

WHERE THE INVISIBLE AND VISIBLE MEET:

NANA ON FILM

by

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(Under the Direction of Jonathan Krell)

ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of the supposed absence of the main character in Emile Zola's *Nana*. Even though she is the namesake of the novel, the *femme fatale* is never given a consistent voice of her own, leading this study to explore the heroine through the eyes of several literary characters: those of the narrator, the novel's reader and the diegetic women and men in Nana's Paris. This work then moves into a case study of four films—each one interpreting Zola's *Nana* in a different light—to uncover the benefits and limitations of seeing the main character in a literal sense. In the end, the converging themes found in both the literary and cinematic perspectives indicate that Nana is not “invisible,” as many scholars believe, but rather something larger, more universal and more complex than can be contained in any one, individual work.

INDEX WORDS: Emile Zola; Nana; Desire; Film; Adaptation; Perspective; Jean Renoir; Dorothy Arzner; Christian-Jaque; Dan Wolman

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For Lisa and Kiel

Also a generous thank-you to my parents as well as Dr. JFK,
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Elle était nue avec une tranquille audace, certaine de la toute-puissance de sa chair [...] Personne ne riait plus, les faces des hommes, sérieuses, se tendaient, avec le nez aminci, la bouche irritée et sans salive. Un vent semblait avoir passé, très doux, chargé d'une sourde menace. Tout d'un coup, dans la bonne enfant, la femme se dressait, inquiétante, apportant le coup de folie de son sexe, ouvrant l'inconnu du désir. (Zola 53)

When he first introduces Nana, Emile Zola surrounds her with a cloud of mystery, insinuating the presence of an unseen but compelling force without ever revealing a source or the reason for this power. Nana is a question mark before she even arrives on the scene, with all of Paris discussing who this new actress could be and what has brought her so suddenly from an unknown into (potential) stardom. According to Bordenave, the theater owner, “Nana a autre chose [...] et quelque chose qui remplace tout. Je l’ai flairée, c’est joliment fort chez elle” (Zola 34), but even he has no words for this *chose*, despite the fact that he discovered it himself and designed a production to showcase it. For Bordenave and many others, Nana’s “talent” is best described as an odor, something completely intangible yet utterly intoxicating and persuasive. As the novel progresses, the reader and the male characters uncover together the extent to which this powerful scent pervades, and yet a concrete origin is never provided nor even suggested. Zola scholar Anna Gural-Migdal explains that “Nana est cette arrivante de toujours, elle ne reste pas, elle va partout, elle échange, elle est le désir qui circule. Elle entre, elle est entre elle et l’Autre, toujours plus qu’elle-même plus que l’Autre” (323).

Indeed, the force, Nana's force—contrary to what Bordenave's statement might suggest—is something far more pervasive than simply the scent, the sight or even the actions of her genitalia; like Courbet's *L'Origine du monde* implies with its title, there is something far more profound and yet universal than the body parts themselves. Even the air is different in the locales where Nana roams; a heavy, hot femininity saturates everything, enthralling every visitor. “Ce sentiment de vertige qu'il [Muffat] avait éprouvé à sa première visite chez Nana, boulevard Haussmann, l'envahissait de nouveau [...] Un moment, craignant de défaillir dans cette odeur de femme qu'il retrouvait, chauffée, décuplée sous le plafond bas, il s'assit” (Zola 151).

Like an aura, Nana herself is rendered similarly intangible throughout the novel by the same literary devices that give her life. Starting with her entrance into the novel, misdirection and ambiguity are the key players in “[t]he play in which Nana first débuts, [which] gives every appearance of travesty at first glance [...] but] is a more direct distortion of Offenbach's *La Belle Hélène*, itself a parody of the *Iliad* intrigue. And while the *Iliad* can be traced to Greek and then to Roman mythology, this is a popular or anonymous heritage. So instead of an origin, we have a movement of infinite regress, an endless displacement of sources” (Beizer 51). Thus even from the beginning, the literary aspects provide no apparent frame of reference for their Venus, a problem that is compounded by the frequent use of indirect free style throughout *Nana*. This manner of narration leaves a noticeable gap of information pertaining to the novel's namesake and permits a multitude of the work's many characters (and even the occasional unknown onlooker) to describe the situation from their point of view, all while abandoning the (anti-) heroine when it come to providing a voice of her own. Zola does intermittently

incorporate traces of Nana's voice throughout his work—such as the following quote, which reflects Nana's sentiments after Muffat's first visit to her home—but even these few phrases are brief and vague, uncovering only small portions of the courtesan at a time: “Elle n'était point fâchée, cela lui semblait drôle que des hommes lui eussent emporté de l'argent. Tout de même, c'étaient des cochons, elle n'avait plus le sou” (Zola 76). The written word, like the translucent veil that covered her body in *La Blonde Vénus*, conceals just enough to provide a subtle air of mystery and creates an incomplete vision of Nana, but one that still holds enough *je ne sais quoi* to be eternally tantalizing.

Many scholars, a number of which will be quoted in the pages to follow, argue that the unknown in Nana makes her invisible or non-existent, finding in the constant redirection of observation and the frequent use of contradicting metaphors a vast emptiness that cannot be defined. It is exactly such a notion that this work will challenge, instead revealing that there are a few traits which, when combined, indicate the existence of a consistent Nana and that even the multiplicity of personalities can become a totality that is far more profound than (possibly) even Zola intended. Because the author does not permit the courtesan to describe herself in any sort of consistent manner, this work will explore many of the other angles from which Nana may be viewed, including several literal observations of Nanas as represented by various cinematic productions. By therefore laying literary perspectives side-by-side with scholarly and artistic interpretations of the “mangeuse d'hommes,” this study will expand the literature on Zola's *Nana* past its traditional limits to uncover a woman who also moves beyond the classic boundaries of the written word.

(1.1) FROM THE BEGINNING/ WHO IS NANA?

Like all the spectators arriving at the *Théâtre des Variétés* for opening night of the *Blonde Vénus*, a first-time reader of Zola or the Rougon-Macquart family enters into *Nana* as a blank slate, wondering—like the Parisians attending her show—only who this namesake could be. “Depuis ce matin,” laments Fauchery, “on m’assomme avec Nana. J’ai rencontré plus de vingt personnes, et Nana par-ci, et Nana par-là ! Est-ce que je sais, moi ! est-ce que je connais toutes les filles de Paris ! ... Nana est une invention de Bordenave. Ça doit être du propre!” (Zola 32). Of course, over the progression of the novel, each reader learns more and more about this mysterious character and eventually constructs a mental compilation of her history, her personality and her tendencies. What is interesting about this feminine result is the wide disparity between certain scholarly articles concerning what exactly Nana and her personality represent. For Russell Cousins, Nana is “a perverse, whimsical, unsentimental business woman trading her sex with nothing but contempt for her victims” (“Revamping *Nana*” 174), or, more simply, “a hard-nosed, destructive whore” (“Sanitizing Zola” 210). On the other hand, Alexander Sesonske sees Zola’s creation as “[s]ex incarnate [...] a goddess, or, as Muffat suspects, the devil. [One i]ncapable of fidelity, with an insatiable appetite for men” (23), and yet just before her death Mignon and Labordette admire that she is a “bonne fille toujours” (Zola 422). Nana is thus simultaneously heartless and heavenly, uninterested and sexually driven, as well as ultimately “good.” Even within Sesonske’s description is this character paradoxical—both divine and evil—and between scholars there is more confusion; how can a cold “business woman” also constantly desire men (her clients) and how could extreme destruction emerge from a person who is, in the end, wholesome at her core?

Éléonore Roy-Reverzy sums up the actress quite well saying, “Nana est innombrable et insaisissable, à la fois femme et pouliche, courtisane et « duchesse », lesbienne et épouse parfaite, figure mythique et « bonne fille », actrice et nymphe sculptée sur son trône de cocotte, contraignant les autres à n’être que ses doubles” (170).

The complexity of this issue stems from the fact that one can easily find multiple sections within *Nana* that suggest each of these very different qualities. One can read that Nana is “très contente au fond de le [Philippe Hugon] voir dépenser tout pour elle, la seule preuve d’amour qui la touchât” and that “elle avait le rire bête et méchant d’un enfant que la destruction amuse” (Zola 389), but at the same time she has two passionate love affairs, multiple “amants de cœur” and even the occasional “crise de maternité.” Many times throughout the novel Nana swears off men or claims to take no pleasure in her occupation, and yet her non-paying male lovers—Georges Hugon and Daguenet, for example—would suggest otherwise. It is through this contradictory construction that Nana’s lovers, readers and filmmakers alike must sift, searching for the nugget of concrete truth in the mound of subjectivity. Unfortunately for all of these explorers, Zola does not simplify this task anymore than he does his character list so that Nana herself often seems more like her destroyed birthday gifts than a complete individual:

[Nana] se donna le régal d’un massacre, tapant les objets, prouvant qu’il n’y en avait pas un de solide, en les détruisant tous [...] La femme de chambre [...] demanda s’il fallait serrer ces choses; et madame ayant dit de les jeter, elle emporta tout dans un coin de sa jupe. A la cuisine, on chiffonnait, on se partageait les débris de madame. (Zola 390)

In pieces like her gifts, Nana is precious and worth analyzing, but her entirety is jumbled within so many other literary jewels that extracting and reconstructing a whole can be a daunting task.

(1.2) THE ACCOMPLICE

Through Zola's strict adherence to his principles of Naturalism, the reader can easily feel that Nana herself—and not the author who created her—is to blame for the confusing *mélange* of a personality since, after all, Zola is simply watching and recording, not directing. This is Zola's mastery: breathing life into a character that then takes on a life of her own, one who all the while destroys any consistency within herself just as she destroyed her gifts, “prouvant qu'il n'y en avait pas un de solide.” Even Zola describes himself as shocked by the woman of his imagining, saying, “[j]e ne crois pas que je puisse jamais dépasser cette horreur de massacre et d'effondrement”

(*Correspondance* 424). But of course, Nana could not achieve such terrible fragmentation alone, and one must note that it is through the very style that claims to merely “observe” and recount her actions that our anti-heroine is able to distribute herself so sporadically. “[H]er fundamental inaccessibility is highlighted by the text itself. The text is, ultimately, only words that continue in a shifting metonymical process. Desire can move along this chain, but will never be able to seize hold of an absolute, a meaning, or the woman's body” (Nelson 427). The narration and narratology Zola applies in *Nana* constantly circulates around its title character but is consistent in neither the proximity to the actress-courtesan nor the perspective used to describe her. It seems that the author's social “experiment” actually extends *into* the novel, where a “head investigator” (the nameless,

omniscient narrator) records all the data being compiled by the multiple “eyewitnesses” (characters) actually observing the outrageous phenomenon (Nana).

With this experimental view, Zola’s passive, free-flowing version of indirect free style (IFS) can be seen as stemming directly from the same Naturalistic, scientific principles as his entire novel. The narratologist Gérard Genette explains that IFS is a subcategory of his concept *discours transposé* “où l’économie de la subordination autorise une plus grande extension du discours, et donc un début d’émancipation, malgré les transpositions temporelles. Mais la différence essentielle [entre le SIL et le discours transposé classique] est l’absence de verbe déclaratif, qui peut entraîner (sauf indications données par le contexte) une double confusion” (192). True to form, Zola’s text passes from one *personnage* to another with no real direction, simply absorbing the thoughts of whoever projects them the loudest and because of this variable movement, one might then expect that the entire work would showcase Nana’s emotions at all times. Ironically, the result is quite the opposite and “ce paradoxe qui tient à ce que ce soit ce personnage si plein, si chargé de mots, si lourd, si décrit, qui soit aussi le plus vide, le plus vain, ce personnage qui fait mieux sentir que beaucoup d’autres sa nature d’ « être de papier » et son statut de « vivant sans entrailles » ” (Roy-Reverzy 180). Rather than being constantly *inside* Nana’s head, the frequent use of IFS in the novel comes from the “observer” (character) who currently has the best perspective from which to view the “subject” (Nana). Indeed, the courtesan’s few and relatively shallow interjections of IFS can thus be considered as the occasional deviation a test subject makes if s/he feels the research is not going in the direction that was previously assumed. Such an assumption is confirmed in the earlier example of Nana’s IFS (see Introduction) as well as the following

quotation—in addition to the many others throughout the novel—where it is displeasure that sparks the actress’s interjections, clearly underscoring a feeling of shock or surprise directed towards the methodology being used to “research” her: “Nana se révoltait davantage chaque jour, à l’idée de tromper Georges. Un petit si innocent, et qui croyait en elle! Elle se serait regardée comme la dernière des dernières. Puis, ça l’aurait dégoûtée” (Zola 190). It is through these and other simple expressions that Nana comes to rein in her novel; like her mysterious aura and scent, she wafts through the lines, occasionally lingering so as to be constantly intense and obvious, yet seem remarkably absent.

(1.3) ENTER THE CINEMA

It is a well-documented fact that Zola possessed a strong interest in photography and was supremely interested in capturing the most natural and most real in both his pictures and his writings. It is no surprise, then, that the advent of cinema—which came about shortly after his death—was heralded by many of Zola’s followers. Leo Braudy reports that “[m]ost critics agree that the embryonic French film industry was nourished by both the example of Zola’s practice and the injunctions of his theory. Many of the early filmmakers were associated with André Antoine’s *Théâtre Libre* group, which had specialized in the naturalistic presentation of plays adapted from Zola’s novels” (74). Nearly a century after its debut, it thus seems only logical that the film industry has created almost as many versions of Zola’s works as it is years old. Many academic articles (such as Braudy’s), discuss the numerous reasons why a film director would be attracted to an *oeuvre* of Zola’s—most notably the influence of Naturalism and the vivid descriptions that spring forth from this genre and author in particular—and yet, at least in the case of *Nana*, one could argue that it is precisely that character *not* perfectly described

who draws filmmakers in. Zola himself is quoted as once saying, “In my opinion, you cannot say you have thoroughly seen anything until you have a photograph of it, revealing a lot of points which otherwise would be unnoticed, and which in most cases could not be distinguished” (qtd in Braudy 73), and so it appears that Nana, who is omnipresent and yet strangely absent in her own novel, would require this same sort of cementing, giving her another (visual) dimension in which to exist and be explained. From another perspective, it would be precisely because only terms such as “ce rien honteux et si puissant, qui soulevait le monde” (Zola 419) come close to approximating the essence that is Nana that the cineaste would feel compelled to render *l’inconnu* and the invisible, visible...

CHAPTER 2

RUNNING THE EXPERIMENT/ WHO SEES NANA?

Before beginning an exploration into the three-dimensional world of cinema one must first understand the varied perspectives of Nana that exist within her novel, as they are the fundamental concepts on which all visual adaptations base their character.

“Curieusement, dans un roman du dévoilement, Nana n’est jamais montrée aux lecteurs qu’à travers les yeux des autres personnages qui, eux, effectuent son agrandissement mythique ainsi que sa mise à nu” (Best 165), so that, in the search for a solid identity of Nana, a close examination of the many characters who observe her must occur—yet all while constantly filtering out the biases that lie behind each of these watchful pairs of eyes. The two largest groupings of characters who often view the courtesan are found in her intradiegetic counterparts and are split into groups by gender. Of course, within both of the sexes there is wide variation on what is seen, what is perceived, and what is projected onto the courtesan-actress; males and females alike are continually amorous, jealous, respectful and afraid—or some combination thereof—of Nana. The result of these mixed emotions is that there is no one, simple manner through which the reader can discriminate between the truth and speculation of the characters, necessitating that each *personnage* be studied on a case-by-case basis. In addition to the gendered dissection of perception, an analysis of *Nana* also reveals two other perspectives, the first being a supposedly unbiased narrator who, despite his double removal from the story with his statute as an extradiegetic-heterodiegetic individual (“narrateur au premier degré qui

raconte une histoire d'où il est absent") (Genette 255), occasionally inserts ideas that sound peculiarly similar to opinions. The last of those who examine Nana throughout the course of her novel is also the culmination of the other three perspectives: that of each individual reader, s/he who is able to absorb all the other visions while forming a fourth and (possibly) independent outlook.

(2.1) OBJECTIVE, OPINIONATED NARRATION

The most obvious vision from which a filmmaker could pull to create his/her perspective of Nana is that of the one who sees all, the one who (supposedly) knows more than any character in the book: the narrator. As "head scientist," this individual's job is to collect and organize all the "data" on his "subject" so as to present a coherent, informative picture of her throughout his "experiment." Unfortunately "l'activité de narration se trouve-t-elle mise en abyme par la promotion fréquente de certains personnages au statut de narrateur occasionnel" (Wagner 73), and thus the frequent use of IFS yields a confounding effect where the varying opinions of the narrator and his characters become intertwined, as Genette indicated it would (see section 1.2). This process leads to the all-knowing voice appearing more and more like the woman he is describing in that he is everywhere and practically non-existent all at once. The sheer existence of the 400-odd pages signifies that there is *someone* narrating a story, and yet in each scene questions arise as to who is speaking and when. The night when Muffat roams the streets of Paris searching for Nana, for example, leads him to the theater where the actress is supposed to be, but upon arrival one reads that "[à] cette heure, la cour, étroite, humide comme un fond de puits, avec ses cabinets d'aisances empesté [...] était noyée d'une vapeur noire [...] C'était, le long de ce puits, comme des gueules de four ouvertes

sur les ténèbres” (Zola 208). This excerpt is part of a long passage where the thoughts of the count are constantly intertwined with those of the narrator so that one is never sure if the constant references to darkness and water (drowning) are from the omniscient voice that is setting the tone of the passage or from Muffat’s internal hallucinations and, therefore, examples of IFS. In addition, the repeated use of demonstrative adjectives (*ce, cette, ces*) as opposed to definite ones (*le, la, les*) creates confusion about the locale and objectivity of the person who is recounting the tale, as these indicators suggest that the *personnage* is actually *in* the scene (and thus involved in each situation) rather than above it all and able to impersonally record the settings and actions.

Contrary to this muddled version of narration, Zola’s original goal in the development of the narrator for *Nana* was simply to have a voice—and nothing more—to recount the events that fall in place. “At one point in *Le roman expérimental*,” notes Katrina Perry, “Zola states that the ‘experiment,’ as he called the interpretation of facts, or novel, is almost always ‘*pour voir*’ [...] yet throughout the novel, Nana’s seduction operates through what can’t be seen and isn’t analyzed” (159), and it is arguably this strain, imposed by Zola’s other quest to elaborate the ephemeral qualities of Nana, that leads to a confused collection of information on the celebrated actress.

Without a doubt, he who leads the reader through the streets and homes of *Nana*’s Paris actually provides very little concrete and objective insight into the actress’s mind, instead relying on textual implications and the voices of other characters to fill out his visual descriptions of her wardrobe and apartment décor. In the frequently cited article “Uncovering *Nana*: The Courtesan’s New Clothes,” Janet Beizer postulates about this narration saying: “If it is impossible to show what is behind the veil, it is because

showing, in narrative, is always dependant on telling. And telling always interposes the veil of language between the reader and what it purports to reveal; or more accurately, it *replaces* revelation by the language that relates it” (52, original emphasis). Beizer goes on to develop the idea of another replacement—for her, language replaces revelation just as the body, Nana’s body, replaces the text:

Nana is, then, originally an effect of language, her name as much a force of contagion as her body will become. But while her name is sexualized, her body becomes text, taking the place of the lines she does not deliver and the songs she cannot sing [...] We have here an initial displacement of the signifier from language to the body—word made flesh. As the novel progresses, we in fact find the locus of meaning repeatedly relayed from the word to the body. (47)

From another light, this conception reveals that the narrator’s perspective is actually *forming* Nana as it transforms her, reflecting—as her mirrors do—a shallow, fragmented and inverted view. With this depiction that generates only a sporadic and inconsistent young woman, shaping her body with the interjections of others and the suggestion of locale, Keith Cohen’s approach to cinematic adaptation through narrative codes would seem to provide the process for conversion to film. The movie scholar explains:

The fundamental difference between novel and film, which superficially makes them seem worlds apart, is that between written word and visual language. The first way of bridging this apparently limitless gap is by considering both word and image as signs aimed at communicating something. In this sense, word and

image are each part of a larger system of signification—part of a language. (88)

From this perspective Cohen argues that one is able to cross the distance between literature and film—with, notably, “narrativity [which] is the most solid median link between novel and cinema, the most pervasive tendency of both verbal and visual languages” (92). Thus, in the same way that Zola’s narrator suggests Nana through multiple literary devices, finding the cinematic equivalents to her literary descriptions would produce the visual image of a vague and fractured *femme* embedded within the film, a “diegetic whole that is never fully *present* in any one group yet always *implied* in each such group” (Cohen 92, original emphasis).

(2.2) THE GAZING FEMALE

If, when choosing his/her path of adaptation, a filmmaker desires to reproduce Nana in a more concrete form, where her body is not the film itself but instead the object being recorded, it is into the feminine side of Zola’s work that s/he must venture. “Nana doit être « la vraie fille », écrit Zola au début de l’*Ebauche*. Ce désir de vérité, il le proclamait depuis longtemps” reports Roger Ripoll, citing the author’s desire to create a woman so real that she becomes the ultimate woman (12). In the process of creating an abstraction such as this, one might then imagine Nana to be the *only* woman in the entire novel, erasing all others, since they would simply be redundant simplifications of her one, supreme female being. Zola’s plethora of characters would clearly stand to argue otherwise and one must thus look internally—that is to say at the women themselves—to determine what it is they add to the storyline. It is on this path that one comes to discover the remarkable similarities between Nana and her supporting characters, a fact that leads

the reader and filmmaker to wonder if the unmistakable lack of narration on Nana's personality could be, in part, displaced onto the other women of the novel, allowing them to become pieces of the whole that is Venus.

Within nearly every female to grace the pages of *Nana*, there are several aspects—some more or less obvious than others—that typify certain traits of the courtesan herself. The flock of fellow actresses and/or prostitutes, for example, underlines the most basic attributes of Nana, both in their careers and their treatment in the novel. Many of the working women share a commonality of names, often going by their child-like nicknames instead of their given names: Tatan Néné, Gaga, Nana. All are also (possibly for brevity's sake) simplified in their existence; one discovers little to nothing about their childhoods, the places they live or their future plans—and only by degree does this aspect of Nana differ from the other women in her story. Outside a reading of *L'Assommoir*, the reader is left with only sparse and infrequent details of Nana's history and even aspirations, as if she, too, like the other working women, simply materialized one day on the streets of Paris with the hopes of being discovered and bought. Even the apparent cold-heartedness shown at the very end of the book, when the supposed *amies* ignore their friend's dead body to discuss more immediate affairs, can be seen as a simple recreation of Nana's expressions for several of her dead lovers. After learning of the death of Vandevres, for example, "Nana [...] désillusionnée [...] ne trouva que cette phrase: —Oh ! le malheureux! c'était si beau !" (Zola 358), and one hundred pages later, Rose Mignon mimics this exact idea, sighing over Nana's dead body, "Ah ! elle est changée, elle est changée" (Zola 438)—both women clearly

lamenting the passing of the exterior and the beauty instead of the soul within their compatriots.

Although in many ways Rose Mignon falls into the same categories as the other actresses Nana surrounds herself with, she also has an extra, more significant connection to the novel's namesake. As the idealistic version of Nana, Rose is a more refined, more practical and more talented person; she is the one who always plays the *femme honnête* roles the other so desires and who, in the end, has the ability to forgive past grievances so as to be nurturing and loving. In their sharing of maternity, these women are joined by another notable character—Sabine Muffat—who also is notably linked by commonalities. For all three of these women, the children are rarely mentioned, are often inconveniences and never speak—not even Estelle Muffat, who appears far more often than Louis Coupeau and the two young Mignons. But, far grander than her awkward daughter, Sabine Muffat becomes the other side of Nana's ideal: a wealthy woman who doesn't just play at being *une grande femme* but instead lives the fantasy life. Of course, Zola draws the connections between Nana and Sabine quite boldly, creating parallels between the two ladies' evening soirées, their lovers and, of course, their distinguishing facial feature: “un signe qu'il [Fauchery] aperçut à la joue gauche de la comtesse, près de la bouche [...] Nana avait le même, absolument. C'était drôle. Sur le signe, de petits poils frisaient; seulement, les poils blonds de Nana étaient chez l'autre d'un noir de jais” (89). In *Et Zola créa la femme*, Derayeh Derakhshesh notes that:

Il est très possible que le « *signe* » représente un signe de sexualité et de dépravation féminine. Sabine peut quand même avoir eu la possibilité de faire une chute à n'importe quel moment. Le

« *signe* », cependant, démontre que les femmes qui possèdent cette marque vont certainement agir selon leur capacité. Cette marque peut bien être un signe de *dégénérescence* inhérente à leur nature. Le père de Sabine, le vieux marquis de Chouard est peut-être le soupirant le plus pervers de Nana [...] Pourtant, ce que Nana et Sabine partagent, c'est la sexualité féminine. De ce fait, l'héroïne n'est pas seule. (73, original emphasis)

Thus between Sabine and the many other females floating about in the novel, Nana is constantly underscored and re-emphasized on every aspect of her personality, from her genetic predisposition for debauchery to her lofty desires to be a proper, well-to-do lady.

Unfortunately, with this understanding of Zola's many females also comes a familiar problem: that of interpretation, both in the literature and in the translation to film. As has been demonstrated, Nana is the "test subject" and the reflection in a mirror who consequently does not often get to share her personal state of mind, so in Zola's formation of the other women as mere extensions of Nana, these same characters are also left without voices with which to study their more extreme and disastrous friend. From a feminist perspective, Derakhshesh claims that, "[a]vec son autorité imposante, ce « texte » patriarcal réduit les femmes au silence ; celles qui, comme Nana, expriment la différence en tant que sujet" (48). The work, in other words, does not provide filmmakers with a clear female viewpoint from which to focus a lens and create a script.

Even those women who are arguably quite different and distinct from the heroine herself—most notably her housekeeper Zoé—are left with largely restricted voices that provide very little material for studying the ultimate woman. A completely under-

estimated and under-represented character in scholarly literature, Zoé—with her watchful eye—would be ideal for constructing a unique perspective on Nana: seeing Madame at her most natural, perceiving both the best and worst sides of the mistress for, as Zola explains, “elle [Nana] n’avait pas de secret pour Zoé. Celle-ci, habituée à de pareilles confidences, les recevait avec une sympathie respectueuse” (Zola 61). This under-side vision of the goddess could make for a revealing and original screenplay that highlights a more feminine and admiring set of eyes—a task that has been only partially realized in one big screen production of *Nana* (see section 3.2).

(2.3) THE MALE GAZE

A world apart from the silent, feminine side of Zola’s *oeuvre* is the vocal and varied male perspective. The most difficult and yet plentiful of the visual perspectives, the man is most often one of Nana’s lovers, but is always someone who would take her if she’d have him. Scholars often lump all of *les hommes* into one large group, discussing how the “male gaze” as a whole impacts the voluptuous object of desire both literally and figuratively, and while this perspective is limited in its scope and does not consider the individual differences in the men, it is a useful *point de départ* from which one can then consider each man in his own right.

“[Nana] is a male creation, a construct of male fantasy [...] The result [...] is that the men in the novel project their nightmares, as well as their desires, onto her. She thus accrues a new and different meaning: she becomes a woman of terrifying mythic proportions, incarnating the monsters of the male imagination,” explains the Zola researcher Brian Nelson in his article “*Nana*: Uses of the Female Body (409-10). From the very beginning, when Fauchery exclaims that Nana is an invention of Bordenave’s

mind, one instantly understands the fluid and transformable entity these men make of their new-found lust object. Compounded by the fact that she enters onto the scene as an actress—one who by trade must pretend and reinvent constantly—the men in Nana's life *create* their idea of a lover based on the one or two of her traits they are able to perceive. Fauchery's observation about *le signe* on Sabine's face, for instance, links her in his mind to Nana—dramatically changing his vision of both the women: clearly, the countess must be corruptible if she shares a commonality with the courtesan, but on the other hand Nana is necessarily on another level, able to influence the upper-class ladies as Sabine can (both speculations which are, eventually, realized during the novel's progression). Muffat, on the other hand, is unable to link his wife to his lover and instead fixates on Nana's animalistic qualities, such as “son chignon de cheveux jaunes dénoué [qui] lui couvrait le dos d'un poil de lionne” (Zola 216), seeing it as a sign of her amorality and her power to devour his formerly noble, religious life. Of course, each of these interpretations are based simply on physical attributes because “ces hommes ne peuvent lire au-delà de la sexualité [...] ils ne ressentent que leur propre désir” (Derakhshesh 54).

This inherent fixation that men have as well as their incapacity to see into the body before them, Jane Gallop argues, stems from Nana's powerful force and the mysterious scent that personifies it: “the unbearable intense immediacy of the ‘odor di femina’ produces anxiety, a state totally threatening to the stability of the psychic economy, that stability which is achieved by means of representations. The visual mode produces representations as a way of mastering what is otherwise too intense” (27). This reduction, while offering an explanation for the male simplification of Nana, also poses an intriguing question about the cinematic visions that could initiate from their

perspectives. If something as intangible as a scent or an aura does not have a corresponding visual equivalent, how then is Nana's power to be explained on screen? In other words, would the visualization of Venus reduce her to a mere woman, making her into something less than the "monsters of the male imagination" or "la vraie fille?" Clearly, this is a highly important and immediate question that a *cinéaste* must face upon his/her decision to adapt *Nana* from the male perspective, and the answer coincides with many of the other choices they must face in their adaptation as well.

Because of the rich storylines and overabundance of characters, any filmmaker undertaking a work of Zola's must be prepared to make many cuts in order to simplify everything into a reasonable movie length and so the forced removal of another aspect should result in the same maneuvers: the idea that Dudley Andrew refers to as "intersecting," which can also be understood as symbolism and exaggeration. Andrew elaborates his concept by extending a metaphor from André Bazin: "the original artwork can be likened to a crystal chandelier whose formal beauty is a product of its intricate but fully artificial arrangement of parts, whereas the cinema would be a crude flashlight interesting not for its own shape or the quality of its light, but for what it makes appear in this or that dark corner" (31). Thus, a film that shows Nana performing in an excessive, stylized version of the *Blonde Vénus*, for example, but excludes her later theatrical roles allows for a simplification of the immense plot so that the one play then becomes the symbol of her entire status as an actress—and when combined with exaggerated make-up and clothing that also suggest this characterization, the audience comes to understand much more about Nana than is actually shown on-screen. Andrew accepts these sorts of losses and substitutions because, even though "a great deal of [the novel] fails to be lit up

[...] what is lit up is only [the novel], [the novel] however as seen by the cinema” (31).

Returning to the idea of the film’s visual perspective, it would thus be possible to represent the courtesan’s inexplicable force through the over-development of one (or more) of the male visions, allowing their idealized and often near-impossible perceptions to be the “flashlight” that projects her mythic origins and abilities.

A prime example of this possibility can be seen by looking through the eyes of the man who watches Nana the most throughout her novel: the count Muffat. From the very beginning, Venus is something new, foreign and uncomfortable to the count, causing him to become “béant, la face marbrée de taches rouges” from the simple sight of her nearly nude body (Zola 54). And yet, rather than becoming accustomed to the strength of her power and the femininity she oozes, Muffat’s slanted vision develops into a fear, distorting his reality of Nana. Indeed, “[a]ll of the places associated with femininity possess a fantastic dimension and provoke in Muffat vertigo, light-headedness, hallucination and premonitions of death. His gaze, inseparable from his repressed sexual fantasies, transforms Nana into a horrifying *femme fatale*” (Nelson 410). In arguably the most famous scene in the narrative, Muffat’s observation of Nana as she examines herself in the mirror exposes—not the courtesan’s body—but the count’s true emotions:

Nana était toute velue, un duvet de rousse faisait de son corps un velours ; tandis que, dans sa croupe et ses cuisses de cavale, dans les renflements charnus creusés de plis profonds, qui donnaient au sexe le voile troublant de leur ombre, il y avait de la bête. C’était la bête d’or, inconsciente comme une force, et dont l’odeur seule gâtait le monde. Muffat regardait toujours, obsédé, possédé, au

point qu'ayant fermé les paupières, pour ne plus voir, l'animal
reparut au fond des ténèbres, grandi, terrible, exagérant sa posture.

(Zola 217)

Like all the men who surround her, the count cannot see anything but Nana's exterior and yet is still unable to comprehend it, reducing her to multiple animal references; in his mind, to have transformed his noble, powerful self into a helpless man, Nana clearly must be something less than human. And yet, instead of assuming that the actress's attraction stems from her being the ultimate woman, he perceives Nana as merely "*comme une force*," really just a "*bête d'or*." Probing even deeper into his mind, one finds that behind the count's closed eyes, Nana is larger and more intense but always *l'animal*. In the end, "[i]l avait conscience de sa défaite, il la savait stupide, ordurière et menteuse, et il la voulait, même empoisonnée" (Zola 217), indicating that the development of a film through the count's eyes would yield a devilish and unintelligent star whose animalistic and evil qualities of attraction would be the highlight of her personality.

On the complete opposite end of the fantasy spectrum is Nana's youngest lover, Georges Hugon, who encounters his future lover in the same manner and on the same night as the count, but reacts in an extremely different manner. Far from blushing in an uncomfortable nervousness, the young man is lifted "de son fauteuil" by "la passion" for the actress before him (Zola 54). For the *bébé*, there is nothing more perfect or more desirable than this woman on stage, she who quickly develops into both his playmate and his mother thanks to one perfect night at her country home. Nana is therefore transformed into a paradox of paradise for Georges: "Elle disait qu'elle avait deux enfants [Georges et Louiset], elle les confondait dans le même caprice de tendresse [...] La nuit [...] elle

faisait la maman ; tandis que lui, vicieux, aimant bien être petit aux bras de cette grande fille, se laissait bercer comme un bébé qu'on endort" (Zola 189). At the same time child and mother, Nana becomes a double attachment from which the young man can never disengage. Even after an entire year away from his *belle*, "Georges regardait Nana avec un tel bonheur de la revoir que ses beaux yeux s'emplissaient de larmes," and he believes that "[m]aintenant, les mauvais jours étaient passés" (Zola 302). Of course nothing remains as it was before, but the idealized version of the actress persists and the young man becomes happy to simply "ramasser les miettes de sa beauté [de Nana]" (Zola 303). One best understands the degree to which Nana is placed on a pedestal when, in extreme distress because of his suspicions that his *amante* also has relations with his brother, Nana passes Bijou, her dog, to Georges "pour le consoler" and "Georges redevint gai, tenant quelque chose d'elle, cette bête toute chaude de ses genoux" (Zola 319). Here the same word that Muffat employs—*bête*—is again used in relation to Nana, but this time the animal is a metonymical extension of the courtesan instead of a metaphorical replacement for her. Nana is animalistic to Georges only insofar as she is magical, a mythical creature to be worshiped, a being who can divide herself out into pieces so well that even the few particles he comes to claim are worth clinging onto. A filmic version of Nana, seen through the young Hugon, would thus be heavenly and shimmering, as if almost divine—a woman so perfect that it is worth dying as her lover rather than to have his few *miettes* taken by another man.

Obviously there are many other males who cross the threshold of Nana's bedroom door, all of whom have their individually crafted ways of perceiving her—so many in fact that it is nearly impossible to make an exhaustive list of their perceptions, although a

couple of more notable visions do remain. For the older Hugon, Philippe, Nana's strongest quality is her destructive side—ruining first his younger brother's morals (and thus providing the reason for the first encounter between the actress and the soldier), and later his wallet and his gifts so that one finds constant reference to emptiness, nothingness and destruction when this man is near his lover. For example, in her zeal for the broken birthday gifts, “[u]ne lueur s’allumait dans ses yeux *vides*, un petit retroussement des lèvres montrait ses dents *blanches*. Puis, lorsque tous furent *en morceaux*, très rouge, reprise de son rire, elle frappa la table de ses mains élargies, elle zézaya d’une voix de *gamine* : —Fini ! n’a plus ! n’a plus !” (Zola 390, my emphasis). Interestingly, the idea of youth and those who have yet to fill their lives with emotional depth is combined with the notion of white—the color that erases all others by being the combination of them—so that Nana, for Philippe, is nothing and/or everything, but never realistic or obtainable. From this point of view Nana is seen as an untamable being to which one can never give enough to satisfy her crazed appetite, but other pairs of eyes, such as the journalist Fauchery's, paint quite a different picture. In this vision, the young woman is something less than even a *bête*—originally termed a fly, she is ultimately disease itself. Nana exists, for the columnist, as “le sang gâté par une longue hérédité de misère and de boisson, qui se transformait chez elle en un détraquement nerveux de son sexe de femme” (Zola 215). Yet, even though he is able to recognize this trait, Fauchery himself eventually falls prey to the infection, which leaves him “un gaillard sans le sou, vivant de ses articles et de ses pièces” (Zola 409).

Throughout Zola's novel it becomes supremely clear that “[i]t is easier for men not to see Nana herself but to see in her only what they want to see [...] they construct

their own multiple images of Nana, their own forms of peep-show, each one heavily reliant on myth and fantasy and each one approaching the darkness that is Nana without ever really venturing in” (Nelson 413), which leads to the development of a different sort of problem. It is not that one does not know exactly through which eyes they are looking, as with the narrator’s perspective, or that the eyes are strangely silent, like with the women, but instead that one can never be certain at who/what the eyes are actually looking. Because “Zola [...] portrays Nana primarily as the object of male desire, reinvented by each spectator according to his individual fantasy rather than as the active subject, pursuing her own desire, inhabiting her own body” (Nelson 413), filmmakers walk a very thin line when adapting the novel from a male perspective. Since Nana cannot be truly seen through a male lens, a production thus risks becoming centered on those who are looking, creating, not a story of the young woman’s life, but instead one of the male reaction to an indescribable female, a development that would leave Nana a slanted and incomplete shadow from the cinematic flashlight that should have illuminated her.

(2.4) READING IS BELIEVING

Unlike the men in *Nana*, who observe with an extremely limited range of vision, each reader of the novel has the opportunity to explore all of the novel’s many perspectives and thus summarize or reject any or all of the other points of view. In this case, the *lecteurs* are able to have (arguably) the most extensive and objective look at the courtesan-actress, as s/he has the potential to rise above the shallow perspectives of the characters and see their visions for what they really are. Indeed, the reader performs the role that the narrator of *Nana* is unable to do: develop the female star into a (seemingly)

concrete entity. Of course this is no simple task, as one must first sift through the numerous possibilities—an analysis that Peter Brooks undertakes with his artistic study of the feminine in Zola's time:

La Nana qui nous est montrée au départ semble appartenir tout à fait au joli érotique de ces tableaux pompiers. Telle qu'elle est présentée, elle a peu en commun avec les cocottes du music-hall représentées, quelques années plus tard, par Toulouse-Lautrec ; elle est trop jolie, trop bien portante pour cela. Elle n'est pas non plus l'une des danseuses ou des actrices de Degas, vue des coulisses, ou bien dans l'intimité de sa toilette : elle est trop « scénique » pour cela, représentation d'une représentation, objet sexuel consciemment créé et recréé. (71)

The one outside the novel has the luxury of approximating Nana the same way Brooks does, able to note that she is somewhat the devil that Muffat sees—although too childlike to be entirely evil—while still partially embodying the rise of the lower-class female—though too flippant and cruel towards Zoé and her other employees to be the ultimate incarnation of revenge. Though still resulting in a fragmented Nana, this position's excellence stems from a freedom and a variability the others cannot allow, and it is here where filmmakers find the greatest liberties to extend their projects of adaptation with Dudley Andrew's term "borrowing." Borrowing, or "the history of grafting and transplantation," is the reason that films often indicate that they are "loosely based on" or "inspired by" texts rather than "reproductions" of them (Andrew 30). And so, even though Brian Nelson declares that "readers of both sexes are positioned to look upon the

woman characters with a male gaze” (416), the same individuals and cineastes are able to “borrow” other seats when arranging themselves to create Nana on the big screen.

This exterior perspective is, of course, not without its shortcomings, and ones which are highlighted by Genette in his “Discours du récit.” Genette explains that, as extradiegetic characters, “[n]ous, lecteurs, ne pouvons pas nous identifier à ces narrataires fictifs que ces narrateurs intradiégétiques ne peuvent s’adresser à nous, ni même supposer notre existence” (265). That is to say, the relationship between Nana and her reader is far more removed than the *rapport* between the courtesan and her diegetic companions or even the two-way mirror between the narration and herself; the young woman cannot experience her literary public just as they are unable to enter into the daily workings of her life. Brooks remarks on the portrayal of this incompatibility during Nana’s famous scene of admiration for herself in front of the mirror: “[t]out se passe comme si le miroir était incliné selon un angle impossible qui nous empêcherait de nous voir à la place du regard du mâle dirigé vers la femme [...] Si Muffat était reflété dans le miroir, cela nous impliquerait nécessairement comme spectateurs de Nana, nous renvoyant à nous-mêmes notre propre reflet” (78). Through the reader’s total absence from the text—and therefore not being able to insert a single opinion into the literature—one can see that in this role Zola’s lofty aspirations for Naturalism are realized. It is the one truly outside Nana’s story who is able to “experiment” with the actress and discover what happens when wealth and lust are both bestowed on a young, ambitious woman—and it is this same person who can produce a film with a genuinely removed, naturalistic eye from which to capture the plot. In addition, when combined with Andrew’s concept of borrowing, the cineaste has the potential to run other studies, similar to Zola’s, by “borrowing” the initial

context or some of the characters and arranging them in a situation “inspired by” that of Nana’s, all while producing a slightly, or even vastly, different result.

(2.5) A FINAL IMAGE?

After examining Nana from the multiple angles that perceive her, one realizes that, ultimately, this Venus is not one, single *chose* but always a multiplicity and a paradox that is never resolved within the confines of the novel. Gural-Migdal, citing the end of Zola’s work, summarizes:

En effet, Nana n’est au départ qu’une invention de Bordenave, un produit fabriqué qui se multiplie dans les images de ses incarnations successives au point que l’original finit par se dissoudre dans la copie. Toute l’existence de l’actrice est un rôle de composition où rayonnent les simulacres érotiques, les projections de soi dans la foule, dans le fictif, dans le rêve. Chaque masque que Nana porte n’est là que pour en dissimuler un autre, jusqu’à ce dernier « masque horrible et grotesque du néant » où se décompose Vénus. (328)

Of course, behind her façade the bearer of masks must, necessarily, also be something or someone—at least a body onto which others place the masks—but it is this existence that the literature is unable convey. Because of Zola’s naturalistic emphasis on observation, Nana is never experienced from within, and through the perversions of those viewing her, even Nana’s true exterior appearance is also veiled. In this ambiguity arises a diamond mine of possibilities for someone who works in the visual realm, providing near-limitless

opportunities to define and re-define who it is that “remplit l’espace [et] hante les lieux car même lorsqu’elle est absente, son nom ne cesse d’être prononcé” (Gural-Migdal 321).

CHAPTER 3

THE BIG SCREEN

With its continuous fluidity of character and the constant change in perspective, *Nana* is the ultimate work from which to develop a film; the courtesan is able to play so many roles for so many different individuals (both in- and outside of her story) that her transition to another medium seems almost as simple as choosing another mask to perform in. In fact, Robert Stam's explanation of all literary texts applies flawlessly to *Nana* in particular because it is "a single novelistic text [which] comprises a series of verbal signals that can trigger a plethora of possible readings. An open structure, constantly reworked and reinterpreted by a boundless context, the text feeds on and is fed into an infinitely permutating intertext, seen through ever-shifting grids of interpretation" (15). Of course, a work as dense as Zola's necessitates numerous deletions and subsequent modifications of the plot in order to condense the material into a length suitable for a typical film, and the confines of the society in which the film is produced also affect the depiction of the numerous sexual and/or violent scenes in *Nana*. Additionally, the issue of finding an actress willing to portray Nana becomes a potential problem, as Russell Cousins explains:

A star whose carefully crafted image is synonymous with glamour and romance might be tempted by a role defined loosely as that of Nana the high-living femme fatale, but such a star when faced with Nana's other persona, namely the talentless, empty-headed and

spendthrift, promiscuous slut depicted by Zola, she might reflect on the damage by association to her reputation and reject the role. Unless, of course, rather than the star having to assimilate the totality of Nana's attractive/unattractive personality, the material of the novel were to be reshaped and sanitized to accommodate the star's need for an attractive only part. ("Revamping *Nana*" 176)

Thus the director and producer of a cinematic *Nana* are immediately and constantly faced with pressure for revision from several different directions. Stam defends such changes, saying "[s]imply adapting a novel without changing it [...] is like reheating a meal" (16), but clearly any modification will have definitive repercussions on the interpretation of the text by its actors and director as well as its audience. What these changes are and how profoundly the original meaning is re-developed by them is exactly what this paper aims to uncover, eventually hoping to unearth the Nana that the novel is unable to reveal.

The movies included for this project are: a silent version directed by Jean Renoir (1926), the only American example by Dorothy Arzner (1934), the first color production by Christian-Jaque (1954) and a rather risqué version by Dan Wolman (1982). The two earliest films have received by far the most scholarly attention, with an even heavier emphasis on Renoir than Arzner. While his is not the first attempt at filming *Nana*, Renoir's is notable both because of his name and his important role in the history of the cinema across France and the world. Arzner, on the other hand, is recognized as a female director with a feminine vision in a time when such concepts were not the norm, and her motion picture is further shaped by the fact that it was created in Hollywood during the restrictive Hays Code era. Two decades after Arzner's adaptation, *Nana* returns to French

cinema in the hands of Christian-Jaque, who adds the magic of color to his production and—like Renoir—directs his wife in the leading role. Lastly, the Italian cineaste Wolman follows a dramatically different path during a far more liberal time, which allows him much greater freedom to express Nana's sexuality than his predecessors, yielding what borders on a pornographic movie that was originally filmed in English but only available today dubbed into French. As a whole, these examples (to be discussed in chronological order) span a wide range of time, styles and levels of fidelity to Zola's text, and together will help to better understand the complexities that arise from giving life to a character whose personality is neither solid nor consistent. And although there are many interesting and revealing aspects of each adaptation, this study concentrates primarily on the representations of Nana's person in an attempt to discover if and how each director makes Zola's mythic and mysterious heroine into a finite but still overwhelming woman.

(3.1) RENOIR AND HESSLING (1926)

According to film historian Alan Williams, Jean Renoir's *Nana* "is probably the most interesting, noble failure of all French films of the 1920s" (136) and by most critical and monetary accounts, the film was indeed *un four*. Yet in light of the amount of literature compiled on the production, there must be something profound and poignant about this *Nana*. The film begins in a dramatically different fashion than Zola's work, with a dark-haired and heavily make-up-ed Nana descending awkwardly onto stage from above, lowered by a rope that—because of an unforeseen knot—leaves the young woman dangling inches from the ground. This comic action causes the audience to take special notice of the actress, even inspiring the solemn-looking count Muffat to be so bold as to present himself backstage after the performance. Visibly uncomfortable in a woman's

dressing room, the count is also strongly attracted to Nana and promises to pay another visit to Nana after the opening of her next show. This second production, the *Petite Duchesse*, has only one lead female role for which both Nana and her rival Rose Mignon are vying. Yet, when Nana expresses interest in the part her acting friends erupt into laughter, causing Nana to storm off in anger.

Back at her small apartment, the actress discovers the count Muffat waiting for her and, though he begs her to be with him, she only accepts his propositions after he concedes to buy her dream role in Fauchery's play. Unfortunately, the opening night of the *Petite Duchesse* is a terrible disaster, so much so that Nana is in the midst of a dramatic tantrum when Muffat arrives to present his friend Vandeuvres and the latter's nephew Georges Hugon to her. Instantly smitten by the actress, Georges Hugon also begins an affair with Nana—a fact that, when discovered, prompts the uncle to pay a visit to the actress in an attempt to separate Georges from Nana. Also unable to resist her charms, Vandeuvres ends up another one of the courtesan's aspiring lovers who suddenly needs “beaucoup d'or” so that he can win her away from Muffat. In order to achieve this goal Vandeuvres decides to rig the *Grand Prix*, fixing it so his underdog filly (Nana) beats all the other horses, thus earning him a large profit in last-minute bets. While Nana (the woman) celebrates her namesake's victory, the filly owner's plan is uncovered and his name disgraced in front of everyone, causing Nana to return home with only Georges. The young man, strangely disturbed that night, takes hold of a pair of scissors and proceeds to carry them around menacingly while Nana admires her reflection in the mirror. When Vandeuvres is introduced into the bedroom and desperately begs the

courtesan to marry him, the young Georges becomes frantic and also offers his hand in marriage, only for both gentlemen to be rejected and dismissed by an annoyed Nana.

After the uncle and nephew depart, Nana is easily distracted by the arrival of Muffat and his present of money and *bonbons*, becoming quite playful and forcing the count to beg for treats like a dog. Suddenly, Georges—who had been waiting and watching in Nana’s bathroom—appears and stabs himself with the scissors, killing himself in front of his lover. Unable to handle the situation, Muffat leaves the frightened Nana alone to discover the other tragic news of the evening: a second suicide by Vandeuvres. Worried about their friend, Nana’s friends from the playhouse arrive and take her to the *Bal Mabille*, feeding her drinks until she is gay enough to dance away her cares in a crazed can-can. When Muffat appears and ends his relationship with the courtesan, Nana goes into convulsions and collapses in the arms of her friends. Never one to stay away, the count arrives when he learns of Nana’s sickness and is just in time to hear the doctor’s prognosis: smallpox. In complete defiance of the possibility for contagion, Muffat slowly climbs the staircase to comfort his pained and dying lover in her last, agonizing moments before she falls over the edge of the bed and breathes her last breath.

(3.1.1) THE AGE OF ATTRACTION

In all of the literature that has been written about this first major adaptation of Zola’s novel, the most common remarks relate to Catherine Hessling’s bizarre interpretation of the lead female role. With dark, thick hair, excessive amounts of facial make-up and overly stylized gestures that are unmatched by any other character, the image that Jean Renoir creates of Nana dramatically differs from Zola’s depiction or even

the soft, delicate feminine ideals painted by the cineaste's father, Pierre Auguste Renoir. A sharp and jagged character, the young Renoir's Nana has a charm that stems more from her playful behaviors and is "thus define[d ...] through the orchestration of gesture rather than through a projection of overt sexuality" (Howard 157). Part of this variance occurs because of Hessling's stature: small and dark like Zola's Rose Mignon, this Nana is utterly unlike the woman with "ses larges hanches qui roulaient dans un balancement voluptueux [et d]es cuisses de blonde grasse" (Zola 53). Visibly dissimilar to the original character, the 1926 role instead recalls the classic Nana through the projection of a child-like temperament that is occasionally alluded to in Zola's work. In the novel phrases such as *bonne enfant* and verbs such as *se faire* or *avoir l' air* as in "Elle se faisait petite" and "Ça la surprenait toujours de se voir; elle avait l' air étonné et séduit d' une jeune fille qui découvre sa puberté" (Zola 75, 216), suggest that Nana is only "playing" life, pretending to be someone else just as children often do. It is this theme that Alexander Sesonske references in his defense of Renoir's characterization of Nana:

Unless we perceive this childishness as a central element in Nana's character, Catherine Hessling's acting in the role must appear ludicrous or totally inept. Every gesture seems exaggerated to the point of destroying credibility, the whole performance greatly overdone [... But i]f we accept this childishness as integral to the character of Nana, the coherence and seriousness of the film can be maintained, the excesses of the performance understood. A child playing at being an adult overdoes every gesture. Little boys pretending to be men adopt an exaggeratedly masculine stance,

... speak in an excessively gruff voice. (24)

In this light Hessling's interpretation of Nana becomes far more understandable, as her hair is unruly as a child's would be, her make-up excessive as a small girl often applies it and her hand and body movements the youthful, comedic versions of a woman's sensual advances.

While this portrayal cannot explain the initial male attraction to such a woman, it does justify the actions of the men once they have become infatuated with Nana. Each lover finds himself infected with the need to express the juvenile emotions of his own personality, which thus explains the otherwise absurd instantaneous burst of tears the Muffat displays when the young actress initially rejects his declaration of love and the twisted and pouting expressions that continually mask the face of Georges Hugon. Even Vandeuvres—seemingly so “worldly and clear-eyed” (Sesonske 28)—transforms when smitten by Nana, imagining unrealistic scenes where his fantasy woman receives handfuls of gold from every direction. Through these facial expressions and reproduced daydreams, Renoir gives a visual dimension to (explanation of) the power that Nana holds over her male lovers, so that when combined with the same vocabulary as Zola (“...c’est la mouche d’or qui empoisonne tout ce qu’elle approche!” cries Vandeuvres as he attempts to warn Muffat), the contagious nature of her immaturity comes to resemble the novelist’s “force de nature, un ferment de destruction [...] corrompant et désorganisant Paris,” even if it does so without aide from “[l]es cuisses de neige” and the rest of the actress’s physical allure (215).

(3.1.2) FACES OF DEATH

In keeping with a heroine who is also an infectious insect, Renoir proceeds towards Nana's death the same way Zola did: using a contagion to kill the disease. Even employing the same virus with its suggestively sexual undertones—*la petite vérole* (smallpox, Nana's killer) as a derivation of *la vérole* (syphilis)—the director appears on the surface to be following the author's finale, although a more profound inspection shows little else that resembles Zola's *fin*. The primary distinction is that, unlike the literary Nana's disappearance to travel the world and her sickness/impending death announced only moments before she expires, Renoir's audience experiences nearly every circumstance surrounding the actress's death. Beginning with her collapse at the *Bal Mabille*, the spectator watches the progression from fainting until dying as well as much of the pain and hallucination that occur in between. So, while "[t]he ambiguity surrounding a reading of Nana's death in the book results from the fact that, unlike Madame Bovary, she does not die but is found already dead" (Howard 162), Renoir depicts only the moments of death and is unconcerned with the post-mortem conversations that Zola describes. Thus while both artists make a moral statement at the end of their *oeuvres*, the uncertainty in the cinematic version is seen in the literal terms instead of created through the lack of visual stimulus.

Heather Howard, while quoting Renoir and his scriptwriter Pierre Lestringuez, remarks on the religious overtones in the film's final scene, claiming that "Nana was given a chance for redemption from her life of vice, and Muffat also compensated for his earlier weakness and humiliation by asserting himself in a traditionally strong male role as her saviour" (163). Yet, while these religious overtones may have been the original

artistic intention, the scene's symbolic use of props and room décor seem to suggest another interpretation. For example, in the time between when Nana's friends take her back to her bedroom and the moment when the actress's hallucinations begin, the sickly young woman finds time to change out of her vibrant dress worn at the *Bal* and into a nightgown. This garment, clearly an indication of her bedridden state, also has several other elements that also play into Nana's character: both its color (white) as well as its embellishment (thick ruffles of fabric around both wrists and the neck). While the color could suggest the purification and forgiveness that the director apparently intended, it may also be a play on the false innocence that Nana's childish behaviors attempt to suggest or the foreshadowing of the total effacement the courtesan will experience in death. Additionally, when the nightgown is contrasted with the flowing, open-necked dress worn in the previous scene, the ornate construction of the latter garment seems to choke Nana's body and also indicates the possibility of an unpleasant death, strangled by the excess (in fabric and in life) that surrounds her. This concept of surplus is repeated in several other elements of luxury throughout Nana's bed chamber, indicating that the courtesan and her greed are not necessarily absolved of their sins, as one might initially believe.

Perhaps signifying Nana's inability to have one of anything, Renoir creates a strange composition of death where the entire final scene is duplicated so that the spectators watch Nana die not once but twice. Also playing on the duality of Nana's child-like (innocent) nature and her position in society as a courtesan, each version of the actress's end suggests a different moral interpretation. Renoir's intended religious zeal features largely in the first take, where the last image is a close-up of the frightened

young woman lost in fervent prayer, yet in the second scene it is wealth and excess that become prominent, as previously unnoticed props come to serve as symbols of the actress's death. This second production is a montage of several shots: first a petrified Nana clinging to the helpless Muffat, followed by images of a necklace falling gracefully off a pile of furs and onto the floor, the abrupt blinking off of an ornate lamp positioned in front of a grand, imposing window, Nana's bed and its luxurious sheets finally still, the dead actress hanging over the side of her bed and, finally, a second shot of the bed itself. Although a clear reason for this double depiction of the final scene is never provided,

It is as if the camera does away with Nana/Catherine Hessling in the subjective tracking shot in order to be free to explore the broader themes more suited to [...] the novel [...] The jewels falling from the fur are a *vanitas* motif, which comments cryptically on Nana's tragic greed and class aspiration [while t]he lamp and window add as ironic touch marking the end of a staged performance. (Golsan 67)

In other words, the later images of death suggest that the true end to Nana's reign comes in the form of a death befitting her lifestyle. Unlike her literary equivalent who dies from the same virus, the cinematic leading lady shows no signs of disfiguring decay, which suggests that the film provides a more moralistic and abstract reason for her death. Through the plurality of shots that reference a surplus of riches (furs, necklaces, the lush linens on a grandiose bed), Renoir seems to indicate that Nana's destruction was a product of her extreme lifestyle more so than smallpox. Last seen drinking and dancing *trop* before falling ill, in the end Nana drowns in her nightgown that is *trop* ornate and

her bed that is *trop* both its style and its usage. In fact, it is this *lit* that is showcased in the final shot of the film (and not the young woman's frozen face), which transforms the end of the 1926 *Nana* into a warning against a lifestyle rather than an emotional moment that results after becoming attached to a character. Ultimately a theme and an unethical example instead of an actual character, Renoir's *Nana* is more the conversion of Zola's character rather than an embellishment and enlightenment of her, and as such does little to encourage a deeper understanding of this complex woman.

(3.2) ARZNER AND STEN (1934)

As the only Hollywood production of *Nana*, the 1934 version of Zola's work is also notable because its director is the only female *cinéaste* known to have completed an adaptation of this *oeuvre*, and also because the film's producer, Samuel Goldwyn, attempted to use the production to showcase his latest discovery: the Ukrainian actress Anna Sten. Both of these endeavors, when combined with the tight restrictions of the Hays Code and the extravagant nature of the original text, make for a cinematic experience unlike any of the other interpretations. It is no surprise, then, that the film begins with an opening scene not found anywhere else: the funeral of *Nana*'s mother. In the successive shots, one learns that *Nana* does not want to follow her mother's fate as a "weak" woman, a point that is emphasized in the following scenes where her sharp, sarcastic remarks in a café scene cut down several male egos. After pushing a drunken soldier into the near-by pool for his inappropriate comments, *Nana* sparks the interest of the "Great Greiner," a distinguished-looking old man who invites *Nana* to join him at his theater where he tells the young woman that he will make her his next big star. This invitation proves to be a blessing and a curse for the owner, who quickly learns that

Nana's the stubborn nature that does not submit easily to his direction, although this discovery does not prevent him from falling in love with her.

Before the opening night of Nana's act, the audience meets the curt and refined Col. André Muffat and his younger, more liberal brother Lt. Georges Muffat, who are both attending the show that night, though the former has strong reservations about the prospect. Neither man is disappointed in his predictions when Nana appears on stage in a long black evening gown, crooning a song about relishing a night of passion but never dwelling on it afterwards. Following the show Col. Muffat's out-of-town guest insists that they head backstage to meet Nana in person, while Georges and his friends wait outside the exit door, also hoping to encounter the new star. In the end, Nana accompanies the older men to dinner, but promises to meet Georges another time, which leads to a brief courtship and plans to summer together in the countryside. The blonde and her young lieutenant enjoy many late nights together in *la campagne* before Georges is caught by his brother while sneaking back home very early one morning. As a higher-ranking officer, the colonel arranges his brother's departure for war and also reports their affair to Nana's jealous lover/financier, Greiner, hoping to finally split the happy couple for good.

Even though the couple promise to write each other every day, Nana's friends Mimi and Zoé (who claim to want to help her move on and back into her former, profitable business) thwart these plans so that, when the elder Muffat appears one day in Nana's apartment, the depressed young actress succumbs to a relationship with the very man who betrayed her. After several months living with André, Nana returns home one evening to find Georges in her apartment, finally home from his time in Algeria. The two

quickly decide to run away together, but while the courtesan rushes into her room to get her coat, Col. Muffat enters and the two brothers begin to fight over their lover. In desperation and confusion, Nana makes the decision to take her own life and eventually dies in the arms of both tormented men.

(3.2.1) RESTRICTING AND REINVENTING NANA

The Nana as seen by Arzner's feminine lens is clearly far removed from Zola's aloof, independent woman, with nearly all the other characters in the storyline also experiencing a strong sense of distance from their original selves. These drastic changes result, in large part, from the Hays Code, a complex document organized by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) as a "corporate statement of policy about the appropriate content of entertainment cinema [... that] acknowledged the possible influence of movies on the morals and conduct of those who saw them" (Balio 46). Not a strict law, the Code—named after the MPPDA's director Will H. Hays—was more a guideline for producers and directors that also helped to understand when and why the censors would edit or reject a film. Among other things, the Code found "[t]he sale of women, or a woman selling her virtue" a "repellent subject" (Bynum), which understandably leads to dramatic changes in *Nana's* plot. Unable to portray "[i]mpure love [...] as attractive and beautiful [...] or] right and permissible" (Bynum), Arzner was forced to convert Nana into a woman who fights her battles from within two confines: nineteenth century patriarchy as well as twentieth century American Puritanism. In order to appeal to this new, secondary audience, the courtesan's image is quickly sanitized, or at least altered, transforming her into a talented (and thus deserving) singer who shows no resemblance to the *plaisanterie* that inspired the literary public to think "[j]amais on

n'avait entendu une voix aussi fausse, menée avec moins de méthode [...] Et elle ne savait même pas se tenir en scène, elle jetait les mains en avant, dans un balancement de tout son corps, qu'on trouva peu convenable et disgracieux" (Zola 43). Reserving most of her flagrant sexuality for innuendo and suggestion, the 1934 Nana becomes a more refined and sculpted version of her textual self—so much so that one could almost imagine that Arzner is telling the story of a fortunate Rose Mignon instead of Nana.

Through many close-ups that frame Sten's face from above while projecting a soft glow around her, Nana is given an angelic quality, like one who is looking upward in prayer—and thus also like one who could hardly be called "impure." Indications of innate goodness such as this may be the reason behind the censor's acceptance of the sometimes questionable material, as it also allows the audience to sympathize with the character while remaining on the acceptable moral ground that the Code so concerned itself with. At the same time, by injecting talent into Nana's powers of seduction Arzner loses the mysterious quality about her heroine. Because the initial attraction is so easily and concretely explained by Sten's stunning looks and "amazing" singing voice—rather than "l'inconnu du désir"—the courtesan becomes a woman instead of a goddess, an (idealized) reality instead of an (impossible) myth.

The opening credits of Arzner's adaptation indicate that the film is "suggested by" Zola's text, and that suggestion becomes apparent through the very things that make it different from the author's *oeuvre*. Whereas in the literary text Nana is circulating and undefined, the cinematic interpretation clearly finds Zola's "suggestions" of a concrete personality and seeks to better explain that existence so that, in rehabilitating Nana's horrible reputation, the director also provides an outlet that the literary character never

received: a voice of her own. From the very beginning, when Nana claims that she will not be “weak” or “poor,” one quickly comes to understand the motivation behind the young woman’s climb up the social and economic ladder in a way that the Naturalist author never made possible. Through Nana’s frequent and biting honesty, such as when she flatly denies André Muffat’s money and retorts “what do you know of a woman like me?” it becomes quite obvious that the men around Nana are unable to understand her, just as Zola’s gentlemen were unable to do—although this time the spectator uncovers a unique and differing perspective. Under Arzner’s direction Nana’s justification for her actions no longer seems disjointed or irrational—her love for Georges and her disdain for the paying customers, for example, are consciously understood in each man’s manner of treating the actress. In addition, Russell Cousins remarks on “Nana’s unabashed self-confidence, her quick-witted rejoinders, and her role-reversal treatment of the male as merely the sexual toy her victims fondly imagined her to be [which] place her in the image of the most memorable Hollywood vamp of the thirties, Mae West” (“Sanitizing Zola” 212), underscoring the fact that this new interpretation of the courtesan is clearly one of admiration. In conjunction with the addition of talent to a list of Nana’s charms and the re-writing of scenes to explain Nana’s rationales, the feminine approach discussed in section 2.2 is unmistakably the route Arzner chose to take in her adaptation.

Unlike the feminine direction explored earlier, the other women in the 1934 *Nana* are as equally unenlightened about the heroine’s personality as the men are. By always depicting Nana dressed in clothing unlike both her best friends Satin and Mimi or the noble Sabine Muffat, the adaptation is able to represent the actress’s flamboyant nature while also expressing something quite distinctive from the novel’s concept of Nana:

individuality. From the opening scene when the two best friends follow docilely along with the funeral prayers while Nana looks around confused and bewildered, the public comprehends that the *amies* do not always subscribe to the same outlook. Further on in the film, while in the café together, Mimi scolds Nana, asking her “Why do you mock these gentlemen, Nana?” to which the latter responds “What gentlemen?” and again a varying viewpoint is highlighted. With the flippant carelessness and ignorance of Zola’s courtesan displaced onto Arzner’s Satin, the film version of Nana is thus able to defy anyone who attempts to subvert her; during the afternoon at the café the young woman remarks “I can insult any man who insults me,” and she later toys with both Greiner and André Muffat’s words, re-interpreting their phrases to give herself the upper hand in the situation. The actress also manages to trick even Satin, Mimi and Zoé during an afternoon in the countryside, surprising all three women when she and Georges emerge from the very place to which the couple had banished the ladies. Indeed, the actress is able to deceive and redirect her friends just as well as her suitors/clients, thus becoming the ultimate woman through her differences instead of her similarities. For Arzner, it is not Nana’s connections to other woman or her undeniable presence that is emphasized when creating the place of honor but rather the defiant approach to every day life that makes her heroine the exemplary female.

(3.2.2) DEATH SANS DESTRUCTION

Of course, “exemplary” as a superlative necessarily has multiple connotations, and Arzner is careful never to forget the wholesome image that the Hays Code encourages her to portray, so much so that “[t]he author [Zola]’s hard-nose prostitute, created as a corrective to the idealized view of the good-hearted whore, is redeemed in

the Hollywood film version to possess precisely those virtues of generosity, dignity, and understanding her literary creator had sought to deny” (Cousins, “Sanitizing Zola” 213). Additionally, because Nana is now a redeemed woman, her death can no longer be interpreted as moral punishment, for she no longer has committed crimes that would merit such a downfall. What results is a near-complete reversal of Zola’s end to *Nana*, beginning with the reason for her death. When the actress—already mildly upset by the announcement of war—arrives home to find Georges in her new apartment, hysterics result. The young soldier, angered by his lover’s lack of communication over the past several months, expresses his emotions with a strength that had yet to be seen in him, even shaking Nana while telling her “I didn’t know how much I loved you [...] I could kill you for what you’ve done, but I won’t because I love you.” Shaken by this change in her love, the courtesan starts babbling for first time, unable to express the truth about the situation but—realizing the impending danger that the elder Muffat’s arrival home could bring—promises to leave with Georges right away. Unfortunately the older brother’s timing could not be more on cue, and to express the ever-increasing levels of panic, the camera provides several extreme close-ups of Nana’s face that had not been seen from the same angle (eye-to-eye with the spectator) since the funeral during the opening scenes. As understood in *The Aesthetics of Film*, “[u]sing close-ups creates an intense *tête à tête* with the spectator, whose interest is thereby focalized upon the character, even when s/he may play a role that is completely effaced in the actual diegetic situation. For example, the shot scale may cue us to identify with a character ignored by the other characters” (Aumont 229-30), which is exactly what Arzner’s film does—bringing Nana to the forefront (instead of the Muffats who are arguing over her) for the last time. With a

face distorted by fear and confusion the actress is no longer the beautiful and confident woman from the beginning of the film and instead recalls Rose Mignon's lamentation "Ah ! elle est changée, elle est changée" (Zola 438). The soft lighting that had framed Sten's face during her earlier close-ups has now vanished, replaced by harsh lines and shadows which also signal the decomposition of Nana's former self. The disturbed woman is strangely silent during these images so that, when combined with the earlier physical violence, the silence, and the repeated negative assessments (i.e. calling herself "the bad woman"), Arzner's Nana becomes a victim of the very ideologies which she attempted to deny throughout the film.

The actual suicide is not depicted on screen—undoubtedly because the Hays Code rejected any form of "[b]rutal killings [...] presented in detail" (Bynum)—and the camera instead displays Georges's and André's reactions to the blast of gunpowder, signaling a slow shift in focus away from the dying woman and onto her abandoned males. In her final moments, Nana whispers that she has "so much to say," but instead silently joins the brothers's hands together as her final living act—literally and figuratively removing herself from the situation and emphasizing the companionship between men over that of their romantic encounters with a woman. It is only in her final words that one comes to understand that Nana's life-taking act still subverts the accepted norm, as she finally escapes from the patriarchy she has suddenly found to be oppressive in all forms—admitting that she is "glad to be going, very glad." Cousins proposes that "[i]f the death of Nana proves anything at all, it confirms the need to rethink the discredited attitudes that have brought about such tragedies" (214), an interpretation that can be applied to both 1930's American society and to the Second Empire Paris of Zola's novel. By

cementing a personality and a morality for Nana, Arzner thus defines one possibility for the erratic literary character but, by also having this woman take her own life, the director implies that the actress is unable to fight forever and eventually is forced to remove herself from the confines of society by any means necessary. Thus, in the end, this celluloid Nana is able to span half a century of time and transcend the social context in which she was created to make relevant commentary on the time in which she is viewed.

(3.3) CHRISTIAN-JAQUE AND CAROL (1954)

Two decades pass after the completion of Arzner's project before the cinematic world's interest in *Nana* is revived, and this time it is the Christian-Jaque production of the novel which attempts to interpret the dense work. This film, because of its mid-century release, is the first about Zola's courtesan to involve color pictures and it makes full use of this new technology—a fact that is evident from the opening scene where the count Muffat enters a long, ornately decorated hallway dressed in the rich colors of gold and purple. This austere man, disdainful of the wealth and opulence that surrounds him, meets with the emperor to discuss his concern about the corruption and debauchery within the government but, because of the intimate friendship he and Napoleon III share, is convinced to remain in his appointed position and even agrees to accompany the prince of Sardinia to the theater that evening. Later that night at the *Théâtre de Variétés*, the production is underway when, in response to an insult from Rose Mignon, Nana rips off her cape and rushes onto stage wearing practically nothing and consequently provokes an enthused reaction from the primarily male crowd. Muffat's guest, who arrives just in time for this spectacle, is quite interested in this "personne très agréable," inciting the two to head backstage after the show to pay their respects. Inside Nana's dressing room, the

count becomes visibly uncomfortable and soon returns home, leaving the prince to dine with the actress for the evening.

After returning home late the next morning from her *soirée* with the prince, Nana meets with the duke Vandevres, a wealthy man who quickly becomes infatuated with the young woman and promises to see her again. Showing no loyalty at all, that very night Nana signs a “proposition” from the banker Steiner, assuring her love and affection to him in exchange for gifts and money. A few days and a variety of Nana’s lovers later, the count Muffat pays the actress a visit and the two begin their affair as well. The count believes Nana when she tells him that she will be with no other men, but in truth the *liaisons* between both Steiner and Vandevres are never quite finished—a fact that Muffat slowly discovers as, first, the banker and his business are ruined because of his excessive personal spending, and then, later, the duke frequently appears to dine with Nana after shows. Quite a jealous man, Muffat challenges Vandevres to a duel but—when the police arrive at the fight—he subsequently retreats behind his governmental duties. An argument about this failure escalates between Nana and Muffat and the actress banishes her lover, deciding to prove that “moi aussi, je suis sentimentale” by moving in with her male co-star Fontan. After a short and abusive relationship filled with arguments, Nana finds herself on the streets and quickly arrested after being mistaken as part of a group of prostitutes.

Desperate not to go to jail, Nana explains to the officers that she is a friend of the count Muffat, who rescues her and promises to give everything she wants if only she will stay with him again. Nana agrees, but soon comes to feel stifled in her excessively luxurious new home with nothing to fill her time, and is thus pleasantly surprised one

afternoon when Vandevres finds her and they begin their relationship anew. The duke explains that he has chosen a race horse to name after his “chère obsession” and if she (the filly) wins at *le Grand Prix*, they will run away together and that otherwise he will disappear from her (Nana’s) life forever. On the day of the big race the filly Nana speeds across the finish line in a last-minute victory, to the excitement of everyone except Muffat who has been informed of the duke’s deal with Nana. A subsequent inspection of Vandevres’s horse and finds that it had been drugged, disqualifying the owner from all the money and prestige he had earned from the win. Devastated and disgraced, the duke sets fire to his stables, killing himself and any hope for a future with Nana. Oblivious to this tragedy, the actress returns to her home to pack when suddenly Muffat arrives and refuses to hear that his *amante* is leaving him. In a final act of desperate jealousy, the count strangles Nana and leaves her beautiful body cold on the stairwell as he walks away a ruined and empty man.

(3.3.1) COLORS AND STRIPES

In arguably the most visually appealing version of this study, Christian-Jaque plays on vision and the act of viewing to express his concept of Nana and her powerful feminine charms. The most notable manner of achieving this, as referred to earlier, is through the brilliant colors that constantly adorn the courtesan’s voluptuous body. From the gleaming gold of her *début* outfit to the intense, deep red velvet dress seen in the final shots, Martine Carol is always dressed in a spectacular array of colors. Just as Arzner clothed her Nana in stronger, more elaborate outfits, likewise Christian-Jaque utilizes shades and hues to emphasize the male’s direct and immediate attraction for his actress. Even her striking red hair color is an indication of Nana’s fiery nature and is only

accented further by the gold and green leaves that are pinned into it during her stage performances. With a vibrant personality that is only accentuated by loud fashions, the power of the courtesan's attraction is experienced early on in the production, when Nana presents herself for the *Variété*'s public adorned only in nothing more than a few golden leaves and the red of her hair. The audience's reaction is similar to the one Zola described, where "[i]l n'y eut pas d'applaudissements [et p]ersonne ne riait plus" (Zola 53), and yet such a silence is not acceptable to the Nana whose attire seems to make noise of its own. Christian-Jaque's actress demands, "donne-moi applaudissements" and upon receiving the warm approval this young woman smiles, though it is not the infamous "sourire aigu de mangeuse d'hommes" (Zola 53). Russell Cousins explains this lack of a menacing air though the conversion of the Nana character into a star vehicle for Martine Carol, so that "for this reason [...] only narrative elements which contribute to her reputation as a screen idol will be developed [...] and] all that might detract from that image will be excised" ("Revamping *Nana*" 177). This Nana, as understood through her new clothing and revised demeanor, is clearly desirable; she asks for attention—even demands it—and has as many natural assets on display as she does talents so that the totality of visual input leaves no question as to why all the men around her are constantly vying for her time.

Even with all her undeniable attraction, Nana's wardrobe—and, by extension, Nana herself—still retains the suggestion of her true nature and the work she does. By frequently wearing outfits with thick stripes down her legs or across the arms of her jackets, the actress is rarely seen without multiple elements of black—the color of night, evil and nothingness—decorating her body. This fact is most obvious in her green and

black evening gown and her favorite pair of stockings, but Carol's wardrobe also showcases several other hints of this dark color such as large black buttons, multiple black ribbons and a favorite black choker often worn around the neck. It is this last item that particularly defines Nana in her career and in her personality—not only by the significant placement of the object around her neck and thus foreshadowing her untimely death to come, but also in the statements made by Muffat before the actress's role is even introduced into the film. In the second scene, when returning home after his meeting with the emperor, Muffat greets his wife and their guest Fauchery but—without so much as even a “bonjour”—gruffly commands his daughter to change her outfit, finding the black necklace and broach she is wearing “indécente.” Thus, according to the count, by wearing the accessory that closely resembles Estelle's or, by association, performing on stage in little more than the equivalent of black lace underwear, Nana is constantly underscoring the immoral side of her personality.

The exhibition of corruption through adornment in black appears to be Christian-Jaque's manner of approximating the *signe* that Zola's Fauchery remarks upon, although the cinematic symbol differs from the literary one in an important manner: all clothing and accessories are removable, while physical marks are not. Indeed, there are scenes where little to no black can be found on the actress's garments—her first outfit, for example, and her later dresses while living with Fontan give far less indication of depravity, as if the director is suggesting that those are the moments when the audience is not clear about her status, when Nana could be a *bonne fille* after all. Of course, like Zola's destiny-driven plot, Nana can never escape her true disposition and in the last scene of the film—when the only black she wears are bows around her wrists—the color

and spirit of darkness become her handcuffs, chaining her to her role forever. Literally forced to submit to fate, the 1954 Nana's disfiguration in death becomes metaphoric through the deep, blood-red color of her dress and the black around her wrists, while the symbolic *maladie* her black represents appears to have spread to her killer—a man dressed for this final shot almost entirely in the color of Nana's evil and sickness.

(3.3.2) MIRRORS AND MALES

In the novel, “[u]n des plaisirs de Nana était de se déshabiller en face de son armoire à glace, où elle se voyait en pied [...] toute nue, elle s’oubliait, elle se regardait longuement. C’était une passion de son corps, un ravissement de satin de sa peau, et de la ligne souple de sa taille, qui la tenait sérieuse, attentive, absorbée dans un amour d’elle-même” (Zola 214). In so many words, Zola provides his readers with important symbolic connotations for mirrors and this mirror scene in particular. As has previously been discussed, the positioning of the mirror in the above passage is curiously able to exclude Muffat from the reflection so that the count feels all the more displaced and desperate while the reader focuses entirely on Nana and her deepest love-object: herself. One might thus expect that the cinematic production to most frequently employ mirrors in its scenes would follow these same lines of reference—allowing the beautiful Carol to duplicate her image and thus reinforce the exclusionary and self-indulgent actions of her character. Yet, unlike the text that inspired Christian-Jaque's work, the visual reflections throughout the technicolor cinematic production of *Nana* take on an association vastly different from the original *oeuvre*.

In general, the mirrors in Christian-Jaque's adaptation are most commonly drawn upon to remind the spectator of others's presence in a shot when those characters would

not normally be shown through a traditional camera lens. For example, when the Prince of Sardinia and Muffat are shown interacting with Nana after her performance in the *Blonde Vénus*, the mirrors in the dressing room continue to reflect images of Fontan and Bordenave's conversation, as if to remind the viewer (and Nana) that she is not a queen holding an audience in her salon, but instead merely a working woman with connections to other low-class workers. Following this trend, Nana is rarely shown examining her reflection for an extraordinary amount of time unless there is someone behind her, and as a result is never featured staring longingly or admiringly at her image for more than a few seconds. Indeed, the only shot where the potential to have a Nana "riant à l'autre Nana, qui, elle aussi, se baisait dans la glace" (Zola 217) occurs—one evening backstage at the *Variétés* when Vandeuvres and Muffat are both present—finds the camera abruptly redirecting the spectator's concentration away from the actress and onto the two men in the scene. The courtesan's one moment of self-examination is completely ignored by the duke and the count who are instead staring each other down while arguing over who will dine with Nana that evening. The male plotline of this scene, with its actions far more dramatic (eventually resulting in a duel) than the potential image of Nana who "ne bougea plus [...] ses yeux demi-clos, sa bouche entrouverte, son visage noyé d'un rire amoureux" (Zola 216), overtakes the feminine self-adoration—a shift in emphasis from Zola's original that becomes typical for Christian-Jaque's adaptation. In fact, the count Muffat's face is reflected more often than any other character in the film, including Nana herself, indicating the major thematic change from the literature to this film.

Russell Cousins observes that because of Muffat's role in the opening two scenes of the film, when even Nana's name is notably absent, "[h]e, rather than Nana, becomes

the initial focal point and as the narrative unfolds it is through his eyes and consciousness that Nana is registered as seductive and dangerous. The ill-fated Count provides a frame for the action” (“Revamping *Nana*” 177). Yet, as *Nana* the film progresses its starring male develops into more than simply the frame for his female co-star’s image. Indeed, throughout the film one discovers a greater number of extreme close-ups focused on the count’s face than the actress’s and his face often covers—if just slightly—a portion of hers during their moments nestled together, so that Muffat comes to overshadow Nana in visual and thus thematic importance. The consistency of the count’s image in opposition to the actress’s fleeting and varied shots suggests a strong, confident male character in the face of his lover’s indecision and easily persuaded temperament. Therefore, where Nana is uncertain as to whether Vandevures or Muffat would be a better provider and allows a horse race to decide, “Muffat’s commitment to Nana is total: he does not substitute Rose Mignon during Nana’s relationship with Fontan, neither is he drawn to the Church to resolve his situation” (Cousins, “Revamping *Nana*” 178), instead defying the respected M. Venot when the latter attempts to condemn the count’s immoral actions.

The culmination of this shift in significance from Zola’s work can be understood through Muffat’s role in the opening and closing scenes of the film. While the count’s simple presence in both the initial and final scenes is notable, as are his soliloquies in each part, it is his physical actions during these very first and last shots that solidify the interpretation of Christian-Jaque’s work as primarily male-centered. Initially, the regally dressed advisor to the emperor marches firmly onto the screen, entering from behind the camera and continuing half-way down the long, ornate hallway before turning left into an unseen door. In the conclusion, contrarily, an overhead long shot films the count leaving

his dead lover in the left-center of the shot and walking away, through the rich decorations of his hotel, solemnly growing smaller on the screen before exiting out the front door. If one considers the last movements as an extension of the first, Christian-Jaque thus links his introductory and concluding shots through *décor* (excessive luxury) and action (walking) as if to imply that the entire experience was just a movement in Muffat's journey through life. Indeed, even the fact that the count turns left in the beginning, only to leave the left-side of the screen in the end has moral implications about the situation since the concept of "left" is directly connected to the *sinistre* and *gauche*. Through this connection from beginning to end, the film's emphasis rests on the male and his potential ruination by the female because, even if it is Nana who lies dead on the floor, it is Muffat who has just killed the only source of joy he had left in his life. So while Christian-Jaque does make bold statements about Nana's personality through her garments, he ultimately creates a film that echoes his own character's (Fauchery's) opinion on Nana's "esprit": "Que ferais-je de ton esprit? Le mien me suffit."

(3.4) WOLMAN AND BERGER (1982)

As its title suggests, *Nana, le désir* is by far the most sexually explicit version in this study and, perhaps because of this fact, has no known scholarly research published on its subject matter. This film, where the Italian director Dan Wolman guides actress Katya Berger in the role of Nana, indicates that it is "loosely based" on Zola's novel and begins with two gentlemen—Steiner and Fauchery—being ushered into the brothel known as the Minotaur by its owner, Fontan. A young man by the name of Hector Muffat quietly slips in behind the men and the camera follows behind him, entering into the *bordel*. Presented immediately with many topless women as well as dancers on stage

doing the can-can, this new location is clearly far from *les Variétés* of *Nana*. The audience soon learns that young Hector is the son of count Muffat, a rigid man who would be very displeased if he learned of his son's venture into debauchery. After several forms of adult entertainment grace the stage of the Minotaur, a man dressed as a magician appears on stage to present the new invention, "la photographie animée," starring "la ravissante et excitante" Nana. What follows is a pornographic short with Nana as a painter's model who is so distracting that the artist sleeps with her instead of creating a new *tableau*. The general crowd's reaction is one of laughter, although all three gentlemen seated together (Steiner, Fauchery and Hector) cannot conceal their new-found lust for the actress before them. After much bargaining and several shots of the three men looking longingly at Nana through peepholes, Steiner is ultimately the one who spends the evening with Nana. This night of lust leads to an intense infatuation with the young lady and over the next few days, Steiner repeatedly begs to be able to see her again while Nana continually refuses, until the old banker promises her anything she wants, including "une grande maison avec un beau jardin, et qui serait à moi [Nana]." Coincidentally, the quickly-acquired new house happens to be neighbor to the Muffat family's home, which of course leads both Hector and his father to pay their respects to the new *voisine*. Hector, the audience learns, is already engaged and promises to sleep with Nana the very night of his wedding—but he must wait until then, as he has no other way to compensate the young woman for her time. The *père* Muffat, on the other hand, succumbs to his desires and becomes a regular visitor chez Nana—dispensing gross sums of personal money in order to be able to stay.

At her first party in her new home, Nana is introduced to a woman named Satin who immediately looks longingly at the hostess and suggests they meet again later. The location for this *rendez-vous*, it turns out, is a lesbian meeting place that convinces an uncertain Nana to begin a homosexual affair with Satin. This unleashing of another side of her personality, it seems, inspires in Nana a constant desire for sexual attention, sleeping with everyone from the count to her horse trainer, and from Satin to the African fighter she convinces Muffat to buy for her at an exorbitant price. In a need to express this new-found liberty, Nana first rids herself of Steiner and then convinces Fauchery to seduce Sabine Muffat in hopes of inspiring the count to return to his wife. After an unsuccessful duel for the countess's honor and the African's loss in a high-stakes fight, Muffat loses his dignity, his home, all his possessions and the respect of both his wife and Nana. Hector finally weds his fiancée, but is immediately distracted and chases down Nana's carriage after she drives by their wedding photo-shoot, further disgracing the family. An unknown amount of time passes between scenes and in the next shot the audiences learns that Nana plans to leave Paris—and she does so “alone,” floating away in a hot air balloon, waving to everyone below ... all while a nameless man smiles up at her from under her skirt.

(3.4.1) NANA'S FILM DEBUT

Along with several plot changes, one of the most notable alterations Wolman made to the original *Nana* is the time period in which his version is set. While Wolman's film is clearly a period piece, it is set in neither Zola nor Nana's time—a fact that is indicated very early on by the use of the “moving pictures.” Through the addition of an element that only came into existence after both the character and the author's death,

Nana, le désir distances its audience from the original plot and the social implications imbedded within. Interestingly, though, it is also the cinema that introduces the actress to her future lovers so that, ultimately, Zola's *théâtre* and his literary world are effectively converted into film. This translation of genres also allows for a play on Zola's original idea of his actress being Bordenave's invention: in the introduction of the real-life Nana to the bordello's public, Fontan announces "cette nouvelle invention [...] Nana," underscoring her person as both abstract and adjustable. In other words, while some of Zola's original intentions when presenting the courtesan remain constant, many others are dramatically altered. Primarily, the first intense moment when "[u]n frisson remua la salle" because "Nana était nue" does not take place in Wolman's version; the alternative vehicle used to present Nana radically alters the scene so that, when the actress finally disrobes, it is laughter and not "les faces des hommes, serieuses" that one observes throughout the room (Zola 53). This dramatic difference results from many factors, but especially from the fact that both the diegetic and extradiegetic public—those inside the Minotaur and those watching Wolman's film, respectively—are unable to focus entirely on Nana, unlike the readers of her novel. As Robert Stam explains:

In a novel, the narrator controls the *only* track available—the verbal track. In a film, the narrator can partially control the verbal track—through voice-over or character dialogue—but that control is subject to innumerable constraints: the presence of the other characters/performers and voices, the palpable and distracting "thereness" of décor and objects and so forth. In a film, the other characters instantly take on a physical presence denied them in a

novel dominated by a narcissistic narrator. (38)

In other words, since her brief “movie” shows the actress with several different men, Nana is unable to be the *only* aspect of the scene and she is instead simply the “main idea.” In the written work, the narrator does note briefly that Rose Mignon is on stage when Venus appears “naissant des flots” (Zola 53), and clearly the spectators do not suddenly empty out of the theater, but for a moment in the literature one knows of nothing but Nana—an instant that does not materialize in Wolman’s film. In addition, Nana’s constant movement during her picture provides no opportunity to portray the young woman “avec une tranquille audace, certaine de la tout-puissance de sa chair” (Zola 53), and as such is unable to fulfill Jonathan Krell’s concept of “petrification” where “Nana hardens into a goddess” (70). In the third act of Bordenave’s theatrical production, the star moves only once and as such “mesmerizes the audience by her mere presence, her *immobility*” (Krell 70, original emphasis), whereas in Fontan’s film the celluloid woman exhibits the jerky, awkward motion innate in all first-generation films. Through this strange sort of activity that clearly inspires laughter from its viewers, Wolman is able to approximate the first few scenes of the *Blonde Vénus*—where Nana’s “beauty is rendered less imposing by her awkward movements and bad voice” (Krell 70)—but never achieves that perfect moment of stillness which inspires a desperate, intense lust. Ultimately, introducing the heroine in film instead of theater cuts off desire from multiple directions, transforming Nana from an intense, tangible (though out of reach) and hot-blooded reality into nothing more than a flat and gauche two-dimensional image.

(3.4.2) SEEING *LE DÉSIR*

Although her original debut may be limited in its portrayal of desire, the successive scenes in this version of *Nana* provide a depiction of the namesake that often resembles Zola's own narrator. When Steiner and Fauchery (discretely followed by Hector Muffat) enter into the backstage world of the Minotaur, the audience is greeted by debauchery at its finest: nude women being pulled by wealthy men in and out of private rooms, which Fontan reveals later, are not as private as the prostitutes and their customers believe. By pushing aside the artwork on the walls, the theater owner uncovers small peepholes for the gentlemen, allowing them to look in on Nana and others, creating for the viewing audience what François Jost calls "ocularization." This term, a cinematic reference to narratology, involves the use of a slight variation of Genette's concepts, so that "*ocularization* has to do with the relation between what the camera shows and what the characters are presumed to be seeing; *focalization* designates the cognitive point of view adopted by the narrative" (74). In contrast to Genette's divisions of focalization, ocularization is divided into three categories: primary-internal (suggesting or implying an image without showing it), secondary-internal (when the contextualization of several shots suggests that the audience is seeing an image from a character's perspective) and zero ocularization (as seen by no one in particular, or "nobody's shot") (Jost 75-6) —and Wolman's use of the peephole images clearly falls into the second category. By framing each angle of Nana in a circular field of vision surrounded by black, and contrasting that with shots of the men peering through different holes in the wall outside the actress's dressing room, the film is able to suggest that the round images are those of Steiner and Fauchery themselves. And, because each image varies slightly due to the two men (and,

later, Hector's) positioning along the wall, Wolman successfully evokes Zola's multiplicity of perspectives on Nana—although the film's the underlying sexual tendencies far out-weigh the literary characters's twisted psychological inventions.

With the implication that the men are drastically limited in their visions of Nana set into place during this early scene, the heroine becomes an object to be continually hidden and uncovered throughout the duration of the film. When she is clothed, Nana is frequently blocked from full view: common household objects such as a candelabra and drapes are strategically placed in front of the camera so that the courtesan is not seen in her entirety, and the one-time use of mirrors is far from the full-frontal inspection that Zola's Nana enjoys so much. For Wolman's re-creation of the mirror scene, five small mirrors are placed in close proximity to each other so that the reflections recall Steiner and Fauchery's peephole visions both in their shape (round) and their similar but not identical images that provide only a partial view of the object of desire. Yet, in stark contrast to the game of *cache-cache* that Nana's person seems to play, the images of Nana—or any other woman—in the nude are never once even partially hidden. Because of scenes like Hector's first peephole vision of a couple having intercourse while Steiner and Fauchery peer at Nana and the "*chasse*" that Nana puts on during her house-warming party, every image of nudity and sexuality comes to imply the presence of Nana, thus making the numerous and nameless topless women throughout the film far more notable. Just as Zola links all females to his ultimate female but never explains any of them, so too does Wolman associate all sexual imagery and activity with his star—although the film is far from a unifying feminist construction. Instead, the 1982 version of *Nana* is told from a strongly male perspective and utilizes the style of adaptation highlighted in section 2.3:

Andrew's notion of "intersecting." Because Zola's text is far too dense for a complete transferal to cinema, a director may choose to emphasize one particular aspect of the novel's namesake and for the Italian filmmaker the aspect is clearly that of sexuality.

In conjunction with Katya Berger's (possibly intentional) complete lack of expression during her interpretation of Nana, the rampant sexual nature of Wolman's film illuminates one of the (visually) under-developed features in Zola's work but, remarkably, often remains faithful to the narrative voices of the original text. By providing no apparent motive for Nana's wild exploration of many sexual avenues and consistently framing unexpressive facial expressions, the film ultimately divulges little about the courtesan's true, interior emotions. Of course, this similarity to Zola's original yields the same problematic issues of interpretation and one comes to understand that simply providing a visual plane does not in fact elaborate on Nana's invisibility. Indeed, Gural-Migdal's analysis of the literary text rings quite true for Wolman's interpretation as well: "Noyée dans un pêle-mêle de corps et d'objets où se confondent les styles, les pays et les époques, Nana incarne l'hétéroclite, l'indéfinissable, l'impur" (322). In revising the plot from the original *récit*, Wolman takes a liberty that extends his film past the limits of the novel, giving no mention of death or destruction at the end of his cinematic adaptation. So while in *Nana* "her death marks the end of contagion [and, d]is-figured, she is cured of textuality [so that d]esire is arrested by death" (Beizer 56), in *Nana, le désir* the departure from Paris by hot-air balloon implies that desire without Zola's social consequences is still able to move onward and upward, into the sky, into fantasy and—in light of the nameless man under the young woman's skirts—into a higher state of being and happiness.

(3.5) A FINAL WORD?

Each film in this study explores the concept of vision in unique and varying manners, and yet this overview of a number of *Nana*'s adaptations makes it abundantly clear that simply looking at the courtesan does not instantly explain or enhance previous explanations of her. Every director attempts to focus on Nana through a specific *cadre* of reference, relying on depth of shot, framing within a shot and numerous other visual techniques to give life to a comprehensible being. Unfortunately—at least for those in search of a finite Nana—the cinema does not necessarily see any *more* than the literary world, it only sees *differently*. Through the varying lenses of time, gender and *cinéaste* inspiration, the courtesan can be both a metaphor for the oppression of women (Azner's version) and a mirror to reflect the male perception of the other sex (Christian-Jaque) while also exhibiting intensely juvenile (Renoir) and highly erotic (Wolman) behaviors. In other words, though the individual films seem to present more a specific perspective than an overall definition of Nana, the totality of these motion pictures does provide visual representation of both the contradiction and the potential for reinvention that Zola bestowed upon his ultimate woman.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

To view the literary perspectives of chapter two in conjunction with the cinematic representations in chapter three is to uncover strong parallels between the four films' thematic images and the four major observational perspectives of Zola's novel. In Renoir's study of depth of shot and the re-creation of scenes, his style comes to recall the narrator's viewpoint in the novel: a being on the outside trying to find the best angle for observation, even if that involves considering the same object or action in two different ways. Arzner's film, on the other hand, makes bold statements about women living within the confines of a male society, allowing her Nana more freedom and more psychological depth so that her eventual silence, though self-inflicted, reflects the oppression she finds in her surroundings and her lovers. The Christian-Jaque production, with its star in revealing and unabashed clothing that references the same confines Arzner's heroine fought against, instead traps the 1954 courtesan within these restrictions and focuses on the male reaction to her, forcing her to remain within the men's limits just as the masculine perspectives in Zola's novel do. Lastly, the Wolman adaptation reveals the possibility for variety in the sentiments of an extradiegetic spectator, able to reinvent Nana based on the diegetic suggestions but ultimately creating a separate fantasy world unlike any other. Yet while the films all provide clear visual images that elaborate on the sometimes ambiguous written word, the individual cinematic works do no more to further an understanding of their main character than do the individual literary perspectives.

Once again, those searching for Nana arrive at an unending multiplicity, wondering who or what it is that is able to be so palpable while always partially hidden behind a literary device or a cinematic technique.

In his study of *Nana* and art, Peter Brooks discusses “l’impossibilité de réconcilier un corps particulier, sexué, et un corps généralisé, idéalisé” (75), which in so many words is the very issue that poses a problem here. In order to reconcile the specific Nanas to her vast and intangible self, an examination of individual literary perspectives and cinematic viewpoints has shown that—while the development of each angle may provide more insight to that particular perception—it does very little to create an overall definition of the actress. At the same time, by stepping back from the particular observations and placing multiple perspectives of Nana side-by-side so as to intermingle genres, gender, time and authors, the limited number of common themes that run through every work begins to suggest an explanation for Zola’s heroine. Whether it is physical *lust* for a voluptuous body, a *need* to emphasize a certain moral lesson, a *longing* to escape from the norms of society, or a *craving* for destruction, the themes of want and desire are firmly cemented in every story, reappearing more often than most of Nana’s lovers. Even the directors or “head scientists” of each *oeuvre* seem to have specific desires in relation to Nana so that, whether it is a craving to experiment with Nana (Zola and Wolman), to control the actress (Christian-Jaque) or to suppress her (Renoir and Arzner), every artist inextricably links the courtesan to longing in multiple ways.

Always in a constant *mélange* between want and need, Nana is in a truly unique position for she is simultaneously the object of desire, one who desires, and the one who reflects the desires of others, ultimately becoming the center around which lust, greed,

social change and every other form of longing swarms. Through this relentless intermingling of desiring and being desired, Nana becomes not one of these concepts but all of them; the heroine is not “une [nouvelle] invention” at all but instead the incarnation of one of the oldest emotions. Nana *is* desire. With the courtesan’s ability to reinvent herself to cater to every one of her lovers’s needs as well as her power to reject them once they can no longer give what she desires, one uncovers pure desire and a continual movement towards the most useful and the most prominent *besoin* with little thought about the possible ramifications for one’s self or other. Like a manifestation of Freud’s *id*, without any of the temperament that the *ego* or *superego* impose, “Nana herself is the figure of desire, [...] a profound disorder, a contagion of unfulfilled passion” (Beizer 54). Examining this concept only on the most shallow level, it is easy to comprehend why both Renoir and Jaque felt compelled to use their own wives in the role of Nana—she is the concrete image of their desire—and why Arzner’s producer imagined the film to be a launch vehicle for his budding star, though the relative failure of all the works (as well as Wolman’s production) indicates that a Nana who is merely childish, witty or sexual does not touch the audience in the same way. Without being the intense fulfillment of all these ideals, the cinematic Nanas can only be comical or strange, for each specific trait is only one fraction of the entirety that makes Zola’s novel so shocking and sensational.

Once again, the separate studies of each film and each literary viewpoint divide instead of combine the multiple descriptions of the courtesan, leading many to believe that Nana could never be fully uncovered. Rather than hidden, Nana is in fact utterly available at all times, if only she is seen as a totality and a combination. Returning to a quotation from the introduction, Brian Nelson postulates that “her [Nana’s] fundamental

inaccessibility is highlighted by the text itself. The text is, ultimately, only words that continue in a shifting metonymical process. Desire can move along this chain, but will never be able to seize hold of an absolute, a meaning, or the woman's body" (427), and yet even the incomplete experiences of the multiple cinematic Nanas seems to counter this argument. In Zola's work Nana is indeed "a shifting metonymical process," transforming from Venus to a queen to a child to a beast and many variations thereof while in each film the courtesan acquires flesh and takes on one of these possibilities, though her core nature—exhibiting and transforming desire—is still expressed in every adaptation. What these motion pictures reveal is that Nana's inaccessibility in the original text stems from her refraction of multiple personalities, leaving one weighed down by the uncertainty of whether she is *une bonne fille*, *la diable* or somewhere in the middle, when in fact what this constant shifting should expose is a greater metonymical relationship. As the "figure of desire," Nana cannot be "moving along a chain," unable to free herself from the text but rather "an absolute" of the highest order, a direct reference to infinite "meanings," and "the woman's body." Because Nana transcends every role she plays in both literature and film to uncover in each lover and spectator urges from deep within she becomes what human nature thrives on and what makes life worth living, she becomes the ultimate desire.

In the end, Zola's Nana was correct to scoff at "la prétention [...] de rendre la nature; comme si on pouvait tout montrer!" (Zola 318), because where the author believed he had created the *vraie fille*, he in fact gave life to something far greater than a single woman. In her inability to be simplified into a manageable person, many scholars have argued that Nana is invisible or ever-veiled, but they are in fact demonstrating is the

limitations they themselves have placed on the actress's possibility for comprehension. Following the same logic that Nana employs to reject the offers of marriage she receives, a pin-point accurate definition of the heroine becomes far too limiting: "je ne serais plus Nana, si je me collais un homme sur le dos" (Zola 410). Too variable and too expressive to be weighed down by a man's ownership or a specific woman's personality, Zola's courtesan would seem to welcome visual representations of her individualized traits that enable a more complete sensory understanding of their implications just as she welcomed numerous lovers—as long as one also accepts that she belongs to no one sole ideal. Uncovering a character that is best understood through a multi-faceted investigation, one arrives at the point from which this began: the entrancement by an "autre chose [...] qui remplace tout" (Zola 34), something that can be one thing only because it is many, an ultimate desire that is able to be perceived and re-invented as few other things can.

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