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Stefanos Geroulanos. *Transparency in Modern France: A Critical History of the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017. xiv + 503 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$29.95 (pb.) ISBN 978-1-5036-0459-9.

Review Essay by Audrey Evrard, Fordham University

In *Transparency in Postwar France: A Critical History of the Present*, Stefanos Geroulanos offers a fascinating, rich, and ambitious reading of 20th century French intellectual and social history through the lens of transparency, a term which by the end of World War II “had become suspect (...) mercurial (and held up) a false mirror to the self, to society, to knowledge, proffering a misguided belief in the purity of the self” (p. 10). Probing the work of philosophers, linguists, ethnographers, scientific discourses, and to a lesser extent, cinema and literature, Geroulanos approaches transparency as a vast conceptual matrix or web that allows him to examine key epistemological and cultural shifts that occurred in the aftermath of World War II. Beyond the immediate optical dimension of the term, the 22 chapters of the book engage notions as wide-ranging as governmental opacity and openness, objectivity and subjectivity, identity and alterity, violence, policing and social normativity, alienation and autonomy, to mention only some concepts used as query nodes. In other words, across this book, transparency reveals more than it effaces; it becomes a tool of mediation rather than the modality of immediacy.

The episodic structure of the book lends itself well to either a traditional reading from beginning to end or to a more fragmented reading: most chapters can be read independently of one another since they each “engage a particular object and the particular conditions under which this object could be asserted, elucidated, known, dismantled, refuted, or overcome” (p. 22). Because of that, some chapters (8, 9, 11, 15, for instance) are more easily accessible to readers less familiar with “high philosophical discussions” (p. 22), and would greatly enrich undergraduate seminars addressing cultural, political and intellectual developments in postwar French society.

In the introduction, the author clearly establishes both the conceptual and historical stakes of his focus on the postwar era and his methodological ambition, namely “attempting semiotic history: to pull historically relevant meaning out of the uses of an idea that seemed minor on its own terms yet was meticulously woven into the fabric of postwar life and thought, an idea phrased in always in terms of a critique that gained momentum and became emblematic of the period itself” (pp. 21-22). The book thus proceeds to detangle seemingly unrelated strings all the while weaving them together anew in order to uncover what transparency had hidden all along: violence, repression, homogeneity, conflict.

My focus in this review will rest more specifically on the author’s (limited) engagement with cinema. Indeed, there is value to be found in the way Geroulanos weaves cinema into this matrix, turning it into another site of inscription for this critical genealogy to unfold. Moreover, transparency as Geroulanos defines and mobilizes it differs from another visual metaphor that has been much more pregnant in film studies for a couple of decades now, namely spectrality. Obviously inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida, cinematic spectrality is more tightly connected to the lingering affects history and memory have on the present and the present materiality of the cinematic image. Transparency, as examined here, has more to do with mechanisms a society or individuals deploy for self-reassurance, self-justification, and political and moral order. Piercing through transparency in a critical manner requires active perceptual shifts that re-engineer long-established collective ways of seeing and thinking. As such, Geroulanos’s ambition for producing a critical history of the present equally lets us ponder *en transparence* the obscure legacy of the Enlightenment and Western modernity, a concern that was central to cinema’s reinvention in the 1950s and 1960s.

From modernity to the (post)modern

Scanning three decades, this critical genealogy uncovers perhaps less a history of France between 1945 and 1975 than a “new way of seeing things” (p. 41), a new optic that various social, intellectual and political agents brought about at a time when modernity itself had become the greatest illusion of all. “The end of the war became a metaphysical event,” Geroulanos states in the second chapter, “France, Year Zero” (p. 41). It is no surprise that he starts this chapter with a quote from Gilles Deleuze’s *Cinema 2: Time-Image* (*L’image-temps*, 1985), a text where the conceptual, the epistemological and the visual converge in the philosopher’s efforts to define the advent of a modern cinema or cinematic modernity. For Deleuze, the war introduced a historical rupture, which “heralded a new reality and demanded a new way of seeing things” (p. 41):

The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not believe in the events which happen to us (...) The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must be an object of belief (...) The cinema must film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link. The nature of the cinematographic illusion has often been considered. Restoring our belief in the world – this is the power of modern cinema (when it stops being bad).[1]

In fact, many chapters examine the necessity philosophers, ethnographers, scientists felt as early as the 1930s, but more urgently from the 1940s onwards, to question inherited beliefs in knowledge of the self and of others as the product of an immediate, transparent consciousness of the world around us. Opacity (p. 49), obstacles (p. 66), “the impossibility of pure observation” (p. 90), differentiability and otherness (pp. 108-109), as well as ambiguity quickly replaced notions of transparency, clarity, homogenization and totality in various intellectual discourses.

A relatively minor thread throughout the book, cinema visually bookends this project. A translucent nod to Jean-Luc Godard on the book cover (both front and back) asserts cinema’s inevitable contributions to the broad dismantlement of transparency that the author tracks throughout the postwar decades. At first glance hardly recognizable, the two silhouettes on display reveal themselves, after more attentive scrutiny, to be the two stars of Jean-Luc Godard’s *Contempt* (1962): Brigitte Bardot wearing a wig making her look like Godard’s muse of the time, Anna Karina, and Michel Piccoli, Godard’s alter ego. This overlay, superimposed onto the title, is at once iconic and illusive to the cinephile; yet, the blurring effect points to the author’s careful framing of his inquiry in the first pages of chapter 1 as one that is broadly “conceptual, epistemological” and not strictly “an optical problem” (pp. 31-32).

Transparency is more than *visual* transparency.

(...) What we mean by ‘transparency’ affects (and is affected by) the way sensation, objects, and materiality – not to mention mediation, objectivity, light – are constructed within a system of thought: were we to press the point, we have to admit that transparency is a concept that has made sensation, perception, mediation, and knowledge *possible*. ‘Manifestation’ and ‘showing through’ are conceptual, epistemological, and not simply visual issues. (pp. 31-32)

Certainly, choosing this image acknowledges the New Wave’s major role in the production of what Geroulanos calls “another imaginary of transparency” from the late 1950s onwards. But it also renders an iconic cinematic image opaque, disfiguring well-known faces into shadow puppets, announcing the author’s gravitation towards films and filmmakers that have asserted cinematic ambivalence towards representation, truth and realism.

What lies beneath the face?

With its playful reliance on the camera-gaze, from Truffaut's *400 Blows* (1958) and Godard's *Breathless* (1959) to Agnes Varda's *Cleo de 5 à 7* (1962), to conjure only a few of these images, the New Wave contributed to propelling the question of subjectivity to the fore of the cinematic screen. Chapter 11, "Face, Mask, and Other as Avatars of Selfhood: A Third Short Story," unveils the multiplicity of uses and meanings that the face was granted on and off screen in the years that followed the end of the war. Bringing together voices as diverse as Franju, Bresson, Cocteau, Barthes, Levinas, and Lacan, the author considers shifts that gradually masked faces and questioned the individual truth and singularity that had once been associated with the face. Once divine (Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 *The Passion of Joan of Arc*), the face in cinema was now the expression of pure artifice (Roland Barthes's "The Face of Garbo") or pure horror (George Franju's 1960 *Eyes without a Face*). The recurrence of the face, and perhaps more specifically of the gaze looking at us from the screen, bears testimony at that time to the inconceivable and un-representable violence that World War II brought forth (p. 179). Interestingly, Geroulanos chooses Franju's "refusal" to force the spectator to "look into the depths of horror," suggesting cinema's reluctance to face the horrific instead of considering Alain Resnais's efforts to address the ontological rupture that caused 1945 through films such as *Night and Fog* (1955), *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (1959), or *Muriel* (1963). If Franju's blurring of the disfigured face of Christine's disfigured face (Edith Scob) denies, in Geroulanos's view, spectators direct visual experience of horror, the recurrence of "hallucinatory" faces in post-1950 French cinema manifests, for Antoine de Baecque, some foreclosed vision of horror that haunts modern cinema:

Modern cinema was born, in the work of all these great filmmakers (...) from images of mass death that worked steadily inside them and resurfaced in other, foreclosed, forms: the look-to-camera, the frozen image, documentary within fiction, the montage of fear, the emergence of macabre figures – all the specifically cinematographic forms that attest to the obsessive presence of a palimpsest of the concentration camps in the cinema of the 1950s.[2]

Across this chapters, Geroulanos seems more concerned, however, about cinema's theatricality, masking and defacing of truth. In fact, whenever he brings in films throughout the book, they tend to be used as supporting evidence that truth, whether it is "pure sublimity or pure horror," cannot be seen or felt unmediated. Hence, cinema only gives us access to certain truths inasmuch as it foregrounds its constructedness and self-conscious mediation of the filmmaker's and the spectators' perception.

Fictions of truth

Questions of subjectivity, identity and cinematic truth are more directly engaged in chapter 15 by way of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's seminal *cinéma-vérité* manifesto, *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960). Obviously, Jean Rouch's ethnographic background connects this chapter to earlier discussions about anthropology and colonialism/anti-colonialism (chapter 9), and Lévi-Strauss's upholding of difference as a fundamental safeguard of our humanity (chapter 14). A lot has already been said and written about *Chronicle of a Summer*, and in recent years, Jean Rouch's contributions to the history of French and world cinema have received greater critical attention. In that regard, Geroulanos's emphasis on this film's conscious theatricality and reflexivity is not really new. Devoting an entire chapter to it moves, however, Jean Rouch's cinematic practice from the margins of French cinema and of the New Wave to a more central position in the conceptual matrix sketched out across the book. Like philosophy, anthropology, psychiatry and other systems of thought, cinema, and particularly *cinéma-vérité* as practiced in *Chronicle of a Summer* was effective at "burst(ing) the fiction of a transparency effected in and through the film" (p. 263). Unlike American direct cinema, which maintained its faith in the transparency of the cinematic image and apparatus, French *cinéma-vérité* relocated its truth in its very apparent, not transparent, materiality and artificiality. Thus, the chapter's novelty consists in refracting debates and analyses that have primarily unfolded within the field of film studies outward into a broader intellectual, political and historical context. But it also offers an intriguing preface to the last part, and to what I initially considered a glaring overlook of another major cinematic revolution, and

“renegotiation of transparency,” in this postwar era, namely the Cinema of May 68. As described by Geroulanos, *Chronicle of a Summer* lays the foundation for militant cinema’s own complex staging of conflicts, absorption and theatricality just a few years later: “the film doubles Rouch’s gesture of creating absorption and situations, and it did so through its capacity to show its own constructedness. That allowed film to bring forth a reality that would otherwise remain hidden and could not be experienced anywhere except in this space of *vérité* that went beyond fiction and documentary” (pp. 263-264). In `68, the absorbing immersion of spectators within the dramaturgy of strikes, protests and cries of revolt would similarly bring out truths out of carefully staged situations and confrontations; extracting truths from what disappeared in the overall theater of `68 – particularly the repression of women’s and immigrant workers’ voices.

Normative transparency

Indeed, chapter 20 turns May 68 into a vacuum, as Deleuze’s words, “This is 1967,” get immediately followed with another brief sentence, “Once May 68 had hit, the horizon of philosophy changed dramatically” (p. 335). In 2002, Kristin Ross wrote in *May ‘68 and its Afterlives* that if there were some transparency in May 68, it consisted in the surging of students and new categories such as that of the “generation 68” but also, and sadly, in the veiling, the “eclipsing”, of workers and the others, especially the politicized immigrants.[3] It is interesting that *Transparency in Postwar France* produces, to some extent, a similar impression. Across chapters 8 and 9, “Between State and Society I and II,” Geroulanos addresses more directly the contribution of the New Wave, hinted at on the cover. He clearly demonstrates that François Truffaut, Claude Chabrol, and of course, Jean-Pierre Melville, gave visibility between 1958 and 1970 to new “figures – the *résistant*, the gangster, the *inadapté*, the *anomic individual*” that “appealed now as contrarian, autonomous ideals, socioeconomic but also moral reactions to the state’s efforts at organizing a society that was only partially under its control” (p. 341). If the gangster and the *résistant* predate the New Wave – as attest early gangster films from the 1930s like Marcel Tourneur’s *Justin de Marseille* (1937), for instance – “their style of resistance propelled an imaginary that developed fully during the student revolts, feeding their anomic and anti-establishment tendencies” during May 68 (pp. 341-342).[4] For the author, such figures embodied an alternative to what was increasingly perceived as the enforcement of restraining norms and the intrusion of state agencies in the everyday life of French citizens, under the disguise of greater social transparency. The cross-pollination of gangster and Resistance narratives facilitated the popularity of “a persistent ethics of resistance to police” effectively embodied in good-natured, sympathetic gangsters, often played by popular actors, such as Jean Gabin and Lino Ventura (p. 144).

Transparency in Postwar France is a captivating read, which bears resonance with our present times in so many ways and in contexts that exceed the geographical boundaries of France. The value of Geroulanos’s attention to films invites us to see different ways in which the debates and practical experimentations that underscored French cinema and changed the trajectory of cinematic practices well beyond France for decades to come were active agents of this critique as well. If this book considers what made France’s assault on transparency unique in the postwar decades, Geroulanos might be suggesting the beginning of a new answer to the question: what made French cinema so revolutionary during those years?

To conclude, I cannot not consider Geroulanos’s reading of the late 1950s and early 1960s in the light of France’s social unrest 50 years after May 68. Both periods share similar perceptions of the police, as a “mediator” that “obstruct(s) state-society relations” more than it “secur(es) transparent order and surveillance” (pp. 131-132), and the New Wave’s celebration of *inadaptés* youths can certainly find echoes in cinematic depictions of the French *banlieues* since the 1990s. Yet, new narratives have appeared in the aftermath of May 68, focused more directly on the imposed norms of economic liberalization. Written about May 68, the following lines resonate quite loudly with the France of 2018, hence my insertion of verbs in the present in parentheses:

Even though May 68, was not about ‘governmental’ transparency, it certainly involved fears regarding the transparency enforced on social space, the perception that the state was too much of a police state, and the recognition of capitalism as the driving force of an alienated and denatured present (...) The students who chanted ‘A bas, l’état policier!’ were (are) not calling for open governance; they fused (fuse), with great success, the episodic image of this or that *flic* (cop) with the general image of a police state that enforced (enforces) a planned capitalist logic on their lives and thus misshaped (mishaps) any genuine future; ‘A bas!’ was (is) the counteragent of this, at once impersonal and active (p. 343). [5]

In recent weeks, social space has once again been turned into a contested zone, where students, protesters, activists face police forces in riot gears. Since March, several universities across France have been occupied and evacuated, as groups of students have rejected efforts by the government to streamline access to universities as disguised selection. Mid-April, between 250 and 300 eco-activists living on the Zone à Défendre (ZAD) in Notre-Dame-des-Landes – a site chosen by the French governments back in the 1970s for the construction of new airport in the Nantes region – were forcefully evacuated by more than 2,500 police forces. Finally, if these conflicts seek to provoke the government into laying bare the falsity of its political and economic transparency, what should we make of the Black Bloc’s radical politics of opacity, as violent masked protesters increasingly appropriate the front lines of labor protests?

NOTES

[1] Gilles Deleuze. *Cinema 2: Time-Image* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 171-172.

[2] Antoine De Baecque. *Camera Historica: A Century in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 68.

[3] Kristin Ross. *May ‘68 and its Afterlives*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 10-11.

[4] In his recent book *Americanism, Media and the Politics of Culture in 1930s France* (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 2016), David Pettersen devotes his entire chapter 2 to the cultural appropriation of the American gangster by poetic realism as early as the mid-to-late 1930s.

[5] Inclusions of present alternatives are mine. For links to recent protests occurring at French universities, see here: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/apr/05/we-cant-back-down-french-students-dig-in-for-macron-battle>; <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/04/france-student-worker-strikes-macron>.

aevrard@fordham.edu

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