



## Porter's Criticism Sees Mind of Modern France

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It's very important to perceive realities through the eyes of others... to listen to conversations in restaurants... to watch television in a foreign country," the French writer Jean-Francois Revel told journalist Melinda Camber Porter in an interview.

Languages, travel, having one foot in a culture other than one's own – all are means of better understanding a particular experience by being able to place it in broader context. The advantages are obvious enough. To the critic, this ability to locate a subject in its larger context is crucial, for it is what facilitates the mite of creativity a critic brings to the object of his scrutiny, thereby enhancing it.

"Through Parisian Eyes" is a collection of the newspaperwoman's interviews, published in earlier versions in *The Times of London*, *The Observer* and *The New Statesman*, and now strung together to make a short book. But despite the customary problems of differing essay lengths, ill-assorted subjects and styles of encounter with them, not to mention aging copy, Miss Porter creates a vivid picture of French artistic and intellectual life from 1975 (the year Francois Truffaut made the films "The Story of Adèle H" and "Small Change") up to the present day, which is to say, following the twin-demise of structuralism in the arts and Marxism in politics.

In her interviews, Miss Porter is, as John Higgins of *The Times of London* says in his foreword, first and foremost a good listener. However, she is no softy, never awed by her illustrious subjects (with the possible exception of an elderly, ailing André Malraux, which surely is excusable). She certainly is not to be browbeaten when a politically defensive Yves Montand, "interspersing English nouns and French verbs," loses his temper with her ("It's a terrible weakness of mine," he afterward told Miss Porter bashfully. "*I admire very much le selfcontrol Britannique.*")

The woman who can tell the star Montand that he has been bad-tempered during the interview has no trouble at all interjecting pithy critical comment into the article written after each talk.

In the case of Marguerite Duras' "sovereign world of women which defies male participation," journalist and director are discussing Miss Duras' film "India Song." The interviewer notes that "while Duras extols and perhaps creates certain specifically female qualities, I wondered if her films would get made if she followed these precepts too faithfully. The wielding of power through words, the direction of a film



crew, all require what Duras chooses to term masculine. ... Fortunately," the essay concludes two pages farther on, "Marguerite Duras is the last person to be taken in by her own rhetoric."

The intellectual coolness of that ending is rather French. It bespeaks aspects of French thought — intellectual intensity, third-person impersonality (Malraux, we are told, tried to avoid use of the word "I" in his speech), a curiously contrasting self preoccupation — that are key to Miss Porter's context and her method of approaching her subjects. She finds, for instance, a distinctly French convention for looking at the "heretic form of traditionalism" articulated by Jean Anouilh during one of his visits to Paris from his Swiss exile:

"Anouilh's reverence for views that were once conformist transforms him into an outcast and rebel. His inability or refusal to voice voices that are acceptable to contemporary society makes him appear to be a writer coming before, rather than in advance of his time. But this does not mean that his views are any the less subversive."

Only a Frenchman, or a foreigner thinking for the moment like a Frenchman, would have said that. And Miss Porter's exchanges with foreigners living in the midst of Parisian artistic and intellectual life tend to be lively. The South African writer Breyten, Breytenbach complains to her of the pressure he felt, as an artist, to become also an intellectual. "Being an intellectual in Paris," he goes on, "is really a form of cannibalism. It's an incredible world."

The German-born film director Marcel Ophüls (son of Max and famous for his documentary "The Sorrow and the Pity") has ties in Paris, where he now lives, but feels himself "an outsider, an observer of the thing, and I know the passwords. But I don't use these intellectual passwords because I don't like them."

Both men's thoughts convey something of the intense intellectual life of the French capital (undiminished by Europe's waning power across the board). This has its roots in the French tendency to split everything between political Right and Left. Françoise Sagan tells Miss Porter that "it's getting worse ... this social, superficial intellectualism ... with its literary prizes... its literary fights... it's grotesque ... but it's also the same spirit that brought about the French Revolution."

So much for the intensity. A quality of self-preoccupation, previously noted, is of course related to the structuralist persuasion preached by Messrs. Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Lacan and Foucault, and laid to rest by another of Miss Porter's subjects, Jean-Paul Aron, in his 1984 book "Les Modernes." Almost touching examples of the tendency crop up in the case of Alain Robbe-Grillet — "nouveau roman" in the 1950s —



“attempting the impossibly difficult task of incorporating a critique of his film within the film [itself].” Then, there is Jacques Lacan’s “theory of psychoanalysis which omitted making any mention of the patient. It had become a self-sufficient study, whose subject matter was psychoanalysis.”

Miss Porter's French-English subjects are, understandably, useful for evoking a context in which an English-speaking reader can get some sense of French cultural life. Peter Brooks, British and a Shakespearean, in Paris to do a play based on the anthropologist Colin Turnbull's book about the Uganda Iks people, seems to be standing happily athwart a whole slew of cultures. The actor Michel Lonsdale does films in both languages. For Miss Porter, he expounds on his experiencing of the different directing styles of Luis Buñuel, Miss Duras and Fred Zinnemann (“The Day of the Jackal”).

The French-English writer Olivier Todd had the unique experience of becoming a protégé of Jean-Paul Sartre after first being exposed to logical positivism under Alfred Ayer at Cambridge (“I didn't trust words the way the French do”). Mr. Todd takes his interlocutor into the morass of recent political history with his account of going to Vietnam in 1965 for the left-wing weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur*. His telling his editors, after being there eight years (“how slow can you be,” he confesses of his late recognition of what was happening), that the enemy in the North were “Red fascists” was not well received, though people now admit he was right.

Much has changed in the world since Miss Porter conducted the first of these interviews more than 10 years ago. She ably and charmingly tracks for those of us who weren't there the role of Parisian arts and ideas in that process. She is now in New York, observing American arts and cultural goings-on for her London paper. One wonders what she is making of us.

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