**Cancan**

**Summary**

The cancan is a popular dance form intimately associated with the Parisian context in which it emerged and underwent much of its early development. From its origins as a French social dance practice in the early nineteenth century, the dance shifted to a more performative mode of presentation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The nineteenth-century cancan involved both male and female dancers performing either solo or in couples, improvising around the quadrille form. The dance attracted the attention of the writers and artists of an incipient Parisian modernism in the 1830s and 1840s, and this connection was reinvigorated in the 1880s and 1890s, particularly in the bohemian culture that centred on the Moulin Rouge. The familiar stereotype of the cancan as a female kick-line refers primarily to the form of the dance that emerged in the early twentieth century, echoing the development of modern mass culture. Later representations of the cancan, particularly in American films of the 1950s, referenced the Moulin Rouge of the 1890s and its connections with both the cancan and the post-Impressionist modern art of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec.

**Beginnings**

The cancan emerged in the 1820s in working-class social dance venues called *guinguettes* on the outskirts of Paris. It was viewed by contemporary writers such as Auguste Luchet and Louis Huart as part of the emergence of modern Paris in which class and gender identities were being reformulated, and classical aesthetics were called into question. Initially, the dance was a variation on the set figures of the quadrille, a social dance performed by four couples in a square formation based on the older form of the *contredanse*. Cancan variations, performed by one or both partners, consisted of improvisations which deviated from the quadrille’s ballet-influenced steps and graceful bodily deportment by using isolated leg, arm and head movements. Wilder versions were given the name *chahut* (uproar), and were considered indecent by the French authorities. The dancers may have drawn inspiration from the many foreign dances performed in the Parisian popular theatres of the 1820s and 1830s. These included the Spanish *cachucha*, a dance using castanets and swaying or twisting hips usually performed as a female solo, and the Haitian *chica*, a dance in which male and female partners approached each other and withdrew, imitating courtship. The earliest dancers of the cancan and *chahut* were predominantly working-class men and bourgeois male students, but some female working-class dancers are also documented in the late 1820s. By the 1840s, the cancan had become more closely associated with female dancers; however, men regularly performed the dance until the early twentieth century.

**Cabaret Revival**

The cancan continued to be danced in public balls in Paris throughout the mid-nineteenth century, during which time celebrity *cancaneuses* developed the cancan repertoire by assimilating steps from the popular *polka*, a couple dance from Bohemia, and performing more virtuosic movements, such as the high kick and *le grand écart* (the splits or jump-splits). In the 1880s and 1890s the dance underwent a revival in the cabarets of Montmartre, which sought to create a liberal, bohemian atmosphere that harked back to Paris of the 1830s and 1840s. At the Moulin Rouge, male and female dancers were employed to perform the cancan (often called the *chahut* or *quadrille naturaliste* in this period) on the dance floor, surrounded by the spectators. Their performances maintained the quadrille formation, incorporating solo improvisations, which allowed dancers to showcase individual skills, such as *le port d’armes*, in which one hand held the leg in an upright position.

The cabarets attracted modernist artists and writers, many of whom incorporated the cancan into their work. Most famously, Toulouse-Lautrec created a number of posters and paintings based on his regular visits to the Moulin Rouge, featuring dancers such as Jane Avril, La Goulue and Valentin le désossé. The writer Guy de Maupassant also frequented the Parisian cabarets, and the quadrille and *chahut* appear in his short stories. During this period, the cancan became increasingly associated with French identity, and particularly Revolutionary notions of liberty, both by French commentators and the many tourists who flocked to the Moulin Rouge.

**Legacies**

In the late 1890s, the Moulin Rouge declined in popularity, and in 1903 it was converted from a dance-hall into a variety theatre showing revues. The rise of the revue, with its focus on multiple, identically costumed female dancers, signalled a transformation of the cancan in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Individual improvisations around the quadrille were replaced by exclusively female precision kick-lines or chorus lines performing choreographed steps in unison or canon. For critics André Levinson and Siegfried Kracauer, the mechanical precision of the 1920s chorus line epitomised the effects of modern mass production techniques on the human body. Possible influences on the development of the kick-line include *The Black Crook*, a production featuring a Parisian ballet troupe that premiered in New York in 1866, and a parody of the cancan in Lydia Thompson’s burlesque play *Ixion* (1868). John Tiller drilled the kick-line into disciplined unison in the 1890s, while the Barrison Sisters added cheeky humour. The female kick-line would become the archetypal form of the cancan, often depicted in later cinema and theatre as an embodiment of modernity.

Clare Parfitt-Brown

**List of works**

Operetta

*Orpheus in the Underworld* (1858) Composer: Jacques Offenbach

*La Vie Parisienne* (1866) Composer: Jacques Offenbach

*The Merry Widow* (1905) Composer: Franz Lehár

*Die keusche Suzanne* (1910) Composer: Jean Gilbert

Ballet

*La Boutique Fantasque* (1919) Choreographer: Léonide Massine; Composer: Gioacchino Rossini; Orchestration: Ottorino Respighi

*Le Beau Danube* (1924) Choreographer: Léonide Massine; Composers: Johann Strauss I, Josef Strauss, Johann Strauss II; Orchestration: Roger Desorimière

The Bar at the Folies Bergère (1934) Choreographer: Ninette de Valois; Composer: Emmanuel Chabrier

*Gaîté Parisienne* (1938) Choreographer: Léonide Massine; Composer: Jacques Offenbach; Orchestration: Manuel Rosenthal

Stage Musicals

*The Black Crook* (1866) Director: William Wheatley; Choreographer: David Costa

*Oklahoma!* (1943) Composers: Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II; Choreographer: Agnes de Mille

*Paint Your Wagon* (1951) Lyrics and music: Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe; Choreographer: Agnes de Mille

*Can-Can* (1953) Lyrics and music: Cole Porter; Choreographer: Michael Kidd

*Gigi* (1973) Lyrics and music: Alan J. Lerner and Frederick Loewe; Choreographer: Onna White

Film

*Ella Lola, a la Trilby* (1898) Thomas A. Edison, Inc.

*A Nymph of the Waves* (1900?) American Mutoscope and Biograph Company

*Line of women dancing can-can at Moulin Rouge, France* (1902)

*Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902) Director: Edwin S. Porter

*Dance, Franchonetti Sisters* (1903) American Mutoscope and Biograph Company

*Le Fantôme du Moulin Rouge* (The Phantom of the Moulin Rouge) (1925) Director: René Clair

*Nana* (1926) Director: Jean Renoir

*Moulin Rouge* (1928) Director: Ewald André Dupont

*An American in Paris* (1951) Director: Vincente Minnelli; Choreographer: Gene Kelly

*Moulin Rouge* (1952) Director: John Huston; Dance Director: William Chappell

*French Cancan* (1954) Director: Jean Renoir; Choreographer: Claude Grandjean

*Can-Can* (1960) Director: Walter Lang; Dance Stager: Hermes Pan

*Lautrec* (1998) Director: Roger Planchon

*Moulin Rouge!* (2001) Director: Baz Luhrmann; Choreographer: John O’Connell

*Midnight in Paris* (2011) Director: Woody Allen

**References and Further Reading**

Cordova, S. D. (1999) *Paris Dances: Textual Choreographies of the Nineteenth-Century Novel*, San Francisco and London: International Scholars Publications.

Gasnault, F. (1986) *Guinguettes et lorettes: Bals publics à Paris au XIXe siècle*, Paris: Aubier.

Mariel, P. and Trocher, J. (1961) *Paris Cancan*, London: Charles Skilton Ltd.

Pessis, J. and Crepineau, J. (1990) *The Moulin Rouge*, New York: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited; Stroud St. Martin's Press.

Price, D. (2010) *Cancan!*, Second Edition, United Kingdom: Cancan Publishing.

**Paratextual Material**

Images have been sent as a separate file.