

NEW ENGLISH-LANGUAGE MONOGRAPHS ON POSTWAR ART IN FRANCE AND THE SECRET HISTORY OF POSTMODERNISM

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The Australian art historian and art critic Terry Smith has observed that postwar art is the primal scene of our present cultural condition.¹ I would argue that postwar *French* art is the primal scene of our present cultural condition. Not because it was an outstanding period for French art. Matisse died in 1954, Fernand Léger in 1955, André Breton in 1961, Yves Klein in 1962, Le Corbusier in 1965, Duchamp in 1968 and Picasso in 1973. The history of what happened to French art after 1945 is important because, surprisingly, it helps to explain how the West arrived at its current geopolitical impasse with China.

French art experienced a dramatic decline after 1945. However, after 1968, out of its ashes emerged something called “French theory”, which became the Hexagon’s most important global cultural export in the fourth quarter of the twentieth century. Not only was the influence of “French theory” ubiquitous inside and outside academia, its effects are still with us today. The early rise of China, but more specifically, the widespread popularity of Maoism in France in the 1960s laid the foundation for the rise of French theory and/or postmodernism. The relationship between the decline of French art, the rise of western Maoism and the triumph of French theory is an intriguing and understudied subject that could potentially transform the way we understand the fate of French art in the

1

Terry Smith, Art History’s Work-in Pro(re)gress. Reflections on the Multiple Modernities Project, in: Flavia Frigeri and Kristian Handberg (eds.), *New Histories of Art in the Global Postwar Era. Multiple Modernities*, London 2022, 20. This review discusses the following publications: Liam Considine, *American Pop Art in Paris. Politics of the Transatlantic Image*. London: Routledge 2020, 176 pages with 8 colour and 45 b/w ill., ISBN 978-0-367-14013-7. Laurel Jean Fredrickson, *Jean-Jacques Lebel and French Happenings of the 1960s. The Erotics of Revolution*. New York: Bloomsbury 2021, 208 pages, ISBN 978-1-501-33233-3. Molly Warnock, *Simon Hantai and the Reserves of Painting*. Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2020, 280 pages with 41 colour and 89 b/w ill., ISBN 978-0-271-08502-9. And last but not least: Lily Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment. Participatory and Institutional Critique in France, 1958–1981*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2020, 336 pages with 17 colour and 81 b/w ill., ISBN 978-1-4780-1208-5 (DOI: [10.1215/9781478012085](https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478012085)). For cover images see [Fig. 1](#). I would like to express my gratitude to the Deutsches Forum für Kunstgeschichte (DFK) which provided me with a research scholarship in the autumn of 2022, and James Elkins for some helpful edits.

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[Fig. 1]

Cover images of the following publications, discussed in this review: Liam Considine, *American Pop Art in Paris. Politics of the Transatlantic Image*, London 2020; Laurel Jean Fredrickson, *Jean-Jacques Lebel and French Happenings of the 1960s. The Erotics of Revolution*, New York 2021; Molly Warnock, *Simon Hantai and the Reserves of Painting*, Philadelphia, PA 2020; and Lily Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment. Participatory and Institutional Critique in France, 1958–1981*, Durham, NC 2020.

second half of the twentieth century, not to mention the history of modern and contemporary art writ large.

How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art from France is the title of a well-known book published in 1983 by the Vancouver-based French art historian Serges Guilbaut.² Guilbaut built his career on the story of how, in the postwar period, France was defeated (yet again) by vulgar Americans who had the audacity to learn how to paint.³ More recently, another French art historian based in the US, Catherine Dossin, has argued that it was, in fact, the emergence of Pop art, above all the reception of Andy Warhol in Paris, which was the key event. She has written, “The triumph of American art in Europe was not the triumph of Abstract Expressionism in the 1950s, but the triumph of Pop art in the 1960s.”⁴ While an empirical survey of European exhibitions points to this conclusion, it is always necessary to correlate other sources of interpretation, including received ideas, in order to supplement raw geographic and economic data.

French art historian Sandrine Hyacinthe, who is currently working on a series of articles about the *École de Paris*, has noted that scepticism about the state of French art was building nationally *within* France in the late 1950s.⁵ Indeed, the French-based avant-garde group the Situationist International, whose stated mission was the “supersession of art”, was established in 1957, indicating that critical assessments of the French cultural scene were already underway before the 1960s. Hyacinthe has also pointed out that the French art critic Alain Jouffroy published an article lamenting the academic quality of French painting as early as 1958 (!). Which is all to say that the most astute French artists, art critics and intellectuals already knew that there was a problem long before Robert Rauschenberg’s silkscreened paintings won the Golden Lion at the Venice Biennale in 1964. In any event, these new insights show that we need to update and expand the research on the topic. Happily, in the last few years a series of new English-language monographs on postwar French art have been published [Fig. 1].

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The real title is *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art. Abstract Art, Freedom and the Cold War*, Chicago, IL 1983.

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Laurie J. Monahan’s 1990 article, *Cultural Cartography. American Designs at the 1964 Venice Biennale*, published in Serge Guilbaut (ed.), *Reconstructing Modernism. Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal 1945–1964*, Cambridge, MA 1990, reiterated Guilbaut’s main points, as did Francis Francina (ed.), *Pollock and After. The Critical Debate*, New York 1985 and Frances Stonor Saunders’s, *Who Paid the Piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, London 1999.

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Catherine Dossin, *The Rise and Fall of American Art, 1940s–1980s. A Geopolitics of Western Art Worlds*, London 2015, 9.

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Sandrine Hyacinthe, presentation at the Archives de la Critique d’Art in Rennes, 7 December 2022; based on her dissertation *L’École de Paris, une histoire sans histoire? L’Art à Paris de 1945 à 1980*, Paris 2016. Hyacinthe cites three articles by Alain Jouffroy: *Situation de la jeune peinture à Paris*, in: *Preuves* 68, 1956, 24; *Le rôle de la jeune peinture*, in: *Preuves* 72, 1957, 54; and *L’École de Paris est-elle condamnée?*, in: *Arts* 26, 1958, 11–13.

The French reception of Pop art is the subject of the American art historian and gallerist Liam Considine's book *American Pop Art in Paris. Politics of the Transatlantic Image* (2020). Considine's text aimed to examine "the dispersion of the Pop image within and beyond the confines of fine art in France, where cultural producers working across a range of media incorporated it as a means to reflect on and resist the onslaught of Americanization – a process of political-economic transformation stemming from the expansion of post-WWII capitalism".⁶ Delivering a history of French art in the 1960s focused on the synthesis of American Pop art and the French tradition of *art engagé*, Considine takes the reader on a chronological tour based on five thematic case studies.

It opens with Warhol's reception in Paris, first at Sonnabend, then by the French artistic movement known as Nouveau Réalisme, in light of the controversial Rauschenberg win in Venice in 1964. A discussion of Jean-Luc Godard's cinematic foray into the Pop aesthetic follows, and then there is a discussion of how the Pop ethos inspired the comics of the Situationist International, and finally an exploration of Pop art's role in the French poster workshops during the revolutionary events of 1968.

For those unfamiliar with the story the book will be a revelation. For the already initiated it is valuable as a record of important dates and developments. Considine was a Tom Crow student and that is evident in his methodology and writing style (which tends toward the precious or overly elaborate), but the scope of the project, with its consideration of film, comics and advertising, is praiseworthy. Nevertheless, it is odd that while Considine recognized that Pop art was the first global art movement, he completely elided the fact that the first Pop art exhibition took place in the UK.⁷

The American art historian Lily Woodruff's *Disordering the Establishment. Participatory and Institutional Critique in France, 1958–1981* (2020) covered the same period, and then some, and as such it serves as a nice compliment to Considine's efforts, though it has a different focus. Her subject is the, "Disorderly situations, conspicuous absences, and institutional contestation which appeared repeatedly as strategies for creating participatory art in France during the 1960s and 70s".⁸ Organized around four mini-monographs dedicated to conceptual artists: the Groupe de Recherche d'Art Visuel, better known as GRAV; Daniel Buren; André Cadere and the Socio-

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Considine, *American Pop Art in Paris*, 3.

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Ibid., 5.

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Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment*, 1.

logical Art Collective, it introduces artists who, with the exception of Buren, are not well known outside of France.⁹

For some of us the subject matter might be heavy going, but in the eternal words of Miss Jean Brodie: “For those who like that sort of thing that is the sort of thing they like.”¹⁰ Certainly, Woodruff has gone all in, and she is a better writer than Considine but her subject is less interesting. The monotonous black and white photos do not help. Since there is no formal analysis, it is not clear why they were included. One of the author’s more notable observations, made in the context of a discussion about whether or not culture can be mandated by government, is: “Culture exceeds institutionalization; it is a logical fallacy to imagine that the government could make people master their own destinies.”¹¹ My inner Wilhelm von Humboldt cries out, “What other reason is there for a state to exist?”, but I digress.¹²

Returning to the subject of formal analysis – the American art historian Molly Warnock’s *Simon Hantaï and the Reserves of Painting* (2020) is a beautiful monograph about the Parisian-based Hungarian painter who was famous for folding up his paintings, then burying them in the ground, before digging them up again and mounting them on stretchers. It is everything the other texts are not: focused, exquisitely written and illustrated in colour, with lots of careful meditations on the artworks themselves. Warnock is easily the best writer in the field, probably because she has read more philosophy than the rest of us, but currently she appears to have the least to say.

Like Catherine Dossin, who edited the impressive anthology *France and the Visual Arts since 1945. Remapping European Postwar and Contemporary Art* (2018), Warnock is a prolific scholar. While Dossin’s work often features lists of facts that do not always convince or cohere, Warnock can be counted on to marshal big ideas with grace and wit. The problem is the quality of Warnock’s writing often surpasses her subject. This is her second book on Hantaï (the first one was *Penser la peinture. Simon Hantaï*, 2012), her third, if you count the exhibition catalogue (2010).¹³ Like her mentor, Michael

9

Buren is perhaps the most famous living French artist and his piece in the Palais Royale, Paris is arguably the most successful piece of conceptual art, period.

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Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Edinburgh 1961.

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Woodruff, *Disordering the Establishment*, 8.

12

Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action* (original German title *Ideen zu einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*), written in the early 1790s, after the French revolution, but not published until 1852.

13

Warnock, *Simon Hantaï and the Reserves of Painting*.

Fried, at the moment she seems stuck on repeat.¹⁴ Even so, in terms of methodology Warnock's books, and recent exhibitions like the fantastic Monet-Mitchell show, curated by the French art historian Susan Pagé (currently showing at the Louis Vuitton foundation in Paris), make the case for an intelligent connoisseurship; or at least an unapologetic art history motivated by the unparalleled joy we sometimes find in works of art.

Now for something completely different: one sentence in Laurel Jean Fredrickson's new monograph *Jean-Jacques Lebel and French Happenings of the 1960s. The Erotics of Revolution* (2021) tells you everything you need to know about her book. "Through the overt transgression of accepted art and action in the 1960s, Lebel made the anal-erotic an ethical metaphor, using what was considered blasphemy and obscenity to battle the hypocrisy of a bourgeois Catholic (and Protestant) capitalist morality that condemned sex but condoned torture as necessary, and exploitation as inevitable."¹⁵ Lebel did not invent happenings of course (Poor France! Foiled again!) – the American artist Allan Kaprow was the first person to use the term in 1957 – but drawing from the traditions of Dada and Surrealism Lebel was definitely at the forefront of artistic experimentation in this vein, at least in Europe. In recent years, he has attracted criticism for his concept of art as buffet/public orgy, particularly in relation to his treatment of women, and Fredrickson does not shy away from this difficult issue, but it is not what motivated the text. Fredrickson's central purpose was to write Lebel into the cannon of postwar art history, and even into history, full stop.

The last chapter proposes that Lebel was one of the unrecognized leaders of the almost revolution of 1968 and goes so far as to present "the events", as the French like to call them, as one gigantic happening. There is a lot more to be said about the state of French art between 1964 and 1968, and the framing of 1968 as an aesthetic or cultural movement, and Fredrickson's last chapter is a breath-taking read. However, like Lebel himself, it is a bit much – a bit much and not enough. While Woodruff's text featured endless black and white images of French conceptual art, *there is not one single image* in Fredrickson's book. Is this American puritanism at its worst or a funding issue? The image on the cover does not even feature Lebel's work! That is a missed opportunity if I ever saw one, for sales alone, considering the subject matter.

Sophie Cras, another French art historian, has mused that it would be nice to have a "world history of art in France" which explored and synthesized the question of what French art owed

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Fried is known for repeating himself, albeit in different books, but two years ago he did something quite out of character, and he should be given credit for it. Though many assumed for decades he was a conservative, in 2021 he came out as a Marxist, and the journal *nonsite.org* devoted a whole issue to the subject. One cannot help but wonder about the timing, or why the journal thought the revelation was worthy of an entire issue. See Michael Fried, *Marxism and Criticism*, in: *nonsite.org* 35, 10 May 2021 (25.02.2023).

¹⁵

Fredrickson, *Jean-Jacques Lebel and French Happenings of the 1960s*, 4.

not just to America, but also to Germany, the Eastern Bloc, Latin America, Asia and elsewhere.¹⁶ It is an excellent point. It is easy to forget, for example, that the Centre Georges Pompidou (better known as the Beaubourg locally), which opened in Paris in 1977, was the first “interactive” art museum in the world, and was designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano and the British architect Richard Rogers. For sure, a general survey text about French postwar art, with an expansive worldview, which treated not only art, but also design, film, fashion and architecture, would be a welcome addition to the bibliography. It would also need to address television and propaganda, specifically Maoist propaganda.

Nineteen-sixty-four was not only the year that the American artist Robert Rauschenberg won the Golden Lion at Venice, stealing it away from the French artist Roger Bissière, it was also the year the French state officially recognized China, and the French interest in China was by no means limited to government circles. The small cultural revolutions that gripped the Western world in the 1960s, from Mexico to Greece, were all inspired by the so-called Great Chinese Proletarian Cultural Revolution that continued unabated for a full decade, between 1966 and 1976. Though France was not the first country to recognize China – that distinction goes to East Germany, in 1949 – Maoism took hold in France with a unique ferocity unseen elsewhere. Possibly because after the war political disillusionment was stronger in France than in other places, which made the French more vulnerable, more susceptible to influence. Therefore, when the Chinese revolutionaries appeared on the horizon, they were welcomed enthusiastically as the natural heirs to the French tradition.

Spellbound by an imaginary revolution that had absolutely nothing to do with what was actually happening on the ground, a large contingent of French writers, philosophers and artists spent the 1960s feverishly translating, discussing and distributing revolutionary Chinese texts and images. Together, sometimes under the guidance of the French philosopher Louis Althusser, students and others participated in a surge of intellectual and cultural activity, creating films, journals, music and literature, which would ulti-

16

See also: Jill Carrick and Deborah Laks (eds.), *Daniel Spoerri. Topographies. Networks of Exchange*, Heidelberg/Paris 2022; Julia Friedrich, *Picasso, Shared and Divided. The Artist and His Image in East and West Germany*, Cologne 2021; Antje Kramer-Mallordy, *L'Aventure allemande du Nouveau Réalisme. Réalités et fantasmes d'une néo-avant-garde européenne 1957–1963*, Dijon 2012; Thomas Kirchner, Antje Kramer-Mallordy and Martin Schneider (eds.), *Hans Hartung et l'Abstraction*, Paris 2020; Mathilde Arnoux, *La réalité en partage. Pour une histoire des relations artistiques entre l'Est et l'Ouest en Europe pendant la guerre froide*, Paris 2018; Fanny Drugeon's recent articles, and the catalogue for Serge Guilbaut's exhibition “Artistes étrangers perdus, libres et aimés à Paris, 1944–1968” (2018–2019). Gemma Sharpe is working on a chapter about the French reception of Pakistani artist Syed Sadequain Ahmed Naqvi, and Pierre Ruault is currently completing a dissertation at Rennes, focused on the appointment of Sweden's Pontus Hultén as the first director of the Beaubourg. The project considers the hiring of Hultén as an acknowledgement of the gap between the leadership of French museums (Dorival, etc.) and the reality of the national, European and international contemporary art scene.

mately help to prepare the ground for 1968 and eventually, the global development of postmodernism.¹⁷

Most people, however, most academics even, have no idea that the majority of French thinkers whom we now associate with postmodernism – such as Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard and Roland Barthes, to name just three examples – were Maoists at one time. Or that French Maoism was/is arguably the origin of what was perhaps France’s most important cultural export during the 1970s and 80s: French theory and postmodernism. Indeed, though French art and artists experienced what might be kindly described as a low point in the postwar years, French theory and theorists experienced an unprecedented wave of popularity; and not just in the world of art and art history – postmodernism has touched every single discipline, everywhere, from anthropology and architecture, to big tech, fashion and even policing. With its obsession with power structures and hierarchies, and its relentless focus on the personal, “Wokeism” is a direct descendent of western Maoism and critical postmodernism.

While there have been a few articles about the significance of Maoism for French art and artists, and in 2020, the open access online art history journal *Selva* dedicated a whole issue to the subject, there is still a lot more work to be done. However, in light of the current political situation, the question needs to be addressed with eyes wide open.¹⁸ To understand the roots of the phenomenon, and the roots of our current situation, there needs to be several new studies devoted to the question of the relationship between European Maoism and postwar art in France, that treat the subject from a variety of political angles. French disillusionment with Maoism may have begun to set in around 1974, but in a sense, it no longer mattered, because by that time, the postmodernist movement clearly had its own momentum nationally and internationally.¹⁹

17

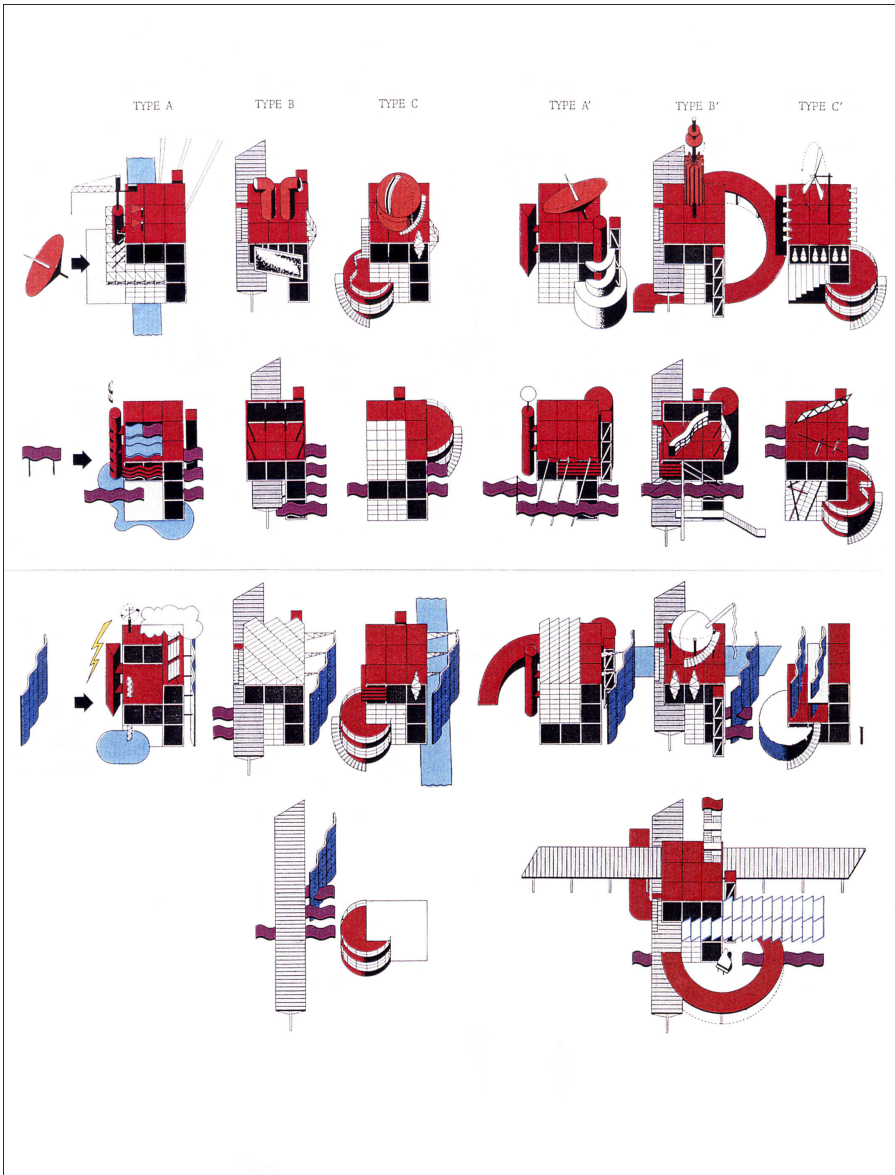
The journal *Les cahiers marxistes-léninistes* produced an issue on art and Marxist-Leninist thought, which became a sort of cult object for radical artists of the period: Art, langue. Lutte des classes, in: *Les cahiers marxistes-léninistes* 12/13, 1966, (12.12.2022). German Professor of transnational American Studies, Alfred Hornung has also written a short article about art, Maoism and postmodernism. He connects it to France but only superficially. See Alfred Hornung, Maoism and Postmodernism, in: *European Review* 23/2, 2015, 261–272.

18

The literature about Maoism and French art includes: Atissa Dorroh’s MA thesis at the Courtauld, *A Territory for the Imagination. Mao’s China in French Painting, 1966–1976* (1998), which was never published, and the three essays in *Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Manchester 2019): Elodie Antoine’s A Secondary Contradiction. Feminist Aesthetics and the Red Room for Vietnam; Allison Myer’s Materialist Translations of Maoism in the Work of Supports/Surfaces; and Sarah Wilson’s Mao, Militancy and Media. Daniel Dezeuze and China from Scroll to (TV) Screen. See also: *Selva. A Journal of the History of Art* 1, 2019 (12.12.2022). It features Jenevive Nykolak’s Painting with Desire. Color after Collectivity, 1972–1974; Sami Siegelbaum’s Painting as Theoretical Practice. Althusser and Supports/Surfaces; and Daniel Spaulding’s, Greenberg avec Mao. Supports/Surfaces and the Specific Contradiction of Painting. There are also brand-new translations of the French artists Pierre Buraglio and Daniel Dezeuze, by Daniel Spaulding and Daniel Marcus, respectively. Daniel Fairfax’s, *The Red Years of Cahiers Du Cinéma 1968–1973*, Amsterdam 2019, should also be mentioned here.

19

Disillusionment was partly due to the fact that news about the reality of what actually happened during the Chinese Cultural Revolution began to arrive in France in the 1970s.



[Fig. 2]
Parc de la Villette, Paris. © Bernard Tschumi Architects, 1983.

French-Swiss architect Bernard Tschumi won an international competition to design the Parc de la Villette in Paris in 1983, with what he has called “The largest deconstructed building in the world, as it’s one building but broken down into many fragments” [Fig. 2].²⁰ Also in 1983, Hal Foster’s seminal text the *Anti-Aesthetic. Essays on Postmodern Culture* was published. Elsewhere I have described that text as a kind of Mao-less Maoism or Mao-light.²¹ When we take the long view, the significance of Maoism arguably eclipses the importance of the US for French art, if only because its influence was so expansive and lasted so long, right up until the present.

The American Literary critic and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson once called postmodernism the cultural logic of late capitalism, but Jameson would say that. It is an open secret that Jameson was and remains a Maoist.²² Actually, as it turns out, post-modernism was the cultural logic of late communism.

However, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipeligo* was translated into French in 1974, and whatever one might think about the text, it created a huge scandal.

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Alyn Griffiths, [Parc de la Villette is the “largest deconstructed building in the world”](#), *Deezen*, 05.05.2022 (07.02.2023).

²¹

Victoria H. F. Scott, Reproducibility, Propaganda and the Chinese Origins of Neoliberal Aesthetics, in: *Art, Global Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution*, Manchester 2019, 335.

²²

A terrific article that completely deconstructs Fredric Jameson’s cultural politics is Guo Jian’s, Resisting Modernity in Contemporary China. The Cultural Revolution and Postmodernism, in: *Modern China* 25/3, 1999, 343–372.