
Led by a Franco-Brazilian team of scholars in the humanities, social sciences, arts and literatures, this joint research project is developing a digital platform for Transatlantic Cultural History to be published in four languages. In a series of essays exploring cultural relations between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, it presents a connected history of the Atlantic space since the 18th century, highlighting the cultural dynamics of the Atlantic region and its crucial role in the contemporary process of globalization.

Americanization through the Arts

[Anaïs Fléchet](#) - Sciences Po Strasbourg

[Martin Guerpin](#) - Université Paris-Saclay

[Philip Nord](#) - Princeton University

[Philippe Gumplowicz](#) - Evry Paris Saclay

- ☐ North Atlantic - Europe - North America
- ☐ The Atlantic Space Within Globalization - The Consolidation of Mass Cultures - The Steam Atlantic

This collection focuses on analyses of artworks and brings together articles that examine the processes of cultural appropriation between the United States and France since the end of the nineteenth century. It explores concrete artistic practices and the way in which they shape sensibilities, the physical world of body, voice, language, and forms.

This collection takes a long view of an aspect of modern globalization: the circulation of artistic forms and practices between the United States and France. It approaches the idea of Americanization through an examination of individual pieces, bodies of work, and changes in the organization of artistic life. Particular attention will be paid to the creative appropriations of forms in music, the visual arts, and literature and to how these appropriations have affected language, the body, artistic genres, and more broadly, ways of life. The presumption of artistic exchanges and appropriations that underpins this approach opens the way to an anthropological understanding of the arts that extends Philippe Descola's observation to the full range of artistic production: "Since the end of the twentieth century, a handful of historians and anthropologists have undertaken to interpret images...by treating them, not so much as self-enclosed assemblages of signs, but as agents in their own right, exercising an influence on social and affective life."¹

Over and above the obvious impacts of Americanization—the accelerating pace of exchanges, a social space ever more governed by legal norms, greater attention paid to minorities, the multiplication of cultural signs of American-ness—, the goal of this collection is to explore the ways in which American influence has reshaped sensibilities the world of the senses, starting in the mid 19th century, with the arts understood as the cutting edge of the process. Much has already been written on the diplomatic, military, economic, political, juridical, moral, intellectual, and cultural dimensions of Franco-American relations and on American soft power. There is much less literature focused on "practical adaptations and appropriations"² by artists and their work.

What does it mean for writers, painters, filmmakers or musicians to adopt an "American style" (whatever that might signify in any particular case) in the way they write, compose, film, dance or act? In most cases, it involves an emphasis on speed, economy of expression, impact, energy, and/or the sharpening of contrasts. But which America are we talking about? That of the Surrealist Philippe Soupault who in the 1920s looked to American cinema to re-energize French poetry? That of a cultivated European fringe who in the 1930s celebrated "the American Negro" as part of a dominated group and as a creator of jazz, the "greatest Te Deum of the century"?³ That of Robert Capa and Robert Franck, pioneers of photo-journalism and of the "Americana" photo? That of Boris Vian who invented an imaginary American writer in order to "write American"? That of the cineaste Jean-Pierre Melville who recreated Manhattan in his studio? That

of hip-hop artists and rappers? That of country line dancers? In many forms they perceived as American, French artists recognized and reworked elements of their own culture. In return, their production was appropriated and americanized by American artists. Criss-crossings made up of samplings, mixings, resurgences. The jazzy compositions of the thirties, those of Ray Ventura, Mireille, and Charles Trenet, import an American-ness, which has been reformulated through voice, rhythmic articulation, and phantasmagoria in ways that call to mind, for lack of a better word, French tradition.

The joining together of populations from several continents—from Europe and Africa, not to mention Asia —on the soil of yet another continent, America, provides the beginnings of an explanation for the capacity of the American model to “establish a paradigm.”⁴ Pertinent in this regard is Ludovic Tournès’s approach, which treats the United States as a laboratory of world culture, of a new kind of globalization.⁵ But Americanization does not just draw its strength from its unparalleled material investment in the means of production, or from its new organization of labor. It is powerful because of all the appropriations that it makes possible. This is where the history of creation enters in.

And so, it is deliberate that this project brings together historians, art historians, musicologists, and historians of photography and film scholars. We are aiming for a comparative understanding of the processes of Americanization, as they manifest themselves from one art form to the next, in terms of chronologies, intensities, usages. Take Jacques Tati’s treatment of the impact of American standards of industrial modernity as an example. In his *Jour de fête*, released in 1949 just as the Cold War was setting in, the postal service imposes a new organization of work in a French village and comes up against an older way of doing things. On the sound track, different styles of music succeed one another. A slow waltz to the accompaniment of an *accordéon musette*—the world as it existed before the coming of American methods—gives way to swing riffs, as the rhythm of the filmed images picks up speed and the body itself is caught up in the frenetic motion. It is as though the music itself is the cause of the body’s acceleration. Its otherness, and the otherness of the behavior it engenders, is emblematic of the village’s Americanization. Yet this jazz genre, supposed to represent the negative effects of modernity in 1949, was in reality a style already in vogue in the 1930s. Was Tati out of phase, not in the swing, so to speak? Or are there regimes of Americanization, packages of emblems and signs, that have a history of their own, unfolding at their own pace? And does it then make sense to speak of regimes of appropriation?

Americanization will thus be studied as an outside force which exerts influence on sensibilities, ways moving, speaking, producing, exchanging and behaving with others. For more than a century and a half, this multifaceted and ever changing phenomenon was observed upon, decried or celebrated. That said, does this configuration (i.e. this way of being with all its corporal, vocal, and auditory aspects that American power would impact), still have relevance in a contemporary world governed by globalized forces?

The essays in this collection are drawn from colloquium and seminar papers first presented under the research auspices of the Maison des Sciences de l’Homme of the Université Paris Saclay, Paris Saclay University (Université d’Évry and Université de Versailles Saint Quentin-en-Yvelines), Princeton University, and the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester.

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1. Philippe Descola, *Les Formes du visible* (Paris: Seuil, 2021), 23.
 2. Louise Benat-Tachot, Serge Gruzinski, Boris Jeanne, *Les Processus d’américanisation* (Paris: Le Manuscrit), 2012, vol. 1 : 9.
 3. Charles Delaunay, *De la Peinture au jazz* (Paris: W, 1985), 22.
 4. Régis Debray, *Civilisation, Comment nous sommes devenus américains* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), 26.
 5. Ludovic Tournès, *Américanisation, Une histoire mondiale (XVIIIe-XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Fayard, 2020).

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[See on Zotero](#)

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Authors

- [Anaïs Fléchet](#) - Sciences Po Strasbourg

Anaïs Fléchet est professeure d'histoire contemporaine à Sciences Po Strasbourg et membre du Laboratoire interdisciplinaire en Etudes Culturelles (CNRS - UMR 7069). Ses travaux portent sur la circulation des pratiques artistiques dans l'espace atlantique, l'histoire culturelle du Brésil et le rôle de la musique dans les relations internationales. Elle co-dirige la plateforme Transatlantic Cultures.

Anaïs Fléchet is professor of modern history at Sciences Po Strasbourg and member of the Laboratoire interdisciplinaire en Etudes Culturelles (CNRS - UMR 7069). Her research focuses on music and international history, Brazilian cultural history, and the circulation of artistic practices in the Atlantic Area. She is the co-director of the Transatlantic Cultures digital platform.

- [Martin Guerpin](#) - Université Paris-Saclay

Martin Guerpin is Assistant professor in Musicology at Paris-Saclay University. His research focuses on musical appropriations, music and identities, and musical life in casinos. He is currently preparing two books: Classical Music and Jazz in France: 1900-1939 (Vrin, 2023) and a critical edition of francophone texts about jazz (Vrin, 2024). He has edited two volumes on Didier Lockwood (Epistrophy, 2020) and Björk (Circuit, 2021). Martin is also a jazz musician (Spoonful, 2017 ; Azawan, 2022).

- [Philip Nord](#) - Princeton University

Philip Nord is Professor Emeritus of History at Princeton University, where he taught for forty years. He has written several books on the history of modern France, including most recently France 1940: Defending the Republic (2015) and After the Deportation: Memory Battles in Postwar France (2020).

- [Philippe Gumpłowicz](#) - Evry PARIS Saclay

Philippe Gumpłowicz est professeur émérite en musicologie à l'Université d'Évry-Paris Saclay. Après avoir dirigé le laboratoire Recherches Arts Spectacles Musique, il co-anime en 2021 les programmes de recherche internationaux « Musique et nation » (ouvrage en préparation aux Editions Berghahn, USA), « Le Fidelio de Beethoven » ; « Américanisations par les arts ? »

Philippe Gumpłowicz is Emeritus Professor of Musicology at the University of Évry-Paris Saclay. After directing the Arts and Music Research Laboratory the Arts and Music Research Laboratory, in 2021 he co-hosts the international research programs "Music and Nation", "Beethoven's Fidelio"; "Americanizations through the arts?"