

Keith Reader, *Across Texts: Essays on Different Forms of French Textuality*. Oxford: Legenda, 252 pp. £85, \$115. (hb). ISBN: 978-1-781888-06-3

Those wishing to find a ‘défense et illustration’ of the field of French Cultural studies over the last few decades need look no further than Keith Reader’s *Across Texts*, the thirteenth title in the series ‘Selected Essays’ published by Legenda and curated by Susan Harrow. The aim of the series is to gather in one book a selection of already published essays from a prominent scholar in the field in order to reflect on future directions for research as opposed to a retrospective history of the discipline. While reading *Across Texts* however, it is difficult not to marvel at how far French studies (in the UK as well as in the US and elsewhere) has come since the early 1970s, both in the scope of topics studied and the complexity of methodologies employed—instead of narrow, author-based interpretations of canonical writers, we are treated to essays on film, philosophy, history, gender, and cuisine, among many other subjects. This eclecticism, as Reader self-critically calls it (‘academic monogamy has never been my strong suit’ p. 1), constitutes the strength of the discipline of French studies, as it acknowledges the interdependency of different texts (literary, filmic, journalistic, culinary) with their multiple contexts and readers across time. What is all the more remarkable is that a scholar such as Reader masters so many varied discourses and manages to tie them together with his characteristic incisive style and biting wit. As a pioneering figure in French Cultural Studies in the UK, Reader helped open up the study of cinema, of literary theory, and of gender for countless new scholars, yet it would be difficult to find many who can match the breadth of his work or the verve of his writing.

The book begins with an introduction by Reader, which is an original and poignant reflection on his choice of the book’s eighteen essays that also serves to situate them within his intellectual trajectory. The personal and the political, as we know, cannot be separated, and Reader’s work makes clear that intellectual honesty requires a certain amount of transparency, even at the risk of pushing the limits of academic propriety. In a few dense but enlightening pages, he sketches out the details of how his less-than inspiring studies (both for what was taught and his own academic performance) at Cambridge and then Oxford were supplemented by an extracurricular passion for cinema, for ‘the Gallic theoretical pantheon’ (p. 3) of Barthes, Foucault, Althusser, and Derrida, and for the culture of France itself. This background helps explain how Reader was able to combine analyses of disparate texts by Stendhal (the subject of his DPhil thesis), Renoir, Arletty, and Régis Debray. When these essays were first published, the very idea (at least in many quarters of the academy) of writing on non-literary French culture was subversive—what these essays retain so many years later is the clarity of their insights and the original linguistic spark of Reader’s rebelliousness as someone working to push the margins of policed academic research.

The first essay in the book serves as a perfect example of Reader’s methodology that reflects both changes in French culture and society and in the discipline of French Studies. ‘De Gaulle, Godard: même combat? Some Personal Reflections’ (first published in 1999 in *Modern & Contemporary France*) examines the coincidence of De Gaulle’s and Godard’s antipathy towards the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s, albeit from different ends of the political spectrum. Reader shows, however, that De Gaulle was unable to understand the increasing power of the visual medium in culture and in politics—this medium was largely exported by the United States, and yet it was to be redefined and reinvented by filmmakers such

as Godard. Reader reminds us that when he joined the Society for French Studies, its journal offered no reviews of books on film, and that he was the first to publish an article on the subject in the Society's journal *French Studies* in 1982 (p. 4); one might add that the academy moves much slower than politics or history. The final essay, on debates in France about the legitimacy of the Israeli state by Badiou, Marty, Debray, and Barnavi, illustrates how French Cultural studies can provide perspective on political and social issues on a global scale, in Reader's words, 'if academics and intellectuals have less scope than might have been imagined in the heyday of Sartrean *engagement* to change the course of events, they can at least contribute to defining more closely the terms in which political choices and affiliations are articulated' (p. 8).

Roughly half of the essays in this volume are dedicated to the study of cinema, in particular the films of Renoir, Vigo, Bresson, Resnais, and Eustache, as well as an essay on Arletty ('Mon cul est intersexuel'). Even here, the approaches are multiple as Reader moves from formalist analyses of these films, to theoretical criticism (using Deleuze's *Masochism* to read Arletty or Kristeva to read Eustache), to political discourse analysis (Giscard and Resnais, and the filmic representation of May '68), and to urban studies ('The *banlieue* in French Cinema of the 1930s' and 'Cinematic Representations of Paris: Vigo/Truffaut/Carax').

Along with cinema, the other major category of the volume is work on gender. Reader is particularly gifted at finding areas of inquiry that defy easy or comforting interpretation and that ask us to suspend our judgement. One of the most dense and fascinating essays of the volume, 'On the Difficulty of Writing about Simone Weil's *La Pesanteur et la grâce*,' looks at how, in the Anglophone world at least, Weil's unique philosophical and political voice has been muted because she does not conform to contemporary ideas of political action or especially gender/ethnic/religious identities: 'A Jew who repudiated her own culture, which has on the whole repaid the compliment; a Christian convert who resolutely declined baptism; a militant socialist whose later social writings, with their stress on *enracinement*, verge on the Pétainist—it is as though her itinerary, with its wealth of contradictory allusions and influences, consciously defied classification' (p. 40). Reader's essays on the Papin sisters and the Gabrielle Russier Affair likewise demonstrate the importance for critical theory and for feminist scholars of looking at problematic cases and how popular and intellectual discourses develop in tandem out of the seemingly trivial 'fait divers.' The essays related to a certain notion of male abjectivity, from Eustache to Doubrovsky and Houellebecq and to Reader's musing on his own masculinity, make for some of the most original and insightful passages of the volume, investigating how the concept of the phallus 'outstrips its habitual biological referent and debouches onto a complex figurative realm defined and criss-crossed by questions of power and language as well as gender' (p. 7). As the title *Across Texts* attests, Reader's exploration of the 'different forms of French textuality' involves a productive juxtaposition of concepts from gender studies, critical theory, popular and high culture, and literary and cinema studies, that makes a quick summary of the work impossible.

To conclude on a personal note, since Reader's work so often engaged a personal perspective on the subjects of his study, this review has been difficult for me to write after his death last summer, only a few weeks after I accepted to write the review. We were conference friends and occasional social media sparring partners (after one memorable disagreement, he replied with 'sic transit gloria'). Sadly, the last message he wrote was a promise to meet up again in London after the pandemic, but *Across Texts* brought back to me his unique critical voice, which proved to be very much alive in these beautiful essays—'sic transit gloria mundi' not one bit.

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