

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

*Sur les Toits: A Symposium on the Prison Protests in Early 1970s France*  
*Organised by Marijn Nieuwenhuis (University of Warwick)*

## **Absence of Images and Images of Absence: Framing the Carceral Space in *Sur les Toits***

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Nicolas Drolc's *Sur les Toits* (2014) is a film about an image. This is the photograph of a group of inmates on the roof of Nancy prison during the riots of January 1972. Taken by Drolc's father, Gérard Drolc, a Nancy-based photographer, the image is as much about what can't be seen as what can. Offering commentary on the prison riots as part of their *Enquête sur l'intolérable*, the *Groupe d'Informations sur les prisons* (GIP 2013: 223, my translation.) suggested that:

The inmates did not get up on roof in order to escape but so that their pleas might carry as far as possible. Who is being addressed by this plea which is currently spreading from prison to prison, gaining in strength and clarity?

The presence of the inmates attests to everything that usually can't be seen inside the walls of the prison. Yet, even with this newly acquired visibility, there are those that remain unseen. The inmates who are unable or unwilling to appear on the roof in front

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of the crowds and the press, and their motivations for remaining below. Those caught up elsewhere inside the prison with different roles in the organization and continuation of the riot. To tell the story of the French prison system, as with prisons elsewhere, is to negotiate both an absence of images and images of absence. The framing techniques used by Drolc in his narrative demonstrate the complexity of such a task and the slipperiness of images of incarceration. They also suggest ways in which interviews, archival footage and fictional representation might be juxtaposed to produce alternative narratives around incarceration, calling attention to how such images operate in popular consciousness to perpetuate ideological myths about justice, punishment and criminality.

## *Ways of Seeing*

*Sur les toits* is focused around the reflections of three former inmates involved in the riots and a prison guard based at Nancy at the time. They all offer background to their incarceration and the events which culminated in the scenes on the prison roof. Their testimonies are supplemented by commentary from, among others, Daniel Defert, a key member of the GIP, as well as Henri Leclerc, one of the defense lawyers involved in the trial of six inmates picked out as “ringleaders” by the prison authorities. These present-day “talking heads” are juxtaposed with archival material largely composed from press cuttings of the time and footage from the GIP’s documentary *Les Prisons Aussi* (1975) directed by Hélène Châtelain and René Lefort. At other moments, often cut into the testimonies, footage from newsreels and prison movies provides a visual, if decontextualized, marker for the events and experience being recounted.

Drolc’s fidelity to the visual narrative produced in *Les Prisons Aussi* in relation to both its aesthetic (for example, Drolc reproduces the technique of zooming in on key details of the “roof” photograph) and its content (which above all else

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invites former inmates to link their experience of prison with the wider socioeconomic context in France during the 1970s) raises important questions as to how we make use of the work of the GIP as both historical document and a practical model for prison-based activism.<sup>1</sup> Echoing Foucault's notion of the "history of the present" in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), the story of today's prison system can only be told via the narrative of its past. *Les Prisons Aussi* functions as a palimpsest in Drolc's film which emphasizes the need to privilege the "voices" of those incarcerated in France's prisons above the discourses of government, prison authorities and mainstream press whilst reminding us of the ways in which these "voices" continue to be silenced.

*Les Prisons Aussi* focuses on the inaccessibility of the prison space through its reliance on interviews with former inmates together with distance shots of prison buildings taken from the outside. Most notable amongst these are the close-ups of the prison gates at Clairvaux, extended footage of guards entering and leaving the premises. The repeated slamming of the heavy prison door, the local children playing outside the gates, and the absence of any inmates in these scenes, emphasize the processes of exclusion and invisibility operating at the heart of the urban landscape. In *Sur les Toits*, Drolc opts to supplement similar images of invisibility with the hyper-visibility of the prison movie, inserting scenes from films such as Jacques Becker's *Le Trou* (1960) into his narrative. There is always a risk that evoking such scenes affirms popular discourses on prisons, inviting a gaze which is voyeuristic rather than critical towards the experience of those imprisoned, which fetishes the criminal body either as caged animal or exciting, subversive other. However, in his juxtaposition of such imagery alongside archival footage, Drolc draws our attention to the way in which public consciousness of prison is mediated by largely fictional representations of the carceral space and those held within it. Moreover, if access to prisons in France remains heavily regulated, we might also think about how such invisibility operates

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alongside the explosion of prison images emanating from the United States via prison documentary franchises such as *Lockup* and *Scared Straight* in which inmates are invited to “perform” a criminality which is always already mediated by existing myths and stereotypes.

## *Wreckage of History*

If the photograph of the inmates up on the roof is the starting point for Drolc’s narrative, [the film itself](#) is bookended by two key sequences—the demolition of Charles III prison in Nancy, site of the 1972 riot, in 2010 and an interview with Serge Livrozet, author of *De la Prison à la révolte* (1973). On the one hand, the demolition of the old prison suggests an erasure of the past, a new beginning embodied by the new Centre Penitenciaire Nancy-Maxéville which opened in June 2009. On the other hand, Livrozet’s damning conclusion is that nothing has really changed either within or outside the walls of the prison. As such he seems to offer an emotive reiteration of the statements made earlier in the film by both Defert and Leclerc that it is the concept of prison itself and not its specific operation in sites like Charles III which constitutes a failure for society. Yet, it is the image of the prison as abandoned ruin or wreckage which affirms its ongoing role in society today.

The scenes of demolition, together with the photographs taken in the aftermath of the riots of corridors filled with debris but emptied of inmates, suggest the possibility of destroying and erasing the carceral past and its dehumanizing effects. Yet, such an erasure functions above all to legitimize the prison through its reform. The decoupling of architecture and the people it houses makes it possible to blame the building for the conditions perpetuated within its walls. A similar decoupling occurs in the unveiling of new prisons, and the preservation and restoration of prisons as museums. The guided tours of such sites are aimed at educating and informing the

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press and public of the success of the prison by carefully hiding or stage-managing contact with inmates and their stories.<sup>2</sup>

This is why the image of the inmates on the roof remains so important. Yet, it also carries with it the risk of becoming metonym, emptied of context and background and interchangeable with images from other roofs and other moments including those at Toul and Clairvaux but also Attica and Strangeways. Consequently, it is the recontextualisation of this image which constitutes the film's impossible project, one which must necessarily negotiate between the archival footage of *Les Prisons Aussi* and the popular imagery of the prison movie in order to re-tell the story of the Nancy riots within our contemporary history of mass incarceration and detention. It is in terms of this impossible project that we need to read Livrozet's bleak assessment that the struggles of the 1970s amounted to nothing. Here, Livrozet turns the gaze back onto Drolc, at one point addressing him directly as young, idealistic filmmaker whom he is at pains to disappoint. Might we read this reversal of the gaze as a direct challenge on the part of Livrozet, an invitation to be proved wrong which extends beyond Drolc as director, to us as spectators?

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> I discuss the legacy of the *Groupe d'Information sur les prisons* in more detail elsewhere (Fuggle 2015).

<sup>2</sup> In their pamphlet focused on Fleury-Mérogis as a "model" prison, the GIP (2013) provide a scathing critique of the prison tour composed of carefully selected members of the mainstream press. See also Michelle Brown's (2009) discussion of the similarities between historical prison museum tours and those conducted within working prisons in *The Culture of Punishment: Prison, Society, and Spectacle*.

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