

---

H-France Review Vol. 14 (June 2014), No. 99

Les Essif, *American 'Unculture' in French Drama. Homo Americanus and the Post-1960 French Resistance*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. xiii + 341 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$95.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-137-29902-4.

Review by Jean-Philippe Mathy, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

Les Essif borrows extensively from French theorists of the postmodern turn such as Jean Baudrillard, Régis Debray, and Guy Debord to discuss representations of America in recent French drama, starting with René de Obaldia's *Wind in the Branches of Sasaffras* (1965). As evidenced by the title and subtitle of his book, Essif's approach rests on the twin notions of "unculture" (Baudrillard) and "homo americanus" (Debray) to describe the United States as the ultimate expression of the Situationists' *société du spectacle*. In the book's introduction, which provides the theoretical underpinning of the following chapters devoted to the reading of several plays grouped according to their main subject matter, Essif wrestles with one of the issues at stake in countless studies of the role of American culture in a globalized "McWorld." Are the United States exporting a unique cultural configuration to which other nations need to adapt and assimilate, or are they simply the most powerful and ubiquitous version of processes of modernization that are at work everywhere, although as unequal and non-synchronic forms of differently paced modernities? Is America exceptional, in other words, or simply exemplary?

Essif frames his argument in the following way at the onset of his study: "The new depth and breadth of French drama's interest in the other side of the Atlantic owes in part to the fact that we have arrived at a point of history where the otherness of New World America is less distinct than ever from contemporary French culture, and the two formerly quite distinct national cultures are beginning to evolve along similar paths—a path that places *homo gallicus* on his guard" (p. 3). Is *homo gallicus*, whose local dialectical worldview Essif contrasts with the "uncritical collective consciousness of America," doomed to disappear as a result of the unstoppable march of 'unculture' throughout the world (p. 10)?

Essif's narrative moves between these two polarities. At some point, he provides the reader with a laundry list of all that is wrong with American mass consumer culture at home. These examples, often taken from the author's own experience as an academic teaching and living in the southern United States, illustrate a kind of fieldwork in hyperreality, complete with a picture of the proliferation of huge plastic pumpkins, inflated snowmen, and other *kitsch* holiday paraphernalia covering a front lawn in a western suburb of Knoxville, Tennessee. Essif's locally-based ethnographic survey of "unculture" in America is quite predictable and includes garish billboards on the I-75 highway through southern Georgia in 2005, the "desperate, dangerous self-mutilating antics of the Jackass films," conservative talk radio shows, the Sam's Club gift catalog, prayer to solve global warming, and the prohibitive cost of the University of Tennessee's football stadium (pp. 23-24). *Homo americanus*, in his native version, might be an ideal-typical abstraction, but in the eyes of some of the French dramatists discussed by the author, its physical incarnation often recalls a combination of Joseph McCarthy, Ayn Rand, Archie Bunker, George W. Bush, Pat Robertson, Rush Limbaugh, and your typical Tea Party supporter, all rolled into one. All of this, however, is uniquely homegrown, and it has not crossed the Atlantic (there is no French Limbaugh or Swedish Pat Robertson). Thus, it can hardly be considered as examples of the Americanization of France, or of the world, for that matter. France might be McDonald's second-most

---

profitable market after the U.S. but they now serve a “McBaguette” over there, as the global gets inflected by local tastes and national practices. In that sense, America can be said to illustrate, or exemplify, the future, rather than manufacture and export it wholesale.

Essif acknowledges as much when he writes that “the reader will be surprised to see how many of the cultural disparities between the French and the Americans...do not show up in the numerous French plays about the American subject... [the French dramatists’] response to ‘America’ is a good deal more subtle than that: all the more reason to believe that they are enacting more of a homo americanus unculture than an American one” (p. 52). Here, he is quite close to Régis Debray, for whom Americanism, as a creed and a way of life, is shared by more than just Americans, and its world-historical ascendancy more striking and more complete in the periphery (in France) than at the center of the Empire. But Essif also shares some of the intellectual Left’s distaste for mass culture (from Eagleton to Eco), which makes his explicit endorsement of Baudrillard’s views somewhat problematic. Essif acknowledges his debt to the latter “for providing the world with such provocatively profound reflections on homo americanus” and states that “it is only after reading and rereading his *America* that I decided to write this book” (p. xii).

However, Baudrillard’s narrative of America as the land of the simulacrum and a “spectral form of civilization” was more celebratory than dismissive (cited by Essif, p. 10). His fascination for the California freeways or Ronald Reagan’s smile performed a radical break from the traditional indictment of American mass culture by European intellectuals, right or left, and Baudrillard was as far from the critical *hauteur* and historical pessimism of the Frankfurt School as he was from Sartre’s quarrel with American cold war militarism. To the extent that Essif remains within the orbit of this high modernist tradition, he parts ways with his mentor. Baudrillard’s point was that the uniquely American “operationality” of the signs of the real would never take place anywhere else, refuting in advance any notion of the Americanization of the world.[1] The United States, Baudrillard famously wrote, provide us with “the original version of modernity. We [French] are the dubbed or subtitled version.”[2]

Essif tends to overemphasize the originality of recent French theatrical depictions of life in the United States, as when he claims, erroneously I would argue, that “not until the second half of the twentieth century do the French begin to project their future in the West of the West...not until the second half of the century do French dramatists take an acute and almost creative interest in the otherness of America” (p. 3). George Duhamel’s aptly titled *Scènes de la vie future*, whose indictment of the world of sports and entertainment prefigures Essif’s own reflections on the mediated hyper-reality of what amounts in his eyes to “a Disneyfied land” (p. 33), as well as Sartre and Claudel’s plays set in the New World come to mind as significant examples of earlier writings on the United States as the “Other” of Europe.

I devoted a good part of this review to Essif’s interpretive framework as it raises significant questions regarding such problematic notions as “Americanization” or “globalization” when dealing with the impact of American culture on the rest of the world. The remainder of the book provides an account of a number of recent French plays ranging from those of noted dramatists such as Obaldia, Arrabal, Michel Vinaver, and Bernard-Marie Koltès to a number of works much less familiar to this reader. The study of some twenty-three plays is divided into four major chapters which correspond to common themes of the French representation of the United States: the Western frontier, war and violence, business, and Spectacle as a global phenomenon. The plays are often centered on iconic figures such as Geronimo, Calamity Jane, and Sacco and Vanzetti, but Essif shows again and again that American heroes and institutions more often than not serve as metaphors for issues having to do more with fascist Spain (in the case of Arrabal), or a sequel to Kafka’s *Amerika* (in André Duparfait’s *Oklahoma Romance*), or France’s treatment of its own minorities, as when André Benedetto’s 1975 play *Geronimo* compares the fate of the Apaches at the hands of the American government to that of Provençals and Occitans in the French republic.

---

Early in his essay, the author views “Americanism” as a form of Orientalism, i.e., not as the celebration by many Americans of their country’s exceptionalism and democratic superiority, but as the way foreign observers project an “essentialized form of an American identity, one that stands in contrast to their own” (p. 6). Although Essif, obviously, sees more merit in the French theorists’ and dramatists’ views of the United States than in the Orientalists’ version of their non-European others, his book demonstrates how the recent staging of the Vietnam War, 9/11, a multinational company, and Guantanamo renews and complicates the century-old interpretive affair between the French and “America.”

#### NOTES

[1] Baudrillard, *America* (New York: Verso, 1988), p. 84.

[2] Baudrillard, *America*, p. 76.

Jean-Philippe Mathy  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
[jmathy@illinois.edu](mailto:jmathy@illinois.edu)

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172