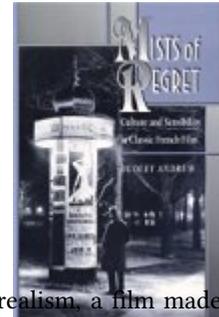


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Dudley Andrew. *Mists of Regret*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1995. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-691-00883-7; \$82.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-05686-9.

Reviewed by Emily Zants (University of Hawaii)
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An essential study for anyone dealing with poetic realism (1936-1939) in French film, it places the brief but classic movement in its historical and cultural context. It dispels the idea that poetic realism was an outgrowth of the Popular Front, tracing a lineage that passes through impressionism and surrealism. The role of the cultural climate as one receptive to the “atmosphere” that pervades these films, the production techniques – especially in set design that immigrants had brought to France – the joint participation of musicians, and finally, and perhaps essentially, the coincidental collaboration of director Carne, poet Prevert and actor Gabin are all analyzed as contributing factors. Andrew refers to his approach as an “optique” involving “the specification of audience expectations, needs, and uses.” He perceives an “optique” as “a sensibility, a function, and a mode of address” rather than a genre or a style.

Poetic realism is defined as films with “evocative locations, characters from the lower social class, a downbeat ending, [] a quartet of fabulous actors” (3), a movement away from action and toward milieu and one with a restricted rather than omniscient point of view. “The movement coheres in the way it conceives its audience,” namely by dark pessimism, appealing to the emotions, not the intellect, with passive protagonists (234).

The first 6 chapters trace the influences and cultural currents that started before sound, deal with Clair, Vigo, and Pagnol, looking at the state of the film industry in the early 30s, the theatrical entertainment tradition and the novel as a basis for the cultural climate. In Andrew’s view, the Popular Front and poetic realism were simultaneous phenomena. Chapters 7-9 deal specifically with “realism” and “poetry” as well as Renoir’s ubiquitous presence with an analysis of *La Bête Humaine* as his

film most representative of poetic realism, a film made when Renoir had rejected his political allegiance to the Popular Front. Renoir, he admits, far exceeds the boundaries of any one movement and particularly that of poetic realism by his expansiveness and his bon-vivant nature. Carne’s *Les Enfants du Paradis* is treated as at once the apotheosis of poetic realism and a betrayal, a betrayal in that it is theatrical and asks more for an audience’s admiration than experiential involvement.

In an attempt to answer the question “Can something of the sensibility of poetic realism live on in a culture markedly different from that which produced it?”, Andrew considers *Casque d’Or*, and *Jonas qui aura 25 ans en l’an 2000*. He sets the stage for a more thorough study of “atmosphere” in later films which might include Chabrol’s use of quiet country towns as settings for his murders (*The Butcher*, for instance). But what of *A River Ran Through It* or *Nobody’s Fool* from the American culture? In these, as in poetic realism: “An idealized poeticized reality encourages viewers to measure the reach and aspiration of their own ordinary lives, to look for the picturesque details in their own homes and neighborhoods” (5). As Andrew notes, Gremillon had discovered the use of “atmosphere” in Griffith’s *Broken Blossoms*. If one gets away from the specific connection of poetic realism to the Popular Front, which Andrew effectively proves to be non-causal, is poetic realism not even more pervasive?

As Andrew points out, prior to poetic realism, dialogue, characters and events predominated film, as in the theater. Poetic realism could well have been the building block that sensitized later directors to the use of atmosphere and milieu as a major, even critical, component of film. His study provides a major foundation for any

exploration in this direction.

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