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Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar, *Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture*. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005. xiii + 449 pp. Illustrations, notes and index. \$35.00 US (hb). ISBN 0-674-01703-X.

Review by Siân Reynolds, University of Stirling.

The dust jacket of this unusual and ambitious book with its images of stasis and violent movement prepares the reader for the further contrasts and juxtapositions to be found inside.[1] To call it a cultural history of the Popular Front in Paris would probably be misleading. Dudley Andrew and Steven Ungar are familiar with Pascal Ory's massive thesis on culture and politics during the Popular Front, but take a different direction.[2] Where Ory's is a reference work, theirs is a set of reflections aiming to break up the unified structure of regular narratives in literature, history and film, and particularly the cohesion suggested by the word "front." Their ambition is to suggest the simultaneous currents of cultural innovation and often conflict surging through the 1930s, and reaching a peak during the Popular Front government of 1936-7.

Coming from film studies and comparative literature, Andrew and Ungar explicitly challenge disciplinary borders and liken their approach, encompassing both elite and popular culture, to a newspaper, in which political headlines, murder trials and scandals, book and film reviews, fashion and sport, all jostle for the reader's attention every day. It should probably be said right away that some historians will not like the result. But anyone who has worked on the 1930s will surely recognize the value of the newspaper analogy, knowing how dependent the historian of the period is on the daily, weekly, or monthly press as a seductive, yet perplexing mine of material. The chief sources for this book, apart from secondary works listed in the excellent notes, are the periodical press of the 1930s, and contemporary films. There are plentiful illustrations, including film stills. Behind the book lies the very real historical problem of how to convey synchronicity. As the authors put it, they have developed, through the examples of Walter Benjamin and André Breton among others, "a respect for the overlooked, the peculiar, the obtuse fact or idea that might burn brilliantly enough to reflect unpredictably, but prophetically, off other elements or moments" (p. 383). Neither Breton ("tiresome and constitutionally adolescent", p. 374) nor Benjamin (for his "crude technological determinism" and being unfair to Malraux) entirely escapes passing criticism, incidentally, though both are elsewhere treated with respect.

Popular Front Paris and the Poetics of Culture consists of a series of linked essays, authored sometimes jointly, sometimes not, one guesses. The poetics of the title is defined as a dialectic between creativity and rules, and a range of possibilities is explored, by breaking some of the rules of presentation. Unexpectedly, for example, the book's introduction is a *tour de force* of reflections on Alain Resnais's "retro" film *Stavisky* ... , released in 1974 but set in the 1930s. It centers on the figure of the businessman and chancer known as Alexandre (Sacha) Stavisky, whose death in suspicious circumstances in January 1934 unleashed the scandal that precipitated the 6 February demonstrations and eventually the formation of the Popular Front. The film is a monument to the "unknowability" of historical events: even eye-witnesses constantly misinterpret what they are seeing. After this warning shot, one might expect more postmodern thoughts than some readers would like. The distrustful may be reassured to know that the essays that follow are thoughtful, detailed and (often) straightforward, ranging over a variety of topics located in the "real" 1930s, loosely grouped into an "elite" first part and a "popular" second part, and it is hard to review the book other than by briefly cataloguing them.

Chapter one takes the events of 1934 as a starting point for an account of the response of the intellectual press, through monthly or weekly journals, in particular the *NRF*, *Vendredi* and *Marianne*. Andrew and Ungar follow Régis Debray in seeing intellectual prestige and influence shift from the academy to the publishing houses, such as Gallimard. “Anyone wishing to contribute to the intellectual culture of this epoch” would have been well-advised to look first “to the bookstores and their suppliers rather than to university lecture halls” (pp. 85-6). Chapter two concentrates on two canonical writers, who commanded attention by having “styles muscular enough to act out” the ambitions of the age, Céline and Malraux. Differing in their politics, yet admiring each other, they are singled out for a series of strikingly masculine epithets. “Forceful,” “vibrant,” “daring,” and “virile,” they signalled “the death of bourgeois thought,” as Emmanuel Berl put it, in a book dedicated to Malraux. [3] But while Malraux appeared to be “young, optimistic and revolutionary,” Céline’s *Voyage au bout de la nuit* “lay like a rat inside the distended python of French politics... Everyone seemed to have read it, but no one knew how to make it nourish new ideas” (p. 106). Céline’s later development in fact cast him into outer darkness.

A third way is indicated in chapter three, “*Esprit* in the arena of extremist politics,” apparently devoted to Emmanuel Mounier’s new journal, but in effect tracing the itinerary of the under-rated Denis de Rougemont, seen here as an “apt index” to nonconformist thought, for qualities strikingly different from those of Céline and Malraux. “Unexceptional” and dispassionate, he too reacted against the dismaying misery and lassitude of the old consensus, while simultaneously rejecting, despite temptation, the false god of nationalism and the desperation of *l’amour fou* (imaginatively evoked here not only by retrospectively cherished films like *Pépé le Moko* and *Le Quai des brumes*, but the popular *Mayerling*). Chapter four dissects two contrasting political films of 1936-1937, *La Vie est à nous* and *La Marseillaise*. The former enlisted the help of Jean Renoir, while the latter was directed by him. *La Marseillaise* is analysed here as a “grand tutorial spectacle” of the Popular Front from above, showing the result when “those who wield cultural power descend into the streets.”

In part two, the focus shifts to what can broadly be called popular culture. Chapter five, “Daily Life in the City”, sets the scene, commenting on post-Haussmann Paris, but arguing that, like television and the Internet today, the radio had, by the 1930s, “established a virtual community of city dwellers, diminishing the importance of ... neighbourhoods.” Chapter six goes in considerable detail into “Popular entertainment and the decay of intimacy”, by tracing the line from the *café conc’* to the local music hall, and eventually to the huge commercial variety complexes like the Folies-Bergère and their rival, the cinema. The music hall “bet on size over intimacy,” and eventually succumbed to the commercial appeal and ‘visual pornography’ of female nudity (illustrated by a heart-stoppingly sad photograph of the line-up at the ABC in 1937 (p. 206). The clenched buttocks tell the story). Spectacles promoting a traditional ethos, such as circus and *café conc’* were “the first casualties” of the age (p. 223). The chapter ends with a suggestive political comparison between Renoir’s *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* and the more popular, but now forgotten film *Rigolboche*, starring Mistinguett, and favouring individual stardom rather than collective responsibility.

Chapter seven, “The look of Paris in the age of Art Déco”, starts from the Rex cinema (“the jewel-box of the boulevard Poissonnière” and still the chosen venue for blockbusters like *Titanic* in 1998) and takes the reader on a breathtaking visual journey through the 1937 exhibition; fashion photography; and the contrast between the established middlebrow magazine *L’Illustration* and emigré photographers like Kertesz and Brassai who pictured Paris in ways we find appealing today. The chapter considers the films of, among others, René Clair and Sacha Guitry, and contains the central paradox that the “style moderne” in furnishings and design, later better known as Art Déco, although launched in Paris in 1925, was exported to Hollywood and returned to French film only at a second remove.

Chapter eight, “The Lower Depths”, compares Eugène Dabit’s novel *L’Hôtel du Nord*, with Marcel Carné’s film of almost the same title but much adapted content, *Hôtel du Nord*, seeing them as different ways of portraying *le petit peuple*. It then follows this up by noting the appeal of the early versions of the celebrity-and-scandal magazine, such as *Détective*. (The *roman-photo* could perhaps also have been mentioned here). In both paper romance and in the celluloid version, whether poetic-realist films made at some expense but about ordinary people, or popular, more spectacular films which used second-hand sets, there was often a desire to escape, usually to some exotic location in the French empire. Chapter nine, “Imagining the Colonies”, begins, predictably perhaps, by a close look at the much-studied 1931 colonial exhibition, but goes on to examine three “colonial” films which were all box-office hits in the 1930s, Léon Poirier’s *L’Appel du silence*, Jean Benoît-Lévy and Marie Epstein’s *Itto*, and two versions of *La Maison du Maltais*. Despite the ideological and production differences between these films, all provided Parisian audiences with a kind of “unthreatening exoticism,” indicating that left and right could both feel the pressure of the colonial idea, partly identifying with, partly rejecting the foreign “other.”

The final chapter “Turbulence in the Atmosphere”, focusses again on intellectuals and artists, now as “historical subjects,” since “everyone breathed the same atmosphere” (p. 340; developed into a long meteorological metaphor, p. 382). In the style of the *tribune libre* or free-floating opinion column that a newspaper may publish alongside its more committed items, the authors look at three moments of “aesthetic utopia” before, during and after the Popular Front. The first is the avant-garde in the age of Surrealism (Dali and Buñuel), with its particular attention both to dreams and to documents and the “thingness” of everyday life. The two were brought together in Vigo’s remarkable film *L’Atalante*, (as André Breton is reprimanded for not realising). The second moment concentrates on Michel Leiris and the Collège de Sociologie (the “negation of redemptive militancy”); the third returns to André Malraux, perhaps surprisingly the star of the book. “Robust, well-proportioned... magnificent”, (p. 367, see note [3] again), Malraux is accorded more space than any other individual. His political aesthetic is here seen as combining action (in Spain and elsewhere), pedagogy (in the fragments prefiguring his *Musée imaginaire*) and cinema (his film of *L’Espoir*). In the conclusion, the reader is once more reminded of multiple vision by the evocation of a shot from Renoir’s *La Règle du jeu* in which Christine, the *marquise*, half-mistakes the meaning of her husband kissing someone else, glimpsed through binoculars, a reference echoing the opening scene of *Stavisky*. It may also refer to various types of myopia as the 1930s ended, but the reader also gets a glimpse of the future in the shape of Claude Lévi-Strauss.

A description of the contents can’t convey all the links, paradoxes and echoes in this very rich and personal study, the fruit of years’ study and teaching, by two scholars whose work will be familiar to anyone acquainted with the cultural history of this period. I have tried to indicate something of their often sparky and striking style by quotations. While there is perhaps no single overarching argument, except that a synchronic view of a historical period carries complexities which no single type of narrative can adequately capture, this is nevertheless a politically committed work, marked by enthusiasm for the inspirational aspects of the age, but also noting the retrospectively readable signs of perplexity, contradiction and anomie. It is not a quick or an easy read, and certainly not one for the undergraduate new to the subject. One senses indeed, from the endorsements on the jacket, universally warm though they are, that its readers for the press, specialists on cinema and culture, were at a loss how to sum it up other than by description, as this reviewer has. I would end by saying that I found it considerably more rewarding on a second reading than on a first, as its interlinked network of ideas became more visible, fascinating and suggestive.

NOTES

[1] On the jacket, a pastel-coloured modernist painting by Boris Taslitzsky appears as a strip across a picture of a dark and empty Parisian park. The modern painting, initially hard to decipher, is entitled “Scènes de grève aux usines Renault” (1939) and, looking closer, one sees helmeted French police on the stairway, while male strikers in cloth caps protect several women, dressed in diaphanous dresses, from their onslaught. One can read these contrasting images in several ways: classical/modern; dark/light/; stasis/movement—and yet they have something in common, not least their depiction of the lightly-veiled female form, since the main picture contains a *fontaine Wallace* with its three classically draped women. (Quite why the Renault women look the way they do is a bit of a mystery). The book is beautifully produced, but the jacket manages to mis-spell one of the authors’ names.

[2] Pascal Ory, *La belle illusion: culture et politique sous le signe du Front populaire 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994). See also Olivier Barrot and Pascal Ory, eds, *Entre Deux Guerres: la création française entre 1919 et 1939* (Paris: Bourin, 1990) and Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: art and politics in France between the wars* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995).

[3] I would not want to make too much of this, since the cultural scene in Paris was indeed largely male-dominated, but while women are by no means absent from this study, and while the authors are gender-conscious and well aware of the “sadism and a certain misogyny” in many manifestations of Parisian culture in these years (p. 345), their language, perhaps unwittingly, seems in places to be rather male-centred (on Malraux in particular) and their chosen focus ignores much of women’s culture. A few significant women (Andrée Viollis, Marie Epstein, photographer Germaine Krull) get a mention, as do showbiz figures and film stars, like the inevitable Josephine Baker and Arletty but, by and large, the creative forces given attention here are all men and working very much in a masculinist milieu. Even quite prominent figures such as Germaine Dulac (cinema), Louise Weiss or Simone Weil (political journalism), who would have fitted well into some of the areas discussed, are left out entirely. Feminism was also a *cultural* phenomenon of the politics of the 1930s, as Christine Bard’s thesis (*Les filles de Marianne: histoire des féminismes 1914-1940*, Fayard, 1995) has shown—more than during the years immediately before or after indeed. It is surely far from the case that “change occurred scarcely at all for women of all classes, who were particularly tied to daily life” (p. 179).

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