Belphégor
Littérature populaire et culture médiatique

15-2 | 2017
Middlebrow

Introduction: European Middlebrow

Diana Holmes

Electronic version
URL: http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/942
DOI: 10.4000/belphegor.942
ISSN: 1499-7185

Publisher
LPCM

Electronic reference
Diana Holmes, « Introduction: European Middlebrow », *Belphégor* [Online], 15-2 | 2017, Online since 23 November 2017, connection on 30 April 2019. URL : http://journals.openedition.org/belphegor/942 ; DOI : 10.4000/belphegor.942

Introduction: European Middlebrow

Diana Holmes

1 The term ‘middlebrow’ has a strong negative charge. It suggests middle-of-the-road, compromise and insipidity, middle *class* in an aspirational and snobbish way. The metaphor on which it is based refers back to the discredited nineteenth-century science of phrenology: a high forehead or brow was believed to denote intelligence, a low one its opposite. The hierarchy of brows, however, is not straightforward, for if the ‘high’ and ‘low’ at least have the dignity of the extreme, ‘middlebrow’ is charged with all the opprobrium that attaches to the norm, the median, the merely average. Recently, however, middlebrow culture in Britain and the United States has become the object of scholarly interest and the term has started to be reclaimed as something more than a dismissive epithet. The English word, with all its derogatory connotations, is - as far as we know - unmatched in any other language hence never quite translatable. Yet the phenomenon of the middlebrow itself surely extends beyond Anglophone cultures, and in this volume our aim is to explore the concept’s wider international relevance to cultural history and to the present. We will begin with an outline history of the term itself and its recent critical renaissance in Anglophone scholarship, then introduce the articles collected here through a brief discussion of the questions they collectively address, and the value of this international perspective for the study of the middlebrow.

The middlebrow reclaimed

2 In the twenty-first century, then, though with some significant antecedents, ‘middlebrow’ has re-emerged in Anglophone cultural and literary studies as a category interesting both because it can tell us much about cultural hierarchies, and because it designates a whole swathe of cultural consumption that has largely been ignored by literary history. The UK-based Middlebrow Network (founded 2008 - http://www.middlebrow-network.com/) places the first recorded use of the word in 1924, and its better-known first mention in the magazine *Punch* in December 1925:

> The B.B.C. claim to have discovered a new type, the 'middlebrow'. It consists of people who are hoping that someday they will get used to the stuff they ought to like.

3 Virginia Woolf's famous diatribe against middlebrow 'busybodies' dates from only a few years later. Her often quoted letter to the *New Statesman* on the subject of the 'brows' was written in 1932; never sent, it was published in 1942 in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays*. In the letter, Woolf asserts that mutual dependence and respect characterise relations between highbrows, who are poor at living but good at representing life through art, and lowbrows, who supply the practical skills that highbrows need to live, but look to the latter to see 'what their (own) lives look like'. Middlebrows, on the other hand, are 'neither one thing nor the other'; they 'amble and saunter (...) in pursuit of no single object, neither art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige'. High and lowbrows, she exhorts, must 'band together to exterminate a pest which is the bane of all thinking and living'. Woolf writes with ironic humour, but as a modernist writer she is also sincere in her disdain for that class of cultural consumer that has neither the fine discrimination of those attuned to the 'high', nor even the unashamed vulgarity of those who enjoy the 'low'. This particular contempt for what Woolf also termed the 'betwixt and between' would be echoed in American Dwight Macdonald's 1962 attack on 'Midcult' which, he said, merely diluted and vulgarised authentic culture.

4 But meanwhile middlebrow as a type of literature, film, radio, press and music that appealed to a broad middle-class public both grew and prospered. Its acknowledged highpoint was the inter-war period, when women's fiction in particular enjoyed a golden age of critically scorned yet very widely read novels by female authors, since restored to print and an enthusiastic readership by the publishing houses Virago and Persephone.[1] It is the inter-war women's novel that has attracted the most critical attention and been at the heart of middlebrow's renaissance. Men, however, also had their middlebrow, as Kate Macdonald explores in her edited *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read* (2011). Macdonald's book also extends the agenda in terms of medium (not just narrative fiction, but also the press, the popular essay, children's books), nation (Canada, Australia and New Zealand as well as Britain), and time period, as the title suggests. The origins of middlebrow can be traced backwards beyond the 1914-18 war, just as its continuing relevance for twenty-first century culture can be persuasively shown.

5 Scholarship has both performed an archaeological role, reinstating as valid objects of study work that had been relegated to the status of bland bourgeois mainstream (the norm against which 'high' modernism defined itself), and has sought to extend critical attention to the specific pleasures offered by, for example, reading a middlebrow novel. Nicola Beauman is generally credited with the first serious treatment of inter-war, popular yet 'literary' - and in most cases critically ignored or belittled - UK women novelists: *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* was published by Virago in 1983. For the USA, Janice Radway's *A Feeling for Books: Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire* provided both a compelling history of middlebrow reading and a nice theorisation of what the term might mean in terms of narrative form and theme, as she fulfilled her aim to 'provide an account of the pleasures of a characteristically middle-brow way of reading' (Radway 1997: 12). Nicola Humble embraced and developed the implications of Beauman's work with a substantial, well theorised study of *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s* (2001): in the mid-twentieth century, she argued, the

feminine middlebrow novel ‘established itself as a distinctive literary form, and worked to remake its readers in its own terms’ (Humble 2001: 9). Since then, as the Middlebrow Network site shows, scholarship has continued to unearth, analyse and theorise the phenomenon of the Anglophone literary middlebrow, with a non-exclusive emphasis on the years between the two world wars. It is in this field that such theory of the middlebrow as exists has largely been formed.

6 What then, has (Anglophone) middlebrow theory agreed on so far? There is no dissent from the view that middlebrow emerged from socio-economic realities, that the development of a new type of middle-class consumer - State educated, situated in the white-collar or professional sector of the economy (in women’s case often by marriage rather than employment), aspiring to the rewards of middle-class status - produced a market for new types of culture, which was willingly catered for by cultural entrepreneurs. Studies have also converged in identifying the peculiar contempt in which middlebrow culture has been held by critics, academics, and artists (in any medium) who themselves identify as ‘high’, and the frequently gendered implications of anti-middlebrow discourse. Middlebrow has largely been characterised, explicitly or implicitly, as feminine - as Rita Felski puts it, writing of 1920s modernism, the credentials of ‘high’ art or literature can be affirmed by characterising the discerning, modern reader as ‘critical, judicious, and masculine’, whilst the ordinary reader who doesn’t quite grasp the avant-garde is depicted as ‘susceptible, emotional and feminine’ (Felski 2003: 33). Attentive to material and social determinants, aware of and opposed to the bias that has excluded much middlebrow culture from history, recent critics have also tried to analyse the specific pleasures of middlebrow cultural practices, and to take their value seriously.

7 A tension is nonetheless apparent in middlebrow theory between two approaches. On the one hand, middlebrow can be seen as a shifting definitional category determined not by intrinsic qualities of the cultural artefact itself, but rather by marketing strategies, fashion, and the desire of an elite to maintain what Bourdieu would term their class ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1979). As Nicola Humble once put it ‘middlebrow is not a fixed designation, there is no such thing as "middlebrow literature". It is a category into which texts move at certain moments in their social history’ (D’Hoker 2011: 260). On the other hand, no critic seems to find this broad, extra-textual account of the category adequate, and attempts to define what constitutes a middlebrow aesthetic, what textual or formal features connect, however loosely, so diverse a body of work, run through the recent but growing body of scholarship on the middlebrow. These features, it is generally agreed, include a preference for realist, representational and immersive strategies over the more abstract, formally demanding techniques of modernism and its heirs. Middlebrow fictions, in whatever medium, invite the suspension of disbelief or what Marie-Laure Ryan terms ‘entrancement’ (Ryan 2001), and to find ourselves transported to an imaginary world demands that we lose or at least minimise attention to the surface of the text (a word used here in its broadest, most generic sense): since the nineteenth century, through sheer familiarity, realist representational techniques have become relatively transparent. Immersion in the fictional universe is achieved through compelling plots, and whilst good plotting has long ceased to be a marker of ‘high’ culture, skilful narrative structuring is central to the appeal of middlebrow novels, plays - and even (as Isabelle Marc suggests in her article below) songs. The creation of plausible, empathy-inducing characters is also vital to effective immersion, and to the sorts of novel and play defined as middlebrow: Janice Radway summarises the type of pleasure that academic study

taught her to relinquish as 'the rush of a good plot and (...) the inspiration offered by an unforgettable character' (Radway 1997: 6). Critics converge too on the notion that the pleasures offered by these popular but serious fictions cannot be reduced to those of escapism - significant though this may be to a category defined in part by its entertainment value. The aspirational element of middlebrow is real, part of its pleasure lies in a sense of learning about the world, expanding knowledge, enriching oneself both cognitively and morally, a process which some narrative theorists argue to be powerfully enabled by immersive, mimetic fictions (see for example Baroni 2007; Schaeffer 1999). Relatively transparent in form, inviting readerly immersion in plot and character, yet instructive, often topical in theme if not subject matter - what begins to emerge from middlebrow critical work so far is what Erica van Boven in her article here refers to as a 'readerly poetics'.

8 Thus far though, it will by now be clear, middlebrow theorising has been based almost exclusively on an English-language context.[2] In January 2014, Kate Macdonald organised a conference entitled *European Middlebrow Cultures, 1880-1950: Reception, Translation, Circulation,* at the Royal Flemish Academy for the Humanities and Art in Brussels. Several of the articles below began life as papers for this conference, and the current volume was in part inspired by its agenda and the discussions that took place there. The second part of this introduction identifies some of the issues that connect the studies of diverse aspects of European middlebrow collected here, and the ways in which they inflect and elaborate upon current theory.

For a European middlebrow

9 First there is the question of temporality. When did an 'in-between' culture aimed at an educated middle-class public really begin? A European perspective confirms that its emergence preceded the inter-war years, and occurred in most developed industrial countries at what the French call the Belle Époque, a term that designates the final decades of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. At this period widespread literacy, advances in printing techniques, and the growth of a third sector staffed by white-collar workers converged to create the necessary conditions. Enterprising publishers such as Leo Simons in the Netherlands (see the article below by Van Boven), Tallandier, Fayard or Ollendorf in France, the author and publisher Ferenc Herczeg in Hungary (see Kálai), launched affordable, well-packaged series, with titles such as *The Modern Library* or *Books for all*, that both popularised the classics and offered new, pleasurable yet instructive fiction selected or commissioned for the purpose. These publishers provided the infrastructure that allowed certain authors to become stars in the middlebrow firmament, raising the question of what exactly in their work appealed to this new category of readers (see Seillan on Georges Ohnet). The Belle Époque also saw the international rise of detective fiction as a genre that combined thrilling entertainment with cerebral workout (see Rutten). European middlebrow extends across the wider time frame: nonetheless, the articles below demonstrate that the inter-war years represent a high point of middlebrow for national cultures well beyond the Anglophone world (see Keltjens for the Netherlands, Bluemel for the UK, d'Hoker and Bonciarelli for Italy). In publishing, further development of national markets was complemented by a strong trans-national trend, with the rapid translation and marketing of bestselling novels particularly for 'peripheral' markets such as that of the Netherlands

(see Keltjens). And to extend the temporalisation of middlebrow forwards, it remains a productive concept to analyse cultural consumption up to the present day, as the articles by Varghese (novels), Kemp (cinema), Platten (comic books) and Marc (music) confirm.

10 Second, the disparaging use of 'middlebrow' - or its linguistic approximations - as what Paul Bleton (in this issue) terms a 'mark of infamy' is echoed across national cultures. The reasons for the hostile rejection of an art that aims to treat serious questions in an accessible manner come more clearly into focus when viewed across different national contexts. Janice Radway finds that the scandalised antipathy of critics and academics to the eminently middlebrow Book of the Month Club in 1920s America was a reaction to 'its failure to maintain the fences cordoning off culture from commerce, the sacred from the profane, and the low from the high' (152), and this dislike of having high or authentic art contaminated by association with the market, hence the tastes of a mass audience, is widely replicated. Indeed mistrust of a culture that appeals to the majority is arguably even stronger in those nations whose sense of identity is historically founded, at least in part, on the self-perceived excellence of their 'high' literature, theatre and art, France being the most obvious example.[3] Jean-Marie Seillan, in his article here, examines the reasons for the opprobrium heaped on one of France's bestselling novelists of the late nineteenth century, Georges Ohnet. Fellow authors who identified themselves as 'high', he concludes, deeply envied Ohnet's commercial success, whilst also resenting what they saw as his debasement of serious art, through pandering to the tastes of a bourgeois audience who liked their social and emotional themes presented in the form of familiar, transparent language and exciting plots. Already in the 1880s, the mimetic aims and plot and character-driven techniques of realism were coming to be defined as naïve and reactionary, even as the new reading public affirmed their limitless demand for those very qualities. The gatekeepers of authentic culture, defined as uncompromised in form or ideology by the pressures of the market, hence as often challenging or difficult for those without the necessary initiation, were out in force across Europe, exemplified here by France, Britain, Italy, the Netherlands and Hungary.

11 Third, a collection of essays on European middlebrow may add to or refine the concept of a 'middlebrow poetics'. The studies assembled here, diverse in both period and national context, are connected by a focus on fiction, which corresponds to the emphasis of existing theory and arguably to the bias of middlebrow culture itself. In formal terms, what emerge as consistent attributes of middlebrow fiction are referentiality, didacticism, and an optimism implicit in structure and style.

Middlebrow poetics

Referentiality

12 Against the grain of self-reflexivity that characterises modernism and its heirs (postmodernism, the currently ubiquitous genres of life-writing and auto-fiction), middlebrow fictions tend to look outwards, to situate the subject firmly in an external context, at once geographic and social. Reference takes precedence over self-reference. Kristin Bluemel shows the significance of end-paper maps that often opened (or 'book-ended') two very widely-read genres of the inter-war period, the regional novel and the children's novel. Whilst these maps of the fictional universe, often charmingly drawn, at one level express nostalgia for a more bounded, pastoral and manageable world, they also

function as a metaphor for the importance of place in middlebrow fiction. To pass in imagination from one's real-life surroundings into the space of make-believe demands that the imagined world have a geography; the endpaper map reaffirms in graphic form what the immersive properties of middlebrow narrative already begin to provide. Those serious but narratively compelling novels that dominated middle-class reading in the Netherlands of the early twentieth century all provided a strong sense of spatial location, from the Schartens' *A House full of people* (1909, see van Boven) to Ernest Claes's *Whitey* (1920) or Madelon Székely-Lulofs' *Rubber* (1931) (see Lambrecht et al), or indeed the international bestseller Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) (Keltjens).

13 A sense of fictional geography, referentially grounded in prior knowledge, encourages the reader's pleasurable immersion in a fictional elsewhere, as does a sense of location in time. Laura Kemp shows how one of the most traumatic periods of (relatively) recent Spanish history, the Civil War, recurs as a setting in contemporary mainstream Spanish cinema. History is presented through the lens of the personal, whilst romantic and family dramas, to which most people can relate their own experience, are projected outwards in time and space. David Platten argues that the inherent referentiality of comics - their necessary visualisation of character and setting - means that the subjective is always located in an external context, signifying the spatial, temporal and social nature of even the most personal human experience, and inviting immersion in a simulated sensory world. The comic form, in other words, is well suited to middlebrow reading.

14 The contemporary French comic books discussed in David Platten's chapter are also referential in another sense: they represent social and political issues that are highly topical, in a way that both entertains and instructs. Since the Belle Époque, the sort of fictions that have attracted a large educated audience, pleasure-seeking yet serious-minded, have dealt explicitly or implicitly with questions of the moment, from the traumas and social upheavals of World War 1 (much women's inter-war fiction) to the practical and moral dilemmas posed by colonialism (see the example of Székely-Lulofs' *Rubber* in Lambrecht et al below) and the increasing diversity of the post-colonial world (see Platten, Varghese). What Raymond Williams termed 'structures of feeling' have always been reflected and refracted through fiction. Here, though, the articles on contemporary culture all suggest a tendency of twenty-first century middlebrow to focus in a quite explicit way, through accessible fictions, on events and questions that also preoccupy the media, politicians and academic scholarship. Two of the most widely read comic books in France (Marjane Satrapoi's *Persepolis* and Riad Sattouf's *L'Arabe du futur*), for example, offer insider views of Islamic culture, critical yet also turning a sceptical gaze on Western values (see Platten). As we have seen, Spanish cinema returns to the still haunting ideological conflicts of the Civil War, and Annamma Varghese shows how the contemporary middlebrow novel in France addresses the highly topical question of French identity and the nation's capacity to assimilate diversity and otherness. In her article on the *chanson*, Isabelle Marc casts as one of the genre's distinguishing features the quality of having 'quelque chose à dire' ('something to say'). Unlike much avant-garde and canonical literature, the middlebrow proposes a fictional world firmly, mimetically grounded in space and time, and invites the reader to suspend awareness of the surface of the text and plunge, entranced, into the imaginary world. At the same time, that world (more often than not) refers to the political or social realities that surround the entranced reader, or to the collective tensions, conflicts, 'structures of feeling' that mould personal experience. This already suggests the second aspect of the 'middlebrow poetics'

that emerges through this volume: middlebrow's pedagogical or instructive function, its didacticism.

Didacticism

15 The aim to instruct and improve was there from the start, as cultural entrepreneurs of the Belle Époque took stock of the new, expanded reading public with its thirst not only for leisure and pleasure but also for learning, discovery, initiation into a culture hitherto associated with an élite. Many of these publishers and writers were motivated by more than money, mingling commercialism with a sincere, philanthropic desire to uplift minds and promote social mobility. The aims of a Leo Simons (Van Boven) or a Ferenc Herczeg (Kàlai) were explicit in this regard - as Simons put it, 'to elevate the many to the sensitivity of the few' - and they had their counterparts in most European nations. The instrumentalist goals of an 'improving' literature intensified, of course, the disdain directed at the middlebrow by a high cultural élite committed to a philosophy of Art for Art's Sake.

16 After World War I, the education of 'the many' was rarely articulated as an explicit goal, for as a broad middle class became - in most European societies - more entrenched and more culturally confident, such discourse came to sound patronising. But part of the pleasure of middlebrow reading continued to reside in the sense of broadening the mind, of learning something, and this was what distinguished it from the fully popular genres of (for example) cheap romance or detective series with their formulaic plots, generally minimal sense of place and time, and repetitive, generic characterisation. The reader of Sherlock Holmes mysteries, or the national variations on Conan Doyle's hero such as Dutch novelist Ivans' detective figure Geoffrey Gill (see Rutten), must pay close attention to evidence, exercise his or her powers of deduction, and at the same time find themselves transported to probably unfamiliar places (London, Yorkshire, Scotland) about which something will be learned. Moreover what is at stake in such novels is not only the solution to the mystery but also questions of psychology, morality and, in the example of Ivans at least, national identity and what constitutes the right balance between rationality and emotion. In all the other inter-war novels explored here too the reader would gain a sense of horizons expanded, knowledge accrued. Bram Lambrecht, Pieter Verstraeten and Dirk de Geest analyse closely the types of knowledge transferred through inter-war middlebrow reading, and find that these range from the encyclopaedic to the moral and the aesthetic. As we have seen, contemporary middlebrow maintains this instructive, mind-broadening impetus: many of the most commercially successful novels, comics and films integrate compelling, suspenseful narrative with cognitive enrichment and the exploration of psychology and emotion.

Narrative optimism

17 However, for the acquisition of knowledge to be compelling there must also be a skilfully structured plot. Middlebrow fictions are characterised, on the whole, by narratives that move forward and carry the reader along through empathy with the characters, or through suspense (what will happen next? will what we fear or hope actually occur?), or simply through engaged curiosity. 'High' literature, since the modernist turn towards the end of the nineteenth century, has been dismissive of plots that pattern the world's

random contingency into sequence and order. Coherent plots, they object (in the words of that arch opponent of the realist novel, Alain Robbe-Grillet) falsely 'impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, univocal world that is entirely intelligible' (Robbe-Grillet 1963: 31). But the middlebrow novel has continued to work on the premise that, as Frank Kermode put it in his eloquent 1967 meditation on narrative, *The Sense of an Ending*, 'to make sense of (our) span (we) need fictive concords with origins and ends' (Kermode 1967: 7) and that plot can provide such 'fictive concords' without being untrue to the complex 'lingua franca of reality' (107). Narrative theorist Raphael Baroni argues that plot is positively good for the reader, for it offers a safe space for the exploration of experiences that in 'real life' might be unbearable or have negative consequences: 'Dans l'espace du récit, les leçons que nous tirons habituellement des épreuves que nous réserve l'existence peuvent être enseignées sans danger: le *vécu passionnel* se convertit en *histoire passionnante*.' ('Within the space of the story, the lessons we usually take from experience can be taught without danger: the emotional intensity of lived experience is transformed into thrilling story', Baroni 2007: 35). The middlebrow fictions beloved of a wide public provide, in one form or another, 'des histoires passionnantes' (thrilling stories), which is precisely the feature most attractive to those wishing to adapt such texts to other media. Adaptation, as many of the cases explored in this volume demonstrate, is a recurring middlebrow characteristic, for a strong plot can effectively be retold through a different medium of narration.

18 There is also an element of optimism in a story that shapes experience into narrative order and concludes with some form of resolution. Middlebrow reading, or watching, or listening, however instructive, is an activity undertaken essentially for pleasure, and as well as the aesthetic pleasure provided by satisfying form, a well told story offers at least some degree of hope, of emerging cheered rather than depressed. This does not mean that all middlebrow fiction proposes a happy ending, only that a well crafted plot implies the possibility of making sense of experience, of recognising patterns in what may be lived as chaos, of gaining some degree of wisdom and sense of meaning. It is this very optimism of the middlebrow that Robbe-Grillet and his many fellows and heirs condemn as presenting the mendacious and mystifying image of a stable and decodable world. Yet in Ryanne Keltjens's analysis of that archetypally middlebrow international bestseller *Gone with the Wind*, or Annamma Varghese's comparison of middlebrow fictional resolutions to the problem of alterity with highbrow pessimism and lowbrow escapism, or David Platten's study of deeply entertaining comic books that deal with the harshest of topics, what emerges is the sense of hope, understanding and the possibility of progress provided by a story, and not necessarily at the expense of mimetic reflection of the world's pain and darkness.

This volume

19 This volume of *Belphégor* proposes a European perspective on middlebrow. Neither encyclopaedic nor comprehensive, its aim is to open up the concept beyond the Anglophone experience and to the reality of transnational culture. It opens with Paul Bleton's reflexions on the unnamed, indeed unidentified phenomenon of a French middlebrow. Whilst demonstrating the relevance and possible usefulness of the term, Bleton underlines too the importance of avoiding reification of the middlebrow category,

for a text's critical reception and the type of reading it makes available vary according to many different factors including, increasingly, migration across a global market.

20 Four articles follow on the Belle Époque birth of middlebrow. Jean-Marie Seillan's study of Georges Ohnet, perhaps the most archetypally middlebrow French author of the late nineteenth century, sets the deeply hostile reception of Ohnet's novels by his literary peers alongside his extraordinary success with a middle-class readership. Seillan interrogates the reasons for both in terms of the socio-ideological context of Third Republic France, and the form and techniques of the novels themselves. Two articles follow, by Erica van Boven and Alex Rutten, on middlebrow in the Netherlands at the Belle Époque, for the Netherlands forms a rich case study as a nation at the intersection between three linguistic zones - Dutch, German and French - with a strong presence too of English, and a desire to create a national culture coexisting with the fact of the nation's permeability to the cultures that surround it. Van Boven shows how the Netherlands was the scene of an exemplary and intentional creation of Belle Époque middlebrow, as one publisher, Leo Simons, combined the commercial imperative to sell books with the philanthropic, idealist aim of improving the minds and hearts of his compatriots. Rutten examines the international phenomenon of early detective fiction through the case of the popular author Ivans' 'Geoffrey Gill series'. Ivans, in tune with Simons' ideals, set out to refine and nationalise a genre hitherto associated with imported pulp fiction: though the English detective Gill is clearly derivative of Sherlock Holmes, his Dutch 'Watson' lends the series a distinctly national flavour and, through his enquiring disposition and moral seriousness, a pedagogic function. Sàndor Kàlai shifts the scene to a rather different national context: for historical reasons, it was only in the major cities of Hungary that the conditions needed for the emergence of middlebrow culture really emerged at the turn from nineteenth to twentieth century. In the major conurbations, though, Hungary represented a microcosm of the birth of middlebrow, as a network of new cultural forms began to appear, from novels to theatre to magazines to book series, and soon to film adaptations. The figure of Ferenc Herczeg was at the heart of these developments.

21 With Kristin Bluemel's article on end-paper maps, we move to the inter-war highpoint of middlebrow in the UK. Bluemel brings out the significance of the materiality of cultural artefacts for their middlebrow status, and the importance of a fully imagined geography to the fictional illusion that is so central to middlebrow reading pleasure. Still in the inter-war period, but with a Netherlands focus, Bram Lambrecht, Pieter Verstraeten & Dirk de Geest examine in some detail the types of knowledge transferred through the 'instructive' dimension of middlebrow fictions, demonstrating how this ranges from the purely documentary to the social, moral and aesthetic. Ryanne Keltjens too locates her study in the inter-war Netherlands, but in order to consider two international bestsellers and the process of adaptation, through translation and marketing, to a different if similarly middlebrow national context. Elke D'hoker & Sarah Bonciarelli use the lens of one key, representative yet unique figure of early middlebrow culture, the now long forgotten writer Pitigrilli, in their study of early twentieth-century middlebrow fiction in Italy. As with many of these studies, d'Hoker and Bonciarelli break new ground in suggesting that middlebrow may have existed in Italy and that the concept can be useful in a revisionary reading of literary history. They also demonstrate that no watertight boundary exists between middlebrow and its contemporary avant-gardes, despite a clear difference in intended audience and, broadly, in aesthetics. Pitigrilli interestingly incorporates distinct elements of modernist style into his highly readable, and very

widely read, novels. Finally four articles address the relevance of 'middlebrow' to twenty-first century culture. Annamma Varghese explores how the different 'brows' of novel in France give narrative form to the very live issue of the relationship between French national identity and France's 'others', demonstrating the specificity of middlebrow in relation to both 'high' and popular fiction, notably in terms of the middlebrow's combination of realism and optimism. David Platten's study of the contemporary *bande dessinée* or comic book in France (though his key examples have also met with international success) echoes this positive view of middlebrow's contemporary potential. Platten shows both how the medium is inherently referential, providing a visual actualisation of a property typical of middlebrow fictions, and how recent successful texts have used the 'magic' of comics to address contemporary social and political concerns with imagination and openness. Laura Kemp's article identifies a set of Spanish films that deal with the Civil War not, like some of their more famous precursors, in formally demanding 'Art house' style but through accessible, intelligible and often personal or family-based stories. Kemp sees in this not a simplification or 'dumbing down' of crucial political and ethical issues, but a way of enabling a collective coming to terms with 'hard to face realities'. And finally, Isabelle Marc proposes that the distinctively - though far from exclusively - French musical genre of 'chanson' exemplifies most of the attributes of middlebrow culture in aural form, not least its narrativity.

22 Virginia Woolf's 'betwixt and between' was a dull space, neither fully alive nor aesthetically pleasing, polluted by the philistine forces of 'money, fame, power, prestige'. This brief trajectory across varying national incarnations of 'in-between' culture confirms the relevance of the socio-economic and the political to its production and reception, but sees the middlebrow rather as a space of imagination tempered by a desire to understand and get to grips with the real and the everyday, as - at its best - a democratic form of instructive pleasure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works cited

Baroni, Raphaël (2007). *La Tension narrative Suspense, curiosité et* surprise. Paris: Seuil.

Beauman, Nicola (1983). *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* London: Virago.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1979). *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement.* Paris: Minuit.

Felski, Rita (2003). *Literature after Feminism.* Chicago and London: Chicago University Press.

D'Hoker, Elke (2011). 'Theorizing the Middlebrow. An Interview with Nicola Humble' in *Interferences littéraires,* November, No.7, pp. 259-65.

Holmes, Diana and Looseley, David, eds. (2013). *Imagining the Popular in Contemporary French Culture.* Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press.

Humble, Nicola (2001). *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kermode, Frank (1967). *The Sense of an Ending*: *Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Macdonald, Dwight (1962). *"Masscult and Midcult". Against the American Grain.* New York: Random House.

Macdonald, Kate, ed. (2011). *The Masculine Middlebrow, 1880-1950: What Mr Miniver Read.* Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Radway, Janice (1997). *A Feeling for Books: Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Caroline Press.

Robbe-Grillet, A. (1963) *Pour un nouveau roman.* Paris: Minuit.

Ryan, Marie-Laure (2001). *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Schaeffer, Jean-Marie (1999). *Pourquoi la fiction?* Paris: Seuil.

Williams, Raymond (1961). *The Long Revolution.* Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Woolf, Virginia (1942). 'Middlebrow' in *The Death of the Moth*. London: Hogarth Press. http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks12/1203811h.html

Selected further works on middlebrow

Bluemel, Kristin (2010). *Intermodernism: Writing and Culture in Interwar and Wartime Britain.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Bracco, Rosa Maria (1990). *Betwixt and Between: Middlebrow Fiction and English Society in the 20s and 30s*. Victoria: The University of Melbourne.

Brown, Erica and Mary Grover eds. (2012). *Middlebrow Literary Cultures: the Battle of the B rows, 1920-1960.* Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Driscoll, Beth (2014). *The New Literary Middlebrow: Tastemakers and Reading in the Twenty-First Century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Faulkner, Sally (2016). *Middlebrow Cinema*. London: Routledge.

Habermann, Ina (2010). *Myth, Memory and the Middlebrow: Priestley, du Maurier and the Symbolic Form of Englishness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Hammill, Faye (2007). *Women, Celebrity and Literary Culture Between the Wars.* Austin: University of Texas Press.

Harker, Jaime (2007). *America the Middlebrow: Women's Novel, Progressivism, and Middlebrow Authorship Between the Wars.* Amherst: University of Massachussetts Press.

Hinds, Hilary (2009). 'Ordinary Disappointments: Femininity, Domesticity, and Nation in British Middlebrow Fiction, 1920-1944' in *Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 55, no 2, Summer.

Huyssen, Andreas (1988). *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jaillant, Lise (2014). *Modernism, Middlebrow and the Literary Canon*. London: Pickering & Chatto.

Light, Alison (1991). *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars.* London: Routledge.

Macdonald, Kate and Christoph Singer, eds. (2015). *Transitions in Middlebrow Writing, 1880-1930*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Perrin, Tom (2015). *The Aesthetics of Middlebrow Fiction: Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945-75*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Rubin, Joan Shelley (1992). *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press.

NOTES

1. Examples of inter-war middlebrow women writers are E.M. Delafield, Winifred Holtby, Margaret Kennedy, Rosamond Lehmann, Dorothy Whipple.

2. I explore middlebrow culture in France in my forthcoming book, provisionally entitled ***Middlebrow Matters: Women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque*** (Liverpool University Press).

3. On the importance of high culture to French national identity see Holmes and Looseley 2013. The UK and the USA, on the other hand - as the current state of politics in both nations shows - display an equally strong tendency to national pride in a philistine indifference to culture.

AUTHOR

DIANA HOLMES

Diana Holmes is Professor of French at the University of Leeds. Her work on French women's writing from the late nineteenth century to the present ranges across the hierarchy of culture from 'high' to 'low' brow, and includes books on Colette, Rachilde, *French Women's Writing 1848-1994,* and romance. She has also published on popular culture in France: stardom and celebrity, story-telling in contemporary French fiction and (with David Looseley) *Imagining the Popular: highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow in contemporary French culture* (2013). Her forthcoming monograph is entitled *Middlebrow Matters: Women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque.*She also works on film and co-edits the Manchester University Press series *French Film Directors* (currently 45 volumes) in which her own co-authored volume on the cinema of François Truffaut appeared.