Kristin Ross

INTRODUCTION TO FAST CARS, CLEAN BODIES [1995]


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...
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.


In 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 for a 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 memoir 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.1

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'.

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.¹³ The stable old, propertied *honnête bourgeois* of Balzac’s era reappears in a very different, streamlined, and fast-moving format: the forward-looking, hardworking *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?⁴

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 dissatisfaction 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.' 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 concealed 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—tapped into 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. 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...
not only to the dawning of the new information technologies but to the ideal spatial arrangement of rooms in modern suburban homes; it was also the title of the leading journal of the day devoted to advances in structuralism. The word communication was everywhere — and yet the experience of communication itself, be it understood as spontaneous expression, reciprocity, or the contiguity necessary for reciprocity to exist, was precisely what was in the process of disappearing under the onslaught of merchandise and the new forms of media technologies. Merchandise (or exchange relations) is first of all the production of nonexchange between people; structuralism, the dominant intellectual movement of the period, fetishizes ‘communication’ at the very moment when various forms of direct, unmediated relations (communicare, Latin: to be in relation with) among people are waning or being decisively transformed.

Touraine’s analogy then holds; his era is the dawning of a new economic and social era in France comparable to that of the beginnings of French industrialization in the 1830s and 1840s. Economists agree that the consolidation of a Fordist regime in France in the decade or so before 1968 — a period of ‘growth without precedent of capitalism in France’, the peak decade, that is, of the thirty-year postwar economic boom — was an extraordinarily voluntarist and thus wrenching experience. It took place, for instance, at the cost of a relentless dismantling of earlier spatial arrangements, particularly in Paris where the city underwent demolitions and renovations equivalent in scale to those Haussman oversaw a hundred years earlier. And it transpired in the decade that saw the stumbling and final collapse of the French Empire, from the decisive battle of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954, to the first major Algerian uprisings a few months later, to the referendum on African independence in 1958, to the granting of that independence in 1960, all the way through to the Evian Accords that officially announced the hard-won independence of Algeria in May 1962.

Touraine makes no mention of the end of the empire in his characterization of the singularity of the age (nor does he mention the beginning of the empire in reference to Balzac’s). His omission is characteristic of many such narratives of the period that tend, even today, to choose between the two stories, the story of French modernization and Americanization on the one hand, or the story of decolonization on the other. I have tried instead throughout this book to hold the two stories in the tension of what I take to be their intricate relationship as it was lived then and as it continues into the present. The peculiar contradictions of France in that period can be seized only if they are seen as those of an exploiter/exploited country, dominator/dominated, exploiting colonial populations at the same time that it is dominated by, or more precisely, entering more and more into collaboration or fusion with, American capitalism. It is this particular tension, in fact, as I argue in the final section of the book, that makes the emergence of the character and social type of the jeune cadre, that high priest of Fordism, something of a national allegory for the modernizing France of the 1950s and 1960s. Midway between owner and worker, managing the proletariat but punching a time clock too, the cadre, like France itself, was a ‘dominated agent of capitalist domination’. 10

Thinking the two narratives together means taking seriously the catchphrase popularized by Lefebvre and the Situationists in the early 1960s: ‘the colonization of everyday life’. In the case of France, in other words, it means considering the various ways in which the practice of colonialism outlived its history. With the waning of its empire, France turned to a form of interior colonialism; rational administrative
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 postwar 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.’ 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 ascendencies, 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 neo-racisms 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. 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 underwent 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 metropoles, in the conflict that crystallized in those days between the
modern and the unmodern (or traditional) – the latter being directly referred to race and supposedly racial traits, such as laziness or filth. The immigration that haunts the collective fantasies of the French today is the old accomplice to the accelerated growth of French society in the 1950s and 1960s. Without the labor of its ex-colonial immigrants, France could not have successfully ‘Americanized’, nor competed in the post-war industrial contest. In the economic boom years, in other words, France made use of the colonies ‘one last time’ in order to resurrect and maintain its national superiority over them – a superiority made all the more urgent by the ex-colonies’ own newly acquired nationhood.

If the colonies provided the labor, the fuel came from the West. Immediately after the war a particular fantasy was exported by the United States, along with the gadgets, techniques, and experts of American capitalism, to a Europe devastated by war: the fantasy of timeless, even, and limitless development. Capitalist modernization presents itself as timeless because it dissolves beginning and end, in the historical sense, into an ongoing, naturalized process, one whose uninterrupted rhythm is provided by a regular and unchanging social world devoid of class conflict. In this book I show how the arrival of the new consumer durables into French life – the repetitive, daily practices and new mediations they brought into being – helped create a break with the eventfulness of the past, or better, helped situate the temporality of the event itself as a thing of the past. I have also argued the complicity of much of the French intellectual production of the era – from structuralism to the Annales school of historiography – with that dissolution, because of the way in which these sciences eliminate from their horizon everything that might conceivably upset the processes of repetition, the way in which they have abandoned the event as a conceptual category. My own somewhat perverse consideration of French modernization as an event is an attempt to fly in the face of this still hegemonic practice. By historicizing France’s transition into American-style mass culture, the prehistory of its postmodernity, I try to provide an experience of the historicity that theories of postmodernism, themselves rooted in the intellectual developments of the 1950s and 1960s and in the dissolution of the event and of diachronic agency, seek to efface.

But we must return now briefly to the most important promise made by modernization: its evenness. Modernization is even because it holds within itself a theory of spatial and temporal convergence: all societies will come to look like us, all will arrive eventually at the same stage or level, all the possibilities of the future are being lived now, at least for the West: there they are, arrayed before us, a changeless world functioning smoothly under the sign of technique. The process of development in the West has been completed; what comes now is already in existence: the confused syncretism of all styles, futures, and possibilities. Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experience has been leveled or smoothed away, where poverty has been reabsorbed, and, most important, a world where class conflict is a thing of the past, the stains of contradiction washed out in a superhuman hygienic effort, by new levels of abundance and equitable distribution.

And yet the French experience, in its highly concentrated, almost laboratory-like intensity, has the advantage of showing modernization to be instead a means of social and particularly racial, differentiation; a differentiation that has its roots in the 19th-century discourse on hygiene I examine in the second chapter of this book and take up again
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 cordonning 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 conjugalty 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. 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, Les particulières (Paris: Livres de poche, 1990), p. 123. Translations from the French are mine unless otherwise noted.
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.
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).
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.