

Gainsbourg over Piaf: The Gendered Pantheon of *Chanson* Artists in French Music Biopics

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Along with a few other notable artists such as the “Brel-Brassens-Ferré trinity” (Looseley 2003: 68), the indisputable diva Edith Piaf and pioneer Charles Trenet, Serge Gainsbourg has come to epitomize French *chanson*. But *chanson* was always more than a solo act; in its earliest and “purest” form, it was actually viewed as an authentic and specifically French artistic expression opposed to commercial Anglo-American popular music (63–86). It is now a discursive trope for French popular music, sung in French, but no longer in sharp opposition to other types of music identified as foreign (Lebrun 2014; Rudent 2018). Despite the visible effects of globalization and internationalization, this metonymic relationship between *chanson*, the ACI [“*auteur-compositeur-interprète*,” equivalent to the singer-songwriter], and French national identity is still operative nowadays (see Cordier 2014; Hawkins 2000; Looseley 2003; 2018). In recent years, it was even showcased in a number of music biopics such as Olivier Dahan’s *La Môme*¹ (2007), Johan Sfar’s *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* (2011), Florent Siri’s *Cloco* (2012), Lisa Azuelos’s *Dalida* (2017), and Matthieu Amalric’s *Barbara* (2017).

In the broad context of media convergence (Jenkins 2006), the resurgence of interest for such singers (and singer-songwriters) in France might be interpreted as a sign of a general need for comforting narratives carried by individual characters who came to represent collective values. By tracing exceptional individual trajectories, Dahan, Sfar, Siri, Azuelo, and Amalric revisit the nation’s past resorting to a melodramatic, teleological vision of history. Their depictions of the lives and careers of Edith Piaf, Serge Gainsbourg, Claude François, Dalida, and Barbara present a coherent—albeit glorified—image of France’s recent history to both a domestic and a global audience. In tune with the biographic boom characteristic of the postmodern era, they also portray the *chanson* star as an exceptional individual, evolving in a mass culture context, whose life is both glamorous and tragic. Finally, they reinforce what I believe to be a clear gender divide in French popular music—and, more broadly, in French culture. This chapter aims at showing how *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* turned Piaf and Gainsbourg into heroic national figures, building on the myth of the modern artist and on the gender differences pervasive in the usual discourse on *chanson*. As I will argue,

these two films contributed to expand and transform the figure of the *chanson* artist associated with the 1950s and 1960s into a contemporary transmedia character, mainly male, situated at the highest end of the esthetic assessment scale in contemporary French popular culture.

The *Chanson* Artists: “Poets” of Post-War France

Despite its being a model for the singer-songwriter as a genre (Marc & Green 2016: 11), the figure of the ACI is culturally specific due to its nearness with the French literary and poetic traditions as well as its opposition to foreign music. Throughout history, literature and poetry enjoyed a highly symbolic value in France. Born in the so-called era of Paris’s “*cabarets rive gauche*,” the ACI transformed the archetype of the modern poet and placed it at the helm of the burgeoning French music industry while maintaining some “folk” values (craft vs industry, sincerity, etc.). As previous research has shown, the proximity between *chanson* and poetry goes back a long way and was enacted with the award of the National Poetry Prize to Georges Brassens in 1967 (Cantaloube-Ferrieu 1981; Marc 2017; Papanikolau 2007). From that moment on, the ACI became an avatar of the “*poète moderne*,” that is, a poet fully committed to his art, assuming Baudelaire’s conception of the modern artist—“a singular man, whose originality is so powerful and clear-cut that it is self-sufficing” (1869b: 58). But it also drew on the myth of the “*poète maudit*”² who lives a tormented life, marked by an exceptional talent and excesses, misfortunes, and self-destruction. Each in their own manner, *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg* perpetuate this myth.

At a time when France was undergoing profound changes in the wake of Americanization and modernization, the Left-Bank singer-songwriter represented a compromise between high art (in the form of poetry) and the burgeoning mass culture. Artists such as Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel—and, to a lesser extent, early Serge Gainsbourg—were extremely popular while often perceived as “true” poets. These solo artists, who started their careers performing in small venues, crystallized the *chanson* genre. They underwent a process of progressive legitimization that included the publication of their lyrics in the “*Poètes d’aujourd’hui*” and “*Poésie et chanson*” book collections by Seghers (Bonnafé 1965; Clouzet 1974; Rioux 1969). In spite of (or thanks to) his provocative attitude, Gainsbourg’s reputation as a major music artist and a poet was indeed well established at the moment of his death, when President François Mitterrand equated him with Baudelaire and Apollinaire (Simmons 2001: ix).

From the outset, the ACI model was overtly masculine. *Chanson* and the French music industry were as male-dominated as French society and culture were. Very few female ACIs emerged in the “classic era” (Barbara, Véronique Sanson, Anne Sylvestre). In turn, women were traditionally confined to the role of “mere” singers. Very often, they adopted a tragic, miserabilist persona, notably in the case of *chanteuses réalistes* such as Damia, Fréhel, and Edith Piaf (Dutheil-Pessin 2004). However, Piaf did not only epitomize this tradition: she also became one of the most prestigious *chanson* artists altogether, overcoming a number of odds—in addition to being a woman, she



neither wrote nor composed her own material. As a result, the songs she performed were, like those written by her singer-songwriter counterparts, published by Seghers in 1974 (i.e., a decade after her death—Costaz 1974).

Nowadays, the great figures of *chanson* convey complex, sometimes ambivalent symbolism, including a taste for the “great” French poetic tradition, enhanced by the individual and collective nostalgic impulses specific to contemporary French culture, together with the pleasures associated with the accessibility of “good” popular music. In the first decades of the twenty-first century, their iconic status has increasingly been shaped by “celebrity culture,” which became so pervasive in France (Dakhli 2010). In addition, one may note a growing tendency to “feminize” *chanson*, not only in terms of an increased visibility and presence of women in music professions, but also of a questioning of heteropatriarchal representations in the *chanson* repertoire.

In this context, Piaf and Gainsbourg remain iconic figures of French *chanson*. Piaf became a national myth during her lifetime, an “invention” which would only grow stronger after her death (Looseley 2015: 83–132), and through which she would come to represent both France and *chanson*. A symbol of *chanson réaliste*, she went down in history as a tragic popular diva, a figure who “teaches us all, men and women, to recognize and assume the pathos we have in common” (120). In a different register, Gainsbourg was capable of combining the esthetics of *chanson poétique* and Anglo-American influences in a brilliant synthesis (Julien 2018), and he turned out to be an inescapable musical reference in France and abroad. As is usually the case with male ACIs, the way he is perceived is more multi-faceted, and often associated with artistic and intellectual innovation—even transgression. Again, the divide between emotion and reason seems to be very much at play. In their contemporary after-lives, music biopics *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* contributed to consolidate Piaf’s and Gainsbourg’s status and their association with pathos and artistic genius, respectively. In order to better understand their cinematographic avatars, I will now linger over some of the general characteristics of music biopics.

The Solo Artist in Cinema

Over the past decade, French cinema’s craze for portraying stars of *chanson* has been framed within the global “revival” of music biopics (Marshall & Kongsgaard 2012). These films also signal a new cinematographic trend which has recently aroused much critical interest (Brown & Vidal 2014; Cartmell & Polasek 2020; Custen 1992), fitting within the context of a global taste for the biographical mode in literature and culture in general. The main character is no longer a great man (a statesman, a scientist, a sportsman, etc.), but a singer-songwriter or the leader of a rock band who may not achieve progress for the community *per se*, but creates memorable, “great” popular music instead. Such films share with classical biopics a teleological vision of history, based on the “future perfect tense” (Brown & Vidal 2014: 6). Despite the influence of avant-garde esthetics, most of them resort to conventional—consensual—narratives and tend to favor a melodramatic mode.





According to Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard (2012), music biopics constitute a good example of the “rock ideology” (Keightley 2001), which combines the spectacular and “mass” character of popular music with elements of romantic and modernist esthetics in an individual figure—the aforementioned singer-songwriter or charismatic leader of a rock band. In this light, “good” popular music is the “authentic” expression of an author, an individual genius comparable to a “*poète moderne*” of *chanson*, capable of creating innovative, original, autonomous, self-referential, and ironic works. Moreover, most cinematographic biographies present what may be described as a “gender divide”: few of them focus on exemplary women (Custen 1992), and when they do, they usually adopt a sentimental or erotic perspective (Bingham 2010). Music biopics do share this tendency. When addressing female artists, they cast them as victims, emphasizing aspects of their love lives and personal tragedies rather than focusing on their music.

In France, the global biopic phenomenon has often been met with expressions of contempt toward yet another symptom of Americanization. Raphaëlle Moine identifies three periods in the genre’s history: the classical *film biographique* in the 1930s and 1940s, the “heritage” cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, and a third wave that originated with *La Môme* in 2007. This last successful trend is characterized by “the culmination of a gradual move away from the maxim *historia magistra vitae est* [‘history is the teacher of life’], which affects both the type of person chosen and the way in which they are depicted” (2014: 57). This new type of French biopic’s focus is no longer on an artist associated with high culture or politics, but rather a show-business celebrity, related to what she calls the “*peopolisation*” of French culture (2017: 127–8). Beginning with *La Môme*, and followed by other music biopics, I argue that this new protagonist is now epitomized by the popular music star, in line with a tendency to institutionalize French popular music. Following Dahan’s internationally acclaimed film, the music biopic has now become the paradigm of the biopic in France—and, because of its commercial success, one of the paradigms of contemporary French cinema abroad.

To get back to Moine, she also addresses the gender divide in French biographic cinema, and analyzes how *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* perpetuate gender stereotypes when it comes to represent artistic creation (105). In the following section, I will address these films as the epitomes of the French music biopic in terms of esthetic ideology and the construction of national and gender identities via what might be described as a process of “pantheonization” of popular music artists.³

Gainsbourg over Piaf? France’s Favorite Song

La Môme and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* were both critically and commercially successful films. They received several national and international awards, including an Oscar that went to Marion Cotillard for best female actress. In the process, they contributed to make Piaf and Gainsbourg emblematic figures of French popular music—and, by extension, of the entire French nation—to viewers in and outside France. Still, Piaf and Gainsbourg were not only two of the most renowned and beloved French popular





singers: they were also the “least exemplary” if one considers their notorious history of substance abuse. Their biopics insist on their extraordinary talent while emphasizing their self-destructive behavior, which reinforces their tragic legends. In this respect, the films follow the narrative and esthetic structure of American mainstream biopics (Moine 2017: 100–5), that is, the intermingling of the personal with the professional, as well as artistic success with individual misery.

Using different narrative strategies, both films start with the central figures’ marginal origins (Piaf is a street child, abandoned by her mother, forced into labor by her father, and Gainsbourg the son of Jewish Russian immigrants who was persecuted during Nazi occupation). From there, they eventually triumph over fate thanks to their extraordinary talent. In fact, their musical trajectories as well as their progress toward success and fame are secondary in comparison with the central plot focusing on their love life and addictions. This connection between suffering and “genius” clearly echoes the myth of the “*poète maudit*”—in Piaf’s case, pain, whether physical or emotional, receives far more attention than her musical achievements.

Despite their relying on the generic (global) biopic formula, the way *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* portray the musical artist is specifically framed within the French cultural context. Gainsbourg and Piaf are presented as visionary artists who came to embody the esthetics of modernity (originality and sophistication, sincerity, autonomy) within popular music. Several scenes show them in the process of creating musical masterpieces immediately identifiable by the French public (Piaf is seen rehearsing and performing, Gainsbourg composing and writing), and the focus is kept on the artist rather than the public’s reaction—even though *La Môme* does show the audience’s fascination with Piaf’s live performances.

On the same train of thought, the differences between the Anglo-American rock star/singer-songwriter and *chanson*’s ACI are particularly salient. As hinted above, *chanson* defined itself in opposition to imported music. Along with the use of the French language, Frenchness is explicitly highlighted through locations and other referential elements, chosen over the most typically French images (Parisian streets and roofs, etc.).⁴ What is more, “La Marseillaise” occupies a central place in both films. Piaf’s musical “revelation” as an extraordinary singer takes place when the child Edith sings the national anthem in front of an improvised audience in the streets of Belleville. In *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)*, the process of creating and recording “Aux Armes et cætera” (his reggae version of that same anthem), and the ensuing public controversy, are among the most detailed musical moments in the film.

The films also tend to deal with France’s recent history from an unquestioning perspective, ignoring social and political circumstances altogether. Escaping Nazi persecution, for example, is presented as a dare game for young Gainsbourg. In Piaf’s case, the war is simply not mentioned, although her activity during those years is well-documented.⁵ This historical vagueness, though clearly rooted in the French context, plays with the audience’s collective memory by including well-known characters in the French star system. This contributes to create a unifying, comforting narrative of the past based on individual stories rather than political and social facts and trends (Moine 2017: 122–6).



In her 2014 essay on the “contemporary French biopic,” Raphaëlle Moine analyzes the adaptation of the genre to the French socio-cultural context as a sign of the primacy of the “culture of the individual,” coupled with an increasing focus of the French media on the intimacy of ordinary people and celebrities (127–8). This break with the traditionally collective values of the *République* was pointed out by other critics who saw the contemporary biopic as a symbol of the triumph of liberal, individualistic, and capitalist ideology (Pigoullé 2011). Nevertheless, this ideology also shows through traditional French historical writing. For the nation’s consensual and *popular* history is not primarily the story of social movements: it is rather a history based on the lives of great men [“*grands hommes*”] who embody France’s values and pride. The list of such exemplary figures, mostly male, may change depending on the historical period and political spectrum (Amalvi 1998), but the country’s hegemonic vision of its own history is not based on the acknowledgment of the role of collective actors and social groups. This brings to mind De Gaulle’s plan to achieve unity through a shared vision of historical grandeur relying on exemplary characters belonging either to the Ancien Régime or the Republican period (Burguière & Revel 1993: 509). In a time of political and social crisis in France, the reinvented lives of Piaf and Gainsbourg as adapted to the screen bring comfort to and memorialize the nation (Pigoullé 2011).

The Emotional Performer and the “Total Artist”

Another striking characteristic of *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* is their shared binary, even sexist vision of the musical artist. In this heavily gendered formula, the male artist is the creator (composer and lyricist), while the female artist, as a performer, assumes a reproductive role. This bias was pointed out by Moine too, who identifies a gender divide in biopics, where women are usually depicted as suffering, pathetic characters (2017: 101–6).

In essence, *La Môme* tells the story of an exceptionally talented woman marked by misfortune and tragedy. Life episodes are related to musical sequences (and vice versa), as the public follows the central character down her path to success and self-destruction. Underpinned by Marion Cotillard’s convincing characterization, Dahan’s account confirms and reinforces Piaf’s tragic legend. Like a chronicle of a death foretold, it shows her progressing toward her tragic end, foreshadowed from the first scene in a New York setting—which simultaneously points to her Frenchness and international dimension. The story is then arranged in a more linear fashion, with a first part devoted to her miserable childhood and her discovery by Louis Leplée. This part is followed by her encounters with the two other men who will eventually help her become Piaf (the artist): Raymond Asso and Marcel Cerdan—the former helped her hone her performer’s skills, the latter was her one great love. A second part then invites the audience to witness the rise of the star, along with a string of excesses and dependence, both on men and drugs. In short, Piaf is presented as a diamond in the rough polished by men (Leplée, Asso, Cerdan), a performer with portentous qualities, but dependent on the creative talent of others—a prodigious diva not only conducted, but fully modeled by



her Pygmalions. Following the masculinist diva's tradition, stemming from Homer's Sirens, Piaf's characterization is closer to that of a monster than that of an actual woman (Leonardi & Pope 1996: 13). While she may not be presented as a menacing creature, the camera keeps her bathed in an expressionist, hyperbolic light, especially during her performances. Her white face, overly red lips, huge forehead, clumsiness, and excesses clash with traditional, heteronormative, and attractive femininity.

Piaf's voice—like that of a Siren—is indeed able to move her audience to the extreme, drawing endless applause and tears, as the shots of the public's reactions during the concert scenes reveal. Her talent lies in that voice, that is, in her emotional rather than intellectual power. And, however extraordinary she may be, the latter power does depend on others—she is a mere vessel for somebody else's vision. The interview she gives to a young American journalist on the beach, referring to love as the ultimate goal and purpose of life, confirms her fundamentally sentimental nature. The fact that she never attains love in the film places her alongside other unwomanly divas, whose talent was also their doom. And yet, the film omits the fact that the “real” Piaf was a sexually emancipated woman, who had many lovers, and that she herself acted as a Pygmalion for several young men who later became major *chanson* stars such as Yves Montand and Charles Aznavour. Put differently, Dahan's film refuses to acknowledge the empowered figure of Piaf.

Conversely, *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* is intended to be a “story”—not a realistic account, but a fiction based on the life of Serge Gainsbourg. The film emphasizes his moments of glory and, above all, his love affairs with female icons of French pop culture (Brigitte Bardot, Jane Birkin). The fictional nature of the film is achieved by the inclusion of animation elements corresponding to imaginary characters: the caricature of the Jew, who becomes the artist's alter ego (“La Gueule”), and also Sfar's graphic incursion in the plot, which introduces a distancing effect from the supposed fidelity of the portrait, especially in the first part of the film (before Gainsbourg meets Jane Birkin). The reference to a “heroic life” in the film's title is in line with the French tradition of distinguishing the country's heroes, honoring those exceptional beings who embody the homeland, being set up as role models for the national community.

Throughout the film, Gainsbourg is associated with two fundamental characteristics: he is a seducer, and a creator. Both make him an exceptional being whose extraordinary nature is highlighted from the start. As the international trailer puts it: “his lovers were legendary,” “his music was visionary,” and “his life was extraordinary.” The narrative insists on two disadvantages that the young Serge Gainsbourg had to deal with: his ugliness, and his Jewishness. Overcoming both, he not only managed to escape the Nazi genocide, but went on to seduce extremely beautiful women, unattainable to most. The film also highlights his artistic talent from an early age, showing him as a painter, a poet, a pianist and, finally, a musical genius. Ample footage is dedicated to his creative process. Musical sequences show him composing alone, manipulating young singer France Gall, or writing “Je t'aime... moi non plus” for Brigitte Bardot—his muse of the moment. In other scenes, shot in a recording studio or at a concert, he is presented as the sole creator of a work that will go down in history. Visionary, transgressive, brilliant: Gainsbourg is a “total artist” whose innate creativity is stimulated by a succession of



muses and breakups. It is also worth noting that the child Gainsbourg and “La Gueule” appear in several scenes portraying him as an adult, as a way to suggest the survival of the child genius and the rebel in the face of conventionalism. An interesting parallel could be made with “Le Peintre de la vie moderne,” where Baudelaire defines genius as “childhood recovered at will, a childhood now equipped for self-expression, with mature faculties and an analytic spirit which permit him to set in order the mass of raw material he has involuntarily accumulated” (1869b: 62).

If one compares the two films, it appears that Piaf and Gainsbourg are both depicted as exceptionally talented personalities who reap the public’s favor while being, at the same time, victims of their addictions. In the end, these films establish an artistic hierarchy between the performer and the creator, as well as regards to gender. Piaf does not write her songs: she performs what others write for her. Only twice in *La Môme* does she make decisions regarding her career and repertoire. Her creation is her performance, valued for its expressive and emotional dimension. As the film goes to great lengths to show her constant suffering, her unhappy life is presented as the source of the pathos found in her songs, and a reason for her success. As for Gainsbourg, he is portrayed as the absolute creator of his work, a work that does not rely on expressiveness and naturalness, but on the tongue-in-cheek quality of his lyrics, on musical and literary intertextuality, intelligence, and double entendre. In contrast to Piaf’s esthetic simplicity and straightforwardness, he emerges as a complex, contradictory being, free from social conventions; he has no second thoughts about leaving his first wife and daughters, indulges in sex scandals and acts as a consummate seducer who overcomes all losses—unlike Piaf, who is the victim of romantic love, utterly destroyed, physically and emotionally, by the accidental death of Cerdan. He even has multiple personalities, goes through several transformations, and takes advantage of his failures to reinvent himself while fashioning female artists such as France Gall, Brigitte Bardot (at least, musically speaking), and Jane Birkin.

All things considered, *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* reveal a gender divide that reproduces the patriarchal binary schemes in which the active subject is male, while the woman, even when exceptional, plays a secondary role, subordinated to the will of others, whether esthetically or sentimentally. The sexist bias, pointed out by Moine in these two films and other French biopics about women (2017: 100–6), reinforces the traditional hierarchy that still prevails in representations of mainstream artists in contemporary France. Originality, intelligence, transgression, and autonomy are shown as masculine virtues, while dependence, sentimentality, and pathos are all feminine attributes.

Conclusion

Focusing on two of the most successful and widely loved French singers, *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* exemplify the way film and popular music feed off each other in their respective capacities for nostalgic evocation, and the re-creation of an individual and a collective past combined. As such, they flatter the national pride



and satisfy the conservative impulse of the mainstream public, and the need to give coherence to the past, at least for the duration of a screening. In sum, they fit in and feed on the “retromaniac,” nostalgic impulse that characterizes much of the popular music and cinema of recent decades (Marc 2014; Reynolds 2011: 385). As heritage cinema and classical biopics did in their heyday, music biopics now play a “commemorative function by revitalizing *lieux de mémoires* [‘sites of memory’] in the course of revisiting them” (Moine 2014: 56). In France, a country which seems to have experienced a perpetual identity and cultural crisis since the post-war years, they are particularly suitable for cementing a patriotic, sentimental Hall of Fame. Built as victims and heroes, Piaf and Gainsbourg take on a national dimension that combines authenticity and stardom. Their posthumous biopics grant them the final reward of forgiveness for their excesses, and the ultimate, collective recognition of their genius, as if marking the last step before an official elevation by State decree to a popular music pantheon.

This popular music pantheon has the power to reconcile the public with national history through the re-creation of the lives of the country’s great “popular” artists. The figures they honor are no longer the exemplary men celebrated in what Ozouf describes as the “cult of the Republic” (1984): they are stars of *chanson*, consensual figures who have now become transmedia *lieux de mémoire*, as pointed out by Looseley (2015: 189) and Sirinelli (2012). Born and raised in a mass-culture context, but direct heirs to the modern myth of the author, these artists have become epic heroes in the contemporary French collective imagination. Gainsbourg was certainly transgressive and provocative during his lifetime, but his biopic turned him into a romantic hero. Similarly, Piaf’s character is glossed over at the expense of her tragic legend so as to create an all-emotional, pan-French, and global feminine figure. Both are thus deprived of any transgressive and questioning force. As in the *chanson de geste*, the exemplary lives of *chanson* stars—because successful in esthetic and commercial terms—bolster a vision of the past which reconciles tragedy and genius, the individual and the nation, the collective and the personal—a vision that appears to be coherent and reassuring in the face of post-modern fragmentation. In a context of political, socio-economic, racial, and cultural divide [“*archipelisation*”] (Fourquet 2019), these consensual figures come across an attempt to reunite France’s mainstream public. In this sense, *La Môme* and *Gainsbourg (vie héroïque)* present a profoundly conservative vision that contributes to shaping a sentimental and uncritical national narrative, based on patriarchal esthetic mystifications, dressed up in melodramatic plots and memorable tunes.

Notes

- 1 *La Vie en rose* in its international version.
- 2 The expression “*poète maudit*” stems from Paul Verlaine’s book, *Les Poètes maudits*. The original edition (1884b) contained notices of Tristan Corbière, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé. The second edition (1888) included three more studies: “Marceline Desbordes-Valmore,” “Villiers de l’Isle-Adam,” and “Pauvre Lelian” (Verlaine himself).



- 3 For centuries, the French State has been distinguishing its most honorable citizens by housing their remains in the famous mausoleum named the Pantheon, a secular temple in Paris's fifth arrondissement.
- 4 In *La Môme*, the character of Marlene Dietrich goes so far as equating Piaf's voice with Paris.
- 5 As David Looseley observes, "she was certainly blacklisted by the national radio service for a short time after the Liberation" (2015: 68).