

H-France Review Vol. 2 (July 2002), No. 64

Margaret Attack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. viii + 182 pp. Chronology, notes, bibliography, and index. \$27.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 0-19-871515-3.

Review by Michael Scott Christofferson, Pennsylvania State University, Erie.

*May 68 in French Fiction and Film* seeks “to communicate a sense of the creative richness and real complexity of the many works and systems of thought engaged with May 68, and to resituate it at the heart of modern cultural history” (p. 7). Attack’s intention is not to be exhaustive, “but rather to explain a group of texts in function of some of the ‘*moments forts*’ of May” and “to read the stories of these narrative texts against that which is at stake in their elaboration” (p. 8). Attack focuses her attention on six novels (Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Belles Images*, Robert Merle’s *Derrière la vitre*, Julia Kristeva’s *Les Samouraïs*, Marie Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire*, Jean-Pierre Manchette’s *Nada*, and René Victor Pilhes’s *L’Imprécateur*) and two films (Jean-Luc Godard’s *Tout va bien* and Marcel Ophüls’s *Le Chagrin et la pitié*). In her analysis Attack seeks to highlight “thematic strands such as anti-Gaullism, and the intellectual configurations of *gauchisme*,” which she believes have “often been neglected” (p. 8). Her work, Attack contends, leads to a “reconsideration of the theoretical paradigms governing the existing maps of postwar history of ideas and culture, particularly in relation to the well-established oppositions between structuralism and existentialism, between political fiction and textual fiction, and between the *mode rétro* and the Resistance myth” (p. 8).

Attack is at her best when discussing the relationship between May 68 and the formal and structural aspects of novels and films. Her chapter on Merle’s *Derrière la vitre*, a novel set on the Nanterre campus of the University of Paris on 22 March 1968, offers a fine analysis of the political unrest at Nanterre that sparked May 68 and of the relationship between that unrest and the form of Merle’s novel. Attack shows how Merle gave authenticity to his representation of the contradictory events of 1968 by adopting the technique of simultaneity and using “in spite of himself, ...the language of the Nouveau Roman” (p. 39). Attack’s analysis of Cardinal’s *Les Mots pour le dire* offers a similarly interesting discussion of the relationship between Cardinal’s best-selling novel and the French women’s movement after 1968, pointing to the importance of language in both. Attack’s conclusion that the novel “is at one with the feminist press” “in its vocabulary and themes” seems convincing (p. 99). Attack’s chapters on Beauvoir’s *Les Belles Images* and on Godard’s *Tout va bien* are similarly interesting, informative, and convincing.

Attack’s chapter on Kristeva’s *Les Samouraïs* is, by comparison, something of a disappointment. She shows the shortcomings of Kristeva’s *roman à clef* about the literary journal *Tel Quel* and the structuralists as a representation of May 68. The novel treats the events as a psychodrama, gives no place to “the vocabularies or motivations of *gauchisme*,” and tells the reader little of intellectual trajectories different from those of the structuralists (p. 82). Yet Attack’s analysis stops there. She is at a loss to explain the “strange paradox” (p. 75)—later said to be a “most extraordinary paradox” (p. 144)—that *Tel Quel*, with which Kristeva was associated, was “close to the ideological and cultural sensibilities of May” and yet supported the PCF and CGT (p. 75). Her analysis of *Les Samouraïs* concludes with the

anodyne observation that the novel is “eloquent testimony to the constant rewritings and superimposed scripts, lived and projected, of the intellectuals” (p. 84). Given Attack’s expressed interest in reading texts in historical context, her failure to confront Kristeva’s fictionalized account of *Tel Quel* with the journal’s real history is hard to explain. Basic works on *Tel Quel* such as Niilo Kaupi’s *The Making of An Avant-Garde: Tel Quel* and Philippe Forest’s *Histoire de Tel Quel 1960-1982* are not in her bibliography.[1] Armed with Kaupi’s Bourdieuan analysis and the wealth of information in Forest’s account, Attack might, at the very least, have expanded on her “suspicion” that when *Tel Quel* spoke of revolution it “always was a revolution for art’s sake” (p. 145).

Attack’s discussion of *Le Chagrin et la pitié* and the “Resistance myth” that the film is said to have shattered also strikes this reader as problematic. Attack points to references to the Occupation and the Resistance during the Algerian War and May 1968—notably in attempts to assimilate the French state and de Gaulle to the Nazis and Vichy and in parallel efforts to cast opposition to the war and then contestation in May 1968 as a continuation of the Resistance—to argue against the claim that before *Le Chagrin et la pitié* “representations of the war and the Occupation had been dominated by the Gaullist (or communist) myths of a nation united in Resistance behind its glorious leadership” (p. 106). Although she does not identify the author of the interpretation with which she takes issue, Attack is presumably seeking to revise Henry Rousso’s seminal *The Vichy Syndrome*. Yet Rousso is not unaware of references to the Occupation and the Resistance in the politics of the Algerian War and May 1968. Indeed, Rousso believes that in May 1968 students “sensed something invented in de Gaulle’s attempt to substitute himself for the Resistance.”[2] Further, the 1960s references to the war years that Attack cites fail to prove that the myth of “resistancialism”—to use Rousso’s term—did not dominate representations. The assimilation of de Gaulle to Pétain and Hitler in 1968, for example, suggested that de Gaulle had betrayed his wartime role a quarter century later. In using this historical analogy, the movement of contestation did not explicitly challenge “resistancialist” representations of the war years, but rather appropriated them in order to discredit de Gaulle by casting him in the role of the villains he fought in the 1940s.

Beyond contesting Rousso’s history of the “resistancialist” myth, Attack seeks to convince her readers that Ophul’s film is *gauchiste*. She strangely argues, for example, that “it is the very *gauchisme* of *Le Chagrin* which leads it to depict the Communist Party as the only resistance movement” (p. 116), a reading of the film that conflicts with Rousso’s sound judgement that the communist Resistance was “deliberately neglected” by the film.[3] Attack would also like us to believe that “another excellent indicator of the *gauchiste* position of the film is the absence of women,” as if *gauchistes* had a monopoly on patriarchy (p. 117). While *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was undoubtedly influenced by May 1968, it would be hard to make the case—and certainly Attack has not succeeded in doing so—that the film is *gauchiste*.

Attack’s book suffers in general from her awkward effort to prove that the importance of *gauchisme* has been underestimated. Failing to define the term, Attack pins the label “*gauchiste*” on such a wide variety of phenomena related to May 1968 that it becomes meaningless. At one point “major elements of the politics of *gauchisme*” are said to include “the importance of culture and the theorizations of class associated with Althusser” (p. 5). At another point “*gauchiste* themes” in Merle’s *Derrière la vitre* are enumerated as: “the political nature of knowledge, knowledge serving the interests of the bourgeoisie; workerism; Vietnam; police-state; repressive sexualities; the need for provocation and contestation” (p. 39). Godard is said to be “one of the prime articulators of *gauchisme* in the cultural sphere” because of his use of the “political themes of anti-capitalism, anti-colonialism, and anti-imperialism, together with the challenge to conventional sexuality and to conventional aesthetics as bourgeois” (p. 53).

Clearly *gauchisme*, which one might minimally define as “a radical alternative to Marxism-Leninism as a theory of the labor movement and its development,” had no monopoly on these themes.[4] There was, after all, a PCF-led opposition to the Vietnam War. Even opposition to the war by the Trotskyite *Jeunesse communiste révolutionnaire* and the Maoist *Union des jeunesses communistes (marxistes-léninistes)*

before May 1968 can only be labeled *gauchiste* with difficulty given that neither organization had fully abandoned Leninism at the time.[5] Further, it is hard to maintain that *gauchisme* challenged conventional sexuality and aesthetics, if only because the populism of a *gauchiste* organization such as the Maoist *Gauche prolétarienne* led it to eschew the counter-cultural movement for fear that it might not be well received by the masses.

Of course, Attack might be right that *gauchisme* had a considerable, perhaps even neglected, cultural impact. But to prove her point she would have to not only define her terms more precisely but also look more closely at relations between intellectuals and artists and *gauchiste* political initiatives. It is striking, for example, that her discussion of Manchette's *Nada*, a novel about *gauchiste* terrorism, does not relate *Nada* to contemporary French debates on the topic. Could there be a connection between the kidnapping in *Nada*, published in November 1972, and the *Gauche prolétarienne*'s March 1972 kidnapping of Robert Nogrette in retaliation for the killing of the Maoist militant Pierre Overney by a Renault-Billancourt security guard? Manchette's contextualization of his novel in a 1982 interview would suggest that this is the case.[6]

Attack appears to be more on target with her effort to relativize the argument, attributed to Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut,[7] that May 1968 brought about the triumph of structuralism and her contention that the opposition between structuralism and existentialism should not be drawn too sharply. She shows, for example, that De Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe* coexisted with structuralist-inspired work in the women's movement. She also establishes the low profile of structuralism in the events of May and the fact that many intellectuals interpreted May as a refutation of structuralism. Yet how significant and original are these findings? Why should we be surprised by the coexistence of structuralist and existentialist works in post-May movements? And did not François Dosse's *History of Structuralism*--which figures in Attack's bibliography but not her footnotes--already demonstrate the ambiguous relationship between structuralism and May 1968?[8]

Attack's book would be greatly improved if it took the existing scholarly literature on its topic more seriously. Use of the studies of *Tel Quel* by Kaupi and Forest might have saved Attack confusion over *Tel Quel*'s politics and given her a broader perspective on Kristeva's *Les Samouraïs*. Closer attention to Rousso's *The Vichy Syndrome* might have helped her forge a more convincing argument about the significance of the political uses of the Occupation and the Resistance before Le Chagrin et la pitié. Dosse's *History of Structuralism* might have steered her away from an uninteresting reinvention of his arguments on the relationship between structuralism and May 68. Likewise, a few errors of fact might have been obviated by more careful attention to sources. Attack cites Daniel Cohn-Bendit's praise of Marcuse as proof that Marcuse was very influential in France in 1968 (pp. 5-6), when, in fact, Cohn-Bendit explicitly denied the influence of Marcuse on the student movement in an often-cited passage from a book in Attack's bibliography.[9] And Attack tells us, without citing her source, that de Gaulle "is reported to have said: 'On n'arrête pas Voltaire'" in response to Sartre's hawking of the Maoist newspaper *La Cause du peuple* on the streets in June 1970 (p. 74). De Gaulle's quip is, of course, unlikely given that he was in retirement at the time and had already said essentially the same thing regarding Sartre during the Algerian War.[10]

In conclusion, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film* offers a number of interesting, although in some cases debatable, studies of novels and films but fails to prove its more significant theses. Ultimately unsatisfying as an interpretation of the cultural impact of May 68, it should, if used with caution, be useful to readers studying one of the texts upon which it focuses.

## NOTES

- [1] Niilo Kauppi, *The Making of an Avant-Garde: Tel Quel*, "Approaches to Semiotics," no. 113, trans. Anne R. Epstein (New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1994); Philippe Forest, *Histoire de Tel Quel 1960-1982* (Paris: Seuil, 1995).
- [2] Henry Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 99 and pp. 75-82 on the Algerian War.
- [3] Rousso, pp. 105-106. According to Rousso, the only members of the communist Resistance in the film were Jacques Duclos and Claude Lévy.
- [4] Richard Gombin, *The Origins of Modern Leftism*, trans. Michael K. Perl (Baltimore.: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 17.
- [5] On the history of opposition to the Vietnam War see Nicolas Pas, "Six heures sur le Vietnam": Histoire des comités Vietnam français 1965-1968," *Revue historique* 613 (January-March 2000), pp. 157-185.
- [6] Manchette said: "On peut considérer Nada comme un roman politique. C'est un commentaire sur le terrorisme. J'étais en train de l'écrire quand j'ai appris par la radio qu'on avait buté Overney et kidnappé Nogrette." "Lutte des casses," interview of Jean-Patrick Manchette by Serge Loupien, 15 March 1982, (11 June 2002). For the date of publication of *Nada* see Le Débat, *Les Idées en France 1945-1988: Une chronologie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989), 289. On the relationship between *gauchisme* and terrorism in France see Isabelle Sommier, *La Violence politique et son deuil: L'après 68 en France et en Italie* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1998).
- [7] Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *La Pensée 68: Essai sur l'anti-humanisme contemporaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).
- [8] François Dosse, *The Sign Sets, 1967-Present*, vol. 2 of *History of Structuralism*, trans. Deborah Glassman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), especially part II, "May 1968 and Structuralism; or, The Misunderstanding."
- [9] Cohn-Bendit said, "Some people have tried to force Marcuse on us as a mentor: that is a joke. None of us have read Marcuse." Quoted in Hervé Bourges, *The French Student Revolt: The Leaders Speak*, trans. B. R. Brewster (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968), p. 58.
- [10] "On n'emprisonne pas Voltaire." Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre, 1905-1980* (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), p. 694.

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ISSN 1553-9172