

# Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature

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Volume 46  
Issue 1 *Special Focus: Migration Narratives in Europe*

Article 19

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March 2022

**Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, editors. France in Flux: Space, Territory, and Contemporary Culture. Liverpool UP, 2019.**

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## Recommended Citation

Black, Suzanne (2022) "Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, editors. France in Flux: Space, Territory, and Contemporary Culture. Liverpool UP, 2019.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 46: Iss. 1, Article 19. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2211>

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**Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, editors. *France in Flux: Space, Territory, and Contemporary Culture*. Liverpool UP, 2019.**

**Abstract**

Review of Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, editors. *France in Flux: Space, Territory, and Contemporary Culture*. Liverpool UP, 2019. xiii + 221 pp.

**Keywords**

flux, space, 21st century France, film, photography, television

Ari J. Blatt and Edward Welch, editors. *France in Flux: Space, Territory, and Contemporary Culture*. Liverpool UP, 2019. xiii + 221 pp.

Readers skimming Blatt and Welch's *France in Flux* might initially be tempted to set the book aside as dry. Figure 1.1 depicts a close-up of dirt; other photographs show lonely men in abandoned industrial sites or repeated exposures of traffic islands. Upon careful reading, however, one realizes that opening our eyes to the importance of these apparently trivial, depressing, or monotonous spaces is precisely the point of this creatively-focused and thoughtfully-organized collection of essays. As Blatt argues in the final pages, it is only by paying attention to peripheral or marginal territory that we can fully understand contemporary France. The contributors therefore take us away from typical representations of France as Paris, landscape painting, or centralized state toward its "edgelands" (162). Paradoxically, I found in this apparently impoverished terrain a greatly enriched view of contemporary France.

An acknowledgement suggests that *France in Flux* began as a workshop, which may account for the book's pleasingly unified feel. It opens with an introduction establishing theoretical framework and historical context, followed by eight chapters on photography, film, a television show, and a novel. In its choice of texts, the collection shows a debt to cultural studies and post-colonial theory but focuses its analysis on the French mainland.

Discussed in the introduction and chapter 6, the television show *Les Revenants* (*The Returned*, 2012-2015) epitomizes three of the book's major concerns: the local, the perils of state planning, and the tensions between a traumatic past and an unsettled present. *Les Revenants* dramatizes the return of the dead to a flooded town in eastern France, where they proceed not to inflict mayhem but to perplex state bureaucracy. As Catherine Clark and Brian Jacobson argue, this setting and plot recall a 1952 hydroelectric project which flooded the village of Tignes, whose "local tragedy" became a triumphant national narrative about industrial progress. Clark and Jacobson conclude that the show prompts a reconsideration of the long-term consequences of France's post-war economic boom through a look back at a particular project.

As well as reminding readers of tensions in post-war French society, the introduction justifies the collection's emphasis on space and flux. Many French texts of recent years, the editors assert, privilege space. If revolutionary movements value time, the nation-state is more concerned with space: defining and policing its borders, managing its resources, and developing its territory. "Flux" signals both the movement of energy as well as unpredictable flow and change; the editors link it to larger networks and to instability, as found in the migrant camps mentioned in several essays. In addition to the traumatic changes wrought by Vichy and decolonization, France experienced both a post-war boom (the "trente glorieuses")

and a post-industrial decline (referred to here as the “trente piteuses” or the “trente ravageuses”). Like other developed countries, France also experienced a split between rural and urban and East and West.

For example, the legacy of central planning and modernizing projects in France’s industrial east is the focus of the book’s second and third chapters. Derek Schilling looks at three different forms of post-industrial documentary, concentrating on figures of individual workers, to whom the films give voice as they seek to reclaim their local spaces. Alison Levine also explores a range of farming documentaries, arguing that they move beyond othering peasants and prettying up country life to raise awareness of larger labor concerns and food production issues.

Chapters 4 and 5 likewise analyze film representations of characters at the margins. Anna Louise Milne draws on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s conception of a minor literature to analyze the technique of experimental filmmaker Sylvain George. She relates George’s camera work to topography and argues for his films as “lyrical documentary” (107). Fiona Handyside studies two fictional films about groups of girls, setting analysis of the films’ locations, framing, and lighting alongside current scholarship on girlhood to show how the girls are at once rebellious and restricted.

Chapter 7 turns to literature and Jean Rolin’s 2015 dystopian novel *Les Événements* (‘The Events’). Joshua Armstrong explores the depiction of roadsides and waterways in Rolin’s story of a character escaping south across a France torn by civil war. He also connects Rolin to the tradition of the French novel (Marcel Proust and Samuel Beckett) and to the “edgeland poetics” of Northern England (181). This theoretically-rich connection pleased me as a comparativist but also seems apt given the book’s British publisher.

These central essays are bracketed by Welch and Blatt’s studies of state-sponsored photography projects. Welch concentrates on the state planning agency DATAR (Délégation à l’aménagement du territoire et à l’action régionale ‘Land Development and Regional Action Delegation’), founded in 1963, and its 1989 publication *Paysages Photographies* (‘Landscape Photographs’). After close readings of the cover design and several photographers’ essays, Welch argues that the book ultimately undermines the agency’s own celebrations of progress, showing instead uneven urban development or untamed mountain landscapes. Likewise Figure 1.1, the Louis Baltz photograph I initially thought a simple shot of dirt, contrasts with the aerial photographs of modernist planners, offering instead “a worm’s eye view” of the destruction left by “spatial planning” (21). Blatt looks at two recent photography projects. The OPP (Observatoire national photographique du paysage ‘National Photographic Observatory of Landscape’) focuses on temporal flux through a series of the same roadway or traffic island at the edge of a town, while the visions of the photographers in the FTL (France(s)

territoire liquide ‘France(s) Liquid Territory’) are more varied and playful. Yet both missions concentrate on overlooked, humble, or everyday places to give a more complex view of France.

The book as a whole delivers, richly, on the same vision. Although I sometimes wished more contributors provided the cross-cultural insights found in Handyside and Armstrong’s essays (for example, how do the “trente glorieuses” and “trente piteuses” compare with other post-war booms and slumps?), this book is an essential read for anyone with a foundation in French studies. It will also be valuable to geographers, historians of photography and film, and scholars of literature and environment.

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