

**Kristin Ross**

INTRODUCTION TO *FAST CARS, CLEAN BODIES* [1995]

(Source: Ross, Kristin (1995) *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: MIT Press, pp. 1–13)

**Editor's introduction**

*Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* simultaneously investigates an intellectual culture fascinated by the everyday (Barthes, Baudrillard, Lefebvre and others) and a more general culture (adverts, movies, magazines) that is continually shaping and producing the everyday. In four chapters, Kristin Ross compiles what might be thought of (after Benjamin) as a range of thought-images for looking at French culture in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In a chapter called 'Hygiene and Modernization' (for instance) Ross describes adverts for newly available domestic technologies (washing machines, fridges and so on) and the rhetoric of hygiene that accompanied them. This rhetoric resonates with the same language that was being used to describe the French opposition to decolonisation in Algeria ('keeping the house in order'). Thus an everyday culture of commodities registers (in coded forms) the brutal torture of Algerians as they struggle for freedom from French control.

As clearly stated in the title of the book, national culture (French culture) is the topic of this study. But the emphasis on a national culture being reordered at a moment of decolonisation signals that we will need to qualify what is meant by 'national' here. With Lefebvre very much in mind, Ross articulates a national everyday that is the locus of a number of forces. On the one hand the period being described is one in which US culture penetrated French culture (and European culture more generally) through pop music, movies and so on. On the other hand decolonisation (particularly the liberation struggle of Algeria) impacts on French life (and, of course, on Algerian life) in a number of ways, such as returning 'white' French Algerians and the internalisation of colonial relations within French cities. 'Nation' here would have no meaning unless it is seen within both larger and smaller networks, yet it is of course 'nation' that is very much the issue for Algeria as it is

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for France. *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* provides an approach to everyday life that foregrounds 'nation' while refusing to see the national as a discrete and stable formation. It also offers an example of the diverse range of materials that can make up an archive for studying the everyday.

Further reading: Fanon 1986; Kuisel 1993; Lefebvre 1991; Kristin Ross 1992.

**I**N CLAUDE CHABROL'S SECOND MOVIE, *Les Cousins* (1959), a young provincial boy called Charles arrives in Paris to study law, and shares an apartment with his cynical, worldly, 'Nietzschean' cousin, also a law student. While his debauched cousin pursues a frenetic social life, the country boy spends most of his time in his room writing fond, descriptive letters back to his mother in the village; tiring momentarily of this, he decides to read some Balzac. The bookstore owner is so pleased with his choice ('all the rest of them, they just want to read pornography and detective fiction') that he makes him a present of a copy of *Illusions perdues*.

Françoise Giroud, one of the key figures behind the proliferation of women's magazines in the 1950s in France and an important character in this book, recalls in her memoirs how she and the cofounder of *Elle* magazine, Hélène Lazareff, imagined the ideal reader of their new magazine as the first issue hit the stands. The reader envisioned by the staff at *Elle* was most likely young, between twenty-five and thirty-five, tired of wartime deprivation, in need of frivolity, and she lived in Angoulême. Why Angoulême? I don't remember, says Giroud. Perhaps because of Rastignac.<sup>1</sup>

In a series of articles that later came to be read as the manifesto of the French novel of the late 1950s, Alain Robbe-Grillet situates his own era and its realist mode of representation by comparing it with that of Balzac. Balzac's period was marked by 'the apogee of the individual', whereas today is the period of 'administrative numbers'. The objects that appear in Balzac's descriptions stagger under the weight of all that they are meant to signify; Robbe-Grillet's objects are present in and for themselves, unencumbered by human significance. Balzac, for Robbe-Grillet, represents 'the old myths of depth'; Robbe-Grillet proposes instead 'a flat and discontinuous universe where each thing refers only to itself.'<sup>2</sup>

Yet if Balzac and his mode of narrative representation provide Robbe-Grillet with the example of everything that the novels of the day should not now be, still Balzac's claim to have represented his own era accurately, realistically, and with authority goes unquestioned. In fact, Robbe-Grillet yearns to *be* the Balzac of his day, to follow his example and produce a new, modernized mode of realism suitable to representing the 'new man' and his era of numbers. The New Novel would be a Human Comedy without the humans.

The Balzac of his day, the Rastignac of her day, the Lucien de Rubempré of the present. In the late 1950s and early 1960s – the roughly ten-year period I examine in this book, the years after electricity but before electronics – Balzac provides a way for people to establish the particular hopes, anxieties, fears, and aspirations of their own era; he is a recurrent figure in an allegory by way of which the present appears as both a repetition and a difference, a means of continuity and a mark of rupture. Once more, as in the 1850s, the countryside is being depleted, and villagers flock to the new forms

of employment, opportunities, and pleasures that can be found in the cities. But the newly arrived Parisians of the postwar era are likely to be provincial French women come to work as shopgirls as in Chabrol's *Les Bonnes femmes* (1960) or in Elsa Triolet's *Roses à crédit* (1959); village boys such as Charles who come to take an advanced degree at the moment when higher education is no longer the prerogative of a tiny elite; or Algerian immigrants seeking work in the car factories on the outskirts of Paris as in Claire Etcherelli's *Elise ou la vraie vie* (1966). Other realist characters have changed as well. The furtive calculations and the limited horizons of the Balzacian 'type' par excellence, the notary, are both repeated and surpassed by another kind of supreme calculator – one who by the very development of his discipline becomes an autonomous factor of the postwar acceleration: the engineer. 'And so beyond the engineer whose knowledge increases and whose machines perfect themselves and multiply, a manner of looking at things is forming, and soon a whole way of reasoning that marks our era.'<sup>3</sup> The stable old, propertied *honnête bourgeois* of Balzac's era reappears in a very different, streamlined, and fast-moving format: the forward-looking, hard-working *jeune cadre*. And yet in *Les Belles images* (1966) Simone de Beauvoir will uncover the strands of class interest that unite the two, reveal them to be the same man wearing different masks.

The essence of the recurring Balzac allegory in the decade I study in this book has to do with periodization. As formulated by Alain Touraine, it is an argument that presumes the epochal originality of Balzac's time in order to argue the same status for the present:

At the dawning of French industrialization, Balzac was aware of the frenzy for money, the social upheaval, but 1848 had to arrive before all the problems surrounding industrial work and the proletariat could be seen in the light of day. Aren't we now, within the new society being organized before our eyes, existing in a moment comparable to the one in which Balzac wrote?<sup>4</sup>

Following Touraine's analogy, May '68 would be the new 1848, the confirming afterthought, the event that certified the massive social upheaval and land grab of the decade that preceded it. With the largest strikes in French history, May '68 would bring all the problems and dissatisfactions surrounding the French lurch into modernization to the light of day. It was the event that marked the political end of that accelerated transition into Fordism: a protest against the Fordist hierarchies of the factories and the exaggerated statism that had controlled French modernization. (The economic confirmation of the end would come a few years later with the oil crisis and economic recession of the early 1970s.)

If I have stopped short of a consideration of the events of May '68 in this book, it is because I wanted to consider instead the event of French modernization in the decade that came before – to consider, that is, French modernization as an event. Modernization is, of course, not an event but a process, made up of slow- and fast-moving economic and social cycles. But in France the state-led modernization drive was extraordinarily concerted, and the desire for a new way of living after the war widespread. The unusual swiftness of French postwar modernization seemed to partake of the qualities of what Braudel has designated as the temporality of the

event: it was headlong, dramatic, and breathless. The speed with which French society was transformed after the war from a rural, empire-oriented, Catholic country into a fully industrialized, decolonized, and urban one meant that the things modernization needed – educated middle managers, for instance, or affordable automobiles and other ‘mature’ consumer durables, or a set of social sciences that followed scientific, functionalist models, or a work force of ex-colonial laborers – burst onto a society that still cherished prewar outlooks with all of the force, excitement, disruption, and horror of the genuinely new.

It is this swiftness that fascinated me, and that I recall being made aware of when I first read Henri Lefebvre. Contrasting the French experience to the slow, steady, ‘rational’ modernization of American society that transpired throughout the twentieth century, Lefebvre evoked the almost cargo-cult-like, sudden descent of large appliances into war-torn French households and streets in the wake of the Marshall Plan. Before the war, it seemed, no one had a refrigerator; after the war, it seemed, everyone did. Fordist consumption, as Michel Aglietta points out (and as the organization of this book reflects) is governed by two commodities: ‘the *standardized housing* that is the privileged site of individual consumption; and the *automobile* as the means of transport compatible with the separation of home and workplace.’<sup>5</sup> French people, peasants and intellectuals alike, tended to describe the changes in their lives in terms of the abrupt transformations in home and transport: the coming of objects – large-scale consumer durables, cars and refrigerators – into their streets and homes, into their workplaces and their *emplois du temps*. In the space of just ten years a rural woman might live the acquisition of electricity, running water, a stove, a refrigerator, a washing machine, a sense of interior space as distinct from exterior space, a car, a television, and the various liberations and oppressions associated with each. What were the effects of such a sudden series of changes? Where were these effects best registered, recorded? Who bore the costs? Modern social relations are of course always mediated by objects; but in the case of the French, this mediation seemed to have increased exponentially, abruptly, and over a very brief period of time. If I return throughout the book to the films of Jacques Tati, it is because they make palpable a daily life that increasingly appeared to unfold in a space where objects tended to dictate to people their gestures and movements – gestures that had not yet congealed into any degree of rote familiarity, and that for the most part had to be learned from watching American films. Was it a mark of the particular rapidity of French modernization that so much of the country’s intellectual effort of the period – the earliest (and thus most materialist) works by Barthes and Baudrillard, for example, or that of the Situationists, Cornelius Castoriadis, Edgar Morin, or Maurice Blanchot in his review essays of Lefebvre – took the form of a theoretical reflection on ‘everyday life’? Or that ‘everyday life’ is elevated to the status of a theoretical concept only at this particular conjuncture? Theoretical categories are not free-floating analytic devices, innocent of historical content. If they instead find their origins in forms of experience, then the transitory importance of critical categories like ‘alienation’ and ‘everyday life’, or the move to the forefront of the concept of ‘reification’ during these years, must then be another sign of the upheaval in social relations occasioned by the sudden, full-scale entry of capital into ‘style of life’, into lived, daily, almost imperceptible rhythms.<sup>6</sup> This is no less true for the dominant conceptual apparatus as well. A key ideological concept like ‘communication’, for example, began to refer in mid-century



techniques developed in the colonies were brought home and put to use side by side with new technological innovations such as advertising in reordering metropolitan, domestic society, the 'everyday life' of its citizens. Marxist theory had made considerable progress in refining theories of imperialism in the domain of international relations. Lefebvre now pushed that theory to apply the insights garnered from an international analysis to new objects: to the domain of interregional relations within France, for example, or the space of domesticity and practices of consumption. But it was above all the unevenness of the built environment of the city, its surroundings, and its social geography that came to crystallize, for Lefebvre, the contradictions of post-war life. For speculative capital, no longer drawn to foraging abroad, was increasingly directed toward investment in the built environment: Paris, the city itself, became the new site for a generalized exploitation of the daily life of its inhabitants through the management of space. At times the conversion from exterior to interior colonialism was facilitated by a literal transfer of personnel; thus, a city councilor involved in the Parisian renovation debates of the early 1960s remarked, 'France decolonized the Third World while colonizing Paris, appointing as head of the commission charged with making decisions about the capital functionaries who had made their careers in Black Africa or in Asia.'<sup>11</sup> But such literal transfers in personnel pale in importance when compared to the emergence, in those years, of what might be termed a *comprador* class serving the interests of the state: financiers, developers, speculators, and high administrative functionaries. Modernization brought into being a whole new range of middlemen and go-betweens, new social types that dominated and profited from the transformations wrought by the state. The *jeune cadre* elevated to an intermediate position in the corporate hierarchy, the housewife elevated to the role of technician or manager of the newly modern home – couldn't these social ascendancies, too, be seen in the light of a generalized 'compradorization' of the French middle class?

In the France of today the tendency to 'keep the two stories separate' has, I think, very serious social and political consequences, consequences that are being played out in the rise of the various neoracisms of the 1980s and 1990s that focus on the figure of the immigrant worker. Keeping the two stories apart is usually another name for forgetting one of the stories or for relegating it to a different time frame. This is in fact what has occurred. For, from this perspective (a prevalent one in France today), France's colonial history was nothing more than an 'exterior' experience that somehow came to an abrupt end, cleanly, in 1962.<sup>12</sup> France then careened forward to new frontiers, modern autoroutes, the EEC, and all-electric kitchens. Having decisively slammed shut the door to the Algerian episode, colonialism itself was made to seem like a dusty archaism, as though it had not transpired in the twentieth century and in the personal histories of many people living today, as though it played only a tiny role in France's national history, and no role at all in its modern identity. One of the arguments of this book is that the very logic of (racial) exclusion that would 'keep the two stories separate' is itself the outcome of the accelerated capitalist modernization the French state undertook in those years. The new contemporary racism centering on questions of immigration is, as the contemporary detective stories of Didier Daeninckx make clear, a racism that has its roots in the era of decolonization and modernization, in the inversion of movements of population between the old colonies and the old metropolises, in the conflict that crystallized in those days between the



the third. If the consolidation of a broad middle class more or less transpires during these years, it is also during these years that France distances itself from its (former) colonies, both within and without: this is the moment of the great cordoning off of the immigrants, their removal to the suburbs in a massive reworking of the social boundaries of Paris and the other large French cities. On the national level France retreats within the hexagon, withdraws from empire, retrenches within its borders at the same time that those boundaries are becoming newly permeable to a whirlwind of economic forces – forces far more destructive of some received notion of ‘national culture’ than any immigrant community could muster. The movement inward – a whole complex process that is in some ways the subject of each of my chapters and that Castoriadis, Morin, and Lefebvre all called ‘privatization’ – is a movement echoed on the level of everyday life by the withdrawal of the new middle classes to their newly comfortable domestic interiors, to the electric kitchens, to the enclosure of private automobiles, to the interior of a new vision of conjugality and an ideology of happiness built around the new unit of middle-class consumption, the couple, and to depoliticization as a response to the increase in bureaucratic control of daily life. Modernization requires the creation of such a privatized and depoliticized broad middle strata: a ‘national middle class’; from this point on, national subjectivity begins to take the place of class. Now, in our own day, when the broad middle strata has become coterminous with the nation itself in France, more atavistic logics or principles of exclusion are coming to light. Class conflict, after all, implies some degree of negotiability; once modernization has run its course, then one is, quite simply, either French or not, modern or not: exclusion becomes racial or national in nature. If the ideology of modernization says convergence – all societies will look the same – what it in fact sustains and freezes into place is the very unevenness or inequality that it was supposed to overcome: they will never be like us, they will never catch up. In today’s Paris that frozen temporal lag appears as a spatial configuration: the white, upper-class city *intra muros*, surrounded by islands of immigrant communities a long RER ride away.

Touraine’s analogy falters when we look to find the writer who foresaw and undertook the monumental task of representing such a momentous transition. Despite his ambitions, Robbe-Grillet did not turn out to be the Balzac of his day. And Didier Daeninckx, who offers the most acute contemporary arguments that the conditions of the immediate present lie in the failures and events of the 1950s and 1960s, is a writer of today, not then. Perhaps the point is that no single writer could occupy the position of Balzac in a moment that was also characterized by the introduction of market research into book publishing, by the mass-marketing of paperback books, by the dawning of image culture, and by a profound crisis in the traditional novel that itself reflected the new fragmentation of social life. But Robbe-Grillet’s novels and theoretical reflections, in particular, are themselves too imbued with the ideology of modernization to offer the necessary critical perspective; as Jacques Leenhardt’s work has shown, the New Novel is part and parcel of that ideology, and of the whole contemporary movement whereby a naive or vulgar materialism comes to be substituted for dialectical materialism, and *mentalité* (or shared culture, shared values, or any of a number of prevalent designations of ‘consensus’ or averaging) takes the place of ideology. Like structuralism and the Annales school of historiography, the New Novel is complicitous with the workings of capitalist modernization, in part because of its avant-gardist refusal or dismantling of historical narrative.

For help in formulating a critical prehistory of postmodernism in France I have had to look elsewhere: to those artists and thinkers who historicized their era at the time and who gave full voice to the debates and controversies surrounding modernization. Novelists such as Christiane Rochefort, Simone de Beauvoir, and Georges Perec working in a realist mode; filmmakers from Jacques Tati to Jacques Demy; and those social theorists who turned their attention after the war to 'everyday life' performed the labor of accounting for the present – its disruptions and its social costs – that the historians, lost in a prolonged dream about the *longue durée* of feudalism, chose to avoid. If the single monumental realist author working to represent the totality of an era – a 'Balzac' – has been relegated to a definitive past, then it is still to the realist mode that we must look to find the narrative style best suited to portraying unevenness.<sup>13</sup> The realist mode attempts to come to terms with, or to give an historical account of, the fatigue and exhilaration of moments when people find themselves living two lives at once. As Raymond Williams has suggested, realism gives a shape to the experiences of those on the outer edges of modernization's scope, the ones caught just outside or the ones who have been left behind, the ones for whom abundance is accompanied by a degradation in their conditions of existence. Realism offers a voice to those who live in a different temporality, who follow a pace of life that is nonsynchronous with the dominant one. In the postwar period realist fiction and film offered a critique of official representations of a uniformly prosperous France, surging forward into American-style patterns of consumption and mass culture. It is in these works that we can still glimpse the 'democracy of consumption' for what it is: the newest form of bourgeois democracy, the alibi of a class society.

## Notes

- 1 Françoise Giroud, *Leçons particulières* (Paris: Livres de poche, 1990), p. 123. Translations from the French are mine unless otherwise noted.
- 2 See Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1963), trans. Richard Howard as *For a New Novel* (New York: Grove, 1965).
- 3 Francis-Louis Closon, *Un homme nouveau: L'ingénieur économiste* (Paris: Presses universitaires françaises, 1961), pp. 13–14.
- 4 Alain Touraine, *La Société post-industrielle* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1969), pp. 115–116.
- 5 Michel Aglietta, *Régulation et crises du capitalisme* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1976), trans. David Fernbach as *A Theory of Capitalist Regulation: The U.S. Experience* (London: New Left Books, 1976), p. 159.
- 6 *Arguments*, an important neo-Marxist journal published between 1956 and 1962 for which Lefebvre, Morin, and Barthes, among others, wrote, published a translation of George Lukács's essay on reification in 1960.
- 7 André Gauron, *Histoire économique de la Vième république*, vol. 1 (Paris: Maspéro, 1983), p. 6.
- 8 See Alain Lipietz, 'Governing the Economy in the Face of International Challenge: From National Developmentalism to National Crisis' in *Searching for the New France*, ed. James F. Hollifield and George Ross (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 17–42.
- 9 Richard Kuisel's *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) is a good example of a political/economic history that focuses entirely on the 'French economic miracle' and Americanization without any consideration of the end of empire.
- 10 The phrase is André Gorz's. See his *Critique de la division du travail* (Paris: Seuil, 1973).
- 11 Cited in Louis Chevalier, *L'Assassinat de Paris* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1977), trans. David P. Jordan as *The Assassination of Paris* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 236.

12 See Etie  
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- 12 See Etienne Balibar, 'L'avancée du racisme en France', in *Les Frontières de la démocratie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992), pp. 19–98.
- 13 I have made this argument in the context of a reading of the detective fiction of Didier Daeninckx in 'Watching the Detectives', in *Postmodernism and the Rereading of Modernity*, ed. Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, and Margaret Iversen (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), pp. 46–65.

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