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Avec ma gueule de mètèque

Diana HOLMES & David LOOSELEY (eds.), *Imagining the popular in contemporary French culture*

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L'auteur & les Éd. Mélanie Seteun

Diana Holmes & David Looseley (eds.), *Imagining the Popular in contemporary French Culture*, Manchester & New York, Manchester University Press, 2013.

This collection of essays reflects the growing academic interest in the popular culture of France in UK university departments of French and Francophone studies, where the analysis of canonical high-cultural literary texts is often still predominant. The opening theoretical introductions by the editors, discussing the categories of “lowbrow, middlebrow and highbrow” in cultural production and the rival principles of “politics and pleasure” in official French cultural policy, are followed by a “discursive history of French popular music” by David Looseley, tracing the notions of “authenticity and appropriation across a wide historical survey”. Diana Holmes goes on to examine “the mimetic prejudice” in the French popular novel; and David Platten traces the themes of “identification,

imitation and critical mortification” in French popular cinema, often neglected in favour of its “high cultural” and “art-house” varieties. Lucy Mazdon traces the ideology of the “national popular” through the evolution of French television since the Liberation years, from the monolithic state-run ORTF to the contemporary proliferation of digital channels. Nigel Armstrong wonders if “popular culture means popular language” and looks at social and linguistic change in the contemporary French vernacular. The volume is rounded off with a brief concluding chapter that identifies a move from “a culture of the word to a polyvalent culture of the visual, the sonic and the digital”. In spite of its synthesizing ambitions, it is difficult to trace a common thread through the disparate chapters of the collection. The survey is also not as complete as it might have been: one wonders why more attention was not paid to topics such as the typically French fascination with “bande dessinée” and graphic novels, or to the culture of sport in France, both areas currently being developed as research specialisms in academic departments of French studies. It is also curious that the chapter on the evolution of the French language doesn’t give more space to the proliferation of “argot” or slang in French everyday speech and oral forms of expression, such as rap music and stand-up comedy. In terms of the study of popular music, it is the chapters by David Looseley which are likely to attract the most interest, well-versed as they are in the very Anglo-centric domains of cultural studies

and Anglophone popular music studies, as well as the avatars of French state cultural policy. Looseley draws attention to the ambivalence of the term "populaire" in the French context, where it refers more to "folk" culture; whereas the term "culture de masse", with its elitist overtones, is probably more appropriate to the Anglophone conception of "popular culture". His opening chapter analyses the intervention of the French state in the development of popular culture since as long ago as the mid-nineteenth century, and the tensions that arise between its pretensions to cultural universalism and the growth of commercially-motivated forms of entertainment, notably those of popular music.

His chapter on the discursive history of French popular song is impressively wide-ranging and thoroughly documented, tracing the evolution of notions of authenticity from the Troubadours right up to the early 21st century reactions to recent television talent shows such as "Star Academy". The later chapters are less encyclopaedic although equally well documented, but likely to be of less interest to researchers working on popular music. In general the collection provides a stimulating alternative view of the significance of popular culture in a linguistic domain singularly different from the more familiar Anglo-American mainstream.

Peter HAWKINS

Jonathyne Briggs, *Sounds French : Globalization, Cultural Communities, and Pop Music in France, 1958-1980*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

In this book, Jonathyne Briggs provides an excellent and engaging new reading of French popular-musical history that is expertly researched. It makes an important contribution to the small but growing anglophone literature on an area which still has trouble finding a home among traditional university disciplines. Despite the exploratory, interdisciplinary, and sometimes paradigm-shifting scholarship it involves, research in English on French popular music is still largely ignored by both mainstream French studies and popular music studies, neither of which seems to know what to make of it. Paradoxically, it is welcomed much more warmly in France, at least by younger scholars, even though (or perhaps because) popular music is

still a relatively new field of research there, that has itself had to struggle to achieve academic legitimacy. That Briggs is an academic historian working in America is therefore interesting in two ways. First because the French studies community of America is even further behind the UK's in recognising popular music as a scholarly concern as valid as literature, theory and film. And second because, as a consequence, stateless Anglophone scholars in the field are steadily finding themselves more at home in cultural history.

Professor Briggs's overarching concern is with the relationship between popular music, globalisation and community formation in the France of that seminal era from the arrival of