

Writing the City: The Cosmopolitan Realism of Offenbach's *La Vie parisienne*

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As the curtain of Paris's Théâtre du Palais Royal rose on October 31, 1866, spectators saw before them a *mise-en-scène* unprecedented in the city's operatic history: a railway station—specifically the Gare de l'Ouest, one of Paris's newest and busiest. A chorus marches onto the stage, announcing that they are the employees of the Ligne de l'Ouest rail company. Against an aggressive triple-meter orchestral accompaniment, the workers list off the names of the French cities and towns served by the company: Conflans, Triel, Poissy, Barentin, Pavilly, Vernon, Bolbec, etc. This list is doubly humorous. First, it captures the mechanical repetitiveness of the ever-expanding French railway system, rendered musically through an eleven-measure dominant prolongation in B \flat major. Second, it pokes fun at mass-produced travel literature aimed specifically at tourists; the chorus, in essence, sings a version of the itineraries found in Lehaguez's *Le Nouveau paris: guide à l'étranger*, a popular guidebook series that contained endless pages of station names in miniscule typescript. The workers follow this list with a second: an account of various professional tasks, such as selling tickets and newspapers, opening and closing gates, and signaling incoming and outgoing rail traffic. These two lists are repeated twice, before the employees march off the stage, presumably back to work.

The employees' exit concludes the first vocal number of *La Vie parisienne*, an *opéra-bouffe* by Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy with music by Jacques Offenbach. Set in the Paris of the 1860s, the operetta centers around two bourgeois men, Gardefeu and Bobinet, who were both rejected by the socialite Métella and who both vow to avenge their dignities in high society. An opportunity arises when the Gondremarcks, a wealthy Swedish couple who have just arrived by train, mistake Gardefeu for their tour guide. Smitten by Gondremarck's wife, Gardefeu plays along, and enlists Bobinet and others to stage a hotel-style dinner party in his own apartment. Mr. Gondremarck, for his part, secretly seeks Métella's company, and is eager to leave his wife behind. In a climactic café scene, a bloodthirsty and hedonistic Brazilian tourist simply named "The Brazilian" encourages Gardefeu and Gondremarck to settle their dispute in a public duel. They stop when Métella and Mrs. Gondremarck reveal their secret alliance and forgive their respective partners.

Nineteenth-century French operetta was particularly equipped to stage such brief encounters between specific social or ethnic groups within a one-act timespan. A gradual loosening of theatrical regulations beginning in 1858 meant that composers of so-called “light” theatrical works could mount larger, multi-act productions featuring costumes, elaborate sets, and, most significantly, a chorus (see Levin 2009). Moreover, the very idea of mounting a multi-act spectacle featuring activities such as train travel and sightseeing was itself a novelty. Opéra-bouffe librettists and composers had thus far resorted to what Jean-Claude Yon has called a “double mask,” a dramaturgical technique that created both temporal and geographical distance from the object of satire, for instance Jupiter satirizing Napoléon III in *Orphée aux enfers* (Yon 2000, 334). The authors of *La Vie parisienne*, however, removed this double mask. The stage was instead saturated to an unprecedented degree with a diverse and entirely contemporary urban community: laborers rub shoulders with young bourgeois citizens and wealthy tourists in Paris’s train stations and cafés. In particular, Offenbach’s operetta staged an ideal mode of sociability for the modern, urban woman; a common thread among the operetta’s female characters, writes Ethel Matala de Mazza (2017, 55), is a refusal “to leave the privilege of elegant public appearances to a select few, but to reclaim that privilege democratically as the common property of women.” This onstage socioeconomic *mélange*, I argue below, depended on a fluency not only in social behaviors, but also in navigating the spaces in which those behaviors were performed.

As a model of what I call “cosmopolitan realism” in mid-nineteenth-century opera, Offenbach’s *La Vie parisienne* did far more than present a satirical tableau of city life during the 1860s, a decade of touristic speculation and urban renewal overseen by Georges-Eugene “Baron” Haussmann. Rather, the operetta functioned as an operatic anthology—analyzing, taxonomizing, and mythologizing Paris’s spaces, citizens and visitors. In order to uncover the dense web of intertextual prescriptions present in the libretto, this article begins by surveying the phrase “La vie parisienne” as a literary trope with a long history that is closely tied to the touristic economy of nineteenth-century Paris. Echoes of this trope reappear in critical responses to the operetta, which debated how accurately Offenbach and his libretto team had represented “Parisian life.” I then show how the operetta’s authors drew on material published in a popular illustrated magazine likewise titled *La Vie parisienne*; Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy both worked for the magazine, and eventually dedicated the score of the operetta to the magazine’s editor, Émile Marcellin. The pair also borrowed substantially from three stage works that they had penned in the early 1860s—*La Clé de Métella*, *Le Brésilien*, and *Le Photographe*—in drafting the *La Vie pa-*

risienne libretto.¹ Rather than merely reflecting societal quirks, the operetta provided a pedagogical guide to navigating a city whose historical identity was shaken by the massive urbanization projects of the 1850s and 60s.² To understand the history of Second Empire Parisian life, therefore, is to study its modes of representation.³

In recent years, scholars of nineteenth-century opera have turned their attention to the distinctly urban contexts that dictated how specific operatic works were created and brought to performance (see Charle 2008, Sala 2013, and Willson 2014). To situate music in a specifically *urban* context is also to understand the particularities of a city in a given time and place. This renewed focus on the city, or what Emanuele Senici (2015, 198) has recently dubbed “operatic urban studies,” includes everyday urban living as fodder for new historiographical or hermeneutic perspectives on individual operatic works. Yet to date, there is a far murkier understanding of how operetta functioned as a literary text within nineteenth-century discourses of urbanization, tourism, and imperialism. As literary historian Christopher Prendergast (1995, 11-24) has convincingly argued, nineteenth-century Paris inspired cryptic metaphors for modernity; to Charles Baudelaire, the city was a “swan,” and to Alfred Delvau, it was a “sphinx.” These literary musings, Prendergast observes, were an attempt to “write the city,” or a way to come to terms with the rapid changes to the geographic, demographic, and cultural landscape. Urban-inspired literature thus served as an ideal venue to explore the conflicts between everyday life and the urban planners’ vision or, as Prendergast puts it, between the lived and the imposed (Prendergast 1995, 214).⁴ This article extends Prendergast’s well-known heuristic of “writing the city” into the operatic sphere. Reframing French operetta as a *prescriptive*, pedagogical, literary genre and not merely a *descriptive*, satirical, performative one, I situate *La Vie parisienne* in a web of “everyday” literature of the Second Empire, including tourist guidebooks, arts newspapers, and lifestyle magazines that anthologized and commented on the city’s metamorphosing public and private spaces.⁵ By dramatizing societal minutia that preoccupied Paris’s denizens and tourists alike, *La Vie parisienne* functioned as a Second-Empire mode of “edutainment,” a neologism that captures media’s ability to process and distribute knowledge.⁶ In tracing a more holistic reception history that expands well beyond the trodden paths of music criticism, this article shows how Parisian operetta featured in serious discourses about the shifting geographies of *la vie moderne*.

"Real Life" as Theatrical Genre

Critics present at the premiere of *La Vie parisienne* questioned whether what they had seen and heard was, in fact, "real" Parisian life. In his review of the premiere in *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, for instance, Edouard Déadé ("D") remained unconvinced by the operetta's portrayal of contemporary society: "it is a world turned upside down, which has no equivalent, not even during the delirious orgies of Carnival."⁷ Paul Foucher, brother-in-law of Victor Hugo, attacked the operetta's libertine representation of contemporary life, noting that the onstage action reminded him of the rue de Bréda, a famously seedy street in Paris's ninth arrondissement: "you will see that not one protest will be raised against this witty piece of pornography, which, under the title 'Parisian life,' turns our capital into an immense Bréda."⁸ Léo Lucas, on the other hand, took issue with the work's nebulous genre: "It's a vaudeville, it's an opéra-bouffe, it's a mix of both genres at once."⁹ Yet despite facing quibbles regarding genre, *La Vie parisienne* provoked some critics to contemplate the relationship between urban fantasy and urban reality, both on and off stage. Repeating the operetta's title in a sardonic manner, Lucas nonetheless drew a line connecting the characters to the spectators: "not a single true character, not a single truly comic situation, but instead a continual onslaught; that is what Parisian life is like (voilà la vie parisienne)."¹⁰ Paris's pleasure-obsessed gentry, Lucas seems to suggest, were almost operatic in their over-the-top theatricality.

It is thus unsurprising that the Marxist cultural critic Siegfried Kracauer cited *La Vie parisienne* as symptomatic of what he deemed the "un-reality" of Second Empire Paris. In his widely cited and famously problematic book *Jacques Offenbach und das Paris seiner Zeit*, published in 1937, Kracauer placed tremendous weight on *La Vie parisienne*, identifying it as "that most enchanting of all paeans of praise that have ever been written to any city" (Kracauer 2002, 295). To Kracauer, Offenbach was both a critic of his time as well as its greatest victim; the rise and fall of the composer's career was inextricably linked with the rise and fall of Napoléon III's Second Empire. As Kracauer saw it, the operetta portrayed Paris as a truly modern city, one that obliterated class distinctions and left its citizens and visitors susceptible to moral transgressions. In a similar vein, Walter Benjamin admitted in a 1928 essay that

None of Offenbach's works fulfils the requirements of operetta as completely as *La Vie parisienne*; nothing in *La Vie parisienne* is as Parisian as the transparent nature of that nonsensical nightlife through which not the logical but certainly the moral order takes its appearance. (Benjamin 2005, 111)

In other words, Kracauer and Benjamin both believed that *La Vie parisienne* was as much a product as it was a representation of the frivolous world of Second Empire Paris.

Kracauer's famous indictment of the Second Empire as a consumer-driven society that dictated Offenbach's professional and artistic decision-making naturally shows its age. Under-cited and laid with what Laurence Senelick (2017, 6) dubbed a "Marxist grid" that obscures the intricacies of the operetta industry, the book is more an artifact of Offenbach's early twentieth-century reception history than it is an example of current thought on the subject. Even Kracauer's colleague Theodor Adorno penned an unforgiving review of Kracauer's study, claiming that the author supports his analysis on the assumption that artist and society are in some sort of fundamental "harmony" (see Everist 2004, 111). Indeed, to claim that operetta was merely a farcical funhouse-mirror through which society viewed itself—the essence of Kracauer's argument—is to neglect the intertextual aspects of operetta as a musical and theatrical genre.¹¹ Just as the city of Paris was curated through guidebooks, cartoons, oil paintings, and novels in the 1850s and 1860s, the "Parisian life" portrayed in *La Vie parisienne* was an assemblage of myths and realities, a juxtaposition of realistic urban spaces with character stereotypes. Offenbach's *La Vie parisienne*, then, was far more than merely a "mirror" reflecting society; as we shall see, it also served as a manual on how to navigate through multicultural interactions within the city.

Defining "La vie parisienne"

The operetta's very title contains a wealth of intertextual data that ties it to discourses of mid-century urban mythmaking. During the 1850s and '60s, it became extremely fashionable to use the word "Paris" in the titles of books, poems, and songs. According to Théophile Gautier, the very word connoted that an author understood the mass appeal for all things Parisian:

With this magic title, *Paris*, a play or review or book is always assured of success. Paris possesses an inexhaustible curiosity that nothing as yet could satisfy, neither large serious works, nor lighter publications, nor histories, nor columns, nor studies, nor memoirs, nor paintings, nor novels. Put this word on a playbill and there will be six months' worth of queues and crowds.¹²

Within the realm of theater, the phrase "la vie parisienne" specifically alluded to the behaviors, customs, and *savoir-faire* of those lucky enough to live in the French capital. Two examples dating from the Second Empire include *Les Femmes de Gavarni: scènes de La Vie parisienne en 4 actes*

mêlées de couplets, by Théodore Barrière, Adrien Decourcelle, and Léon Beauvallet (1852), and *Les Portiers: scènes de La Vie parisienne en 1 acte*, by Édouard Louis Alexandre Brisebarre and Eugène Nus (1860). These two works, both of which contain leading characters who are cooks, chambermaids, and butlers, feature humorous tales of street life on stage. *Les Femmes de Gavarni* even contains a character who is simply named *flâneur*, that archetypal urban walker made famous by Baudelaire and made legendary by Benjamin (see Tester 1994). Within the realm of tourist literature, “la vie parisienne” connoted much more than physical existence within the walls of the French capital; it also referred to a set of behaviors that were spelled out to foreigners in guidebooks. According to the 1864 guidebook *Le Nouveau Paris*, the expression refers to “a manner of being, of living, and even of thinking, which is completely unique to the Parisian population. This way of living constitutes a sort of individuality. The general characteristic is to above all be more ‘foreign’ than any European capital.”¹³ It was thus possible—even profitable—to construct and reproduce a universalized image of “Parisian life” and market it to a cosmopolitan audience.

Of all the appearances of the phrase “la vie parisienne” in literature and journalism, Meilhac and Halévy drew above all on one particular source in the composition of their libretto: the weekly illustrated magazine whose full title was *La Vie parisienne: mœurs élégantes, choses du jour, fantaisies, voyages, théâtres, musique, modes*, which began printing in 1863 (Figure 1). The operetta, named after the magazine, also bears a dedication to magazine’s founder and editor, Émile Marcelin (Figure 2). Furthermore, Meilhac and Halévy were both regular contributors to the magazine in its early years, as both columnists and illustrators. Although this connection between Offenbach’s operetta and Marcelin’s magazine has been glossed in biographical studies, a deeper, intertextual exploration of the magazine, the three vaudevilles, and the operetta reveals the extent to which Offenbach and his collaborators combined fiction and reality to “write the city.”¹⁴

Paris, According to Marcelin

Émile-Marcelin-Isidore Planat, who published under the pseudonym “Marcelin,” made his career by contributing cartoons and caricatures to some of Paris’s most widely circulated magazines, such as *Le Rire*, *Le Journal pour rire*, *L’Illustration* and *Le Journal amusant*. In addition to his work in magazine journalism, Marcelin was also a costume designer, who worked primarily in the realm of vaudeville. The magazine *La Vie parisienne*, therefore, married his two professional interests: the theater and the street. Marcelin’s magazine capitalized on the hedonism of *haut-bourgeois*



Figure 1: Cover of *La Vie parisienne: mœurs élégantes, choses du jour, fantaisies, voyages, théâtres, musique, modes*, 1866.

life of the Second Empire, and was marketed directly at those who were prospering from the healthy stock market and from urban speculation. As *Le Figaro* reported in Marcelin's obituary on December 25, 1887, the epoch in which *La Vie parisienne* was conceived was marked by a “*joie de vivre*, . . . a fever of unparalleled prosperity . . . in which all aspirations were turned towards luxury, towards pleasure, towards partying, and towards brouhaha.”¹⁵ Yet Marcelin did not simply report on the happenings of Parisian society; rather, he crafted a periodical that offered a panoply of critical impressions, editorials, and reviews. As the preface to the January 9, 1864, issue put it, Marcelin's was “a magazine that is a kind of *salon* of people who are not fools, where everyone shares news and speaks their mind without thinking of those who are listening.”¹⁶ By referring to the magazine as a “salon,” the author reimagines it as an imaginary social space for like-minded Parisians.¹⁷



Figure 2: *La Vie parisienne*, title page of the 1867 published vocal score.

Although the operetta’s librettists staged social spaces widely covered in contemporary periodicals—a train terminal (Act 1), a bourgeois salon (Act 2), a *table d’hôte* (Act 3), the Café Anglais (Act 4)—it was Meilhac’s and Halévy’s depiction of tourists that most closely paralleled the cosmopolitan aesthetics of Marcelin’s magazine. In the October 20, 1866, issue of *La Vie parisienne*, an article titled “Étrangers et étrangères” begins by identifying two “types” of foreigners, the *étranger sérieux ou curieux* (“the serious and curious foreigner”) and the *étranger noceur* (“the party-going foreigner”).¹⁸ The former is only interested in monuments and palaces, while the latter is more inclined to shop and people-watch. The former walks with a steady gait, eyes looking forward—he speaks little French, but speaks often. This foreigner is usually English or German, and can be identified with distinctive signifiers—all of which also conform to gendered stereotypes of the bourgeois family: “a guide, a parasol, a glasses case or a pince-nez, an

opera glass slung over the neck, no gloves, and with a wife and children, many children, a trail of children.”¹⁹ By contrast, the latter is most often a blasé youth of about nineteen years of age, whose only interests are “private rooms and backstage parties.”²⁰ The author takes a guess that the *étranger noceur* is likely a “Brazilian from London or from New York”—a newly affluent visitor to Paris whose primary objective is to spend money. In short, the real is rendered theatrical: foreigners are assigned stereotypical behaviors and dress. The resulting descriptions of boulevard life read like character sketches for an operetta: Gondremarck was originally German in the early version of the libretto (named “Gourdakirsch”), while the character of “le Brésilien,” as we will see shortly, embraces *La Vie parisienne* with as much hedonism as Marcelin’s “swaggering Brazilian from London or from New York.” Like Offenbach’s singing characters, Marcelin’s urbanites pop off the page as archetypal examples of *types parisiens* that one may encounter on the street, in the café, or, indeed, in a theatrical production. It was this interplay between the journalistic and the theatrical that defined Marcelin’s aesthetic, and it subsequently informed the dramaturgical premise of Offenbach’s operetta.

With its balance of humor and sobriety, prose and illustration, culture and gossip, *La Vie parisienne* was a hugely successful publication, and it continued to publish new issues until as late as 1970. The magazine not only guided Parisians through their everyday lives, but it also propagated the myth of Paris as the world capital of theater, entertainment, and general good taste. Marcelin achieved this by eliminating the distinction between the theater of the stage and the theater of everyday life, and this interchangeability was not lost on contemporaries. In his retrospective 1902 essay on the careers of Meilhac and Halévy, Francisque Sarcey commented on the libretto team’s apparent tendency to leaf through Marcelin’s magazine for inspiration. Sarcey noted that their *La Petite marquise*, a three-act *comédie* that premiered at the Variétés in 1874, was yet another in a series of works in which “articles from *La Vie parisienne* were simply transported to the stage and adapted to the optics of the theater.”²¹ Yet while Sarcey did not condone such blending of the real and the written, others sympathized with this theatrical view of modern life. As Hippolyte Taine noted in the preface to Marcelin’s posthumously published memoir—which bore the inevitable title *Souvenirs de la vie parisienne*—Marcelin “found that there is little difference between a thing that is real and a thing that is illustrated; after a few hours, this difference evaporated.”²² This idea of the city-as-spectacle fit comfortably within the social world of the Second Empire; as social historians have demonstrated, the *fête impériale* stood as the quintessential symbol of imperial modernity (see Truesdell 1997 and Hazareesingh 2004).

Meilhac and Halévy skillfully translated the *fête impériale* trope into Marcelin's magazine as well as their own stage works. By 1866, the two had established a reputation on the vaudeville stage and had already gained renown for their comical portrayals of everyday modern life. As the journalist Gustave Claudin reminisced in his 1884 memoirs, "what was so successful in the stage works of these two authors was what one could call their *modernity* [original emphasis]. No one else was able to mock the manias, ticks, and absurdities of the day so exactly."²³ By exposing the cyclical relationship between the real and the staged, Marcelin, Meilhac, and Halévy portrayed social life as what Richard Schechner (2003, 71) has called a "scripted performance 'in life,'" or that fluid oscillation between expectation and spontaneity.²⁴ It was thus in homage to their former employer that Meilhac and Halévy titled their 1866 operetta after the magazine, and dedicated it to that magazine's founding editor. In drafting their libretto, Meilhac and Halévy combined their own lived experiences of Parisian bourgeois life with familiar literary trends in order to stage a farcical Paris that feigned to represent reality. The two librettists appropriated the stereotypes of Parisian bourgeois culture into comedic plays written in the early 1860s, and from there, into the 1866 operetta. Given how little attention musicologists have hitherto paid to the careers of vaudeville and operetta librettists, we must first consider Meilhac's and Halévy's distinct relationships to the French capital.

Paris, According to Meilhac and Halévy

Henri Meilhac was a born-and-raised Parisian. Soon after completing his studies at the Collège Louis-le-Grand, Meilhac found work as a columnist and draftsman for the *Journal pour rire*, a satirical newspaper founded in 1848. Working under the pseudonym "Talin," Meilhac covered a variety of Parisian topics: restaurant openings, the lives of actors and actresses, couture, prostitution, as well as vaudeville dramaturgy.²⁵ As a journalist, Meilhac was praised for his lyrical prose and for his minute observations of everyday life. As Jean-Camille Fulbert-Dumonteil observed in an 1869 issue of *Le Gaulois*, Meilhac "understood the recesses of the soul as well as he understood the behind-the-scenes of Parisian life, and he knew the human heart as well as he knew the boulevard."²⁶

Meilhac was also a skilled illustrator. Teaming up with Abel Damourette, a colleague at the *Journal pour rire*, Meilhac published several collections of illustrations titled *Petits albums pour rire* that caricatured various *types parisiens*, such as actors, comedians, street performers, college students, bureaucrats, and prostitutes. In addition to publishing their own illustrations, Damourette and Meilhac also commissioned issues from other art-

ists and caricaturists for the series, with “Paris”-inspired titles like *Les Folies parisiennes* and *On nous écrit de Paris* by the photographer Nadar and *Vie d'une parisienne* by the illustrator Gustave Janet. Meilhac’s early career was thus defined by a concentrated exposure to the people and institutions that critiqued, mocked, and mythologized city life. Moreover, his professional training allowed him to capture those experiences through both word and image.

Unlike Meilhac, whose professional life began in journalism, Ludovic Halévy began his writing career while working in civil service. As a secrétaire-rédacteur to the Corps Législatif, Halévy won the favor of the Duc de Morny, the illegitimate half-brother of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte (the future Napoléon III). In 1854, Halévy wrote his first stage work, *La Fille d'un mécène*, while traveling throughout France on assignment for the Ministère d'État. His career as an operetta librettist effectively began in the summer of 1855, during which Offenbach was scrambling to assemble a program for the opening night of his new Bouffes-Parisiens theater. Offenbach, who needed a prologue, called on the impresario Henri Duponchel (1794–1868) to recommend someone. Duponchel suggested Halévy. In his *Notebooks*, published in 1880 (the year of Offenbach’s death), then-civil servant Halévy recounted the humbling experience of first meeting composer Offenbach and the effect it had on his subsequent literary career: “It was the beginning of my collaboration with Offenbach and the beginning of my life in theater.”²⁷

Despite their different professional backgrounds, Meilhac and Halévy became widely regarded for the meticulous way in which they documented Parisian life; as Carolyn Abbate (2017, 21) has recently noted, Halévy in particular processed his experience of everyday life through a blend of nostalgia, attentiveness, and skepticism. Even Émile Zola, a virulent critic of Offenbach’s operettas, praised the libretto team’s ability to conjure accurate images of contemporary society that were at once funny, realistic, and dramaturgically sound. Adopting the famous Baudelairean slogan, Zola reflected in 1881 that “Meilhac and Halévy are very subtle painters of modern life. They have marvelously appropriated the distinct codes of certain societal worlds, and their comedies are at times works of great veracity that are executed by artists. I find (their one-act comedies) to be much superior to their other works.”²⁸ To Zola, the one-act vaudevilles that Meilhac and Halévy penned in the early years of their collaboration—works that are all but forgotten today—were more successful in depicting the spectacular society of *la vie moderne* than were their more famous operettas. *La Clé de Métella*, *Le Brésilien*, and *Le Photographe*—vaudevilles almost entirely ignored in Francophone opera studies—not only contained the prototypical

scenarios for *La Vie parisienne*, but also addressed the subtle relationships of the Parisian bourgeoisie to the aristocracy, to wealthy foreigners, and to one another.

A Tale of Two Dames: *La Clé de Métella* (1862)

The prototype for the character of Métella, the female lead of *La Vie parisienne*, is found in *La Clé de Métella*, a one-act *comédie* that premiered on November 24, 1862, at the Théâtre du Vaudeville. Meilhac and Halévy's play explores the distinct ways in which married women and professional courtesans were perceived by men. Lucien, marquis de Volsy, is married to Jeanne de Volsy, a woman of aristocratic roots who rarely leaves her apartment. Bored of domestic life, Lucien frequently attends spectacles, balls, soirées, as well as the salon of the famous courtesan Métella. Lucien's cousin Gontran, on the other hand, is a quiet bachelor who spends more time with Jeanne than her husband does. But Gontran is eager to win the favor of Métella and enlists his cousin to coach him on how to gain access to Métella's rarefied social circle. In exchange, Gontran helps Lucien to understand his own wife's needs and desires in order to rescue their marriage from perpetual unhappiness. The two cousins are assisted by the chambermaid Jacqueline, who offers advice on both domestic and boulevard life.

La Clé de Métella was received favorably by the press and by the literary community. As the actor and librettist Victor Koning reported, "the success of *Clef* [sic] *de Métella* continues to grow every night." Then, speaking on behalf of envious playwrights, Koning wryly adds, "but we hope that this success doesn't *continue* to grow."²⁹

Through the contrasting female figures of Métella and Jeanne, Meilhac and Halévy parody the constant desire of the Parisian male gentry to leave the domestic sphere to frequent social spaces such as the salon, the hotel restaurant, the theater box, and the café. Each of these spaces bore witness to performative rituals, with specific rules for entering, exiting, socializing, seducing, and gazing. In fact, the gaze (or its conspicuous absence) was crucial to Meilhac and Halévy's dramaturgy: the eponymous character of *La Clé de Métella* is not a character at all, since Métella never actually appears on stage. Instead, she is presented to the audience as an object of male protagonists' desire and is the main subject of conversation between the four characters throughout the play.³⁰ Lucien repeatedly abandons his wife Jeanne at home to attend the Théâtre des Variétés, where Métella rents a private box. As a foil to Métella, Jeanne assumes the role of domestic *grande dame*, a term that connoted married upper-middle-class women who, as Susan McClary (1992, 37) has observed, "withdrew from participation in the public sphere," often denying themselves sexual and social

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El les sont tris tes les mar_ qui ses De nous voir fu yant leurs sa lon, Al

Example 1: “Elles sont tristes les marquises,” Act 1, *La Vie parisienne*.

expression “in conformity with images found in conduct manuals, novels, and operas.” This vicarious mode of living is confirmed in scene 2; Jeanne recalls having recently devoured an issue of *Revue des Deux-Mondes*, a monthly cultural affairs magazine in print since 1829. A bookworm and a recluse, Jeanne is nonetheless aware of her husband’s shuttling between the home and the boulevard. As she complains in the opening scene, “During every intermission, a dozen young men . . . survey the women who are in the theater. When they arrive at this . . . lady, they repeat her name out loud several times; I thus concluded that there is a certain pride in seeming to know her.”³¹ To Jeanne, the life of the *grande dame* is associated with domesticity and intimate encounters. Unlike the invisible Métella’s dynamic sociability, Jeanne leads her life by the letter—namely, the simulated worlds of guidebooks and lifestyle magazines.

In *La Vie parisienne*, Meilhac and Halévy refashion Métella from a faceless subject of discussion in *La Clé de Métella* into a character with a substantial speaking and singing role. Métella’s entrance in Act 1 takes Bobinet and Gardefeu by surprise. She pretends not to recognize them and walks past them holding the arm of another man. Meilhac and Halévy employ comedic mirroring to emphasize the ability of a courtesan to attract two men into her orbit. Métella’s unexpected reaction to seeing Bobinet and Gardefeu causes the two to console each other about the way they were just treated: “Elle se moquait de moi,” Bobinet complains, echoing the same words uttered by Gontran in *La Clé de Métella*. Yet Bobinet continues by explaining how he and Métella do not “speak the same language.” This mismatch is expressed in Bobinet’s first couplets, “Elles sont tristes les marquises.” (Example 1). Over a light string accompaniment, Bobinet bemoans the strains (both financial and moral) placed upon him by pursuing women in salons. The jaunty motive that opens the verse, a leap of a fourth followed by threefold pitch repetition, seems to recall the piano quadrilles that pervaded middlebrow Parisian salons and parlors of the time. In his

refrain, Bobinet expresses hope that “honest women” could be found in the affluent Saint-Germain neighborhood of the sixth arrondissement. Bobinet underscores his enthusiasm with faster note values as he vows to “crowd the salons of the Faubourg Saint-Germain,” while leaps of fifths and octaves provide a contrast to the repeated-note melody of the verses. Through subtle musical characterization, Offenbach paints a picture of two distinct social spaces, which in the plot are identified by two opposite embodiments of the Parisian socialite: respectively, Métella and the Baroness de Gondremarck.

A Foreigner Enters the Furnace: *Le Brésilien* (1863)

If the character of Métella is the embodiment of the rarefied Parisian social sphere accessible to a select group of (male) insiders and predominantly female target audience of magazines such as *La Vie Parisienne*, then the character of the “Brazilian” functions as an archetypical albeit heavily exoticized representation of the rich “outsider”—or, to use a term from Marcelin’s magazine quoted previously, an *étranger noceur*. Meilhac and Halévy’s *Le Brésilien*, a one-act *comédie mêlée de chant*, premiered at the Théâtre du Palais Royal on May 9, 1863. It was a lasting success; in Offenbach’s lifetime, *Le Brésilien* was revived ten times, totaling nearly three-hundred performances between its premiere and the end of the century (Goninet 1994, 234). The action takes place in the salon of Madame Rafaëli, who is eager for Monsieur Blancpartout to ask for her hand. But the cowardly Blancpartout is convinced by Rafaëli’s conniving chambermaid that Rafaëli is seeing a short-tempered Brazilian prince. When Rafaëli learns about this lie, she plays it to her advantage: this will force Blancpartout to ask for her hand more quickly. Rafaëli and her chambermaids enlist Greluche, a young singer, to play the Brazilian, while Blancpartout goes in disguise as a barber to avoid direct confrontation. In the end, all plots and identities are revealed, and Blancpartout and Rafaëli are finally engaged.

An examination of costume designs for the “Brazilian” reveals the extent to which the actor contorted his physical features to portray the erratic, hedonistic visitor to Paris. It also allows for a closer examination of visual representations of tourists, and how these representations in turn betray collective sentiments regarding class and race, specifically concerning visitors. A photograph from the 1863 premiere of the vaudeville (Figure 3) shows the celebrated comic actor Brasseur (1829–1890) as the “Brazilian” and the *vaudevilliste* Gil-Pérès (1822–1882) as Blancpartout. The costume loosely resembles the stage directions in the published version of the vaudeville. According to the staging instructions for scene 4, Greluche, who disguises himself as the eponymous “Brazilian,” enters



Figure 3: Brasseur (left) and Gil-Pérès in *Le Brésilien*, 1863. Bibliothèque nationale (henceforth BnF).

wearing a “black wig and moustache” and sports “a copper skin tone, expensive and eccentric clothing, vibrant colors, jewelry.” The character’s afro-styled hair (evident in the photo) and vibrant jewelry (not shown here) suggest a desired contrast to Gil-Pérès’s presumably more reserved, “Gallic”-looking features. The libretto reinforces the not-so-subtle exoticization of the non-Parisian foreigner; when Rafaëli commends Greluche on his acting, Greluche replies, “You could have asked me to play a Turk or a little peasant from Normandy, I would have pulled it off in the same way.”³² This comment can be read (charitably) as a self-disparaging remark aimed at Greluche’s poor acting, a remark that would have been especially funny given Brasseur’s fame as an impersonator. However, this juxtaposition of travelers of places near and far—Brazil, Turkey, Normandy—appeared frequently in Marcelin’s *La Vie parisienne*, as we have seen with the aforementioned article on tourist archetypes. By reducing Brazilians, Turks, and French provincials to a fixed set of “foreign” mannerisms, Meilhac and Halévy—following Marcelin’s lead—projected an image of fish-out-of-water Parisian tourists, who were an increasing presence on Paris’s streets leading up to the 1867 World’s Fair. In cosmopolitan, imperial Paris, it fol-



Figure 4: Draner, costume sketch for the “Brazilian,” Act 1, *La Vie parisienne*. BnF.

lows, not all Parisians were created equal.

We can trace this connection between tourism and exoticism further through the character of the “Brazilian” in Offenbach’s operetta. Costume sketches suggest that he was to assume an even more ostentatious persona than that of his vaudeville predecessor (Figure 4). For the character’s Act 1 entrance, the designer indicates an overcoat of red and black satin, silver embroidery, jewelry, and a golden vest. Brasseur is given a top hat, which indicated his wealth and social status, while a travel bag embroidered in gold signified his status as a visitor to the city. As photographs from the premiere suggest, the Brazilian’s costume was most outlandish in Act 5, in which he sports a sombrero to the Café Anglais. Although the character’s makeup, hair, and props immediately strike the modern-day viewer as teeming with exotic stereotypes, the Brazilian’s primary function in the operetta is to demonstrate the ethnic range of wealthy foreigners who, upon arriving in Paris, coalesce into greedy, hedonistic urbanites. Though “realist” in its depiction of cosmopolitan public spaces, *La Vie parisienne* teems with sonic, visual, and textual signifiers of French colonization, or what Ralph Locke would call “full-context” stereotypes of non-Western identity (see Locke 2009).

If the costumes for the two “Brazilians” betray a bourgeois conception

of the character as an “exotic” entrant into Parisian society, the two solo musical numbers—the *ronde* from the vaudeville and the *rondeau* from the operetta—further serve to translate the non-European foreigner into a Parisian archetype. An obscure little chanson entitled “Voulez-vous acceptez mon bras,” better known as the *Ronde du Brésilien*, appears in scene 14 of *Le Brésilien* (Example 2). Despite contributing the linchpin musical number, Offenbach humbly attempted to downplay his authorial status; in a congratulatory letter addressed to both librettists dated May 9, 1863, he writes: “I applaud your play and [the performance of] my chanson. It goes without saying that my name will not be mentioned for this little ditty tonight, nor will it appear on tomorrow’s poster.”³³ Despite Offenbach’s modesty, the musical number was a stand-alone success. The couplets were published by G. Brandus and Dufour in two versions, one with piano accompaniment and one without, while the title page of both versions bears a dedication to the two stars of the play, Brasseur and Gil-Pères.³⁴ Jules Lovy of *Le Ménestrel* singled out Offenbach’s *Ronde*, comparing its success to some of the repertoire of the cafés-concerts:

The ‘Ronde du Brésilien!’ Certainly the most hair-raising song written in a long time. One must hear it sung by Brasseur and Gil-Pères. [Its success owes] not only to the extremely entertaining text of the two witty vaudeville writers, which will make you burst into laughter. It is also one of Offenbach’s most joyful musical concoctions, one of the most original melodies that the fecund composer has drawn from his fertile imagination.³⁵

A year later, in 1864, Henri Thiéry and Paul Avenel adapted the *Ronde*, with new text, in their vaudeville *Les Calicots*, giving Offenbach’s tune a life of its own.³⁶ The *Ronde du Brésilien* concludes a rather convoluted scene between Blancpartout (disguised as a barber) and Greluche (disguised as a generic “Brazilian” nobleman). Greluche, upon learning that barbers enjoy attending vaudevilles, decides to entertain Blancpartout with a “chansonnette comique.” Greluche then sings about a man who follows a woman around the world trying to offer her his arm, while Blancpartout offers an extra layer of humor to the scene by repeating lines sung by Greluche. The music follows a conventional couplet-with-refrain pattern, in which each couplet continues the story of the courtship. The refrain serves as a vehicle for comedic virtuosity by having the singer imitate, alternately, a trumpet, a clarinet, and a cymbal. The accompaniment is a straightforward “oom-pah” pattern with an eight-measure introduction that also serves as a ritornello between the refrain the next couplet.

While the *Ronde* served as the vaudeville’s musical centerpiece, it also offered the audience a tour of Paris. In the first couplet, Brasseur shoots

VOULEZ-VOUS ACCEPTER MON BRAS?

RONDE DU BRÉSILIEN

Chantée au Théâtre du Palais Royal par BRASSEUR et GIL PEREZ

Paroles de

Musique de

HENRI MEILHAC et LUDOVIC HALÉVY

JACQUES OFFENBACH

Allegretto moderato.

PIANO.

The piano introduction consists of two staves of music. The right hand features a lively, rhythmic melody with eighth and sixteenth notes, while the left hand provides a steady accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

p *3^{me} voix ad libitum.*

En allant à son minis_terre, Il la rencontra ru'du Bac, Il la rencontra ru'du Bac. Elle s'ar_ma d'un front sé-

The vocal line for the first voice part begins with a piano dynamic. The melody is simple and rhythmic, following the lyrics. The piano accompaniment continues with a steady accompaniment.

2^{me} voix ad libitum. *3^{me} voix ad libitum.*

vere, Il voulut l'atteindre, mais crac, Il voulut l'atteindre, mais crac. Elle prit le quai des lu_nettes, des lunettes L'impassé

The second and third voice parts enter with their respective lyrics. The piano accompaniment remains consistent.

3^{me} voix ad libitum. *rit.* *

S^t André des Arts. La ru' des vieilles handri_ettes, ha_driettes Et tous les nouveaux boulevarts L'homme la suivait à quinz?

The third voice part continues with its lyrics. The piano accompaniment includes a *rit.* (ritardando) marking.

più ritenuto. *à tempo.*

pas Et lui disait tout bas, Voulez-vous, voulez-vous, voulez-vous ac_cep_ter mon bras? voulez-

The first voice part concludes with the main phrase. The piano accompaniment includes a *più rit.* (più ritardando) marking.

NOTA BENE. La ronde du Brésilien peut être chantée à une seule voix qui répètera, dans ce cas, les phrases de la 3^{me} voix, indiquées *ad libitum*.

B. et D. 10855.

G. BRANDUS et S. DUFOUR rue Richelieu 103.

off the names of obscure Parisian locales: the Rue du Bac (present-day seventh arrondissement), the Quai des lunettes (now the Quai d'horloge, in the first arrondissement), the Impasse Saint-André-des-Arts (present-day sixth arrondissement), and the Rue des Haudriettes (present-day third arrondissement). This evocation of Paris's liminal spaces—side streets, alleyways, docks—is especially striking given that the singer is purportedly a Brazilian noble who is an outsider to the city. Although in no way advancing the plot, the *Ronde* was instead an exercise in “writing the city” through musical placemaking. Street names became poetic content, thus giving liminal urban space a moment in the spotlight.

Like the vaudeville *Ronde*, the *rondeau* from *La Vie parisienne* functions predominantly as a dramatic non-sequitur to the plot. In the finale of Act 1, the Brazilian enters amidst a crowd of tourists who have just disembarked from a train at the Gare de l'Ouest (Example 3). A short choral outburst praising Paris is followed by six suspenseful orchestral measures that serve the dramaturgical purpose of allowing the Brazilian to emerge from the crowd, as well as the harmonic purpose of modulating from C major to F, the key of the Brazilian's solo number. Rather than recount a story, the operetta's Brazilian sings in the first person, and confesses his desire for conspicuous consumption on his third visit to Paris. This zeal is underpinned by the rapid-fire text setting and brisk *allegro vivo* tempo and galloping accompaniment. In Paris, the rich foreigner boasts, he twice blew his wealth on clothing, on jewelry, and on drunken revelry with friends and mistresses.

The Brazilian's rondo leads directly into the choral finale of Act 1, a *galop* in which the chorus of tourists alternately describe Paris as a “charming place” and a “furnace.”³⁷ Joined by the Brazilian and the other lead roles, the tourists describe Paris as a hub for visitors from around the world, and they chant the names of the many nationalities on the trains and ships arriving in or leaving Paris: “Brésiliens, Japonais, Hollandais, Espagnols, Romagnols, Egyptiens et Prussiens, etc.” For audiences in 1866, this impressive list of nations visiting Paris was an all-too-true reflection of Paris's last Exposition Universelle, which attracted over five million visitors, as well as the one that would soon take place on the Champs de Mars. Moreover, the list offers a stark socioeconomic contrast to the one pattered by the railroad workers in Act 1: one list recounts sites of labor, the other sites of pleasure.

The character of the “Brazilian” sheds light on how Meilhac and Halévy evaporated racial difference under the umbrella of Parisian tourism. While his appearance, mannerisms, and way of speaking and singing are in stark contrast to his fellow characters, the wealthy Brazilian nonetheless feels at home in Parisian culture, with its conspicuous consumption, its diverse

Allegro vivo

LE BRÉSILIEN.

Je suis Bré si lien, j'ai de l'or Et j'a rri ve de Ri o Ja nei re; Plus

Example 3: *La Vie parisienne*, The Brazilian's entrance, Act 1, finale.

social spaces, and its sexual freedom. Indeed, this sense of cosmopolitan identity was reiterated in the monumental *Paris Guide 1867*, an exhibition-year guidebook that included literary and philosophical essays on the meaning and nature of modern life in the city. In one chapter, Gustave Frédérix (1867, 1015) notes that being “Parisian” is more of an attitude than it is a strict geographic affiliation. He then adds—almost certainly alluding to *La Vie parisienne*—that there are “Parisians from Paris” as well as “Parisians from Brazil.”

What is Real: *Le Photographe* (1864)

In the March 16, 1864, issue of *La Vie parisienne*, Marcelin published a half-page cartoon devoted to the studio of the famous photographer Pierre Petit.³⁸ Surrounded by a diverse group of clientele, the famed photographer is pictured riding a chariot in the sky, mimicking either the sun-god Apollo or the “Sun-King” Louis XIV. Marcelin presented the portrait photographer’s studio—a relatively new social space—as saturated with old social codes.

Perhaps inspired by Marcelin’s enduring fascination with the sociological ramifications of new technologies, Meilhac and Halévy turned to a tried-and-tested scenario (a cunning portraitist and his oblivious sitter) in *Le Photographe*, a one-act *comédie-vaudeville* that premiered on Christmas Eve 1864 at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal. Here, Meilhac and Halévy recycled the eponymous heroine from *La Clé de Métella* into an onstage role, and, for the first time, created a character named “Raoul de Gardefeu.” The plot also bears an uncanny resemblance to *La Vie*: eager to forget his onetime lover Métella, Gardefeu attempts to seduce the Baroness von Gourdakirsch, who thinks she is having her portrait taken by a professional photographer.

Gardefeu's servant Alexandre assists in refashioning his employer's salon into a believable photographer's studio. The Baroness's husband is in turn interested in Métella, while Gardefeu struggles to keep everything a secret.

Of the three vaudeville predecessors to *La Vie parisienne* discussed in this article, *Le Photographe* comes closest to encapsulating the humorous encounters between Parisians and foreigners that are so prominent in Marcelin's magazine and Offenbach's operetta. There is the obvious transference of characters' names: Gardefeu and Métella appear in both vaudeville and operetta, and it is a short jump from "Gourdakirsch" to "Gondremarck." But the clearest parallel is through the character of Gardefeu. It is through him that the wealthy on-stage foreigners experience what they believe to be "real" Parisian life. In both vaudeville and operetta, Gardefeu functions as the primary mediator between the theater audience and the on-stage action: the plots of both works are beholden to his selfish interventions.

If we interpret Gardefeu as a meta-character whose single-minded lust and fluency in bourgeois norms dictates the drama, he emerges as an archetypal example of a *gandin*, an epithet widely used during the nineteenth century that roughly translates to "dandy."³⁹ In Albert Wolff's review of *Le Photographe*, Gardefeu is described as "a *gandin* of the boulevards who, in order to entice a beautiful German baroness to his apartment, transforms his salon into a branch of Nadar's studio."⁴⁰ The review of Offenbach's *La Vie parisienne* in the *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris* uses the same terminology to describe Gardefeu; he is a "young *gandin* . . . who made the acquaintance of a Swedish baroness."⁴¹ In nineteenth-century parlance, *gandins* were young men who frequented the cafés on the boulevard de Gand, a street that was a playground for the wealthy during the Restoration and would later be replaced by the equally vibrant Boulevard des Italiens.⁴² Although the *gandin* could be placed on the same social spectrum as the *dandy*, he is typically younger, smugger, and has not yet achieved a level of refinedness. As literary historian Miranda Gill has observed, the Second Empire *gandin* was seen as a vulgar successor to the *lion* of the July Monarchy, and the use of the word *dandy* as a foil to *gandin* implied that Parisians associated proper decorum with English street culture (Gill 2009, 75). *Gandin* was never intended as compliment. In his 1865 dictionary of "eccentric French terms," Gustave Naquet summarized *gandisme* as "ridiculous folly."⁴³ Indeed, Marcelin himself often portrayed the *gandin* as a sulking, unemployed youth in the pages of *La Vie parisienne*.

As an embodiment of the conspicuous consumption that came to define social life in the Second Empire, the *gandin* appeared in a variety of dramatic and literary works that foregrounded city life. The playwright

Théodore Barrière examined the social practices of the street in his 1855 play *Les Parisiens de la décadence*, which features a character named Paul Gandin. Émile Zola would later use the term in *The Kill*, the controversial 1871 novel that scrutinized the negative effects of Haussmannization on male sociability. Zola's description of the activities of the teenage Maxime Saccard and his schoolboy friend is one of the most vivid literary accounts of blasé youth culture in Second-Empire Paris: "The two youths would smoke, look at women, and spatter pedestrians with mud as if returning from the races. It was an astonishing little world, a breeding ground for the snobs and imbeciles who could be seen every day on the rue du Havre, nattily dressed in their dandyish jackets, playing at being blasé men of means" (Zola 2004, 96).

One could easily adapt Zola's words to describe Gardefeu and Bobinet. Indeed, Meilhac and Halévy use the word *gandin* obliquely in the Brazilian's *La Vie parisienne* rondeau, in which the foreigner complains of the "cold," "judgmental," and "conniving" stares of young Parisian men when they are confronted with people not of their own kind. The Brazilian utters the word at a brief caesura as if to mock the young men who sulk in the backs of theater boxes:

. . . this *gandin*,
who, posh yet needy,
hides in the back of the [theater] box,
and complains, while chewing on his moustache,
where the hell to find more money!

Meilhac and Halévy thus deploy one stereotypical Parisian "type," namely the rich Brazilian foreigner, to lampoon another, namely the blasé youth. Yet, as we have seen, Gardefeu and Bobinet were not the first *gandins* that Meilhac and Halévy had created. Blancpartout (*Le Brésilien*) and Lucien (*La Clé de Métella*) also exhibit the traits of this well-known Second Empire *type parisien*.

Parisian Heroes

Nineteenth-century operas tend to have a hero. Yet amongst the dueling tourists, mendacious courtesans, and lustful *gandins*, we search in vain for any heroism in the Paris of *La Vie Parisienne*. Who, then, emerges as the hero(ine) of Offenbach's operetta? In his classic essay "Paris, a Modern Myth," the sociologist Roger Caillois (2003) notes that a palpable shift took place in characterizations of the literary hero beginning around 1840. Romantic literary tropes of ennui, interiority, and escapism made way for

a fictional hero who was more aggressive and enterprising; writers such as Balzac, Baudelaire, Flaubert and, later, Zola “sought to incorporate into real life the exigencies that the Romantics (e.g. Chateaubriand, Musset, and early Hugo) had resigned themselves to satisfying on an artistic level, and that sustained their verse” (Caillois 2003, 187). In other words, the urban environment came to play a key role in defining the social and psychological ambitions of literary heroes. Whereas Caillois looks to the popular novel as a sign of this paradigm shift—specifically, the shift in taste from the escapist adventure novel to the urban detective thriller—this article has shown how popular musical theater in mid-nineteenth century Paris also saw an increased receptivity towards the technologies, materialities, and circumstances that distinguished the metropolis from the provinces. Vaudeville and operetta, two genres wrongfully neglected by opera scholars, provide a valuable corpus of literature that dramatized everyday life in the city. Scores, libretti, costume sketches, and staging instructions provide the historian with keys to understanding how fictional heroes, such as those found in novels and poems, shifted from being perpetual outsiders to Parisian streets (e.g. Balzac’s *Rastignac*, Stendhal’s *Julien*) to being products of those streets (e.g. Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, Offenbach’s *femme du monde*). In “The Painter of Modern Life,” Baudelaire (1981, 422) also acknowledged that the new modern hero is not a swashbuckler or revolutionary, but rather an informed street dweller: dandyism, wrote Baudelaire, was the last flicker of heroism in an age of decadence. Indeed, Caillois (2004, 188) notes that the emergence of the “modern hero” owed much to a literary aesthetics that prioritized both sociological and theatrical representations of urban life, or what he calls a “dramaturgy” of urban society (Caillois 2004, 188).

Just as nineteenth-century guidebooks and magazines briefed readers on social spaces, linguistic quirks, and urban legends, so too did operetta equip critics with language to “dramatize” mid-century Parisian life. While some critics, as we have seen, were unsettled by the operetta’s all-too-real depiction of Paris’s seedy nightlife, humorists and caricaturists (Figure 5) were as fascinated with the “physiognomy” of the theater audience as they were with the onstage characters that mocked that audience. In his memoirs, Gustave Claudin even referred to the onslaught of foreign tourists as resembling Gondremarck, paraphrasing the character’s lustful Act 2 couplets “je veux m’en fourrer jusque-là” (I want to throw myself in up to here):

Since visitors had well-stocked purses, they flocked directly to the most fashionable neighborhoods. Real Parisians disappeared in the crowd and were nowhere to be found. In the evenings, the restaurants where they used to dine, the theater boxes and stalls where they used to go and listen to comedies and operas, were all taken over by a cohort of curious



Figure 5: “The public at the premiere of *La Vie parisienne*. This curious engraving shows the ebullient physiognomy of the spectators present at the premiere of the famous operetta.” Lithograph by Draner. BnF.

[foreigners] who, like baron de Gondremarck from *La Vie parisienne*, “wanted to throw themselves in up to their necks.”⁴⁴

As Claudin suggests, *La Vie parisienne* was “read” by its public, in terms of whom they would encounter, where they should go, and how they ought to behave in the French capital. But at the same time, the operetta, like its namesake magazine, was itself a “reading” of Parisian life, drawing on lived experiences as well as on scripted stereotypes. Viewed from a distance, it becomes evident that there are no “good” or “evil” characters in *La Vie parisienne*. Rather, the operetta—like any cosmopolitan city—was populated with characters whose expectations of personal gain clashed with the realities of living in the metropolis. This fluidity between written discourses and lived practices played a profound role in constructing the myth of a distinctly *Parisian* urban identity during the middle decades of the nineteenth century.

Notes

1. *La Clé de Métella*, comédie in one act, 1862; *Le Brésilien*, comédie mêlée de chant in one act, 1863; *Le Photographe*, comédie-vaudeville in one act, 1864.
2. By 1866, Paris was undergoing several major urban development projects. Overseen by Baron Haussmann, the so-called “second phase” of construction included expansion of the Boulevard Magenta and the construction of the Boulevard Malesherbes and the Avenue Daumesnil. It also included the construction of what are today the Place de la République and the Étoile, as well as a near-total demolition of the winding streets of the Île de la Cité. An auxiliary urban project was the construction of edifices in preparation for the 1867

World's Fair. It is well beyond the scope of this essay to detail Haussmann's *tabula rasa* approach to urban renewal; but, for a detailed study of Haussmann's politics of urban planning, see Jordan 1995.

3. Laurence Senelick (2017) has recently explored modes of representation in Offenbach's works—both how Offenbach staged modernity, and how his works were in turn adapted to represent an idealized image of Second-Empire Paris. While Senelick notes that for Offenbach “the genuine mark of modernity is a concern for triviality” (*Ibid.*, 9), I argue here that operetta assumed the same earnestly informative role as did the guidebook or the realist novel. All three genres provided narrative maps of the urban experience, both for tourists and for residents who could not keep up with the pace of Haussmannization.

4. Citing Prendergast, Jan Pasler (2009, 24) has noted that late-nineteenth-century writers and critics pointed to the city's fleeting ontology as one of its most prominent pleasures—as well as one of its hazards.

5. While Peter Mondelli (2017) has recently explored the unspoken or “ineffable” modes of satire in Offenbach's operettas, my article provides an alternate reading of the genre that looks beyond modes of critique and instead at operetta's capability to function as an instructive text.

6. There is to date no scholarship that frames opera or operetta as “edutainment,” but the term has been increasingly used in recent work in popular-music pedagogy. In his study of knowledge's role in the cultural formation of hip-hop culture, Travis L. Gosa (2016, 64) takes musical “edutainment” to mean “a mix of fun and socially conscious music and discourse.” In adopting the term, I aim to grant the authors of operetta and vaudeville moralistic agency over how they portrayed their city. In other words, like hip-hop, operetta and vaudeville had the power to explain.

7. “C'est un monde à l'envers qui n'a pas son pareil, même au sein des orgies délirantes du carnaval.” Review by “D.” (Edouard Déaddé), *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, November 4, 1866.

8. “Vous verrez que pas une réclamation ne s'élèvera contre la pornographie spirituelle qui, sous le titre *La Vie parisienne*, fait de notre capitale un immense Bréda.” Foucher, 1867, 427.

9. “Ce n'est qu'un vaudeville, qu'un opéra bouffe, c'est un mélange des deux genres à la fois.” Léo Lucas, *Journal des marchandes de modes*, November 15, 1866.

10. “Pas un caractère vrai, pas une situation vraiment comique, mais une charge continue, voilà *La Vie parisienne*.” Léo Lucas, *Journal des marchandes de modes*, November 15, 1866.

11. Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker (2015, 325) offer a Kracauer-inspired interpretation of operetta in claiming that “Offenbach farces can be seen as mirrors on society, with politics and social undertows satirized and negotiated within their libretti.”

12. “Avec ce titre magique de Paris, un drame, une revue, un livre est toujours sûr du succès. Paris a sur lui-même une curiosité inextinguible que rien n'a pu satisfaire encore, ni les gros ouvrages sérieux, ni les publications légères, ni l'histoire, ni la chronique, ni l'étude, ni la mémoire, ni le tableau, ni le roman. Mettez ce mot sur une affiche et en voilà pour six mois de queue et de foule.” Gautier, 1856, p. i.

13. “Ce que l'on nomme *La Vie parisienne* est une manière d'être, de vivre et même de penser toute particulière à la population parisienne. Cette vie constitue une sorte d'individualité. Son caractère général, c'est surtout d'être plus extérieure que dans aucune autre

capitale de l'Europe." de Cesena 1864, 677.

14. Yon's hefty biography of Offenbach mentions the operetta's dedication to Marcelin but does not elaborate on their relationship. Tracing Meilhac's and Halévy's contributions to the magazine presents a particular challenge; illustrations are rarely if ever attributed, and writers adopted pseudonyms to hide their identities. While critics have attempted to decipher these pseudonyms, there is no evidence of their veracity; and perhaps the authors changed pseudonyms over time. According to Parisis's obituary of Marcelin in *Le Figaro*, Meilhac signed his name under the pseudonym "H...Off," while Halévy adopted the pseudonym "Puck."

15. "une joie de vivre . . . fièvre d'une prospérité sans précédent . . . dont toutes les aspirations étaient tournées vers le luxe, vers le Plaisir, vers la fête et vers le tintamarre." *Le Figaro*, December 5, 1887.

16. "un journal qui soit en quelque sorte un salon de gens pas bêtes, où chacun apporte sa nouvelle et dit son impression sans songer à ceux qui l'écoutent." *La Vie parisienne*, January 9, 1864.

17. This allusion to the salon could be stretched further. As Yon (2000, 334) notes, Meilhac and Halévy's work for Marcelin's magazine and in their vaudevilles capitalized on the popularity of Thierry Chavanne's *salons caricaturaux* ("caricature-salons"), or humorous illustrations of the artistic and literary salons.

18. "Étrangers et étrangères," *La Vie parisienne*, October 20, 1866.

19. "un guide, un parapluie, un carnet des lunettes ou un binocle, une lorgnette en sautoir, pas de gants, mais une femme et des enfants, beaucoup d'enfants, un sillage d'enfants."

20. "les cabinets particuliers et les avant-scènes."

21. "*La Petite Marquise* continue, dans un cadre un peu plus agrandi, cette série de pièces, qui ne sont que des articles de *La Vie parisienne* transportés à la scène et mises au point d'optique du théâtre." Sarcey 1902, 209.

22. "[Marcelin] trouvait qu'entre la chose réelle et la chose dessinée la différence est petite; au bout de quelques heures, cette différence s'évanouissait." Marcelin 1888, p. ix.

23. "Ce qui fut réussir les pièces de ces deux auteurs, c'était ce qu'on pourrait appeler leur *modernité*. Nul autre ne raillait aussi exactement qu'eux les manies, les tics et les ridicules du jour." Claudin 1884, 241.

24. Schechner distinguishes between the "written script" and the people who perform it. In other words, scripts provide "the basic code and sequence" of an event, while the actors must interpret that script on a spectrum from the literal to the liberal. In Marcelin's magazine, the "real-life" characters of Paris—those who attend the theaters—are no better at breaking from the "script" than are the professional actors who perform at those theaters.

25. Talin (Meilhac), "Comment se fait un vaudeville," *Journal pour rire*, July 9, 1853.

26. "[Meilhac] connaissait les replis de l'âme comme les coulisses de la vie parisienne, et le cœur humain comme le Boulevard." Fulbert-Dumonthel, *Le Gaulois*, November 9, 1869.

27. "Ce fut le commencement de ma collaboration avec Offenbach et le commencement de ma vie en théâtre." See Yon 2000, 140.

28. "MM. Meilhac and Halévy sont des peintres très souples de la vie moderne. Ils ont saisi à merveille les codes particuliers de certains mondes, et leurs comédies sont parfois des tableaux d'une grande vérité, exécutés par des artistes. Je les crois même de beaucoup

supérieurs à leurs œuvres.” See Zola 1881, 268.

29. “Le succès . . . de la *Clef* [sic] de Métella, ne fait que grandir tous les soirs.” Koning 1864, 119.

30. The name “Métella” may be a reference to George Sand’s novella *Métella*, which was first published serially in 1833 in the *Revue des deux mondes*, a magazine that is referenced in Meilhac and Halévy’s play. Sand’s *Métella*, in turn, could possibly have been inspired by Balzac’s *La femme abandonnée*, which would extend the intertextual web of *La Vie parisienne* to include urban fiction from the early nineteenth century. As an archetypal *femme du monde*, the invisible Métella in *Clé de Métella* remains an offstage fetish object that only the male characters are able to see. For a revisionist reading of Offenbach’s *Métella* as an affirmative image of nineteenth-century female sexuality, see Hadlock 2016.

31. “À chaque entr’acte, une dizaine de jeunes gens . . . passaient en revue les femmes qu’il y avait dans la salle. . . Quand ils arrivaient à cette . . . demoiselle, ils la nommaient tout haut et plusieurs fois; j’en ai conclu qu’il y avait un certain orgueil à avoir l’air de la connaître.”

32. “Vous m’aurez fait jouer un Turc ou un petit paysan normand, ça aurait été absolument la même chose.”

33. “Je vais applaudir votre pièce et ma chanson. Il va sans dire que mon nom ne sera pas prononcé pour cette bêtise, ce soir, ni mis sur l’affiche demain.” Goninet 1994, 60.

34. The score remained in circulation at least until the end of the century; in 1899, Erik Satie recycled the *Ronde du Brésilien* into an original song entitled “Loubet assassin.” He transposed Offenbach’s original tune down a tritone, wrote a new introduction, and rewrote the accompaniment. For a discussion of Satie’s arrangement as well as a reproduction of Satie’s sketch, see Whiting 1999, 200–201.

35. “La ‘Ronde du Brésilien!’ Voilà certes la plus ébouriffante chanson qui ait été imaginée depuis longtemps. Il faut l’entendre chanter par Brasseur et Gil-Pérès. Ce ne sont pas seulement les paroles ultra-plaisantes des deux spirituels vaudevillistes qui font pouffer de rire, mais c’est une des plus heureuses trouvailles musicales d’Offenbach, une des plus originales mélodies que le fécond compositeur ait, jusqu’à présent, puisées, dans sa fertile imagination.” *Le Ménestrel*, April 12, 1863.

36. *Les Calicots* premiered at the Théâtre des Folies-Dramatiques on May 24, 1864.

37. As David Rissin (1980, 179 n.1) argues, Offenbach, Halévy, and Hector-Jonathan Crémieux deliberately used the word “fournaise” as a metaphor for contemporary society in *Orphée aux enfers*, where it signified both pleasure and hell.

38. *La Vie parisienne*, March 16, 1864.

39. In Baudelaire’s (1981, 420–21) formulation, the *dandy* is a cultivated aesthete who regards urban living as a metaphysical experience: “Dandyism in certain respects comes close to spirituality and to stoicism, but a dandy can never be a vulgar man.”

40. “un *gandin* des boulevards qui, pour attirer chez lui une jolie baronne allemande, a transformé son salon en une succursale de la maison Nadar.” *Le Journal amusant*, December 31, 1864.

41. “un jeune *gandin* . . . qui a fait . . . la rencontre d’une baronne suédoise.” *Revue et gazette musicale de Paris*, November 4, 1866.

42. “Gandin,” in *Le Trésor de la langue française informatisé (TILF)*, www.atilf.fr (accessed September 24, 2018).

43. “Le *gandinisme*, c’est le ridicule dans la sottise.” Larchey 1865, 153.

44. “Comme les visiteurs avaient des bourses bien garnies, ils se dirigèrent tout droit vers les quartiers les plus à la mode. Les vrais Parisiens disparurent dans la foule, et ne purent se retrouver. Le soir, les restaurants où ils avaient coutume de diner, les loges et les stalles de spectacle où ils allaient écouter des opéras et des comédies, étaient pris d’assaut par des cohortes de curieux voulant, comme le baron de Gondremarck de *La Vie parisienne*, s’en fourrer jusqu’au cou.” Claudin 1884, 17–18.

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