The Work of Art in the Age of Speculative Politics: A Reading of the Anti-Totalitarian Artifact in the Era of the Popular Front, 1934-1938

by

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INTRODUCTION

The Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne Paris 1937 presented to the city a permanent reliquary of modernism, a subdued, neo-classical monument. Remarkably, the monument offered something quite unusual to the city: a terrace, but not merely a terrace, a commanding perspective upon the city of Paris. From the terrace of the newly constructed, Palais de Chaillot, one could observe the urban expanse of the western side of the city: from the Trocadéro, through the Champs de Mars and all the way to Montparnasse. The city occupied a place of omniscience at the World Fair: but what did it see?

National pavilions resided placidly on the Champs de Mars, a picture of fair play and international tranquility; national singularity corralled peacefully under the watchful gaze of the city, reaffirming the subject-object paradigm. But two pavilions disrupted the aesthetic balance of the Champs de Mars, the equanimity of nation-states, and, thereby, challenged the city’s claims to omniscience. Facing off, each against the other, two, lithic totalitarian façades rose higher than the rest: Albert Speer’s Nazi pavilion and Boris Iovan’s Soviet pavilion. The Nazi eagle perched menacingly on the swastika whilst Soviet worker and peasant rushed forward clasping hammer and sickle; these were the symbols of a vast program of image synchronization and politicization. These pavilions demonstrated, on the grandest of stages, the indelible components of the totalitarian artwork: scale, iconography and anthropomorphism.\(^1\) They were examples of a more “total”, work of art: architectural and sculptural elements fused to extra-stylistic corollaries.
The narratives of these pavilions dominate accounts of the Paris World Fair: Speer’s “chance” discovery of the Soviet design; his patriotic decision to assert the Reich’s restored sense of national pride, within the context of a rapidly-degrading, international situation, emphasized by the presence of the pavilion of the Second Spanish Republic. Even, Pablo Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, which caused similar, and still resonate, commotion, persists as part of a polemic that, in fact, reifies the predominance of the totalitarian pavilions. The centrality of these pavilions to the popular imaginary of the World Fair is constitutive of totalitarian art’s, historiographical command over the cultural production of the 1930s. The decade conjures forth images of the gleaming, totalitarian façade; the classical forms of allegorical sculpture; and the pristine landscape of neo-romantic painting. But what of the Palais de Chaillot? Seemingly submerged within a sea of totalitarian standardization, the French monument belongs to this historical moment as well.

The fate of the Palais de Chaillot is the historiographical fate of French art of the 1930s. The illustrative, yet insubstantial moniker of monumental art [*ergo totalitarian art*] subsumes the pictorial trends in 1930s France: the return of classicism and the rise of realism. This historiographical thesis, in turn, generates another: a more, “thorough” account of a moribund, French visual culture, struggling to find new values and idioms, outside of the stultifying styles of *rappel à l’ordre*. The one historiographical moment, necessarily, reinforces the other; yet, neither is sufficient. For it is as difficult to rescue liberal, bourgeois France from the torrent of totalitarianism, as it is to rescue her artworks from the torrent of tautology.

The Palais de Chaillot abstracted French claims to [cultural] transcendence. It stood as a figure of the “transcendent subject”, embodying extant rhetoric that was as
rich as it was conflicted.² The complexity and variety of this discourse bespoke a historical moment of equal perplexity: the era of the Popular Front. The main premise of this thesis is that France’s visual culture – rich in metaphor and rhetoric – is an unparalleled, historical document, for as Romy Golan writes, “…it is in France, a bastion of democracy…it that one finds the most compelling demonstration of the covert interaction between art and politics.”³

From 1934 to 1938, a vast popular movement swept over France, in response to the formation and subsequent election of an ephemeral, leftist coalition, le Front populaire (Popular Front). The effects of this popular movement on the cultural artifacts of the day were profound, as a strict intersection between formalist pursuits and mass political participation as well as (mass) cultural consumption became indiscernible.⁴ In fact, such convergence between politics and the cultural moment had not been seen in France, since the time of the Dreyfus Affair.⁵

A new, mass society provided a context for the artworks of the era of the Popular Front. Mass society was the aggregate of two equally unique, sub-phenomena: mass politics and mass culture. The 1930s saw the appreciable fruition of mass political institutions: fascism in the heart of Europe and popular democracy. The Popular Front experiment in France was one such manifestation of mass politics; it, however, proved a peculiar case study.

The rassemblement of the political institutions of the Left began in the aftermath of the anti-parliamentary, paramilitary riots of 6 February 1934 in Paris. In sum the Left viewed these riots as a failed, fascist coup-d’état, due to the heavy presence of “fascist” leagues on the Place de la Concorde. These riots touched off a wave of
popular participation, mobilized against the menace of domestic and international fascism. Paradoxically, the *Rassemblement populaire* sought to harness this nation-wide, popular participation against a mass political institution.

Mass culture stood as the other constituent of modern, mass society, leading to a comprehensive reevaluation of visual culture. In the 1930s, a “generalized”, mass media regime officially arrived in France, with the birth of the radio and the expansion of photography, advertising and the new sound film. This mass cultural model soon became the prevalent, cultural model in France. Its almost, instantaneous ubiquity soon threatened the very existence of traditional, canonized media forms (*i.e.* painting and sculpture).

Mass society served to isolate the cultural transformation of the 1930s within a well-defined, historical context. The Popular Front coalesced under the shadow of three, world historical moments: the world-wide economic crisis of the 1930s; the rise of fascism [in general] and of National Socialism [in particular]; and the redefinition of Comintern policy, from a policy of “class against class” warfare, to one of sponsoring “left-sympathetic”, popular front coalitions. In France the shift in Soviet policy had an immediate impact on the French Communist Party (PCF): after engaging in a fratricidal war with the Socialist Party (S.F.I.O.), the PCF reached out to the S.F.I.O. for a united, anti-fascist front, in the aftermath of 6 February. It was a dramatic event in the political life of the Third Republic.

Walter Benjamin completed the first draft of “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” in 1935, in the midst of the efflorescence of popular participation surrounding the *Rassemblement populaire*. His exegesis – an artifact of the times – spoke directly to the totalitarian and anti-totalitarian experiences. In his
“Artwork” essay, he highlighted the fundamental transfiguration(s) that affected the visual culture of the era of the Popular Front. He asserted that the “withering away” of aura – coincidental with the advent of technically reproducible art – was a monumental instance in the artwork’s qualitative denaturing. The disappearance of aura entailed a shift away from cult (or ritual) value, which had hitherto been the artwork’s primary, evaluative scaffold. Though foundational, aura remained an [almost] impenetrable concept in Benjaminian aesthetics; however, it is one that will be better resolved within the development of this thesis, as it approximates Benjamin’s shift in extra-aesthetic praxis. In place of cult, maintained Benjamin, now stood exhibition value, the rise of which radically altered the epistemology of aesthetics, as “[a]esthetics may declare its autonomy…but artwork cannot stand on its own: it must be grounded in some other practice.”

Benjamin drew politics into relation with the artwork, proposing that politics played a determinate role in the subject’s reaction to the artwork (the object), often endowing the object with allegoric properties it did not possess. He, furthermore, suggested that this vital step in modern aesthetics brought the artwork closer to its telos, prefiguring the masses’ appropriation of the cultural means of production. As such, it was a liminal moment in the life of the artwork.

Benjamin wrote in Popular Front Paris, descrying the rallying of popular energy in fascist regimes. He posited that fascism aestheticized politics, “[purging] politics of legal and moral standards” by presenting abstracted, “aesthetic” tropes, in their place. Communism responded to the fascist aestheticization of politics with the politicization of art, crafting an artwork that spoke to the experience of the masses. Experimentation with popular democracy made France the natural home for Benjamin’s mass-conscious artwork.
At first glance, the people’s culture (la culture populaire) of the era of the Popular Front seemingly answered Benjamin’s call-to-arms. People’s culture – the manufactured, government-imposed culture of the Popular Front – was innately anti-fascist, and, therefore, indelibly politicized. It concerned itself primordially with the masses, born of the same popular agitation that begot the Popular Front. Moreover, people’s culture, in its mission to democratize culture – recolonizing it for the masses – moved toward a similar telos.

But people’s culture, “artificial” as it was, was still the amalgam of individuated phenomena, disparate referents and dueling cultural models. This was [in part] due to the fact that the Popular Front was a political hybrid, a unique aggregate of “government, electoral coalition and mass movement”. Anti-fascism remained one of its sole, unifying bands, a fact reflected in the Front’s acutely pluralistic discourse, “an implicit refutation of Nazi Gleichschaltung [cultural standardization].”

These pluralistic discourses – examples of the manifold pressures besetting the Popular Front – were, in turn, grafted upon the artwork, as politics was at the artwork’s epistemological locus. This resulted in the development of an anti-totalitarian artwork that in contradistinction to the totalitarian artifact did not (and could not) reflect a univocal message, which was inherent in the Gesamtkunstwerk (totalizing work of art).

Like totalitarian culture, people’s culture, however, implied the imposition of a “totalizing, philosophical perspective” upon the artwork. The “totalizing” mission of people’s culture, its attempt to break down cultural barriers, entailed the abstraction of tropes, in sum, the aestheticization of politics. People’s culture relied upon the same
touchstones as totalitarian culture: mass spectacle (scale) and the Nation (iconography and anthropomorphism).

People’s culture, nevertheless, sought to distance itself from totalitarian culture, by couching its cultural evocation within a virtuous, democratic rhetoric. From the outset, people’s culture was envisioned as a counter to totalitarianism; unarguable, however, was people’s culture’s uneasy courtship of the totalizing work of art, and by extension, totalitarian culture.

The interaction of art, politics and ideology in France has vast implications for the dominant histories of the 1930s, as a decade of crisis. From a prisoner-of-war camp, Marc Bloch denounced the decade’s moral lassitude and intellectual vacuity in *Strange Defeat*, instigating a new historiographical consensus of irrefutable continuity between the decadent thirties and the Vichy years. This consensus perseveres today. Eugen Weber entitled his account of the 1930s, *The Hollow Years*, diagnosing French society, as torpid and paralyzed. Again, the French art of the 1930s falls victim of intractable, historiographical paradigms.

But the anti-totalitarian artifact represents the unique, historiographical opportunity of an underrepresented, historical moment: the moment of mass politics and culture, of totalizing perspectives and fluid interpretations, of heterogeneous tropes and stylistic syncretism. This moment demands further analysis. The subsequent chapters chronicle the trajectory of people’s culture, an epiphenomenon of the anti-totalitarian experience in the era of the Popular Front. They consider the very nature of the symbiotic processes of contextualization and politicization [of the artwork]: processes that become so invasive as to fundamentally reorder the realm of aesthetics. And they decode the latent dialogue between two ideological systems – a
dialogue, buried in the artifact – as to demonstrate a previously dismissed, homology, or ideological intersection, between pluralistic democracy and monolithic totalitarianism.
I: THE MODERN MURAL: THE POLITICS OF A SITE-BOUND MODEL

“Context here overrides the contents of the individual installations and inflects all works situated within its compass by association.”

Esther da Costa Meyer

The practice of large panel painting was synonymous with the 1930s, as one countenanced its recrudescence as a dominant, visual art form. A number of factors, both stylistic and extra-stylistic, contributed to the “reinsertion” of mural art in the fine arts canon. Firstly, the Depression dramatically renegotiated the terms of the market for luxuries goods; a precipitous drop in the number of private commissions characterized its effect on the art market. As a result, both public and private commissions soon focused on mural art, due to the availability of “blank” surfaces on private walls and public buildings.

Mural art also provided French artists with a means to move beyond the stylistic certitudes of previous decades, allowing for a measure of aesthetic innovation. For many former artists of the avant-garde, mural art offered a new medium – and concomitantly, a new idiom – with which to herald their passage to a more accessible aesthetic. Artists, like Fernand Léger, 1881-1955, whose works of the 1910s and 1920s were only understood in the opaque language of the avant-garde, could revitalize their respective *œuvres* with recourse to panel painting. And thus the conventions of panel painting, though well rehearsed, were reconceived and reinterpreted by artists of the era.

An ethos of communitarianism shaped the new relationship between the artist and the art form:

Philosophically, mural art presented the advantage of demonstrating to all that the artist was not the frenzied individualist, the solitary genius, an image
imposed by the Romantic age. As a result of the collaboration that mural art encouraged between painter, sculptor and architect, it did make a giant stride toward a thesis of integration [promulgated by the Popular Front] – or reintegration, with reference to pre-Renaissance art – between artistic practices.¹⁸

Mural art thus prefigured an “indivisible”, people’s culture, expressed through the inter-disciplinary nature of the medium as well as the large-scale collaboration it produced. The art form sought to fulfill the Front’s cultural mission to breakdown the barriers within the fine arts.

Communitarianism, however, functioned as a signifier for the Middle Ages, and thus, a modern construct. The mythologized epoch soon became a referent for the mural, seemingly justified by the medium’s pre-Renaissance origins.¹⁹ These referents ordered the communion of artist and medium.

The “medieval” harkened back to a communal, artisanal Middle Ages. The construction of the “medieval” positioned itself in opposition to another standard: individualism, a derivative of the Enlightenment, which naturally served as an antipode to communitarianism. There existed a fully integrated artwork, shared by all, in an equally, integrated society, in the revisionist account of the Middle Ages.²⁰ But commencing with the Renaissance and strengthening in the Enlightenment, an ethos of individualism reoriented the trajectory of art and society in the form of l’art pour l’art (art for art’s sake). In this epithet, the modern mural channeled the communal “essence” of the Middle Ages.

Modern intellectuals introduced the construction of the Middle Ages, as idealized epoch, in their romanticization of the artisan and the craftsperson.²¹ In France the romanticized craftsperson and communal, artist workshop participated in an “abstracted” cult of finery, the ébénisterie tradition.²² The notion of a cult of finery –
instilled in the national imaginary and exported abroad – was inextricably linked to
the imagined, French mastery over this cult.\textsuperscript{23} In \textit{toto}, the cult of finery was
constitutive of a larger, anti-factory discourse, in which, industrialization devalued
craft and ornamentation, at the expense of rote sameness.\textsuperscript{24} The modern mural, an
intrinsically, communal art, emerged “logically”, as an outgrowth of this narrative.

Walter Benjamin framed the clash between the communal and the individual
in a Marxist teleology. The communal was essentially modern, “mechanized”, and
there were no referents that extended back in time, certainly not back to the
hierarchic Middle Ages. He thus viewed “medieval” artworks and those of the post-
Renaissance to be of the same, qualitative standard: aura. Aura – the unique
phenomenon of distance – was displaced with the spectacular rise of the techniques of
mechanical reproduction.\textsuperscript{25} The “changed production relations and means of
production”, what Benjamin discerned as, “an altered collective praxis based on
technical reproduction…” generated “novel conditions for political agency…”; these
“novel conditions for political agency” were inherent in the new artwork.\textsuperscript{26} And thus
communal art forms were necessarily technically reproducible: film, photography and
photomontage. In particular, film was paradigmatic of a metamorphosed “means of
production”, which is to say that the large crew the medium demands could be used
to effect political change, in the realm of culture. To Benjamin the masses’ [potential]
mastery of the cultural means of production fell solely under the purview of the de-
auraticized artwork.\textsuperscript{27}

The modern mural seemingly flies in the face of Benjamin, as an auratic
medium with a modern, communal and mass political evocation. But it is with
recourse to Benjamin that one best understands the liminal moment that the modern
mural represented. Context – introduced with the advent of mechanical reproduction – induced a comprehensive reassessment of the artwork. The epistemological focus of all artworks shifted from ritual to politics. In the case of the auratic artwork, politics was impressed upon it, by means of the artwork’s site-specific, political and historical context, making the mural a site-bound model. The site’s mass political associations were transferred to the mural, which became a metonymy of the site.

Furthermore, the modern mural was beholden to a modern sense perception that was equally time-bound. Tactility and spatial proximity – the dominant modes of sensory perception in the era of the masses – informed the artwork, further contextualizing and politicizing mural art, in its global attempt “to bring things closer spatially and humanly.”28 The shadow of the cinema (and mass media) thus fell upon the modern mural; the cinema’s ability to [best] convey the modern modes of sensory perception to the masses attests to the preeminence of the medium as a cultural referent, for the artworks of the era. The models of mass culture – continuously refined in the 1930s – exercised a determinate role upon mural art, which is to say that the modern mural resided in a nexus with the mass media of the day.

Mass media and mass politics, as constituent parts of the mass society of the 1930s, worked in symbiosis, as cultural referents. Nostalgia for an often mythologized, communal, past – shared by most members of French society in the 1930s – figured prominently in the restoration of the modern mural. Nostalgia caused a schism in an already polarized French society.

On the Right, it participated in the politicized rhetoric of a by-gone, organic community, linked by consanguinity.29 Conversely, on the Left, nostalgia was interpreted as communitarianism, which signified the union of intellectual and worker
and the end of the alienation of the urban proletariat. Communitarianism can only be understood within a larger dialectic with the brief, exuberant political moment. In the realm of culture, it was further extrapolated to suggest the breaking down of cultural barriers: barriers between “high art” and “folk art”; barriers between disciplines in the fine arts; and hierarchies between the fine arts and the applied, or technical arts. Artists and intellectuals sympathetic to the mission of the Popular Front spoke almost exclusively in the language of “communion” and community. Fernand Léger used this language to make larger claims about the modern mural. The artist sought to democratize the modern mural by insisting upon its social function. Envisioned as “the collective art of tomorrow”, mural art synthesized the artist’s aspiration for aesthetic novelty with a perceived public or social function: “The intersection of a pictorial pursuit and the era of the masses lead the artist to pose or re-pose the question of a medium of vast dimensions, displayed to a large public.”

Politics, however, trumped the social function, by sheer nature of the mural’s size, public distinction and, above all, context. And though the mural had always been of “vast dimensions”, the dictates of site renegotiated the art form’s political measure. The political dimension that inhered in a mural was naturally brought to the forefront, making the medium a highly prized site for “politicizing”. The mural partook in public discourse; or more accurately, public discourse was impressed upon it. But this discourse often proved to be hermeneutic. For instance, nostalgia, an indelible component of the era’s mass political discourse, figured prominently in the “crafting” of the modern mural. Nostalgia was, nonetheless, a veiled code for a mythic Middle Ages, or neo-medievalism, a popular, extant trope, enclosing mural art within a hermeneutic circle.
The process by which artworks of the era of the Popular Front became invested with political associations tended to be more discrete, subtler, than the analogous process in totalitarian regimes. The political and ideological pluralism of a coalition government (i.e. the interplay of ideas, across the political spectrum, the confluence in tropes, and intra-coalition friction) engendered strident, multivalent rhetoric. This mass political rhetoric, in turn, imposed itself upon typological discourse and upon the artwork itself, a testament to the architectonic correlations between politics and culture. The principles of metonymy, or associative politics, were upheld, in several case studies of panel paintings created for the 1937 *Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* (International Exhibition of Arts and Techniques in Modern Life.)

I

Fernand Léger remained at the forefront of mural painting throughout the era of the Popular Front:

Of all the artists already attracted to [mural art], the artist who, as a result of the Popular Front, pushed his reflections on the aesthetic implications of [mural art] the furthest, and whose complete *oeuvre* thus resounds with this conviction, [was] Fernand Léger.33

Léger’s rediscovery of mural art – after having first grappled with the medium in the early 1930s – coincided with the nation-wide, popular enthusiasm created by the *Rassemblement populaire*. His mural for the French pavilion at the Brussels International Fine Arts Exposition in 1935 heralded the new phase in his *oeuvre* (Figure 1). For the International Exhibition in Paris, Fernand Léger rendered another panel painting *Les Transports des Forces* (*The Transmission of Energy*), which one can read with recourse to the vast arrays of images, symbols and references of the Popular Front (Figure 2).
Figure 1. Fernand Léger, Project for stadium decoration, 1935.

Figure 2. Fernand Léger, *The Transmission of Energy*, 1937.
The Transmission of Energy, measuring 50 by 100 cm, epitomizes the monumental art of the period. As the title suggests, the composition conveys the idea of motion and sweeping power. Its visual focus, a force of water, completely bisects the image and perfectly illustrates the motifs of movement and energy. The artist’s rich, syncretic aesthetic vocabulary begets multiple interpretations, particularly of the flux motif. Futurism, the machine aesthetic, organicism, realism and geometric abstraction comprise Léger’s aesthetic vocabulary. These varied and often paradoxical, stylistic references connote a lack of stylistic unity.

The lack of a cohesive style was emblematic of the artworks of the era. It echoed the uncertain locus of political power. Yet, it also demonstrated a fundamental paradox affecting the artists of the Left. “Seldom [had they] so readily sensed the political consequences of their work…” yet, the innately, tumultuous nature of a coalition had produced an equally fragmented aesthetic. What was to be made of the multivocal style?

The artist was compelled to have a more fluid understanding of style, in order to remain united under the banner of the Popular Front and for the artwork “to expand to inspire society at large…” The register of modern art was thus expanded to incorporate different styles. Context, however, imposed ideological and political overtones upon these stylistic references. And as a result, the aesthetically heterogeneous artwork – already politicized under the evocation of the Front – now boasted a multiplicity of often-dueling, political references.

The unmistakable dynamism and vibrancy of Léger’s work typifies Futurism. The narrative themes of power, energy and man’s mastery over the productive forces
of nature strengthen the composition’s tie to Futurism. However, Futurism serves to complicate the mural’s politics.

In Italy the Futurist movement embraced Italian Fascism. Although Futurism predated the Fascist takeover, the movement’s championing of the destruction of an ossified, bourgeois state gave Mussolini intellectual credence. The Futurist fetishization and aestheticization of violence and bellicose politics reached an apogee during Italy’s campaign against Abyssinia in 1935. Domestically, French “fascist” leagues and political parties – in their similar exhortations for dynamism and overthrow of the liberal-democratic regime – largely modeled themselves on the Italian prototype.

Though of the same cultural moment, Léger and the Futurists interpreted dynamism differently. Léger suggested “flux” to refer to the street demonstrations of the era, a manifestation of the popular effervescence that began in the aftermath of 6 February 1934 and crested in the factory takeovers of the spring and summer of 1936. In particular, the election of Blum’s government endowed the masses with a sense of “revolutionary” possibility. One can analyze the well-pronounced traces of figuration with recourse to this political moment, as the presence of identifiable forms differed markedly from Léger’s avant-gardiste works of earlier decades.

Artists introduced a social function – constitutive of people’s culture – as a bulwark against fascism. The social function was translated in a figurative representational, pictorial idiom, required in the artwork’s transitional phase; Léger wrote: “But I am afraid that the general public will continue to demand a representational element, for it has never had the necessary time or sufficient liberty of spirit to pursue its artistic education.” In response to the “demand for a
representational element,” Léger depicted symbols of toil: water, light and sites of human engineering. These symbols constituted his New Realism.40

New Realism excoriated the subject:

Rather than return to the subject, it is better to appeal to the object. With the subject, we lose the necessary freedom in aesthetic intensity. The subject fetters visual effects….If one only uses an object, one has more of a chance to make something of aesthetic quality.41

Léger endowed the object (symbols of toil) with a social value, as it spoke to the quotidien existence of the masses:

The great formula is the object. Modern pedagogues must conceive of the educative value of the object. The education of the masses is done today in the streets by objects, the exhibition of objects in showcases. Commerce and industry impose the object upon the masses. It is as such that the tastes of the masses are formed.42

The artist acknowledged the liminal nature of mural art, which prefigured a “return to a creative state similar to that which existed before the Renaissance, to a ‘collective art that created immortal masterpieces’”.43 Again, one notes the pervasive use of the Middle Ages as a referent for the artwork, attesting to the infiltration of political and social rhetoric upon art.

Two other influences figured prominently in Léger’s New Realism: America and cinema. Mural painting also became a dominant visual art form in America in the 1930s. Government-supported, American mural painting provided an early template for state-subsidized artworks in a liberal regime. The murals of the Depression-era, Worker’s Project Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project became paradigms of the artwork’s social evocation, offering pictorial narratives of the working class.44 These works served as stimuli for French muralists, revealing the French fascination with American culture and society.45
However, America was not merely held up as an ideal in *The Transmission of Energy* but as an object of criticism as well. The American Taylorized factory embodied the dehumanizing capitalism that contributed to homogeneous, mass culture. Mass culture was deemed of American derivation; as such, Republican culture in the late nineteenth century – the antecedent to people’s culture – “positioned” itself against the American “model”.46 It was thus undeniable that from the early days of state-sanctioned culture, France’s perceived monopoly on a socially transformative, culture was intimately linked to the “monolithic” nature of the American culture industry: French culture, the last rampart against the American infiltration of European culture.

Paradoxically, forms of American culture were most alluring to European artists and intellectuals. More expressly, the American urban landscape reconditioned the iconography of the avant-garde. It was a common referent in Piet Mondrian’s, 1872-1944, non-figurative paintings and in Léger’s treatment of the machine aesthetic; in 1931 Léger wrote:

> The most colossal spectacle in the world. Neither film nor photography nor reportage can dim the amazing spectacle that is New York at night, seen from the fortieth floor. This city has been able to withstand all the vulgarizations, all the curiosity of men who have tried to describe her, copy her. She retains her freshness, her unexpectedness, her surprise for the traveler who is seeing her for the first time.47

America, moreover, took the lead in commercial filmmaking after the momentous shift to the sound film. France was the birthplace of cinema – with the Lumière films of the late nineteenth century – but, in particular, after the advent of the sound film, the nation was flooded with Hollywood exports, as the American studio system soon proved more efficient than its French analogue.48 Léger’s well-chronicled projects for
a cinematic mural in the late 1930s confirmed the nexus between mural art and the mass media.49

The correlate of mass culture, assembly-line capitalism, also had a place in Industrial France, serving a significant role during the First World War and the inter-war years:

[Taylorism’s] time-and-motion principles and assembly-line methods had been given enormous encouragement by the demands of wartime production and post-war reconstruction, winning over innovative industrialists…as well as the most technologically progressive Radical politicians, above all Louis Loucher, minister of reconstruction in 1919, and Edouard Herriot, the dominant Radical figure of the 1920s and early 1930s. In tune with the moderate reforming direction of Radical politics, it offered the prospect of scientific solutions to social problems…50

In the early post-war period, Purism emerged as an art movement that distilled the social evocation of the machine in its iconography (Figure 3).51 The machine aesthetic – the Purist pictorial idiom of choice – apotheosized during the Paris Art Déco Fair (1925), but its traces remained present in The Transmission of Energy.52

Figure 3: Fernand Léger, The City, 1919.
French mass culture also informed the machine aesthetic, as Léger’s fascination with cinema predated the advent of the Hollywood colossus – in the aftermath of the “shift” to the sound film. In 1924 he released his experimental-film, *Le Ballet Mécanique* (The Mechanical Ballet). As the title suggests, the film was dynamic and “techno-utopian” in scope: “[It] used cinematic devices of fast-cutting to produce intense effects of fragmentation and movement.”\(^{53}\) (Figure 4) In his “Artwork” essay, Benjamin advocated an aesthetic of fragmentation and “shock” – perfected by Bertolt Brecht – to overcome the fascist aestheticization of politics:

> ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility’...charted how the media of shock produced altogether positive ‘existential’ modes of embodiment and corporeal ‘habits’. Modernity’s reproductive media and technological means yielded a new culture of distraction (*Zerstreung*), in which the fragmentation of a former aesthetic totality signaled the loss of human aura, that is, the waning of corporeal immediacy – its ‘here and now’ – cherished by the stage actor of yore.\(^{54}\)

Benjamin maintained that montage techniques, in dialogue with new, collective labor *praxis*, had altered human sense perception. As such, the machine iconographically imputed man’s salvation in the inter-war years. Léger’s recourse to the machine aesthetic in the 1930s demonstrated the extent to which people’s culture was in and of itself a teleological model, “foreshadowing” the masses’ mastery of [cultural] production.
The machine aesthetic also connoted internationalism, in the case of universalist art movements, such as De Stijl, Bauhaus and Soviet Constructivism. The machine aesthetic was, however, not merely under the unique dominion of the universalist Left. The machine, as a signifier of social renewal, also figured prominently in fascist iconography:

Notable here is the Janus-face nature of fascism’s regenerative nationalism: to reinvigorate the body politic, fascists looked beyond a decadent present to past eras, but they did not advocate a nostalgic return to, say, the era of Imperial Rome. Instead, they sought to incorporate qualities associated with
past era into the creation of a radically new society, fully integrated with
twentieth-century industrialism and technology. Futurism, in particular, espoused the revolutionary potential of the machine.

Nonetheless, Fascist art traditionally relied upon a distinctive, regionalist, painterly idiom, to which Léger also laid claim in his Popular Front murals. Whereas Léger’s works of the avant-garde displayed the artist’s purer palate (with the use of primary colors and non-colors, natural hues), organic hues (i.e. brown, green and orange) abound in The Transmission of Energy. Regionalism was also a prevalent political rhetoric throughout the era of the Popular Front, championed on both the extreme left and the ultra-nationalist right in the form of neo-corporatism.

Regionalism tended to be a distinctive, national style, in an era when the Nation was an intractable trope. The subtle shift to reactionary xenophobia often proved too alluring for proponents of the regional style, as it was “regionalism, even more than nationalism, that was to function…as the ultimate prophylactic against the debilitating infiltration by things foreign.” The art critic, Camille Mauclair, embodied the reactionary dialogue that took place in French cultural circles:

...Mauclair eulogized the values of architectural regionalism as the enemy of the leveling uniformity of the international style, and as the scarecrow of communism. Mounting an accusation that became, with the growing ravages of unemployment, an invincible battle cry for the supporters of the retour au métier, Mauclair accused the Third Republic of pushing the French craftsman out and threatening him with famine.

Far from echoing xenophobia, The Transmission of Energy participated in the consolidation of aesthetic modernism, by fusing aspects of Regionalism to the machine aesthetic. During the 1930s, the visual register of modernity expanded to incorporate Regionalism and classicism. This process occurred throughout the 1930s, concurrently with the politicization of the artwork; these processes proved to
be in such perfect symbiosis that it is nearly impossible to disassociate the political from the realm of aesthetics.

*The Transmission of Energy* is, therefore, a product of its cultural moment, as a multivocal artwork in its [artifact-specific] aesthetic and extra-aesthetic fecundity. However, as an auratic art form, the mural is beholden to the politics and context of its site. The Palais de la Découverte (Palace of Discovery), a popular science pavilion at the Paris World Fair (1937), thus adds another analytic layer to the discussion of the anti-totalitarian artifact. Essentially, *The Transmission of Energy* – animating the pavilion – became a metonymy for the site; this is to say that the artwork stood as a proxy for the politics of the site.

The politics of science in the 1930s encapsulated the politics of the Palace of Discovery. The Popular Front was the first French government with a veritable science policy. The Blum government sought to harness science, “as a vital component of France’s cultural patrimony.” To those ends, the reforms of the school system, proposed by the Minister of National Education, Jean Zay, sought to better integrate the sciences within a nationwide curriculum. Science, therefore, participated in an essentially, cultural debate, as the link between art and science was conscientiously crafted.

In the realm of politics, the Popular Front reorganized the manner in which the sciences were funded, bringing governmental funding up to par with private funds, which had largely subsidized scientific research before 1936. The Popular Front legislated readily identifiable policy measures: the creation of an Undersecretary for Scientific Research, under the Minister of National Education, and the inception of Central Service for Scientific Research, both in 1936. These measures gave
impetus to government-supported research, leading to the foundation of a National Center of Scientific Research (CNRS) in 1939, two years after the dissolution of the first Popular Front government.69

The cultural apparatus of the Left heralded these advances, according journalistic space to the Front’s concept of “discovery.”70 Science thus comprised the mass media landscape. Representations of scientific pursuits were common in periodicals. The vulgarization of the sciences – the creation of a stock, saturated image in the press – was also intimately linked to lithography, a de-auraticized art form.71 In the 1930s, the French press vaunted new breakthroughs in hydroelectricity.72 And, therefore, Léger’s representation of a water plant, in *The Transmission of Energy*, suggests the nexus between mural art and mass society. The Palace of Discovery itself was well within the vulgarizing tradition of the sciences, manifesting the extent to which, a “cult” of science existed and flourished during the era of the Popular Front.

Extant rhetoric expressed the importance of science. The Third Republic solidified its tacit alliance with science, breathing new life into the words of the late Socialist icon, Jean Jaures: “Science is naturally republican.”73 Research, pure and disinterested, was exalted as a Religion in the pantheon of the secular Republic. Progress became a means toward societal transformation and renewal; Jean Perrin, the Undersecretary of Scientific Research and the co-creator of the Palace of Discovery, wrote:

> It is only by science that we can hope for something really new that will enfranchise all men, thus giving them the noble leisures of high culture. And this same Research will finish by saving us from degeneration and sickness, leading us toward the destiny we were promised.74
‘Liberation by science was a noble end for the Republic’, mused Jean Perrin, who alongside men like René Daumal exhorted that science be placed “at the honorable place that suits it, at the bosom of real and fundamental [people’s] culture…”

The Palace of Discovery was a sign of the cultural moment, an abstraction of rhetoric(s). These rhetoric(s) formulated theories, which found universal support on the Left. Parallels were made between aesthetic creation and scientific discovery. To this effect, science was elevated to the level of artistic production, while art rose to the plane of scientific discovery. The PCF grounded the union of art and science in a neo-medievalist conception of art as the entirety of man’s productive work in time and space, visualized at the “Science and Art” exhibit at the Palace of Discovery.

The Popular Front, in turn, “institutionalized” this union. The Grand Palais, the museum of the state, hosted the Palace of Discovery, in its glorification of the sciences. In toto, the union of science and art became an indelible component of people’s culture. Both art and science represented twin avenues to human development and social regeneration. The Palace of Discovery expressed the notion of a transformative culture on a monumental scale.

The rhetoric of discovery was, nonetheless, purposefully open-ended and ambiguous. Jean Perrin instilled an educative mission into the pavilion, constitutive of people’s culture. Yet this didactic mission could not belie large traces of Republican culture, though people’s culture seemingly counteracted the inherent elitism of the Republican cultural mission. People’s culture’s, fundamental ambivalence to mass politics arose as a result of the menace that mass politics (and mass viewership) posed to Republican culture, the progenitor of people’s culture.
Republican culture was itself beholden to Enlightenment teleology. However, in the 1930s, anti-Enlightenment discourse reached its apogee: it fueled the ultra-nationalistic right and the extreme left. When not under attack, Enlightenment teleology was often redirected by the Left, lapsing into Neo-Jacobinism, or national populism. Paradoxically, the primary referent of the universalist left soon became the Nation.

The Nation, interpreted by the Neo-Jacobins, comprised the pictorial iconography of the era of the Popular Front. At a neighboring pavilion, Raoul Dufy adopted a national framework for his mural *La Fée Electricité* (The Electricity Ferry), a narrative of electricity in modern life (Figure 5). The unionized left, namely, the Compagnie Parisienne d’Electricité (CPDE) and the organizations and unions that it regrouped, constructed the mural’s site, the Electricity Pavilion. The involvement of the Syndicat des Producteurs et Distributeurs d’Energie électrique (Union of Producers and Distributors of Electrical Energy) indicated the extent to which leftist cultural institutions sought to reappropriate signs of the Nation from the Right.
Science became a sign of the Nation, situated along a national, tropological axis. After adopting science as an arm of people’s culture, the Left sought to mobilize it against the nationalist right and the fascist threat across the Rhine. At the Palace of Discovery, Jacques Lipchitz, a Cubist sculptor, displayed his *Prometheus strangling the Vulture*, an updated allegory of the myth of Prometheus (Figure 6).\(^8^4\) Prometheus wore a Phrygian bonnet, an iconographic symbol of the Republic, while strangling the vulture, which many took to represent the Nazi eagle.\(^8^5\)
Benjamin countenanced the same paradox of “appropriating” science for a people’s culture that was simultaneously, universalist and materialist as well as nationalist and Republican. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” also heralded a cult of technology, intrinsically linked to the de-auraticized artwork. As such, he alluded to the transitional nature of the site, the Palace of Discovery, as a sign of an equally, liminal people’s culture – liminal to the extent that it harbored traces of Republicanism. Mechanical reproduction thus threatened the viability of the site-bound model, mural art, as mass society menaced the Republican residue of people’s culture. However, in Popular Front France, all these dueling signs, rhetoric(s) and referents were housed together. This attests to the extra-aesthetic richness of the anti-totalitarian artifact, reflecting the pluralistic discourse of the Popular Front.
The artistic pair of Robert and Sonia Delaunay made a similar transition to artists, like Fernand Léger, from the high modernism of the avant-garde to the more accessible, pictorial idiom of people’s culture. For the Paris World Fair, the Delaunays produced three monumental, panel paintings for the aviation and railroad pavilions. The murals, *Moteur d’avion* (*Airplane Motor*), *Voyages lointains* (*Distant Voyages*) and *Portugal* all illustrated the visual precepts for which the artists had become known: color, rhythm and simultaneity (Figures 7-9). Yet, the politicization of the cultural moment had also radicalized the artists, a shift reflected in the artworks.

Figure 7: Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Project for *Moteur d’avion*, 1936.
Aesthetically, the Delaunay murals are accomplished, visual statements. The compositional focus of *Airplane Motor* is a distinctive airplane motor, depicted colorfully.

Figure 8: Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Project for *Voyages lointains*, 1936-37.

Figure 9: Sonia Delaunay and assistants working on *Portugal*.
in pale blue, yellow, pink, red and white. Abstracted, circular forms in black and white emanate from the motor, suggesting steam and smoke. *Les Voyages lointains* is a detailed and quasi-figural painting. One discerns a clear narrative, with reference to the painting’s title. Foremost, a circular motif lends compositional unity to the mural, intimating the force of a locomotive. The traces of figuration suggest that people are embarking on a voyage. Rendered in the same idiom, *Portugal* portrays several women, wearing native garb.

The Delaunay murals were the by-product of the duo’s lengthy collaboration with artists Félix Aublet and László Moholy-Nagy. Aublet and Moholy-Nagy drew upon their vast, theoretical and conceptual backgrounds, to introduce new visual and extra-visual values that reshaped the Delaunay oeuvre. In particular, the Delaunay murals reflected Moholy-Nagy’s fascination with a “new art”.

New art was an art of light, as its practitioners accorded compositional primacy to “the pictorial quality of artificial lights.” Light was at the new art’s visual and iconographic core. It, however, took the Delaunays a number of years — until their meeting with Aublet in 1935 — to grasp the iconological importance of light. Subsequently, light, as leitmotiv, functioned as a mobilizing device, around which Aublet and the Delaunays founded the group Art and Light, in anticipation of the upcoming World Fair. The group proclaimed the new thematic predominance of light, heralding “light’s” apotheosis at the Exposition Internationale.

In the public domain, the extra-aesthetic corollary of light was equally vast. Light participated in a discussion of national health, centered on its positive, biological effects. Health had become a politicized discourse, due [in part] to France’s declining birthrate; this discourse took on an almost frenzied tone as the *années creuses*
Internationally, national health became a popular debate: neighboring Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy promulgated racialist edicts, based upon a tradition of human typologies and eugenics. In France there existed an analogous, neo-Lamarckian tradition [albeit, on a far smaller scale]. The rhetoric of national regeneration often accompanied this type of discourse. And both right and left shared in a persistent call for national renewal.

The Popular Front itself sought to revive culture as a bulwark against fascism. The trope of the New Man, of the “total individual”, emerged from the Front’s discourse. These “regenerative” tropes soon functioned as the theoretical scaffold for new art; Charles Malegarie, one of the commissioners of the Palace of Light at the World Fair, presented light as an element of public health, “an agent of discipline and anti-Romantic [“medieval”] teaching and thus, a generator of health in the absolute sense of the word.” The New Man was an indelible component of the iconography and iconology of new art. The universal evocation of new art was thus aimed at the integration of aesthetics within a “mobilization and mythification of the discourse of national culture.”

The process of articulating vital, social discourses through aesthetics is constitutive of Walter Benjamin’s totalizing work of art (l’oeuvre d’art complète), “where the visual effects of all medias, traditional and new, are fused into one whole entity.” The totalizing work of art functions as an abstraction or an aestheticization of discourse. New art reflected the abstraction of mass political (i.e. public health) discussions.

A revolutionary aesthetic was, logically, implied in the Gesamtkunstwerk (totalizing work of art). The totalizing work of art evolved naturally on the Left, in the
wake of the Bolshevik Revolution, monopolized by art movements sympathetic to the unwavering bond that existed between art and politics (style and function) in the Soviet Union. Moholy-Nagy’s fascination with Soviet Constructivism and [to a lesser extent] his association with Bauhaus explained his encouragement of a totalizing work of art. In the 1930s, the total work of art, however, moved to the Right, as fascism used aesthetics to “abstract” history and political institutions into symbols. The total work of art of the era of the Popular Front thus bore the unmistakable taint of fascism.

In France artists of the new art endeavored to reproduce the totalizing work of art. They aspired to an artwork that was universal in scope but devoid of the totalitarian component of the fascist aestheticization of politics. The moniker of total work of art could be applied [though, arguably so] to the artifacts of the Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques. The World Fair sought to form an indissoluble union between the fine arts and the technical arts, in a manner akin to Soviet Constructivism. It is thus conceivable that the ethos of the total work of art subsumed the Front’s promotion of an indivisible, people’s culture.

The open and contentious debates that occurred in Popular Front France, however, help situate the anti-totalitarian artwork within a reform aesthetic, in contradistinction to the ideologically univocal nature (Gleichschaltung) of the total work of art. And therefore, the symbology of the new art illustrated its contradictory references (totalitarian and pluralistic), which affirmed the unofficial, cultural “interchange” between totalitarian regimes and Third Republic France.

The Delaunays used mural art to represent the reform aesthetic. However, the mural’s liminal state ensured that the abstracted discourse that inheres in the total work of art would be subjugated to the politics of site. The artists installed their mural
works in transportation pavilions (railroad and aviation) at the Paris World Fair. The reform aesthetic adopted a national scaffold, when grafted onto the mural’s site. This, in turn, brought questions of modern transport and speed to the ideological fore.

Speed, constitutive of the modern sense perception, was elemental to the iconography of the New Man, as the modern man was depicted in constant motion. The representation of speed and dynamism in transportation pavilions helps qualify their mass appeal, as speed characterized the new modes of inter-personal interaction. Context would, however, problematize the representation of these values, as the Popular Front conceived of the cult of technology as a telos. As aforementioned the teleology of people’s culture derived [in part] from Third Republic progressivism; yet the notion of a Second Machine Age – displayed in the extant artifacts – developed within the unique, socio-political context of the inter-war years.

A redefinition of the role of the airplane occurred as a result of the Popular Front. Pierre Cot, Blum’s Aviation Minister, introduced measures aimed at bolstering France’s civilian aviation, in an effort to facilitate travel and mass tourism. In the leftist press, these measures focused on a notion of “people’s aviation” (aviation populaire) and communal, people’s aviation units (sections d’aviation populaires). More importantly, an exultant rhetoric of aerial sport advertised popular aviation to the masses. However, behind the innocent façade of civilian sport, Cot also sought to train military pilots, underscoring the prerogatives of national, military rearmament. France’s military readiness was thrown into sharp relief with the start of the Spanish Civil War.

The aerial-induced, civilian slaughter of the Spanish Civil War, depicted vividly at the pavilion of the Spanish Republic in Pablo Picasso’s Guernica, occasioned
a wholesale reinterpretation of the Palace of Air, where *Airplane Motor* was housed. The popularity of the Picasso piece necessarily influenced popular reaction to modern aviation, which impacted transport’s, painterly representation. *Guernica* cast an ominous shadow upon the entire scaffold of the cult of technology, which [to a far greater extent] affected another instrument of modern transport: the railroad.

The railroad signified modernity and social transformation, becoming a sign of technology as *telos* in the era of the Popular Front. The installation of *Distant Voyages* and *Portugal* in the Railroad pavilion thus carried limitless, contextual implications. The Popular Front’s project of nationalizing the transportation industry coincided with the World Fair.\(^\text{103}\) The creation of the Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer (National Railroad Society), in late summer 1937, demonstrates the singular relationship Blum government’s had with the railroad industry.\(^\text{104}\)

This relationship had its origins in complex, cultural and societal forces: most expressly, the advent of the *politique de loisir* (leisure policy) – and in particular, the introduction of the *congé payé* (paid vacation) in June 1936 – informed the relationship. The dramatic shift toward a “democratized”, leisure model provided the impetus for a standardization and nationalization of France’s railroads.\(^\text{105}\)

The Matignon Accords, which granted paid vacations and a 40-hour workweek, introduced the problem of mass leisure.\(^\text{106}\) The Blum government responded dynamically with a new leisure model. However, leisure underwent a dramatic politicization in the era of the masses. Foremost, the “organization of leisure” bore the definitive mark of totalitarianism, as “fascist states [and to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union] had been preeminently successful” in the restriction and reordering of leisure.\(^\text{107}\) Furthermore, other leisure forms (primarily, Catholic and
bourgeois/liberal) were “institutional” entities in France; additionally, there was a perceived, “dehumanizing”, mass leisure model, imported from America and expressed in cinema. The intractability of these leisure models led the Popular Front to propose a democratized, socialist form of leisure. The Popular Front adopted “popular consumer democracy”, aimed primarily against the fascist manipulation of mass leisure, which proved to be a hybrid of the pre-existing, leisure models.108

Julian Jackson adumbrates the objectives of popular democracy, as Léo Lagrange, Undersecretary of Sports and Leisure, defined them:

First, ‘to allow the youth of France to discover joy and health through the practice of sport’…Secondly, Lagrange argued that a generalization of leisure would create ‘moral unity’ and ‘bring together the different elements of French youth’…Thirdly, the aim was to generalize participation in sport and democratize both tourism and elitist sports such as skiing or aviation. Finally, Lagrange stressed that his aim was not to ‘regiment’ leisure but to reconcile liberal individualism and totalitarian effectiveness.109

The politique du loisir loomed over the popular imagination; it soon centered on the congé payé.110 There was a wealth of public debate, surrounding the congé payé on both right and left.111 The notion of reuniting the masses with the nation was omnipresent in these debates. The imagery of the first congé payé was rich in allusion, suggesting that the masses were in the process of recovering “lost values of family and community” through leisure activities.112 “Family and community”, however, proved to be signifiers of the Nation; national values were the values to be reclaimed, by touring historical sites and enjoying the national patrimony. The trope of a populace, renewing itself on the vital sap of the Nation typified the extant discourse. It culminated in a new conception of social citizenship: the instilling of national values, in an effort to access a transcendent, historical family.113 A more, “total” man would emerge as a result of leisure:
The best of them will develop their bodies and their souls. They will work as artists, in projects that are joyful for them; they will develop their minds, they will make Beauty, they will learn Science and advance it, they will remain roused by the fierce desire to discover and to increase that which is divine in all of us.\textsuperscript{114}

From political discourse, leisure became a pervasive motif. The iconography of the New Man comprised leisure. The thematic predominance of leisure was nowhere, more prominent, more seductively illustrated, than in the cultural artifacts of the Paris World Fair. Fair organizers (after the election of the Popular Front) conceived of their pavilions as expressions of the Front’s policy of edification through leisure. The Delaunay murals, which conveyed the tropes of national regeneration, installed themselves alongside the genesis of “popular consumer democracy”, in a decidedly national framework, bespeaking the Popular Front’s, primordial concern with mass politics.

The reform aesthetic of the Popular Front used the transitional medium of mural art, as a means to herald the social harmony of a more, complete and far-reaching people’s culture. People’s culture was, therefore, not a static concept; it comprised active interventions, by contentious tropes. Moreover, people’s culture was a profoundly teleological model. All its referents proposed new media that, as Walter Benjamin contended, prefigured a new state of political agency that inhered in collective, production \textit{praxis}. Free of the extra-aesthetic implications of site, these post-auratic art forms replicated a new age, a blend of “communal fantasy and nostalgia” and “a desire for the technical rationalization of collective exchanges.”\textsuperscript{115}
“Just as there is comparative anatomy, which helps us to understand the nature and history of organs, so this photographer [August Sander] is doing comparative photography, adopting a scientific standpoint superior to the photographer of detail.”  

Walter Benjamin, “Little History of Photography”

Before moving onto an object (or artifact) specific analysis of post-auratic art forms, and the determinant role they played in the construction of people’s culture, it is perhaps more beneficial to first revisit the concept of aura, in relation to its historical context and to the momentousness of its eradication, as a fundamental, aesthetic quality. Walter Benjamin’s definition of aura, while richly detailed, remains wholly interpretive:

The concept of aura which was proposed above with reference to historical objects may usefully be illustrated with reference to the aura of natural ones. We define the aura of the latter as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch.

However, what, nevertheless, becomes evident in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” is the bond between aura and human sense perception. Aura is predicated upon a certain mode of existence, a “fundamental category of experience, memory and perception permeating human possibilities of encountering the world…” In aesthetic terms, aura is constitutive of a singular, subject-object relationship, in which the subject interprets the object (the work of art) as part of this larger “modality of experience.” Like human sense perception, aura is contextually-bound; the shift away from aura accompanies various, social and cultural changes. Aura is beholden to a historical moment [in Marxist teleology, the era of the
bourgeoisie); and thus, the transformation of the historical moment necessarily entails
the “withering away of aura.”

The magnitude of the loss of aura could be seen in the technically
reproducible artwork, an artwork born to an era whose sense perception was
incommensurate with that of aura. These artworks suggested new possibilities,
“conflicting possibilities”, contingent upon the qualitative standard unleashed in the era
of the masses: politics. Politics was in the tissue of the post-auratic artwork,
dominating the subject-object relationship; which is to say that political associations
reordered mass reaction to new media forms. Politics was what was primarily at stake
in people’s culture, from its post-6 February 1934 birth. But whereas the site imposed
itself as an intermediary between mural art (the object) and the subject’s response to
it, there was an unfiltered, indelibly political, subject-object relationship, with respect
to the post-auratic artwork. Modernity, haunting in its “conflicting possibilities”, was
now everywhere a referent for people’s culture.

I

In 1936 the photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson took his camera to the shores of the
Marne River to document the first congé payé (paid vacation). There, he chronicled the
multitude of Frenchmen and women, enjoying, what was quite probably, their first
vacation, an inaugural foray outside of the metal fortress of Paris. The artist crept
along stealthily, often photographing his subjects from the back, so as to remain
undetected. His lens thus infiltrated the domain of people’s vacation and tourism, a
haven of repose and détente.
His photographs were among the first mass media representations of the *congé payé*, simultaneously chronicling and crafting a revolutionary leisure time. They provided an image of a new world; the images accented human forms – depicted almost “sculptorally” – in fresh landscapes. Golden gleams, escaping through trees and reflecting off the Marne, these iconic representations of a new “modality of experience” were a radical departure from the archetypal illustration of the gray-hued, urban landscape. The iconological sum of Cartier-Bresson’s classical compositions – their synchronized stasis and vitality – seemingly spoke to the humanist evocation of leisure in the political lexicon of the Popular Front.

The transformation of the human condition through leisure was a utopian ideal, an ideal of the Popular Front, inscribed within a modernist register. The
breadth of utopian discourse that surrounded the “legitimization” of youth leisure not only spoke to the popularity of New Man tropes but also suggested the political stakes involved in youth cultural edification through leisure. The Popular Front, situated youth culture within its vast, cultural program.

The youth hostel movement became the focus of youth culture in Popular Front France. The movement, originally of German derivation, gained momentum, as a social movement, in the 1930s, with the foundation of the religious, French League for Youth Hostels (la ligue Française pour les auberges de jeunesse) and the Secular Center for Youth Hostels (le Centre laïque des auberges de jeunesse or CLAJ). Léo Lagrange focused on the CLAJ, as he sought to achieve the first objective of his leisure policy: “…to ‘allow the youth of France to discover joy and health through the practice of sport’.”

Youth hostels were paradigmatic of Lagrange’s attempts to democratize, or socialize, national spaces – which had hitherto been fractured or compartmentalized, along class lines – through popular leisure. Youth hostels encapsulated an indivisible culture, conceived [in toto] as a “veritable miniature Republic of the Young.” They represented a new, utopian space, where youth could be inculcated with Republican values. In the popular imagination, the youth hostel was an idealized space within nature, where human values could be recovered. The movement, therefore, served as an analogue to the Regionalist, regenerative discourse – fueling both right and left in the 1930s – in its insistence upon a bucolic, restorative world, apart from the hustle of modern city life.

Cartier-Bresson’s images conjure forth this notion of leisure time, as idealized time outside of temporal bounds. In one photograph, in particular, a group of young
men tussle at a campsite (Figure 11). The compositional focus is on these vital youth, mostly shirtless as to emphasize their taut physiques, muscles alert from rigorous play. They smile and fight good-naturedly but determined looks remain on their faces. They appear healthy, strong, pleasant, the race of Frenchmen at the dawn of a new era.

Leisure purportedly furthered the spiritual delight and development of French youth. Youth leisure, while cloaked in utopian rhetoric, however, did not fail to express “the fears of an ageing society aware of the threat across the Rhine…” and thus intent upon demonstrating that, “democracy as well as fascism could harness the revolt of youth.” Cartier-Bresson photographs, in their homosocial imagery, convey the bellicose undertones of youth leisure in Popular Front France.

To this effect, there was a confluence between the leisure experiments of the Popular Front and those of its totalitarian neighbors:

Historians Jean-Claude Richez and Léon Strauss have also emphasized convergences between French aspirations for popular tourism and the Nazi Kraft durch Freude – accessibility to leisure practices connoting social prestige, the role of vacations in familial and national unity, the return to and reconciliation with nature, and the regeneration of the body.

In Nazi Germany, the Hitler youth was the focal point of youth culture. The National Socialist “colonization of its citizens’ free time…” filtered into youth leisure: “Pursuits which had rather innocuously occupied the time of youth groups before 1933, such as camping and hiking, were invested with direct political significance by the Hitler youth.”

The depiction of leisure in the Third Reich necessarily evoked Strength through Joy, not merely because of the cultural centralization of Gleichschaltung. Leni Riefenstahl’s Olympia, for instance, is, foremost, a glorification of the athletic body in
motion: the silhouettes her camera created accented the lines, strength and beauty of the modern athlete. But from its inception, its idyllic imagery was read as a glorification of Nazi rhetoric; though there is irrefutable evidence that Goebbels himself was infuriated at the lack of overt propaganda in the film. The process by which context blanketed the reaction to the artwork predated National Socialism, arising with the birth of the photographic image. Photography, divested of any link to pre-modern cult and aura, became beholden to another property.

The answer to “what was at stake for the technically reproducible artwork in the era of mass dissemination?” is naturally politics. This, of course, had implications for Popular Front-era people’s culture, implying that the artifact mimicked a particular mode of existence. “Premiers congés payés” created a new iconography of leisure, but its iconological allusions cast a longer shadow. Politics inflected Cartier-Bresson’s realist idiom into the regressive allegories of Romanticism, providing homology with Nationalist Socialist “blood and soil” rhetoric. As we move to the post-auratic media marshaled in the cause of people’s culture, it is imperative to note the extent to which the technically reproducible image presupposed a vast and unstable web of political and ideological referents: modernity.
II: THE MODERN MUSEUM: NEGOTIATING SPACES

“…after having created museums in the eighteenth century for the elite, in the nineteenth century for the Bourgeoisie, it is now necessary to begin the organization of museums for the people, who ignore them.”

Georges Huisman, Inspector General of the Fine Arts

“History was no longer a revelation of constants but a dynamic web of social and cultural forces, none absolute in themselves.”

Mary Caroline McLeod

The 1930s saw a clarification of the modern museum that radically transformed museum culture and praxis. These changes coalesced under the rubric of museography, the modern science of museum organization, encompassing a museum’s architecture, planning and installation. The modern museum was updated to the era of mass reproducibility, with the introduction of mass media art forms: photography, photomontage and film. Moreover, curators now installed their collective artworks to convey a narrative, whereas previously exhibitions were [mostly] understood in purely aesthetic terms. This shift unforeseeably altered the epistemological focus of art history, as the extra-stylistic narrative secured [critical] ascendancy vis-à-vis form and style.

At this crucial intersection, the Popular Front began to heed the call of the modern museum, to such an extent that museum legislation remained one of the Front’s few, readily identifiable, cultural policy measures. The didactic aims of museography and those of the Popular Front fundamentally coincided. The new medium and the coalition government both shared a vested interest in the permanence of the other. The modern museum proved to be an ideal forum for the furtherance of the Front’s cultural policy, which, in turn, elicited its
institutionalization. One can thus trace the political motives that were causal in the expansion of museography.

The modern museum responded to the Front’s preoccupation with the “leisuring” and edification of the masses; and, it soon served as a focal point in people’s culture, promoted as a “democraticized” space, accessible to all. Didacticism, implicit in people’s culture, soon found an outlet in the new, curatorial “narratives”. However, these extra-aesthetic narratives introduced context, as the artifact’s primary, evaluative criterion. The often-explicit, curatorial narrative was time-bound, whereas one could impute a transcendent quality onto the artwork. The teleology of the Popular Front – understood as a “dynamic web” of referents and countervalent, social and cultural forces – often subsumed these narratives, further contextualizing them. In toto context provoked a wholesale reassessment of the museum as cultural artifact: from apolitical, the museum became a politicized space, the successful dissemination of mass ideology was now at stake.

The first museological “experiment”, the 1937 Vincent Van Gogh retrospective, occurred during the era of the Popular Front. It manifested two, paradoxical tendencies that would become paradigmatic of museography: historicism and ahistoricism. Historicism was constitutive of the educative mission of museography and people’s culture. Its intent was to contextualize the artwork, within a clearly defined, historical moment, by using “scientific” graphs and models and personal artifacts from the artist’s life. Curators endeavored to install their works in a “documentary” fashion, in an effort to show that the artifact was, in fact, a historical document.
In contradistinction, ahistoricism attempted to bring the viewer (the subject) deeper into the reality of the object, by causing a “sense of separation from [the subject’s] real life”; thus ahistoricism appealed to the senses, whereas historicism’s innate didacticism stimulated the intellect. Museography, abetted by the introduction of mechanically reproduced addenda, sought to “[collapse] the time and space” between the subject and a presumably, “authentic past”.

Museography, therefore, became an expression of a reconfigured modality of experience, defined by Benjamin as “…the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction.” At the exhibit, reproductions of Van Gogh paintings replaced their originals, if those originals were not available, revealing the extent to which the medium was adapted to the dictates of mass contemplation. Furthermore, recourse to reproductions, photography and film for the simulation of truth amounted to the destruction of aura, making museography a thoroughly, post-auratic art form. The medium relied upon [to a lesser extent] the same truth simulation devices as film: principally the suggestion of truth through tactility – or the “apprehension” of the object. But not only were the masses “getting hold of an object”, they were unsuspectingly grasping at a refashioned past.

The Popular Front aimed to harness museography in the arsenal of people’s culture, for the art form’s transformative potential, even though the medium’s, intrinsic anti-historicism would seemingly mitigate the pedagogic effects of the Front’s teleology. However, one soon learnt that this teleology was not merely conveyed through pedagogy; it was also disseminated through rhetoric. Abstracted pasts already
existed as popular tropes in the era of the Popular Front; and as demonstrated, these discourses carried with them indelibly ideological, mass political, components. The refashioned past – and the representation of the refashioned past – served the presentist agenda of the Popular Front.

Museography’s paradoxical trends could, therefore, coexist; the vast program of mass edification fused itself onto an abstracted representation of a popular trope. As aforementioned strident rhetoric could not belie the open-endedness of some of these discourses, given the nature of the political moment. The following chapter demonstrates how the Popular Front used “primitive” societies to reflect back upon the inter-war, French experience; and how, in turn, the representation of those societies diffused into the iconology of modernity.

I

Two museological experiments, closely linked to the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques*, actuated the imposition of the Front’s teleology upon the artwork. They isolated “simple” societies from their contextual foundations, in an effort to express a notion of the Nation and of historical continuity that was conformant with the teleology of the Popular Front. Once posited, this teleology was diffused to the masses, [often] in the form of national populism. Suffice it to say that the individual artworks that comprised these museums were divested of their contextual properties, as part of a preexistent society, as well as their purely aesthetic relevance. The ideological associations of the Popular Front reactivated original artifacts; and mechanically reproduced duplicates stood alongside these recontextualized artifacts, to fill in narrative holes. In these artifacts, we countenance the symbiotic processes of delegitimization, decontextualization and reactivation.
Ethnographers and curators refashioned two museums in the newly constructed Palais de Chaillot: the Musée des Monuments Français (Museum of French Monuments) and the Musée de l’Homme (Museum of Man). The former – remodeled from the nineteenth century Musée de Sculpture Comparée (Museum of Comparative Sculpture) – housed reproductions of French sculpture, frescoes and painted glass. The large presence of Gothic and Romanesque works gave the museum a medieval slant, as was the original intention of Viollet-le-Duc, the curator of the old Sculpture Museum, in the nineteenth century.

The Musée des Monuments Français, however, became another sign of the Left’s continuing efforts to recolonize France’s historical patrimony from the Right. The attendant rhetoric bespoke the tide of national populism: “Those who visit the Musée des Monuments Français, after having contemplated so many witnesses of our past, take away from it, if they are French, a deep satisfaction, a kind of pride.” The Popular Front thus appealed to a [subdued] form of cultural chauvinism, France’s pride in her artistic lineage.

But, more tellingly, the French Monuments Museum evoked a certain lineage:

The artifacts within the Musée des Monuments Français conjured forth…an organic society of local parishes and autochthonous lords; this was a world in which institutions of church and state seemed to reflect directly the local conditions of agrarian production.

The image of the pre-modern, “organic society” was a pervasive, extant trope, whose application superseded a seemingly impartial, interest in the exploration of medieval culture. This trope, implicated in the development of the modern mural, persisted in the new museological experiment. The French Monuments Museum, envisioned as a mass pedagogic instrument, affirmed the substantive, tropological link between neo-
medievalism and people’s culture. The museum embodied the politicized rhetoric, which dominated the popular representation of the Middle Ages in Popular France. The Musée des Monuments Français, therefore, “connoted a certain vision of the [Nation].” Communitarianism and collectivism, as signifiers of the trope of the Middle Ages, guided this vision of the Nation. This form of abstracted representation of the past spoke to the exigencies of the present: reform of French society.

One such reform was economic; in the midst of economic stagnation, neo-medievalism invariably referred to corporatism. The wild vicissitudes and attendant imbalances of a capitalist economy were perceived to be at the root of France’s economic malaise. The simple, economic model of the Middle Ages – promoted, as such, at the French Monument’s Museum – was visibly the obverse of speculative capitalism. A return to this prototype would presumably rectify the imbalances of the present system. The French Monument’s Museum thus encapsulated the pervasive, anti-industrialization discourse of the era of the Popular Front. The refashioning of an obsolete, nineteenth century experiment evidenced the extent to which culture was in dialogue with ideology; how “medieval portals and tombs” could acquire new ideological imperatives.

But more was happening at the French Monuments Museum than an “artificial” representation of the Middle Ages; as Paul Deschamps, curator of the Musée des Monuments Français, wrote: “One should note the very special character of Musée des Monuments Français, it contains no original works. Only copies appear there, as exact as possible and in the precise dimensions of the originals.” These mass reproduced, proxy-artifacts, however, functioned in the service of people’s culture, as tools for the instruction of the masses in “medieval” culture. These
artifacts, moreover, helped to install the masses within a legible teleology, implying that they alone could lead the way back to the balanced societies of yore.

The presence of proxy-artworks in the modern museum confirmed the nexus between people’s culture and mass society, and, by extension, pedagogy and mass contemplation. Technically reproduced simulacra had a mass political role – didactic and truth replicating – which helped overcome the paradox of museography. This role proved vital to the authority of the mass produced artwork.

The Musée de l’Homme – refashioned from the nineteenth century Ethnography Museum (Musée de l’Ethnographie) – also conveyed a similar [no less, covert] ideological message and belonged to the same, museological moment. Here, genuine artifacts, however, worked in the service of latent narratives, in contradistinction to the proxy-artworks of the Musée des Monuments Français.

Again, implicit in the convergence of medium and moment was the politicization of museography:

[Paul] Rivet [who would become the museum’s principal curator] wanted to take advantage of the intellectual conjunction (in 1936), to not only modernize the equipment [of the old Ethnography Museum]…but to move the orientation of the museum further to the Left.153

Michel Leiris, one of Rivet’s collaborators, therefore, defined the program of the new museum, as to accent its interrelation with people’s culture: “To promote contact between technicians and visitors, [in an effort] to make the Museum of Man an instrument of people’s culture at the same time as a center for specialists…”154

The Musée de l’Homme itself undertook an audacious mission: “to present a complete picture of races, of peoples, and of civilizations from the appearance of man to the present day, spanning all continents.”155 Man’s story began in Africa, as her
artifacts were displayed first.\textsuperscript{156} The designation of Africa as the cradle of civilization – implied, as it was, in the installation of the artifacts – seemingly relied upon sound, impartial science. But cruder, ideological assertions also banded around this scientific truism; they could also point to the Museum of Man for theoretical support.

France took artifacts from her colonies and placed them in the Musée de l’Ethnographie; they were later transferred to the Musée de l’Homme. However, the effect of taking these artifacts – recontextualizing them – was to “collapse” African society into one, abstracted concept; to the extent that, it virtually implied that “Africa” was “ostensibly authentic and stable, not yet buffeted by the forces of history,” before the arrival of Europeans.\textsuperscript{157} This notion was prevalent in the 1880s and 1890s – at the heyday of the Ethnography Museum – but it was not uncommon in the 1930s:

While the Greco-Latin civilization soared upward almost without interruption until the present, Africa, as if stricken by an abrupt lethargy, saw its most advanced peoples immobilize themselves at a stage hardly more advanced than the Middle Ages.

…Except in some isolated cases where Europeans have artificially introduced the seed, all concepts whose appearance postdates the Renaissance are more or less absent from the Dark Continent.\textsuperscript{158}

The Museum of Man sought to distance itself from the more racialized tropes of the 1930s. Even the move from a museum of Ethnography to one of Man suggested a revolution in the perception of the “Other”: from ethnocentricity to progressivism:

…the transformation in terminology also operated in a similar trajectory – outside of the appreciable fusion of anthropology, the sciences of prehistory and ethnography – [as there was] the victory of a totalizing, philosophical perspective, one of a progressivist tone, simultaneously reclaimed as a cultural project of popular education, evocative of Jean Perrin’s at the Palace of Discovery.\textsuperscript{159}
The shift, nonetheless, modified rhetoric, but amounted to the same imposition of a “totalizing philosophical perspective” upon an “Other”. The Front endeavored to subsume foreign cultures within its project of popular education, delegitimizing these cultures and stripping their artifacts of their original meaning(s).

In *toto* the artifact now spoke the language of progressivism, disinterested scholarship and Science. Familiar, New Man tropes were revisited, as there was a formal connection made between naive, African societies and the pristine societies of the Middle Ages, as can be discerned in Paul Perrin’s quote. This connection existed at the behest of a new, Popular Front-era folklorist culture. This is to say that the representations of the “Other” and of the “past” provided historical continuity with an equally, “artificial” trope.

Folklore was a syncretic term, purposefully, “open-ended”, in the lexicon of the Popular Front:

> It embraced everything from the survival of rural rituals, regional costumes, and dances, to what Rivière and his associate André Varagnac called “le folklore ouvrier”; present-day “proletarian rituals” including strikes, street demonstrations, and such impromptu events as the “Burial Ceremony of the 48-Hour Week.” As such, it managed to collapse, or rather synthesize in truly Hegelian fashion, the dichotomy between the peasantry and the working class into the concept of ‘le fait populaire’ (the life of the people).160

Folklorism explicitly attempted to reclaim the cult of deepest France (*la France profonde*) – by marrying proletarian ritual to peasant custom – as rural France was perceived to be a bastion of conservatism.161 But more importantly, peasant France was part of the larger, national imaginary, a vital sign of the Nation; it was, therefore, imperative that it be reclaimed from the Right.162163 The rise of folklorism lead to the development of the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires or ATP (National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions), which opened in 1939.164
These museological experiments evidenced the extent to which the necessarily, abstracted representation of the past and of the “Other” served a presentist agenda: leftist “folklorism”. Artifacts, wrenched from their original context, existed to authenticate extant tropes; artifacts now unwittingly participated in an artificially imposed narrative, where they once served culturally-specific roles. We can read in this complex narrative the shreds of an artificially imposed, historical continuity that will come to startling life in the next artifact.

II

Prime Minister Léon Blum opined, after reviewing the preparations for the upcoming World Fair, that there was no significant space set aside to showcase, “what was perceived to be a virtually unrivaled domain of French strength”: her cultural patrimony. The French Masterpieces Exhibition (Chefs-d’oeuvre de l’Art Français) was, therefore, hastily assembled. The Retrospective comprised twelve hundred works of French painting and sculpture from Gallo-Roman times to the fin-de-siècle, by its June 1937 opening at the Palais de Tokio. The Chefs-d’oeuvre de l’Art Français was greeted with near-universal acclaim in cultural reviews sympathetic to both right and left.

Delving deeper, however, one begins to discern glaring inconsistencies. Firstly, that a vast, historical retrospective, spanning millennia, unveiled during a highly polarized, political moment, did not provoke critical discord. Furthermore, the Chefs-d’oeuvre de l’Art Français opened in the midst of a wholesale reevaluation of modern museum praxis, yet the show itself was devoid of overt pedagogy, “curatorial interference” and mass media addenda – as was the custom in the museological
experiments of the day. Why was the artifact so seemingly divorced from its cultural and political moment?

The explanation originates in the analysis: “…[Virtually] no published account went on record without tacitly accepting from the outset the notion that the Chefs-d’oeuvre expressed or embodied, in a more or less unproblematic manner, the nation of France.”167 This fact is conspicuous, insofar as the Left and the Right had competing, highly politicized claims to France’s historical patrimony. The French Masterpieces exhibition, however, presupposed cultural “continuity”, global continuity that did not belong to either right or left.

The language of a “living” history dominated the exhibition’s critical reception:

Lying on the outskirts of the World Fair, do not forget the unexpected blossoming of a past that lends a comforting preface to difficult current events, like the chrysalis avows her struggles in the birth of the butterfly…In its passing resurrection, to which the majority of the grand art collections and museums of France and the world, with the exception of the Louvre, contributed, this beautiful past appears more alive than ever, vibrant and glorious, like the France of our classical and varied artists, like France in her latent unity, where the presence of a continuous taste leads us to this transitory diversity.

This past… visibly brings us a new biography of French art, from the Middle Ages to Impressionism, during the eight hundred years of her collaboration with the French soul, each century inexorably delivery one stone in the complete edifice. Among so many diverse faces, this luminous and instructive Retrospective is nothing like a nocturnal review or a funerary march.168

These words more than suggested the presence of an Eternal France, her story unfolding immutably. The transcendent artwork – the “stone” in the larger “edifice” of the Nation – occupied a singular place within this narrative. Manifestly, teleology shone through:

At each moment in the history of French art, we find the same autonomy, in abundance and in variation. And the sight of this magnificent Retrospective
makes us better feel the extent to which, history and destiny weigh upon and condition artistic creation; history and the destiny she brings to our people refuse to give art independence and autonomy.169

In the minds of all, the artifact was a sign of a mythic France, of the Nation. The Retrospective thus reified the myth of a “living” France, grasped by both right and left.

Critical consensus, however, generated two antipodal readings of the Nation. The Left attempted to harness and “socialize” (or democratize) the cultural patrimony, through exhibitions like the Chefs-d’œuvre de l’Art Français. The Popular Front – endowed with a Revolutionary zeal – conceived of a “universal art”, paradoxically “rooted”, in the historical community, and “radiating” abroad.170 Universalism was at the theoretical core of the Popular Front’s “New Humanism”, as Georges Huisman contended:

What infinite happiness to think that, during all of the summer of 1937, the museum at the quai de Tokio will become, for the entire world, a reliquary of French humanism where each visitor will sample, in his own fashion, the lessons of an art that has for a long time been a universal art, and that will always remain, at the forefront of European civilization, an incomparable instrument of reconciliation and of peace!171

Pedagogy was palpable, existing in the notion of patrimony for the people and thusly participating in the mass political discourse of the day. Overt curation or didacticism could only fetter the universal art.

The signs that indicated a universal art on the Left, however, provided fuel for cultural xenophobia on the Right. By in large, the Right interpreted these same artifacts as proof of a consanguineous state. This is to say that their understanding of historical continuity was bound to race. Race was the only means available to access transcendent Frenchness. The unabashedly, essentialist reading of the Nation resumed the generational dispute over a more successful, cultural model: inclusive or
exclusive. Though the French Masterpieces Retrospective responded ambiguously to this debate, there were other national exhibitions in 1937 that were far less equivocal. These shows, in turn, cast a shadow on the Popular Front’s recourse to the Nation as cultural referent.

In the same summer of 1937, Hitler’s Reich staged the Great German Art Exhibition to display Nazi Germany’s new, stylistic consensus. And where the French Masterpieces show was open-ended, the German Art exhibition was unequivocal; the prevailing idealist and naturalistic aesthetic idiom, depicted at the show, signified “the body of the nation’, cleansed of inner conflicts…”

Whether the claim was true, the relentlessness of the imagery, the extent of stylistic conformity, denoted a seismic shift in the representation of the Nation – a shift toward a monolithic representation that was constitutive of the totalitarian artwork. That the Great German Art Exhibition coincided with the Degenerate Art Exhibition that proscribed all strands of modern art affirmed the perceived, univocal identity of Nazi culture. The artwork still functioned as a sign of the Nation; but where the Popular Front presented these signs without intermediary, the Nazis employed all means at their disposal – namely, the mass media – to illustrate, under the banner of the totalizing work of art, their conception of the New Man.

III

National museums received government funding from the Ministry of National Education and its sub-ministry, the Ministry of Fine Arts. In some cases, direct government intervention reordered the objectives of these ventures; in others, government involvement led to the creation of a new exhibition or museum. This is to reiterate the fact that the modern museum represented the “official” cultural policy of
the Popular Front, in its attempt to “socialize” culture under the rubric of New Humanism.174

The museological experiments that focused on France’s historical lineage—Musée des Monuments Français and Chefs-d’oeuvres de l’Art Français—were not the extent of cultural reevaluation in the era of the Popular Front. The museum also heralded the advent of modernity, with exhibitions of “contemporary” art. These exhibitions sought to define modernity, through the plastic arts.

“Living” art, first, became a concern of the Popular Front with the construction of the Palais de Tokio for the World Fair, as it was envisaged as the state’s premier, modern art museum. But what modern art was to fill the walls of modernism’s new sanctuary?

The Popular Front, however, temporarily employed the Palais de Tokio for its French Art Retrospective; in the interim period, ephemeral contemporary art exhibits would propose their singular evaluations and definitions of modern art. The Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant (Masters of Independent Art) at the Petit Palais and the Origines et Développement de l’Art International Indépendant (Origins and Development of International Independent Art) at the Jeu de Paume both occurred in 1937. Both served as global assessments of contemporary, independent art. The contradictory imagery of these exhibitions soon showed that modernity—while ineluctable—was in and of itself an indefinite construct, which carried with it a highly contentious, mass political corollary. The mere ascribing of modern art status often involved the imposition of a “totalizing philosophical perspective”—as did the reactivation of artifacts under the banner of Neo-Humanism—upon the artwork; this “perspective” informed popular response to the object.
Since its inception in 1900, the Petit Palais functioned as the art gallery of the municipality. This function, therefore, largely predetermined the scope of the exhibition: a retrospective of the artists of the Ecole de Paris (Paris School), which consisted of Frenchmen and “naturalized” foreigners, whose prolific portfolios made Paris the capital of the avant-garde in the early twentieth century. The curator of the Petit Palais, Raymond Escholier, moreover, responded to what he deemed to be the paucity of institutional (or government-sanctioned), contemporary art shows.175

Those who reviewed the Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant tended to highlight the sense of novelty that accompanied, such a large, publicly-sanctioned exhibition of contemporary art: “For the sole reason that the exhibition is the first of this order…it will bear witness to that which represents living art today, at the moment of the World Fair.”176 But there was almost tacit agreement that the modern art show was an extension of the French Masterpieces Retrospective; where the Chefs-d’oeuvre de l’Art Français had terminated at 1900, more or less, with Paul Cézanne and Henri Rousseau, the Petit Palais exhibition resumed at the arbitrary date of 1895, with the varying currents of Post-Impressionism.177 The mutual exaltation of a national school of art solidified the nexus. Reaction to the Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant show almost emulated that of the French Masterpieces Retrospective.

The notion of a French school, the “wholly”, French Ecole de Paris, went uncontested at the Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant, as it had at the Chefs-d’oeuvre Retrospective:

A unique exhibition of masterpieces is currently assembled at the Petit Palais and at the museum at the quai de Tokio [Chefs-d’oeuvres de l’Art Français], which together group, with the old masters, the independent masters of modern art…[The evolution of] French art realizes itself with a continual certainty and with a unique persistence of vitality.178
Again, the singular “Frenchness” that this review, and many others like it, intimated was inherently problematic, in light of the polarized politics of the era. Artists of the School of Paris received “access” to the cult of the Nation, the School of France. Yet, the presence of foreign artists at the Petit Palais show further exacerbated the already-problematic claims to a transcendent “Frenchness”. Foreign artists of the School of Paris, like Pablo Picasso and Marc Chagall, were considered “so much the more ours [French] for having participated in the projects of the School of Paris.” The Nation, therefore, expanded to include men not born on French soil but who toiled in a “French” style.

In this instance, the individual artwork partook in the larger cultural mission of universal art; the trope of the Nation subsumed response to the artwork. An inclusive, “assimilationist” model informed the artwork, which became paradigmatic of Jean Zay’s now familiar conception of a culture that was both “rooted” and “radiating”. Escholier’s exhibition participated in the institutionalization (and canonization) of the School of Paris, helping to position the School as part of the cultural heritage. The artifact, represented at the Petit Palais exhibit, was “profoundly national as it enriches itself with foreign assets”: a “living” example of the national patrimony that the Popular Front strove to harness, under the flag of New Humanism.

However, consensus surrounding a “living”, national identity – astonishing in and of itself – did not spill over into similar consensus on a universal, cultural model. Many argued that only French nationals had rights to the Nation, only their works should be state-sanctioned under the French School. James Herbert recapitulated
René Gillouin’s invective on the Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant show, written in the Bulletin municipal, with the title “La farce de l’art vivant” (“The Farce of Living Art”):

…hundreds of artists of the good French race, full of talent and knowledge, will vegetate their entire lives in an obscure mediocrity [while] aliens, having flocked to Paris from their native Lithuania, Podolsk, or Czechoslovakia where they would have had no chance to pursue the most minimal career [usurped] the natives’ rightful place in achieving governmental recognition.183

Gillouin cast art as a central player in a larger battle between two cultural models, inclusive, or universalist, and exclusive or, essentialist. The Nation, however, proved to be at the theoretical core of both models, indicating the inviolability of the Nation, as a stylistic referent in the era of mass politics.

Curators, at the nearby Jeu de Paume, however, revolted against this “nationalized” scaffold. For their exhibition of contemporary art, they installed artworks within a decidedly, international[ist] [and not universalist] framework that was almost anomalous in its day. The Origines et Développement de l’Art International Indépendant exhibition catalogued the evolution of independent art, with a similar, post-Impressionist, starting point to that of the Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant.184 The exhibition then traced the varying currents of the European avant-garde, displaying artworks from as diverse art movements as Cubism and Constructivism.

The internationalist scaffold, adopted at the Origines et Développement de l’Art Intéernational Indépendent, was largely predetermined by the gallery’s role as the principal museum of foreign schools of contemporary art.185 The museum’s curator, André Dezarros, however, used the exhibit as a forum to inveigh against the separation of foreign and French art; this polemic – played out through the plastic
arts—might suggest that the show was purely formalist, thereby, apolitical. But the radical, curatorial choice to display French works alongside foreign works—all under the shared moniker of independent art, and thus divorced from national reference—was in and of itself highly political, in an era where national referents predominated. This is to say that the show’s installation remained distinct in the cultural program of the Popular Front.

Furthermore, a simple comparison between the artworks of the Jeu de Paume exhibit and those displayed at the Petit Palais attests to the stylistic innovation of the former. The larger, municipal show reflected the more conservative, national canon. Though promoted as “living,” the School of Paris was largely moribund [as such] by the 1930s. Paradoxically, “living” art movements, like Surrealism, remained consciously outside of the national canon. They proved too anarchic, too self-reflexive, in sum, too destabilizing, for residence in an institutional pantheon:

Despite their desire for a “hands on” connection with the material and indexical world during the Depression years, [the Surrealist] revolution of consciousness remained fundamentally predicated on questioning man’s subjectivity and the centrality of self. Such varied strategies as the fragmentation of collage, bodily dismemberment, psychic automatism, and Salvador Dalí’s “paranoiac-critical method” were deliberately destabilizing.

The inclusion of Surrealism at the Jeu de Paume show, an institutional forum, broadened [to some extent] the Popular Front’s formalist vocabulary, moving it slightly away from the dictates of the conservative rappel à l’ordre that the Front inherited and displayed at the Petit Palais. As an extant artifact, the Origines et Développement de l’Art International Indépendent exhibition moved beyond the familiar representation of the Nation; and by doing so, it expanded the Front’s iconologic definition of modernity.
The Origines et Développement de l’Art Intéernational Indépendent exhibit would, however, prove anomalous – a rather small affair – in the face of prevailing cultural trends. The *Ausstellung Französischer Kunst der Gegenwart* (French Art of the Present) – which opened in Berlin alongside the Paris World Fair and the Chefs-d’œuvres de l’Art Français – represented a seismic shift in form and content from the Jeu de Paume show, though it was also devoted to contemporary art. Government-supported, the French Art of the Present relied on conservative curatorial choices to propose a conception of the Nation alarmingly sympathetic to that of their Nazi hosts.

International exhibitions of French art were one of the many examples of the Popular Front’s cultural policy in action. Prague, Warsaw, Lisbon and Bogotá were some of the cities that received French art, as part of the cultural venture. The exhibition in Berlin would presumably conform itself to the larger, cultural mission of the Popular Front.

One can define this mission as *rayonnement culturel* (cultural radiation), the unofficial cultural policy of the Popular Front. Jean Zay retrospectively alluded to this term and to its political connotations:

> In the realm of what is called “propaganda” – a word to be proscribed – the Ministry for National Education, with the *Action Artistique*, organized in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs…exhibitions of French art…Many other decisions were taken, whose character might seem purely technical, and yet had a political dimension.

*Rayonnement culturel* was the global arm of New Humanism: an “enlightened” French culture, in all its splendor, was to be showcased abroad. The nationalist and elitist mindset originated in the Revolutionary armies of the 1790s. However, in the 1930s, peaceful interchange, not citizen’s armies, provided the means for cultural radiation. Peaceful interchange was to be both a “mode of transportation” and a sign of
democracy; democracy, in particular, was to be exported to the reaches of the globe. The anti-totalitarian artwork thus embodied the political dimension of rayonnement culturel: the defense of democratic institutions against the encroachment of totalitarianism.  

The defense of democracy was contingent upon the effectiveness of the anti-totalitarian artifact. Rayonnement culturel, however, referred to the Nation, in a fairly unambiguous fashion. As a result, the artifact did not always foremost reify “democracy’s most vital symbol, freedom of expression in art and literature,” caught as it was, in the exaltation of French culture. This is to say that the reiteration of nationalist tropes problematized the artifact in Berlin. The particular character of those tropes, in light of certain iconographic choices, proved to be of greater and, ultimately, of graver consequence.

The French Art of the Present exhibit proposed a “healthy” vision of French art, one in perfect harmony with Nazi idealism: “[The Berlin show] managed to avoid all the signs of what the Nazis termed decadence: no distortion, no abstraction, no figures inspired by African statuary.” Leisure activities and terrein (rural) motifs were iconographically pervasive. The condensation of French modern art into those key, conservative, themes attested to an ideologically, self-serving, curatorial selection. There was a tacit understanding of acceptable imagery; and the pictorial conservatism of the artifact amounted to a wholesale “revision” of contemporary art.

The political corollary of these iconographic choices was far more disturbing still. The artworks materialized as signs of the Nation – under the prescriptions of rayonnement culturel – representing a “safe”, “nostalgic” France. Yet, the show at the Prussian Academy of Art accrued a more damning interpretation, in the context of
Nazi Germany’s proscription of “modern art” as Jewish and Bolshevik. The staging of a government-supported exhibition in Nazi Germany, where members of the Prussian Academy and exhibiting French artists had been designated as degenerate, took French propaganda aims to the limit, presenting a “revisionist” account of French society. That no foreigners or Jews participated in the French Art of the Present exhibition more than suggested the unofficial triumph of an essentialist, racialized conception of the Nation.

IV

The Nation, as referent, suffused the artifacts of the Paris World Fair. In great measure, Le Corbusier’s Temps Nouveaux (New Times) Pavilion signified the Nation, presenting itself as a visual polemic (Figure 11). “New times” – the inescapable and ever-evolving term – took tropological refuge in the Nation. Yet, the open-ended term referred, above all, to the cultural ascendancy of people’s culture, corresponding to the pavilion’s subtitle, Musée d’éducation populaire (urbanisme). Here, the anti-totalitarian artifact represented New Humanism, in all its inconsistencies and lapses.
Le Corbusier’s New Times Pavilion took many forms before the final canvas structure went up at the Porte Maillot. In sum it adopted a leftist rhetorical approach, as the mass movement, surrounding the Rassemblement populaire, gathered momentum.\(^{198}\) In early 1936, Le Corbusier changed the pavilion’s name from the overtly elitist-sounding, Museum of Contemporary Aesthetics to the more politically engaged, New Times: Museum of Contemporary Aesthetics.\(^{199}\) To the architect, “New Times” perfectly encapsulated the moment:

While “Temps Nouveaux” matched strikingly the dynamism suggested by the form of the building, the name also recalled the phrase Nový Mir (New World), often used in revolutionary Russia.

…Conversely, the term “Temps Nouveaux” propounded, in Le Corbusier’s mind, aesthetic themes of the yet-to-come, of a present pregnant with future promises. The open-ended, dynamic term “nouveau” stood, in a sense, for another term Le Corbusier usually avoided: “avant-garde.”\(^{200}\)
Moreover, the support of leading members of the Popular Front, in particular that of the Prime Minister himself, in addition to ministers, Jean Zay and Jean Monnet, was invaluable to the success of Le Corbusier’s project, confirming the extent to which the Blum government directly imposed its cultural agenda upon many of the artifacts of the Paris World Fair.201

As such, the New Times Pavilion was undeniably an artifact of a unique cultural moment in France. Foremost, the pavilion’s formal innovation – elaborated as it was, in the midst of “revolutionary” zeal – bespoke the cultural experimentation and reevaluation stimulated by the Popular Front. The structure itself, a canvas tent, “harkened back not to power stations or highly mechanized industrial plants but rather to man’s most primitive shelter.”202 The use of canvas attests to the presence of a new, stylistic register in Le Corbusier’s modernist oeuvre. Canvas’ inherent organismic had social implications that differed markedly from those of the metals of Le Corbusier’s highly “mechanized”, Purist structures of the 1920s. Regionalism – of the kind one discerns in The Transmission of Energy – was inherent in canvas, where steel and iron corresponded to the Purist belief in a techno-utopian future.

Furthermore, canvas, a temporal material, also had an unmistakable, “agit-prop” value; Le Corbusier envisaged the pavilion as a museum of people’s education that would be transported throughout France, after the World Fair.203 The idea, though never fully actualized, survived in the adoption of a light, transportable material, which sought to “revive” the leftist, agit-prop tradition begun by the Bolsheviks, in the wake of the Russian Revolution.204

The Popular Front also experimented with canvas to construct vacation homes, under the auspices of the Ministry of Leisure.205 Pierre Jeanneret worked on
both vacation homes, which would be used for the Front’s leisure policy, and the New Times Pavilion, demonstrating the convergence of politics and art in the era of the Popular Front.206

Jeanneret, moreover, articulated Le Corbusier’s vision of a “free-form” interior core, “sans façade”, which would be used as the museum of popular education. His architectural experience with the Popular Front, constructing fast-assembly vacation houses, using the same technique, for Léo Lagrange’s Ministry, influenced the plan for an “imploding” interior, again reinforcing the nexus between the anti-totalitarian artifact and the Front’s leisure policy.207 The artifact reified many of the same New Man tropes, tropes that were implicit in the Popular Front’s leisure model. The object was, moreover, the paradigmatic, “democratized” space, sought after by the Popular Front, in its mission to “socialize” culture.

The pavilion’s decoration also illustrated the Front’s notion of a democratized space. Pedagogic tools saturated the interior “museum”: notably, photographs, photomontages and graphs.208 These tools created an effect that was, “looser… [and] intentionally more accessible than the cerebral compositions of the twenties,” further contextualizing the artifact within the museological moment of the Popular Front.209

Didactic tools tended to be post-auratic artifacts (i.e. photography, typography and newsprint techniques), which further signified a nexus between people’s culture and mass society. The pavilion’s decorators, (Juan Mirò, Charlotte Perriand, and Fernand Léger), however, installed cathedral vitrines and artist workshops – examples of “medieval” imagery – alongside these mechanically reproducible addenda.210 The effect of this imagery was to, paradoxically, reify the tropes of neo-medievalism – implicit in the crafting of people’s culture.
In the New Times Pavilion, neo-medievalism stood alongside a proposed project of urban renewal, as constituent parts of people’s culture. Pascal Ory contends that the New Times Pavilion represented the “apogee of Le Corbusier’s social period”. The notion of a democratized space, therefore, applied to the “urbanist” evocation of the New Times Pavilion, as the pavilion prefigured a new means of “popular” living, a marriage of form and [utopian] function:

Everything is new: the conception, the technique, the presentation. This edifice contains a veritable synthesis of architecture. One finds one hundred ingenious and audacious solutions to [the problems of] urbanism, recreation, and man’s destiny in society. One sees a stadium of one hundred thousand seats, a “Center of Vaction”, a plan for the development of unhealthy islet in Paris...

Urban renewal suggested the failure of bourgeois architecture: “The financial crisis of 1929, parliamentary paralysis in France, and the emergence of National Socialism in Germany partially undermined faith in architecture as a solution to social problems in capitalist society.” The New Times Pavilion responded to the perceived, incapacity of bourgeois architecture to find a solution to communal living. The pavilion, conceived spatially for mass contemplation, prefigured the masses’ commandeering of the means of production.

The New Times Pavilion, therefore, resided at the intersection of urban renewal and societal renewal, “hailing the [masses'] incorporation of art, facilitated through the medium of architecture.” The masses could ‘absorb’ the artifact tactiley, as inferred Benjamin in his “Artwork” essay. The tactile nature of “social” architecture extended to its ability to advance a new, collective mode of living, one attune to a reconfigured modality of experience. In sum, the New Times Pavilion spoke the language of communitarianism on two distinct, seemingly paradoxical
planes: “urbanist” and neo-medievalist, both modern constructions, both referents of people's culture.

The New Times Pavilion was a convergence of urbanism and museography, two, post-auratic, “tactilized” media that in and of themselves “betray the process of politicization in a particularly powerful manner.” The process of politicization is without intermediary in the post-auratic artwork, suggesting a direct imposition of extra-aesthetic, or mass political, referents upon the artwork. The varying signifiers of people’s culture impressed themselves upon the “tactile” artifact, activating and reactivating the artwork with new, political associations, necessarily outside of the realm of style and form. The anti-totalitarian artwork was simultaneously obscured and potent, as a historical document, as a result of context and the dictates of mass contemplation.

The primary, mass cultural referent for these art forms was, of course, the cinema, as suggested the installation of a projecting wall for films in the New Times Pavilion. Museography and architecture served as passageways to film in the arsenal of people’s culture. Film would also revisit the trajectory of the artwork in the era of the Popular Front; from apolitical it became an expression of the contextual grasp of mass politics.
“Rather than discussing a cinéma de Blum or a cinéma de Pétain, it is more constructive to speak [comprehensively] of a cinéma de crise [crisis cinema]. An economic crisis that stokes the fires of dissatisfaction, hardship and social criticism, arising predominately from the Left, but occasionally from the far right, as can be seen in Rebatet or in Autant-Lara’s rightist-anarchism. A cultural crisis that shakes the foundations of a national identity exalted by the Third Republic, emanating as much from the Surrealism of [Jacques] Prévert, as the new “mass civilization”, underpinning the cinema.”

Pascal Ory

A new, alternative cinema of the Left emerged in the mid-1930s, concurrent with the development of the Popular Front. A number of socio-economic factors contributed to the rise of this social cinema. Foremost, the Depression of the 1930s had an adverse effect on the industries of culture, as rehearsed in Chapter 1. The titans of the French film industry bore the economic crisis particularly harshly, which led to the break-up of film conglomerates, Pathé and Gaumont, between 1934 and 1936. The significant disruption in commercial film created the conditions for the growth of an alternative cinema:

The break-up of the conglomerates meant an end to the mass-produced film of standard plot and thematic content. The new producers tended to be less rooted to tradition-bound concepts of public preference and of commercial viability than Pathé and Gaumont which had been producing films for twenty-five years.

Left filmmaking [to a certain extent] filled the large void generated by the dissolution of Pathé and Gaumont. Thematically, the “left” films of the early 1930s, in particular those of Jean Vigo, provided a fertile model for the social cinema of the mid-30s; social justice and criticism were central themes in Jean Vigo’s films, and they would reappear half a decade later. Moreover, the reaction to Vigo’s films – most notably, to Zéro de Conduite, A Propos de Nice and L’Atlante – foreshadowed the numerous
barriers that the social cinema would encounter, thus positioning his films [retrospectively] as templates of left filmmaking:

Vigo’s career illustrates just how difficult it was to realize the objectives of a socially conscious and critical French cinema during the early thirties… Politically motivated film censorship and the domination of film production by the big conglomerates of Pathé and Gaumont tended to inhibit the development of such a cinema.221

This is to say that the response to Vigo’s films prefigured a list of grievances, seized upon by cultural institutions of the Left. Film censorship became one of many key points, around which leftist film associations mobilized in the era of the Popular Front. It surfaced as a cause célèbre, most prominently, after the banning of the PCF-sponsored, La Vie est à nous in 1936.

The cinéma de crise was, therefore, decidedly political from the outset, a barometer of the pervasive, societal and cultural, reevaluation that occurred throughout the 1930s. However, the politicization of French culture, as a result of the rise of fascism, further radicalized the genre, proving to be the driving force behind the comprehensive introduction of mass political themes. Fascism first entered into the cinéma de crise by obscure allusion (i.e. Batala in Le Crime de M. Lange); it soon became thematically dominant. The Left took its inaugural foray into political filmmaking within this contextual backdrop, which would establish the genre’s mass political nature.

Political parties of the Left began to seize upon film – as the visual art form best equipped to communicate their respective messages to a mass audience – in the wake of the riots of 6 February 1934 and, thereby, in the midst of the intensified, popular energy surrounding the Rassemblement populaire. The political parties, farthest to the Left, first experimented with “political” filmmaking: the S.F.I.O. and the
French Communist Party. In 1935 the Seine Federation of the Socialist Party established a cinematic wing, the Cinematographic Section, under the leadership of Marceau Pivert. The Cinematographic Section produced two political films: *Le Mur des fédérés*, about the Paris commune, and *14 juillet 1935*, about the Bastille Day demonstrations that launched the Popular Front. The Seine Federation, however, remained largely outside of the aegis of the S.F.I.O.; its political and cultural militancy was more a product of Pivert’s radicalism than a lasting trend in mainstream French Socialism.

The PCF – where the S.F.I.O. was [to a certain extent] tentative – fully embraced the cinematic medium, understanding, from a relatively early date, its mass political potential. The PCF dominated left filmmaking, in the era of the Popular Front, by the sheer number of filmic enterprises it sponsored and to which it was affiliated. The PCF was able to exert such a formidable command over leftist cinema for a number of reasons: foremost, as a result of the vast, cultural infrastructure it already had in place. Moreover, the highly centralized nature of the PCF facilitated decision-making, in most matters.

The crafting of a leftist tradition of “independent” filmmaking, however, brought the question of filmic models to the fore; and as there was a paucity of “political” films in France, filmic models were imported from abroad. The Soviet “propaganda” films of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein proved natural prototypes for the French left, particularly for the PCF. The social cinema of the Left, nonetheless, shared many aesthetic and thematic affinities with contemporaneous Fascist films. The manifold, structural similarities between *La vie est à nous* and Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Triumph of the Will*, more expressly, suggested that left filmmaking in
France relied upon many of the same, cultural touchstones as those of its totalitarian analogues.228

Walter Benjamin navigated the same cultural terrain in his “Artwork” essay. In it, he suggested that film more readily lends itself, than any other visual medium, to an analysis of the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction. This claim is essentially bifurcated, as Benjamin evaluated film on two, distinct, but interrelated, theoretical scaffolds. Foremost, he reasoned that cinema exerts a singular influence upon the industries of culture: a phenomenon of mass culture. He also maintained that the medium presupposes social transformation, as a result of the omnipresence of mass culture; this socially transformative evocation fell under the purview of people’s culture, in Popular Front France.

The conception of film’s crucial, societal role served as a point of intersection between these two scaffolds, as from its inception, film assumed a decisive place in visual culture:

Cinema, nonetheless, is not an image among others. In proposing to society a representation of itself, the medium, almost immediately, imposes new values, a new form of education, another contact between the world and self. Presenting itself as an incarnation of modernity, it appears quickly as the only possible synthesis of emotions, ideas, techniques, [available] representations, but also as the suggestion of novelty, progress and the values of the time (speed, movement, energy, electricity, automobile, etc)...From whence its [almost immediate] ability to created mass frenzy originates, quickly attracting millions of avid spectators [and eliciting from them] strong passions and personal satisfaction.229

Cinema was the incarnation of a new mode of existence: “The tactility of its shock effects broke no distance...”230 The medium, more expressly, its “montage” value, was an aesthetic correlate of the radical reconfiguration of space and time, which coincided with a shift toward an industrial society. As such, speed, movement and energy – in sum, the dominant values of the industrial age – permeated film, as they
imbued the artworks of the era (mural art, photography and museography), as predominant motifs. This, of course, bespeaks the role of cinema – more precisely the new cinématographe parlant or “talkies” of the 1920s and 1930s – as a cultural referent for the ensemble of artworks of the era of the Popular Front.

Film, due to its “totalistic” nature, moreover, prefigured radical social change. The masses were vital to this evaluation of the medium: “The political significance of film as a medium is that it teaches the masses to master such experience and thereby bring their life in the city, which otherwise threatens to overwhelm them, under control.” In the 1930s, one countenanced the marked increase in the cinematic space accorded to the masses, in the cinéma de crise: the genre “[established] the masses as the pre-eminent subject matter of a liberated cinema…” It would prove vital to the self-representation of the masses, thereby, critical to the fruition of people’s culture.

Jean Renoir’s filmography in the 1930s followed the now-familiar trajectory of leftist, intellectual production in the era of the Popular Front. They thus serve as an ideal case study of the development of the cinéma de crise, within the unique, historical context of Popular Front France. His films visibly brought the masses to the narrative foreground, by interjecting themes central to their experience. Renoir’s films functioned simultaneously as cultural referents, for the artifacts of people’s culture, and primary source objects (artifacts), of the very same, cultural phenomenon. As paradigmatic examples of a dynamic, new medium, these films “[responded] to and [shaped] in turn, the transformation of experience brought about by urban existence…”
The “transformation of experience brought about by urban existence” implies more than industrialization; it reaffirms film’s primordial relation to mass politics, a relation that intersected dramatically with the social evocation of the Popular Front. The cinéma de crise acknowledged and revolutionized the “public” frame, inserting itself within the public mission of people’s culture. It, moreover, raised an often-biased lens to the Popular Front, by documenting the mass movement, either directly (in La Vie est à nous) or by metaphor (in La Marseillaise).

It is, therefore, undeniable that the cinéma de crise was the telos of people’s culture; the permanence of people’s culture relied upon the vitality of the cinéma de crise’s public frame. The public frame – like the mass political referents of people’s culture in the previous case studies – was, however, in constant flux. The following chapter chronicles the evolution of the public frame, spanning the length of the era of the Popular Front, from Jean Renoir’s Le Crime de M. Lange and concluding with La Bête Humaine.

I. Le Crime de Monsieur Lange (The Crime of Mr. Lange) (1936)

As aforementioned, the cinéma de crise was unique in its treatment of the urban working classes, thrusting them for the first time into the forefront of narrative film and thereby creating a new public frame. Left filmmakers of the cinéma de crise politicized the medium, by addressing issues pertinent to the masses’ experience. They, thereby, expanded the medium’s, narrative-cum-political bounds. Jean Renoir’s Le Crime de Monsieur Lange is a paradigmatic film of the cinéma de crise, illustrating the filmmaker’s grappling with concerns of this social class, concerns shaped by the sociopolitical and economic situation. The leap to artifact of a bourgeoning, people’s culture is, therefore, not difficult to make, when analyzing Le Crime de Monsieur Lange, as the film
represented a “radical upcurve” in the popular reaction to the message of leftist unity, confirmed by its conception in 1935 and its release only weeks after the introduction of the electoral program of the Rassemblement populaire. In this film, the triumph of collective experience, the film’s fundamental theme, signaled awareness on part of the filmmaker of cinema’s, necessarily ascendant place in people’s culture.

*Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* chronicles life and love in a micro-community – enclosed within an inimitable courtyard – in a working class neighborhood in Paris. Amédée Lange is an assistant to Batala, who owns a publishing company. Lange spends his nights writing Westerns about his fictional Arizona Jim. He appears almost oblivious to quotidian affairs, in particular the amorous advances of Valentine, who owns a laundry in the community. Batala is Lange’s antithesis: he is corrupt and amoral, preying upon young women. His publishing company is beset by financial problems and creditors besiege him. Batala, knowing of Lange’s Arizona Jim stories, assuages a creditor by telling him that Lange is “genius”. Batala then manipulates Lange into signing away the rights to *Arizona Jim*, which Batala publishes, liberally inserting advertisements for pills that debase the integrity of the story.

Batala leaves Paris by train, upon receiving a letter from a creditor threatening imminent action. There is a train accident and Batala is presumed dead. The members of the courtyard, with the help of the creditor’s son, form a cooperative to forestall the publishing house’s closure and their unemployment. The cooperative flourishes as a result of the popularity of *Arizona Jim*. One night, Batala, disguised as a priest, returns, in an effort to regain control of his publishing house. Lange finds him rummaging in his former office. Batala threatens to disband the cooperative, fire all of the employees and recoup the profits of a potential *Arizona Jim* movie, asserting that
any enterprise needs an “authority” figure. A stunned Lange listens to Batala, and then watches him attempt to seduce Valentine, with whom Lange has fallen in love. Finally, springing to action, Lange hurries toward Batala and shoots him. After realizing what he has done, he flees to the border with Valentine. The final shot is their crossing the border into Belgium.

Though “social” themes are manifold in Le Crime de Monsieur Lange, it was the film’s recourse to a context of justification – the fact that the film did not unfold linearly – that was unusual for a Renoir film of the time. The film commences with Lange and Valentine arriving at a border hotel; the son of the manager identifies Lange as the murder in the newspaper and urges his father to call the police. Valentine, who has been in a hotel room with Lange, emerges and recounts the events that lead up to Batala’s murder. The film ends at the same border hotel, before panning to Valentine’s and Lange’s walking across the border.

The use of a “prologue” and “epilogue” served two narrative purposes. The first was to equate the hoteliers with a spontaneously conceived, popular jury that acquits Lange of his crime, thus reinforcing the notion of communitarianism. The idea of a popular jury corresponded to the ideals of social justice and collective, self-determination, propounded by the film, ideas that resonated in the rhetoric of the Rassemblement populaire.

The “context of justification”, moreover, contextualized the narrative. In an opening scene, the concierge, a former military man, alludes to “hard work” and “hard times”. The film, thereby, established a clear, historical moment: the Depression of the 1930s. Shots on location, such as those at Saint-Germain, further situated the film, in Popular Front Paris. Renoir made a decisive move toward
political filmmaking, by so unequivocally calling upon context, as context necessarily evokes politics.

The “context of justification” functioned well, as Renoir married it to a distinct, visual focus: the courtyard, comprising a laundry, concierge and printshop. This courtyard has been energetically debated in Renoir scholarship, as an illustration of communal living. Renoir’s *mise-en-scène*, furthermore, implied the humanization of the courtyard, in Renoir’s first expression of cinematographically socialized space.

Many film historians attribute the anchoring of the vast majority of the ensemble action in the courtyard to the involvement of Jacques Prévert and his theatrical troupe, October Group. And it is almost undeniable that Prévert politicized *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*, writing important, political issues into the script: most notably, anticlericalism and antimilitarism. These issues clarified the political proclivities of the October Group, which tended toward anarchism and “agit-prop”:

> The October Group, which existed from spring 1932 to summer 1936, presented the singularity of having been an indisputably [artistically] successful, leftist, agit-prop troupe. This small miracle was due to a unique mixture of a small cell of militants — members or affiliates of the PCF — a band of pseudo-artists, all united, for some years, around an inexhaustible storyteller, Jacques Prévert.

Renoir’s collaboration with the October Group represented a point of rupture between his “bourgeois” films of the early 1930s and his films of the social cinema. This rupture entailed the recognition and affirmation of a public frame.

However, any analysis of Renoir’s films of the *cinéma de crise* must negotiate the tension between Renoir’s humanism and his political evocation. This tension was, perhaps, constitutive of a larger tension within people’s culture. This is to say that the “totalistic” nature of people’s culture in addition to its tendency to regroup varied
stylistic statements under its umbrella allowed for cultural production that spanned the vast waves of Neo-Humanism. Unsurprisingly, certain artifacts did not mimic the rhetoric of the political moment:

[Renoir’s films] do not transparently reflect [Neo-Humanist] ideology or a specific conjuncture. They need to be considered as active interventions in a contested and evolving terrain, interventions which pursue ideological struggle in the arena of representation and have to find their own way to politicize cinema while reaching out to a popular audience.240

The notion of “active interventions in a contested an evolving terrain” resolves tensions in Renoir’s œuvre. It, more importantly, signifies the place of political films within the trajectory of people’s culture, implying that these artifacts were, collectively, the telos of people’s culture.

Renoir was far less ambiguous when trumpeting the precepts of people’s culture [than in apprising the political moment]; the twin ideals of a communal, utopian society and a communal, utopian culture were essential to the narrative: “The film’s radicalism goes beyond the conventionally political and calls for a transformation of popular culture, which it first constitutes as a contested domain.”241 To this effect, Renoir made a clear distinction between the banal, dehumanizing mass culture of Batala’s publishing exploits and the liberating, people’s culture of Lange’s Westerns.

Mass society was thematically central to Le Crime de M. Lange, as evidenced by the diegetic space afforded to mass media and mass culture. Batala’s Javert, founded upon insipid advertisements and the commodification of sex, represented the worst in mass culture – reifying the subordination of the working classes and the permanence of the individualist, capitalist order.242 Renoir associated Batala with this capitalist order, which, at its worst, verges on a cult of personality. The notion of regressive,
decadent capitalism may allude to fascism, as it did in extant rhetoric; Batala may be a proxy for a de la Rocque or a Mussolini – a charismatic, authority figure.

Nonetheless, Renoir suggested that this order (capitalist or fascist) is restrictive and he filmed it as such. In one scene, the members of the cooperative dislodge a large advertisement for *Javert* from the window of Charles’ room, in the wake of Batala’s presumed death; light pours into Charles’ room and the young man is reunited with his love, a young laundress that Batala has seduced, for good measure.

Conversely, *Arizona Jim* expressed radical, collectivist ideals. The success of the cooperative was inextricably linked to the success of *Arizona Jim*; they thus represented twin poles of the same, liberating ideals: “The Arizona Jim stories are thus a prototype for the film itself and what it hopes to achieve. They suggest clearly that a suitably transformed popular culture can take a radical message to a receptive public.”

Moreover, Prévert script situated much of the action within the courtyard’s printing press. There was a clear nexus between mass media (and culture) and societal renewal, as the film followed an almost, Benjaminian script. Mechanical reproducibility begot the industrial *praxis* that heralded a change in political agency, a change, upon which the members of the courtyard seize, in forming an autonomous collective. The film’s *mise en scène* reinforced the notion of radical, social change, embodied in the cooperative; the filmmaker’s exploratory camerawork revolutionized depth of field, thereby, collectivizing the frame and uniting human experience.

*Le Crime de Monsieur Lange* was self-reflexive in its promotion of the precepts of people’s culture, as an artifact of that very, same people’s culture; stylistically, Renoir socialized space in an effort to visualize the rhetoric of people’s culture. The
filmmaker dared to proclaim that the public frame, with which he paralleled society at large, belonged to everyone. And via the public frame, the director navigated between the smaller story of the cooperative and its members and the more, universal story of the worker’s experience – his exigencies and his redemption – in Popular Front France.

II. La Vie est à nous (Life Belongs to Us) (1936)

Where Le Crime de M. Lange radicalized, Renoir’s next film, La Vie est à nous, revolutionized the medium’s treatment of the urban industrial proletariat. It is on the “strength” of his leftist credentials, proudly displayed in Le Crime de Monsieur Lange, that the PCF asked Renoir to oversee its first foray into propaganda filmmaking. The result was perhaps one of the most complex and passionately debated, cinematic experiences of the cinéma de crise. A thorough analysis of this cultural artifact yields a remarkably comprehensive understanding of the public frame and the means in which, cultural institutions of the Left manipulated it.

The film is an extraordinarily sophisticated, filmic statement, synthesizing a number of cinematic devices. In its day, it transcended the stylistic confines of French cinema, at times adopting an unambiguously, external model of political filmmaking. These models were in and of themselves signifiers of politics. It is this confluence of the external and the domestic that enables us to identify the complex historical moment that the film represented.

La Vie est à nous, a propaganda film for the PCF’s 1936 electoral campaign, tacitly addressed the three world historical moments that precipitated the rise of the Popular Front: the economic crisis; the rise of fascism; and the reorientation of the
Comintern. These crises mobilized the cultural community and the momentum they provided was clearly illustrated in *La Vie est à nous.*

*La Vie est à nous* declares in the opening credits that it is a unique, historical document (*un document historique unique*), in an attempt to historicize itself. This claim underscores the fact that film reproduced Maurice Thorez’s rhetorical strategy, used in his speech to the Eighth Party Congress at Villeurbane. La *Vie est à nous*, in avowing its historical document “status”, made a claim to “truth status” and thus to the “objectivity of its imagery”. The claim to truth status is, however, indefensible, given the implicit, univocal nature of propaganda filmmaking. Nonetheless, this claim, however untenable, was time-honored, exposing the cultural models that were operative in the crafting of the tradition of French propaganda filmmaking.

The construction of a domestic, propaganda filmmaking tradition, certainly, did not occur in a historical vacuum. This tradition derived from both the totalitarian model of propaganda filmmaking and the French tradition of *culture engagée* (politicized culture) that originated in the Dreyfus Affair. Foremost, the cinematic achievement of totalitarian regimes, in the realm of propaganda filmmaking, far outstripped that of Third Republic France, by the era of the Popular Front. This was due, in part, to the structural contrasts between the French and totalitarian film industries. The latter, state-run, had at its disposition the almost boundless coffers of their respective, cultural ministries. Moreover, totalitarian filmmaking was thematically subordinate to the monolithic ideology of the regime and, thereby, did not “suffer” from many of the political ambiguities of liberal democracies. In the realm of culture, totalitarian regimes monopolized cultural institutions, in an effort to dominate all modes of
perception and thought. This was at the ideological core of cultural standardization (*Gleichschaltung*).

Totalitarian filmmaking and Weimar filmmaking served as models for political filmmaking in France in the 1930s. Fascist cultural models, however, ceded little space to Soviet models in the construction of the Left’s, propaganda tradition. A comparison between *La Vie est à nous* and Leni Riefanstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* – which Renoir’s film follows chronologically – bears out this assertion. Both films made claims to historical document “status” in their initial credits. Furthermore, both films concerned themselves, almost primordially, with mass ideology, even though Riefenstahl and Renoir made distinctive, cinematographic choices in the depiction of the masses. The aestheticization of politics – in the Benjaminian sense – was at full display in both works, though the PCF’s reappropriation of traditional patriotic iconography (*i.e.* the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier), pales in comparison to Riefenstahl’s architectonic rendering of Nazi symbology – from the standards of Imperial Germany to the blood flag of the Munich putsch. Both films revolved around a party congress and featured speeches by recognizable, political figures. Both films were, necessarily, teleologically-oriented, only reaching their respective endpoints by subverting seemingly objective documentary imagery. The implications for *La Vie est à nous* as an illustration of the Popular Front’s proxy of the totalizing work of art are clear – as are those of the many artifacts of people’s culture, from the Delaunay murals to the Chefs-d’oeuvre de l’Art Français Retrospective: a film of such anti-fascist zeal fashioned by the same, cultural touchstones as those of fascist cinema.

It was, however, with recourse to the Soviet and Weimar tradition of political filmmaking that *La Vie est à nous* stopped short of the anesthetizing, illusionistic
contrivances of Triumph of the Will, a film that “…so deliberately [masked] the way it produces meaning that one does not know whether it is documentary or fiction, truth or fantasy (oppositions that are, of course, conventional, not actual).” Soviet film represented the dominant model of political filmmaking to left filmmakers in the era of the Popular Front. Soviet-style montage influenced the opening, montage shots of France. La Vie est à nous appropriated the two, principal forms of militant filmmaking, forms previously explored by earlier Leftist filmmakers:

These two major paths of the militant film (laid down by the two major historical categories of the cinema – Méliès and Lumière) had both been explored before Renoir and before 1936. The first (montage of documentary footage) was essentially explored by Vertov…The second (using fiction and representation for political analysis) was explored by Brecht and Dudow in Kuhle Wampe, which played in Paris in October 1932 at the Faüguère cinema. We do not know whether Renoir saw Kuhle Wampe (though he knew Brecht’s work, if only through working with Karl Koch), but it is a fact that Renoir’s originality in La Vie est à nous (the result of collective reflection) consists in integrating – dialectically – these two existing cinematic approaches.

The notion of a dialectical “integration” of elements of documentary footage and political, fictional narrative clearly underscored the decidedly, leftist origins of the film.

The conjunction of these two filmic models served to blur reality, by, first, diminishing the implicit claim to objectivity made by the documentary footage and, then, reinserting that claim in the fictional sequences. An alternative truth emerged as a result of these distorting practices. This truth encapsulated the ideological keystones of the cinéma de crise.

The film commences with photographic montages of France’s natural splendor, accompanied with a voice of god narration. The “omniscient” narration expresses the unsurpassed beauty and bounty of France, even referring to France’s
ranking, among other countries, to bolster his assertions. This opening sequence dislocated time, imparting a sense of atemporal space upon the viewer. Together, the sense of timelessness and a seemingly, all-knowing narration are elemental to documentary filmmaking. But the film estranged the viewer from “documentary” objectivity, when the sequence shifts to a scene in a poor classroom, and the narrator is identified as a teacher, lecturing his students.

The film explicitly called into question the objectivity of documentary footage. It created a schism between the narration, boasting of France’s bounty, and the reality of a poverty-stricken schoolroom. As viewers, we demand greater explanation. In this manner, the film cautioned the viewer to the ideological bias of documentary footage.

*La Vie est à nous* responded to the widely-held belief on the Left that newsreels were *de facto* instruments of rightist propaganda:

> All of the censorship decrees had exempted newsreels from the requirement of obtaining a visa. Yet with newsreels being produced exclusively by commercial organizations not sympathetic to the Left, everyone on the Left was able to monitor carefully the political bias of the newsreels according to the interpretations presented of current events…There were no Left newsreels.

The overall response of newsreels to the anti-parliamentary riots of 6 February 1934 flagrantly highlighted their inherent biases. The newsreels depicted the event in an effort to restore calm, under-representing the seditious elements of the riots.

After revealing the ideological agenda of newsreels, *La Vie est à nous*, then, divides itself into three distinct scenarios, each addressing a segment of the PCF’s electorate: the industrial proletariat, rural peasants and the unemployed bourgeoisie. These scenarios focused on the exploitation of these classes by the leading 200 families, introducing what will become key rhetoric(s) of the Popular Front: in
particular, the notion of a main tendue (extended hand) to the Church and bourgeois institutions.\textsuperscript{257} In essence, these scenarios responded to questions posed by the gap in the narrative between France’s natural wealth and the poverty of many of her citizens: the treachery of the 200 families accounted for this startling disparity. There was a clear juxtaposition made between these 200 families – the titans of industry – and domestic and international fascism. To this effect, the film depicts original footage of the Italian “rape” of Absynnia, thereby linking fascism to war and indirectly implicating the 200 families in the degradation of the international situation.

The film suggested that the only solution to the depravity engendered by international and domestic fascism is the PCF. The PCF, thereby, positioned itself as the avatar of the Popular Front and of people’s culture. It subjugated, with its totalistic message, the public frame, created by the obscuring of reality.\textsuperscript{258} The film’s final sequences are of a party congress, populated by recognizable party leaders (\textit{i.e.} Paul Vaillant-Couturier and Maurice Thorez). The characters in the fictional scenarios are also present, interspersed within the audience but highlighted by Renoir’s camera. This scenario attempted to “reinvest” objective truth into the fictional “representation of political analysis”:

[The film’s] sequences demonstrate the complexity of the relation between documentary and fiction in \textit{La vie est à nous}. First, the introduction of the fiction causes a disconnection in the documentary, subverts it and denounces it as a lure; then, the fiction (through the intermediary device of recalling the faces of the fictional characters, except that this duplication of the fiction itself now has a documentary value) reinvests the documentary shots (still bearing a fictive connotation) and gives them a documentary value once again.\textsuperscript{259}

It was people’s culture – as it was understood and fashioned by the PCF – that, however, proved to be the “duplication of the fiction”, which accrues
“documentary value.” The need to repossess documentary imagery for the Left and for the people was, above all, constitutive of the film’s, basic aims. But the filmmaker(s) expanded the public frame to incorporate the industrial proletariat – as opposed to the urban working class as depicted in *Le Crime de Monsieur Lange*. The usage of devices that resonated with the proletariat, such as Proletariat Theater or chorus, affirmed the creation of an “alternative” space, even within political filmmaking, that spoke directly to the proletariat – as had Fernand Léger’s subject-based, New Realism. The cinéma de crise undertook to inhabit this alternative space; the PCF sought to monopolize it.

Films, like *La Vie est à nous*, were crucial to the self-representation of the masses, a group that was ignored in commercial cinema and pandered to by dehumanizing, mass culture. They were essential to the development of a collective consciousness, by representing a new, mass consciousness in the public frame. The power of the film’s final sequence stemmed from the inclusion of the identifiable, fictional characters of the film’s diegesis into a sea of people, singing *L’Internationale*, as they repossess France. Interestingly, the fact that the PCF entirely financed *La Vie est à nous* (from collections at meetings) only strengthened the film’s populist claims, as it was intended to prefigure the masses’ repossession of the means of cultural production.

### III. *La Grande Illusion* (The Grand Illusion) (1937)

In 1937 *La Grande Illusion* permeated the cultural zeitgeist, by negotiating between the private and public frames, in a manner in which Renoir’s previous offerings of the cinéma de crise had not. In Popular Front France, films of the social cinema were rarely commercially viable, ghettoized in the cinéma de crise. This begets the fundamental question: how could a film move beyond the generic confines of the
cinéma de crise and become a popular culture phenomenon, while remaining a film of undisputed high quality and of social conscious?

*La Grande Illusion* unquestionably bestrode people’s culture and the modern, mass media regime, with a transcendent, humanist message. The film posed culturally pertinent questions – about the nature of war and nationalism – and responded to them in a fashion that was neither didactic nor overly transparent. The film’s genre, in particular, appealed to a majority of French audiences; and *La Grande Illusion* broached themes that encapsulated the French experience of the 1930s.

The film, set during the First World War, commences when two French officers, Maréchal and de Boeldieu, are shot down behind enemy lines, during a reconnaissance mission. They, first, meet Captain von Rauffenstein, a career officer of the Imperial German army, who, like de Boeldieu – a distant acquaintance – is an aristocrat. The French officers are later taken to a German prisoner-of-war camp, where they meet and are housed with a charismatic group of French soldiers, among them, Rosenthal, a wealthy Jew from an affluent, banking family. Together, these prisoners conspire to escape, by a digging a tunnel, while planning a revue for the entire camp. During the revue, news arrives that the French have retaken the fort of Douaumont, in the battle of Verdun. Maréchal proudly proclaims this news to the audience and begins a rousing and defiant rendition of “La Marseillaise”, addressed principally at the German commanding officers. These officers force Maréchal into solitary confinement for his insubordination, as his “cell” mates approach the completion of their tunnel. Maréchal is fortunately released before the escape is to take place; and his comrades greet him rapturously, upon his return. The Germans,
however, announce that the prisoners are to be moved to another location that day, foiling their escape plan.

The action then moves to Wintersborn, a medieval fortress in the heart of Germany, where escape is virtually impossible. Maréchal and de Boeldieu are reunited with Rosenthal; and to their collective surprise, Captain von Rauffenstein, who is their new camp commander, after having been gravely injured in battle. Von Rauffenstein confides his feelings of futility in de Boeldieu, whom he views as a class equal. Meanwhile, Maréchal, de Boeldieu and Rosenthal devise another escape plan. De Boeldieu creates a diversion, by playing the fife, while Maréchal and Rosenthal escape over the steep walls of the camp, seeking the Swiss border. De Boeldieu is shot down by von Rauffenstein for his defiance and dies in the German’s room.

Maréchal and Rosenthal, meanwhile, face numerous obstacles in their escape and almost abandon each other after a particularly, vitriolic argument. They find temporary succor in a barn until the owner returns. The barn owner is Elsa, a widowed, farm wife, who shelters the escaped prisoners alongside her daughter Lotte. As Rosenthal mends his broken ankle, Elsa and Maréchal fall in love. They become a small family and on Christmas Eve, Rosenthal makes a small crèche for little Lotte. However, in the final sequences, Maréchal and Rosenthal leave Elsa’s home for the Swiss frontier, in an effort to regain their respective squadrons and, as states Maréchal, “…to end this whore of a war…hoping that it will the last.” The camera dissolves with Rosenthal and Maréchal crossing the snowy, artificial border into Switzerland.

In directing a war film, Renoir operated within the generic confines of commercially viable cinema, as the genre was immensely popular in the 1930s
Dramatic war films, like *La Grande Illusion*, and military farces alike dominated French cinemas, attesting to the power of audience identification with the genre.\(^{261}\). The First World War setting was also a significant factor in the film’s positive, mass reaction:

Gérard Talon has ascertained that, given the political issues of the period, between 1936 and 1938 a love story had a 63 percent chance of interesting the public if it took place during the First World War, in a military setting, and [featured] problems concerning national duty.\(^{262}\)

World War I – or the Great War – represented a cultural obsession for the French in the inter-war years, significantly permeating the visual culture of the era of the Popular Front as a prominent motif. Film audiences of the 1930s were well acquainted with and consistently enthralled by the glut of war movies set during the First World War: *Paix sur le Rhin* (1938) and *Marthe Richard* (1937), among many others.\(^{263}\)

The film’s ambiguous politics, in addition to, genre identification accounts for its widespread success.\(^{264}\) *La Grande Illusion* was, above all, an evocation of Renoir’s humanism; the film’s message of camaraderie and human dignity had universal appeal, although the filmmaker envisioned the film primarily as a pacifist film. *La Grande Illusion*, in contradistinction to Renoir’s earlier films of the cinéma de crise, was profoundly ambiguous in its approach to salient, political issues. The filmmaker’s fear of anachronism – the inserting of inter-war themes into a World War I film – compelled him to leave the public frame open-ended, where in *La Vie est à nous*, the public frame was unequivocal. Audiences thus gleaned a multiplicity of interpretations, from the film: both left and right identified with the film’s political message, another instance in widespread consensus, across the political spectrum.\(^{265}\)

Film historian, Martin O’Shaughnessy, provocatively titled his segment on *La
Grande Illusion, “Progressive and regressive nationalisms”, which emphasizes the film’s ambiguous treatment of nationalism. The scenes set at the prison-of-war camp, Hallbach, accentuated themes of international fraternity. There, the prison guards are sympathetic, allowing the prisoners to express themselves through concerts. Maréchal’s guard treats him humanely, when he is placed in solitary confinement, smiling fondly when he begins whistling a popular tune.

Conversely, bellicose nationalism was also present. The “ebb and flow”, around the capture and surrender of the fort of Douaumont, suggested the slight fluctuations that trigger jingoistic responses by soldiers. In this context, the viewer reevaluated the national anthem; it is the singing of “La Marseillaise”, after the French recapture Douaumont that causes Maréchal’s to be thrown into solitary confinement. The film, moreover, underlined the notion of public victories and private defeats, in an effort to expose the totality of the wartime experience. In this instance, Elsa shows Maréchal members of her family who have all been slain in the war, ironically, at the sites of Germany’s greatest victories.

Furthermore, La Grande Illusion was unique in that it was a war film denuded of battles and trenches. The actual war thus occupied an indeterminate – yet omnipresent – space, as the film primarily focused on personal narratives (the private frame). To this effect, Renoir shifted away from the traditional, violent imagery of the war film. He instead alluded to the public frame in an effort to demystify the romance of war, which the film suggested to be the ultimate illusion.

Class was also thematically central, as the film’s principal protagonists, Maréchal, Rosenthal and de Boeldieu, each inhabit markedly different, social milieus: petit bourgeois (Maréchal), bourgeois (Rosenthal) and aristocratic (de Boeldieu). A
common “code of aristocracy”, articulated in their choice to speak cosmopolitan English to each other, serves to bond the two aristocrats, de Boeldieu and von Rauffenstein. Similarly, Rosenthal and Maréchal find genuine companionship in each other that is difficult to find in the more reserved, de Boeldieu.

Renoir, however, sought to portray relationships that penetrated through class barriers, like that of Maréchal and de Boeldieu, in a deeper “meditation on what divides or unites men…” This “meditation” was constitutive of the political moment, as the Popular Front crusaded for a fully integrated society. The film, moreover, accented the role of the French Revolution – thereby, tacitly acknowledging the Popular Front’s, ideological debt to the Revolution – in destabilizing social hierarchies by toppling the aristocracy. The film, nonetheless, remained ambiguous as to whether it was nostalgic for a by-gone era or embraced the notion of historical teleology, advocated by the Front.

In *La Grande Illusion*, themes came together in a trinity of spaces: Hallbach, Wintersborn and Elsa’s house. Each space reinforced a narrative theme that the other spaces punctured; this paradigm did not develop dialectically but as a “vast web” of themes that coexisted within a shared frame. The interplay of ideas across a vast, filmic space paralleled ideological interplay in Popular Front France, where various rhetoric(s) diffused across an almost, immeasurable political terrain.

### IV: *La Marseillaise (The Marseillaise) (1938)*

In the wake of *La Grande Illusion*, Renoir embarked upon his most complex filming, yet: *La Marseillaise*, a retelling of the French Revolution from the people’s perspective. The film thus continued in the tradition of grand, national narratives. In the French Revolution, the film found the grandest narrative of all. The film’s story visibly
differed from *La Grande Illusion* – or any of the other films of the *cinéma de crise*; and its use of the public frame was analogous to that of contemporaneous, “national” films, like *Olympia* (1938) and Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* (1938). In its unprecedented scope, *La Marseillaise*, however, monopolized the cultural apparatus of left filmmaking, proving to be Renoir’s last foray into that genre, as there would not be a similar surge of cultural energy on the Left that would support the public frame. The film, therefore, served as an ideal abstraction of the historical moment, measuring the waning of the popular energy bolstering the Popular Front, after the fall of Blum’s government in 1937; one can read ominously, in Renoir’s subsequent films, the death to the New Man that *La Marseillaise* portended.

*La Marseillaise* was a “people’s” account of the French Revolution, focusing on individual stories. It was an anti-“great events” tale of the epic Revolution, which sought to rehabilitate the image of the masses, a public mission conformant to the dominant tropes of the Popular Front. As such, Renoir positioned his film as a corrective to gorier histories of the Revolution that had portrayed the revolutionary masses as bloody-thirsty hoards.270

The film commences with a noble conveying the news of the siege of the Bastille to Louis XVI. The monarch, depicted as a benevolent man with simple pleasures and a voracious appetite, responds to the duke de la Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, asking [rhetorically] if it is a revolt. To which the duke rejoins that it is, in fact, a revolution. The next sequence provides the rationale for the Revolution, panning to a peasant who shoots an irritant pigeon, who is eating his crop. An aristocrat, profiting from the unjust rules of the *ancien régime* that privileged the rights of the nobility, takes him to court.
The peasant escapes the gallows by fleeing to the mountains surrounding Marseillaise; there, he meets other fugitives. They soon return to Marseilles after seeing destructive smoke on the horizon. They arrive in the midst of the Revolution and assist in the takeover of a royalist fort and enlist in the new, revolutionary, people’s army.

Meanwhile, the hymn, “La Marseillaise”, begins to take shape and quickly disseminates across France, following the trajectory of the citizen’s army. Parisians rapturously greet both army and hymn; in Paris the army overcomes the Swiss Guard and enters into the Tuileries Palace. The film ends with the citizen’s army charging forth to meet the counter-revolutionary army at Coblenz, in one of the decisive battles of the Revolution.

*La Marseillaise* was one of the first, alternatively funded films in French cinema, financed, in part, by Ciné-Liberté and trade unions. The politicization of political bodies closely linked to the film (i.e. CGT and Popular Front) naturally entailed the politicization of the film. These political bodies, no doubt, influenced Renoir’s choice of a Revolutionary setting, as the filmmaker openly acknowledged the “similarity” between the film’s setting and the 1930s.

As such, Renoir’s *La Marseillaise* was comparable – in terms of its manipulation of the public frame – to Leni Riefenstahl’s *Olympia* and Sergei Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky*. There was definite confluence between the French film and its totalitarian analogues, reaffirming homology between totalitarianism and pluralistic democracy. All three films were part of a larger, cultural moment, which saw the wholesale reevaluation of tropes of the Nation. This reevaluation, in turn, reordered the representation of “national” values. *Olympia*, the “documentary” of the Olympic
Games in Berlin, shot with original footage, and *Alexander Nevsky*, the patriotic ode to the medieval prince who repelled the advances of the Teutonic Knights, interposed highly political rhetoric(s) upon historical events. *Alexander Nevsky* barely withheld its Germanophobia; and the parallels it drew between the barbarous Teutonic Knights and the Nazis were hardly veiled. The Nazi rhetoric of “filiation” with classical Greece shaped reaction to Leni Riefenstahl’s interest in the beauty and movement of the human form.

In this manner, *La Marseillaise* approached the French Revolution with the larger, cultural agenda of the Popular Front:

Renoir’s film makes clear its manifest preference for the radical Revolution of 1792 over the moderate one of 1789, while its characters state their allegiance to Robespierre, the iconic figure of the radical left. It sets out to oppose the right’s counter-versions of events, giving a human and sympathetic face to the revolutionary crowd, customarily depicted as an irrational, destructive and faceless mob in right-wing accounts… Such a representation is inevitably selective. Isolating the time when the Revolution was on the strong upward curve, which saw the establishment of universal male suffrage and the first great victory of the citizen’s army, it [purposely] eliminates awkward facets of the ensuing period, notably the bloody repression of internal dissent and the murderous in-fighting among factions which paved the way for Napoleonic dictatorship.²⁷⁴

The connection drawn between the Austrian and Prussian autocratic armies – who supported counter-revolution – and Nazi Germany hinted at the perpetual menace across the Rhine. This link reinforced extant rhetoric about fascism as the most decadent stage of capitalism, establishing further nexus between artifact and political moment. Explicitly, Renoir’s choice of the French Revolution, the seminal moment in modern French history, was deliberate, as to the Neo-Jacobin left the Revolution signified the birth of the Republic and was thus the logical forerunner to the Popular Front.
However, by the 1930s, the Revolution had been subordinated to its lore – the politicization of the event after the fact. *La Marseillaise* continued in the French tradition of universal art, begun in Revolutionary times: this is to say that the art that was to be exported abroad was profoundly national – analogous to *rayonnement culturel*, in the manner of the French Art of the Present exhibit in Berlin. In this sense, *La Marseillaise* maneuvered between popular nationalism, with its pervasive use of symbols of the Nation that it sought to recolonize from the Right, and national populism, in an effort to enhance the Front’s teleology. The national anthem was the focus of the public frame. The Left laid claim to the anthem, by revealing its origins and proposing a mythic continuity to it. To this effect, the collective singing of “*La Marseillaise*” served as a visual signifier of the people’s repossession of France – a signifier also employed in *La vie est à nous*.

*La Marseillaise* maintained Renoir’s, filmic idiom. The filmmaker inserted individual stories within a universal narrative, situating recognizable characters within larger masses. As a result, the individual added to the collective; the filmmaker never submerged the individual within the mass, as was the tendency in Fascist choreography.

The visual motif of repossession of the nation by the masses bespoke the concurrent development of a new, national consciousness, which originated in the *politique du loisir* (leisure policy). The implicit theme of national rejuvenation through touring the nation was a vestige of the rhetoric of 1936. However, the masses did not repossess France after seeing the film, as they had swarmed the banks of the Marne in 1936. The cultural landscape shifted from 1936 to 1938, as popular energies waned on the Left. Blum resigned in mid-1937, as his government was unable to accomplish
the ambitious reforms of French society. La Marseillaise, envisioned as the first of many self-financing, leftist films, was the last film ever produced by Ciné-Liberté.

The Popular Front existed no longer, though its vision survived in rhetoric. But the rhetoric was becoming increasingly hollow; the tepid reaction to La Marseillaise suggested that the public frame – an abstraction of this rhetoric – was no longer tenable. The social cinema, but not the cinéma de crise itself, died alongside the Popular Front and its social militancy. Renoir’s next film, La Bête Humaine, would unflinchingly depict the vast implications the failure of the public frame brought to bear on people’s culture: the medium that held the greatest promise of social transformation and societal renewal abruptly cast off its social evocation.

V. LA CULTURE POPULAIRE: CONCLUSIONS

In its bleak tone and dark mood, Jean Renoir’s La Bête Humaine (1938) signaled the definitive end of people’s culture, as the filmmaker made the conscious move from social cinema to the prevalent, Poetic Realist aesthetic of the late 1930s. The film’s financial success attests to the commercial viability of Poetic Realism, which, in turn, indicated a momentous shift in the cultural and historical moment. The months, in which Renoir shot the film (summer 1938), followed the dissolution of the second, Popular Front government; internationally, the dictators were redrawing the map of Europe. These anxieties saturated the film’s melancholy atmosphere. As such, the film’s principal protagonists retreat inward, into private spaces, whereas there had always been a negotiation between private and public spaces – between the public and private frame – in Renoir’s earlier films. La Bête Humaine illustrated the failure of government-sanctioned, cultural “policy”, with it, people’s culture.
To briefly summarize, the film commences when Roubaud, a stationmaster, learns that his wife, Séverine, has been having an affair with her godfather, Grand-Morin, who is an important railroad baron. Roubaud kills Grand-Morin on a train, with Séverine present; Jacques Lantier, a train conductor, notices the two returning from Grand-Morin’s train compartment but vows to stay silent. Lantier and Séverine become lovers, as Séverine wants to assure his complicity. She later urges Lantier to kill Roubaud, who, she says, has grown intolerable; but Lantier cannot and they grow estranged. Séverine arouses Lantier’s jealousy by cavorting with another man, and finally, Lantier accedes to kill Roubaud. However, Lantier, who suffers from nervous fits, when stirred by women, kills Séverine, in one such fit. On the train, the next day, Lantier confesses his actions to Pécqueux, his fellow train engineer, before jumping to his death. The final scene is Pécqueux grieving over Lantier’s dead body.

The film’s themes, visibly, represented a radical departure from those of Renoir’s films of the social cinema. Fatalism replaced the ideals of a liberated, utopian society, one in which the masses assume control over the modes of cultural production, again, a rhetoric that dominated the lexicon of the Popular Front, filtering into the iconography of people’s culture, such as the machine aesthetic, depicted by Léger in Les Transports des forces.

Conversely, in La Bête Humaine, the actors move within stifling, private spaces. These spaces echoed the compartmentalization of French society, reflecting the Front’s failure to reform this society. The film depicts a profoundly alienated, urban proletariat, alienated, as they were before the advent of people’s culture. The film suggested that with the Popular Front extinct and people’s culture in extremis, society reverted back to its previously, stratified state.
The film, furthermore, illustrated the return – or, more aptly, the revenge – of private spaces, with the predominance of atmospheric, interior shots. This fundamentally conflicted with the Popular Front’s mission to transform and socialize the public domain, through people’s culture – whether through public mural commissions, democratizing the modern museum, filming the masses repossessing the nation in *La vie est à nous* or the citizen’s armies of *La Marseillaise*. Renoir, moreover, accented these private spaces, by filming them with expressionistic lighting.\(^{280/281}\)

And when the filmmaker shot exteriors, he chose to intensify the effects of “languishing” shadows that restrict the movement of the central protagonists.

Movement, speed and flux proved fundamental to the iconography of people’s culture, as the dominant values of the Industrial Age. Industrialism was, in turn, a signifier of the New Man. In particular, the representation of modern transport – most notably, in the transportation pavilions of the Exposition Internationale – carried with it the hope of radical social change and societal regeneration. The Popular Front explicitly recognized the train, within the iconography of the Popular Front, for its close association with the *congés payés* (paid vacations) and the new, democratic leisure model. However, by 1938 counter-revolution was in the air. The new Prime Minister, Edouard Daladier and his Finance Minister, Paul Reynaud, reversed most of the Popular Front’s social advancements (*i.e.* the 40-hour work week and the paid vacation.)\(^{282}\)

As a result, Renoir subverted both movement and the sites of Industrialization, bereft, as they were, of the promise of self-determination. In the film, Lantier has a primordial bond with his locomotive, *la Lison*: “[It becomes] a visual expression of that consuming flame which drives each character toward his
Here, the filmmaker used the train to convey a sense of life marching inexorably onto its conclusion, dismissing the idea of emancipation: “The locomotive in motion appears as a demanding master, controlling its servants, who are also silenced by its roar – perhaps thus evoking critical reference to ‘brutal strength rendered inarticulate by industrial society.’” Industrialization continued to command a significant, diegetic presence in the cinéma de crise, by inverting popular signs and, thereby, exposing the hollowness of New Man tropes.

By striking down the New Man, La Bête Humaine emphatically recast the transcendent subject of people’s culture. The filmmaker overturned the popular tropes of people’s culture: the private frame repudiated communitarianism; and the metamorphosis in iconology (and diminution in scale), in particular, from that of La Marseillaise, entailed the failure of the Nation. In sum the film embodied a reconfigured object, which, in turn, suggested a lasting, contextual shift. The vast web of signifiers and referents and the dialectic between communitarianism and the political moment – all of which, people’s culture represented – were now, largely obsolete. The anti-totalitarian artifact persisted in a profoundly, reconstructed state, virtually indiscernible from its situation in the era of the Popular Front.
THE ANTI-TOTALITARIAN ARTIFACT: CONCLUSIONS

In 1937 the *Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne* riveted the city of Paris; its incandescent light set ablaze throughout the capital. In the early months of 1938, the once-refulgent light cast by the *Exposition Internationale* dwindled perceptibly. But just as the popular euphoria surrounding the World Fair was abating, a new exhibition at the Galerie Beaux-Arts in Paris conjured forth the image of the great, Paris Fair: the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme*. The renowned masters of Surrealism (Dali, Magritte, Ernst, Masson) displayed their artifacts – artifacts being a sufficiently, appropriate term to define their eclectic production – at an exhibit that, by all appearance, made an analogous claim to “internationalism”, as had the World Fair.285

The Surrealist exhibition did not, however, assume the same, vast scope, as many of the museological experiments, associated with the World Fair. The show markedly contrasted with the Maîtres de l’Art Indépendant exhibit at the Petit Palais, which had omitted Surrealism [save one Max Ernst painting] from its chronology of the modern avant-garde.286 The diminished scope of the Surrealist show, above all, attests to the marginal place the movement occupied in the cultural landscape of France, in the late 1930s.287 What to make of the movement’s negligible stature in the late 1930s? Dominant historiography contributes its ideas, suggesting that Surrealism emigrated. The opposite is, in fact, true: the movement accessed a place of such caustic, ironic interiority that the artifacts became metonymy[s] of negation.

At the exhibit, the Surrealists conceived of the gallery space itself as an artwork, decorating it with mossy fauna, an inviting bed, and over a thousand bags of
charcoal, hanging precariously from the ceiling. The artifacts themselves, almost an afterthought, comprised art of all disciplines (e.g. painting, photography, sculpture [in the loosest sense of the word]). However, it is the sheer number of works on canvas present at the exhibit that command further analysis, given the “interdiction” placed on the medium, an “interdiction” the Surrealists demonstrated, by shunting painting to the peripheries of the exhibition.

It may seem incongruous to conclude an exegesis on the chronology of the technically reproducible artwork with, perhaps, the most traditional of media in the plastic arts: painting. It may seem more paradoxical still to conclude an exegesis on the trajectory of people’s culture with a marginal art movement that resolutely eschewed [and mocked] the conventions of that “popular” cultural phenomenon. But something quite fascinating was afoot at the Galerie Beaux-Arts, something almost, entirely ignored by dominant historiography.

The works on canvas, displayed at the Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme, exposed Surrealism’s, theoretical aims. These aims had mutated since the movement’s establishment in 1925; they were now firmly anchored in the unique, cultural context of France, in the post-Popular Front era. This is to say that Surrealism’s, generalized treatment of painting in 1938 raised critical questions [hitherto, unposed] about the nature of the anti-totalitarian artwork, questions, to which the group posited new, “combustible” conclusions. These conclusions represented a new, disjunctive theory about the contextualization of the work of art in the age of speculative politics.

Viewed in toto, Surrealist paintings in 1938 “ventured a parody, an ironization, of the world’s fair and the accessory artistic exhibitions of city and state.”288 This is to say that they assailed the principal tropological axes, along which people’s culture
aligned itself. These paintings, foremost, dismissed the trope of Nation (of a living, continuous national patrimony), a trope that entrenched itself within the artifacts of people’s culture: whether the French Masterpieces Retrospective, Le Corbusier’s Temps Nouveaux pavilion or Renoir’s *La Marseillaise*. The movement’s fierce individualism – depicted in their haunting dreamscapes – furthermore, problematized communitarianism, and the attendant rhetoric(s) of societal regeneration, rhetoric(s) that were, naturally, at the crux of mural art, museography and the social cinema. These canvas works existed [almost solely] to refute the contextual and rhetorical foundation of people’s culture.

In its place, Surrealist painting suggested a wholly subjective, de-politicized reading of context. The artifact remained time-bound, but only to the extent that it mocked context. The “International” in the title of the Surrealist exhibit, therefore, signified a new reading of internationalism, one divorced from the “national” universalism of *rayonnement culturel* – and the Front’s variant of the totalizing work of art. This was a baffling negation of national tropes, in an era in which an entire cultural phenomenon (people’s culture) staked its vast social claims on the permanence of those, very same tropes. Did Surrealism fly in the face of Benjamin’s analysis of the work of art in the age of mass politics?

The dislodging of context, in fact, proved to be the “subjectivitizing” of context, otherwise stated, rendering context subjective, by abrogating tropes. The Surrealist artifact in 1938 presupposed the juxtaposition of seemingly, irreconcilable objects; the subjectivity of dreams – a theoretical debt to Freud – anchored this *praxis*:

Grasping the meaning of a painting thus involves the collapse of any potential distance pried open by a trope between a depicted object and its interpretation (or, for that matter, between that depiction and the object it
Surrealist painting reconfigured context – without dismissing it altogether – by dislodging images and resituating them in an artist-determined context. Surrealists exercised contextual agency over their paintings, as a result of the inherent subjectivity of their *praxis*.291

Surrealist *praxis*, therefore, differed from that of the mural artist, who, while also working in an auratic medium, reified site-specific tropes, as a result of the liminal nature of mural art. This was constitutive of the fundamental conflict between objective and subjective *praxis*. The former notion, defined by Benjamin in his “Artwork” essay, entailed that the artwork – incapable of standing alone – must be grounded in another practice. Benjamin established this practice as politics or, more expressly, the fusing of politics (and tropes) into one nexus: context. The artifacts of people’s culture – grounded in cultural “policy” – are the paradigmatic examples of objective *praxis*.

In contradistinction, subjective *praxis* dissolved the effects of “ritualization”, inherent in the auratic artwork. Surrealism, thereby, fascinated and horrified Benjamin because of its distinct *praxis*. However, context bridged between these two *praxes*, as the notion of a “collapse of any potential distance” – a notion, inherent in the Surrealist juxtaposition of images on canvas – harkened back to the modern sense perception. The modern sense perception was, therefore, apposite to both Surrealist painting and Benjamin’s, post-auratic artwork. Moreover, Surrealist painting in 1938 did, in fact, abstract individualism and negation, by so vociferously [and derisively] negating tropes.292 What this suggested was that irrespective of conflicting *praxes*, the
anti-totalitarian artwork in 1938 fell under the singular and totalistic purview of context. There was indeed something, quite compelling occurring in the visual culture of the 1930s, in both popular and marginal culture.

But, today, accounts of the *Exposition Internationale du Surréalisme* are scarce, though the exhibition conceivably functions as a barometer of both Surrealism—which in and of itself commands an extensive, historiographical range—and of the historical moment. The fate of this exhibition is the historiographical fate of anti-totalitarian, visual culture in the 1930s, of all conditions, *praxes* and scaffolds. These pictorial trends openly eschew the historiographically dominant, trajectory of the avant-garde. This trajectory—efflorescent in the 1920s, disbanded in the 1930s, in the face of totalitarianism, and reconstituted in post-war America—blankets and compresses aesthetic modernism, into distinct, historiographical moments: the avant-gardes of the 1920s and 1940s, interposed by totalitarianism, an intractable midpoint. As such, the avant-garde is a problematic term, in relation to the people’s culture of Popular Front France, as it suggests that people’s culture is either, a valley among the peaks of vital modernism, or, alternately, an insignificant shadow, cast by the towering pillars of totalitarianism.

Yet, the short, discrete moment that constituted the era of the Popular Front demands excavation from the calcified rock of historiography, as the artifacts of a once, refulgent people’s culture do not cease to identify the fluctuations between historical antitheses, paradigmatic of the anti-totalitarian experience. The artifact remains vital, fecund, an expression of the matrix of speculative politics, and, therefore, unerring in its symbiotic, contextual and aesthetic evocations—irrespective of a failure in policy. This is a process, illuminated by Benjamin on the way to his
monumental *Passagen-Werk*, where his passages “[would betray] the process of politicization in a particularly powerful manner.” We can fuse the process of politicization to that of contextualization. The artwork, a refraction of its context, permeates beyond a rigidly, demarcated aesthetic sphere, and into the explosive “phantasmagoria” of experience.
APPENDIX 1

ABRIDGED CULTURAL POLICY MEASURES¹

Note I: The social laws of 1936 & the politque des loisirs (leisure policy): the congé payé (paid vacation) and forty-hour workweek

Note II: Credits raised 705 million francs for the Ministry of National Education

Note III: Credits raised 38 million francs for the Ministry of Fine Arts

Note IV: Creation of the ‘Undersecretary of State for the Organization of Sports and Leisure’, entrusted to Léo Lagrange

Note V: Creation of the ‘Undersecretary of State for Scientific Research’, confided first to Irène Joliot-Curie, and then, to Jean Perrin

Note VI: Jean Zay’s abortive reforms of the education system

Note VII: Support of state and ‘people’s’ theater: appointment of new a director to the Comédie Française (Edouard Bourdet); subsidies for Romain Rolland’s 14 juillet (at reduced price)

Note VIII: In liaison with People’s Associations for the Friends of Museums (APAM)

Note IX: Nocturnal Louvre; lowering of tickets for youth and workers

Note X: Chefs-d’œuvres de l’Art Français Retrospective

Note XI: International Folklore Conference, headed by Zay and Lagrange (paves the way for the creation of the Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions)

Note XII: Jean Perrin’s, Palace of Discovery

Note XIII: Reform of National Museums: Measures to facilitate the finance of historical monuments (8 October 1936); Creation of Museum of French Monuments; Creation of Museum of Man

Note XIV: Proposed reforms of fine arts education: Accenting the Applied Arts

Note XV: Innumerable commissions for artists at the Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie moderne (see: Delaunays and Léger)

¹ All examples are either taken from either, Julian Jackson, The Popular Front in France: Defending democracy, 1934-1938 or Pascal Ory, La belle illusion: Culture et Politique sous le signe du Front populaire 1935-1938
This appendix comprises headlines from the Socialist’s and Communist’s dailies, *Le Populaire* & *L’Humanité*, and a brochure from the original program of the Popular Front: Françoise Denoyelle, François Cuel, Jean-Louis Vilbert-Guigue, *Le Front populaire des photographes*. 
LE PROGRAMME
DU FRONT POPULAIRE

Recommandations politiques
I. - Défense de la liberté démocratique. Le peuple doit exercer ses droits et ses libertés.
II. - Protection contre les exactions politiques. Le peuple doit être protégé contre les exactions et les persécutions de toutes sortes.

Recommandations économiques
I. - Restauration de l'équilibre social et économique. Le peuple doit être protégé contre les injustices et les oppression de toutes sortes.
II. - Protection des industries de la petite et moyenne taille. Le peuple doit être protégé contre les exactions et les oppression de toutes sortes.

Avec nos frères socialistes
Avec nos amis radicaux

LE FRONT POPULAIRE
CONTRE
POUR

CE QUE NOUS NE Voulons PAS!
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Monographs & Articles


**Periodicals**

*Ce Soir*
*Commune, revue littéraire pour la defense de la culture*
*L’Humanité*
*Le Populaire*
*Vendredi*

**Films**

Marcel Carné, *Le Jour se lève*
Marcel Carné, *Le Quai des Brumes*
Sergei Eisenstein, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938)
Jean Renoir, *La Vie est à nous* (1936)
Jean Renoir, *Les Bas-fonds* (1936)
Jean Renoir, *La Grande Illusion* (1937)
Jean Renoir, *La Marseillaise* (1938)
Jean Renoir, La Bête Humaine (1938)
Jean Renoir, La Règle du jeu (1939)
Leni Riefenstahl, The Triumph of the Will (1935)
Leni Riefenstahl, Olympia (1938)
Photographic credit

Collection Kay Hillman, New York: Figure 7
Collection the artist, Paris: Figure 8
Journal of Architectural Historians: Figure 10
L’Esprit Nouveau: Figure 4
Magnum photos: Figure 11
Marlborough Gallery, NY: Figure 6
Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris: Figure 5
Musée National Fernand Leger: Figures 1 & 2
Philadelphia Museum of Art: Figure 3
Notes to introduction


4 One countenanced the birth of numerous cultural associations that claimed a higher, political evocation: le Comité de vigilance des intellectuels anti-fascistes (Vigilance Committee of Anti-fascist intellectuals); the Communist-affiliated, l'Association des écrivains et artistes révolutionnaires or AEAR (Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers), who sponsored the Maison de la Culture; Mai 36; and the groupes Savoir, among many others. Pascal Ory, *La Belle Illusion: Culture et Politique sous le signe du Front populaire, 1935-1938* (Paris: Plon, 1994).

5 Insofar as the breadth of cultural activity on the French left was so great between the years 1934 and 1938, it is almost inconceivable to relate in great detail the extant, cultural production of the French right. However, this thesis attempts to show, in certain instances, the ideological overlap between Right and Left to refute the claim that the polarization of politics in this era precluded equivalence in rhetoric.

6 Due to the limited breadth of this thesis and the relative difficulty in accessing sources, I will not be able to speak substantively on the issue of the radio. For further reading, see: Christian Brochand, *Histoire générale de la radio et de la télévision en France: Tome I: 1921-1944* (Paris: La Documentation Française, 1994); & Cécile Méadel, *Histoire de la radio des années trente: Du sans-filiste à l'auditeur* (Paris: Anthros-Economica, 1994).


9 Fenves, 62.

10 It is difficult to describe the multi-faceted character of the mass politicization of the arts. However, statistics, especially those of the spectacular rise of “leisure” unions, do begin to scratch the surface: in 1933, the nation’s largest union, the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) regrouped 48 unions (syndicats du Spectacle) by 1938 that number increased to 62. Ory, 86.


13 Ory, 503.

Notes to chapter 1

14 Meyer, 186.


16 Ory, 243.

17 Ory, 244.

18 “Philosophiquement, l’art mural présentait l’avantage de manifester aux yeux de tous que l’artiste n’était pas l’individualiste forcené, le génie solitaire dont l’âge romantique avait imposé l’image. Grâce à la collaboration qu’il encourageait entre le peintre, le sculpteur et l’architecte, il faisait faire un pas de géant à la thèse de l’intégration – ou réintégration, par référence aux périodes antérieures à la Renaissance – des pratiques artistiques entre elles.” Ory, 243.

19 The mural originated in pre-Renaissance frescoes and mosaics.

20 I define neo-medievalism in the broadest of senses, as the romanticization of the period by artists and intellectuals. For further reading on neo-medievalism, see: Sophie Bowress, "The Presence of the Past: Art in France in the 1930s, with Special Reference to Le Corbusier, Léger and Braque" (University of London, 1995).
Viollet-Le-Duc’s, nineteenth century, Museum of Comparative Sculpture (Musée de Sculpture Comparée)—which will be further discussed in Chapter 2—is a paradigmatic example of neo-medievalism.

In the early-1930s, when Le Corbusier came under fire from the Right, “[he] made sure to present himself as a first-class craftsman, traditionally trained in the 1900s at the École de Beaux-Arts of La-Chaux-de-Fond.” This is to demonstrate the place the craftsman held [and to a certain extent, still holds] in the French national imaginary. Romy Golan, Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 90.

The Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels (International Exposition of Modern Industrial and Decorative Arts) in Paris (1925) visibly perpetuated the time-honored tradition of displaying to the world and celebrating [domestically] the perceived, “unrivaled” French mastery of finery.

For an example of the nationalist dimension of the “cult” of French finery—in particular as it pertains to American culture, see: Richard F. Kuisel, Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

Again, aura will be developed within the trajectory of the thesis.


I will use de-auraticized or post-auratic interchangeably; these terms both refer to mechanically reproducible art forms (i.e. photography, printing and film). Conversely, an auratic art form is one that is not essentially, mechanically reproducible (i.e. mural painting and sculpture).


See Charles Maurras’ inter-war oeuvre for an example of his political ideas. As the leader of the Action Française, Maurras was an iconic figure on the Right.


“La rencontre de la recherche picturale et de l’ère des masses conduisait l’artiste à se poser ou reposer, la question d’une plastique de grandes dimensions, exposés aux regards d’un large public.” Ory, 243-44.

The PCF did not participate in Léon Blum’s cabinet, though they were an important component of the Popular Front electoral coalition.

“Reste que de toutes les personnalités déjà attirées par ce type de spéculation, celle qui allait grâce au Front populaire pousser le plus loin sa réflexion sur les implications esthétiques de ce choix de principe, et dont toute l’œuvre résonnerait désormais de cette conviction, est Fernand Léger.” Ory, 244.


Andrew and Ungar, 154.


Andrew and Ungar, 154.


Meyer R., 209.

"Plutôt que de retourner au sujet, il vaut mieux faire appel à l’objet. Avec le sujet, nous perdons la liberté nécessaire à l’intensité plastique. Les effets plastiques sont bridés par un sujet, les trois quarts du temps, pas toujours. Si on ne sert que l’objet, on a beaucoup plus de chance de faire quelque chose de qualité plastique…” Fernand Léger, “Où va la peinture?,” Commune, revue littéraire pour la défense de la culture (1935).


Léger, 94. & Meyer R., 211.


See: Richard Kuisel, Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization

This is the thesis propounded in Dominique Kalifa, La Culture de masse en France. 1 : 1860-1930 (Paris: La Découverte, 2001).

Léger, 84.


Meyer R., 232.


Golan, 61.

Green, 155.

Hanssen, 79.

Golan, 61.


Antliff, 150.

See Golan, “rusticizing the modern,” in Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France between the Wars.


Golan, 88.

Golan, 88.


Lemoine, 421-423.

Ory, 471.


See: Appendix (Note 6) & Jackson, 130.


Goetschel and Loyer, 98.

Goetschel and Loyer, 98.

Goetschel and Loyer, 98.

Vendredi, an extant periodical that spanned the length of the era of the Popular Front, demonstrates the appropriation of the Front’s rhetoric. Jacques de Brussey-Malyville, “Au Palais de la Découverte,” Vendredi (1937).

Lithography, in nineteenth century journals, was a particular case study in the use of mechanically reproducible media to create a stock image. Dominique Kalifa, La Culture de Masse en France. 1 : 1860-1930 (Paris: La Découverte, 2001).

“La science est naturellement républicaine.” Jean Jaurès quoted in: Ory, 477.

“C’est par la science que nous pouvons espérer quelque chose de vraiment nouveau qui libérera tous les hommes de toute servitude et leur donnera ainsi les nobles loisirs sans lesquels il n’est pas de haut culture. Et cette même Recherche finira par nous épargner la déchéance et la maladie transformant en une Avenue éclatante la destinée…qui nous semblait promise.” Jean Perrin quoted in: Georges Friedmann, “Jean Perrin,” Vendredi (1937).


This relationship between people’s culture and Republican culture accounts for the appearance of a “pedagogic tool”, such as L’Encyclopédie française, the brainchild of Lucien Febvre, in the era of mass mobilization, as it was conceived as a “scion” of Denis Diderot’s great Enlightenment-era Encyclopédie. Goetschel and Loyer, 98.

With over two million visitors, the Palais de la Découverte was the paradigmatic example of mass viewership in the era of the Popular Font, so much so that the pavilion became a permanent museum after the World Fair. Paris 1937: Cinquantenaire de l’Exposition Internationale des Arts et des Techniques dans la Vie Moderne, 294-299.

Guicharnaud, 91.

The Palais de l’Electricité also exemplified the impetus unions gave in the spurring of cultural innovation throughout the era of the Popular Front. Unions, following the example of the nation’s most powerful union, the Confédération Générale de Travail (CGT), became instrumental in the promotion of people’s culture to the urban proletariat. The CGT began organizing worker’s educational “programs” in the early thirties. Jackson, 122-123.

Green, 159.

Green, 159.

The “Science and Art” exhibit featured mechanical reproductions – photographs – alongside scientific inventions.


Rousseau, 35.

“…la valeur plastique des lumières artificielles.” Rousseau, 35.

Rousseau, 37.

The années creuses were the years in which, due to the carnage of the First World War, France’s mortality rate would surpass her natality rate. For further reading on the history of public health and eugenics in France, see: William Schneider, “Toward the Improvement of the Human Race: The History of Eugenics in France,” The Journal of Modern History 54 (1982): pp. 268-291.

Romy Golan chronicles the pervasiveness of articles devoted to biology and “biological man” in extant periodicals, such as Plan. Golan, 98.


 “…un agent de discipline intellectuelle et d’enseignement anti-romantique et donc, en définitive, un générateur de santé dans l’intégrale acception du terme.” Charles Malegarie quoted in Rousseau, 38.


Stone, 224.

In particular, Soviet Constructivism was considered the extent of a revolutionary aesthetic on the Left.

Jean Levy-Besombes, “L’Aviation populaire?,” *Vendredi* (1937.)

For further reading on the perception of aviation, see: Robert Wohl, *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western imagination, 1908-1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994.) In France Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was the focus of single-minded passions; when he crashed in the African desert, *L’Humanité* ran front-page updates for nearly a week. *L’Humanité* (1936).


Sowerwine, 159

There were 40 and 60 percent reductions in the price of train tickets, induced by Blum’s government to promote the new policy of paid vacations. These new tickets were often called Lagrange tickets. Ellen Furlough, “Making Mass Vacations: Tourism and Consumer Culture in France, 1930s to 1970s,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* Vol. 40, no. 2 (1998), p. 255.

Sowerwine, 154-156.


Leftist periodicals accorded leisure – whether in the form of a women’s or youth section or a weekly cinema page – increased journalistic space. See: L’Humanité, *Le Populaire* and *Vendredi*.


Cross, 599.

Cross, 608-609.

“…Mais surtout les meilleurs d’entre eux développeront leurs cerveaux, ils feront de la Beauté, ils connaîtront la Science et la prolongeront encore, ils resteront soulevés par l’âpre désir de découvrir et de multiplier ce qu’il y a de divin en nous.” Jean Perrin quoted in: Ory, 479.

Robert Delaunay quoted in: Rousseau, 41.

*Notes to entr’acte*


Benjamin, 178.

Costello, 165.

Costello, 166.

Costello, 165.


Goetschal and Loyer, 99.

Jackson, 133.

Jackson, 133.

Jackson, 133-134.

The youth hostel movement was a success, from 250 hostels in June 1936, the number exploded to 400 by the end of the year. Jackson, “Le temps des loisirs: Popular Tourism and Mass Leisure in the Vision of the Front populaire,” 231.


Notes to chapter 2

129 “...après avoir créer des musées au dix-huitième siècle pour l’élite, aux dix-neuvième pour la Bourgeoisie, il fallait maintenant entreprendre l’organisation des musées pour le peuple, qui les ignore.” Georges Huisman quoted in: Ory, 258.


131 Ory, 255.

132 Ory, 254.

133 Ory, 256.

134 Examples include: The Nocturnal Louvre & the Popular Front’s affiliation with the People’s Association of Friends of the Museum (APAM); see Appendix.

135 Curators tended to be intellectuals, sympathetic to the mission of the Front.

136 As Pascal Ory suggests, museography also served as a means in which the Left could propound [for the first time] their cultural agenda (i.e. people’s culture) to the masses that flocked to the new museums and exhibitions. Ory, 256.

137 The contextualization of the artwork participated in a greater, educative process, a vestige of Republican culture.

138 At the Van Gogh show, curators displayed the artist’s correspondence. Ory, 256.


140 Herbert, 55.

141 Benjamin, 178.

142 These reproductions were displayed alongside letters, photographs and other personal items. Ory, 256.

143 The Van Gogh show did not have an explicit ideological component; however, the Right decried the Left’s excessive didacticism and condescension to the masses, attacking the contentious foundation of museography. These are a few examples of the Right’s reaction to museography: “Do not encumber the visitor with considerations that are trivial and often perfectly ridiculous and false...It is in observing, if one has the gift, that one will instruct themselves.” Pierre du Colombier, Candide (1937). Quoted in Ory, 257. “...[They] take advantage of the masses’ inferiority, their puerile curiosity, instead of elevating them by demanding that they make an effort to instruct themselves, to understand...” François Fosca, Je suis Partout (1937). Quoted in: Ory, 257.

144 Herbert, 42.

145 Herbert, 42.

146 Paul Deschamps quoted in: Herbert, 42.

147 Herbert, 49.

148 “…This hermeticism of the feudal group during the Middle Ages, according to numerous descriptions of the era penned in the 1930s, followed from the simple cyclical character of the medieval economy: with its perfect match between production and consumption, no surpluses could leave the closed system.” Herbert, 49.

149 Herbert, 43.


151 Herbert, 49.

152 Herbert, 49.

153 “Rivet voulut profiter de la conjoncture intellectuelle de 1936 pour non seulement moderniser les équipements...mais aussi en gauchir sensiblement l’orientation.” Ory, 503.


Herbert, 52.

Herbert, 51.

Paul Perrin quoted in: Herbert, 52.

“Mais la transformation terminologique opérée dans la foulée marque aussi, au-delà de la fusion ainsi réalisée entre l’anthropologie, les sciences de la préhistoire et l’ethnographie, la victoire d’une perspective philosophique totalisante, de tonalité progressiste, en même temps qu’elle recouvre un projet culturel d’éducation populaire, qui n’est pas sans rappeler celui de Jean Perrin au Palais de la découverte.” Ory, 503.

Golan, 122-123.


In both these dual missions, the PCF’s about-face provided stimulus to the Left cultural apparatus. The PCF’s embrace of Neo-Jacobinism presaged its adoption of a folklorist line. The 1936 strikes provided an ideal time for the PCF to elaborate its agrarian policy. The term folklore ouvrier comes to embody the cultural appendage of Communist policy. Ory, 500.


Though it opened after the fall of the First Popular Front, the ATP owes its existence to the Popular Front’s museological moment.

Herbert, 83.

The works were transported from the provinces as well as from abroad. The only significant cultural institution that did not contribute to the Retrospective was the Louvre. Its expanded hours were meant to absorb the tourists from the World Fair; therefore, its collection had to remain in tact. Herbert, 83.

Herbert, 84.

“En marge des « Arts et Techniques » de l’heure présente, ne regrettons pas cette apotheose inattendue d’un passé qui prête une si réconfortante préface à l’actualité laborieuse où la chrysalide avoue son effort à l’enfantevement du papillon… Dans sa résurrection passagère, à laquelle ont contribué la plupart des grandes collections et des musées de la France et du monde à l’exception du Louvre, ce beau passé nous apparaît plus vivant que jamais, vivant et glorieux comme la France même de nos auteurs classiques et varié comme elle en son unité latente, où la présence d’un goût permanent se devine sous la diversité transitoire.


Jean Zay quoted in: Herbert, 112.

Georges Huisman quoted in: Herbert, 112.


Photographs of the sickly and grossly deformed were installed alongside modern art tableaux at the Degenerate Art exhibit. Hinz, 331.

See: Appendix (note 3).

“Pour la seule raison qu’elle est la première manifestation de cette ordre...elle portera témoignage de ce que représente l’art vivant aujourd’hui, au moment même de l’exposition de 1937.” Lucie Mazauric, “L’art vivant au Petit Palais, Vendredi (1937).


Foreign artists were [more or less] proscribed at the Chefs-d’oeuvres Retrospective, which proved a difficult negotiation, as the Retrospective commenced in advance of the advent of the modern nation-state.


There was also a difficult negotiation between tradition – imposed in the form of the post-war rappel à l’ordre – and the avant-garde. The avant-garde, even in its final throws, continued to “crusade” against conservatism, though the “canonized” avant-garde had [to a certain extent] become tradition.


René Gillouin quoted in: Herbert, 104.

Amidon, 102.

Amidon, 112.

Amidon, 114.

There were nearly 1500 works at the Petit Palais show. Paris 1937: L’art indépendant.

This is not to say that the artists of the School of Paris did not continue to work; but as an artistic movement, the School is largely defunct by the 1930s.

Golan, 102.


Ory, 945.


Cone, 555.

Cone, 556-564.

Cone, 555.

Cone, 565.

Helen Syrkusz, a Communist architect, wrote an ideological program for the New Times Pavilion.


Udovicki-Selb, 46.

In fact Le Corbusier’s participation at the Paris World Fair was largely the result of the Popular Front’s direct involvement.

McLeod, 22.

Udovicki-Selb, 51.


Udovicki-Selb, 51.

Pierre Jeanneret was Le Corbusier’s cousin and a member of the Communist Party.

Udovicki-Selb, 51.

Ory, 287.

McLeod, 23.

Udovicki-Selb, 52.

Ory, 287.

Notes on chapter 3


However, it is important to note that films of “standard” plot continued to be produced throughout the 1930s. By no means did the Left films of the Popular Front era completely replace commercial cinema.


The section would produce nearly a dozen films, before losing momentum in 1937. Buchsbaum, 56-59.

The Communist-sponsored Association des artistes et des écrivains révolutionnaires (AEAR) had a cinematic section, the Alliance of Independent Cinema (ACI). The ACI would later transform into Ciné-Liberté, which would finance the film La Marseillaise. Buchsbaum, Cinéma Engagé: Film in the Popular Front.

In contradistinction, the Socialist Party was profoundly democratic, so much so that many of its internal debates spilled over into the pages of its daily, Le populaire.

The connection between Soviet cinema and the cinéma de crise will be discussed in further detail.

“The cinéma, pourtant, n’est pas une image parmi d’autres. En proposant à la société une représentation d’elle-même, il impose presque d’emblée de nouvelles valeurs, une nouvelle forme d’éducation, un autre rapport au monde et à soi. Se donnant comme une incarnation de la modernité, il apparaît très vite comme la seule synthèse possible de toutes les émotions, des idées, des techniques, des représentations disponibles, mais aussi comme la promesse de la nouveauté, du progrès et des valeurs du temps (la vitesse, le mouvement, l’énergie, l’électricité, l’automobile, etc.)…D’où son caractère presque immédiat de passion populaire, qui attire rapidement des milliers de spectateurs avides de sensations fortes et d’assouvissement individuel.” Kalifa, 64.

Costello, 176.

Costello, 176.
Benjamin alludes to urban experience in the reconfiguration of human sense perception. By no means do I wish to delimit the Popular Front to an urban, political phenomenon, when, in fact, the Front’s ability to span the nation distinguishes it from many of France’s “revolutions” that were traditionally confined to Paris. Renoir represented this singularity, which accounts for the naturalist motifs in *La Marseillaise*.


O’Shaughnessy, 104.


Sesonke, 186.

O’Shaughnessy, 104.


Cinema was often viewed as the idle leisure of the masses, a conception Renoir challenged in *Le Crime de M. Lange*.

O’Shaughnessy, 109.

The film occupies a contested space within Jean Renoir’s filmography of the 1930s, as the intensely collaborative nature of the filming process renders the assigning of directorial agency to Renoir difficult.

Moreover, filming coincided with the election of the Popular Front in Spain, which demonstrates the extent to which the film was a part of a larger, historical moment.


O’Shaughnessy, 115.

Goetschel and Loyer, 71.

Such was the case in the gestation, filming and production of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935) and *Olympia* (1938).

This is not to say that there were not codes in totalitarian film that contrasted with political orthodoxy. But as I am fundamentally concerned with perception, the centralized rhetoric of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union attenuated any inconsistencies in message.

Faulkner, 75.

Sesonke, 225.


Sesonke, 225.

Buchsbaum, 36-7.

Buchsbaum, 37.


O’Shaughnessy, 115-116.

Bonitzer et al., 81.

The film was the box-office hit in 1937.

Jackson, 144.

Faulkner, 89.

Faulkner, 89.
However, many conceived of the film as a leftist film, with the thematic predominance of fellowship and internationalism. O’Shaughnessy, 130. O’Shaughnessy, 126-7. Faulkner, 293. O’Shaughnessy, 124. Faulkner, 290. A film critic for the leftist periodical _Vendredi_ wrote: “[La Marseillaise] lacks cruelty. A revolution has never occurred as such and never will. Picturesque imagery is always seductive; in a representation of war, there is always too much painting and not enough war.” Pierre Bost, “La Marseillaise ou Jean Renoir, peintre d’Histoire,” _Vendredi_ (1938).

The idea of the film was launched publicly under the auspices of the Popular Front, in a meeting attended by both Renoir and Jean Zay. The “people” financed the film, as funds were to be raised by public subscription. However, when the funds proved insufficient, the CGT – who, by now, controlled Ciné Libérté [once a cooperative] – provided the remaining funds. Jackson, 142-143.

Blum resigned as a result of economic policy, more explicitly, the devaluation of the franc. A second Popular Front government was organized in 1938; it only served a month before Blum resigned. It is difficult to ignore the Popular Front’s responsibility in the failure of left filmmaking. It approached the medium tentatively, withholding crucial funds and maintaining the ban on _La vie est à nous_. This we can largely contrast with the well-documented relationship between Nazi Germany [and to a lesser extent, the Soviet Union] and the cinema.

The film was adapted from Emile Zola’s novel of the same title. O’Shaughnessy, 142.

Jean Gabin perfected the archetypal proletariat anti-hero in a series of films in the 1930s: _Les Bas-fonds, La Grande Illusion, La Bête Humaine, Hôtel du Nord_, and _Quai des Brumes_.

Unlike in 1936, bitter repression followed a failed strike of industrial workers. Sowerwine, 181.

The Left rejected the movement after Surrealism’s failed courtship with the PCF. And Surrealism’s, ongoing censure of Blum’s, non-intervention policy in Spain put the movement at odds with the government. Lewis, 135-141.

This reading was, however, not decontextualized or bound to ritual, in the manner of auratic art forms.

Herbert, 158.


Fenves, 71.