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Gazing, Settler Cinema, and the Algerian War: *Slanted Kisses*

Abstract:

This article analyses patterns of what I will call de-colonial gazing in *Slanted Kisses* (1962): a short film directed by two European settlers, in and around Algiers, during the Algerian War (1954-1962). As a means of departure, I identify two types of de-colonial gaze that I argue are crucial to the politics of *Slanted Kisses*: 'the amorous gaze' (linked to a desire to forget about conflict, and to retreat into Eurocentric solitude); and 'the panoramic gaze' (linked to a desire to control the colonial landscape, transforming it into a visual spectacle). In the third section of the article, I then examine the allegorical imaginary at play in *Slanted Kisses* – anchored in visual idioms of light and darkness – before concluding with some thoughts on how this allegory functions in relation to the history of decolonization in Algeria.

Introduction

This article examines the politics and poetics of looking in *Au biseau des baisers* [*Slanted Kisses*] (Gilles and Sator, 1962), a short film directed during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). Fought largely in the north-eastern hinterlands of rural Algeria, but also in urban zones – including the capital, Algiers – and characterized by bouts of guerrilla warfare and counter-insurgency operations, exchanged between militants directly or indirectly affiliated with the primary nationalist party, the FLN [The National Liberation Front], and members of the French army, the Algerian War has long been recognized as one of – if not *the* – most contentious conflict in modern French history. Historians often cite the clandestine yet quasi-ubiquitous use of torture by French soldiers against suspected nationalists as

a defining aspect of the Algerian War: firstly insofar as it led to an understanding of the conflict as a 'dirty war', marred by unjustified excesses and punctuated by military defeat (Algeria, meanwhile, triumphantly acquired national sovereignty on July 5, 1962); but also insofar as it shaded the tone of many French cinematic narratives released during the late 1950s and early 1960s, the overarching majority of which were filmed and set in France, for example Jacques Rozier's 1963 *Adieu Philippine* [*Goodbye Philippine*]; Robert Enrico's 1964 *La Belle vie* [*The Good Life*]; and Alain Resnais's much theorized 1963 *Muriel ou le Temps d'un retour* [*Muriel, or the Time of a Return*]. These soldier-centric narratives have been vigorously discussed by a variety of scholars,[1] and I do not aim to re-examine them here. What this article instead aspires to do is to address the politico-optic iconography of a little-known, and almost completely un-theorized film,[2] remarkably shot in and around Algiers, in 1959 – at the bloody apex of the War – by two European settlers. That film is *Slanted Kisses*.

Forged after the conquest of Algeria in 1830, the settlers (also known as *les pieds-noirs*), were a socially and religiously diverse community, whose geographical bastion extended largely throughout the northern coastal towns: Oran, Bône, Philippeville, Algiers, and the cultivated northern farmlands of the Mitidja. Out of a total population of ten million, just under a million were settlers, yet, irrespective of their origins, and irrespective of the fact that, in 1875, Algeria had become an integral part of France – in short, a *département* rather than a colony – they possessed enormous privileges systematically denied to indigenous Algerians, including:

[1] See, for example, Daniel (1972), Dine (1994), Stora (1998; 2004), Greene (1999), Croombs (2010), Sharpe (2017; 2019) and Flood (2017).
[2] The only other scholars to analyze *Slated Kisses* in any depth are Gaël Lépingle and Marcos Uzal (2014). Also see Lépingle's 2008 documentary, *Guy Gilles et le temps désaccordé* [*Guy Gilles, Out of Time*]. *Slanted Kisses* is currently available to watch on YouTube.

economic privileges fostered by the expropriation of land (often exploited to produce wine, despite the fact that it was anathema to the largely Muslim population), educational privileges, and legal privileges, notably, the right to vote, and French citizenship, which was even extended to those originating from Italy and Spain. In 1961, Frantz Fanon famously elaborated on how these privileges manifested themselves in the 'brightly lit streets of the settler's town: well-fed, easy-going; its belly always full of good things' ([1961] 1963: 39).

Privileges so ingrained in the fabric of everyday colonial life that they seemed natural and immutable were, unsurprisingly, privileges that turned the settlers into what was increasingly considered a legitimate target of nationalist violence during decolonization, giving rise to a series of atrocities of escalating ferocity. In 1945, for example, armed men associated with the Algerian nationalist politician Messali Hadj killed approximately 100 European settlers in the north-eastern town of Sétif, after having been prevented from deploying banners during a pro-independence demonstration, catalysing, in turn, a vertiginous torrent of retributive attacks against indigenous Algerians, perpetrated by settler vigilantes and the French army, in an event known as the Sétif Massacre. In 1955, two FLN leaders based in Constantine launched a policy of total war on all colonial inhabitants (military and civil), leading to what is now known as the Philippeville Massacre, during which seventy-one European settlers were slaughtered. In September 1956, three *mujahida* [female freedom-fighters] – Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired, and Samia Lakhdari – famously planted a series of bombs in cafes located around the settler neighbourhoods of Algiers, fatally wounding three European civilians. In July 1962, approximately 1000[3] settlers were killed when a wave of Algerians indiscriminately attacked the European

[3] This figure remains hotly contested. See Stora (1998: 194) for more details.

community of Oran, thus definitely precluding any hope of Franco-Algerian fraternity in the immediate aftermath of Algerian Independence (for more information on these atrocities see Horne, 2006: 23–28; 118–122; 185–187; 533).

Emboldened by privilege, imperilled by violence, consumed by anxieties about what their so-called country would become: such were the conflicting factors that coalesced in the slippery identity of the settlers, whose history continues to split academics, divided as to whether to paint them as quasi-fascistic political reactionaries, in that they frequently endorsed patterns of retributive violence inflicted upon Algerian citizens by the army, or, from 1961 onwards, the OAS [Secret Armed Organization],[4] or sacrificial lambs turned refugees, in that they were treated with indifference if not derision by metropolitan communities, especially after the mass exodus of 1962, when hundreds of thousands of settlers arrived in France by boat seeking asylum from the violence sprawling through Algeria (Barclay, Chopin and Evans [2018]; Hubbell [2015]; see the Conclusion for more details on this exodus). It was also this nexus of contradictions that catalyzed an incredibly prescient study by a young Pierre Nora, entitled *Les Français d'Algérie* [*The French of Algeria*] ([1961] 2012). Deploying the same psycho-historical methodology as that used years later by cultural historians such as Henri Rousso (1987; 1992) and Benjamin Stora (1998; 2004), Nora's thesis was predicated upon the persuasively argued belief that the settlers had, consciously or not, systematically denied, disavowed and 'scotomized', that is to say, 'cut themselves off from', the most traumatic and guilty aspects of their history through the fantasmatic imaginary of their culture ([1961] 2012: 207). Not violence, but peace and love, thus emerged as the overarching moods of their literary,

[4] The OAS was a neo-fascistic pro-colonial military organization formed in 1961 with the aim of using violence (shootings, kidnappings, plastic bombings) in an ultimately futile attempt to stop Algeria from achieving independence.

and, as we will see, cinematic corpus. And not privilege, but pathos, was the core value embodied by their protagonists. It is a hypothesis echoed by Claire Eldridge, who has argued that 'the trauma of [decolonization] produced a preoccupation with an idealized Algeria, the lineaments of which became more vivid and more perfect in direct proportion to the turmoil and distress of the present' (2016: 21). Finally, it is an argument supported by *Slanted Kisses*, which represents decolonization in precisely such 'idealized' terms, notably by harnessing the powers of what I will call the de-colonial gaze.[5]

Theorizing the de-colonial gaze

The question of the gaze has been a recurring concern for thinkers associated with critical theory, post-colonial theory, and film theory, yet depending on the methodology deployed, and the socio-historical context in question, it has been discussed in different ways. In the 1940s and 1950s, for example, during the rise of Negritude and the emergence of anti-colonial nationalism throughout France's increasingly fragile empire, in North and West Africa, and Indochina, intellectuals such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Frantz Fanon harnessed theoretical trends in psychoanalysis, phenomenology and existentialism, to diagnose, and lambast, what both saw as a deeply entrenched hierarchy, at once ethnic and ocular: between 'the white man' who 'enjoyed the privilege of seeing without being seen' (Sartre [1948], 1964/1965: 13), and the black man, who existed as the object of this gaze: 'dislocated, distorted and imprisoned' by it (Fanon [1952], 2008: 85; 86). Fanon's famous

[5] I have chosen the adjective 'de-colonial' to convey the sense that *Slanted Kisses* is neither a classically colonial, nor post-colonial, nor anti-colonial narrative, but rather one imbued with passions and anxieties that are linked directly to the settler experience of decolonization.

phenomenological account of being hailed by a white child, who cries out "'Look, a Negro!'" in his presence ([1952] 2008: 84), is, in particular, often cited as a seminal point in critical race theory, if only as it seemed to predict, with incredible clairvoyance, many of the debates that would take place much later: firstly in the rise of cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and film studies, during the 1960s and the 1970s, and then again in the so-called visual turn in the 1990s. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the gaze conceptualized by Fanon was one that had arisen out of the apotheosis of colonial ideology, not its protracted decomposition. Rather than the de-colonial gaze, what Fanon had been subjected to was the colonial gaze *par excellence*.

Only in the late 1950s did intellectuals begin to think specifically about how decolonization had given rise to a pattern of gazing characterized by a clearly delineated constellation of perceptual parameters and ideological traits. One early intervention in debates surrounding the de-colonial gaze was Alain Robbe-Grillet's 1957 novel, *La Jalousie* [*Jealousy*], which turns around the psycho-sexual-racial micro-drama of a newly-wed couple, who travel from France to the Ivory Coast – granted independence from French colonial rule in 1960 – on their honeymoon. Not that this trip generates any scenes of ardent romance, as one might expect. Instead, the novel is largely dedicated to documenting, in minute detail, a pattern of obsessive compulsive, even pathological, behaviour, exhibited by the husband, who appears consumed with an overdetermined yet largely unexplained impulse: to peer from the domestic space of the couple's rented villa, through the slatted blinds of a 'jalousie window', onto the surrounding banana plantation. So complex was the metaphorical imaginary at work in *La Jalousie*, that, in 1973, Jacques Leenhardt published an entire monograph dedicated to textual analysis of it.

Drawing from a dazzlingly interdisciplinary genealogy of theories, including those proposed by Sartre, Fanon, André Malraux and Pierre Bourdieu, Leenhardt's analysis essentially depends upon three, main arguments, all of which, as we will see, are relevant to my own interpretation of *Slanted Kisses*. Firstly, Leenhardt argues that the central male protagonist in *La Jalousie* functions less as a psychologically realized character in the realist tradition, than as the pure embodiment of Sartre's aforementioned concept of 'the white gaze' (1973: 51). Leenhardt: 'the husband's *imperium* over the plantation aligns him not only with visual mastery, but also with regressive colonial ideology, in the sense that he doesn't venture *onto* the terrain that he is happy to *survey*' (1973: 52 [emphasis in original]). Secondly, Leenhardt claims that the novel is structured by a series of subtle dichotomies: between the interior space of the villa, aligned as much with 'logical-light' [lumière-raison] as it is with the brightness of empire, and enlightenment thought, that is to say, the imperial Self (1973: 69), and the exterior space of the plantation, aligned, as it is, with the looming peril of nationalist violence, the end of empire, the night of decolonization, and the colonial Other (1973: 67–74). To these two arguments, Leenhardt then adds a third, claiming that the optical interplay that operates in the novel mirrors the ways in which colonial societies often respond to the threat of nationalism and decolonization, by displaying a sudden and acute 'taste for morbid geometrism', 'morbid' in the sense that this geometrism is based on an almost pathological yearning for 'symmetry, planning and logic' (1973: 55). As Leenhardt glosses: 'faced with the possible twilight of colonialism, morbid geometrism performs a very clear ideological function. It is the sign of a Cartesian [colonial power] trying to control a [colonized] reality that no longer submits, but rebels' (1973: 55). It is a point to which I will return in the second section of this article, entitled 'panoramic gazes'.

Above and beyond Leenhardt's exceptional, but critically undervalued work, further inspiration for this article has come from thinkers associated with film studies. Crucial in this respect is the paradigm shift that took place in the 1970s, when a generation of European film scholars aligned with Apparatus Theory, not only turned their attention to the dynamics of the gaze, but also twisted the focus of the domain, from 'the question of content to the question of form, from representation to the mode of representation' (Elsaesser and Hagener, 2015: 107). At least in relation to my own argument, the most pertinent scholar associated with this methodological breakthrough is Jean-Louis Baudry, whose article 'The Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus' (1974), advanced an understanding of classical narrative cinema as a medium engineered to generate an impression of mastery in the spectator, positioned as 'the transcendental subject' (1974: 43–44). Unlike Leenhardt's work, but like other film scholars associated with Apparatus Theory (for example Laura Mulvey), Baudry's Marxist inflected, and ideologically driven, analysis, however, made no mention of the politics of ethnicity or colonialism in the production of this phenomenon, framing it instead as symptomatic of Western perspectival traditions in Renaissance painting, Cartesian optics, and the camera obscura. In a curiously inverted form of this blind-spot, Edward Saïd's seminal text, *Orientalism* (1978), meanwhile, famously *did* interrogate the cultural politics of colonialism, in turn, playing a major part in elevating post-colonial studies to an established methodology in the humanities, yet, at the same time, shied away from engaging with 'the graphic image, pictorial practice', and the politics of the look in histories of colonial construction, consolidation, and anti-colonial nationalism (Ramaswamy, 2014: 6).

Only recently have theorists working in post-colonial studies and film studies begun to examine correlations between the visual power relations at play in cinema, and the ethnic power relations at play in the (post)colony. In a compelling article entitled 'Imaging Terra Incognita: The Disciplinary Gaze of Empire' (1991), Ella Shohat, for example, argues convincingly that contemporary Hollywood remains shackled to a neo-colonial imaginary, inherited from the iconography of colonial films made in France, England, and America, during the 1920s and 1930s, and subtended by two attendant concerns: landscape and looking. 'For many years, 'cinema [has] participated in the study of other cultures, and in the development of ethnography and geography, through observing and recording the details of topographies and cultures', states Shohat (1991: 67). Elsewhere, her analysis appears to succinctly synthesize theories proposed by Sartre, Leenhardt and Baudry: 'the [colonial] camera was not unlike the microscope in its detailing of the "other"'. 'Technological inventions [in the world of cinema] mapped the globe as a neatly organized space of knowledge' (1991: 67).

As with her brilliant monograph, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, co-written with Robert Stam (1994), Shohat's article is an undeniably important contribution to debates surrounding ethnicity and visuality, although, it should be noted that the cinematic production of Algeria – under colonial rule or liberated from it – is not the central concern of her thesis, but a minor one. In order to address *this* question, we must look towards the work of two thinkers more specifically located in French studies. One of these is Guy Austin, who has persuasively examined how, in apparent opposition to the cinematic narratives analyzed by Shohat, French films made during decolonization displayed what could be described as an ocular aversion to the crisis – a desire to look away from it rather than towards it – leading to the impression that

there 'was "nothing" to see in Algeria' (2007: 182). The other thinker who has done much to advance the study of Franco-Algerian de-colonial representation (that is to say, cultural narratives produced in, and through, the decolonization of Algeria), is Benjamin Stora, who, like Austin, approaches the question of the de-colonial gaze from a methodological angle more rooted in cultural studies than psychoanalysis, phenomenology, or Apparatus Theory. Even still, his theories about how French directors frequently represented the Algerian War as a 'black hole', 'absence', [6] or 'blank' (2004: 182; 176; 181), are often couched in a lexicon that is particularly contemporary in its sensitivity towards the politics of visuality. As we will see, Stora's claim that, during the 1950s and 1960s, Algeria was often represented in metropolitan culture as a becalmed land of empty vistas, devoid of Algerians, 'as if in a vacuum' (2004: 164), will be a central component of my analysis, here.

From Sartre to Leenhardt, from Baudry to Shohat, from Austin to Stora: in different ways, all of these theorists have thus provided inspiration for the methodological compass of this article, alongside my understanding of the de-colonial gaze. In the first section, we will therefore see how, like *La Jalousie*, *Slanted Kisses* focuses on a young colonial couple that attempt to master the colonized space that surrounds them, through sight. The second section will then shift focus to the politics of dis-embodied (rather than embodied) gazing, examining how the film encourages the spectator to gaze at the landscape of Algeria, represented as 'symmetrical, logical', yet empty, to paraphrase Leenhardt and Stora, in order to generate the impression that they too can master it. The article will then conclude will some thoughts on how the directors foreground patterns of light and darkness as part of an elaborate allegory on the twilight of colonial rule.

[6] On the question of de-colonial absence see Croombs (2010) and (Flood, 2017: 53).

Slanted Kisses

Slanted Kisses was filmed on 35 mm in Algeria during the summer of 1959 by two young settlers: Guy Gilles and Marc Sator. Before launching the project, Gilles had completed an art degree at Les Beaux-Arts (studying painting, drawing, and interior design), worked as a journalist for *L'Echo d'Alger*, and begun his military service in an administrative department in Algiers. The film was shot over the course of two months, every Saturday and Sunday, as Gilles was only available then. Sator, meanwhile, had studied physics, providing the perfect scientific counterpoint to Gilles's artistic disposition. The duo also benefitted from the talent of the American director, James Blue, who acted as co-cinematographer on the project, which was screened in a limited number of cinemas in Paris, in October 1962.

The plot of *Slanted Kisses* is, on the surface, incredibly simple. Two young lovers (played by Alain Gual and Madeleine Serra, a professional dancer at Algiers Opera, who had also worked in television), decide to make the short trip from La Madrague in Algiers (where Gilles had lived as a child; famously eulogised in a song by Brigitte Bardot, released in 1962), to Tipaza, a port town located in the north of the country, on a Sunday afternoon. Not that the couple have any concrete plans: indeed, once they reach their destination, they appear to do very little, spending their time meandering through streets and jetties shimmering with sunlight, before retreating to the coastline after romantic doubts begin to seep into their increasingly anxious verbal exchanges. And it is here, on a maudlin shore, that the film concludes, whilst the sun, slowly, but surely, sets. It is a melancholic ending to a narrative that deploys the visual idiom of de-colonial gazing to construct an illusion of a country filled with love and plenitude rather than chaos and atrocity.

The amorous gaze

Slanted Kisses, first scene. A cluster of unidentified teenage boys sporting swimwear, and etched with the corporeal indicia of preadolescent lust, linger insouciantly on a sun-drenched jetty, framed by the vast sea and horizon, scrutinizing something located in off-screen space. As the camera slowly pans, this something – or rather someone – is revealed to be the contours of a young woman, whose gentle gestures bespeak the language of ballet: arabesques, pirouette, en pointe; whilst her abbreviated attire – a black leotard – provides an opaque indication of her soon-to-be-revealed identity as a European settler named Madeleine. Curiously impervious to the presence of her audience, the dancer edges towards the camera across the jetty whilst the boys gaze on: their eyes transfixed, their bodies languorous. In this oneiric dreamscape devoid of exposition – which, according to Gilles, was filmed by him and him alone – the woman offers herself as an object, or spectacle, to be looked at, to be desired, to be loved.

Although assembled using highly unconventional patterns of framing and mise-èn-scene arguably inflected by Gilles's studies in painting rather than cinema, the theme of preadolescent gazing that motivates this scene was by no means ground-breaking. During the 1940s, a whole generation of Italian directors had already filmed a number of works in which the horror of Nazi rule was registered precisely through the traumatized eyes of young witnesses, caught up in what Elizabeth Alsop has termed 'choral gazing' (2014: 35) (see for example Rossellini's *Germania anno zero* [*Germany, Year Zero*] [1948], or De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette* [*Bicycle Thieves*] [1948]); whilst, in the 1950s, François Truffaut famously stripped this trope of its political element by instead exposing his young protagonists to primal scenes of

abuse, love and transgression (Lebeau, 2008: 69–85). Truffaut's short 1957 film, *Les Mistons* [*The Mischief Makers*], in particular, turns around a group of preadolescent boys that hunt down alternately voyeuristic and fetishistic glimpses of their amorous obsession – a young woman named Bernadette – in much the same way as the boys that feature at the start of *Slanted Kisses* appear so captivated by the object of their look that they are plunged into a state of libidinal paralysis. The difference, of course, is that – unlike Truffaut's films, which were generally set in affluent *quartiers* in Paris, during periods of non-conflict – this scene, and indeed the remainder of *Slanted Kisses,* was filmed in Algeria, a country that, by this point, had already been irrevocably riven by five long years of political violence.

That this violence is neither visualized explicitly nor echoed discreetly in this scene is symptomatic of a number of factors. Firstly, setting: insofar as it was filmed in La Pointe Pescade, a comparatively isolated, and therefore becalmed, coastal town, located in the north-west of Algiers, and whose economy, at least until 1962, depended almost exclusively upon colonial tourism, hospitality, and entertainment. Cleansed of the tensions that tugged at the seams of inter-ethnic communities living in zones such as Bab-el-Oued, it is thus unsurprising that the landscape appears to have been enshrined as a prelapsarian paradisiac frieze, frozen in time and space.

But there are other aesthetic factors, too. Consider, for a moment, the sense of utter stillness that irradiates from the bodies of the boys, assembled in such a way as to mirror the geometric architecture of the jetty, and reminiscent of many of Gilles's later films, which often revolved around the simple idiom of 'an encounter, between the seen and the seer, between a skin and a light' (Uzal, 2014: 69). Or the measured gait of the dancer, whose arms trace perfect circles in a sky devoid of imperfection. Or the slow, wide pan that Gilles deploys to capture this curiously serendipitous

encounter, between an unidentified *they* who stare placidly, and an unidentified *she* who undulates gently. The scene might only be a few seconds long, but these seconds were apparently all that Gilles needed to begin to transform Algeria, from a notorious arena of settler fear and colonial injustice, into a dreamlike realm of soft and hazy preadolescent lust. As such, it mirrors the contemporaneous tendency for French writers to 'alleviate and reassure the *mauvaise conscience* [guilty conscience] of the dominant [colonial] culture, by linking colonisation with childhood innocence' (Portuges, 1996: 94; also see Eades, 2006: 262).

Unlike Truffaut, Gilles and Sator do not dedicate the remainder of their film to exploring the libidinous impulses of *pre*adolescent gazing, as such. Just as the setting abruptly shifts after this opening scene – from a serene jetty to an urban road – so too is the group of early-teen boys that feature therein swiftly yet definitively usurped by two late-teen lovers: Alain and Madeleine, who have spent the last few weekends together, courting each other. Alain, we learn, is an accounting assistant graced with sad eyes and a propensity towards charmingly awkward conversation ('you talk like a book', he tells his interlocutor at a market in Algiers, before elaborating, 'which is pretty stupid as I have never heard a book speak'). Madeleine, meanwhile, is, naturally enough, a ballet student, who reveals that the dreamlike scene that features at the start of the film was precisely that – a dream – *her* dream; undoubtedly the most striking aspect of Madeleine's look is the distinctive black beehive that she sports precariously atop her head. Neither protagonist is endowed with much depth, whether psychological, moral, or political. Both however, are part of the settler community, and display the tell-tale signs of adolescent love.

As cultural critics such as Philip Dine (1994: 79–82) and Lucienne Martini (1997: 21) have perceived, love was an ideologeme that featured within many

narratives produced during the War by settler authors. Sometimes the love in question was directed towards the geographical territory of Algeria, giving rise to heavily lyrical passages eulogizing the vanishing beauty of the horizon, the august light of dusk and dawn, and the diaphanous folds of the Mediterranean Sea (see Lanta [1999], for example). Other times, the love expressed was a love directed towards the colonized community, although it is important to note that these emotions rarely evolved beyond the level of platonic tenderness without being shaded by psychosexual pathology or racial transgression. Hence the titles of settler novels such as *Nous nous aimerons demain* [*We Will Love Each Other Tomorrow*] (Stil, 1957), or Jean Brune's *Cette haine qui ressemble à l'amour* [*This Hate That Looks Like Love*] (1961). In Albert Camus's *Noces à Tipasa* [*Nuptials at Tipasa*] – which, as we will see, forms an important intertext in the film – the author waxes lyrically yet nebulously about 'loving an entire race, born from the sun and the sea' (1959 [1937]: 21). Still other times, settler authors managed to neatly combine both of these types of love into narratives permeated with emotional attachments at once territorial and social. By interspersing past images of colonial farmland with present images of inter-ethnic reconciliation, *Les Oliviers de la justice* [*The Olive Trees of Justice*] (1962), by Jean Pélégri and James Blue, for example, does just that.[7]

A curious outlier in this corpus, *Slanted Kisses* both indulges in, and reconfigures, this trend towards framing Algeria as a site of amorous encounter. As in the work Stil, Brune, Lanta, and Camus, the architecture of emotions that subtends *Slanted Kisses* appears driven by a similar belief in love as a haven, or antidote, to the

[7] *The Olive Trees of Justice* documents forty-eight hours in the life of Jean, a former settler who travels from France to Algeria in order to comfort and then eventually bury his moribund farmer-father. The film itself shuttles between flashbacks of cultivated northern farmlands, located in the Mitidja, and footage of Jean strolling around the capital, Algiers.

trauma of War, in addition to the radicalization of politics catalysed by it. Alain and Madeleine may thus be tender, contemplative, intimate, or elegiac, but they are never outraged, nor terrified, not even mildly irritated; traumatized they are not. Only once does Madeleine allude to the conflict, the better to forget it: 'it's when everything is beautiful that we are at our ugliest. Wars shouldn't exist', she intones sedately, as the couple gaze amorously at each other. Apart from a cluster of lyrics that feature on the sound-track, it is the first and last time anyone alludes to the political crisis driving the country to the point of breakdown. Hence the film equates the pleasure of looking with the pleasure of loving, and the pleasure of loving with the pleasure of forgetting.

What distinguishes *Slanted Kisses* from many of the narratives produced by the settler authors cited above is the extent to which the two juvenescent protagonists direct their love inwards, towards each other, rather than outwards, towards the colonized communities that surround them. This quasi-colonial tendency to evacuate Algeria of its inhabitants, transforming it into nothing but an empty landscape, has been theorized before. Indeed, as early as 1961 Pierre Nora had already begun chastising European settlers for responding, sometimes consciously, other times not, to the rise of nationalism that threatened their way of life by 'denying the existence of Arabs' (2012 [1961]: 116), conjuring them out of the frame of representation, whilst David Carroll has argued that the settler imaginary expresses a yen to 'live in a world inhabited exclusively by French *pieds-noirs*, whereas in reality, they lived in a French colony [sic] in which the overwhelming majority of inhabitants were Arab or Berber' (2007: 22). Even Camus didn't escape this critical fate: in 1982, Rachid Boudjedra

lambasted the writer for 'annihilating Algerians through the magic of words and fiction' (cited in Sanyal, 2015: 58).[8]

Mirroring this tendency towards self-preservation through self-isolation, towards banishing the indigenous populace of Algiers from on-screen space, shunning them from sight, many of the shots used in *Slanted Kisses* (which was originally intended to be a silent film, driven by gesture rather than dialogue), thus reiterate a remarkably myopic exchange of glances, to the point of solipsism: Alain looks at Madeleine, Madeleine looks at Alain. They smile. Embrace. No one else speaks, sees, or is seen, erecting a vision of Algeria as an ontological *huis clos*, beyond history, and beyond time. Infatuated with each other, consumed by each other, Alain and Madeleine see nobody but each other. Their love is, in a word, blind.

Panoramic gazes

There is another species of de-colonial gaze that exists in *Slanted Kisses*. But it is not an amorous gaze directed inwards, towards the eyes of a significant other, or the body of an apotheosized dancer, but rather a panoramic gaze, directed outwards, towards the empty – in other words, radically depopulated – landscape of Algeria. Echoing the excursions performed by Jean, the maudlin de-colonial *flâneur* of Blue and Pélégri's aforementioned film, *The Olive Trees of Justice,* yet elongating these excursions to quasi-epic proportions, many of the shots in *Slanted Kisses* thus resemble little more than an extended travelogue, facilitated by various gaits of locomotion – walking, running, swimming – punctuated intermittently by the frenetic speed of a motorbike,

[8] Guy Austin has likewise shown how both colonial and post-colonial French and Algerian films represented Algeria as a 'tabula rasa' [blank slate] (2007: 191), whilst Maria Flood has used the notion of 'terra nullius' [nobody's land] to identify the neo-colonial imaginary at play in Xavier Beauvois's 2010 *Des hommes et des dieux* [*Of Gods and Men*] (2017: 121).

and propelled by a wanderlust ostensibly driven less by a destination than it is by a sense: sight. It is for this reason that the trip that Alain and Madeleine make in the film cannot be defined as sightseeing as such, given that no sites are seen. Instead, the couple are inexorably drawn to landscapes which enable aspirations of total or absolute vision; landscapes not impeded by the animation of crowds, even less by the in-animation of monuments, but instead characterized by nothing but total immersion in immensity, in infinity, in soft flatness: roads, beaches, the sky and the sea.

A significant intertext in *Slanted Kisses* is a short novella published by Albert Camus in 1937, entitled *Noces à Tipasa*, and from which Madeleine directly quotes at one point in the film.[9] Although *Slanted Kisses* begins in Algiers, whereas *Noces* does not, both works are set largely in Tipaza (that Camus spells Tipasa, in line with conventions established during the Roman Empire). Both works turn around the same attempt at plunging the reader, or spectator, into a quasi-spiritual, quasi-mystical terrain, associated with lyrical beauty and sensual excess. And, most importantly, both works feature couples who perform rites propelled not so much by a desire to do, but rather by a Zen-like desire to simply be, and to see, 'allowing for no space or distance between the perceiver and the perceived' (Brown, 2004: 33). Allusions to what James Brown has theorized as 'cosmic seeing' (2004: 60), thus pepper Camus's novella, as when one of the protagonists extols, 'to see, and to see on this earth, how can one forget this rule?' (1959 [1937]: 15), before rhapsodizing about eating fresh fruit: 'my teeth wrapped around the peach, I listen to my blood pumping up to my ears, I look with all of my eyes' (1959 [1937]: 17). That the object of this gaze is rarely delineated

[9] The lines are taken from the very first paragraph of Camus's novella, translated as: 'in the spring, Tipasa is inhabited by gods, and the gods speak in the sun, the scent of absinthe leaves, the silver armour of the sea, the raw blue sky'.

apparently matters little in *Noces*, which, not incidentally, features no indigenous Algerians. All that is important is that a settler is exercising their power of sight.

It is precisely this propensity towards 'looking with all eyes' that structures one of the most important scenes in *Slanted Kisses*, when Alain and Madeleine hurtle down the roads leading from Algiers to Tipaza by motorbike. Composed of a salvo of three rapid-fire panning shots and five tracking shots (three of which are taken from the perspective of the couple), from a narrative point of view, this scene achieves very little. From an ideological point of view, however, it is highly significant, insofar as it accelerates the aperture of human vision to the state of what Brown terms 'cosmic seeing', Michel Foucault might call 'panoptic gazing' ('when one sees everything without ever being seen' [1995 [1975]: 202]), or what Kristin Ross has conceptualized as 'panoramic perception', that is, the kind of perception that prevails 'when the viewer no longer belongs to the same space as the perceived object', as within a train or car (1995: 3). Perched atop the motorbike, not only are the lovers able to leapfrog between Algiers and Tipaza with absolute ease, but they are equally capable of seizing glimpses of unwitting members of the populace with absolute impunity, providing the spectator with furtive snapshots of a family languishing beside the road; a young boy with a shopping bag; three stocky men in white vests; and, crucially, a woman in the *haïk* (a white outer garment often worn by Arabs in Algeria); none of which, judging from their startled expressions, had been consulted by Gilles and Sator before filming, and none of which are granted more than a few milliseconds to gaze curiously back at the camera, before being usurped by the serenity of the skyline. At once accelerated and expansive, unfettered and unregulated, totalizing and telescopic, it is here, more than any other scene, that the de-colonial gaze possessed by the couple admits their absolute power – their

imperium – as Europeans, bringing to mind Sartre's observation that 'for three thousand years, the white man was only a look' ([1948] 1964/1965: 13).

Complementing these patterns of embodied panoramic gazing, performed by Alain and Madeleine, are patterns of disembodied panoramic gazing, performed by the camera. Consider, for instance, the two extreme long shots that immediately follow Madeleine's dream scene, both of which are captured from the dizzying height of towering buildings. In the first, the camera peers down on Alain as he traces through traffic on his motorbike in the Darse de l'Amirauté (in Algiers), before panning upwards to a cloudless sky. Immediately afterwards, the camera pans down from the sky to pause on the distant contours of a square, framed by the Casbah. Neither of these shots are taken from the perspective of a protagonist, yet both present the viewer with a quasi-cartographic, panoramic vision of the capital.

Seeing requires presence. It also often requires power. To gaze from a space, the gazer frequently needs to have been able to gain access to that space, by freedom of movement, force, negotiation, or, quite simply, by taking advantage of the insidious authority commanded by settlers living in a colonized society. Whether Gilles are Sator were threatened by the FLN for filming in Algiers (as Blue and Pélégri were, during filming for *The Olive Trees of Justice*), is unknown. What is certain is that these shots form stubborn proof that two European directors have seen Algiers from an architectural apex unoccupied by resistance (whether pro- or anti-colonial), and that this act of seeing has been captured by the mechanical eye of their camera. Likewise, just as these shots form an ontological expression of power, so too do they hark back to visual cultures that legitimized colonial power. In his enlightening book, *Empire of Landscape* (2009), John Zarobell has, for example, analyzed the ideological impulses that gave rise to Jean-Charles Langois's *Panorama*

of Algiers (1833), an immense *panorama rotunda* [circular room], in which the viewer was invited to peer through darkness at a series of 50 metre high paintings of the colonized city, illuminated by gas lights and windows. For Zarobell, the most important aspect of this panorama was not what it represented, but how it represented, specifically, by inviting the spectator to cast their gaze over the architecture of the newly acquired capital from a transcendental perspective, like that pioneered by Renaissance painters during the 1400s and 1500s, 'allowing, in turn, the fantastical acquisition of colonial territory by Parisian viewers' (2009: 12). Although separated from Langois's installation by over a hundred years, it is precisely this visual idiom of Algiers-as-landscape, seized from a vantage point at once panoramic and perspectival, that re-emerged in classic colonial films such as *Pépé le Moko* (Duvivier, 1937)[10] and, I would argue, *Slanted Kisses*, once again suturing the viewer into a spectatorial position 'in which their centrality is unquestioned and their power is unlimited' (Zarobell, 2009: 6).

It is also a style of framing that the directors deploy when the couple reach Tipaza. Although here, the vertical (pan)oramas deployed in early shots of Algiers are generally replaced by horizontal (pan)oramas, the vantage point in question is usually a dune or a jetty rather than an architectural edifice, and the field of vision is rarely populated by anything more than the two lovers cruising down an empty road on their motorbike, or sifting through vegetation scattered across the coastline. Many of these later shots echo a tendency within settler culture to abstract and romanticize Algeria, projecting it through a soft-focus lens composed of what Safaa Fathy and Jacques Derrida have exalted as 'places known and dreamed of: deserts, oceans, or marine spaces, dry lands, coasts and beaches' (2000: 23), and resonating with Camus's vision

[10] For more details on this film, see Maria Flood's chapter, 'From Colonial Casbah to Casbah-*Banlieue*: Settlement and Space in *Pépé le Moko* (1937) and *La Haine* (1996)' (2020).

of Tipaza as a mystical idyll, where the 'sea sucks with the sound of kissing' ([1937] 1959: 12). They are also assembled in such a way that Algeria emerges as a compositionally harmonious landscape, filled with little more than a geometrically aligned matrix of straight lines and coloured shapes, all of which evokes Leenhardt's aforementioned notion of 'morbid geometrism', as a de-colonial phenomenon characterised by an obsessive craving for 'symmetry, planning and logic'. To the seduction of flora, the directors thus add the pleasure of order, as, once again, the country is dragged, via the de-colonial gaze, from a state of colonial atrocity into the realm of visual spectacle.

Light and darkness

For a film that implicitly frames the act of looking as an act of empowerment, it is perhaps unsurprising that light – unstained white sunlight – is everywhere in at least the first half of *Slanted Kisses*, smothering the landscape with an oily glaze, and draping the lovers, like many other protagonists in Gilles's films, at least, in 'a solar eroticism' (Lépingle, 2014a: 227). Only once do Alain and Madeleine enter into the penumbra of an architectural structure – a semi-covered building composed of fishing pools – before continuing on their pilgrimage through a world of shimmering white streets, beaches, jetties, roads, promenades, esplanades, and promontories, bracketed in Algiers (whose sobriquet 'The White' stems from the non-colour of its architecture), by similarly speckless buildings. Theirs is a life lived in high contrast. So bright are certain shots in the narrative that objects start to lose their contours, their ontological status as things-in-themselves: the peak of a white hut bleeds into the white brilliance of the sky, so too do the blond locks of a local singer; horizons

disappear in-between the bright tonalities of clouds and waves. According to Mathieu Macheret, shots like these align *Slanted Kisses* with impressionist cinema, insofar as they 'contain time in light, allowing it to float freely within the cinematic frame and beyond it' (2008). The overarching brightness of the film also contributes to a vision of Algeria as an Edenic, almost prehistoric idyll (it is never bright to the point of blindness, as within Camus's 1942 work *L'Étranger* [*The Stranger*],[11] for example), all the while allowing the patterns of amorous and panoramic gazing that dominate the film to exist and subsist.

That is, until, the end of *Slanted Kisses*, when Alain and Madeleine descend into a sandy bay, located adjacent to a cluster of famous Roman ruins in Tipaza (which Camus alludes to in his novella), before gazing out onto the very expanse of water used to transport thousands of settlers to France during the exodus of 1962. For the first time in the film, the white glow of previous scenes yields to an abiding impression of darkness, expressed through: the ochre and iron rock formations that creep along the coast, dominating on-screen space; the long shadows that begin to cling to the feet of the lovers as they trail towards the sea, stretching out on the sand; the murky still pool into which they momentarily peer, reflecting eyes that now seem unable to look at each other, and, above all, the crepuscular sun, 'glowing red and golden' (Gilles and Sator, 1962: 43). No longer a swirl of pale whites, colour is here contrapuntal, divided. It is also the point at which the couple's relationship appears, unexpectedly, untenable. Madeleine, for one, finds herself unable to ignore the impermanence of affective ties. In a soliloquy as sober as it is melancholic, she laments: 'I can't believe in love like you do. If I know love will die, then it's already dead. The sun is going down, we need to end this'.

[11] I am thinking particularly of Meursault's description of the sun when he kills 'the Arab' as 'a long sparkling blade which struck my forehead' ([1942] 1957: 94).

The decline of the day, the decline of affection: that Madeleine's words spin an analogy between the sun and love is clear enough. Less clear, however, are the contours of a further analogy, woven deep within the visual and verbal thickets of this scene, and which subtly shifts the emphasis of the film: from emotions to empire. Madeleine's thinly veiled suggestion that she needs to separate from Alain, for instance, can be read as a thickly veiled suggestion that Algeria is in the process of separating from France, particularly as the iconography of the sun was frequently used by a range of metropolitan and settler artists during decolonization, to allegorically allude to the rise and demise of colonial rule. Robbe-Grillet's aforementioned *La Jalousie*, for example, deploys the trope of the night 'to symbolize the dusk of white men' (Leenhardt, 1973: 72), whilst Gilles's first project – a similarly tragic tale of adolescents haunted by a feeling of fatality in Algeria – was tellingly named *Soleil éteint* [*Setting Sun*] (1958). Deeply implicated in this solar imaginary, the final scene of *Slanted Kisses* can thus be seen as an attempt at both chronicling and sublimating the decolonization of Algeria, by transforming it from a historical-political revolution, punctuated by the aforementioned series of settler massacres, to one confined, and thus contained, within the comparatively safe and softened realm of diurnal/nocturnal activity, and juvenescent emotions.

But there is also another image included in this scene that further complicates our understanding of it. Barely a few seconds long, and profoundly elliptical, the image in question occurs as the couple discuss their relationship in the failing light of the evening. Suddenly, the camera cuts abruptly to an unidentified young man brandishing a rifle, somewhere on a sandy shoreline, perhaps with the two lovers, perhaps not; while his weaponry, if not his casual attire, belies his status as a soldier. He aims, lingers, and fires. Before the third shot in this triptych captures his target:

the sun, bleeding into the mountainous range located across the bay (Mount Chenoua). In a 2005 interview, Marc Sator revealed that these shots were inspired by a similar scene in Fritz Lang's *Le Tombeau hindou* [*The Indian Tomb*] (1959); they also mirror the opening sequence of Godard's *À bout de souffle* [*Breathless*] (1960), when Michel fires brazenly at the sky. What Sator doesn't elaborate on are the metaphorical implications of this overdetermined image, which, if pushed to its logical conclusion, opaquely implies that the figurative light of colonial ideology is being extinguished by the very people tasked with upholding it: the army. Shaded with pathos rather than tainted with guilt – in short, blissfully ignorant of their role in the crisis enveloping the country – Alain and Madeleine thus ultimately exit the narrative morally unscathed by the weapon of violence that tarnishes the hands of the soldier. As darkness consumes the lovers, their future remains unclear.

Conclusion

1962: the year that *Slanted Kisses* saw the light of day was also the year that Algeria gained independence, leading to a state of shock amongst the 1 million settlers living in the country, especially as the FLN had spent years ominously impelling them to choose between 'the suitcase or the coffin' (in other words, either leave the country alive; or don't, and die). Unsurprisingly, the vast majority of settlers chose the former. From Oran to Algiers, from Tipaza to Constantine, not a single town in Algeria – truly sovereign Algeria – wasn't affected by the aftermath of independence. It was during these chaotic months, from April to August 1962, that 99 per cent of the settler community – around 800,00 individuals – fled the country, frantically. Apart from Marc Sator, it seems, who continued to live in Algeria until 1967, teaching classes at

the National Centre for Cinema, and even managing to shoot his own full-length film, *L'Été algérien* [*The Algerian Summer*] (1964).[12]

That *Slanted Kisses* is saturated with a melancholic sense of finality, of impending exile, of something ending and someone leaving, of the oblique presence of nationalist violence that had constantly threatened to crest into chaos since 1945, is therefore, unsurprising. And yet, by way of the power of de-colonial gazing, an antidote to this melancholia is, in the film, concocted. The faculties of panoramic perception possessed by the couple, for instance, not only bear witness to the vast existential privileges possessed by European settlers, but also provide ample opportunities for the spectator to contemplate, and vicariously possess, the landscape of Algeria from a god-like perspective. The film is really less a narrative in the Hollywood tradition than it is a tapestry of quasi-pictorial visual spectacles; a cinematic postcard, whose compositional harmony often edges the diegesis into a half-Platonic, half-Cartesian world of abstract forms, upon which Alain and Madeleine look, with rapt fascination. And when the couple do not contemplate the landscape around them – conspicuously evacuated of anything or anyone that could rupture their beatific peregrinations across the country, in short, evacuated of indigenous Algerians or any zone associated with Algerians, for example shantytowns – they contemplate themselves, spinning a perfect circle of amorous glances that once again transmutes Algeria into a spatio-temporal plane that Gilles himself poeticized as 'beyond time and beyond politics' (2014: 51). As the two young lovers stare

[12] In 1965, Gilles released his first full-length film, *L'Amour à la mer* [*Love by the Sea*], about a conscript returning to Paris from Algeria. In 1970, he released the quasi-autobiographical *Le Clair de Terre* [*Earth Light*], about a young man who travels from Paris to his homeland Tunisia (Gilles wanted to film in Algeria, yet couldn't obtain authorisation). Like *Slanted Kisses* and *Setting Sun,* both of these films are almost entirely absent from scholarship on cinematic representations of decolonization. See Lépingle and Uzal (2014), for more details.

romantically into each other's eyes, the War is nothing but a distant drama on a flickering horizon.

Declaration of interest statement

None

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