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Odd Man Out:  
Two Self-Portraits of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

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Principles of Research  
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Self-portraits say more about an artist than any biography ever will, because they show how the artist perceives him or herself, both inside and out. It is a very specific manifestation of the artist within his or her work. In showing him or herself, the artist is vulnerable, accessible, and intimate with the audience by breaking down the artifice of the picture frame that separates artist and viewer. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's 1880 painting *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror* (fig. 1) and *Au Moulin Rouge* from 1892 (fig. 2), are illustrations of this. Toulouse-Lautrec, consciously and unconsciously, has created a persona of himself in his works that reflects his self-concept, especially his struggle with his own identity. In *Au Moulin Rouge*, he uses a familiar environment in which he distorts himself and his placement to define himself and his role in society. In *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, his self-image translates into a private portrayal of the artist as outsider, as the "Other," even to himself.

This notion of the "Other" is a well-known psychological and sociological concept that refers to anything or anyone outside the mainstream. It is also anyone or anything that one is not. In this instance, the use of the "Other" to

discuss Toulouse-Lautrec's self-portraiture is used as psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan understood it in relation to his theory of the mirror stage. Toulouse-Lautrec did not write much, as evidenced in the small number of letters that survive him, so by using psychoanalysis to decipher his two self-portraits in *Au Moulin Rouge* and *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, viewers can have a better idea of the artist's self-concept.

Toulouse-Lautrec was well-liked, yet he saw himself as an outsider. Although he had many friends and was a staple in the nightlife scene of Paris, his self-perception was that of the satellite observer. He was situated somewhere between those performing onstage and the audience looking on, and his paintings documented the fantastic world he saw. Much of this was determined by his appearance. At the age of thirteen, he had broken both of his brittle leg bones several times in small accidents and they never healed properly. So despite myths about him as a dwarf, he, in fact, had a regular-sized torso but child-size legs, bringing him to an approximate height of four feet, eleven inches.

His stature was so disproportionate that he had to walk with a cane. His size, along with malformed sinuses that gave him a constant snuffle and caused a lisp, created what must have been an extremely strange appearance.<sup>1</sup> Toulouse-Lautrec made light of his deformity, but he was still very sensitive about the way he looked. According to Douglas Cooper, "he was haunted by the idea of being a

misfit.”<sup>2</sup> Understandably, most of the photographs of him are from the waist up, directed by Toulouse-Lautrec so that he would look as normal as possible. These photographs, however, would always show him in some sort of costume, such as a clown, a choirboy, a geisha, even Jane Avril, a famous Moulin Rouge dancer. Toulouse-Lautrec always found a way not to present a whole or serious image of himself in portraits of him by himself or others.

One of Toulouse-Lautrec's friends, photographer Maurice Guibert, often used Henri as one of his subjects. In one portrait (fig. 3), Guibert uses trick photography to create a photo in which Toulouse Lautrec is sitting at an easel drawing a portrait of himself while simultaneously seated as the model for the portrait on the other side of the frame. This photograph not only captures a full-lengthened true likeness of the artist— which was often altered by costume or exaggeration—but also serves as a comment on the artist’s portraiture. In the photo, the viewer can actually see what the artist looked like. His characteristic beard and glasses are present, and he is engaging in a leisurely way in both the familiar act of creating art, as well as modeling.

By comparison, one can see that he is much more idealized in his self-depiction in *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, and that his image in *Au Moulin Rouge* looks more like the cartoon version of himself at the easel in this photograph. In the photograph, Toulouse-Lautrec is looking at himself, seated across from

himself, and is deliberately creating a caricature. This is a literal, visual depiction of the artist observing himself, attempting a self-portrait, and losing himself by choice in the artistic process. It is absolutely relevant to *Au Moulin Rouge* and *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, because even though those self-portraits were not done in jest, as was this photograph, they are similarly altered appearances by Toulouse-Lautrec of himself. He did not seem to be able to see himself without an overlay of judgment or projection.

Although in a few other paintings he includes his self-image, these paintings are the only two self-portraits Toulouse-Lautrec executed.<sup>3</sup> He seemed to prefer to be seen as a character. Much of this attempt at the absurd is rooted in his strange appearance resulting from his disability, and further fueled by tension with his father. Toulouse-Lautrec's father was hardly ever around and from multiple accounts from the artist's biography by Julia Frey, seems to have been a womanizer and attention-seeker. These qualities may have had the effect on his son of never feeling important enough to be noticed. In a December 28, 1886 letter to his grandmother, Gabrielle de Toulouse-Lautrec, the artist is struggling, and references the imagined disappointment of his father:

I'm not in the process of regenerating French art at all, and I'm struggling with a hapless piece of paper that hasn't done a thing to me and on which, believe me, I'm not doing anything worthwhile. I'd like to tell you a little bit about what I'm doing...Papa would of course call me an outsider—I had to make an effort, since (you know as well as I do)...I'm living a Bohemian life...The fact that I

feel hemmed in by a number of sentimental considerations that I will absolutely have to forget if I want to achieve anything makes me all the more ill at ease on the hill of Montmartre...<sup>4</sup>

Surely, his bizarre appearance would have provided him plenty of attention, but not the type he sought and over which he had no control. However, his abnormalities did not keep him from the public eye. He wore his looks with dignity and did not try to gain sympathy from others. His fascination with women, especially in the sex industry, is apparent in his many scandalous subjects of interest, including a period when he was interested in the concept of "lesbianism for fun."<sup>5</sup> During this phase of his work, he focused on erotic portrayals of women with other women, usually kissing or laying in bed together. His taste for sordid glamour was characteristic of his work. Yet deep down, his struggle with his own identity is apparent, even in portraits of him done by other artists. He never sat for a serious portrait; he was always trying to be humorous or outrageous.

He was born an aristocrat, and yet chose to engulf himself in a particularly *louche*<sup>6</sup> and infamous section of Paris. He felt liberated in a new lifestyle that was so opposed to his upper-class childhood, because he was among more bohemian and free-thinking individuals who praised him for his talent and were his sources of inspiration.<sup>7</sup> His love for painting since his youth found its expression in the nightlife of Montmartre, a section of Paris that during the late nineteenth

century was *the* hotspot for free-thinking artists, prostitutes, and entertainers. Its nightclubs, brothels, and cafés drew an eclectic group of people together to celebrate the excesses of the *fin-de-siècle*. Nuns in Montmartre made wine because it was tax-free to do so outside the heart of the city. This led to an abundance of cheap alcohol and eventually, open-air drinking places, or *ginguettes*.

Inadvertently, these nuns were supplying the whole 18<sup>th</sup> *arrondissement*<sup>8</sup>. The legendary cabaret, Moulin Rouge, meaning "red windmill" in French, was the jewel of Montmartre, and a particular favorite of Toulouse-Lautrec's. He was fascinated with the Moulin Rouge's atmosphere: a mix of alcohol, sex, and entertainment. Performers such as Jane Avril, "La Goulue," Polaire, and Yvette Guilbert became his muses. Toulouse-Lautrec was captivated by this environment, and documented it as he experienced it, tainted yet fabulous.

The combination of this particular man and this nightclub proved to be what the artist is most remembered for. He depicted the stars of the Moulin Rouge, the audience, and what the typical night there consisted of. This subject matter found its way into Toulouse-Lautrec's drawings, paintings, promotional posters, and prints. In what would seem to be a seedy part of Paris, Toulouse-Lautrec saw the world where he belonged, and everything he could ever possibly want for subject matter. For many, it was an unattractive section of the city, but Toulouse-Lautrec had an eye for the beauty of difference, even ugliness.



Although as a child he loved to draw, during his recovery from having broken both of his legs, Toulouse-Lautrec began to paint. His first artistic instructor was René Princeteau, an artist who was well-known for his paintings of horses and dogs, and who was a friend of the boy's father.<sup>9</sup> Though Toulouse-Lautrec's drawing was considered atrocious by comparison to the standard, and often ended up more as caricatures of models instead of portraits, his painting had always been considered impressive. After studying under various mentors such as Léon Bonnat and Fernand Corman, he began to develop his own style. His desire to capture the essence of the human subject pushed him away from realism and landed him appropriately in the Post-Impressionist movement. Post-Impressionists were interested in liberating color and brushstroke from illusionism like the Impressionists, but took this even further by focusing more heavily on expression.

Toulouse-Lautrec was more concerned with what rather than who, and strove to show the spirit of individuals or events, rather than to paint the way people and places looked. He did not paint glamorous and idealized showgirls; rather, he showed the personalities of the dancers at the Moulin Rouge. They were not pretty, for the most part; they were lewd, drunk, outrageous, and fabulous. For technique, he combined influence from Impressionist and Post-Impressionist colleagues, such as Degas and Van Gogh, with bold color and line

found in Japanese prints that had become so popular in France during this time.<sup>10</sup>

This new hybrid style translated seamlessly into the Moulin Rouge promotional posters he created. A Toulouse-Lautrec image of Jane Avril dancing was eye-catching, seductive, and the ideal advertisement.

His paintings focus on the portrayal of individuals. Each figure is a portrait, and the scene as a whole often lacks unification because each individual is so strong: he or she could be pulled out of the work to stand alone. In *Au Moulin Rouge*, the color palette is dark and constant, with most figures dressed in black and the décor consisting mostly of dark wooden features. This emphasizes the somewhat déclassé, nighttime atmosphere of the setting. It is difficult for the viewer to pick out who the most important person in the scene is, because according to hierarchy of scale and proximity to the viewer within the picture plane, it should be May Milton, the famous performer shown with a greenish face. However, she is shoved off to the right and not even completely in the frame. To her right, there is a group of people seated at the table including the prominent figures of Edouard Dujardin, a poet and critic, and Paul Sescou, a photographer.<sup>11</sup> Since May Milton is the only figure that faces fully outward, she pulls the viewer in as a participant of the scene, leaning over the bar to watch as the usual patrons pass through the room.

In *Au Moulin Rouge*, Toulouse-Lautrec has placed his self-portrait in the rear of the space, back behind the table filled with people. He and his cousin, Gabriel Tapié de Céleyran, his frequent companion, occupy the space furthest away from the viewer.<sup>12</sup> Formally, his position is deceiving, because he appears to have intended himself to be a figure walking casually through the background, yet he happens to have just walked through the center of the picture. The viewer's eye is initially drawn to the ghostly greenish-blue face of May Milton at the bottom right of the painting. Then, the horizontal of the dark brown bar forces the viewer's eye back and to the left of the picture plane—directly to the space Toulouse-Lautrec and his cousin are about to enter. An invisible line is drawn from the woman's glowing face back to Toulouse-Lautrec, and is parallel to the heavy line of the bar's edge. Since all the figures at the table are seated and arranged in closed positions, Toulouse-Lautrec and his cousin become the peak of a pyramid of figures. According to the usual intentions of pyramidal composition, he and his cousin then automatically have higher status within the scene just by being at the pinnacle.

Accurate depiction of space in this painting was not one of Toulouse-Lautrec's priorities. Heavy lines and disproportion create depth in different parts of the canvas rather than standard linear perspective. For example, the lines of the table seem awkward, but that is because the table is not as important as those

who are sitting at it: it is used to represent the area where they are gathered. Japanese influence is strongly apparent in this regard. He takes his heavy use of diagonal lines and his choice not to place important figures in the center of the painting from Japanese art. He uses what seem to be the casual lines of the floorboards and of the bar, along with figures facing in different directions, to pull the scene apart into four groupings. May Milton faces towards the viewer; anchoring the work on the right, while to the top-left is the artist's self-portrait accompanied by his cousin. All the figures seated at the table keep their conversation within themselves and hold down the left side of the composition along with the wide bar that runs next to them, balancing the weightiness of May Milton's portrait. Some even have their backs completely turned on the viewer, like Jane Avril, a Moulin Rouge dancer, at the very back, adjusting her hair in a mirror.<sup>13</sup>

The spacing and balancing of these groups convey the different lives that intersected at the Moulin Rouge. Each of these groups is in their own worlds within the context of the entire painting, though each section is supported by the others that surround it so that it does not need to stand alone. This also places Toulouse-Lautrec and his cousin fittingly into their own realm as the only figures moving towards the left, away from the action; clearly distinct from and outside the other groups. This is a contradiction. Toulouse-Lautrec is showing what he

considered to be his circle of friends and his favorite place to go at night, but he is still passing by as an outsider. He should be sitting at the table, or striking up conversation with Jane Avril as she fixes her hair. Instead, he is the voyeur's voyeur. He watches those who are watching, helping him to capture the experience as a whole.

Even though Toulouse-Lautrec reveals an apparently more accurate self-portrait in this painting than in *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, he again is showing his conflict of identity. His self-portrait is squat and barely noticeable, blending into the bleak backdrop of his lanky cousin, Gabriel. He has, in fact caricatured himself: the big nose, the beard, and the typical bowler hat are what stand out and are all features that identify him as Toulouse-Lautrec. However, the rather long face that we see in the photograph with its gentle eyes and soft contours has here been rendered flattened and crude. Moreover, he is shown in profile, again not fully exposing himself to the viewer, and emphasizing his unattractive features. He looks like a cartoon next to the slim, feminine frame of Jane Avril, and he appears tiny even compared to the seated men at the table. Once the viewer finally notices him, he does not fit in, visually. Instead, he calls attention to himself through his difference, and by standing apart from the others. It is a comment on his social life: he considers himself an outsider, even though he is an important part of the scene.

*Self-Portrait Before a Mirror* could not be more different. Despite this, however, both paintings show completely separate situations in which the artist views himself in similar ways. *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror* plays with the question of self-perception in a much more studied and private manner. He is the only figure in the painting, so in contrast to the busy scene of nightlife in *Au Moulin Rouge*, Toulouse-Lautrec chose here to focus only on himself. The importance of the mirror as an instrument of abstraction as well as a filter should not be overlooked. In *Mirror*, his brushwork is very loose and painterly, blurring details on his face and the items stacked on the surface in front of the mirror. The artist lets the viewer look at him, but does not let him or her completely into his world.

Although a mirror is usually used when an artist makes a self-portrait, the fact that Toulouse-Lautrec shows the mirror itself in the painting makes a frame within the frame. It creates a twice-removed environment from the viewer, yet at the same time, by looking at the painting, the viewer stands in the same space as the artist would have stood. The viewer looks into the mirror with him because Toulouse-Lautrec wants him or her to see what he sees. Toulouse-Lautrec clearly had an aversion to confronting himself and his image, and only through others, or by the use of a mirror, does he feel comfortable enough to show himself more intimately to the audience. In this self-portrait, his damaged appearance is

clearly avoided and unrepresented. The artist has distorted the image in the mirror, and this distortion shows the viewer the artist's conflicted identity.

He was a strange-looking man who struggled with his self-image. When he saw his likeness reflected in a mirror, it is likely that he did not like what he saw. In *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, this is evident because he alters himself. He shows himself without his signature glasses and one would not refrain from calling him dashing, even handsome, in this work. This painting was the closest he ever came to a serious self-portrait: his drawings of himself were always caricatures, usually showing him with a giant head, exaggerated features, and rarely ever his legs. In *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, the viewer sees Toulouse-Lautrec as he wished he were or perhaps before he was able to confront the reality of who he was. This further supports the idea that he was uncomfortable in his own skin, to the point of misrepresenting himself. The way that he looks at himself in the mirror is as though he is looking at a stranger, as if it were any model posing for him: once again, the voyeur's voyeur.

He is an outsider even within himself. In this painting, he is withdrawn, boxed in by the objects surrounding him, and is visually small when compared to the candlestick, clock and other items on his mantle.<sup>14</sup> The bowl in the foreground is almost twice the size of his head. He does not even seem to see his reflection as an image of himself. Instead, he uses what he sees before him in the

mirror to study and record an unknown and idealized reflection. He raises one eyebrow inquisitively and looks out of the corner of his eye. His body is in three quarter view, once again not making himself fully vulnerable to the viewer.

Toulouse-Lautrec's artistic decisions in the production of his self-portraits represent his self-consciousness. Lacan's theories of psychoanalysis are ideal for trying to understand this ego struggle because these two paintings visually capture a moment when the artist is forced to confront his own image. Also, these two paintings were painted twelve years apart, and show the artist in completely different ways, giving to the comparison a larger scope of time during his career as an artist. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel was the first philosopher to address the concept of the "Other" as part of his theories of consciousness. Jacques Lacan furthered Hegel's ideas by relating "Otherness" to the mirror stage, a period in life when a child finally discovers the connection between his or her reflection in a mirror and his or her own person. According to Joel Dor, a Lacan scholar, the mirror stage "indicates an initial confusion between self and other, a confusion amply confirmed by the stereotyped relations he has with other children. These relations unequivocally confirm that it is primarily through the other that he experiences himself and orients himself at first."<sup>15</sup> According to Lacan, "the unconscious is the Other's discourse," meaning that a person develops and shapes itself based on interacting with others.<sup>16</sup>



Keeping these ideas in mind, Toulouse-Lautrec's *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror* can be read, quite literally, as an adult choosing not to accept the implications of the mirror stage, and denying his image rather than integrating it. He has become his own Other because in this painting, he is everything he is not in real life. He is showing an alienated self-division visually in this self-portrait, unconsciously displaying a self-concept in which there is no reconciliation to self.

The viewer watches the artist as he looks into a mirror. This is the moment when he, as an adult, should recognize himself and identify his internal person with the image he sees reflected. Yet there is a disconnect, and he attempts to force himself and the viewer to see an idealized version of himself. Richard Kearney describes this in his explanation of Lacan's mirror stage:

The child experiences the body as 'fragmented', that is, in terms of biological insufficiency and lack of cohesion. To overcome this lack of unity, the child contrives to replace the incomplete self with an ideal unified self or *imago*. This *imago* is, therefore, an imaginary projection in response to a real lack... [The child] seeks to compensate for its sense of anatomical inadequacy by identifying with this image of integration and sufficiency. The child imagines a future self-identity, which it is *not*, which is *other*...<sup>17</sup>

Toulouse-Lautrec is, for all intents and purposes, a child who is insufficient physically, and creates his own *imago* in *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror* to compensate for his anatomical inadequacy. He shows his struggles with self-image in this visual adult version of the mirror stage and subsequent idealization and displacement.

The concept of the "Other" also applies to *Au Moulin Rouge* because the artist has presented his image as callous others might define him, as unidealized as the mirror portrait is idealized. He defines himself based on his social circle of bohemians and misfits, and places himself as a participant within the scene. Yet he shows himself as a stranger in the crowd. He has become, at this point split, "Othered" in a Lacanian sense between who he is and how he sees himself. This self-concept is permanently unstable and outside himself.

The artist's self-portraits show him as the Other because that is how he thought of himself. In Julia Frey's biography of the artist, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*, she writes:

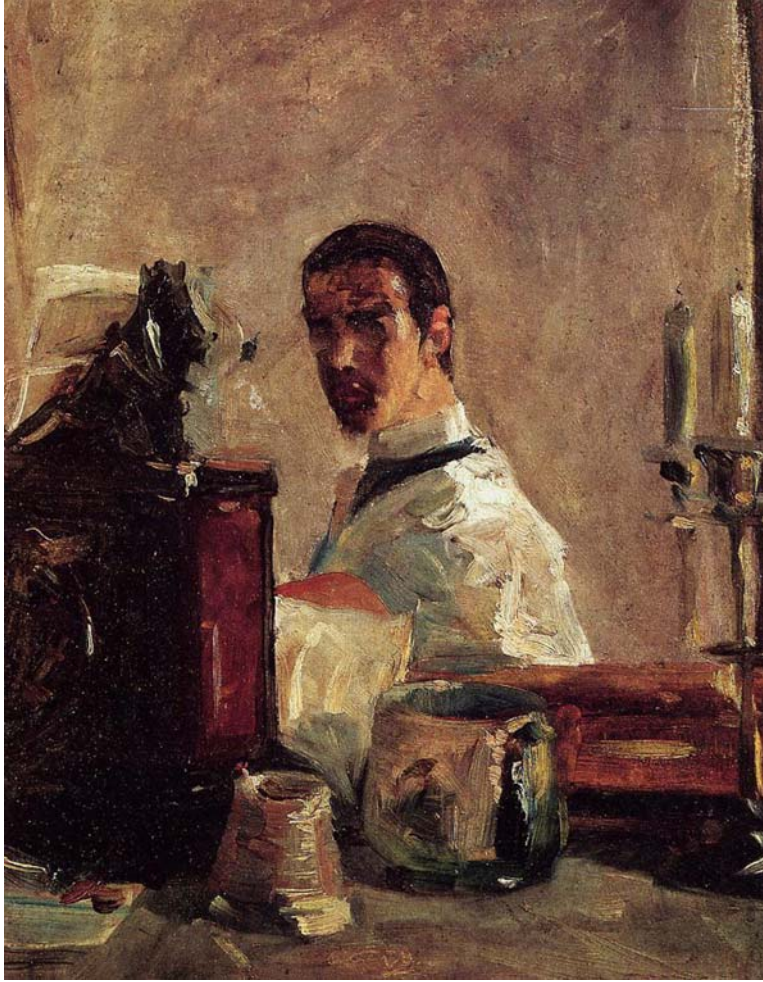
His perception of his role was prophetic, since renown would finally come to him not as a performer, but as an observer...although his deformity may have been the image, which affected him most, and certainly drove him to accept the passivity of the artist-observer...<sup>18</sup>

He did not fall into this role, nor was he an outsider by default. He chose this position because it was already what he did best: watching the show, both on stage and in real life. In *Au Moulin Rouge*, he is shown in his favorite environment, yet does not participate in it actively; he is an observer of his own lifestyle. He is central and unimportant, active and passive, observer and participant, all at the same time. In *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, Toulouse-Lautrec transcends the artist-viewer relationship by becoming both artist and viewer as a

way to hide himself. He fantasizes, and finds a way to keep himself and the fantasy from vulnerability by using the mirror as a shield from the exposure of the open plane of the painting. Nonetheless, it reveals his conflict.

Toulouse-Lautrec has "Othered" himself in his self-portraits because he could not come to terms with his self-image. He was a stranger to himself, uneasy about his appearance and who he was, and observed himself and the scene through the eyes of his represented self. He did not identify with the images he created of himself, and the viewer can see this by how awkward, inaccurate, falsified, caricatured, removed, and odd these self-portraits are.

## Images



**Figure 1** *Self-Portrait Before a Mirror*, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1880, Oil on Canvas.



**Figure 2** *Au Moulin Rouge*, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, 1892, Oil on Canvas.



**Figure 3** *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, Maurice Guibert, Photograph, c. 1892.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Thompson, Philip Dennis Cate, Mary Chapin Weaver, *Toulouse-Lautrec and Montmartre*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 60.

<sup>2</sup> Douglas Cooper, *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982), 11.

<sup>3</sup> In Toulouse-Lautrec's 1884 painting *The Sacred Grove*, the artist parodies Pierre Puvis de Chavannes' painting *The Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and Muses*. He also includes a self-image with his back fully turned towards the viewer. Though this is not an example of self-portraiture, it is interesting to see the artist, yet again, not fully showing himself in the picture.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert D. Schimmel, *The Letters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 107.

<sup>5</sup> Patrick O'Connor, *Nightlife of Paris: The Art of Toulouse Lautrec*, (New York: Universe, 1992), 74.

<sup>6</sup> "Not reputable or decent" Definition from Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Bloch Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*, (New York: Viking, 1994), 130-131.

<sup>8</sup> Term for each of the 20 districts into which Paris is divided.

<sup>9</sup> Douglas Cooper, *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982), 19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.



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<sup>11</sup> Reinhold Heller, "Rediscovering Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's 'At The Moulin Rouge,'" *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 117.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Cooper, *Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1982), 260.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhold Heller, "Rediscovering Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's 'At The Moulin Rouge,'" *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986): 117.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Bloch Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*, (New York: Viking, 1994), 236.

<sup>15</sup> Joel Dor, *Introduction to the Reading of Lacan*, (New York: Other Press LLC, 1998), 96.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Lacan, Translated by Bruce Fink, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2002), 10.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Kearney, *Modern Movements in European Philosophy*, (New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 273-274.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Bloch Frey, *Toulouse-Lautrec: A Life*, (New York: Viking, 1994), 236-237.