

JENNY PERLIN AT THE KITCHEN, NEW YORK
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Jenny Perlin is understandably proud of her relative, Marshall Perlin: a lawyer, Perlin forced the US government in the 1970s to release a massive archive of papers which related to the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the two American Communists who were alleged to have passed nuclear secrets to the Soviet Union, who were subsequently executed in 1953, and who became one of the last century's great causes célèbres for the American left. Apparently, for two decades after the executions, the FBI went on spying on hundreds of people who they thought were related to the case. Spooky, and very Cold War, you imagine, except that George Bush was recently trapped into admitting that he was authorising countless wiretaps to further the administration's current battles.

To recreate something of the flavour of the bygone spying, Perlin hired actors to stage a dinner conversation between two couples which the FBI once tapped. The resulting film, 'Transcript', is a gentle, subtle, sometimes comic and always very well handled piece of commentary.

It is the night of 30th October 1953. Ernest Pataki and Vivian Glassman have come around for dinner with Max and Annette Finestone; FBI operatives NY964-S and NY963-S are craning to hear the conversation outside. The problem the FBI had was that their equipment wasn't too hot, so everything they heard was muffled, and as the film begins we hear the voices of agents, speaking their report, laying out the situation and confessing their problems. And the frustrated perspective of the operatives is all we have: the film lingers on the hallway of the old-fashioned apartment block, sometimes cutting out and returning when the light seems different, sometimes lingering on closed doors and the obscuring glare of light on glass. Then it moves up the stairs as if the operatives were creeping to the door, jerking back and forth again and enjoying the texture of the old painted wallpaper and the well-trodden floor. We hear what the FBI hear, which is very muffled voices only occasionally intelligible - and only possibly, faintly incriminating to the paranoid mind.

There is much warm nostalgia in this, and the comedy of the FBI's attempts lends more, but, of course, Perlin means for this situation to provide a kind of template, an hypothesis for what might be going on outside apartments across America right now. And that provides the chill which seals and completes the film very nicely. Another film, 'Inaudible', takes the form of a 16mm animation in which we see a kind of written transcript of the operatives' negligible findings, the word 'inaudible' appearing in line after line. But it only gilds the very lovely lily that is 'Transcript' itself.

Morgan Falconer

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