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David A. Pettersen, *Americanism, Media and the Politics of Culture in 1930s France*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016. xiii + 316 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$140.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-78316-8507.

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On 4 July 1917, just months after President Woodrow Wilson abandoned neutrality and declared war on Germany, General John J. Pershing marched through Paris with a token number of troops, all that America then had available. This public relations effort was a triumph, buoying French spirits, and it was punctuated by a visit to Picpus Cemetery to give honor at the grave of Lafayette. There, Colonel Stanton (not Pershing) famously said, “Lafayette, we are here.” Indeed, Americans were there, and by the end of the war, some two million Americans would have served in France. As consequential and welcome as was this physical American presence, perhaps more consequential was the floodgates now open to American culture in France.

Indeed, American culture would factor prominently in interwar France. The four bloody years of the Great War took countless lives and profoundly scarred men, families, and the cultural landscape of France. The immediate postwar years were a time of mourning and of making sense of the war. Melancholy, however, gave way to renewal, and a new American export to France, jazz, gave a syncopated beat to the modernity emerging from the hecatombs of war. Soon, American cinema, literature, celebrities, and even expatriates made their presence felt, fascinating many in the halcyon twenties. Others, however, were uncomfortable, even hostile to the modern that American culture represented, and these cultural anxieties intensified after the great Depression, in the “hollow years” of the 1930s, a protracted moment of intense nationalism, anti-modernism, xenophobia and, ostensibly, anti-Americanism. [1] This anti-Americanism, many historians suggest, was more cultural than political and found its greatest expression with French intellectuals, both on the right and the left. [2]

Anti-Americanism, however, may never have been so broadly or deeply held, and where it was espoused, it was often done so ambivalently. Indeed, as David A. Pettersen argues in *Americanism, Media and the Politics of Culture in 1930s France*, Americanism was prevalent in interwar French mass and elite culture, and it was a complex trope employed “to fantasize, to appropriate and to imagine new forms of social, political and cultural life” (p. 3). Pettersen, a scholar of French literature and film studies, carefully analyzes a narrow body of texts to demonstrate how “the imaginary America” of American mass culture, exported to France, informed “the relationship between modernism and modernity” (p.3) in French cinema and literature in the 1930s. Pettersen builds a balanced argument, interrogating the tropes and function of Americanism in works both on the political left, by Jean Renoir, Julien Duvivier, Marcel Carné, and André Malraux, and on the political right, through works by Pierre Drieu la Rochelle and Louis-Ferdinand Céline. Finally, he studies Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Chemins de la liberté* to trace how motifs dating from the thirties persisted into the immediate post-war years. In their work in cinema and literature in the 1930s, these creative, engaged individuals invariably, Pettersen argues, referenced a “miscellany” (p. 7) of distinctly American cultural forms—the gangster, the western, hard-boiled crime fiction, jazz, primitivism, and consumerism—in an effort to imagine the future.

In his first chapter, Pettersen analyzes two films by Jean Renoir when the filmmaker was associated with the left, before his disenchantment with politics: *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* (1936) and *La Règle du jeu* (1939). These engaged films, Pettersen argues, “explore the revolutionary potential of mass culture originating both inside and outside France” (p. 26). Although Pettersen briefly summarizes the plots of the movies, his greatest concern is how Renoir, in *Monsieur Lange*, sets in competition the American genre of the western and the French genre of the *fait divers*. When the protagonist Lange, a successful writer of cowboy fiction for a publishing collective, kills the capitalist (former) owner of the publishing house, the audience must decide if the murder is “revolutionary and just” (p. 29) or just a *fait divers*, an act of incomprehensible violence. Pettersen contends that it was the Americanism of the western trope that led to imagining “social transformation” (p. 34) in the murder. In *La Règle*, Renoir employed a character, Jurieux—an aviator reminiscent of Lindbergh in his celebrity, energy, function in mass culture, and, in short, in his modernity. But by 1939, Renoir expressed pessimism, when the “disruptive force” (p. 42) of Jurieux was betrayed, as all accept the rules of the game. America and modern mass culture, Pettersen suggests, was a vehicle for addressing French society, but not necessarily for transforming it.

In his second chapter, Pettersen examines poetic realism in Julien Duvivier’s *Pépé le Moko* (1937) and Marcel Carné’s *Quai des brumes* (1938) and *Le Jour se lève* (1939), movies that coincided with the unraveling of the Popular Front. Poetic realism, as a film style, often focused on working class misery, flawed protagonists, and on milieu instead of events. But rather than didactically addressing class issues, Duvivier and Carné, for example, employed the trope of the American gangster to address “the changes wrought by industrialization on the French working class, especially with respect to a new society of mass consumption, increased social mobility and labour migration to the cities” (p. 66). In the interwar years, the American movie *Scarface* was popular in France, and the gangster became a fashionable representation in the sensational mass press. The gangster, Pettersen argues, used violence to satisfy his desire for money and luxury items; he was acquisitive and was set in opposition to the French tradition of the criminal of the *fait divers*. In *Pépé le Moko*, Pettersen argues there is a conflict between Gallic and American tropes of gangsters, and the protagonist’s ultimate suicide suggests to Pettersen the inability to resolve tensions between competing images of the working class. In Carné’s *Quai des brumes*, for example, a movie about three murders, Pettersen claims the real killers are the “pressures that modernity exerts on the working class: war, colonialism, mass consumerism, industrialization, mass media and modern technology” (p. 89). What had been flourishing in America was now in France, and poetic realism, ostensibly a distinctly French style, was, in fact, in conversation with American culture.

Pettersen next moves to literature on the left and analyzes André Malraux’s revolutionary novels. Malraux, Pettersen argues, was sensitive to American culture and mass media and believed both could be used to rethink the modern novel. In writing about revolution, Malraux employed the “dark imagery of the American metropolis in hard-boiled crime fiction... [to recreate] the sensations and affects of street violence, shock troops, and individual action” (p. 112). To take just one of Pettersen’s example’s from Malraux’s *Les Conquérants*, “fast American cars, dark streets and automatic weapons” (p. 118) functioned to evoke the dynamism of contemporary life. Interestingly, though, the gangster seemed to have lost his revolutionary potential in literature by the late thirties: Malraux came to believe such tropes were “unproductive or even reactionary” (p. 140); indeed, the gangster now looked ominously like the Nazi.

On the political right, Pierre Drieu la Rochelle was known for criticizing American culture, but Pettersen contends his anti-Americanism was “a kind of Americanism in its own right.” (p. 141) Indeed, Pettersen argues that Drieu used America and mass culture to shape his fascist protagonist in the novel *Gilles*. Drieu, Pettersen notes, was not always hostile to America: Drieu admired modernist American literature, especially Hemingway. Drieu found in America and in modernist American literature “violent energies... [that held] the possibility for aesthetic and social renewal” (p. 151). Further

exploring the right, Pettersen turns his attention to Louis Ferdinand Céline's *Voyage au bout de la nuit* (1932) and his anti-Semitic pamphlets. Céline, too, was critical of American writers, cinema, jazz, and mass culture; however, Pettersen argues that Céline re-appropriated the dynamism of American culture to advance modernist literature in France. Pettersen thus hears in Céline's anti-Semitic pamphlets a syncopated style: "Céline does not want to discount entirely the stylistic innovations afforded by American cinema and jazz; rather, he wants to sever them from their American, African American and African cultural contexts by whitewashing them and making them 'French'" (p. 176). Similarly, in *Voyage*, Céline has a section on America, largely disapproving of American modernity, but fascinated by it. To capture the sonic energy of America, Céline incorporated jazz styling as "a reference point for his own style" (p. 180). Céline also expressed the interwar ethos of a "return to order," which in one form expressed cultural and literary nationalism. In this project, Céline attacked jazz, but also exploited its rhythmic forms in writing; it expressed modern life aesthetically.

Finally, Pettersen examines Jean-Paul Sartre's *Les Chemins de la liberté*, started before World War II but published after it; Pettersen thus uses the novel cycle to show the continuity in Americanism after the war. Moreover, Pettersen challenges the idea that Sartre was uniformly hostile to Americanism. Rather, in Sartre's attempt to write his way out of bourgeois life, he engaged with American mass culture, including jazz for its authenticity, milieu, and style. Moreover, suggests Pettersen, as Sartre tried to rethink literature, imagining it more democratic and spontaneous, he looked to "American writers, films and mass culture for formal and stylistic techniques" (p. 242) to re-vitalize French literature.

Pettersen's *Americanism* provides a very sensitive and close reading of a handful of canonical works in film and literature from the 1930s. His attention to language, lighting, mood, characters, and symbolism is more than admirable, as is his well-written, clear prose. He convinces us that Americanism, in a time of nationalism, was a significant cultural trope, one that should nuance our understanding of anti-American sentiments in the interwar years. His work also shows the difference between disciplines: Pettersen, in French literature and cinema studies, rarely strays from the confines of his key texts. We find little engagement with the contemporary reception of the works, the larger social, political, and cultural changes over time, or even the history and historiography of the period. But these are history's concerns--my discipline, not Pettersen's.

NOTES

[1] Eugen Weber, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994).

[2] Philippe Roger, *The American Enemy: A Story of French Anti-Americanism*, trans. Sharon Bowman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Seth D. Armus, *French Anti-Americanism (1930-1948): Critical Moments in a Complex History* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2007).

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