



## French intellectuals: A fall from grace

Excerpted From: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*: 30 August, 1987

By: Carlin Romano

The two thick 'biographies of Jean-Paul Sartre published this summer recall an era, when French intellectuals, beat the drum and American artists and writers fell into step. Greenwich Village still hasn't recovered from the case-crawler image that Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir popularized in their existentialist heyday.

Intense young people still sit at matchbox tables, downing endless cappuccinos, pointing their cigarettes preciously upward. Except for a turn toward green hair, no flat-out reason exists to think anything has changed. Aren't they pondering whether to see Truffaut's Jules and Jim? Aren't they poets, painters and filmmakers scribbling literature, art and Casablanca into those notebooks? Isn't the prestige of French culture everything it has ever been?

No, No and No. According to newspaper reports, interest in old foreign films is sharply down. Truffaut is dead, and so, in the last decade, are an unusual number of French masters of thought — Sartre, Beauvoir, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes. With the exception of Marguerite Duras "The Lover a year ago, no recent French novel has made a splash here comparable to that of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*. Those intense kids with their pens out in cases are undoubtedly scribbling down final stock prices and mortgage rates.

No, French culture's longtime prestige in the United States, itself a historical accident, is gone, even though the present Socialist government spends more money on culture than any of its predecessors. If Sartre was the quintessential French cultural ambassador of the '40s, and existentialism the model product, the 70s brought us tightrope danseur Philippe Petit and slow dancing between skyscrapers.

So Melinda Camber Porter's *Through Parisian Eyes: Reflections on Contemporary French Arts and Culture* (Oxford University Press, \$18,95) comes as an inviting opportunity to tap into Paris' thinking in the winter of its greatness. Porter, a British correspondent who covered the city for the *London Times*, has brought together more than 30 interviews with leading cultural figures that she did between 1975 to 1985. She wrangled in directors (Truffaut, Costa-Gavras, Alain-Resnais), novelists (Marguerite Duras, Françoise Sagan), playwrights (Eugene Ionesco, Jean Anouilh), philosophers (Bernard-Henri Levy, Ed-



mond Jabes) and more. The pieces read briskly — thanks to Porter's willingness to listen well - and challenge when necessary.

Inevitably, much of the material involves the 'private concerns of the interviewees — Jean Louis-Barrault's belief that "theater was invented so people could have a big party," for instance, or the Suicide of French director Jean Eustache (*The Mother and the Whore*) in 1981. Some peers considered Eustache a victim of the film industry. But fellow director Bertrand Tavernier observes that he "was someone who provoked death, and who lived a tormented life. He used to tape record all his conversations with girlfriends, all the rows, and then he'd use them for the dialogues in his films. There were women who recognized themselves in a film of his and killed themselves."

A handful of more common concerns surface, however. The issue of French collaboration with the Nazis has been hashed out in many French forums over the last decade, and the ramifications touch almost everyone.

"I think they now know," says filmmaker Marcel Ophuls, referring to skeptical intellectuals, "that Sartre had a 'Lord Jim' attitude toward life. It took them along time to realize that Sartre" did not 'resist.

Another topic is what journalist Olivier Todd describes as "this paranoid polarization into Right and Left," with the Right gaining ground because of disappointment over Francois Mitterrand's Socialist government. Several speakers discuss the growing success of Jean-Marie La Pen and his National Front, a racist party opposed to "Third Worlders" in France.

Francoise Giroud, the co-founder of the French newsmagazine L'Express and a leading moderate feminist, acknowledges the polarization, observing that "since feminism has been associated with the Left it's suffering a setback." She believes "the death of Marxism has left an empty space" among French intellectuals, as well as a collective bad temper.

"The Left today in France' has a nasty problem," agrees Olivier Todd, "which is how they can be on the Left without accepting capitalism with its faults and even its crimes, but with its incredible superiority over existing socialism."

Such issues matter enormously in France because of another topic that Porter's subjects regularly reflect on — the power of intellectuals in French life.

"The intellectuals have always had importance in France since the eighteenth century," says Regis Debray, the Marxist thinker whose own position in Mitterrand's government confirms" the point. "They have a power which they have never exercised in any other country."



"Some of the Parisian intellectuals are so self-important," huffs Ophuls. "And you don't run across that self-importance in other countries. I mean people like Gunter Grass have a pretty firm hold on reality and evaluate their importance in Western culture realistically. The same thing with English writers. They all know that the action is no longer in Europe. Anymore. That's not the way in France. They don't seem to realize that they're operating in an empty shell."

Breyten Breytenbach, the South African poet living in Paris, confides to Porter that "he's noticed the syndrome: "In Paris, you cannot be a writer or painter unless you enter intellectually. The two go together here." But he adds that a "good, well-trained French mind is a beautiful thing to watch.

For the time being, Americans aren't paying much attention. Today, French ministers decry our cultural imperialism, French schoolteachers despair over Americanized diction and French teenagers wear University of Wisconsin sweatshirts. Meanwhile, the most dashing French cultural import in the last decade is not a writer, painter or singer. It's the croissant.

© The Philadelphia Inquirer, 1987.

