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Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, eds., *France in Flux: Space, Territory and Contemporary Culture*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019. ix + 221 pp. Notes. £85.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 978-1-786-94178-7.

Review by Kory Olson, Stockton University.

It can seem at times that France encounters a new crisis each month as it grapples with changes it did not predict. The massive *gilets jaunes* protests have threatened to stall President Macron's ability to enact many of the social reforms he desires. Although the latest numbers suggest a dip in unemployment, France lags behind many of her neighbors in job creation. Climate change continues to upend weather patterns as record heatwaves and monsoon-like rains become a new norm. So, it should not be surprising that a malaise has appeared in recent French cultural output. *France in Flux: Space, Territory and Contemporary Culture* examines French reactions to their nation's post-war trajectory. In the collection's introduction, editors Ari Blatt and Edward Welch remind readers that, "France remains a conservative nation, sclerotic and slow to adjust, and so rooted in its traditions and habits that, sometimes, it can feel like an open-air museum...At the same time, however, France is constantly evolving. Change at all levels of society, no matter how subdued or overt it may be, is unrelenting" (p. 7). France's post-war *Trente Glorieuses* produced a strong, modern nation that promised plentiful jobs and a good life to its citizens. Yet, after reading this book, one may feel that the *Trente Piteuses*, the subsequent thirty dreadful years of stagnation (p. 7), coupled with France's inability to stem *délocalisations* of factories and their jobs, is becoming the new norm. *France in Flux* examines how cinema, photography, television, and literature have all been mobilized in order to map, grasp, and understand the nature of change in contemporary France (p. 8). As the title suggests, the authors examine the intersection between status quo and change, the former France *glorieuse* and present-day *piteuse*. They look at how the French have reacted to the "fluctuating pressures that, in recent decades, have been at work on French society...but also on French space, territory, and identity" and "the state of continuous change and unpredictability" (p. 6-7).

In chapter one, Edward Welch looks at spatial planning in the Mission photographique de la Délégation à l'aménagement du territoire et à l'action régionale's (DATAR) monumental 684-page *Paysages Photographies en France les années quatre-vingt* (1989). Published to mark its twenty-year anniversary, it conveniently coincided with France's bicentennial. The agency commissioned twenty-eight photographers to capture the state of the nation and the resulting book project examines the effect of French modernization during that time. Readers will find that reactions to that impact remains a common theme for the remainder of the book. Welch's

investigation shows us how the DATAR's tome documents the limits of the state's ability to transform the landscape. The agency's photographers instead demonstrate how state-led action actually changed the country (p. 13), showing what one of the DATAR book's authors referred to as "territoire vécu," a lived or real space of everyday life (p. 20). Perhaps more important, Welch helpfully demonstrates how the *Mission photographique* unofficially critiques France's once-favored spatial planning. Yes, light open-plan office spaces have sprung up on the edge of cities, for example, but they contrast with abandoned industrial plants, from which jobs have fled. This post-modernization portrait, which appears in many forms throughout several of the book's remaining chapters, clearly shows where and how the promise of *la France glorieuse* has fallen flat.

Chapters two, three, and four interact with actual people affected by "flux." In chapter two, Derek Schilling, through documentary films, examines France's lost labor via the slow deindustrialization that has become a main contributor to the thirty pitiful years. Schilling presents Denis Gheerbrant, who crisscrosses metropolitan France from Pas-de-Calais to Marseille to interview men and women "lingering at the margins" in *Et la vie* (1991) (p. 41), and Marcel Trillat's *Silence dans la vallée* (2007). Both *cineastes* examine a "culture du pauvre" where the workplace no longer offers hope, but instead epitomizes tales of defeat (p. 47). In chapter one, Welch looks at how photos of abandoned steelwork complexes epitomize what has gone wrong with the state's *dirigisme*; here, Gheerbrant and Trillat introduce readers to the people who have experienced the consequences of *délocalisation* firsthand and thus find themselves out of work. Through Schilling's investigation, we come to see them as personal guides to the margins of society. Schilling adds Abdallah Badis's *Le Chemin noir* (2012) to chronicle an ever more specialized subset of France's post-war industrial workers: Algerians who came to the Lorraine region to work before or during the Algerian War of Independence. Badis's protagonists, like those in films by Gheerbrant and Trillat, have run up against the limits of French state involvement and also experience the brunt of Lorraine's swift deindustrialization. In chapter three, Alison J. Murray Levine takes us away from industrial France to rural farmland, another marginalized zone in France today. Although agriculture remains closely tied to French identity, it is slowly becoming "foreign" to many of its citizens as time and migration to cities have severed vestiges of familial ties to ancestral farms. Furthermore, in fictional cinematic portrayals, French rural space tends to serve as a playground for city folk, where filmmakers have emptied it of actual farmers and other locals (p. 66). Levine brings readers to the people who live in spaces that have experienced the same trends found in the previous chapter. In films, such as *La vie modern/Modern Life* (2008), *Farrebique* (1946), *Les Terriens* (2000), and *Les fils de la terre* (2011), Levine shows farmers as subjects instead of objects and represents farmland as *pays* (real) rather than *paysage* (fictionalized), a choice that produces an "inhabited view of rural space, instead of [the] pictorial one" that viewers are used to (p. 73). Levine's chapter serves as a nice counterbalance to abandoned factories, especially as she concentrates on the outdoor, cultivated agricultural spaces (orchards, pastures, hayfields, etc.) that house the primary sites of farmers' labor and provide their livelihood (p. 70). Chapter four, by Anna-Louise Milne, also focuses on people, and their "expressive style and rhythm" in the films of Sylvain George. Milne begins with a section she entitles "The bathers." There, she takes apart a scene from Michaux's *Face à ce qui se dérobe* (1976) where we see a group of young men in Calais washing at the pump. She identifies an intimate moment where almost-naked bodies have been released from rules. In a second section entitled "Burners," Milne contrasts the "joyfulness" (p. 98) of the bathing scene with George's films *No Border* (2005) and *Éclats* (2011). In the latter, immigrants disfigure their fingertips in a campfire in the hope that they

can bypass European border controls and join society and all the promises it offers. By the end of this chapter, readers see how fire warms, but also scars.

In chapter five, Fiona Handyside highlights younger female protagonists in two films, *17 filles* (2011) and *Bande des filles* (2014), for whom the desirable *centre* always seems just over the horizon. This chapter marks a nice transition from the preceding documentary investigations. *17 filles* takes place in Lorient, a former Breton industrial hub that now grapples with the same economic decline investigated earlier by Schilling. Echoing her colleagues, Handyside explores how the protagonists, a group of girls who form a pact to get pregnant, occupy the margins of society, often portrayed cinematically through light and dark. At a party on the beach, for example, the pregnant girls—flirting and kissing boys in front of a fire—are bathed in golden light. These glimpses of “shimmer and sparkle” operate as a promise of changing fortunes that seem to always “be out of reach” (pp. 115-116). In the second film, *Bande des filles*, which takes place in Bagnolet, just outside Paris, the *filles* actively choose to participate in gang culture. Of course, the *banlieue* remains a well-explored space and this film’s urban topography situates the film in the margins of Paris and society, epitomized by a blurry Eiffel Tower always off in the distance. Handyside helpfully guides readers into the visual and sonic environments that these girls inhabit. We read, for example, that they “look out over distant horizons, stare out to see...fight on rooftops, dance in anonymous hotel rooms...seemingly suspended in time and space” (pp. 116-117). Furthermore, the protagonists of both films exercise a right to choose to escape parental control, which confirms their place at the margins of society, either by getting pregnant with the hopes of taking advantage of the subsequent welfare benefits (*17 filles*), or finding togetherness in the joyous rebellion of a gang (*Bande des filles*).

Chapters six and seven provide alternate realities to France today. Chapter six, “*Les Revenants*, Tignes and the Return of Post-war Modernisation” moves readers from film to television. Catherine E. Clark and Brian R. Jacobson provide a timely analysis of the hit series *Les Revenants*, where an unnamed village’s dead have returned. However, by season two, residents of “La Ville” must also contend with the zombie-like nature of animals that have also perished and “returned” due to a flood from a faulty dam at the end of the first season. Clark and Jacobson convincingly explain how the television series represents a fictionalized view of the failed promise of modernization seen in chapter one by linking that event to the failure of the French state to continue its successful modernization drive that fueled much of the *Trente Glorieuses*. Furthermore, Clark and Jacobson argue that the limits of modernization go beyond decaying infrastructure to include the negative effects it caused to nature in the 1950s and that continue to shape France’s environment today (p. 150). An underlying theme of climate change, another problem facing France today, cannot be ignored as floods have become a common occurrence as rising global temperatures dump more water and rain on France. Beyond weather, season one of *Les Revenants* also evokes Vichy through an authoritative state and resistance to it. A paternal figure in season two also evokes additional right-wing notions, which times well with the rise of extremism in various political circles today. Chapter seven looks at the fictional depiction of a France as a failed state. Here, Joshua Armstrong examines topography and ecology in Jean Rolin’s *Les Événements* (2014). Readers experience the French countryside via a narrator who quits Paris for the South of France in hopes of escaping a nation ravaged by civil war. For Armstrong, Rolin’s “countryside” differs from the rural spaces examined earlier by Levine. No longer a source of identity, in *Les Événements*, it is revealed as something “other than expected,” as landscapes have become “the terrain of predilection for the postmodern, post-industrial psychogeographer” (p. 163). Perhaps in a reaction to today’s

consumerist society, “resource ruin, epitomized by abandoned shipping yards, incarnates wasteful mass consumption of the natural world” (p. 172). Armstrong tells readers that Rolin was always “plus attiré par les périphéries que par les centres” (p. 168). We can see this draw as readers follow the protagonist as he deviates from main roads—and civilization itself—where familiar corporate guideposts, such as chain restaurants and hotels have lost their meaning in the on-going civil war. As a result, he must then turn to once-ignored natural features to find his way (p. 168).

Ari Blatt concludes this collection in chapter eight with a return to the visual medium of photography. His investigation bookends well with Welch’s opening chapter. Blatt introduces readers to both the Observatoire Photographique du paysage (OPP) and France(s) territoire liquide (FTL), which he refers to as “two of the most recent and most compelling photographic missions that set out to engage issues...in ways that other media cannot” (p. 187). A hefty claim, no doubt, but Blatt walks the reader through the agencies’ process and we soon understand how they provide a more nuanced view of the nation than we saw in chapter one. The OPP invited fourteen photographers to take pictures of the same sites under the same conditions over regular intervals, which Blatt refers to as an evolving succession of “nows” (p. 195). Although uncoordinated, Blatt brings these moments together. Over a series of photos, for example, we can see a once rural space lose its identity as vegetation disappears, and streets, houses, and walls materialize in that same space. Through vignettes such as these, Blatt reaffirms the theme of *aménagement du territoire*, discussed throughout the book, but in terms of the anguish or trauma associated with modern forms of development. As a result, one may find mild discomfort in the views provided, as *paysages* become no more (p. 192). The FTL, on the other hand, had fewer constraints, embraced a variety of styles and subjects, and saw space and place as a playground of sorts (p. 199). To close the volume, Blatt walks us through a succession of FTL artists, many of whom document the margins of society. Their subjects—the French border, refugee camps, roads and bridges—represent the “flux” facing France today.

With the increasing pace of globalization and the rising specter of climate change, this timely volume addresses a viewpoint that, in my opinion, will greatly benefit courses on contemporary France, literature, or cinema. Upon first glance, this collection may appear incongruous. The book’s contributors investigate varying mediums over a fifty-year period. Yet, the editors have assembled authors whose work comes together to create a well-thought-out narrative. France’s post-war modernization hoped to change the nation and improve the lives of all its citizens, but the resulting “flux” affected national space, territory, and identity differently. It has pushed some to the margins and left many others behind altogether. By examining how the French react to the rapid social, demographic, and changes via photography, film, literature, readers can better understand this France in flux.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, “Introduction”

Edward Welch, “Angels of History: Looking Back at Spatial Planning in the Mission photographique de la DATAR”

Derek Schilling, “Disuse and Affect: Post-Industrial Landscapes of France’s Labour Lost”

Alison J. Murray Levine, “Depth of Field: Farmland and Farm Life in Contemporary French Documentary”

Anna-Louise Milne, “Sylvain George’s Minor Mode, or Cinema at the Margins of its Fragile Community”

Fiona Handyside, “Girlhood Luminosities and Topographical Politics: *17 Filles* (Delphine and Muriel Coulin, 2011) and *Bande des filles* (Céline Sciamma, 2014)”

Catherine E. Clark and Brian R. Jacobson, “*Les Revenants*, Tignes and the Return of Post-war Modernisation”

Joshua Armstrong, “French Edgeland Poetics: Topography and Ecology in Jean Rolin’s *Les Événements*”

Ari J. Blatt, “Picturing a Nation of Local Places in the Observatoire photographique du paysage and France(s) territoire liquide”

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