Frantz Fanon and the Test of Time

Maureen Murphy

Translator: Simon Pleasance

Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2576>

DOI: 10.4000/critiquedart.2576

ISBN: 2265-9404

ISSN: 2265-9404

Publisher

Groupeement d'intérêt scientifique (GIS) Archives de la critique d'art

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 April 2012

ISBN: 1246-8258

ISSN: 1246-8258

Electronic reference

Maureen Murphy, « Frantz Fanon and the Test of Time », *Critique d'art* [Online], 39 | Printemps 2012,
Online since 01 April 2013, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/critiquedart/2576> ; DOI : 10.4000/critiquedart.2576

This text was automatically generated on 1 May 2019.

Archives de la critique d'art

Frantz Fanon and the Test of Time

Maureen Murphy

Translation : Simon Pleasance

REFERENCES

Fanon, Frantz. *Œuvres*, Paris : La Découverte, 2011

Macey, David. *Frantz Fanon, une vie*, Paris : La Découverte, 2011

Renault, Matthieu. *Frantz Fanon : de l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale*, Paris : Ed. Amsterdam, 2011

- 1 While the shadow cast over incitation to violence has long weighed on the perception of Fanon's writings, a critical and all-encompassing re-reading of his thinking is called for today. Several recent books published to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the author's death and Algeria's independence invite us so to do. Frantz Fanon, who was born in 1925, came from a fairly well-off family and grew up in Fort-de-France, on the island of Martinique, at that time conspicuously marked by rural poverty and racism. He attended the Lycée Schoelcher, where he was taught by Aimé Césaire alongside Edouard Glissant, and enlisted during the Second World War in the Forces de la France Libre, after which he studied medicine in Lyon, before becoming a psychiatrist in 1953. He left the metropolis shortly thereafter and settled in Algeria where he pursued his commitment to decolonization, applied to both thinking and acts. The revival of interest illustrated by the publication of many different books about Fanon can be included in a much broader movement involving the exhumation of colonial issues undertaken in France over the past 10 years. Because if, in the Anglo-Saxon countries, so-called "postcolonial" studies developed in academic circles back in the 1970s, in France, consideration of this past has taken longer, and seems to be emerging in a context that is at times contentious or, at the very least, contradictory.¹ The comparative historiography of Fanon studies sketched out by Matthieu Renault in the introduction to his book is enlightening in this respect. Borrowing the analysis of the authors of *Fanon: A Critical Reader*² published in 1996, M.

Renault quotes five periods in the genealogy of studies devoted to Fanon: “After the moment of the “applications” and “reactions” which had summoned revolutionary thinkers, and Marxist and “liberal” critics, the stage of biographies was embarked upon, followed by the stage of readings of Fanon from the viewpoint of political theory. The fourth stage, “still in progress”, was bound up with the emergence of cultural and postcolonial studies”. The editors of the compilation called for the emergence of a fifth stage which would incorporate his writings in the field of Human Sciences, properly so called. What strikes M. Renault in this genealogy is the fact that it is essentially Anglo-Saxon. “In France”, he writes, “[...] where Fanon is concerned, *everything remains to be said*”. Betting on the “non-biography”,³ M. Renault attempts to take up the thread of Fanon studies, offering French readers an overall view of his output. In his preface, Achille Mbembé makes an identical observation about the genealogy of the studies relating to the author (although without quoting the source of the analysis), but, for his part, opts for a biographical approach, even using the image of the “mould” which was allegedly represented by the ordeals of Nazism, colonialism, and the “bitter encounter with metropolitan France”⁴, from which, according to him, Fanon would emerge unscathed. With a hagiographical tendency, pulling Fanon towards an African-ness (*africanité*) which he probably would not have laid claim to himself⁵, A. Mbembé writes a preface where emotion takes precedence over rigour and fails to describe the complexity at work in Fanon. If Mbembé tries to draw Fanon towards Africa, André Lucrèce⁶, for his part, draws him towards Martinique, by seeking to create an intellectual connection with Aimé Césaire, which leads him to distort history in order to respond to challenges of memorial recognition. In the midst of this conflict of memories, probably caused by the absence of any scientific treatment of Fanon’s thinking in France, M. Renault’s text offers a satisfying and constructive proposition.

- 2 Setting his sights at political philosophy, the author organizes his book in a thematic way and tries to emphasize the forms of “epistemic shifts” (p. 29) made by Fanon based on the writings of authors such as Marx, Freud, Sartre, and Hegel: “The alternative to decolonializations”, he writes, “was not only that of the appropriation or rejection of the “gifts” of the West, but was also and perhaps first and foremost situated at the very heart of the methods of their revival” (p. 194). His analysis is precise and far-reaching, but would have benefited from introducing a historical perspective and depth. One would have liked the author to take a more evident stance in relation to the discussions developed on the other side of the Atlantic, which he sketches out in his introduction, but does not subsequently pursue.
- 3 Fanon’s writings about culture undergo little analysis, as, incidentally, is often the case, with their almost clinical rawness as well as the absence of any exotic charge explaining why history preferred to remember the writings of the theoreticians of negritude, for example. At a time when identity-based categories such as “African”, “Indian”, and “Arab” contemporary art are flourishing in time with biennial shows and political events, the reading of Fanon’s writings nevertheless helps us to rethink the relationship between art, politics and identity, in order to bring forth, once again, the idea of individuality and national belonging or affiliation, to the detriment of an undoubtedly seductive, but often hollow, community-based approach. Writing on the eve of independence being achieved in various countries, at a moment in history when certain African intellectuals were homing in on the pride of an exhumed past, the better to respond to the inferiority-inducing arguments of the colonizers, Fanon nevertheless calls for a break with what he

conceived of as a form of “racialization of thought” (*Œuvres* p. 250). “The density of History does not determine any of my acts”, he wrote. “I am my own foundation, and it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental datum that I introduce the cycle of my freedom” (*idem*). In 2011, Senegal organized the second *Festival mondial des arts nègres* in Dakar, as a tribute to the festival organized by Léopold Sédar Senghor in 1966. A reciprocal movement to decolonize consciences seems necessary, and there is an urgent need to re-read Frantz Fanon, if only to link back up with the thread of the discussion and reactivate the debate.

NOTES

1. See *La Situation post-coloniale : les postcolonial Studies dans le débat français*, (ed. by Marie-Claude Smouts), Paris : Les Presses de Sciences Po, 2007 ; Amselle, Jean-Loup. *L'Occident décroché : enquête sur les postcolonialismes*, Paris : Stock, 2008 ; and Bayart, J.F. *Les Etudes postcoloniales : un carnaval académique*, Paris : Karthala, 2010.
2. “Introduction: Five Stages of Fanon Studies” in *Fanon: A Critical Reader* (Gordon, L. R., Sharpley-Whiting T.D., White, R.T. eds.), Malden-Oxford : Blackwell, 1996, pp. 1-8
3. Renault, Matthieu. “Pour une généalogie de la critique postcoloniale” in *Frantz Fanon : de l'anticolonialisme à la critique postcoloniale*, *Op. cit.*, p. 8.
4. Mbembé, Achille. “Préface” in *Frantz Fanon : Œuvres*, *Op. cit.*, p. 9
5. A. Mbembé refers to the *africanité* (African-ness) of Fanon's thinking (p. 14), whereas Fanon challenged this type of identity-based category, preferring national or even nationalist affiliation.
6. André, Lucrèce. *Frantz Fanon et les Antilles : l'empreinte d'une pensée*, Fort-de-France : Le Teneur ; K Editions, 2011