Modern & Contemporary France

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cmcf20


Matthew F. Jordan

a Penn State University
Published online: 11 Dec 2013.


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2013.861409

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &
Book Review

JEREMY F. LANE
Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2013
244 pages, $70.00, ISBN: 978 0472118816

What kind of communicative action should we take when we write books of cultural criticism so as to position ourselves in a shrinking field of cultural production? I found myself asking this self-reflexive question after reading Jazz and machine-age imperialism, which, the cover states, Jeremy Lane has positioned as a ‘bold challenge to the existing homogenous picture’ of the reception of American jazz in France. Offering close readings of important texts grouped in thematic assemblages, Lane’s analysis is persuasive. Yet the way he persuades, his rhetoric of critique, provokes the questions above.

There are two important concepts that help tie this collection of readings together. The first is ‘machine-age imperialism’, the historical context used to situate the ‘disruptive dynamism’ pulling at French culture during the twentieth century. Jazz, as he sees it, became a powerful figure of synecdoche for those disruptions. The second is Derrida’s notion of iterability, which works in tension with the first because Lane insists that historical heuristic devices like ‘discursive fields’ or Foucauldian ‘epistemes’ are too deterministic. Derrida’s postmodern anti-historicism made him a liberating figure for a generation of literary critics, and Lane selectively thrives on this and other Derridean riffs like ‘phonocentrism’, which he uses to pick apart jazz critics or philosophers who emphasise the ear and sound over the eye and sight.

Yet, given the postmodern embrace of small ‘t’ truths that this Derridean stance implies, how does one persuade a reader that one way of reading a text is better than another? One can to tell a different story that sets texts in a different light—like Foucault did—or one can critique perspectives that differ from one’s own, as if others fail to see some big ‘T’ truths. Lane seems to choose the latter. For example, he uses Jane Nardal’s ambivalent reaction to jazz throughout as a standard against which he judges writers lacking her wonderfully postcolonial acuity, as if they could have willed themselves free of the imperialist discourses and ideologies of the day.

Similarly, he describes the perspectives of four pretty different books on jazz in France—by Ludovic Tournès, Jeffrey Jackson, Colin Nettelbeck and me—as
‘homogenous’ and implies that we deny space to colonial citizens or subjects. This is a ‘failure’, he argues, as if the choice to articulate a story different from his re-enacts a kind of symbolic imperialist violence. Having also read Paul Gilroy and other postcolonial theorists who have become canonical for graduate students in recent decades, I laboured over whether to include such voices; but since colonials often felt like outsiders in search of a transnational identity more welcoming than a French one, I ultimately decided they didn’t quite fit the story I was telling. It was a conscious choice I made as a storyteller, not a ‘failure’.

Likewise, Lane pounces on me for failing to sufficiently chide André Schaeffner for his tropic primitivism because I described Schaeffner’s utilisation of a new hybrid category, la musique afro-américaine, as a significant development in the discourse on jazz. Lane insists that ‘this belief that recognizing the hybrid status of jazz is, in itself, sufficient to scotch all claims as the music’s supposedly primitive characteristics is surely mistaken’ (36). I wasn’t ‘scotching’ anything; in my story about the metamorphosis of the ideas used to debate jazz and Frenchness away from ideal purity toward murky hybridity, it was a significant moment. Different perspectives, for sure, but doesn’t Derrida’s concept of iterability open up a space for radical pluralism? Is this style of close reading, where one hammers away at differing views before pointing out the ‘true significance’ (139) of a text, really what Derrida meant when he called for a philosophy of différance?

Schaeffner and I are hardly the only figures targeted by Lane’s realist rhetoric. But it would be wrong to write off the book because of Lane’s seeming tone-deafness to the reflexive implications of iterability in the act of critique. I still find Jazz and machine-age imperialism a thoroughly researched book with moments of brilliance that can teach its readers a lot. Perhaps Lane’s troubling tone can be better attributed to having followed the rules of a field of cultural production. This kind of genre-driven rhetoric flows from the book proposal and the literature review, where authors typically point out the flaws of others who work in the same field. But should scholarly critique be a ‘cutting contest’ like the jazzmen used to have, wherein a very small group of people who have read the same texts slash one another in print to show, quoting Sidney Bechet, ‘who’s got more dog’? One wonders, conversely, if it might be better understood as articulations within an ongoing conversation that might follow the same normative ethics of empathy and understanding that we should strive for in our public lives. Within the economy of linguistic exchanges that determine academic critique as a field of cultural production, is the best way to gain symbolic capital really to devalue the capital of those whose iterable articulations differ from one’s own? I hope not.

Matthew F. Jordan
Penn State University
© 2013 Matthew F. Jordan
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2013.861409