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Alison James, *The Documentary Imagination in Twentieth-Century French Literature. Writing with Facts.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 288 pp. Bibliography and index. £59.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9-78-0198859680.

Review by Andy Stafford, University of Leeds.

The recent deaths of the French science-fiction aficionado twins Igor and Grigori Bogdanov, and the widespread obituaries, even in the British press, had this reviewer scurrying to the fifth volume of the complete works of Roland Barthes. Why? Because, in 1976, rather implausibly, the by then eminent critic wrote a highly eulogistic review in Maurice Nadeau's *La Quinzaine littéraire* of the Bogdanovs' book *Clefs pour la science-fiction.*[1] This rather recondite publication by the late Barthes--called "Il n'existe aucun discours qui ne soit une Fiction"--was due to be the preface to the Bogdanovs' volume, but was eventually not included by their publisher, Seghers.[2] The twins had been participants in Barthes's final seminar at the EHESS in 1975-1976 (the second series on the "discours amoureux"), giving a joint paper on the "discours de l'intimidation"--though, according to Eric Marty, the semiologist was more interested in their identical beauty, a fascination carried into the opening paragraph of his written piece.[3] What is more interesting in Barthes's review of their study of science-fiction however is that it showed to him that all discourse, even Structuralism, is a *Fiction* (with a capital F). Thus, in full (if that is possible) post-structuralist, post-semiotic mode, Barthes sets out the proto-post-modernist terrain: "La Fiction, en effet, ne s'oppose pas platement à la verité." Just like Orpheus *not* looking at Eurydice and thereby pointing to his desire for her *en creux*, the Bogdanovs' analysis, insists Barthes, illustrated what "la science 'scientifique'" could not: "la Fiction de nos désirs comblés."[4] This psychoanalysis-inflected point about desire in fiction might have sounded new and fresh in the mid-1970s, but it seemed now merely to replace Barthes's earlier sociological and Lukácsian understanding of fiction with a Lacanian-Deleuzian one, both of which could be broadly summarised by the slogan once used by the British (mildly left-wing) tabloid newspaper *The Daily Mirror*: "if you want to know what is happening in the world, look in the mirror."

Alison James's wide-ranging study of fact in fiction is not interested in science-fiction; nor does she deign to include life-writing. But her analysis of "documentary" writings by André Gide, Surrealists André Breton and Louis Aragon, the Marguerites Duras and Yourcenar, and Patrick Modiano, amongst briefer accounts of more recent writers (Emmanuel Carrère, Laurent Binet, François Bon, Annie Ernaux) grapples with the thorny issue raised by Barthes of how to characterise the relationship between fact and fiction. In so doing, her approach is in tune with a recent move in Postcolonial Studies (roughly since the Millennium), that of refusing to see fiction as *purely* document; that is--paradoxically for a book on the documentary--, to valorize fiction as fiction rather than as window onto culture. Hence the term "imagination" in the book's title: how do writers of fiction figure the non-fictional, the real of twentieth-century life?

Surprisingly then, there is no mention of the work of the young, pre-Marxist, Georg Lukács, whose 1910 meditation on the essay form, in the famous "Letter to Leo Popper,"[5] tries to distinguish between life and Life, in ways that go far beyond the essay. Nevertheless, there is a stimulating chapter on Gide's fascination for the *fait divers*, including his obsession with the case of the recluse Mélanie, in *La Sequestrée de Poitiers* [6] (famously analysed as an example of a happy *socialisme à distance* in Barthes's 1976-1977 lecture series *Comment vivre ensemble*[7]), and the infamous murder case of the *affaire Redureau*, as well as analysis of Gide's accounts of his time as a jury member in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Gide's is a sensibility not just to depraved and deprived aspects of modern life but also to reporting and public opinion, all given through the eyes of a fiction writer, a (Protestant-inspired) witnessing which allows the book then to venture into Gide's accounts of the Soviet Union in the 1930s (though James does not mention Barthes's stark intertextual references to Gide in the USSR in his 1974 diary [8] of the infamous *Tel Quel* visit to Maoist China), and more so into his trips to Congo and Chad. The main aim then is to elucidate what James calls documentary rhetoric.

Neither fiction nor autobiography, the writer's account of real-life situations puts into play, and plays with, notions of authenticity and witnessing, that raise questions about justice--think of recent reporting of Ghislaine Maxwell's trial and related legal proceedings, including Prince Andrew's lawyers' attempts to dodge the law. But, overall, James illustrates the mobility of the Gidean eye (or pen), as it slips between the role of juror, judge, moral witness, anonymous public opinion, journalist…and, of course, novelist, in an account that she calls elusive and multiple. James sees this as twentieth-century naturalism, a Zola for the modern world, but which, in the extreme case of Redureau (the thirteen-year-old boy who kills his family), has affinities with Michel Foucault's 1970s archival work on the case of 1835 murderer Pierre Rivière.[9] Indeed, the status of the archive, whether historical or contemporary (news-paper cuttings for example), is an important element in the discussion of faction.

The main historiographical aim of the book is to trace a thread from Zola's nineteenth-century naturalism, through Gide's twentieth-century version, up until post-war witnessing and post-memory, in an epistemological approach which also looks at aesthetic engagements with the documentary. Here the analysis makes an important link between Gide's ethnographies of Africa and the Soviet Union in the late 1920s and early 1930s on the one hand, and Surrealism's engagement with the Document on the other. Gide's written account of his visit to the Congo is put alongside his (then) lover Marc Allégret's 1929 documentary film. But James discounts Jean Rouch's dismissal of the film and examines as productive the gaps between visual and written text. Whilst Allégret's film is analysed for its desire to get close to the daily lives of those Congolese that the two Frenchmen encountered, Gide is shown to be sceptical of film's ability to document accurately, especially as it erases "social context under the guise of a mythical state of nature" (p. 73). Even Gide's own written approach, though critical of the concession system in colonial equatorial Africa, is less inclined to criticise the colonial administration and is shown to be less self-aware of the cultural superiority on which the colonialist is premised than the work of Michel Leiris in the famous Dakar-Djibouti mission of 1931-1933. Indeed, as James shows, Gide realises that he has to sacrifice the objectivity of pure journalism for the immediacy of witnessing in his quest to bring the archive into the public sphere. Nevertheless, Gide has shown that literature has a purchase on the real by exploring a documentary modernism that the Surrealists will then radicalize.

The chapter on Louis Aragon, André Breton, and Georges Bataille is, in a sense, the centrepiece of the volume, as the analysis moves, *in extremis*, beyond realism and naturalism, including photography, to consider the anti-literary nature of the document, dissolving the "boundary between the created document and the found document" (p. 79). Surrealism's pre-war engagement with document is above all a denial of genius, of intentions, and one that would make any Structuralist of the late twentieth century proud. Indeed, the automatist understanding of all human documentation prefigures Structuralism's obsession with depersonalization or with impersonalism. However, Surrealism's document favours the internal over the external dimension of chance and undecidability; whereas post-1960s semiotics would keep these two in tight tension, both plural and non-committal on the functions of signs as both inductive and deductive (witness Barthes's stunning 1964 essay [10] on André Martin's photography of the Eiffel Tower, in which the function of the empty metal edifice is--equally--to see and be seen).

After Surrealism, the study changes tack, to consider autofiction and memory, firstly in an excellent chapter on Yourcenar that interrogates mementoes and relics of all sorts, in a manner that anticipates, secondly, the post-war fascination with witnessing. Here Modiano, Duras, Claude Lanzmann, Paul Ricoeur, and Henry Rousso accompany us on the voyage through to the post-memory of Georges Perec and W. G. Sebald. It is a journey that could take us right up to today's younger generation of novelists such as Camille de Toledo whose 2020 Sebaldian novel *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* [11] was nominated for the Prix Goncourt.

Two elements are however missing in the volume. Firstly, there is no mention of the more recent transformatory view of the photograph that goes beyond, if not destroys, the document, especially in the work of André Rouillé (2005) and François Soulages (1998); though the author will no doubt object that these are millennial considerations on digital photographic culture. The other is however rooted in 1930s anti-racism. Petrine Archer-Straw's important critique [12] of the racial politics of Bataille's and Leiris's magazine, *Documents*, could have made an obvious, deeper link with Gide and Allégret's Congo. It could also have helped the later discussion of witnessing concerning the Rwandan genocide.

Indeed, it is rather easy to point to the gaps and oversights in this ambitious book--for this reader, in the francophone arena (the varied work of Patrick Chamoiseau, Leila Sebbar, Sembène Ousmane, and Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine springs to mind) as well as the conceptual and philosophical questions that are skirted over (the fact that *montage* is the standard French word for documentary is not mentioned, let alone explored and explained). Overall, this book felt like it needed to be two books, especially if it insists on starting with the late nineteenth century. It has opened up a huge area of research, but, without stopping even to consider the etymology of the word document--seemly or fitting--, has left much other work to be done.

NOTES

[1] Igor and Grigori Bogdanov, *Clefs pour la science-fiction* (Paris: Seghers, 1978).

[2] Roland Barthes, "Il n'existe aucun discours qui ne soit une Fiction", in id., *Oeuvres Complètes, Tome IV, 1972-1976* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 937-939.

[3] Eric Marty, *Roland Barthes: le métier d'écrire* (Paris: Seuil, 2006), p. 37.

[4] Roland Barthes, "Il n'existe aucun discours qui ne soit une Fiction", p. 938.

[5] Georg Lukács, "On the Nature and Form of the Essay. A Letter to Leo Popper" [1910], in Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (London: Merlin Press, 1974), pp. 1-18.

[6] André Gide, *La Séquestrée de Poitiers* [1930] (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).

[7] Roland Barthes, *Comment vivre ensemble. Cours et séminaires au Collège de France (1976-1977)* (Paris: Seuil, 2002).

[8] Roland Barthes, 'Compte rendu du voyage en Chine', in Anne Herschberg Pierrot, ed., *Le Lexique de l'auteur. Séminaire à l'École pratique des hautes études, 1973-1974* (Paris: Seuil, 2010), pp. 227-245.

[9] Michel Foucault, *Moi, Pierre Rivière, ayant égorgé ma mère, ma sœur, mon frère* (Paris: Seuil, 1973).

[10] Roland Barthes, *La Tour Eiffel* (Paris: Delpire, 1964)

[11] Camille de Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* (Paris: Verdier, 2020).

[12] Petrine Archer-Straw, *Negrophilia. Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

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