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STAR FACES AND BODIES IN AN AGE OF ATROCITY: L'INSOUMIS (CAVALIER 1964) AND LES CENTURIONS (ROBSON 1966)

Abstract

Often physically flawless to the point of perfection, cinematic stars are frequently metaphorized as gods, or mirrors, of our own collective desires. But why would the iconography of stardom be mobilized to narrate a sociopolitical phenomenon defined by absolute violence – for example, the War that raged between the French army and Algerian nationalists from 1954 to 1962? Through detailed textual analysis of Alain Cavalier's 1964 polar, *L'Insoumis*, and Mark Robson's combat film, *Les centurions* (1966), this article will seek to shed light on this very issue. As it does, it will trace connections between the history of decolonization and political engagement, and theories of identification, gender, stardom and spectacle, before examining how the contradictory values embodied by stars in these films mirrored the ideology of a society in a state of contradiction: split between a desire to know the truth about the War and a desire for ignorance.

Au physique irréprochable, presque parfait, les stars du cinéma sont fréquemment décrites comme des dieux, ou des miroirs de nos désirs collectifs. Mais pourquoi ces vedettes s'utiliseraient pour raconter un phénomène socio-politique ancré dans la violence inouïe – par exemple, la guerre qui a explosé entre l'armée française et les nationalistes algériens de 1954 à 1962 ? En analysant deux films importants de cette période : L'Insoumis (1964), d'Alain Cavalier, et Les centurions (1966), de Mark Robson, cet article va répondre précisément à cette question. L'identification, le genre, le vedettariat, et le spectacle : tels sont les concepts qui sont discutés ici, ainsi que l'histoire de décolonisation et de l'engagement politique. L'article se conclut enfin avec une réflexion sur comment les valeurs contradictoires incarnées par les stars dans ces films reflètent l'idéologie d'une société dans un état de contradiction: divisée entre un désir de savoir la vérité sur la guerre, et un désir d'ignorance.

The Algerian War was a conflict that provoked a veritable litany of crises in French society: from 1954 (when nationalists fired the initial salvo against French settlers in Algeria), to 1962 (the point at which independence from colonialism was attained) – and beyond. Crisis: for the 1.2 million young male *appelés* forced to fight for a cause that they seldom understood, let alone cared about. Crisis: for a community of intellectuals split by the radicalization of identity politics carving up the country. Crisis: for the Fourth and Fifth Republics, with the latter acting decisively to grant Algeria sovereignty where the former fatally vacillated. Finally, crisis: for a generation of directors such as Alain Cavalier and Mark Robson, who were confronted with the vexed question of how to narrate a War not only devoid of a name,¹ but also fundamentally unpopular amongst the people in whose name it was being fought.

This is an article about stardom and atrocity. It is an article that will begin by exploring how leftist militants revealed the violent truth of colonial rule in Algeria in the late 1950s, before showing how these revelations led to the rise of what Jean-Paul

¹ In the early years of the War, it was referred to through a constellation of euphemisms, including 'pacification', 'police operations', 'insurrection', and 'transference of power'.

Sartre termed colonial bad faith. It is an article about Cavalier's 1964 polar, *L'Insoumis* (1964). And Robson's bombastic combat film, *Les centurions* (1966). It is an article about stars, star bodies, star faces, and the remarkable power of stars to neutralize ideological contradictions. Finally, it is an article about colonial guilt. And how stars function in both of these films as mirrors which projected, back onto France, the face that it desired, a face cleansed of guilt and atrocity.

Atrocity and 'bad faith'

If we had to identify one year the stakes at play in the Algerian War suddenly shifted then that year would be 1957. 1957 was, after all, the year in which a spate of testimonials published by military personnel returning from service (notably Jean-Jacques Servan-Shreiber, Robert Bonnaud and Pierre-Henri Simon) suddenly exposed the official policy of pacification, propagated by high profile military officials and politicians, as an elaborate euphemism, more often than not deployed in order to disseminate fascistic patterns of structural violence, orchestrated by elite regiments of paratroopers and legionnaires, and directed often indiscriminately against the Algerian community. Detainment, summary executions, pillaging, rape, and torture: by the time the army had controversially been granted special powers to tackle nationalists during the Battle of Algiers (1957-1958), the litany of accusations directed against it in this 'turn against silence'² had all but transformed Algeria in the public's imagination from a colonial paradise into a cesspit of human rights abuse.

But amidst these accusations of atrocity, one question loomed large: torture. Administered, more often than not, in clandestine detention centers, for example the infamous Villa Susini, or El Biar (where Henri Alleg, author of *La Question* [1957], was held), and run by paratroopers and legionnaires, torture sessions usually revolved around two principal methods of interrogation: waterboarding, or the *gégène*, a small electric device attached to sensitive parts of the body – the penis, breasts, ears, mouth – and capable of incapacitating the subject without penetration, leaving them physically, if not psychologically, unmarked. For some, like the paratrooper, Jacques Massu, or the politician Robert Lacoste, the *gégène* was a modern, even civilized piece of equipment, certainly compared to the ostensibly barbaric death-rituals used by Algerian nationalists – disfigurement, throat-slitting, castration.³ Others framed it as an anomaly carried out exclusively by the Foreign Legion, and hence by non-French men. Still others, like Georges-Mathieu Mattéi brought the question closer to home: in a 1958 article, published in *Esprit*, the author constructed a disquieting image of an officer who would 'caress the breasts of his wife or girlfriend'⁴ in France with the very same hands he had used to distort, etch, strike, twist, wring – that is to say, objectify and obliterate – bodies tortured in Algeria. Throughout 1957 and 1958, France seemed to be on the cusp of a significant *prise de conscience politique*; truth would trump silence as torture was seen, spoken about, understood. It also forms a sublimated subtext of both films discussed in this article.

² James D. Le Sueur, *Uncivil War: intellectuals and identity politics during the decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), p. 179.

³ Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962* (New York, New York Review Books, 2012), p. 176.

⁴ Georges-Mathieu Mattéi, 'La Génération algérienne', *Esprit*, May (1958), pp. 818–824.

That the so-called turn against silence spearheaded by Mattéi and others did not trigger a cacophony of anticolonial criticism can be attributed to a number of factors. Official censorship, of course, played a part, as did modernization, whose ideology of novelty forced the colonial legacy from the realm of the burning present to an elusive past. But perhaps the most powerful factors in the persistence of silence were neither political, nor economic, but socio-cultural. It is an aetiology that Jean-Paul Sartre appeared to grasp instinctively, diagnosing, in an article entitled ‘Vous êtes formidables’, ‘la fausse ignorance où l’on nous fait vivre et que nous contribuons à maintenir’.⁵ Elsewhere in this article, popular culture is signalled out as a conductive agent in what Sartre terms this act of ‘mauvaise foi douloureuse’⁶, before he reaches the apex of his argument: ‘si nous refusons de faire nous-même l’enquête sur la vérité française [...], c’est que nous avons peur. Peur de voir nu notre vrai visage’.⁷

Looking back at this moment of barely understood yet soon-to-be-all-consuming no-return, Sartre appears to have exaggerated, in the interest of argument, the extent to which popular culture disavowed the simmering violence of decolonization. A more productive revision of his hypothesis might involve acknowledging the frequent allusions to the War that found themselves strewn throughout popular narratives – televisual, cinematic, journalistic – whilst nevertheless maintaining the emphasis on political sublimation, disavowal, and absolution that Sartre associates with the daily newspaper, *France-Soir* and *Vous êtes formidables*, a radio show that, according to the author, alleviated the guilt of the nation through tales of everyday generosity. It is precisely this logic of bad faith – of unpleasing truths displaced by pleasing untruths, of political doublespeak articulated through the folds of popular culture – that is expressed, I believe, on the front cover of an edition of *Paris-Match* published on the 6 November, 1954 (Figure 1), and, as we will see *L’Insoumis*, and *Les centurions*. On the left: a neatly formatted block of text informing the reader that ‘la vague terroriste a franchi la frontière de l’Algérie’. On the right: a gently looming photograph of the Italian actress Gina Lollobrigida, whose darkly erotic gaze and flawless complexion tempers the ominous announcement articulated in the adjacent cover line with the promise of intimacy. Right from the opening salvo, it is therefore clear that the War could not be expressed in its true, traumatic state, but had to be sanitized, qualified, even aestheticized, for a nation simultaneously fascinated and horrified by this sudden eruption of political violence into the ostensibly becalmed waters of the colonies. According to opinion polls, as much as eighty per cent⁸ of the population didn’t know what to think about the “question” of War, preferring to exist in a state of denial, and fuelling what Simone de Beauvoir termed a ‘tetanus of the imagination’.⁹ In the case of the *Paris-Match* cover, the abject bodies of the settlers killed in the attack are displaced by the sublime body of a cinematic star.

⁵ Sartre, ‘Vous êtes formidables’, *Les Temps modernes*, 135 (May 1957), p. 1642.

⁶ Sartre, ‘Vous êtes formidables’, p. 1646.

⁷ Sartre, ‘Vous êtes formidables’, p. 1644–1645.

⁸ Richard Roud, *Godard* (London, BFI, 2010), p. 34.

⁹ Cited in Rita Maran, *Torture and the Role of Ideology in the French-Algerian War* (New York, Praeger, 1989), p. 143.

Stardom and the 'cracked mirror'

The relationship between politics and stardom is the subject of a voluminous theoretical literature, onto which this article aims to build. Often these studies frame the female star-body as the site of political neutralization – a phenomenon that, as I will later argue, is embodied by the male stars that populate *L'Insoumis* and *Les centurions*. Thus in her article 'The Matter of Myth', Sarah Leahy has illustrated how, in uniting 'beauty, femininity, prosperity, femininity, fashion and sex appeal, Brigitte Bardot [the French star of the 1950s] promoted the idea of a France not in the process of losing her colonies in a very bloody way, but of a country embarking on a sustained period of economic growth and modernization',¹⁰ whilst both Geneviève Sellier and Judith Mayne have explored the ways in which 1940s and 1950s female film stars were often drained of the political agency that they exhibited in real life, primarily as this agency was often interpreted in highly gendered terms: as a challenge to patriarchal ideology. In Sellier's work,¹¹ Bardot again resurfaces as an actor whose refusal to bow to a campaign of blackmail led by the proto-fascistic group the OAS¹² was consistently denied representation in the androcentric universe of auteurist cinema, where she was instead reduced to acting as an apolitical synecdoche for capitalist mass-consumption (for example in Louis Malle's 1962 *Vie Privée*). This hypothesis is echoed in Mayne's analysis of Danielle Darrieux, whose off-screen declarations against National Socialism were viewed by directors as evidence of an excess of virility: tantamount to transvestism.¹³ Whilst Bardot was granted a career on the condition that her body remained apolitical, Darrieux was cast into the obscure hinterlands of Occupied cinema, all but forgotten.

Other theorists have interpreted this process of political neutralization using vocabulary associated with ideological analysis rather than feminist historiography. Many of these hypotheses stem from theories proposed by Richard Dyer, who has identified one of the qualities of the star as their ability to 'conceal prevalent ideological contradictions'.¹⁴ This process of concealment – or what Dyer elsewhere terms displacement – is evident, for example, in the star-image of Shirley Temple, who both 'asserted and denied the problem aspects of Depression-capitalist society',¹⁵ or the ways in which Gérard Depardieu's ostensibly effeminate voice neutralized the misogynistic violence performed by his brutish body¹⁶ (at least until the 1980s when his on-screen persona became intertwined with an inexorable decline in virility). And

¹⁰ Leahy, 'The matter of myth: Brigitte Bardot, stardom and sex', *Studies in French Cinema*, 3: 2 (2003), 71–81 (p. 75).

¹¹ Sellier, *Masculine Singular: French New Wave Cinema* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2008), pp. 200–210.

¹² The OAS (Organisation armée secrète) was a paramilitary organization formed in 1961 after a failed putsch orchestrated by ex-legionnaires and paratroopers, in the desperate hope of preventing Algeria from attaining independence through an often promiscuous campaign of pro-colonial terrorism (carried out through plastic bombings known as *la strounga*, shootings with sub-machine guns, and arson with Molotov cocktails, or gasoline), against advocates of Algerian nationalism.

¹³ Mayne, 'Danielle Darrieux, French female stardom, and the Occupation', *Studies in French Cinema*, 10:2 (2010), 169–187.

¹⁴ Dyer, *Stars* (London, BFI, 2008), p. 27.

¹⁵ Dyer, *Stars*, p. 28.

¹⁶ Guy Austin, *Stars in Modern French Film* (Arnold, London, 2003), p. 84.

then there is Jean Gabin, whose self-reflexive definition of stars as social agents who ‘admettent ... l’inadmissible’,¹⁷ effectively prefigured his own star-role in Claude Autant-Lara’s 1965 *La Traversée de Paris*: a narrative that has been criticized for not only providing moral absolution for the director (who would later be accused of denouncing Jews during the Occupation), but also for articulating a barely acknowledged collective desire to absolve, obviate, in other words, *displace*, the legacy of guilt engendered by collaboration by recasting collaborators as charismatic antiheroes, blessed with charm, magnetism, and, above all, an aura of presence expressed in the micro-physiognomy of the face. In the somewhat oblique words of Claude Mauriac (cited in Vincendeau), ‘le choix de cet acteur a été un des mensonges de ce film. Il fallait aux auteurs le visage humain et sympathique de Gabin pour faire passer l’odieux de certaines de ses paroles et de quelques-uns de ses actes’.¹⁸ Finally, in the introduction to their edited collection, *Stardom in Postwar France*, John Gaffney and Diana Holmes state pertinently that their work is premised on a belief that ‘the preoccupations, values, conflicts, and contradictions of a particular culture, its “climate of feeling”, are vividly expressed through its celebrities’, before emphasising how ‘a study of stardom can reveal what is becoming and what is being left behind; what is being aspired to and what is being forgotten and denied’.¹⁹

This article at once draws and expands upon these theories of stardom. Like Dyer, Austin, Vincendeau, Gaffney and Holmes, I will identify how the two stars deployed *L’Insoumis* and *Les centurions* embody a constellation of values-locked-in-tension, including: violence and beauty, guilt and innocence, perpetration and victimhood, articulated, like Gabin, through the language of the face as through the language of the body. However, this article will also aim to both distil and dilate the hypotheses proposed by these theorists, specifically by historicizing the sense of contradiction embodied by these stars as a symptom of France’s equally contradictory desire for truth sublimated by untruth that arose in the flickering twilight of empire. As with Lollobrigida on *Paris-Match*, stars in these films act as a cracked mirror image of the Janus face of the nation, split between a desire to know the truth about the War and a desire for ignorance; a nation, in other words, riddled with painful bad faith.

L’Insoumis: Delon the noir star, or the power of beauty

Solipsistic, dark and strange, *L’Insoumis* turns around the wheels of a conspiracy orchestrated by the OAS. The film begins in the anarchic streets of Algiers, where the spectator is introduced to Thomas Vlassenroot (Alain Delon), and his former lieutenant (Georges Géret), two legionnaires-turned-putschists-turned-OAS-commandos who, alongside a third settler accomplice, Amério (Robert Castel), plan to kidnap and imprison a leftist lawyer named Dominique Servet (Lea Massari), in order to extract details about her Algerian-nationalist clients. Yet, no sooner has the plot been hatched than it begins to unravel: firstly when Thomas is shot by

¹⁷ Cited in Ginette Vincendeau and Claude Gauteur, *Jean Gabin: Anatomie d’un mythe* (Paris, Nouveau monde, 2006), p. 152.

¹⁸ Cited in Ginette Vincendeau and Claude Gauteur, *Jean Gabin: Anatomie d’un mythe*, p. 152.

¹⁹ Gaffney and Holmes, ‘Introduction’ in *Stardom in Postwar France* (New York, Berghahn, 2007), 1–6 (p. 1).

Amério after he secretly begins to empathize with their prisoner, and then when he is compelled to imprison their puzzled plot-leader (Figure 2) in order to execute what turns out to be painfully slow yet epic quest to his native Luxembourg in an attempt to be reunited with his daughter. The result is a film that simultaneously acknowledges and disavows the existence of colonial atrocity through images of violence and beauty.

Two men sit facing each other. One brandishes a gun, the other, a sharp suit. A light bulb lingers between them, casting harsh shards of light on their faces. Beyond that, the room is plunged into darkness. There is talk of financial gain. Of a deal. As this scene suggests, and as Cavalier himself later attested,²⁰ the influence of *film noir* on *L'Insoumis* is all-pervasive: from the deep chiaroscuro used here to dramatize Thomas and his ex-lieutenant concocting their unholy alliance in a murky apartment, to his infatuation with weapons, cars, and money, his tragic quest for his family home (a plot that mirrors John Hudson's classic *noir* narrative, *Asphalt Jungle* [1950]), right through to the danger of feminine attachment and entrapment embodied by Dominique – Thomas's prisoner, lover and indirect executioner (for it is ultimately due to her inability to remain quiet whilst he empathizes with her that Thomas is shot by his co-conspirator). Crucially, the influence of *noir* upon *L'Insoumis* can be glimpsed in Cavalier's depiction of a man drawn into an inexorable vortex of violence from which he is granted little release.

The term violence crops up as much in the reams of scholarship on film *noir* as it does in the often-hagiographic biographies on Delon. Thus if André Bazin eulogized Humphrey Bogart – *the* star of American film noir – as a man for whom 'revolvers become an almost intellectual weapon, the argument that dumbfounds',²¹ and Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton chastised *noir* directors for populating their narratives with 'an unprecedented panoply of cruelties and sufferings',²² then Delon's screen identity has been described as 'predatory',²³ 'untamed',²⁴ even 'cruel'.²⁵ In *L'Insoumis*, Thomas's cruelty emerges slowly. Nowhere is it apparent, for example, in the opening scene of the film, during which Thomas – in a spectacular display of altruism – attempts to save a wounded comrade stranded on a rocky precipice in the harsh landscape of the Aurès Mountains. It is only once Thomas has deserted from the Legion that his spasmodic outbursts of violence gather pace. Maria, for example, is subjected to a petty yet painful blow to her head when she admits to lying to him, whilst Thomas exhibits an equally disconcerting lack of sympathy after

²⁰ Cavalier, 'Interview with Françoise Audé, Jean-Pierre Jeancolas and François Ramasse', *Positif*, 240 (1981), 4–17 (p. 15). See also: Cavalier, 'Interview with Olivier Père' (2017) at <http://cinema.arte.tv/fr/article/linsoumis-rencontre-avec-alain-cavalier-lundi-20-mars-22h15>, accessed 22 March 2018.

²¹ Bazin, 'The Death of Humphrey Bogart' in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950s*, ed. by Jim Hillier, trans. Liz Heron (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1985 [1957]), 98–101 (p. 99).

²² Borde and Chaumeton, *A Panorama of American Film Noir: 1941-1953* (San Francisco, City Lights Books, 2002), p. 10.

²³ Graeme Hayes, 'Framing the Wolf: The Spectacular Masculinity of Alain Delon', in *The Trouble with Men: Masculinities in European and Hollywood Cinema* ed. by Phil Powrie et al. (London and New York, Wallflower Press, 2004), p. 47.

²⁴ Guy Austin, *Stars in Modern French Film*, p. 55.

²⁵ Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema* (London and New York, Continuum, 2000), p. 173.

kidnapping Dominique: he calmly quenches his thirst with a crisp beer whilst she languishes in the stifling heat of the bathroom. Yes, these subtle signs of cruelty are, of course, tempered as Thomas gently begins to empathize with the plight of his captive, providing evidence, in short, that he is able to engage with others above and beyond the naked logic of violence. But at the same time, this *prise de conscience* is almost immediately exposed as superficial when he shoots and is shot by Amério – an act whose horror is visually expressed in the fragmented montage of objects that follows: a bloody body, dragged; bullet holes, streaked tiles, shattered glass – glass everywhere. Finally, Thomas’s propensity for inflicting pain is exposed when he propels the head of his betrayed plot leader through a window in a dingy Luxembourgian hotel. And it is here, in this instance of truly abject violence, that the anticolonial politics of the film are revealed. Like the leftist militants associated with the turn against silence, Cavalier refuses to depict the army as an organization led by a humane moral compass. Although initially altruistic, Thomas turns into nothing more than a misanthropic cold-hearted killer.

What is interesting about *L’Insoumis* is that Cavalier frames the ex-legionnaire as an individual with whom the spectator is impelled to identify, despite the fact that he appears to lack even the most basic prerequisites for human subjectivity – feelings, emotions, morality. When assembling the imaginary of popular cinema, it seems, spectatorial identification could be created, quite simply, through a superlative profile. It is a principle that, in his aforementioned monograph, *Les Stars*, Edgar Morin seemed to grasp instinctively, stating: ‘la star est star parce que le système technique du film développe et excite une projection-identification, qui culmine en divinisation précisément lorsqu’il se fixe sur ce que l’homme connaît de plus émouvant au monde: un beau visage humain’.²⁶ It is also a principle that René Clément took full advantage of in his psychological thriller, *Plein soleil* (1960), a film whose ‘narcissistic display of Delon’s face and body’²⁷ proved so potent that it effectively enabled the actor to subsequently set up Delbeau (the company with which he co-produced *L’Insoumis*). Indeed, according to Cavalier,²⁸ the screenplay of *L’Insoumis* was written precisely for Delon, thus granting him an exceptional, and thus occasionally problematic, degree of jurisdiction over his star-image.

Delon hardly pioneered the modality of morally ambiguous performance displayed in these early works. As theorists such as Nick Rees-Roberts and Darren Waldron have pointed out, the star notably drew from the Method as an aesthetic basis for his acting style.²⁹ Delon’s famous silence, for example, not only finds its purest expression in *L’Insoumis* (a film that somewhat ironically echoes the turn against silence through images of violence), but also develops the art of ‘unverbalized emotion’³⁰ cultivated in the 1950s by James Dean and Marlon Brando. Like these stars, Delon was someone who spoke through the polyphony of the body, oscillating between images of facial stillness and corporeal kinesis, with the latter being particularly prominent in moments that precede deeds of brutality in *L’Insoumis*.

²⁶ Morin, *Les Stars* (Paris, Editions Galilée, 1984), p. 148.

²⁷ Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*, p. 173.

²⁸ Cavalier, ‘Interview with Olivier Père’.

²⁹ Rees-Roberts and Waldron, ‘Introduction: Alain Delon, *Then and Now*’ in *Alain Delon: Style, Stardom, and Masculinity*, ed. by Nick Rees-Roberts and Darren Waldron (New York and London, Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–12 (p. 8).

³⁰ James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1998), p. 204.

Equally, in a persuasive article on the Method, Leo Braudy has argued how Hollywood stars of the 1950s ‘acted out the audience’s fantasy life, especially interwoven fantasies of impotence and rebellion’.³¹ Delon’s performance in *L’Insoumis* obviously arose out of a different social climate than that which gave rise to the Method: characterized less by anxieties surrounding the implications of youth culture on society, and more by anxieties surrounding the implications of colonial atrocity on society; but it is precisely this notion of the actor as an overdetermined site of ideological contradiction, indeed neutralization, that informs this article.

Likewise, Delon’s face has often been described as possessing a mask-like quality: harsh yet majestic, supremely indifferent – a paragon of what Barthes might have termed the degree zero of faciality. Just like a mask, Delon’s physiognomy seems to exist in a state of permanent inertia. It is composed of a myriad of micro-movements, devoid of the dynamism normally granted by the gesticulation of the mouth. It is a spectacle often framed as a site of erotic contemplation for the spectator, through close-ups, a formal technique that Noa Steimatsky has described as ‘affording a departure from the chronological temporality of the diegesis’.³² Finally, in the same way as masks, Delon’s platonic profile is a screen, or patina, that conceals. According to Guy Austin, ‘behind the intimidating beauty, the ferocious reputation, the links with the underworld and, more recently, with police organizations, behind the leather jacket and the expressionless face, there is a hidden sadness that allows the romanticising of Delon’s image’.³³ Romantic, to be sure, but also aesthetically and politically reassuring. Precisely: in *L’Insoumis*, at least, Delon’s profile is a mask that softens not only the impact of the increasingly nefarious rituals of killing that Thomas performs as the plot hurtles towards its climax (a process of sublimation artfully albeit indirectly captured in Ginette Vincendeau’s description of Delon’s contradictory star-image as one of ‘cruel beauty’³⁴), but also, in turn, softens the extent of France’s complicity in colonial atrocity, exposed in the turn against silence by writers such as Mattéi, Alleg and Sartre.

One of the most illuminating pieces of scholarship on Delon’s talismanic persona has been published by Steve Neale, whose 1983 article, ‘Masculinity as Spectacle’ raises many questions pertinent to this inquiry. Neale begins his argument by illustrating how, in films such as Melville’s aforementioned *Le Samourai*, Delon was often tasked with embodying ‘images of linguistic and emotional reticence’ (an observation that again harks back to the Method), before outlining the ways in which the sexually conservative politics of mainstream cinema essentially prevent ‘the male body from existing explicitly as an erotic object’ – as this would risk provoking a state of homoerotic *over*-identification in heterosexual male spectators – but needs to be constantly ‘disqualified by images of masculine mutilation and sadism’.³⁵ Here, Neale moves away from textual analysis of Delon, the star, to explore the oeuvre of Anthony Mann. But, judging from the veritable emporium of swabs, dressings, ointments and strips of hydrophilic gauze which litter *L’Insoumis*, Neale could not have asked for a more persuasive case of his own hypothesis: for every unblemished

³¹ Braudy, “‘No Body’s Perfect’”: Method Acting and 50s Culture’, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 35:1 (1996): 191–215 p. 212.

³² Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 28.

³³ Guy Austin, *Stars in Modern French Film*, p. 62.

³⁴ Ginette Vincendeau, *Stars and Stardom in French Cinema*, p. 173.

³⁵ Neale, ‘Masculinity as Spectacle: Reflections on Men and Mainstream Cinema’, *Screen*, 24: 6 (1983), 2–17 (p. 14).

portrait of Thomas's divine profile, there is an image of his festering gunshot wound. Jean Narobi conceptualized the aesthetics of *L'Insoumis* as 'une esthétique de hou-hou [pain]',³⁶ whilst Cavalier curiously promoted his project as 'l'histoire d'un homme qui a un trou dans le côté du coeur'.³⁷ Whilst the army attempted to preserve the flawless skin of their torture-victims, Cavalier subjects Thomas to a gruelling physical ordeal, arguably to compensate for his flawless beauty. Crucially, not once is Delon's ideologically overdetermined face tainted by the violence that scars his body.

This was not the first time that Cavalier had attempted to grapple with the politics of decolonization. In 1961, he had released what is generally considered as one of the most politically engaged cinematic narratives of the decolonial epoch with *Le Combat dans l'île*, a formally classical dramatization of a leftist militant and far right activist who clash over the heart of a woman, who becomes, as a result, the spoils of a war between men rather than a war of ideologies. *L'Insoumis* doesn't exactly replicate the patterns of characterization seen within *Le Combat dans l'île*: apart from the elusive references to Dominique's relationship with Algerian nationalists, the modus operandi of leftist militancy dramatized in the latter is curiously absent from the former, for example. And yet, upon reflection, the two narratives appear to share an important parallels in the way in which they not only gesture towards – but also temper – the truth of pro-colonial violence, for a society at once captivated and profoundly troubled by the atrocities being conducted in its name.

In *L'Insoumis*, perhaps the most pertinent example of this interplay between violence and beauty, guilt and innocence, occurs when Dominique is first dragged into the bathroom of the apartment where she is due to be held. Here, bemusement yields to panic as she takes stock of the ominous objects that litter this space. A bathtub, squalid sink, windows boarded up with planks. Ambient horror invades the room: rape, a possibility; torture, a probability. Precisely: waterboarding. For the first time in the film, the pain of Dominique's clients threatens to transform into a pain of her own, as Cavalier twists his narrative around the parameters of state censorship. But then, almost as soon as this oblique allusion to colonial inhumanity has been articulated, is it subsequently undone: firstly when the lieutenant claims that she has "l'esprit mal tourné" (thus speciously insinuating that the OAS would never dabble in such practices, despite their sinister history of terrorism, including confronting an Algerian motorcyclist at random and setting him alight with petrol; and inadvertently blinding André Malraux's four-year-old neighbour with a bomb), and then when the camera cuts to an image of a shirtless Thomas, fraternizing with his shirted comrades. Instead of leading the spectator to empathize with Dominique, our attention is towed towards Thomas's darkly radiant body. Similarly, later in the narrative, Thomas awakes during the night to discover Dominique, pleading in a voice hoarse with desperation and dehydration, for something to drink. Our taciturn antihero, by contrast, is well hydrated: immediately before engaging with his bedraggled captive through the keyhole of the bathroom, he pours a bottle of water over his naked torso in a shot saturated with eroticism and *noir* chiaroscuro. And it is in this shot that Delon's star-power again comes into full force. For suddenly, Thomas is no longer a barbaric right-wing activist, but a deified object of desire incarnate – firstly for the spectator, but later too for Dominique, who eventually succumbs to his virile charms. For all intents and purposes, the stifling heat of the apartment is as much of a threat to Dominique's life as it is a pretext for Thomas to undress.

³⁶ Narobi, 'Entre deux chaises', *Cahiers du cinéma*, 161–162 (1965), p. 149.

³⁷ Cavalier, 'Interview with Nicole Zand', *Le Monde*, 28 September 1964.

Despite being hounded by his enraged former lieutenant through the rural hinterlands of France, and having to deal with an increasingly infected wound, Thomas somehow manages to preserve his deadly charm and fatal composure right up until the elegiac climax of *L'Insoumis*. But now, there are neither captives nor accomplices. There is only defeat: a long and unsettling sequence depicts Thomas lurching towards his daughter before collapsing to the ground – ‘le retour au silence de celui qui ne sait pas communiquer’.³⁸ It is, by all accounts, an undeniably disconcerting moment in the film. But it is also a moment of sublime pathos, whereby Thomas’s crimes, committed under the banner of greed and colonialism – desertion, abduction, assassination – are nothing less than displaced and forgotten in the gentle arch of his posture, much in the same way as Lollobrigida tempers the allusions to death articulated on the cover of *Paris-Match*. Thomas’s violent tenancies might allude to the naked violence of colonialism, but his perfect profile nevertheless provides the perfect pretext for a society yearning for absolution from accusations of complicity in atrocity. Thomas’s star face is a conduit for colonial bad faith.

Les centurions: paras as stars, and the ghost of Bigeard

A somewhat different take on the Algerian War is proposed by Mark Robson, whose 1966 film, *Les centurions/Lost Command*, recounts the trials and tribulations of a triumvirate of paras, who struggle, firstly, against rural nationalists in the hinterlands of the Aurès Mountains, and then against urban guerrillas in the so-called Battle of Algiers. Produced by Columbia Pictures and filmed by an established Canadian director (who had already made a string of successful films, including *The Bridges at Tokyo Ri* [1954]), naturally enough, *Les centurions* reverberates with echoes of American popular culture: from the bombastic images of conflict that draw from the iconography of the World War Two combat film, to the vast dusty shots of Algeria that transform the country into a grandiose Western (although the film was actually shot in Spain), before cresting in the star-presence of Anthony Quinn, who plays the unwieldy Colonel Raspéguy (Figure 3). Raspéguy’s brigade, meanwhile, features a motley assortment of French actors, including Maurice Ronet (as a belligerent para named Boisfeuras), and Alain Delon, whose vocation as a sensitive military historian named Escalvier was widely panned by French journalists, primarily as Delon’s star-persona had already become indelibly moored to his body rather than mind, as seen in *L'Insoumis*. That said, *Les centurions* also shares an important parallel with Cavalier’s film in the ways in which it erects ‘une image rassurante de la France en guerre [qui] ne risque aucunement d’ébranler les certitudes du public français’.³⁹ Fascinating yet reassuring for a society struck down by bad faith, the War once again emerges as a corporeal spectacle populated by stars.

As France heralded the dawn of image culture, mass media, and commodity fetishism in the 1950s and 1960s, a new, military archetype was born: the para. Paras only represented three to five percent of the forces on duty in Algeria, but this did not

³⁸ Didier Coureau, ‘L’Insoumis ou L’Abeille, le revolver, la serrure’, *Etudes cinématographiques*, 61 (1996), 45–56 (p. 55).

³⁹ Philip Dine, ‘Trois regards étrangers: “Les oliviers de la justice” de James Blue, “La Bataille d’Alger” de Gillo Pontecorvo, “Les centurions” de Mark Robson’ in *La guerre d’Algérie à l’écran*, ed. by Guy Hennebelle, Mouny Berrah and Benjamin Stora (Condé-sur-Noireau, 1997), 80–86 (p. 86).

prevent the popular press from elevating paras such as Jacques Massu, Roger Trinquier and Marcel Bigeard to the status of demigods, despite fact that these men found themselves increasingly implicated in accusations of atrocity as the War developed. Thus, in 1957 (the year of the turn against silence), *Paris-press* celebrated Bastille Day by dedicating a special edition of the magazine to the paras, their ‘vedettes’,⁴⁰ whilst François Nourissier identified paras and celebrities as ‘deux grandes images motrices de notre décennie’.⁴¹ ‘Like Bardot, paras fulfilled escapist fantasies: sex, violence, and adventure’.⁴² And whilst the archetypal para might have embodied a hyper-virile version of Bardot’s androgyny, these two figures shared an important homology in that their images rarely functioned as anything other than physical ciphers, drained of psychological and political depth, and instead ‘chargées de sensualité, de scandale, toutes les deux consacrées à la gloire de la force et de la soumission, toutes les deux composantes des sexualités de substitution pour cette société qui en manque’.⁴³ Far more corporeal than cerebral; the bodies of Bardot and the paras were, in this respect, all but skin-deep: pure sex, pure surface, pure image.

That *Les centurions* mirrors this aestheticization of the para-body should come as no surprise; the film was, after all, adapted from a pro-military novel written by no one less than a former para-turned-journalist (Jean Lartéguy). So, in the very first scene of the narrative, the spectator is faced with an image of Raspéguy – whose character Lartéguy originally crafted after forging a personal relationship with Marcel Bigeard – flinging himself over the parapet of a trench during the battle of Dien Bien Phu (which took place during the First Indochina War, from 1946 to 1954), thus providing dramatic evidence of the virile physical prowess that he will later display performing an incongruous physical workout in the company of a woman he has just seduced (he stands on his head in her bedroom and stretches on her balcony), before later nimbly bounding through a military gauntlet set up in the Aurès to weed out weak soldiers from the regiment. There is, to be sure, a modicum of truth in these bombastic displays of athleticism: Bigeard was, after all, known for his ‘Rommel style of leadership, jumping with the first wave [of parachutists], and always leading from the front’.⁴⁴ But whilst paras like Bigeard and Massu were keen to combine the direct action of guerrilla warfare with the psychological propaganda of pacification, giving rise to a dialectic modality of military strategy labelled ‘subversive war’,⁴⁵ taught, incidentally, at Bigeard’s own Jeanne d’Arc specialist officer training school, the jagged ballet of vaults, sprints, lunges and dives performed by Raspéguy and his comrades throughout the training and battle scenes in *Les centurions* transforms the War from a political into a purely physical drama – a panoramic orgy of falling torsos – inherited as much from the visual imaginary of French popular culture as it was from the Hollywoodian iconography of World War Two combat films, such as *Bataan* (Garnett 1953), *Sands of Iwo Jima* (Dwan 1949) and Robson’s own *Home of the Brave* (1949).

One of the most pervasive criticisms directed against these earlier films was

⁴⁰ Cited in John Talbott, ‘The Myth and Reality of the Paratrooper’, *Armed Forces and Society*, 3:1 (1976), 69–86, p. 72.

⁴¹ Cited in Gilles Perrault, *Les Parachutistes* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1961), p. 10.

⁴² Talbott, ‘The Myth and Reality of the Paratrooper’, pp. 69–70.

⁴³ François Nourissier cited in Perrault, *Les Parachutistes*, p. 10.

⁴⁴ Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962*, pp. 146–147.

⁴⁵ Martin Thomas, *The French North African Crisis: Colonial Breakdown and Anglo-French Relations 1945–1962* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), p. 93.

that they subtly transformed the very phenomenon of conflict into a pleasurable spectacle. Toby Haggith, for example, has observed that ‘the battlefield in feature films involved a composition and artistic quality which was theatrical and intrinsically pleasing’,⁴⁶ whilst James Chapman contends that ‘even explicitly anti-war films tended to aestheticize the subject’,⁴⁷ leading to what has elsewhere been termed ‘the pleasure-culture of war’.⁴⁸ Despite narrating an at least initially unnamed conflict without heroes, without major battles, without glory, and without clear victors, but instead ‘réduite à des escarmouches ou à des massacres, et hantée par la trahison politique’,⁴⁹ it is precisely this drive towards spectacularization that subtends the iconography of *Les centurions*. From the very first scenes, grenades soar over a serrated horizon, fringed either with an expanse of sky; or later, ancient ruins. Paras leap from hovering helicopters. A soldier sprints gun-in-hand through no-man’s-land, desperate to save a marooned comrade; and so on. In *L’Insoumis*, the brutality of the pro-colonial OAS may have been transposed into a romantic narrative through the beauty of Thomas’s face, and the surging affection of his victim. But here, it is the infamously euphemistic colonial credo of pacification that is romanticized, tendering an intoxicating antithesis to the turn against silence of 1957. It is significant, in this respect that, apart from a brief medium-shot of three bloody corpses lying at the fictional town of Rhalem (a shot apparently inspired by the massacre of 19 conscripts in the town of Palestro in 1956, who were then subjected to acts of mutilation, including having their lips, noses and testicles cut off, eyes gouged out, and stomachs stuffed with pebbles), *Les centurions* features conspicuously few images of raw suffering, or death. Instead, as within the archetypal World War Two combat film, combatants either abruptly succumb to their injuries as if they have been struck down with acute narcolepsy or, more often than not, leap out of the flames of an explosion into a colossal abyss, positioned just outside of the purview of one of the many wide-angle shots used by the director, and embellished with a crackle of pyrotechnics. It is, apparently, not possible for soldiers or nationalists to die in an abject manner in Robson’s narrative; weeping, privately; thinking of their loved ones – longing for them. Death must be anesthetized or aestheticized, rendered visually pleasurable, like Lollobrigida and Delon. Death, like decolonization, must be sublimated or, ideally, spectacular.

Spectacular too is Anthony Quinn, whose exuberant performance split critics; some puzzled by the star’s presence – Jean de Baroncelli elliptically described how ‘la fière carrure de Quinn rend son personnage imposant’⁵⁰ – others positively dismayed by the comparatively inconsequential roles that Robson meted out to the rest of the largely French cast – especially Delon, whose role as a military historian sits uneasily with the anti-intellectual ethos that had already come to define his on-screen persona. As an actor who had learnt his trade in Hollywood epics such as *The*

⁴⁶ Haggith, ‘D-Day Filming: For Real. A Comparison of “Truth” and “Reality” in “Saving Private Ryan” and Combat Film by the British Army’s Film and Photographic Unit’, *Film History*, 14: 3/4 (2002), 332–253 (p. 344).

⁴⁷ Chapman, *War and Film* (London, Reaktion Books, 2008), p. 80.

⁴⁸ Graham Dawson, *Soldier Heroes: British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, Routledge, 1994), p. 4.

⁴⁹ Norbert Multeau, ‘Quand la guerre est un spectacle’ in *Le cinéma et la guerre*, ed. by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie and Philippe d’Hugues (Paris, CFHM, 2006), 147–155 (p. 152).

⁵⁰ Baroncelli, ‘Les Centurions’, *Le Monde*, 11 October 1966.

Guns of Naverone (Lee Thompson 1961) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean 1962), Quinn possessed neither the brutal beauty nor the cerebral vanity of Delon and Ronet, respectively (leaving him free from the perceived problems of eroticizing a male actor outlined in the previous section). Instead, in *Les centurions*, Quinn's star power emanates from the acrobatic cadence of his voice, the excess of his gestures, his jocular demeanour, and, above all, his warm, raspy laugh – an invitation to intimacy severely lacking from Delon's chilly disposition – and which instead positions him in close proximity to one of the biggest stars in American cinema: John Wayne.⁵¹ So, rather than the solitary legionnaire played by Delon in *L'Insoumis*, we get the everyman Quinn/Raspéguy – a figure alternately framed alongside the fawning faces of his mother, his lover, and his natal Basque community – the implication being that he is a man among men; feared by some, loved by others, respected by all. Except, that is, by his bureaucratic military peers, who accuse him of being a maverick (like Wayne), preferring unusual tactics to established military procedures.

Naturally enough, Raspéguy's irreverence derives in part from historical fact: almost as soon as the War had begun had Bigeard himself earned his reputation as an unconventional leader, much to the delight of journalists working for *L'Express*, *Paris-press* and *France Dimanche*. Firstly, there was Bigeard's decision to devise a new para outfit, shaving off the excess material from the shorts in the standard uniform and using it to make a curious cloth cap. Then there was his unusual although admittedly effective approach to guerrilla warfare – his belief in cutting off nationalists from the population in order to stem the flow of information and food – combined with an increasingly jarring disrespect for political hierarchy. It was during this time that, for right-wing activists, Bigeard became a romanticized hero whose forced dismissal from the army in 1960 only added to his legacy the pathos of a martyr. But for those on the Left, Bigeard's irreverence raised as many questions as it did answers. Questions that oscillated anxiously, once again, around the word torture.

As with Cavalier, Robson does not attempt to deny the practice of torture amongst elite military forces based in Algeria. At least two scenes in the film include more or less overt allusions to the torture of Algerian nationalists: firstly after the tit-for-tat massacre of paras and Algerian civilians that occurs at Rahlem; and secondly during the Battle of Algiers, when the commandos attempt to crack down on a terrorist cell orchestrated by Ben Said and Esclavier's improbable combatant-girlfriend, Aïcha (played by Grégoire Aslan and Claudia Cardinale). In both of these scenes Raspéguy is present; yet, instead of actively implicating the Colonel in the torture sessions that swirl like eddies around him, Robson preserves Quinn's star-charm, framing the systematic atrocities conducted by the army alternately as a deed perpetrated by a cluster of intransigent rebels, or as 'la faute aux évènements, aux circonstances, et au fatal enchaînement'.⁵² "Do what you need to do", intones Raspéguy, when Esclavier surreptitiously drags Aïcha into a sombre office room for "questioning". If the act remains shadowy, the implications are clear: torture is a technique practiced beyond the limits of his control and comprehension. As a matter

⁵¹ As Alex Adams has brilliantly shown, the complex nexus of connection between Wayne and Quinn/Raspéguy/Bigeard are also bolstered by the fact that *Les centurions* regurgitates many of the spatial tropes associated with the Western genre. See Adams, *Political Torture in Popular Culture: the Role of Representations in the Post-9/11 Torture Debate* (London, Routledge, 2016), p. 96.

⁵² Anon, 'Les Centurions', *Le Canard Enchaîné*, 12 October 1966.

of fact, thanks to research conducted by scholars such as Pierre-Vidal Naquet,⁵³ Marnia Lazreg,⁵⁴ and Alain Ruscio,⁵⁵ we now know that this imagery actually belies a grim truth: not only had Bigeard witnessed a female combatant named Louise Ighilhariz interned in a torture camp near Algiers in 1957, in her own words, ‘swimming in a bed full of shit and the blood of dried menses’,⁵⁶ but he was also personally involved in the institutionalized torture of suspects during the War, infamously dumping their corpses into the Mediterranean Sea using an ingeniously grim miscellany of cement-shoes and body barrels, and thus earning his victims a perverse sobriquet: Bigeard’s shrimps. A far cry from the all-American hero portrayed by Quinn/Raspéguy, whose ineffable charm, like Delon/Thomas’s body, dazzles the spectator, exculpates them.

By means of a conclusion, I would like to focus my attention, again, on the so-called turn against silence that occurred in 1957, when France found itself not only exposed to – but rendered complicit within – the acts of atrocity being committed in Algeria: chief amongst them, torture. Abruptly: everyone knew, but didn’t want to know, or knew too much. Knowledge was not power, but weakness. It was the source of a dark sense of guilt, leading to profound yearning for fantasmatic images or objects that would salve the guilt inflicted on metropolitan society by this knowledge, salvage the reputation of those tainted by it, and provide a sense of coherence – of plentitude – for a nation politically, morally, and psychologically fragmented, splintered, by this epistemological burden – this colonial chimera.

And it is here that *I’Insoumis* and *Les centurions* enter the fray. For what these narratives bear witness to, obliquely yet unmistakably, is the power of stars to provide moral certainty in moments of great uncertainty; to soften and smooth the most troubling crises in history – and to exculpate those associated with these crises; to act as a conductor for colonial bad faith, allowing the nation to exist in a state of collective disavowal and contradiction, of barely registered denial; and, as such, to render what Claude Liazu has termed ‘the impossible discourse of the military’,⁵⁷ not only possible, but positively pleasing. According to John Gaffney and Diana Holmes, during decolonization, ‘stars functioned in part to mask a deeper unarticulated knowledge, almost like a psychically repressed nightmare: the horrors of France’s decolonization process’.⁵⁸ So much so, in fact, that in *L’Insoumis* and *Les centurions*, the War is transfigured from a conflict that was characterized by atrocities and an absolute lack of military spectacle, into a quasi-homoerotic, quasi-fascistic, spectacular blaze of idealized paramilitary figures: one bestowed with a platonic profile, the other with a superlative torso; neither complicit in the practice of torture.

⁵³ Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les crimes de l’armée française, Algérie 1954–1962* (Paris, La Découverte, 2001), p. 115; 158.

⁵⁴ Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 53–54; 161–162.

⁵⁵ Ruscio, ‘Deux ou trois choses que nous savons du général Bigeard’ (2012) at <http://journals.openedition.org/chrhc/2647>, accessed 29 March 2018.

⁵⁶ Cited in Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire*, p. 162.

⁵⁷ Liazu, ‘Le contingent entre silence et discours ancien combattant’ in *La Guerre d’Algérie et les Français*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Rioux (Paris, Fayard, 1990), 509–516 (p. 513).

⁵⁸ Gaffney and Holmes, ‘Stardom in Theory and Context’ in *Stardom in Postwar France* (New York, Berghahn, 2007), 7–25 (p. 20).

Above all, what Cavalier and Robson's narratives illustrate are the ways in which, during decolonization, the tortured bodies of Algerians – defaced and dehumanized – were displaced by the flawless bodies of stars like Delon, Quinn, Lollobrigida. Wounded by the turn against silence, France turned to stardom – for absolution.