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Tel Quel in Manhattan: America and the French avant-garde, 1960-82.

I. *Tel Quel's* voyages out

Any account of the transmission and reception of French theory across the Atlantic has at its disposal a conveniently dated and located event. At the instigation of René Girard, who was already established in the United States, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes, Jean Hyppolite, Lucien Goldmann and Jacques Derrida were invited to speak at the International Colloquium on Critical Languages and the Sciences of Man at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in 1966. The story of French theory's 'Conquest of the West' is well-known: the delegation was meant to introduce the American audience to the intricacies of structuralism, the great vogue of French intellectual life, but instead, Derrida's paper, 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines' most fired the imaginations of the American participants, among them Paul de Man. In a supposedly defining moment, then, American thought skipped a generation, passing over the rigours of structuralism, opting instead for the playfulness of deconstruction. While the advocates of structuralism returned to Paris with a few converts, Derrida had established a permanent beachhead, his insights embraced in American universities long before they were widely recognized in France. An old story, hardly worth retelling.¹

In the same year, a somewhat less renowned (then and now) trio of French writers from the left bank went seeking their fortunes in the New World. Francis Ponge, Marcelin Pleynet and Jean Thibaudeau travelled independently of each other, but all shared an affiliation with the Parisian journal *Tel Quel*. Ponge, an influential but still little known poet, generally recognized as the *parrain* (godfather) of the *Tel Quel* group, had the previous year spent semesters teaching at Barnard College (New York) and Connecticut College (New London), and was in 1966 on the university lecture circuit. Pleynet, poet, art critic and *secrétaire de rédaction* of *Tel Quel* from 1963-82, was teaching a seminar on Lautréamont at Northwestern University in Illinois and in his spare time scouring the

galleries of New York for catalogues of American painting. The novelist and playwright Thibaudeau, a member of the editorial committee of *Tel Quel* from 1960-71, had, with the help of Ponge, secured two semesters work at Connecticut College, where he taught survey courses on French literature.

In the history of the trans-Atlantic traffic in ideas, this first, informally organized, expedition by *Tel Quel* was hardly auspicious, if the reports made by Pleynet and Ponge are anything to go by. Philippe Forest, in *Histoire de Tel Quel 1960-1982*, reproduces a letter from each to Philippe Sollers, the presiding force at the journal. Ponge's priorities are equally divided between the mercenary and the missionary in his epistle of November 8th:

Notre retour est fixé au 21 ou au 22 janvier (nos poches bien remplies, espérons-le, de façon qu'il ne soit plus trop question de voyages avant longtemps). Cependant, il ne se peut pas que notre insistance, ici, à enfoncer le clou *Tel Quel* dans les têtes auxquelles nous avons affaire, ne finisse pas – étant donné la relative mollesse de ces têtes et leur aptitude à se laisser convaincre – par obtenir quelques 'résultats' intéressants ou mettons seulement quelques 'répercussions'. Pleynet et Thibaudeau, chacun à sa façon, montrent ici, chaque fois qu'ils se montrent (et c'est aussi souvent qu'ils le peuvent, vraiment), *Tel Quel* en chair et en os, et en action.

Our return is fixed for the 21st or 22nd of January (our pockets so full of cash, we hope, that there will be no need for a return trip in the near future). In the meantime, we carry on the good work, driving the *Tel Quel* nail into every head we come across; and given the softness of the heads and their willingness to be convinced of anything, this should yield some interesting 'results' or at least 'repercussions'. Pleynet and Thibaudeau, each in their fashion, show, each time they

go on show (and it's truly as often as they can) *Tel Quel* in flesh and blood, and in action. (269)²

Pleynet is less hopeful of converting his students at Evanston: '[Mes étudiants] écoutent ce cours sur Lautreámont avec les yeux hors de la tête. Les 99/100 de ce que je dis sont perdus, mais le germe est semé et ceux qui viendront ici après pourront cultiver la chose – à moins qu'il ne meure – sur le plan de la pensée, ce pays aura bientôt un siècle de retard.' '[My students] listen to my lectures on Lautreámont with their eyes popping out of their heads. 99% of what I say is lost on them, but the seed is sown, and those who come after me might be able to cultivate it, as long as it doesn't die straightaway – in terms of thought, this country is at least a century behind' (270). The perennially impoverished Ponge can be forgiven for wanting to relieve wealthy American universities of a few of their dollars. Pleynet is probably not even aware that his metaphor of the European seed finding barren soil in America reproduces an eighteenth-century slander leveled by natural historians such as the Comte de Buffon and Abbé Raynal, who held that the continent was too hot and soggy to be fertile³; Pleynet, in any case, had little time for college students – he was more keen on MOMA and the abstract expressionists, whom he thought were decidedly *ahead* of European artists. Thibaudeau, for his part, claims to have taught his course 'avec joie' and relished visiting museums in Boston, Philadelphia, Washington, at least as he recounts it in his memoirs. (117) Nevertheless, this other delegation of '66 hardly met with the same successes as the conference participants in Baltimore.

And yet, in spite of the pessimism of Pleynet and Ponge, the *Tel Quel* seed (or nail, if we follow Ponge) did not die, and within a few years the offers of university positions came thick and fast, for the most part to be declined because of Vietnam, since the radical *telqueliens* were loath in that period to accept money from a compromised imperialist

nation.⁴ However, as the United States gradually withdrew its troops from Indochina, the *telquelians* began to answer the demands from America, most notably in the case of Julia Kristeva, who had arrived in Paris from Bulgaria in late 1965 and was to join the *TQ* editorial board in 1970. The migration of French theorists and their ideas to American institutions has been widely documented and analysed. Kelly Oliver, for instance, outlines thoroughly in *Reading Kristeva* the process of translation into English of Kristeva's writing through the 1970s, an 'importation' which saw Kristeva's work in many ways misapprehended and adapted for local disputes (163-80). But North America (Thibaudeau and another member of the *Tel Quel* collective, Jean Ricardou, later spent time at Laval University in Quebec) was not simply a pecuniary opportunity for the journal's members, nor does an account of the reception, and for many, distortion, of their ideas in American universities give a full picture of the trans-Atlantic exchange that was taking place. For at least some of the *telquelians* who made their way west, or who encountered American art and literature in France, America posed distinct theoretical problems of its own. America, to borrow the words of a non-*telquelien*, was 'good to think with'. *Tel Quel's* engagement with the American problematic is most thoroughly carried out in the special triple issue in 1977 dedicated to the United States, but that was by no means the first or only such engagement. As Patrick ffrench points out in a recent interview with Marcelin Pleynet, the interest was longstanding (Pleyne, Interview 20).

It is thanks in large part to the efforts of ffrench and his co-editor of *The Tel Quel Reader*, Roland-François Lack, that a fuller sense of the history of *Tel Quel* has lately become available to Anglo-American readers. *Tel Quel* has always been known as the main tribune of post-structuralist theory, publishing much of the later work of Roland Barthes in its 'Collection Tel Quel', and nurturing the talents of Derrida and Kristeva among other figures very familiar to an English-speaking world; however, in the *Tel Quel Reader*

and in French's *The Time of Theory* and in a special issue of *parallax*, the history of the journal as a journal, with background on the minor as well as the major players, has come to light. French and Lack are not alone in exploring in the past decade the intricacies of *Tel Quel*. Philippe Forest's magisterial history of the journal emerged shortly after Thibaudeau's memoir and Kristeva's novelisation of the *Tel Quel* moment in *The Samurai*; and Danielle Marx-Scouras and Niilo Kauppi both published book-length studies in the 1990s. It is within the space opened by such work that I propose to investigate not the main trajectory of the journal by any means, but one of the many by-ways pursued by *Tel Quel* from its formation through to its demise. The journal's shifting conceptualizations of America can be measured against its own notorious and frequent changes of programme, and are of interest not the least because for the *telqueliens*, as for Hegel in *The Philosophy of History* (87), America was the land of the future.

II. 1970s: unconscious America

'Pourquoi les États-Unis?' This is the question the editorial committee of *Tel Quel*, represented by Julia Kristeva, Marcelin Pleynet and Philippe Sollers, set itself in 1977 at the opening of the special triple issue of the avant-garde journal. In the panel discussion between the three, Kristeva gives the most coherent and provocative justification for the 250-odd pages dedicated to America in the year after the bi-centenary celebrations (which are not, incidentally, cited as an occasion for the issue). She explains the turn in terms of a desire for *difference*, comparing her interest in America with both her move from Bulgaria to France and her subsequent intellectual investment in China, an investment shared by the entire *Tel Quel* group in the early 1970s. She says, 'C'est donc par curiosité et par désir de découvrir une autre solution de l'impasse occidentale que je me suis envolée deux fois [...] aux États-Unis' (3) 'It was [...] out of curiosity and the desire to discover some other solution to the impasse of the West that made me fly off

twice to the United States' ('Why the US?' 273). In other words, America offers another opportunity for *Tel Quel* to 'think otherwise', to de-centre via otherness the constricting European metaphysical tradition. America, then, is to fulfill much the same function that Japan performs for Roland Barthes in *L'Empire des signes* (1970), part of which was originally published in *Tel Quel* in 1968. Japan, according to Barthes, represents 'un système symbolique [...] entièrement dépris du nôtre [...] c'est la possibilité d'une différence, d'une mutation, d'une révolution dans la propriété des systèmes symboliques' (10) 'a symbolic system ... altogether detached from our own [I]t is the possibility of a difference, of a mutation, of a revolution in the propriety of symbolic systems' (*Empire of Signs* 3).

Kristeva is particularly taken with American artistic practice, which she claims is consistently more experimental than in Europe, and crucially, is not primarily linguistic:

Eh bien, ce sont des pratiques artistiques *non verbales*. Les Américains me semblent exceller, aujourd'hui, et pousser très à fond et très loin et beaucoup plus radicalement que cela ne se fait en Europe, tout ce qui relève du geste, de la couleur et du son. J'ai assisté à plusieurs expositions ou spectacles, aussi bien d'avant-garde reconnue que l'under-ground dans les lofts du Saloon du village, qui attirent beaucoup de jeunes: j'avais l'impression d'être dans les catacombes des premiers chrétiens [...] Ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font; ils n'adhèrent pas verbalement c'est-à-dire consciemment et analytiquement [...] ce qu'ils effectuent. Quand ça se parle, ça ne correspond pas à ce qui se fait en geste, couleur et son. ('Pourquoi les ÉU?' 4-5)

For they are *non-verbal*. The Americans today seem to me to excel in any research into gesture, colour and sound, which they pursue in great depth and scope and much more radically than is done in Europe. I attended several exhibitions or performances, both of the recognized avant-garde and of the underground in the lofts and cellars of the Village, which attract many young people, and I felt as though I were in the catacombs of the early Christians [...] They aren't aware of what they're doing: they don't have a verbal, that is to say, conscious and analytical

[...] connection to what they are doing. When they do say something in these performances, it does not correspond to what is done in gesture, colour and sound. (275, translation modified)

It is not always wise to draw far-reaching conclusions based on comments made in interviews and discussions such as these because of the impromptu nature of the format, but it is legitimate to do so here, for the opening of ‘Why the United States?’ is effectively a recapitulation of Kristeva’s essay ‘D’Ithaca à New York’, published in 1974 in *Tel Quel*’s satellite journal *Promesse* and then again in 1977 in her *Polylogue*. In that essay she describes the US as ‘Une culture entière, neuve, vivante, qui se produit sans se parler’ (An entire culture, new, alive, that produces itself without speaking) and goes on, ‘[d]ans la pénombre, face aux traces d’Artaud ou du surréalisme, mais inventées a neuf, j’imaginai les catacombs des premiers chrétiens: sauf qu’à ce commencement-ci, s’il en est un, le Verbe n’est pas.’ ([i]n the half-light, watching Artaud and Surrealism being reinvented, I imagined myself in the catacombs of the early Christians: except at this beginning, if it is one, there is no Word) (500).

Kristeva is clearly taken with what she perceives as *primitive* and *unconscious* in American art, a move entirely consonant with the long-term interests of *Tel Quel*, which had consistently reexamined the texts and strategies of modernism, a movement whose engagements with the primitive and the unconscious are well known, even if, for them, the primitive was to the south or east of Europe rather than to the west. That is not to say that Kristeva has taken up a novel position here by associating Americans with the primitive, for the European myth of the delightfully (or frighteningly) primitive American stretches back to a ‘discovery’ which ante-dates Kristeva’s by some five centuries.

Nevertheless, we can see in this report the appeal of these ‘non-verbal’ American artists for Kristeva: they illustrate an important distinction between the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘semiotic’ she had worked out previously in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974). The

symbolic, or language, is ‘a social effect of the relation to the other, established through [...] differences and [...] structures’ (96-7), while the semiotic is non-verbal and ‘precedes the establishment of the sign’ and ‘is not, therefore, cognitive in the sense of being assumed by a knowing, already constituted subject.’(95) Americans, according to Kristeva, excel in the latter ‘modality’, but struggle in the former.

Whereas Chinese had fascinated *Tel Quel* in the early 1970s as a non-phonetic and non-Western language, America is embraced in 1977 as a place where language, in art at least, is pushed into the background, to be replaced by experimentation in the visual and aural fields. As French and Lack have pointed out, the interest in the United States coincided with *Tel Quel*'s departure from its “‘high” grammatological phase’, its movement ‘beyond the writing principle’ (7). Appropriately, then, the special issue bypasses for the most part American literature.⁵ Instead there are essays by Tom Bishop and Guy Scarpetta on American performance art, interviews with dancer-choreographers Merce Cunningham and Viola Farber, a series of ‘Responses’ from Robert Wilson, a theatre director well-known for subjugating language to a bit-part in his painterly *mises-en-scène*, a letter from film director Michael Snow, and an essay on the abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell by Marcelin Pleynet. All of these pieces serve to support Kristeva’s contention that Americans (or at least New Yorkers, which is what most *telquelians* understood by Americans) are adept at ‘any research into gesture, colour and sound.’

Scarpetta’s piece, ‘Le corps américain’, which effectively closes out the issue, confirms Kristeva’s contentious theses about American art and culture. Just as Kristeva looks to the United States for a solution to the ‘impasse of the West’, Scarpetta sees in American experimental theatre a solution to the impasse of the European stage. The ruptures marked by the names of Brecht and Artaud have, according to Scarpetta, either been

ignored or restricted to strictly formal effects in European theatre since the war (248-9; 215-17). Where European theatre fails to break from the ‘illustrative’ and ‘expressive’ model and makes no real effort to test ‘la contradiction entre la représentation et la mise-en-scène’ (257), the American directors Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman and the dancer Meredith Monk succeed. For Scarpetta in 1977, theatrical experimentation means taking advantage of the non-linguistic possibilities of theatre, of the use it makes of bodies in space and time, of its potential for *dépense* (expenditure - an allusion to Bataille). This sort of experimentation is more likely to take place in America because of certain conditions which prevail there. He names four, of which the third is the most striking:

La toute-puissance, malgré tout, d’un certain ‘fond’ matriarcal [...] permettant, au travers d’expériences ‘esthétiques’, l’exploration de tout un versant pré-symbolique (comme directement branché sur le corps maternel), rythmique, musical, spatial, coloré. Là où l’accès à la langue, au sens, à la symbolisation de ces expériences semble [...] faire impasse – se déploie une prolifération de pratiques au sein des ‘visual arts’ (peinture, théâtre, danse): franchissement de limites, invention d’espaces, de rythmes, dérives, portées par une longueur d’onde à dimension perverse [...] ou psychotisante – en tout cas: exploration vertigineuse d’un ‘continent muet’. (250)

The omnipotence, in spite of everything, of a certain matriarchal ‘base’ [...] allowing for the exploration, through ‘aesthetic’ experiments, of a whole pre-symbolic field (as if directly plugged into the maternal body) consisting of rhythm, music, space and colour. In the very same place where the access to language, to meaning, and to symbolization of these experiments seems blocked [...] there is an active proliferation of practices within the ‘visual arts’ (painting, theatre, dance): breaking of limits, invention of spaces and rhythms, deviations [...] exaggerated to a perverse, quasi-psychotic degree – the vertiginous exploration, in any case, of a ‘silent continent’. (217-18)

Scarpetta’s view of America clearly coincides with Kristeva’s; and a distinct *Tel Quel* position on the ‘pre-symbolic’ continent emerges. The mistake would be to assume that this position is *simply* patronising. The *telqueliens* themselves want to explore the ‘whole

pre-symbolic field', and the fact that the experiments are 'quasi-psychotic' would hardly deter an avant-garde dedicated to limit experiences. However, it is hard to tell whether Scarpetta and Kristeva are content to leave to the Americans such adventures in the non-verbal, or are themselves interested in becoming-American.

Toril Moi suggests that the 'silent continent' may in fact be just another opportunity for verbalization by *Tel Quel*: 'The American reader [...] may feel scandalized at the Parisian trio's somewhat condescending description of the non-verbalized American void, which supposedly is crying out to be filled with the discourse of European (French?) intellectuals' (272). The trio does ask itself in 'Pourquoi les États-Unis?' why, in Kristeva's words, 'on se sent appelés' 'we feel we are being called' by the 'trou de verbalisation' 'gap in verbalization' (9; 281), and the incomplete answers they give indicate that their main concern is indeed, What can America do for us? Pleynet, for instance, has a fairly conventional notion of America as a release from the quotidian: 'lorsqu'on arrive aux États-Unis on erre beaucoup plus facilement et on erre avec un liberté qu'on ne rencontre absolument nulle part ailleurs' (13) 'When one arrives in the United States one drifts around very easily, with a liberty found absolutely nowhere else' (285). To Pleynet's vision of American mobility, Kristeva adds, in 'Mémoire' (published in the first issue of *L'Infini*, which replaced *Tel Quel*), a picture of imperial riches: 'Le climat alexandrin, cosmopolite et decadent de New York me donne toujours [...] l'impression d'une Rome tardive. Je ne trouve rien de plus stimulant pour le travail que ces séjours outre-Atlantique' (53) 'The Alexandrine, cosmopolitan, decadent climate of New York City always gives me [...] the impression of a latter-day Rome; I find nothing more stimulating to my work than those sojourns across the Atlantic' ('Memory's Hyperbole' 20). America is enabling then, a site of intellectual exploration, and the non-verbal Americans are productive for thinking across, but there is no question of

collapsing the difference between the self-aware European traveller and the alien continent being visited. Americans are kept at a distance in the same way that Roland Barthes, wrapped up in self-interrogation, preoccupied with the mutations in his own symbolic systems, keeps semiotically rich Japan at a distance. In fact, Kristeva sounds remarkably like Barthes when she writes, in ‘D’Ithaca à New York’, ‘Entendre les discours des autres, c’est exposer le langage “propre” à la violence la plus violente. Les autres empêchent que mon discours devienne un “code absolu”, et provoquent la langue à produire un autre dispositif, une autre “forme” (conceptuelle, discursive).’ (To hear the discourses of others is to expose one’s “proper” language to the utmost violence. Encountering others prevents my own discourse from becoming an “absolute code”, and brings about another scene, another (conceptual, discursive) “form”) (513).

And yet, at the same time, there is a tacit approval of American political models and the implication that Europe might learn from them. While they are not blind to the corruption of American politics (Watergate looms large at this juncture) and they recognize the violence of American interventions around the globe, the *telqueliens* nonetheless insist that the very plurality of the US population works against totalitarian structures. Pleyner claims that it is ‘constitué d’une multiplicité d’ethnies et de langues et [...] c’est certainement cette multiplicité qui ne parvient pas à donner à la forme de l’État les structures répressives qu’elle peut avoir partout dans le monde’ (‘Pourquoi les ÉU?’ 11) ‘composed of many ethnic groups and languages, whose very multiplicity does not manage to provide the state with the same repressive structures it can have elsewhere in the world’ (282). Kristeva sees in the same dispersal of languages and ‘logique de clivages’, the possible lesson for Europeans of the ‘American way of life’, that is, ‘la seule façon ... d’aménager un espace antitotalitaire de survie réelle sur la planète’ (the last chance for the survival of an anti-totalitarian space on the planet) (‘Ithaca - New York’

506). Therefore, not a socialist utopia, a dream left behind with China, but a democratic ‘polytopia’. At the level of artistic practice, then, *Tel Quel* embraces the United States for its experiments in the pre-symbolic, while at the level of the polity it is the exact opposite – an explosion of discourses, a babelization – which proves so attractive.

If we wished to be skeptical about this lurch westwards by *Tel Quel*, we could mark it down as just one more of its ‘successive enthusiasms,’ to use the words of Pierre Bourdieu (xii). The new ‘enthusiasm’ for the United States is all the more remarkable if we consider the *volte-face* it constitutes from the previous enthusiasm. What greater cultural and political difference could be imagined than the one between Maoist China and capitalist USA? Unsympathetic observers on the left were quick to say that the journal’s sudden Atlanticism, in the words of Marx-Scouras, ‘merely confirmed the group’s abdication of Marxism in favour of monopoly-capitalism and imperialism’ (198), and Jérôme Bindé, in a review of the issue in *Le Monde*, accused *Tel Quel* of ‘chic liberal pessimism’ (cited in Marx-Scouras 198). Such blanket condemnations simply ignore Kristeva’s attempts to understand capitalism in the United States as ‘un système de récupération permanente, de replâtrage de crise’ (Pourquoi ÉU? 3) ‘a system of permanent recuperation, of patching-up of crisis’ (‘Why the US?’ 274); but it is nevertheless true that the intellectuals of *Tel Quel* could expect considerable gains from relations with American universities in particular. Kristeva had, since 1973, shared a personal chair at Columbia University with Umberto Eco and Tzvetan Todorov; Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, both formerly associated with the journal, were in the process of establishing long-term affiliations with Berkeley and Yale; Jean-Joseph Goux made the move permanently to Brown University; and even Sollers, by his own proud admission *illisible* in French and little known in Anglophone circles, was invited on a lecturing tour of the United States in 1976. Officially unaffiliated (as a group) with any

university in France, the *telqueliens* eventually found an eager and receptive campus audience in America. At the risk of being reductive, then, we could say that *Tel Quel* turned to the United States for the same reason that many others have in the past – to take its goods to market. There is certainly some substance to this argument, and at least one historian of *Tel Quel*, Niilo Kauppi, has managed to interpret the entire influential output of the journal in terms of the cultural capital collected by its contributors over its 22-year history (364-73). In the face of such Bourdieu-inspired distinction-tallying, though, it is necessary to consider the entire history of the journal's relations with American culture, which by no means began in 1977.

III. 1960s: The flight of modernity

The first mention of America in the mercurial Parisian *revue* is in 1960 in *TQ 2*, and although it is brief it is worth pointing out because it directly contradicts the view of primitive, 'non-verbal', unconscious America put forward by Kristeva and Scarpetta in 1977. In an unsigned piece entitled 'Petit dictionnaire des idées reçues 1960', which glosses various nationalities and the stereotypes associated with them, we find '*Les Américains*: sont de grands enfants'. The little dictionary ironically debunks a series of petit bourgeois mythologies, and this entry correctly identifies the most worn out received notion about Americans – that they are naïve, innocent, youthful. In other words, in 1960 *Tel Quel* dismisses precisely the myth which Kristeva resurrects in a much more sophisticated form in 1977 when she praises American artists for their work in 'gesture, colour and sound' as if they were so many infants – fascinated by spinning black and white mobiles, testing out newfound vocal chords.

In order to understand how *Tel Quel* comes full circle like this, it is useful to break down into three phases its changing perspective on the United States. In the period 1960-66

Tel Quel regularly published short commentaries on American poetry, prose and visual arts as well as writings by or interviews with Americans. From 1967-73, during the height of American involvement in Vietnam, and during *Tel Quel's* most radical Marxist/Maoist phase, interest in American writers dried up dramatically, but attacks on 'Yankee capitalism' and 'imperialism' pepper the pages of the journal. Finally, from 1973 until 1982, when *Tel Quel* was reborn as *L'Infini*, American artistic practice once again attracts attention, and now American critics like Susan Sontag, Shoshana Felman and Jeffrey Mehlman publish in the journal. Like any form of periodisation, this one has its limitations, and some of the theses proposed in the first phase will reappear in 1977, but as a device for orientation, it is useful.

In the first period it was mainly Marcelin Pleyne, *secrétaire de rédaction* of *Tel Quel* for most of its life, and Denis Roche, another member of the editorial collective, who were responsible for the promotion of American literature and art they felt had been undeservedly neglected in Paris. Pleyne was particularly interested in abstract expressionism and, with Roche, in the poetry and poetics of Ezra Pound. Pleyne wrote about Paris exhibitions by Robert Rauschenberg, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and the sculptor David Smith; the journal published previously untranslated parts of Pound's *Cantos* as well as his essay on 'The art of poetry'; it published poetry by John Ashbery and Robert Creeley and made available in French for the first time Charles Olson's manifesto on 'Projective Verse'. Nabokov, Hemingway, Burroughs, and Cummings all feature in one way or another during this period.

In its early years *Tel Quel* was interested in testing the limits of poetic and literary language, and many of its examples came from the United States. The sense that there was common cause with American writers in the avant-garde project of experimentation

is confirmed by the fact that in 1962 *Tel Quel* announced the launch of a poetry review, *Traverses I*, with John Ashbery, James Bishop, Pleynet and Roche on the editorial committee. The historian of *Tel Quel*, Philippe Forest, tells us that this project never saw the light of day (135), but it is nevertheless clear that at this stage *Tel Quel* thought of Americans as collaborators and equals in artistic experimentation, a position somewhat at odds with the tone of the 1977 special issue in which Americans are not aware what they are doing, but just do it, unconsciously.⁶

Nowhere is the thesis about the primitiveness of American art more robustly contested than in Pleynet's essay on Franz Kline in *Tel Quel* 19 (Autumn 1964). He accepts the art critic Harold Rosenberg's term for the abstract expressionists – *franc-tireurs* – but goes on to say

Il est beaucoup plus difficile de suivre H. Rosenberg lorsqu'il prétend que l'art, aux États-Unis, se présente le plus souvent comme un art primitif... il entretient là une mythologie des plus détestables. Pour reprendre sa figure du franc-tireur, il conviendra volontiers je pense qu'elle ne s'applique ni aux sauvages (bons ou mauvais) ni aux primitifs, mais que le franc-tireur appartient [...] à une minorité qui lutte [...] contre une force qui lui est nettement supérieure.

It is much more difficult to follow Rosenberg when he claims that American art is most characteristically primitive... because he thereby reproduces a truly pernicious mythology. If we take his term, the *franc-tireur*, it should be obvious that it applies neither to savages (good or bad), nor to primitives, but that the *franc-tireur* belongs [...] to a minority who are struggling [...] against a clearly superior force. (89)⁷

Instead of the 'pernicious mythology' of the primitive American artist, Pleynet in these years consistently seeks filiations between Europeans and Americans: Rauschenberg's painting is compared with the poetry of Denis Roche (*TQ* 13); Merce Cunningham is linked with Artaud, and William Burroughs with Genet (*TQ* 18). And in an unsigned

piece to mark the death of Hemingway, *Tel Quel* effectively claims that without the American novelist, the *nouveau roman* might not have been possible:

rien de ce que nous aimons ou cherchons dans la littérature d'aujourd'hui ne pourrait se concevoir sans quelque rencontre ou quelque parenté secrète avec le meilleur Hemingway [...] un refus de signification psychologique, et au-delà peut-être un refus de toute signification, cette entreprise radicale de déflation, de réduction sémantique ne procède-t-elle pas autant d'Hemingway que de Kafka?

nothing that we admire or hope for in literature today could have been conceived of without some encounter with or secret link by way of the best in Hemingway. [...] The refusal of psychological signification, and beyond that even the refusal of signification altogether, this radical enterprise of deflation, of semantic reduction, does it not follow on as much from Hemingway as from Kafka? ('Relire Hemingway' 95)

The early *Tel Quel* treated Americans as fellow travellers in their project of experimentation because they thought of them as surrogate Europeans, as inheritors of a set of European aesthetic problems. Or rather, as Pleynet puts it in a recent interview, 'What struck me right away in American culture was that everything was at once the same and different. A number of artists, writers and intellectuals (far from being the most minor) had fled fascist Europe for the States. Neither the war, nor its aftermath, were the same there as here.' (21) So, while he emphasises the difference of America, it is a difference based on a transplantation, what Sollers in 'Pourquoi les États-Unis?' calls the European 'graft' on the American continent. (8-9; 280-2)⁸ More precisely, World War II did not so much induce the flight of European traditions and culture to America, but the departure there of a specific modernity which was in formation across Europe. This case is made most fully by Pleynet in his essay 'De la culture moderne' (1976) published in his *Art et littérature* (1977). He cites a series of exiles (Breton, Ernst, Duchamp, Masson, Dali,

Mondrian, Gropius, Brecht, Schönberg) and contends that their exodus was due to the incompatibility of fascism and modern culture; these figures did not import to America their national cultures, but a transcultural phenomenon, the modern, which impacted in America mainly on the plastic arts rather than literature (239-40). According to Pleynet, modern American painting only really begins in 1939-40 with the arrival of the surrealists and their notions of 'automatic writing' and 'psychic automatism', techniques appropriated and modified by American artists.

For Pleynet, abstract expressionism cannot be understood without taking into account how it breaks with surrealism, jettisoning its theory but appropriating its methods. And just as de Kooning, Pollock, Rothko, Motherwell, were admired for breaking from European models, so PopArt and the beatniks were dismissed for failing to do so. These two movements, writes Pleynet in an essay on the avant-garde,

ont en commun d'avoir trouver leur statut dans un pays où les vertus révolutionnaires sont autant que je sache soigneusement contrôlées [...] tous deux jouant la transgression et la modernité, se trouvent accueillis par la gauche européenne, qui en ce domaine comme en bien d'autres feint de croire que la répétition de son passé est garante de son avenir.

emerge from a country where revolutionary qualities, as far as I can tell, are kept carefully under control [...] both play at transgression and modernity, and find themselves embraced by the European Left, which in this domain, as in many others, fools itself that the repetition of its past is a guarantee of its future. ('Problèmes de l'avant-garde' 84)

For Pleynet, then, the European avant-garde continues in the United States by, paradoxically, refusing to ape Europe. On the French publication of *Naked Lunch*, Pleynet berated the publishers for saying the novel is 'traduit de l'anglais' when in fact it

is written in something entirely different, ‘newyorkais’, and yet at the same time he links Burroughs with Genet. There is of course also a move here to distance American art from any British origins. For instance, of Ezra Pound, Denis Roche writes, ‘Malgré Robert Frost [...] qui voulait assujettir la nouvelle poésie américaine à la rigoureuse métrique anglo-saxonne, Pound va opérer une véritable révolution poétique.’ ‘In spite of Robert Frost [...] who wanted to subjugate the new American poetry to a rigorous Anglo-Saxon metrics, Pound brought about a genuine poetic revolution’ (Pour Ezra Pound’ 20) In any case, there is no question, in this first ‘America *tel quel*’ of a primitive, unconscious, silent continent; instead, American art is *modern art*, a strange hybrid of European aesthetic questions and a new continent.

IV. Primitive *and* avant-garde

In its various incarnations, *Tel Quel*'s America was inevitably based on selection, on privileging certain aspects of American culture over others. Two notable gaps in their account of America are particularly worth mentioning. First, the *telqueliens*, as has been noted, were distinctly Manhattan-bound in their perspective of the United States. In this, they went against the grain of post-1945 French visions of America, as Jean-Philippe Mathy explains: ‘While New York, Chicago, and the Deep South were the favorite objects of French interpretations in the 1920s and 1930s, the West Coast became the new locus of American mythologies after WWII’ (197) When Lyotard eulogizes American space in *Le mur du Pacifique* (1979), it is to California he turns, and although Baudrillard passes through New York in *America* (1986), it is in Los Angeles and especially the desert that he truly discovers the nature of the simulating and blank continent. For the narcissistic *telqueliens*, New York is the key American locus because of its artistic scene, its avant-garde which at once reminds them of their own (of themselves) and seems strange in its primitiveness. The second area of neglect by *Tel*

Quel is the obverse face of this fascination with the American avant-garde, such as it is. Unlike most French commentators on America, from Georges Duhamel bemoaning the spiritual emptiness of the Movies, to Jean Baudrillard delighting in Disneyland, the *telquelians* have remarkably little to say about American popular/mass culture, which for so many is the defining factor in American culture.⁹ There are two notable exceptions: in *TQ* 52 (1972), Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin published 'Enquête sur une image', a caustic analysis of the famous photo of Jane Fonda in Hanoi, written in the form of a letter to the star (effectively a prose version of their filmic essay, *Lettre à Jane* [1972]); and in *TQ* 66 (1976) an extraordinary celebration of American comics by Alain Rey, who finds in *Krazy Kat*, *Pogo* and Robert Crumb a radical signifying practice. Tellingly though, Godard, Gorin and Rey were not part of the *Tel Quel* collective, and these were their only contributions to the journal. Godard, of course, was more usually associated with *Cahiers du cinéma*; and the presence of this journal, as well as *Cinéthique*, may have dissuaded *Tel Quel* from straying into investigations of Hollywood or even European cinema, but it is more likely that there was simply very little interest in the culture industry among the mandarins at *Tel Quel*.¹⁰

To ignore mass culture in their versions of America may reveal the cultural biases of *Tel Quel*, but is not necessarily a failing, for it allows the journal to sidestep the usual matrix of thought applied to the 'menace in the West', so often dismissed by the smug or anxious European intellectual as barbaric or vulgar. Rather than mass culture, *Tel Quel* focused its attention on American 'high culture', and rather than barbarism and vulgarity, its key concept was the primitive, even if this term is not explicitly used by Kristeva or Scarpetta. One question, then, clearly needs answering: Why does the first phase (1960-66) reject so stoutly the thesis of the primitive American and the later one resuscitate it so uncritically? It may be that in the early years of the journal the *telquelians* could view

the Americans as their artistic cousins because they did not really encounter many Americans, nor did they go to America until the end of that first period. Instead, America came to them, in the shape of translations, exhibitions, and cultural travellers such as Ashbery, who lived in Paris and knew Pleynet.

In the period from 1973 onwards, in the writing of Kristeva in particular, America becomes an anthropological entity, a culture which is faced in all its complexity, and as such not so easily assimilable to a European framework. But why does non-European automatically mean primitive? Even when the primitive is celebrated, we correctly see as condescension its attribution to other cultures. And yet, there is something bold about this move by Kristeva. In a period of de-colonization, it is no longer possible to locate the primitive in Asia or Africa as the modernists, the forebears of *Tel Quel*, had done – Kristeva would never get away with it. However, there is a sense in which the *telquelist* project *needs* the primitive, cannot dispense with the powerful and disruptive unconscious forces it has been associated with. It has often been pointed out that *Tel Quel* was founded at the very height of the Algerian war of independence and yet the journal made no mention of these events, a silence which for many commentators was inexcusable. At the same time, Pleynet's distaste for the 'pernicious mythology' of the primitive demonstrates a critical awareness, in the aftermath of decolonization, to such issues. Kristeva's wager, after the Vietnam war, is to reclaim the pernicious mythology, displacing it from its usual target in colonized non-European locales, and reapplying it to the fascinating and threatening continent to the west. It is hard to say whether the wager is calculated to salvage for Europe some cultural superiority in the face of American economic dominance (the easy, automatic answer) or to embrace what is best in America, but the answer may lie in that culture *Tel Quel* had previously celebrated: China. It is fair to say that *Tel Quel* had its fingers burnt with its enthusiasm for China, its dogmatic and

unconditional support for that utopian space proving less and less viable as the totalitarian realities of Maoism came to light. With its ‘turn’ to America, which was in fact a return, *Tel Quel* could establish a critical distance which it had failed to maintain with regard to China, for the *telqueliens*’ enthusiasm for America was never absolute. As Jacqueline Rose points out, Kristeva also identifies dangers in the American non-verbal: ‘that same non-verbalization might [...] also be the sign of a resistance, the almost psychotic hyper-activity of a violent and overproductive culture incessantly on the go’ (152) In other words, the idealization of China was replaced by an ambivalent stance towards America. Like Alexis de Tocqueville before them, then, the *telqueliens* found that with America they could sit on the fence: all that remained was for them to confess, as Tocqueville did, that in America they saw more than America: ‘J’avoue que dans l’Amérique j’ai voulu plus que l’Amérique’ (31).

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¹ See Donato and Macksey, which collects papers from the symposium and explains its rationale (xv-xix). Lentricchia (157-63) gives a sardonic account of the event but isolates the moment as crucial to subsequent intellectual developments in the United States, particularly emphasizing the success of Derrida and the general failure of orthodox structuralism. Culler (7-12) contests the reductiveness of Lentricchia's version.

² Translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

³ The 'dispute of the New World' is documented in Commager and Giordanetti as well as Gerbi.

⁴ This point is made by Kristeva in her fictionalisation of the *Tel Quel* period, *The Samurai* and confirmed by Forest who explains that Kristeva, Sollers and Jean-Louis Houdebine all turned down offers in the late 60s (270-1). In her more recent 'Europhilia, Europhobia', Kristeva reflects on the anti-American sentiment that predominated in her native Bulgaria and then in Paris where she arrived during the Vietnam war. Girard invited her to teach at the University of Baltimore in 1966, but she declined, unwilling to 'see myself collaborating with the "cops of the world"' (33).

⁵ The special issue also contains an essay by Philip Roth, poetry by John Ashbery, an interview with Gregory Corso and an essay by Harry Blake on post-modern American fiction, but this does not prevent Kristeva from claiming, rather tendentiously, that 'les pratiques les plus radicales ne se parlent pas [...] il n'y a pas de grande littérature américaine aujourd'hui en dehors de quelques exceptions qui sont d'ailleurs de provenance anglaise, nostalgiquement tournées vers l'humour juif kafkaïen.' ('Pourquoi les États-Unis?' 5) 'the most radical practices are non-verbal ... there is no great American literature today, apart from a few exceptions, which are in any case of English origins, and nostalgically oriented towards a Kafkaesque Jewish humour.' ('Why the United States?' 276)

⁶ In *The Samurai*, Kristeva describes a Chinese woman artist in much the same terms as those non-verbal Americans: 'cette Chinoise était un phénomène./ Li ne sait pas ce qu'elle fait, mais elle sait faire' (236); 'this woman was a phenomenon./ Li didn't know what she was doing, but she knew how to do it' (177).

⁷ *Franc-tireur* is not easily translated. It means sniper, but it also refers to any civilians who take up arms independently of an organized army and includes those resistance fighters in Paris in WWII who did not hesitate to shoot when the time was ripe. The term therefore implies decisiveness to the point of unconscious action.

⁸ Sollers: 'La grande greffe principale, je la vois évidemment, au moment de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, dans l'exil, dans le drainage des différentes personnalités excentriques de l'Europe vers les États-Unis [...] Appelons ça aussi la greffe surréaliste sur les États-Unis pendant la guerre./ Cette greffe est à l'origine quand même, me semble t'il, de ce qu'on appelle l'art américain.' (8-9) 'Naturally, I see the main graft at the time of the Second World War as being the draining of marginalized European personalities into an American exile. Let's call it the grafting of the European avant-garde on to the United States [...] Let's also call it the grafting of Surrealism on to the United States during the war./ This grafting, it seems to me, is at the source of what we call American art.' (280)

⁹ On the rise of mass culture being equated with 'Americanisation', see Strinati 21-37.

¹⁰ One member of the editorial collective, Jean-Louis Baudry, did write influential articles on the cinematic apparatus, but not in *Tel Quel*.