



Paris As A State of Mind

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By: Bill Jones

More than almost any other capital city. Paris embodies a national culture. Inheritor of the traditions of 18th Century salons and 19th Century artistic movements, it retains the spirit of a vital intellectual nerve center, where Ideas matter more than Attitude. In "Through Parisian Eyes," a book consisting of more than 30 interviews with Paris-based or bred writers, directors, actors and political figures. Melinda Camber Porter, who reports on the arts and cultural affairs for The Times of London, has compiled an illuminating record of a moment in the life of this perpetually fascinating place.

Porter's interviews cover the decade from about 1975 to 1985. Written in essay rather than straight question-and-answer style, they are occasionally punctuated with Porter's own observations about her subject or topic of discussion. Frequently judgmental, her comments bear the stamp of an assured, informed intelligence:

"I often had the feeling in Paris that intellectual debates had taken the place of sports. For the intellectuals are usually interested in defeating the opponent, and winning the argument, rather than in discussing an issue. There is little sense of fair play. The debaters often use ammunition of a personal nature. And the sights continue in private as well as in the newspapers and television."

Porter provides sympathetic yet balanced assessments of the careers of Jean-Paul Sartre and Roland Barthes, but is capable of deflating the insufferably pompous Yves Montand with well-aimed understatement: "I was impressed by his ability to give a political speech in the privacy of his living room."

Montand, however, is not alone in his eagerness to engage in polemics. Paris, where the words Left and Right were first applied to political factions, is a city in which books, movies, art and newspapers are more often than not conceived and perceived in ideological terms. For years, Parisian intellectuals were infatuated with various shades of Marxism, and the French Communist Party has long been a potent force. Now, however, following the blistering attack on Marxist thought by Bernard-Henri Levy in his "La Barbarie a visage humain" and the demise of structuralism, a certain amount of confusion insects the political and artistic arenas. Compounding the problem for the old-school leftist intellectual is the presence of the socialist administration of Francois Mitterand. As Francoise Giroud, the first French Secretary of State for Women, appointed by the conservative Giscard d'Estaing in 1974, told Porter: "You see, the Parisian intellectuals don't want to be on the side of the establishment ... So they feel very ill-at-case



because they don't want to be against a socialist government, and yet, they don't want to be for it. So they maintain a silence."

Porter sees the void left by the collapse of Marxism and structuralism as a positive cultural indicator: "It is a heartening sign that no new coterie dogmas have been fabricated in the eighties, for it paves the way for a more open-minded and less rigid approach to literature." Not that the old dogmas have entirely forsaken the field, though. Alain Robbe-Grillet, advocate of the "New Novel" of the fifties, adheres to his program of ignoring character, narrative structure, and "ideas." in the films he directs, although he raised both eyebrows and hackles when he wrote a straight-forward autobiography in 1984. The book. Porter notes, dismayed Robbe-Grillet's followers and prompted *Le Monde* to ask: "How can the champion of a literature without conscience or meaning begin to write about his own life and his ancestors after thirty years of asceticism? One has to admit that his followers have been wasting their time."

Is it appears that French literature is presently at loose ends, in search of a new direction, Porter's interviews with various film directors give the impression of an artistic enterprise that is fully alive. "Paris," says the book's introduction, "not Los Angeles, is the city of film." Part of the credit for the renewal is given to Mitterand's aggressive Minister of Culture, Jack Lang, who has supplied crucial financial support for the industry. Lang appointed the director Costa-Gavras ("Z," "Missing") to head Cincimatheque, the national film institute, and poured funds into it in an effort to transform the agency into something like the highly esteemed British Film Institute.

Among the directors Porter has interviewed during the past ten years are Costa-Gavras, the late Francois Truffaut ("Jules et Jim"), Marcel Ophuls ("The Sorrow and the Pity"), Alain Resnais ("Hiroshima, *Mon Amour*"), Louis Malle ("Atlantic City"), Marcel Carne ("*Les Enfants du paradis*"), the late Jean Eustache ("The Mother and the Whore") and Marguerite Duras ("India Song"). They are as dissimilar a group as could be imagined, but, collectively, they demonstrate through their statements on filmmaking a sense of responsibility to their audiences and themselves and an awareness of something more important than the box office take.

The table of contents to "Through Parisian Eyes" reads like a "Who's Who" of current French culture. Other figures included are Jean-Paul Aron, Benard-Henri Levy, Edmond Jabes, Françoise Sagan, the late Andre Malraux, Peter Brook, Regis Jean Anouilh, Monique Wittig, Olivier Todd, Delphine Seyrig, Jean-Francois Revci and Eugene Ionesco.

Porter attempts, more or less successfully, to impose some formal thematic order on her book by arranging her interviews under headings such as "Communication at the Breaking Point." "The Invasion of



the Modernist Philosophers” and “The Sovereignty of the Writer.” But the overarching theme is, of course. Paris itself — the impact of the city on those who spend their creative lives there or who have developed their world-view there. Breyten Breytenbach, the South African novelist, poet and painter who now lives in Paris, puts it thus: “I think Paris is a very stimulating environment so creation ... The basic nature of French intellectual life is still stimulating. The quality is still high. And the things that people consider to be important, like thinking, are still very much a force in French life.” Porter's book, more than anything, shows Paris as a state of mind.

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