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Rachel Haworth, *From the Chanson française to the Canzone d'autore in the 1960s and 1970s: Authenticity, Authority, Influence*. Farnham, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2015. 201 pp. Bibliography and index. \$109.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4094-4173-1.

Review by Charles Rearick, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

This book, as the author summarizes it, is a “sustained analysis of the discourse” about the *chanson française* and the *canzone d'autore*, some leading French and Italian singer-songwriters, and “a selection of their songs” (p. 183). “Discourse” is the keyword. Haworth uses that term in the way that Pierre Bourdieu and Simon Firth conceived it—to mean a set of “rules” that define the aesthetic value of certain cultural products and genres (p. 4).<sup>[1]</sup>

Treating first the discourse on French song, Rachel Haworth traces a series of books and articles that cast the *chanson française* as a high art form in the 1950s. In those writings, the discourse-makers had in mind a specific kind of *chanson*: song performed by the songwriters themselves. Three of those *chanson* singers are Haworth’s featured subjects in the first four chapters: Georges Brassens, Jacques Brel, and Léo Ferré. Similar singer-songwriters and a similar discourse emerged in 1960s Italy, she recounts in the next two chapters. In the Italian discourse, artists such as Fabrizio De André and Giorgio Gaber and their *canzone* won critical recognition as the best. Like Brassens and Brel, they enjoyed popular success as well. (For this H-France review, I give attention primarily to the French parts of the book.)

The discourses that Haworth parses are the writings of music critics, journalists, writers, and academics. These music specialists used several criteria for evaluating songs and for judging the works of singer-songwriters to be superior. Literary quality was one measure, particularly poetic expression in a seemingly personal vein. Another valued quality was recognizable connection to the national heritage—or a perceived Frenchness (in Brassens’s songs most of all, but also in Belgian-born Brel’s). Above all, “authenticity” was what distinguished the *chanson* of the singer-songwriters from other popular music. But, as Haworth makes clear, the concept of authenticity had varied meanings—from sincere, heartfelt lyrics and a seemingly true-French character to a critical, unvarnished reflection of contemporary society.

Although ambiguities surround authenticity and other key themes, the discourse contained one starkly clear binary: the opposition between *chansons* and the pop songs that were dominant in the mass media. In the view of the *chanson* connoisseurs, the creations of the songwriter-singers were of the highest quality largely because serious artists crafted them, as opposed to market-driven entertainers content with delivering a bland, formulaic product. This disdain for mass-culture music notwithstanding, the favorite singer-songwriters of the connoisseurs became commercially successful—or, as the author puts it, stars who were anti-stars, somehow apart from the song industry.

The emphasis on discourse throughout the book gives the impression that a small roster of writers powerfully shaped culture and mass taste. The reader may well ask: what about the role of ordinary people, just song-loving fans? Their part is left unclear, except for noting that the three great *chanson*

singers achieved the status of “stars” in the eyes of the general public. Did the fans read or care what the writers thought and wrote? Did the expert discourse precede popular opinion or parallel it ... or follow it? Only toward the end of the book, in a chapter on memories and commemorations of the star singers since 2000, does a gap between the discourse and the public clearly show up: the fans in more recent times have not disparaged commercial success the way the writers on *chanson* did back in the 1950s and '60s.

Although the author’s commentary on singers and songs is only a small part of the study (compared to discourse analysis), it does include some noteworthy observations about the stars in performance. Drawing on eyewitness accounts, Haworth brings out the perceived meanings of the singers’ physical appearance and demeanor as viewed through the discursive lens. That is, she explains how audiences might have appreciatively interpreted awkwardness and evident nervousness, even sweating (notably in the case of Brel), as signs of “performed authenticity” (p. 136) and “creative effort” (p. 154).

The postwar *chanson* singers belong to a tradition of singer-songwriters that goes back to Aristide Bruant, Haworth points out. In the thirties, the genre was brilliantly updated by Charles Trenet. He was still prominent and productive in the fifties alongside the author’s chosen three, although he did not share their penchant for social criticism. It seems to me that Édith Piaf also met some of the criteria of the “authentic” artistic singers. She could well have figured directly in Haworth’s analysis, not just mentioned in passing. That might have further clarified the discourse “rules” and, most importantly, the gender considerations at work.

This book builds on the accepted notion of a “golden age” of *chanson* in the 1950s and 1960s (the decades central to the argument, though not the ones announced by the title), but it largely skirts some obvious historical questions. Why “a golden age” then, why those years? The author describes her approach as multidisciplinary and in part cultural history (p. 4), but it stops short of providing historical background on the cultural, economic and social conditions of the *Trente Glorieuses*, the growing presence of youth, or the sources of contestation.<sup>[2]</sup> The focus stays fixed on *chanson* and discourse, with little attention given even to other popular music, such as rock’n’roll.

The music critics championing *chanson* do appear to be reacting against the invasion of foreign music that excited French youth. But again that observation leads to a question about a broader public of listeners: did fans, too, embrace *chanson* as an appealing alternative, breaking not only with standard commercial hits, but also with rock’n’roll and Anglo-American popular music generally (including folk and jazz)? Testimony from the popular press or older people who were *chanson* enthusiasts “back in the day” could help answer the question.

Unfortunately, the writing in this book is dissertation-style, which is likely off-putting to many readers. More editing would help. Surely most editors would eliminate the many repetitions, particularly the statements and restatements that follow the phrase “as we have seen” and the anticipatory “as we shall see.”

The main contribution of the book, in sum, is to elucidate such slippery concepts as “authenticity” and their role in thinking and writing about the *chanson française* and *canzone d'autore* after the Second World War. For historians of France, the chapters on *canzone d'autore* are of interest for a couple of reasons. They not only reveal cultural parallels in the two countries, but also show in specific detail the international importance and apparent influence of *chanson française* stars, above all, Brassens and Brel.<sup>[3]</sup>

## NOTES

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University Press, 1996) and Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: Evaluating Popular Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

[2] To situate the *chanson française* of the 1950s and 1960s in a cultural context, classics such as Pascal Ory's *L'Aventure culturelle française, 1945-1989* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1994), and Richard F. Kuisel's *Seducing the French: the Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993) would be useful. So would more recent studies, such as Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François Sirinelli, eds., *La Culture de masse en France de la Belle Époque à aujourd'hui* (Paris: Fayard, 2002); Richard Ivan Jobs, *Riding the New Wave: Youth and the Rejuvenation of France After the Second World War* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 2007); and Rosemary Wakeman, *The Heroic City: Paris, 1945-1958* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

[3] The similarities between the featured Italian stars and the French stars can be viewed and heard online by searching YouTube videos of Fabrizio De André and Giorgio Gaber and listening. Enjoy!

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