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# POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY AND MASCULINITY IN ALGERIA

Alain Resnais's Absent 'Muriel'

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**Algerian War**  
**film**  
**masculinity**  
**Alain Resnais**  
**torture**  
.....

*This essay analyses Muriel (1963), the third feature-length film from Alain Resnais, which attempts to make sense of a fragmented past and present that have been torn apart by international wars and domestic conflicts. The film highlights the multitude of silences and amnesias surrounding the French–Algerian War and its remembrances (or lack thereof) as the nation struggled to come to terms with colonial guilt. After mapping out the ways in which representations of destruction and rebuilding around both the French–Algerian War and the Second World War inform Muriel, the essay goes on to examine how form and content subtly reveal memory and masculinity as being tied up in this postwar, postcolonial identity crisis, exemplified by the visual absence of Muriel, an Algerian woman who was tortured and killed by a French Army unit during the war. Although the torture scene is not represented visually, its haunting presence exemplifies how the Algerian female body functioned as a screen onto which French men could project their anxieties around colonial power and masculinity. While the visual absence of torture and the title character is a glaring omission, it is one that could be also interpreted as obliquely addressing*

*issues at the heart of the Franco-Algerian conflict, including censorship, torture and war crimes.*

Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past – a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera. (Bergson 2004, 171)

*Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* (1963), the third feature-length film from acclaimed French director Alain Resnais and second collaboration with screenwriter Jean Cayrol, attempts to make sense of a fragmented past and present that have been torn apart by international wars and domestic conflicts. Taking the recently concluded French–Algerian War (1954–1962) (as well as the slightly more distant Second World War) as its point of departure, the film interrogates a postwar amnesia and its far-reaching effects on bodies and minds. As in his previous films *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad* (1961), Resnais maintains a stylistic agenda of innovation in cinematic form and uses a variety of techniques to reflect the uneasiness and anxiety felt by his characters who are, for the most part, average French citizens coping with the period's anxieties. In this way, they are representative of the psychic and physical struggles occurring for this particular class of French citizens in the wake of a conflict that saw between 400,000 and 1.5 million deaths<sup>1</sup> and witnessed the use and abuse of interrogation techniques performed under the guise of French national security interests.

1 The exact number of casualties has been vigorously debated, with French officials claiming approximately 400,000 deaths and Algerian sources alleging 1.5 million.

2 All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

Throughout his career, Resnais showed a marked lack of interest in making verisimilar films, forcing his viewers to become active spectators who must constantly work to grasp content and meaning: 'My goal is to put viewers in a state that in a week, six months, a year later, faced with a problem, they can't cheat but are required to react *freely* ... What is necessary is to shake people's certainty, wake them up, make them accept that given values are not intangible' (Roumette 1961).<sup>2</sup> While never fully embracing the *Nouvelle Vague*, Resnais's eschewing of unity and coherence was undeniably New Wave-esque. In *Muriel*, for example, we must make sense of repeated contradictions in character and plot, drawing connections where there may actually be none. Rapid montage and pervasive lingering shots create an atmosphere of fragmentation that makes the film nearly impossible to summarize, indeed comprehend, in any coherent way. Conversations are often illogical, questions posed are rarely answered, and awkward silences are ubiquitous. Characters often appear to be having conversations only with themselves, refusing to conform to the unstated rules of interpersonal communication.

Despite the fact that the film has been deemed ‘one of the most technically innovative and thematically ingenious films to have been inspired by the Algerian war’ (Dine 1994, 223), it is still, as one reviewer puts it, ‘difficult to seize, let alone write about’ (Milne 1963, 178). Susan Sontag echoes a similar sentiment, describing the film as ‘designed so that, at any given moment of it, it’s not about anything at all’ (1963, 26).

The film’s title positions a particular individual (Muriel) as its prime topic of investigation, an Algerian woman who was tortured and killed by a French Army unit during the war. This character will, however, never appear in the film, highlighting a conspicuous absence of the Algerian female body in representations of the conflict. But given that the film has been accurately critiqued for solely exposing the experiences of the French soldier and civilian,<sup>3</sup> it follows that its true investment is in representing its survivors rather than its victims. Indeed, I propose that *Muriel* is most interested in representing the pitfalls and paradoxes of a changing French national identity complicated by France’s wartime crimes and its ultimate relinquishment of *l’Algérie française*. It is through its disjointedness that it speaks to the anxieties that French soldiers experienced upon their return from Algeria in the early 1960s, but, I argue, it is through these same cinematic techniques that it also alludes to – if not quite explicitly represents – the psychological and bodily pain inflicted on Algerians during the war. Thus, we may interpret Resnais’s aesthetic choices as obliquely addressing issues at the heart of the Franco-Algerian conflict, including public secrets like censorship, torture and war crimes.

The above epigraph from Henri Bergson’s *Matter and Memory* summarizes the sort of memory work that is occurring for the film’s protagonist, Bernard, a French soldier involved in Muriel’s torture who becomes obsessed with his haunting memories of this woman and with documenting her story. Bergson’s metaphorical camera is echoed by the ubiquitous camera that Bernard totes, as he attempts to reconstitute memory while calling out those guilty of her murder. But this evocation simultaneously forces the viewer to question the role of the camera filming this feature film. In encouraging a presumably French audience to confront issues of colonial violence and torture (even if they are visually absent), Resnais’s camera could be interpreted as a tool to accept collective responsibility for the actions done under the name of the French Republic.

In the pages that follow, I first map out the ways in which representations of destruction and rebuilding (figurative and symbolic) around both the French–Algerian War and the Second World War inform our reading of *Muriel*. I then go on to examine how the film’s form and content subtly reveal memory and masculinity as being tied up in this postwar identity crisis, exemplified by Muriel’s haunting absence and other visual disappearing acts. Tactics of memory evasion like forgetting and denial and, conversely, attempts to remember (and even hyper-remember) also play out in particular ways that

3 Whether because of the strict censorship regulations or a lack of interest in portraying the effects of the war on any population other than that of the French *Hexagone*, Resnais’s choice not to include any visual representation of Muriel resulted in heavy critique. For more on this argument, see Boudjedra (1971) and Gauch (2001).

intersect with gender. Not unlike Elaine Showalter's still-pertinent assessment that shell shock is 'the body language of masculine complaint, a disguised male protest not only against war but against the concept of "manliness" itself' (1987, 172), Bernard returns from the war a broken man attempting to piece together the story of this Muriel and to reclaim some semblance of postwar masculinity. He knows no other way to deal with his memories and guilt than to gather 'evidence' (in the form of photographs and 'documentary' footage) in hopes of eventually telling her story. Unsurprisingly, his efforts will prove unsuccessful, as he is powerless to change what happened in Algeria or to be understood by his family and friends at home in France. And this seeming impotence in telling the story of Muriel points to a certain crisis in masculinity that many French soldiers returning from war were experiencing.

Before turning to a more comprehensive analysis of the film, I would like to offer a brief caveat and state that my reading of *Muriel* will differ markedly from previous analyses and critiques that followed an evolutionary reading of the film, viewing it as a culmination of his previous works (*Hiroshima mon amour*, *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, *Nuit et brouillard*). I acknowledge the merit in approaches that take Resnais's *œuvre* as a starting point to understanding this often opaque and sometimes baffling film, but, as film scholar Roy Armes states, any attempt to interpret one Resnais film in terms of another is fraught with difficulty (1968, 10). I believe much can be gleaned from addressing the film as a work on its own, a work that was written and produced at a very particular historical moment when, after eight years of intense violence and prolonged strife, France had just ceded control of its most valuable overseas territory.

### **Layered Memories and Failing Frenchness**

This story should take place in a reconstructed city. There now exist only a few islands of ruins, old ruins that have aged badly. Cement sparkles. Houses open onto indefinable rooms, full of straw, debris, gardens with dead trees. But these little domains from an old war can only be discovered by accident ... The rest of the city is brand new, stupidly new. Straight roads intersecting at right angles, street lights giving off an orange glow, avenues ready for the next war, allowing for the easy passage of tanks. Empty stores, for rent. Parking lots. Cinemas whose sound never stops. Blank walls. Lots of television antennas ... (Cayrol and Resnais 1963, 11)

So begins Jean Cayrol's screenplay. *Muriel's* protagonists play out their own troubled relationships to time and place against the backdrop of a destroyed

city haunted by its newness. Ruins, although often well hidden, are constant reminders of not only the past but also the magnitude of force (i.e. aerial bombardment) that caused such utter devastation. The city has been partially rebuilt after the destruction of one war but is simultaneously ready for another as the new urban geometry allows for the easy passage of military vehicles. While there are inconspicuous ruins to be found throughout the city, a shiny novelty pervades. Bright lights point to rapid modernization, juxtaposed against blank walls and empty storefronts. These stimuli cannot overpower the emptiness that remains, giving the city the feeling of what the character Alphonse terms ‘a martyr city’. Similarly, in the eerily vacant streets of this rebuilt city without a centre, no path ever seems to lead to either level ground or a feeling of stabilization.

The film is set in the northern French city of Boulogne, a region decimated by the Germans in 1944, but now completely rebuilt with modern block-like structures populating the urban landscape. As Kristin Ross (1995) has aptly detailed, the 1950s and 1960s were a period of newfound optimism and confidence for France’s burgeoning class of baby-boomers; new technologies and increased buying power allowed these ‘technocrats’ access to a more comfortable way of life filled with appliances and automobiles, seemingly ensuring happier times ahead. This future-directed hopefulness was, however, being enacted during a period of troubled relationships with the previous decades. As the colonial project failed, focus was directed to a slightly more distant, albeit quasi-mythical, past wherein France emerged victorious. The French–Algerian War remained obscured at this moment when memories of the Second World War, when the French valiantly fought to fend off their Nazi occupiers, were crystallizing in the collective imagination and aiding in the construction of a postwar national identity.

Studies of memory, both personal and collective, have grown immensely in the past few decades,<sup>4</sup> with scholarly work around the Holocaust and trauma being especially influential in the emergence of this new field. In this respect, Michael Rothberg’s ‘multidirectional memory’, a notion that emerges from his work on remembering the Holocaust in the age of decolonization, proves especially relevant to analysing *Muriel*. This approach to memory, characterized by ‘ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative’ (2009, 3), is helpful in thinking through the ways in which memories of Algeria overlap with the Second World War; indeed, the Second World War haunts the French–Algerian War. Rothberg’s work also allows us to see how memories need not occlude one another: ‘An overly rigid focus on memory competition distracts from other ways of thinking about the relation between histories and their memorial legacies. Ultimately, memory is not a zero-sum game’ (2009, 11).

4 See Rothberg (2009, 315–316, nn. 1–6) for an overview of this ‘memory boom’ in scholarly work.

5 As a camp survivor, Cayrol has admitted to being obsessed with the recounting of the Second World War. It is interesting to think that, for Cayrol, *Muriel* may have been more about the Second World War than about Algeria, while Resnais has stated that his documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (also written by Cayrol), which takes the Holocaust as its subject, was actually about Algeria. This highlights how deeply intertwined these two historical periods were for the filmmakers and for the contemporary viewing public.

And through both form and content, *Muriel*'s two intersecting narratives expose the imbrication of these two twentieth-century conflicts.<sup>5</sup> The first storyline involves 38-year-old H el ene who, according to Cayrol's character sketch, should look both 20 and 45 years old. She is an antique dealer and compulsive gambler who lives among the dusty antiques that she sells out of her apartment, but her obsession with the past becomes all the more clear when we learn that she has invited to her home Alphonse, a now middle-aged man with whom she had an affair twenty years earlier. In this strange reunion, H el ene and Alphonse each seem invested in communicating a certain version of the past (often at odds with the other's), especially around the Second World War when their affair took place. In the film's second and, for the purposes of this essay, more significant narrative, Bernard, H el ene's 21-year-old stepson, also maintains a strained relationship with the past. Having returned to France eight months earlier after serving in the army for almost two years, he is haunted by the French–Algerian War, just as H el ene is haunted by distant memories that revolve around the Second World War.

In *Muriel* Algeria is spoken about but never truly congeals into memories that can be adequately remembered. Gilles Deleuze comments in *Cinema 2* that in the film 'there are two memories ... each marked by a war: Boulogne and Algeria' (1989, 118). Deleuze thereby underscores the confusion inherent in the presentation of this temporal moment: Algeria refers to the location in North Africa as well as to the Algerian War, while Boulogne refers to the French city, but must also refer to the Second World War and the destruction it visited upon this city. This problematic relationship to the past, and particularly to the overlap of the Second World War and Algeria, is made evident through a rapid montage technique of moving back and forth between these two moments. Street signs commemorating the Resistance are presented alternately with images of newly built structures that symbolize the modernized city. This juxtaposition almost seems to map the two historical moments onto one another, emphasizing their urban overlaps as well as their temporal proximity. Through the choice of images, though, the film simultaneously evokes the idea that the Second World War was (and continues to be) highly commemorated and celebrated, while Algeria is not. Even though the conflict exists in the memories and imaginations of the film's characters, the city has no plaques to commemorate this war. The film can only represent the colonial conflict obtusely through the contemporary technologies and built structures so emblematic of this technocratic society of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a newly imagined world that was very much constructed in the face of decolonization, which, as historian Todd Shepard details, became an avoidance strategy. According to Shepard, 'decolonization' itself was an invention that 'allowed the French to *avoid* facing the challenges that Algerian nationalism and the Algerian Revolution posed to classic conceptions of French values and history, at least temporarily' (2006, 272).<sup>6</sup>



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6 Philip Dine echoes this point: 'France's successful participation in the postwar project of Europeanization was to be predicated upon the dropping of its historic claim to Algeria. Indeed, the underlying rationale for the wholesale reconstruction of French society so ambitiously undertaken at this time consisted in the shift from a colonial vision of national *grandeur*, with Algeria regarded as the jewel in the imperial crown, to a "hexagonal" (i.e. exclusively metropolitan) conception of a modernized France at the heart of a united Europe' (2000, 73).

7 Two other Muriels are found in the film: a young girl in the street called by her mother ('Muriel, come here!') and a newspaper headline about a woman named Muriel who was tortured for thirty hours.

Forgetting figures centrally in this process, for imagining the decolonization of Algeria as a socially and historically progressive step forward, the French could 'forget that Algeria had been part of France since the 1830s and ... escape many of the larger implications of that shared past. Through this forgetting, there emerged novel definitions of French identity and new institutions of the French state' (2006, 2).

A patchwork of shattered and fragmented memories, Algeria cannot be related in any coherent language. In a similar vein, Marnia Lazreg writes of the linguistic challenges of speaking about a conflict that relied on an impossibility of being named:

The grammar of euphemisms contained torture by sinking it below the level of consciousness, repressing its disturbing intrusion on the oft-displayed stage of France's 'civilizing mission'. It released torture from its special status as an uncivilized method and floated it as one of many anonymous 'exactions', reflecting the namelessness of the war itself. French officials and the press alike referred to the war as 'Algeria's incidents' ... Tangled up in this orgiastic name-fixing was the French unease with acknowledging Algerians' identity. A French department (Algeria's official status) was inhabited by *French* people. But every French person knew that Algerians were not quite French, yet they needed to be thought of as such for France's own sense of identity. (Lazreg 2008, 112)

Bound up with the process of naming and misnaming, French identity shows itself to be rather tenuous and, in a Hegelian dialectical fashion, even dependent on the construction of a lower hierarchical status of Algerians. In the film, too, it becomes complicated to speak about Muriel, and stand-ins proliferate for this ever-absent woman whose visual absence renders her ever-present. For example, before we learn who she actually was, Bernard speaks to H el ene of his supposed fianc ee in the first minutes:<sup>7</sup>

*Bernard* I'm going to see Muriel.

*H el ene* You'll be back for dinner, I hope ... Where did you meet this Muriel? Such a strange name.

*Bernard* She's ill now.

*H el ene* Ah!

*Bernard* No, she isn't ill.

As demonstrated in the dialogue, mystery surrounds this woman, her name, and her health. Only later will we come to understand that *this* Muriel, the conflation of a murdered woman with a make-believe lover, is a figment of Bernard's imagination. Muriel was not in fact the name of the woman to whom the word refers, and she was only given this French-sounding moniker by those who violated her. While her agency and identity were symbolically and physically stripped (through both this misnaming and the



8 Here it is also worth signalling Raphaëlle Branche's (2001) meticulous study, particularly its interrogation into the complex meaning of torture during the war.

violence inflicted on her body), calling this woman Muriel also created a certain proximity to Frenchness, even as her torture and death simultaneously highlighted the impossibility of ever being truly 'French'. Lazreg refers to this as a failed Frenchness: 'torture was meant to beat the "primitive" out of the failed Frenchness of the victim. The Algerian was seen as having been created by France, but failing to become French. Torture was meant to remake him into an obedient French colonial subject' (2008, 133–134).<sup>8</sup> Despite her murder, Muriel will be posthumously made into such an obedient French subject – in the form of Bernard's imaginary fiancée. She can then live on as his fictional partner without there being a question for his family and friends about the ethnic background of this woman they will never meet. Moreover, he can appear to embody a healthy, heteronormative masculinity, not a violent manliness wherein he participates in this same woman's torture and murder.

### Resnais's Modernist *mise-en-abyme*

In a 1961 interview Resnais spoke of the importance of fragmentation in the structuring and style of his films, stating: 'Modern life is full of ruptures, it's felt everywhere. Painting and literature bear witness to it, so why wouldn't cinema do so as well, instead of sticking to a traditional linear narrative?' (Roumette 1961). This 'modern life' of which Resnais speaks is modernity at a very specific moment in French history when society was still reeling from destruction and decolonization. French soldiers like Bernard were returning home to urban spaces that looked quite different than they had prior to their deployment. Indeed, rebuilding for the future often requires replacing, razing or even reinventing, and the reconstructed city of Boulogne provides the backdrop for this process of negotiating past, present and future.

Throughout the first half of the film, several oblique and vague references are made to Bernard's time as a soldier in Algeria and to the woman (mis) named Muriel, but it is not until halfway through<sup>9</sup> that we finally learn from Bernard who she was:

9 This moment occurs at nearly the exact middle of the film. For a discussion of various scholars' false remembrance of the temporal location of this scene in the film, see Wilson (2006, 91). Given that misremembering is at the heart of Resnais's film, it is ironic that arguably the most important scene would be

Nobody knew this woman ... I can still see it. The shed was in the back, with the ammunition. I didn't see her at first. I stumbled over her as I went up to the table. She looked asleep but she was trembling. They said her name was Muriel. It probably wasn't her real name. There were five of us around her discussing it. She had to talk before nightfall. Robert bent down and turned her over. Muriel moaned. She had her arm over her eyes. He let go, and she collapsed like a sack. Then it began again. She was dragged by her ankles to the middle of the shed. Robert kicked her. He pointed a flashlight towards her. Her lips were swollen and flecked with foam. Her clothes were ripped off. She was propped on a chair, but she fell. One arm was sort of twisted. It had to be finished. She was beyond talking, anyway. I

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incorrectly  
remembered.

hit her too. Muriel groaned under the blows. My hands hurt. Muriel's hair was all wet. Robert lit a cigarette and went up to her. She screamed. She stared at me. Why me? Then she closed her eyes and began to vomit ... I went back later. I lifted the cover. As if she'd been a long time in water, like a sack of potatoes split open, blood all over her body, in her hair, burns on her breast. Muriel's eyes were open. I almost didn't care. Maybe I didn't care at all. I went to bed, I went to sleep. Early the next morning, Robert disposed of her.

The gravity of Bernard's description is undeniable. Muriel's body is at the centre of his story; her raw corporeality – her eyes, lips, arm and hair – and her bodily fluids – blood, vomit and sweat – still obsess him. But while her body is central, it is only the object of the story. After admitting to slapping Muriel, the focus becomes the pain felt in *his* body, not hers. At this moment in the film, there is a profound disconnect between the words we hear and the images we see. The film's screen literally becomes another screen for another film composed of a very different sort of image. Bernard's 'confessional' and admission of his role in this woman's death is told to a mysterious old man dubbed Vieux Jean and is set against the backdrop of home movies presumably shot by Bernard during his time in Algeria. These images occupy the entire frame, seemingly inserted into the fictional film as documentary footage, but which are instead amateur videos taken by Bernard. But this film-within-a-film is not composed of images of Muriel or of tortured bodies, but rather, as Cayrol describes it, of 'blurry images of North Africa, very post-card-like'.

Cayrol's choice to describe the images in this way is significant, given the appearance of actual postcards earlier in the film. During his first night in Boulogne, Hélène's guest Alphonse finds himself alone in her apartment, Hélène having strangely departed with her current lover. He begins to snoop around and comes across what appear to be postcards of the Algerian landscape, complete with sunny skies and palm trees. This leads him to a stack of documents belonging to Bernard: notes, journals, military papers, photographs. But most significant to this scene is that we are given a preview of the above story of Muriel's torture and death, with Bernard's handwritten journal revealing what happened. As Alphonse flips through the pages, we can only attempt to piece together these linguistic fragments: '...grave very quickly. I lifted the cover. Muriel's eyes weren't closed ... people thought we were engaged ... I began to see the truth with Muriel. Since Muriel I can't really live ... I'm lost. I think I want to die. Anyway, I'm not afraid ...'

The image/word discrepancy in the scene of Bernard's monologue and admission also highlights a certain impossibility of truly telling the story of Muriel, or, more generally, telling the story of torture. Bernard can say the words, but there are no appropriate images to match his narrative. Emmanuel

Lévinas's elaboration on the relationship and break between the visual and auditory seems appropriate here:

In sound, and in the consciousness termed hearing, there is in fact a break with the self-complete world of vision ... In its entirety, sound is a ringing, clanging scandal. Whereas, in vision, form is wedded to content in such a way as to appease it. In sound the perceptible quality overflows so that form can no longer contain its content. A real rent is produced, through which the world that is here prolongs a dimension that cannot be converted into vision. (Lévinas 1997, 147)

For Lévinas, the hermeneutics of sound is privileged over the hermetics of vision. Vision, associated with ration and knowability, strives to capture what it represents, whereas sound always goes beyond, defying any attempt to contain it. In Lévinasian terms, *Muriel's* sounds of war elude representation, especially in light of the dissonance between the auditory and the visual. Additionally, for Lévinas, sound moves us, and we feel its vibrations in our body. We feel Bernard's words, but his monotony of voice both betrays and magnifies the gravity of his narration's content. Even though the story he tells is contained, the reverberating narrative – itself located at the exact midpoint – bleeds through the rest of the film, into what precedes and what follows.

Resnais's cinematic devices and the elliptical nature of the film's plot leave the viewer feeling unsettled and disturbed, much as Bernard felt upon his return to France. But despite the ability to portray violence, Resnais chose not to film the most serious form of violence contained in the film: the torture of Muriel. The violence of the unrepresentable is echoed in the violence of Resnais's filming and aesthetic choices, particularly in his choice to set Bernard's narration of Muriel's torture and death against the screen of his amateur video footage. However, the modernist *mise-en-abyme* that is Bernard's film creates a metafiction: the internal duplication in *Muriel* allows it to talk about itself, adding a self-referential quality to both Resnais's and Bernard's films, to the act of narration, and to the use, misuse and abuse of images.

We will later be met with another discrepancy between the visual and the auditory that equally reinforces Muriel's visual absence. Towards the end of the film, Alphonse's lover, Françoise, comes across one such piece of evidence, a tape recorder belonging to Bernard. She jokingly asks if it contains 'secrets or confessions', a question that prompts him to slap her across the face (echoing the slap he confessed to having given Muriel), thereby suggesting that he may, in fact, be hiding something. Further complicating the situation, she then accidentally starts the tape, playing what we can assume is a recording of the torture session. The recording is not of screams of pain, but, analogous to the images in Bernard's film, it contains sounds

10 *Le Petit soldat* provides an interesting counterpoint to *Muriel*. In Godard's film torture was shown, although Algeria was not named. In Resnais's film, Algeria is named but torture is not shown.

11 Alain Resnais, too, had personal experience with the censor during the war. Before directing *Muriel*, he had commissioned Anne-Marie de Vilaine to write a story about Algeria in which 'politics was articulated with sexual relations' (Sellier 2008: 112). The screenplay about a young couple torn apart by the war would never be produced, however, as the censor's intervention forced him to abandon the project (Sellier 2008: 216).

of soldiers laughing. Just like Bernard's retelling of Muriel's torture, the sound recording from the 'interrogation' defies representation. In fact, Algeria (and all significations it carries with it) thwarts speech, always forestalling any capacity for true comprehension. And it is this *mise-en-abyme* that, while evading and avoiding representing torture, subtly alludes to governmental silencing around the French–Algerian War. Although censorship had been abolished with the founding of the Fifth Republic, through declaration of a state of emergency a constitutional clause allowed for reinstatement of the state censor. Numerous works depicting scenes of torture would be banned, including films like Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit soldat*<sup>10</sup> and texts like Henri Alleg's *La Question*.<sup>11</sup> The absence of torture and the title character is a glaring omission, but one which could be interpreted as Resnais pointing out a larger absence, not only in French cinema, but also in the national consciousness.

The role of cinema is worth interrogating here. For example, what could films do at this historical moment that other media could not? Returning to the above scene in which Bernard confesses his role in Muriel's death, the 'blurry images of North Africa' that provide the backdrop to the story Bernard recounts are composed of video of troops firing heavy artillery, images of mosques, and quotidian activity of French troops joking among themselves. With the exception of the film's last scene, Bernard's amateur video footage contains the film's only shots in which the camera is in motion. Resnais's aesthetic choice to shoot nearly the whole film in still shots speaks to a larger issue of psychological and somatic fragmentation in this social and political climate. In the post-Muriel epoch in which these characters live, they see themselves as immobile and unable to effect change in the past or present. They must stay in neat little boxes (which, ironically, are the sorts of structures that populate the landscape of the modernized Boulogne), just as they must stay within the frames of the film. Conversely, the use of moving shots suggests a freedom of movement of body and of camera. Like the blurry images and scenes of soldiers laughing, Bernard's moving shots, albeit shaky, hark back to a recent past, just as the post-Muriel lack of movement now speaks to the effects that war crimes 'abroad' and the treatment of 'foreign' bodies like Muriel's would have on society 'at home'.

### Blurred Bodies and Kaleidoscopic Consciousnesses

It is impossible to separate style and narrative in *Muriel*, for the film's fragmented plot is both reflected and exacerbated by its editing. Jump cuts, long takes, cut-aways, oblique-angle shots and discontinuous cuts dominate, working to

create a feeling of brokenness, almost as if something has been omitted from the film's narrative. Through stylistic techniques like rapid montage and lingering, almost voyeuristic shots, Resnais's camera lends itself to reflecting on violence. His technique of using extreme close-ups of body parts, for example, has been read by some scholars as creating the effect of mutilation or of cutting up the body. The viewer is immediately met with this feeling of visual fragmentation in the opening sequence, as random objects rapidly alternate with hands and other body parts. These shots remove subjectivity and dislocate the camera's object from any living consciousness, yet speak to larger social issues. As Emma Wilson states: 'Through the intrusive cutting of the film, its restlessness, its challenge to order, its plangent music, *Muriel* appears to assault the viewer. This can certainly be read as a reflection on modern alienation and on the unease of this postwar French community' (2006, 99). Surprisingly, one film technique is not employed by Resnais. Despite the film's obsession with memory and the past, there is not one flashback, underscoring the notion of unrepresentable memories.

While creating a feeling of unease for the viewer, the non-cohesive and, at times, kaleidoscopic filming simultaneously makes a strong statement about the film's topic matter. Bodies and psyches are broken, and the structure of the film itself describes the shattered existences of the characters. I will now turn to two such scenes that, through an overlapping of style and narrative, highlight the fragmentation of identity, including gender and nationality. The first scene is a brief moment, comprised of only seven seconds, in which we see Bernard through a kaleidoscope. The second is a bit more mysterious and depicts the fading into nothingness of a projected image of Algerian women. While the former highlights replication and duplication and the latter focuses on blurring and fading, they both point to the reality of the period's fractured existences.

Sandwiched between two much longer unrelated scenes, the kaleidoscope scene does not seem to 'fit' (as if any scene in the film does). We quickly see an image of Bernard's girlfriend Marie-Do pointing a kaleidoscope in his direction. The film's frame then shifts to what she is perceiving as she looks through the kaleidoscope's viewer: a colourful array of images, moving and shifting as she turns the kaleidoscope, which we can easily decipher to be Bernard (Figure 1). This scene substantiates the film's investment in exploring the relationship not only to shattered but also non-distinct and infinitely replicated and replaceable existences. In its kaleidoscopic approach, the entire project of *Muriel* might also, to use a Foucauldian framework, subvert the art of surveillance and refigure the diagram of power that existed during and after the war. Instead of setting up surveillance and power visually like a pyramid or hierarchical structure, *Muriel* constructs it as a kaleidoscope, or a circle, or a horizontal 'plane', perhaps in an effort to diffuse the all-seeing, fascist-like gaze that certainly existed in periods of censorship into a



Figure 1 Kaleidoscope. *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* © 1963 Argos Films.

subjective, more democratic but, therefore, also less coherent visual experience. Bernard's earlier film-within-a-film also successfully draws attention to the fact that the film is a development process unto itself: you cannot see what is going on while you are experiencing it. In this way, the entire film (aided by the containedness of its static frames) functions as negatives from a roll of film, showing the inverse of the panoptic approach to filmmaking, questioning what the man in the tower actually caught on tape. In *Muriel*, technologies (even 'primitive' technologies like the kaleidoscope) diffuse power in order to create a direct tension with a systematic way of disciplining bodies. Despite the absence of the body of the tortured, the film and the film-within-the-film may represent a counter to the official history.

In another curious scene later in the film, H el ene grows concerned about Bernard after fellow-conscript Robert approaches her to enquire about his whereabouts. Against the backdrop of a foreboding and cacophonous soundtrack, she goes looking in his *atelier* and turns on a film projector. An image of several veiled women at an outdoor market flashes onto the wall, but immediately the image blurs and then disappears into nothingness (Figures 2 and 3).

A few seconds later, Bernard walks in and seems agitated to find his step-mother there:

*Bernard* It's strange to see you here.

*H el ene* Will you show me a film?

*Bernard* I don't want to be a filmmaker. I'm gathering proof, that's all.

*H el ene* Proof? Against whom?

*Bernard* You wouldn't understand.



Figure 2 Projector Scene 1. *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* © 1963 Argos Films.

Bernard then stands in front of the screen onto which the images had just been projected, in effect replacing or standing in for the disappearing women's images that had faded moments before his arrival (Figure 4). He angrily tells H el ene to leave, but before exiting, she says, 'You've been back for eight months, don't forget', an allusion to his inability to integrate back into society since his return from Algeria. Bernard strangely utters: 'Muriel isn't here, you know. Can you lend me 3,000 francs?' To which H el ene responds: 'I'm only interested in Muriel because of you.' Even as the image of Algerian women had just strangely disappeared before her eyes, she does not seem disturbed or surprised and is only concerned with that which directly



Figure 3 Projector Scene 2. *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* © 1963 Argos Films.





Figure 4 Bernard in front of projector screen. *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour*  
© 1963 Argos Films.

affects her family, perhaps not dissimilar from the ways in which many French citizens preferred to turn a blind eye to the atrocities that were being committed across the Mediterranean Sea.

Ranjana Khanna writes of the ways in which representations of Algerian women were made to function in film: 'the screen of visibility we observe in film is to be understood in terms of both what is seen and what is unseen on the scene of representation ... In many films about or from Algeria, the figure of woman encapsulates how filmic representation gestures toward that which it cannot represent. Its very constitution is made invisible' (2008, 104). Khanna's words seem to approximate Resnais's project while also signalling the linkages between representation and gender. The disappearance of the veiled women in the film found by H el ene, combined with Bernard's physicality, points to a larger crisis of masculinity occurring at this historical moment. As Frantz Fanon famously made clear, Algerian women had been used in particular ways by all sides of the conflict, and the female body itself became (re)colonized and functioned as a weapon used by men. In his essay 'Algeria Unveiled', for example, Fanon parrots French political doctrine as follows: 'If we want to destroy the structure of Algerian society, its capacity for resistance, we must first of all conquer the women; we must go and find them behind the veil where they hide themselves and in the houses where the men keep them out of sight' (1967, 37–38).<sup>12</sup>

12 For Shepard, supposed concern for Algerian women's well-being also became an evasion

Algerian female bodies, I argue, also served as screens onto which French men could literally project their anxieties around colonial power and masculinity. In describing how this notion fits into larger dynamics of colonialism,

tactic: ‘By showing that women and their liberation were the targets of French efforts in Algeria, the government could avoid responding to the FLN or engaging a debate on the question of colonialism’ (2006, 187).

Edward Said’s notion of Orientalism becomes key: ‘European culture gained its strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self’ (1978, 3), with the inferiorized Orient becoming ‘the screen onto which Europe could project its own disallowed fears and desires. The representation of the Arab or Asian as mysterious, exotic, and seductive was coupled with the idea that they were inherently barbaric, criminal, and dangerous, set outside the frame of modernity, poised in a timeless space’ (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012, 2). The literal and figurative projection occurring thereby positioned French male soldiers as being able to discount or remove the agency of Algerian women – even if unconsciously – while simultaneously reinforcing, through military status and use of violence, their own status as manly men. But here, in this scene, it is curiously the opposite, as Bernard steps into the place where these images had been projected. He positions his body in the exact spot where the projected image of Algerian women faded away, underscoring the notion that (French) hegemonic masculinity was being (re)constructed against (Algerian) femininity and its destruction. It is this reversal that allows us to see his fragility as he strives to embody some semblance of a healthy masculinity. But the fissures and anxieties in this uncertain and unstable system are made clear as Muriel imprinted herself on him, causing him to fail at this form of colonial manliness.

### **Haunted, or Masculinity in Crisis**

The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life ... The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition. (Gordon 2008, 8)

Bernard is, in Gordon’s terms, haunted by Muriel’s ghost and by all for which she stands as she pulls on his emotions, provoking in him such a transformative and affective recognition. In his recounting, Bernard is particularly fixated on that instant at which he and Muriel lock eyes, for it was at that moment that she saw him for who he was: a representative of the French colonial project and a torturer. She stares at him imploringly, forcing him to make a choice about saving her from the inevitable torture to follow, but he does nothing and is now haunted by her condemning gaze and her destroyed body. Although he seems to feel some responsibility for not halting the torture, his self-interrogation has the potential effect of erasing the possibility of guilt, for it suggests that there is no reason for him to be singled out. His

‘Why me?’, which positions him as both subject and object of the scene, will haunt him, for he knows there could be a reason for being stared at by Muriel. While the question demonstrates some notion of replaceability (Why me? Why not another?), it simultaneously signals the singularity of his situation. He *felt* her stare so intensely that it remained with him even upon his return to France. For Deleuze, ‘The character in Resnais’s cinema is Lazarean precisely because he returns from death, from the land of the dead; he has passed through death and is born from death, whose sensory-motor disturbances he retains’ (1989, 207–208). Perhaps to cope with what Deleuze would identify as his return from the land of the dead, Bernard must work to save her memory and perhaps even expose the injustices done unto this woman and her tortured body, even as he struggles to rid himself of these sensory-motor disturbances he retains.

Bernard’s existence becomes consumed by telling Muriel’s story, which will come in the form of an indictment of his fellow soldier, Robert, who forced him to be implicated in this act that would destroy his sanity and result in him being, as he puts it, ‘disfigured by the war’. This disfigurement proves the most threatening to his masculinity, as he will search for a way to reconstitute some sense of manliness, which, as I will analyse below, eventually results in him committing a deadly act. The fact that Bernard will never be successful in exposing the story of Muriel’s torture is symptomatic of the larger diversion of memory and a preference to forget war crimes committed and other memories that threaten (the façade of) a sane national identity and healthy masculinity. Indeed, his quest often looks more like a search for absolution for his own crimes rather than an attempt to bring any justice to the situation. While Bernard will not be successful in exposing the information we are yearning for, the act will, however, do a different sort of work – that of shoring up a sense of masculinity that Bernard seems to have lost with the death of Muriel.

Robert states early in the film: ‘You want to tell Muriel’s story? But Muriel can’t be told ...’ and then later ‘Algeria is all over for us ... We’re in France. The main thing is for every Frenchman to feel alone, scared. He’ll erect barbed wire around his little ego. He doesn’t want trouble.’ These words again call attention to the inarticulacy and amnesiac tendency of war, for he places Muriel’s story (and others like it) ‘in the realm of the *intransmissible*, or more particularly in the realm of that which will be repressed and silenced on return to France’ (Wilson 2006, 96). Here, Robert is simultaneously pointing to the fact that Frenchness (or perhaps French masculinity) is at stake and is tied up with both fear and individual and collective identity and accountability. Robert’s statements become a wake-up call for Bernard, as he realizes nothing can be done to change the past and that perhaps no one *wants* to know Muriel’s story. Despite his intention of incriminating those responsible for the torture and murder, Robert’s words, combined with the realization of powerlessness

to change the past and repair the future, have drastic consequences for Bernard. Instead of exposing the fact of Muriel's torture and death, he later tracks down Robert, the only link he still has to his time in Algeria, and shoots and kills him, an act that only reinforces his own complicity in the crimes of war (Gauch 2001, 55). After killing Robert, he renounces his efforts to represent the torture by throwing his ever-present camera into the sea, erasing any possibility that he may be able to bring Muriel's story to light. Like Françoise's half-joking statement that planted in the viewer a seed of doubt over what Bernard may have done in Algeria, this act also forces us to question what may have been on that camera of which he rid himself. May it have contained images of Muriel's tortured, destroyed and dead body?

Through his sensitivity (often stereotyped as 'feminine') to Muriel's pain and his figurative and literal detachment from his fellow soldiers (who participate in 'masculine' activities while he prefers to be behind his camera), Bernard has also distanced himself from what it means to be a man in this postwar period of international crises. He appears less interested in engaging in the violent acts that Robert embraces and more invested in exposing the fragility of human bodies and psyches. Having perhaps failed at 'being a man', he attempts to restore some sense of masculinity, perhaps a more self-righteous version, by acting as a whistleblower and incriminating his fellow conscripts who killed at least one individual. It is with tears streaming down his cheeks that he assassinates Robert, the only individual in Boulogne who had shared with him those horrors.

*Muriel* uncovers how guilt, collaboration and the committing of unspoken (and unrepresentable) acts like torture during the French–Algerian War led to the partialness of selves and fragmentation of body and mind. Alain Resnais's film speaks to the ways in which memory is structured and how images are repressed so as to not disturb the front of sanity and national cohesiveness, a process in which masculinity becomes key. It was not haphazard that Resnais chose to focus on a female torture victim, nor was it an oversight never actually to represent her in the film. Although the torture scene is not represented visually, its haunting presence also echoes the idea that the Algerian female body functioned as a screen onto which French men could project their anxieties around colonial power and masculinity. Bernard struggles with his fellow-Frenchmen's tendencies to bolster their masculinity through torture of Algerian women and actively attempts to subvert this dynamic. He is, however, incapable; not having the tools to dismantle structures like gender, race and nationality, he ultimately evades responsibility.

*Muriel* is also about the burden of being a witness to – but participating in – literal and symbolic acts of violence in the name of the collective (e.g. nationality) and the personal (e.g. masculinity). Resnais stated that the characters of *Muriel* 'will be seen from the outside. We will never penetrate the thoughts and minds of our characters. These will show themselves only through their

actions' (cited in Houston 1963, 36). Just like the replicable structures built up throughout the city of Boulogne, these impenetrable characters appear as mere façades without interior consciousness moving through the world. But this appearance of empty subjectivity is false and is instead a defense mechanism and self-preservation strategy to cope with this generation's process of self-searching in the wake of war, decolonization, modernization, changing masculinities, and the fall of the French Empire. These representative characters are projectors, casting violence onto colonized others who serve as screens to work through their anxieties; yet they are also screens themselves, being imprinted upon and inevitably absorbing pain and upheaval circulating throughout this period of decolonization.

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