H-France Review Vol. 2 (June 2002), No. 41

Gabriel P. Weisberg, Ed., *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture*. New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 2001. xvii + 296 pp. Illustrations, notes, selected bibliography. $30.00 US (pb). ISBN 0-8135-3009-1.

Review by Jerrold Seigel, New York University.

Although scholars and writers have given attention to many features of life and culture in Montmartre during the decades between 1880 and 1914, a conference held at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1999 was organized to probe a "largely unexplored" aspect of life on and around the Butte, "the nature of popular culture as it was cultivated in Montmartre and...its continued significance in the postmodern period" (p. 3). The resulting volume contains ten essays, plus an introduction by the editor and a brief foreword by Karal Ann Marling. [1] The various authors provide much interesting information about the subject, some of it new, giving a broad portrait of the variety of diversions, satisfactions, and dangers visitors sought or found in the years when the Chat Noir cabaret and its imitators, as well as the Church of the Sacré-Coeur, were relatively new, and when the region was the subject of memorable depictions and advertisements by some of its famous *habitués* and associates, including Toulouse-Lautrec, Seurat, and Picasso.

Getting a group of scholars animated by their separate and diverse interests to focus on a topic assigned by a conference organizer or an editor is not easy, and it has not been accomplished with total success here. Most of the contributors dutifully mention the question posed by the editor, but their chief concerns lie elsewhere. John Kim Munholland studies the views about Montmartre held by Third Republic politicians, Elizabeth K. Menon examines images of women, Jill Miller deals with bourgeois responses to lower-class poverty and alcoholism, Richard Sonn with the anarchist circles and activities. All the other writers, including the editor, deal with topics in art history or cultural history that may bear on popular themes, but have only peripheral connections to mass culture. Moreover, Raymond Jonas, whose essay provides the most interesting perspective from which to think about mass culture, calls into question the general assumptions about it shared by most of the others.

Perhaps it would be too much to ask such a book to address some of the many questions about popular culture that have arisen in debates about modern media and their impact on audiences and consumers: whether popular culture and mass culture are the same thing or different (the two are never clearly distinguished in the book), whether popular culture is dulling or invigorating, whether it provides needed satisfactions and even forms of collective participation, or instead manipulates desires, draws people into intensified forms of private experience, and thereby weakens civic involvement. Although they do not take up such issues, the contributors to the collection seem to agree that mass culture is a good thing, and that Montmartre deserves to be celebrated for providing an early exemplification of it. A chief reason for this positive attitude appears to be the conviction shared by most of them that popular culture, or at least the version of it developed in Montmartre, was and is in some way "oppositional." Thus the editor tells us that "the earliest moderns on the butte systematically dismantled the world around them," reconstructing it in their own way, and that Montmartre became a breeding ground for "what today is termed "popular culture" because it was "literally on the fringes of Paris," so that it escaped official control, and "became an area where traditional boundaries were blurred (one of the

primary conditions considered today to be indicative of postmodernism)." He adds that the middle-class patrons who frequented the area were "compelled to experience the perverse pleasures of Montmartre and it was their presence that stimulated a quest to provide ever more shocking entertainment, frequently at their own expense-both morally and financially." That avant-garde and bohemian locales shared the heights with the new church of Sacré-Coeur "added another layer of boundary-blurring" (pp. 3-4). Howard G. Lay thinks that, whatever happened later, around 1880 "popular forms of signification, deftly deployed, still seemed capable of doing oppositional damage to social, cultural, and political authority" (p. 150). Elena Cueto-Asín believes that middle-class people who witnessed the Chat Noir's shadow theater found themselves in "a space originally designed to exclude them"(p.244). And Richard Sonn holds that the "authentic bohemians" and artists who made Montmartre what it was were animated by "a spirit of rebellion" that was not invalidated by "the commercial appropriation of bohemia" (p. 140). Leaving aside the question of whether either modernist dismantling of traditional forms or post-modernist boundary- blurring can serve as criteria for identifying or understanding mass culture (relations between avant-garde practitioners and consumers of popular culture have often been tense), the book mainly raises issues about what it means to see Montmartre as "oppositional," and in what way the answer to this question can help to understand the evolution and meaning of mass culture.

Parisian pleasure-seekers had long flocked to Montmartre, some for the rural atmosphere and fresh air (that powered the various *moulins* converted to gathering-places), others for the cheap wine made possible by the region's location outside the gates where the *octroi* or city excise tax was collected. During the Second Empire locales like the Moulin de la Galette drew a large mixed crowd, famously depicted by Impressionist painters. But a new phase in the quarter's history began in the 1880s, sparked in part by the opening of the Chat Noir cabaret in 1881. The Chat Noir became the model for a large number of other establishments, most famously Aristide Bruant's Le Mirliton and the Lapin Agile (older, but reconceived somewhat on the Chat Noir model) where Picasso and his friends sometimes hung out. These were the spots that drew Parisians in search of the bohemian Montmartre that is the main subject of the present book. They were colorful, sometimes riveting places. Performances of various kinds provided accompaniments to drink and talk, many involving dramatic reading or singing, as well as the famous pantomime shadow theater that performed in the Chat Noir and other locales. Drama was often present in the settings (one was fitted out like a jail, one prefigured Heaven and another's entrance represented the mouth of Hell), and patrons were drawn into drama too, at the Chat Noir treated with exaggerated, caricatured respect, at Le Mirliton directly assaulted with the insults that darkly glimmered beneath the Chat Noir's opposite style. Various varieties of sex were available in and around some of these places, and even those who did not seek it may have felt the *frisson* of its closeness, magnified by the presence of pimps and petty criminals driven by different passions.

That such a world was in some way marginal, occupying the repressed borders of the organized, respectable daytime life led by most of the cabarets' patrons, seems clear enough. But that world emerged out of a particular history, one that remains essentially untold in the book under review.[2] The Chat Noir was founded by two friends, Rodolphe Salis and Emile Goudeau. Salis, who put up the capital and ran the business, is often mentioned. Goudeau hardly appears in the book at all, yet it was he who conceived the original model for the place. Goudeau had led what he himself described as a bohemian life mostly in the Latin Quarter during the 1860s and 1870s, but like many young men with literary ambitions and limited talent before him, he ended up seeking an escape from it. The exit he found was an imaginative one, involving the formation of a club aimed at making young poets and writers known to society at large through public readings in *cafés*. Goudeau called his original locale the Club des Hydropathes; its members included a number of people who would later be important in Montmartre, including André Gill, Alphonse Allais, and Jules Jouy. Alongside the readings, which attracted large crowds, the Hydropathes published a paper, each issue featuring some member of the group, all in pursuit of Goudeau's aim of making writers and artists known to the ordinary bourgeois whose purchases of books and images were required to sustain their careers.

In broad terms Goudeau's project was to organize cultural consumption at a moment when the old system of patronage was being swallowed up in new social relations-the growth of Paris, the emergence of *nouvelles couches sociales*, political democratization (Goudeau saw a link between the Hydropathes, founded in 1878, and the political crisis of the previous year)-all contributing to a larger and as yet little-understood market for all kinds of goods. His "system" (as he called it) had much in common with other contemporary attempts to organize consumption, including department stores (which similarly sought to form a public by mixing culture and commerce), and the attempt by art dealers such as Paul Durand-Ruel to educate lookers and buyers to appreciate new styles of painting through exhibitions and publications. Richard Sonn observes interestingly that even *fin-de-siècle* anarchism was devoted to publicity-including "the deed" as a form of it (p. 138).

When Salis and Goudeau founded the Chat Noir in 1881, it was on the model of the Hydropathes. The cabaret, like the society, had its own newspaper and Goudeau became the editor (no one in the collection under review mentions this). From the beginning, then, the aim was to combine entertainment with publicity for the poets and artists associated with the cabaret, and their works were on sale there. The quasi-commercial inspiration of the new Montmartre culture was therefore apparent from the very beginning. An early article in the *Chat Noir* paper referred to one of the department stores, *Les grands magasins du Louvre*, as a "fairy palace." What such a place had in common with the cabaret was that both promoted their causes through some form of the liberation of fantasy-about sex, social position, or forbidden life-styles in the case of the cabarets, about foreign places, luxury, or limitless possession in the case of the stores, as Zola made clear in *Au Bonheur des dames*. Given this background, it is far off the mark to claim as Elena Cueto-Asín does that the Chat Noir was "an attempt to recuperate public space by excluding or alienating the middle class that had imposed itself and its values of exclusivity on the social order at large" (p. 230). Other contributors to *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* make similar pronouncements. Some of them butt up against the limits to the oppositionality they claim for the quarter's culture, but without really coming to terms with what they find.

When Howard G. Lay (whose intelligent essay contains some powerful and stimulating readings of visual images, notably Seurat's *Chahut*)quotes a writer in *Le Rappel* who described what went on at the Lapin Agile as "Nous payons; mais nous chantons; c'est une révolte qui ne casse rien, et qui nous suffit" (We pay; but we sing: it's a harmless revolt, and that's enough for us), he glosses it by saying "what better way to describe the chemistry of oppositionality." But surely the most such a sentiment harbors of oppositionality is a kind of contained nostalgia for it (a feeling Goudeau retained when he put bohemian life behind him and founded the Hydropathes). What this quote really exhibits is ambivalence, an affective embrace of the opportunity bourgeois life affords to live simultaneously inside and outside its boundaries. A similar observation seems required in regard to John Kim Munholland's presentation of Montmartre as "a delinquent community." Munholland's modelfor such delinquency is a roomful of schoolboys who throw spit wads at a teacher whose back is turned. That is disrespectful behavior to be sure, but those who engage in it go forth-in the large majority- to find their stable place in respectable society soon enough. In fact Munholland recognizes this more clearly than some of his fellow writers, noting that the Third Republic's easing of regulations on places where alcohol was served actually helped to make Montmartre culture possible, and he sensibly concludes that the quarter never posed any kind of serious threat to the regime or its values.

Many contributors to the book refer to the locales of Montmartre as bohemian, but most of them do so in a one-sided way that casts a veil over an important aspect of the story. For them, bohemianism means a revolt against bourgeois restriction, a quasi-anarchist search for liberation from the strait-laced, disciplined, ordered ideals of middle- class existence. There were (and are) surely bohemians who fit this description. But French bohemia in the nineteenth century contained another side, a recurring criticism of bourgeois life not for being overly rigid and confining, but for being too soft, indulgent, and corrupt. If there was an uninhibited bohemia there was also a kind of puritan one, exemplified in the group that called itself the "water- drinkers" during the 1840s (they appear, recognized as heirs of the ancient

Stoics, in Henry Murger's classic tales and plays), in the fiercely moralistic Fourierist apostle Jean Journet (who frequented some of the same locales as Murger and Baudelaire), and in some of the student groups that published short-lived newspapers in the last decade of the Second Empire. Their bohemia was not a place of indulgence, but of serious, devoted work. In this two-sidedness, bohemia mirrored the bourgeois society outside, from which it sprung, and whose moral alternatives some of its denizens sought to develop in purified fashion. This second current in bohemianism was present at the Chat Noir too, in the person of such performers as Maurice Rollinat, the quasi-mystical enthusiast for Baudelaire (whose poetry he read there; his own writings would be an important inspiration for Rodin's *Gates of Hell*, as Debora Silverman has shown) and the fanatical Catholic Leon Bloy, who brought a tone of dour, repentant spirituality to the newspaper and the *café*. Janet Whitmore is the only writer in the current collection to recognize the presence of such concerns in the Chat Noir's mix, but the point is dulled by being made in an essay devoted to "absurdist humor." Elizabeth Menon notes that Willette, a Chat Noir fixture, gave warnings about the dangers of prostitution in the quarter, but she thinks they were stirred up only by an increased brazenness in the behavior of street women.

Beyond these missed opportunities for a more complex understanding of its subject, errors of misspelling and odd translation periodically crop up in the book. Lay twice misspells Eugène Vermersch's name as Vermesch (pp. 157-58.) Whitmore weirdly renders Bloy's self-description as "Un Trappiste Raté" as "an ineffectual Trappist Monk" (p. 217). Menon strangely mistranslates one cartoon caption, "Méfie-toi camerade, c'est pas de l'amour, c'est la vache enragée" as "Trust me... It's not Love, it's a Wild Ride" (pp. 47-49); *méfie-toi* is about the opposite of trust, and *la vache enragée* refers to *misère*or hunger.

A lone contribution to the book suggests a different approach to Montmartre as a site of mass culture, Raymond A. Jonas's essay on the Sacré-Coeur and the pilgrimages made to it. Other writers in the book mention the presence of the new church, to be sure, largely as a target of anti-Catholic sentiment. Munholland points out that it was the church that made the quarter suspect as harboring rightist as well as leftist opposition to the Republic, and both Sonn and Jonas refer to Steinlen's 1900 lithograph of Liberty leading an unchained people in an assault on the church. But what makes Jonas's contribution so interesting and suggestive is his demonstration that in many ways pilgrimage to the church was itself a form of mass culture, and one with surprising ties to more secular ones. Montmartre had long been a site of pilgrimage (none of the contributors to the collection mention this). Jonas shows not only that the annual rhythm of the pilgrimage to Sacré-Coeur followed that of other travel in France, peaking in the summer months, but easily the most popular year for pilgrimage, and the one that produced by far the largest number of donations was 1889, when the Universal Exposition that celebrated the centenary of the Revolution brought many visitors to Paris. Jonas imagines pilgrims leaving the church after a sermon on the terrible consequences of the Revolution for Catholic France, and descending to enjoy the Exposition, where the glories of modern secular civilization were celebrated. That some of these pilgrims might have been drawn to other features of Montmartre culture (for instance the folkloric processions, even some of the modernized copies or parodies of them) there seems no way to know. Jonas is probably correct that there was little overlap between the pilgrims and the patrons of the cabarets, but given the presence of figures like Rollinat and Bloy in the latter, perhaps we should not be overly dogmatic in denying it. In any case Jonas is surely right that, already in the years before 1914 (as today), the church "so animated local activity that, over time, Montmartre came to depend upon the Sacré-Coeur as much as the Sacré-Coeur depended upon it" (p. 111).

Here we come to the basis of a different understanding of Montmartre as a place where some of the lineaments of modern mass culture began to make an early appearance. But from this point of view oppositionality or marginality no longer helps much in recognizing the phenomenon in question. There may be a sense in which traditional religion constitutes a kind of remonstrance against modern life, a way of holding out against it, but Jonas's evidence suggests that the pilgrims to Sacré-Coeur could be Catholic and modern at the same time. Such a mix of tradition and modernity is visible in many

constituents of contemporary mass culture, from the astrology columns of mass- circulation newspapers to soap operas, most pop music, and sporting events. Whatever else modern mass culture may be, it is surely not single-minded or consistent in its values or attitudes. A much better word than "opposition" or "protest" to describe its overall stance toward the dominant features of "official" life would be ambivalence, just as it is a better term to use about most forms of bohemianism than alienation or rebellion. That is in the end why *Montmartre and the Making of Mass Culture* remains an unsatisfying book. The contributors seem too caught up in the romance of resistance to have absorbed the lesson of Jonas's contribution to the symposium where it originated.

NOTES

[1] The contents: Karal Ann Marling, "Americans in Paris: Montmartre and the Art of Pop Culture" (Foreword); Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Montmartre's Lure: An Impact on Mass Culture" (Introduction); John Kim Munholland, "Republican Order and Republican Tolerance in Fin-de-Siècle France: Montmartre as a Delinquent Community"; Elizabeth K. Menon, "Images of Pleasure and Vice: Women on the Fringe"; Jill Miller, "*Les enfants des ivrognes*: Concern for the Children of Montmartre"; Raymond A. Jonas, "Sacred Tourism and Secular Pilgrimage: Montmartre and the Basilica of Sacré-Coeur"; Richard D. Sonn, "Marginality and Transgression: Anarchy's Subversive Allure"; Howard G. Lay, "Pictorial Acrobatics"; Michael L. J. Wilson, "Portrait of the Artist as a Louis XIII Chair"; Janet Whitmore, "Absurdist Humor in Bohemia"; Elena Cueto-Asín, "The Chat Noir's Théâtre d'Ombres: Shadow Plays and the Recuperation of Public Space"; Gabriel P. Weisberg, "Discovering Sites: Enervating Signs for the Spanish *Modernistas*."

[2] I take the following account from my book, *Bohemian Paris: Politics, Culture, and the Boundaries of Bourgeois Life, 1830-1930* (New York: Viking Press, 1986; reprinted Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), Chapter 8.

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