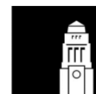

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Delivered at SCMS conference, Denver, 14 April, 2023

SLIDE 1: What is late-colonial French Cinema?

SLIDE 2: book

SLIDE 3: structure

SLIDE 4: Part one: historical context

Before we get to the question of cinema, a bit of historical context. In 1954, the French army, seen here on the left, became embroiled in an infamous military conflict, fought largely in what was then colonial French Algeria, against Algerian nationalists, seen here on the right. Without going into too much detail, this was a conflict fought over two fundamental rights: one of which was territorial – the right to own a country – and one of which was national – the right to be defined *as* Algerian, rather than French. It was also a conflict that was characterised by the perpetration of various atrocities, committed largely by the French army, including the widespread use of indiscriminate violence, detainment, torture, rape, and napalm. Indeed, it was partly due to these atrocities that the War would eventually reach its bitter conclusion in 1962: resulting, on the one hand, in military defeat for France, and, on the other hand, in military victory, for Algeria.

SLIDE 5: Part two: Beyond the 'New Wave' canon

The question of how French cinema represented the Algerian War of Independence as it was occurring, is a complex one. A great deal of scholarship has, for example, been concerned with exploring how a select pantheon of directors, associated with the so-called French New Wave, depicted the War, with theorists generally focusing on three comparable films. One of these is *Cléo from 5 to 7* by Agnès Varda, which turns around a star singer living in Paris, and whose mysterious illness has often been read as an allegory for the war itself. A second is *Muriel* by Alain Resnais, which portrays a pained conscript who returns home to northern France. To these two films can also be added Jean-Luc Godard's *The Little Soldier*, which

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represents a deserter from the French army. It is no exaggeration to say that these films have dominated thinking on French cinema and the decolonisation of Algeria for at least three discernible reasons. Firstly, all of them are (now) publicly available to buy on DVD and to watch on streaming sites. Secondly, all of these films have been extensively written about, making the task of writing about them – or even understanding them – immediately less difficult (*improv. Muriel*). And thirdly, all of these films feature modernist techniques associated with formal fragmentation and narrative ambiguity, rendering them particularly seductive to the operations of textual analysis, the modernist turn in the Humanities, and contributing to what (**SLIDE 6**) Geneviève Sellier has criticised as the 'cult' of the French New Wave, even as Sellier ironically *contributes* to this cult, as the subtitle of her book, *French New Wave Cinema*, suggests (2008: 1–7). This is not to say that existing scholarship on these three films is necessarily lacking in quality – I am, for instance, a huge fan of Sellier's reading of *The Little Soldier*. But what I *would* like to suggest in this paper is that going beyond the 'canon' is an academic endeavour worth pursuing, in the sense that this shift, from the French New Wave, to what I would like to call late-colonial French cinema, generates a huge string of theoretical questions that have only started to be posed, much less answered. (**SLIDE 7**) As Adam Lowenstein contends,

'when film scholars uncritically adopt the concept of a "New Wave", a certain brand of film history is written, one that tends to elevate a particular kind of aesthetics and politics to the privileged status often connoted by the term New Wave, whilst other contemporary films are left by the wayside' (2005: 11-12)

SLIDE 8: Part three: Towards late-colonial French cinema

So what would happen if we were to go beyond the New Wave canon and examine some of the many other French films that not only dealt with the demise of colonialism in Algeria as it was occurring, but also, to use Lowenstein's formulation, have been 'left by the wayside' in dominant film history? So, I suppose that the first thing that we would notice – if we were to perform this scholarly manoeuvre – is that many of these late-colonial films do not feature the same modernist formal strategies that we see in works associated with the so-called New

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Wave. For example, in Claude Autant-Lara's tale of conscientious objection, *Thou Shall Not Kill*, we find a much more conventional cluster of stylistic techniques, associated with the spatio-temporal continuity of classical Hollywood realism, whilst Mark Robson's *Lost Command* depicts a group of paratroopers using formal techniques pioneered in the World War Two combat film. Nor are many of these films fictional, but non-fictional, with Jacques Panijel's *October in Paris* deploying a curious blend of expository and interactive documentary strategies, to chronicle the fallout of an infamous police massacre. Still other films – such as *The Olive Trees of Justice* – are even more singular in their mode of representation, with this narrative, in particular, blending aspects of Italian neo-realism with observational documentary, to chronicle the melancholia of a man who travels from France to war-torn Algeria. So what we really have here is a trans-generic corpus of late-colonial French films – some modernist, some realist, some high-brow, some low-brow, some fictional, some non-fictional, or quasi-fictional – yet all of which thematised the collapse of colonialism in Algeria as it was taking place (*stress that you examine 15 films in your book, but 70 exist*).

Show trailer for *Lost Command.*

(STAY ON SAME SLIDE) Part four: Pacifism and redemption

So far in this paper, I have talked quite a bit about questions of film form and genre. In the last part of my talk, I want to highlight a further advantage of going beyond the New Wave canon: namely insofar as this shift enables us to identify the presence of two ethical tropes, woven into the films seen on the screen. And those tropes are pacifism and redemption.

So, I suppose that the first question that we need to ask when dealing with the trope of *pacifism*, at least, is how these films represent opposition, or resistance, to the war. And I suppose that the answer to this question is that they do this in various ways (**SLIDE 9**). Sometimes, for example, the ethos of pacifism is embodied in the figure of the veteran, that is to say, a returning soldier who seems to have been scarred by their experience of warfare (*see screen for images of veterans*). Other times, pacifism is conveyed through more sexualised imagery, with certain films deploying the trope of impotence, in other words, a loss of virility, to allegorically represent the loss of a war (*Alain in* Louis Malle's film). (**SLIDE**

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10) Sometimes, pacifism takes the form of a nostalgic longing for a pre-war past, with this nostalgia being notably prevalent in narratives made by French settlers in Algeria (*The Olive Trees of Justice*). (**SLIDE 11**) In a small number of films, the ethics of pacifism are incarnated in the bodies of female French citizens who wait for their soldier partners to return from the war (*The Return, The Umbrellas of Cherbourg, Postal Sector 89098*). However it is conveyed, the war emerges in all of these films as an unequivocally negative event: one linked either to excessive brutality, or logistical failure, but never to a rhetoric of victory.

SLIDE 12: But just as the films seen on the screen seem to position themselves in opposition to the war being waged in Algeria, so too do they seem to function in another manner: to contribute to an image of French society as ultimately absolved of the atrocities committed therein. (**SLIDE 13**) In an important book on the history of the war, Benjamin Stora has claimed that 'in France, it was important that any guilt generated in [the decolonisation of Algeria] was mitigated' (1998: 20). In French films from this period, this process of 'mitigation', or what I would like to call 'redemption', takes different guises. When the films in question are set in French Algeria, for example, it is notable that the **French settlers** depicted therein are in no way responsible for perpetrating or encouraging any injustices committed under the banner of colonialism. **SLIDE 14:** Quite the opposite, with themes of love, melancholia and absolution pervading narratives such as *The Olive Trees of Justice*. (**SLIDE 15**). A comparable point can also be made in relation to how many late-colonial French films represent soldiers who have returned from French Algeria: as innocent victims of a war beyond their control.

Whilst watching: any idea how images from this have been used?

Clip from L'Insoumis – 1.39

The Smiths: **SLIDE 16**

Focusing on this subtext of redemptive pacifism also leads me to the conclusion of this paper, during which I would like to dwell, just for a few minutes, on how (**SLIDE 17**) this corpus of films has been conceptualised in the history of world cinema. In existing scholarship, film

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historians display a tendency to see the French New Wave, either as an ephemeral phenomenon that disappeared as soon as it had emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s, or as a precursor to the political modernisms of the 1970s (I am thinking here the experiments that Godard conducted in the 1970s, for example, *Tout va bien*). In this paper, however, I would like to suggest that the legacy of what I have been calling late-colonial French cinema can be glimpsed in the iconographies of a different sub-category of cinema: one that emerged notably as America struggled to deal with the ethical questions posed by the Vietnam War (**SLIDE 18**). Both *Coming Home*, released in 1978, and *Rambo: First Blood*, released in 1982, for instance, display many of the tropes that I associate with redemptive pacifism, representing American veterans as innocent casualties of an unjust war. (**SLIDE 19**) As Kathleen McClancy claims, 'by characterizing Rambo, a veteran, as a victim', the film 'absolves him of guilt for his actions during wartime' (2014: 504). This is not to say that late-colonial French films and Vietnam war films are entirely devoid of differences: the soldiers that populate American narratives about Vietnam, for example, are only partly visible in French narratives about Algeria. But it is to say that – in both cases – the medium of cinema arguably functioned to sublimate, or soften, the ethical contours of a controversial war, transforming military perpetration into victimhood, and colonial-imperial guilt into innocence. Thank you (**SLIDES 20 and 21**).

Hand out copies of book.