies have arguably achieved this. As a result of their creative responses to the art versus commerce debate, newer artists will no doubt learn to similarly *retourner* their *veste[s]* in order to respond to current cultural debates and keep the evolutionary *chanson* form alive and well.

3 Gainsbourg alluded to this during his interview with Glaser, *Discorama*, 3 January 1965.

Bibliography of Works Consulted

I list here all material I refer to in the thesis, as well as those books, articles, albums and DVDs that have influenced it in some way. The discographies for the three case studies in Part III include only the original, published albums—see the appropriate chapters for details on where to find full discographies for these artists.

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Songs, Albums and DVDs[2]

I list here all songs analysed, or referred to in detail, in the thesis, in alphabetical order by principal performer. For each bibliographic reference, I have given the title of the individual song, followed by details of an album (or EP) on which it is available. Given the wide variation in song dates, the album cited is not necessarily the first album on which it appeared—the date of the release of the

1 Other song lyrics were obtained either from album sleeves or from the website www.paroles.net. When lyrics were taken from this website, they were cross-checked with the recording in question and, in cases of discrepancy between the printed lyrics and album versions, preference was given to the album version.

2 At present, it is not possible to download music from legal internet sites such as www.fnacmusic.fr (the download site of the national audio-visual store, La FNAC), www.virginmega.fr (the download site of Virgin France), www.universalmusic.fr (the download site of Universal Music France) unless resident in France. Such protectionist measures make it difficult for persons living outside of France to obtain single songs or non-export albums, and seem to undermine attempts made by sections of the French government and the music industry to ensure French song receives international attention.

individual song is given in parentheses after the song title. I have, to the best of my ability, given complete and current details for each song or album, including details of reference numbers. For some entries, the reference number corresponds to the number printed on the album sleeve and generally adheres to the following format: 848 944–2; for other entries, the number corresponds to the codes used by record stores such as amazon.com (e.g., B000006SOB).

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Selected Press and Online Articles

This section contains only those articles referred to in the thesis. Many more relevant press articles on individual singer-songwriters are in existence, but are too diverse and numerous to cite here.[3]

3 Le Monde index (available in most university libraries) is a good place to start when looking for press articles on singer-songwriters. Most online newspaper archives require a consultation fee, but *L'Express*, at the time of writing, still provides free access to its online archives. *Chorus* (see 'Websites') also provides free online consultation of a selected number of past editions and articles, and specific back issues of the magazine can be ordered via a form obtained from the website.

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