

# MORE THAN JUST A SEX-SYMBOL?

A study into the popularity of Martine Carol and her working relationship with Henri Jeanson: “Frenchness, stardom and language”

## Introduction

During the 1940s and 50s in France, Martine Carol was the undisputed female star of the moment whose popularity surpassed French audiences to earn her international fame. This project looks at 3 particular films released between 1954 and 1957 in which Carol worked in collaboration with the screenwriter Henri Jeanson and the director Christian-Jaque (*Madame du Barry* [1954], *Nana* [1955] and *Nathalie* [1957]).

My initial interest in this project stems from having undertaken a module led by Dr Sarah Leahy, during Stage 2 of my BA in Modern Languages. Although the module gave an extremely informative overview, this project enables a deeper level of analysis due to its primary focus on just one particular actress and screenwriter. The role and importance of screenwriters in French cinema is relatively underdeveloped and so this project aims to both further increase my understanding but also show the importance of further research to be carried out.



**\*Police Officer: “Follow me”**  
**Nathalie: “Generally it’s me that people tend to follow”**  
 -  
**Police Officer: “You’re not going to tell me that you have managed in 2 hours to detain an individual that we have been hunting down for ten years?”**  
**Nathalie: “Well I had to hurry, I had a hairdresser’s appointment”**

## Research Methods

I carried out preliminary studies using material available online and in Newcastle University’s Robinson Library on Martine Carol, Henri Jeanson and cinematic production in France in the 1940s-50s. Following this initial research period, I continued my research in the Cinémathèque française in Paris. This library contains a wealth of information about French cinema such as press reviews dating back to the original release of the films, as well as original scripts and funding applications.

The experience of travelling to Paris to gain access to primary sources gave me a real insight into the process of carrying out academic research. One of the main things I experienced during my first self-led project was the sheer volume of information available to me in relation to previous study which was always focused within the University’s resources. This taught me the importance of managing my time and prioritising documents and materials to find the most relevant information to my project. Another lesson I learnt about self-led research was the need to stay focused on my initial hypothesis as when I began to study the material available, as it soon became evident that other areas of research were of equal interest.

## Aims and Objectives

- Study the link between screen-writer and performer in order to gain an understanding about Martine Carol’s rise to stardom.
- Study Jeanson’s scripts to learn about how Carol’s stardom was linked to her language, as well as learning about female identity in France at that time.
- Research material related to the reception of the films to learn more about why Carol was so popular.



**Stranger: “Are you looking for something?”**  
**Nathalie: “No... I’m in the middle of losing something... Don’t worry, it’s nothing!”**  
 -

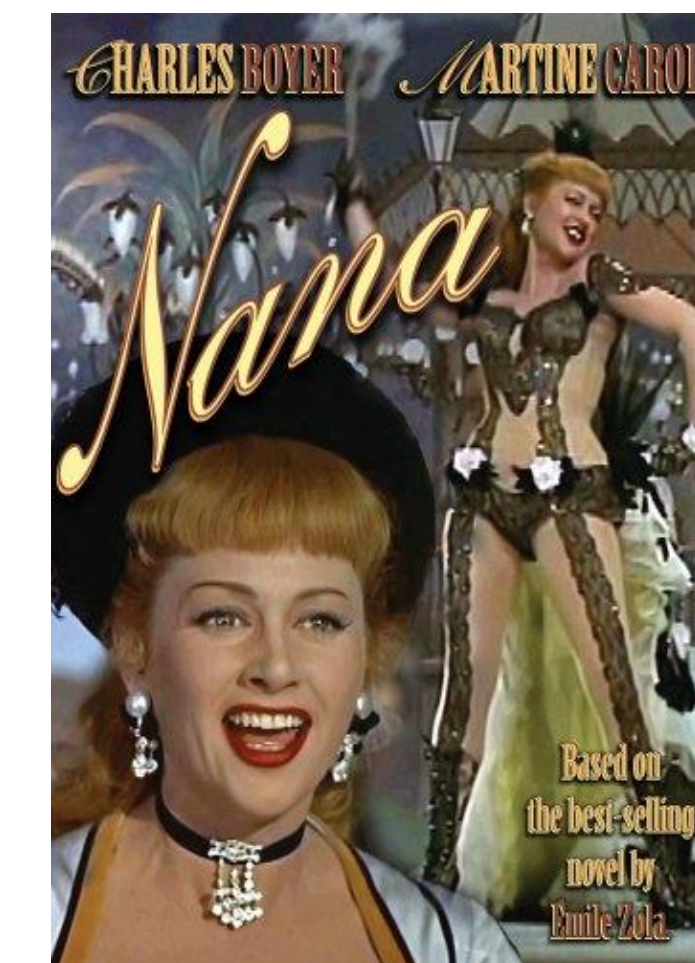
**Pivoine: “Are you really hurt?”**  
**Nathalie: “I can’t feel my arm anymore!”**  
**Frank: “I’ll drive you straight to the hospital. Can you walk?”**  
**Nathalie: “Of course! I don’t tend to walk on my hands!”**

## Findings

The success of each film is credited to her performances: ‘**The revelation of Nana, is Martine Carol.**’ (*Témoignage chrétien*, 9.9.1955)

- Carol’s popularity amongst international audiences prove her status as a sex-symbol, as linguistic talent was not as easily translated to foreign cinema. She was considered to be the embodiment of French feminine aesthetic in the 50s.
- Her popularity amongst women lends support to both Carol’s acting skills and Jeanson’s dialogue as he created characters to which a female audience could relate to. His fiery characters and Carol’s delivery of his witty dialogue enhanced Carol’s reputation as a skilled comedienne.
- Jeanson can be said to have led an active role in boosting Carol’s profile as he wrote scripts especially for her. Jeanson’s writing in the 1950s was influential as for the audience at the time language was said to be ‘a spectacle, especially when spoken by great stars’ (Witt, 2004:144)
- The positive reception of the films *Nathalie* and *Madame du Barry* suggested Carol’s stardom can be attributed to more than her body as there is ‘Not a kiss! ... Barely a glimpse of the natural advantages that have made her famous’ (*L’Aurore Paris*, 14.12.1957) These films were therefore successful due to Carol’s skill as a comedic actress and Jeanson’s scripts.
- The political and historical context at the time created a niche for traditional films of quality and comedies and so involving Carol in these film guaranteed her popularity amongst the masses.

Witt, M. and Temple, M. (eds) 2004. *The French Cinema Book* (BFI Publishing)



**Nana:**  
**“We left as soon as he left. And he didn’t even thank me for my wasted evening! Not a single flower... no gifts.”**  
 -  
**Nana: “If you find me too underdressed then cover me in your applause”**  
 -  
**Nana: “Personally, I am not very demanding. I really want to love you – but we have to make an agreement. You have to promise me that you will never be jealous and to always trust me whatever happens, but there must be no obligation to commitment on my behalf.”**

## Conclusion

Martine Carol was propelled to stardom due to a combination of language and body - her beautiful looks and her comical delivery of Henri Jeanson’s scripts.

This project has highlighted the importance of the screenwriter, and so further research is required in order to determine the correlation between writer and the success of the film and/or performers. Jeanson wrote specifically for Carol, as well as for Louis Jouvert and Gérard Philipe who were also renowned for their verbal performance style. An interesting further area research would be to study the popularity of Jeanson’s scripts which involved theatrical stars in relation to those written for less established actors.



## Further Implications

Although my initial aims focused on the relationship between Carol’s stardom and her language and image, after having begun my research, I noticed that a lot of the material concerning Carol was focusing on comparing her with her ‘successor’ and fellow sex-symbol Brigitte Bardot. This sparked my interest, giving me inspiration for a future area of research. As Carol’s fame and popularity diminished, Bardot became more and more successful, and I believe it would be interesting to determine how these two stars’ popularity were linked, and how their different roles show changes in conceptions of femininity.