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Guilt Displacement: Representing the Algerian War of Independence in *Le Retour* (Goldenberg, 1959) and *Secteur Postal* 89098 (Durand, 1961)

Mani Sharpe

As a range of scholars has shown, one of the most compelling aspects of military conflict is that it often gives rise to a process of displacement, one through which the guilt experienced by male soldiers overcome by opposing armies, or complicit in acts of military atrocity in the non-cinematic world, is reformulated and redirected onto the bodies of civilian women in the cinematic world, generating, in turn, an antagonistic ambience of feminine, rather than masculine, culpability. Frequently, this is an argument developed in relation to cultural narratives produced in the aftermath of World War One and World War Two, especially within defeated or politically compromised countries like Germany, Japan, Italy and France. In her illuminating monograph, *The Cinema of Things*, Elizabeth Ezra, for example, pinpoints Louis Feuillade's silent serial film *Les Vampires/The Vampires* (1915–1916) as one such narrative, eloquently interpreting the central female figure of the intrigue—the totemic Irma Vep, played by Musidora—as a figure of "exaggerated culpability": with this quality reflecting the "guilt of survivors, of [French] men who did not fight in the [First World War], or those who did fight and lived to tell about it" (Ezra 2018, 109). It is an argument echoed by Geneviève Sellier and Noël Burch,[1] Susan Hayward (Hayward 2005), Sarah Leahy (Leahy 2007), and Susan Weiner (Weiner 2001), all of whom have explored how post-Liberation French cinema worked through the guilt of the Occupation (a period during which many French citizens were complicit in the perpetration of atrocities orchestrated by the Nazis), first, by shifting it from the historical domain to the cultural realm; second, by transforming it from a question of war and politics to a question of sexuality and psychology; third, by grafting this revised, psychological guilt, onto the bodies of female

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protagonists, often depicted as consumed by irrepressible libidinous urges, or disloyal to their victimized soldier-partners; and fourth, by punishing these women accordingly, specifically by subjecting them to instances of "justified" diegetic violence, as within Yves Allégret's 1949 *Manèges/Merry-Go-Round* (Leahy and Hayward 2000, 85–86). In her chapter "Gender Panic," for instance, Leahy identifies *la garce*—the bitch—as a figure that crystallizes this dynamic of displacement, supporting her theories through astute textual analysis of *Panique/Panic* (Duvivier, 1946) and *Quai des Orfèvres/Quay of the Goldsmiths* (Clouzot, 1947). Writes Leahy: "in the misogynistic climate of the Liberation, narratives such as these laid the blame [for France's military defeat] squarely at the women's feet: the *garce* is duplicitous, adulterous, and guilty, or both *fatale* and victim, leading her man to his death through the pursuit of her own desire" (Leahy 2007, 106). Examining the imaginary of what they term noir realism, an amalgamation of poetic realism and *film noir*, Burch and Sellier concur, diagnosing the *garce* as "a beautiful and deceptive young woman who acts as a scapegoat for the national community, with this process being all the more effective insofar as it is largely invisible" (Sellier and Burch 2014, 249). This argument is lastly mirrored in that pursued by Weiner, who identifies *Avant le déluge/Before the Deluge* (Cayatte, 1954) and *Le Repos du Guerrier* (Rochefort, 1958) as two narratives which "imagined a way to repudiate and excise national shame by putting the sexualized young female"—designated as an *enfant terrible* by Weiner—"on trial as the sign of all that was wrong, unnatural, and impure in postwar France" (Weiner 2001, 138).

One war that is often left out of this strain of research is the Algerian War of Independence, a famous war of decolonization that took place largely in French Algeria between 1954 and 1962. Depending on the location, this war took different forms. In rural regions such as the Aurès and Kabylia, French paratroopers performing artillery-fuelled maneuvers clashed against armed members of the Algerian National Liberation Front (*Front de libération nationale*, henceforth referred to as the FLN), who used hit-and-run tactics to target military encampments and colonial infrastructure. In urban regions such as Algiers and Oran, members of the French army launched various counterinsurgency operations in a bid to "pacify"—to adopt the sanitized vocabulary deployed by French officials during the period—the proliferating insurrection. "Like other counter-insurgency wars, Algeria was a conflict without front lines and without regular opponents. This increased the propensity of certain French units to perpetrate injustices and atrocities," (Alexander et al. 2002, 9) for example napalm-propelled aerial bombardments, indiscriminate roundups, extrajudicial detention, summary executions (covered up as disappearances), local reprisals, violent interrogations, and frequently sexualized torture sessions,

including instances of heterosexual and homosexual rape (between perpetrators and victims), forced incest (between victims), and both electro and water torture (Lazreg 2008, 9). Indeed, it was partly due to these atrocities that the war would eventually reach its bitter conclusion in 1962: resulting, on the one hand, in military defeat for France, and, on the other hand, in military victory, for Algeria.

How did French films represent the war as it was unfolding? In order to address this question, a question that many scholars[2] have explored, and to which I will return throughout this article, we may productively identify two forms of distortion, both of which impacted upon how the war was imagined in the cinematic sphere. One of these was tied to the politics of censorship,[3] leading to a plethora of films that dramatized the war in an elliptical or allegorical fashion (as in Agnès Varda's film *Cléo de 5 à 7/Cléo from 5 to 7* [1962] or Louis Malle's *Le Feu follet/The Fire Within* [1963]),[4] rendering "the censors inoperative for lack of explicit images or lines" (Baecque 2012, 143). Another was aligned with the ethics of culpability, with Claire Eldridge diagnosing the early 1960s as a period "littered with groups seeking to devolve," that is to say, displace, "responsibility [for the violence of the war] onto an external party or force" (Eldridge 2010, 125), further deforming how it was depicted. This displacement of responsibility could be seen, for example, in Robert Enrico's *La Belle vie/The Good Life* (1964) (Sharpe 2023c, 44–54), in which a melancholic conscript named Frédéric is brutally beaten by a group of paratroopers on the streets of Paris, implicitly suggesting that it is *they*, rather than *he*, who is guilty of facilitating the "injustices and atrocities" that characterized the conflict. An inverted form of this imagery could be found in Jacques Dupont's *Les Distractions/Trapped by Fear* (1960), in which a psychologically distressed former paratrooper is unjustifiably hounded into a state of suicidal submission by riot police in Paris, once again depicting returning French soldiers as innocent victims rather than guilty perpetrators of violence (Sharpe 2023c, 84). In different ways, both of these films exhibit what Alex Adams has elsewhere termed a tendency to "displace the responsibility for the horror of [specific military acts] onto war in general," in turn "obscuring the material structures of responsibility which enable systemic imperial violence" (Adams 2022, 413).

But evidence suggests that French films made during the war did not only function in this way. At least some of them performed this rhetorical gesture of "displacement" using the type of gendered imagery that we find in the earlier—post-World War One and post-World War Two—films listed at the start of this article. One such film, for example, is Georges Franju's proto-horror *Les Yeux sans visage/Eyes Without a Face* (1960), in which a disturbed nurse named Louise (Alida Valli), becomes embroiled in

a violent conspiracy to procure a new face for a disfigured protagonist named Christiane (Edith Scob). Crucially, this conspiracy culminates in an operation that mirrors the ways in which soldiers stationed in French Algeria burnt the faces of their victims during electrotorture, leading Adam Lowenstein to suggest that the film allegorically "displaces the [militarised] masculine violence of [the war] onto a network of violence exchanged between [civilian] women" (Lowenstein 1998, 50; also see Lowenstein 2005, 50–52). Although devoid of tropes associated with horror, a comparable argument could be made about Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit soldat/The Little Soldier* (1960/1963), in which the central female protagonist—Véronica (Anna Karina)—is revealed as doubly duplicitous: first, insofar as she consistently withholds any information regarding her affiliations with the FLN from her ex-military partner, and second, as she is later framed as possibly guilty of leading him into the clutches of FLN nationalists, generating an infamous scene in which he is subjected to bouts of electro and water torture.[5] It is for this reason that Geneviève Sellier describes the film as about "two types of entrapment: politics and love" (Sellier 2008, 138), whilst Laura Mulvey suggests that Godard associates "female sexuality and femininity with secrets, with something that lies 'darkly' behind the mask" (Mulvey 1996, 46). Crucially, in their emphasis on the epistemologically unstable surface of the female face, both *Les Yeux sans visage* and *Le Petit soldat* obliquely shift the burden of responsibility for the torture of Algerians: away from French soldiers and toward civilian women.

Other late-colonial French films operate in a different manner, revolving not around images of political torture, but scenes of romantic breakdown. Often this breakdown is one that occurs between a returning French soldier and their ambivalent female partner, wife, or lover, whose mercurial and frequently sexual behavior either catalyzes or precipitates the psychological traumatization of the former, leading sometimes, but not always, to death. In Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud/Elevator to the Gallows* (1958), for example, an ex-paratrooper named Julien Tavernier (Maurice Ronet), becomes embroiled in a deadly plot hatched by his seductive—yet ultimately destructive—*femme fatale* lover, Florence Carala (Jeanne Moreau). Not that this plot is successful. Indeed, instead of culminating in the planned murder, the majority of the film is devoted to chronicling Tavernier's unfortunate predicament, trapped as he is, within the film's titular elevator, before Florence eventually implicates him in the failed assassination (Betz 2009, 155–156). Along similar lines, in Malle's *Le Feu follet*, an ex-military official named Alain (played again by Maurice Ronet), is subjected to an insidious cycle of emasculation, perpetrated by his lover and estranged wife, and which plunges him gently into an inexorable spiral: from alcoholism, to impotence, to suicidal ideation, to self-death (Sharpe

2023c, 92–101). Likewise, in Alain Cavalier's *Le Combat dans l'île/The Fight on the Island* (1962), a right-wing veteran of the war named Clément (Jean-Louis Trintignant) is betrayed by his wife, who leaves him for a leftist activist. That is, until Clément is mortally wounded by his political and romantic adversary during the climatic "fight on the island."[6] Finally, in Paul Carpita's *Demain L'amour/Love, Tomorrow* (1962),[7] a former soldier named Gérard (Jean-Claude Merac) experiences a spatio-temporally ambiguous series of flashbacks after crashing his convertible. Some of these flashbacks visualize him and his former partner Madeleine (Corinne Coppier) on a beach; others are set in a train station when Gérard is called up for service ("when I let go of your hand, I knew that absence would kill love," he intones); or in rocky terrain in Algeria, a landscape through which Gérard is pictured scarpering, gun-in-hand. Still other flashbacks linger on images of Madeleine as she articulates her intention to end their relationship, with Gérard's psychological distress—the catalyst for his car crash—being ultimately framed as both a symptom of the horror of war and the disloyalty of female partners. As we will see, a similar point could be made about *Le Retour* and *Secteur postal 89098*.

Le Retour (1959)

Shot in 1959, *Le Retour* is a short film directed by Daniel Goldenberg, in collaboration with the ex-paratrooper, Yann le Masson, who was responsible for cinematography, alongside Georges Barsky. According to the credits, the screenplay was based on an obscure short story by the French-Greek author, Gisèle Prassinos, whose personal and artistic alignment with the Surrealist movement undoubtedly accounts for the oneiric ambience that pervades *Le Retour*, even as the film draws from more contemporaneous trends in late-modernist art cinema,[8] with Goldenberg citing Alain Resnais as a formative influence on it. As we will see, *Le Retour* could also be categorized as a "veteran film" or "home-front drama," with John Trafton designating the former as "a subgenre of the war film […], in which the tortured mental state of the veteran is a discernible narrative device" (Trafton 2015, 18), whilst Dan Hassoun conceptualizes the latter as a work in which "interpersonal dramas involving soldiers and their families [take precedent over combat]" (Hassoun 2016, 390). In *Le Retour*, the "interpersonal drama" in question takes place at the Gare de Lyon train station, in Paris. It is here that the spectator is introduced to an unnamed young woman (played by Lucie Arnold, and henceforth referred to as "the Young Woman"), who is initially dramatized waiting for her unnamed soldier-partner (played by Jean-Claude Rolland, henceforth referred to as "the Soldier") to return on a train from Algeria, via Marseille. Amidst jubilant

images of young couples embracing each other, the narrative then performs two key turning points. One of these relates to the physicality of the Soldier, whose depleted appearance subverts the spectatorial expectations established by the sound-track. The other relates to the psychology of the Young Woman, who suddenly seems overcome by a perplexing yearning to avoid their encounter, hiding from her partner within the folds of crowds that surround her, until he leaves the station, distraught.

Technically speaking, Goldenberg and his team shot *Le Retour* over the course of a working week, using a Caméflex Éclair-Coutant camera, loaded with 35 mm film, in 1:66 aspect ratio (Sharpe 2023a). Many of the shots that feature in the film are of anonymous non-actors, or what Goldenberg calls "involuntary extras" (Sharpe 2023a), leading to a curious blending of fiction and nonfiction that we also find within other cinematic narratives about the war, for example, Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7*, Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Bataille d'Alger/The Battle of Algiers* (1966), and *Les Oliviers de la justice/The Olive Trees of Justice* (Pélégri and Blue, 1962) (Sharpe 2023c, 157, 175). In terms of exhibition, *Le Retour* has only been screened in public twice since 1959. One of these screenings took place in February 1970, when a small cinema called *le Studio de la Harpe* agreed to project *Le Retour* before Goldenberg's feature-length work, *Le Portrait de Marianne/Portrait of Marianne* (1969). The other took place in 2012, when *Le Retour* was included on the programme of a film festival, organized by the Cinémathèque de Toulouse, to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war (Sharpe 2023a). Interestingly, Goldenberg states in an interview that filming for *Le Retour* was not affected by the regime of censorship in operation at the time, passing "unnoticed" into the public realm (Sharpe 2023a). During the writing of this article, he also kindly provided me with a digital copy of *Le Retour*, which is now available to view for free online, complete with English subtitles.[9]

From Unity to Obscurity

According to Gilles Deleuze, one of the defining traits of films made during the late silent era, for example, *Broken Blossoms* (Griffith, 1919), was that they represented the face on screen as a harmonious totality, combining "a minimum of movement" with "a maximum of unity" (Deleuze 1986, 88). During the first 6 minutes of *Le Retour*, Goldenberg creates a similar sense of unity, using a combination of close-ups, medium close-ups, and medium shots, to visualize the Young Woman, as she waits in the station. This unity is generated, for example, through the balanced composition of these shots, with her facial features positioned at a three-quarter angle, towards the camera, to optimize their visibility. It is facilitated by the stability of the frame, with shots being either frozen into stasis or eased into gentle motion by slow-reverse

tracking and horizontal panning. It is maintained by Goldenberg's use of shallow depth, which both trains our gaze upon the Young Woman's visage, captured in focus in the foreground, whilst banishing the background to an unfocused blur (Figure 1). It is created by the temporality of the shots, with their extended duration—they last, on average, around fourteen seconds—recalling Jacques Aumont's theorem that silent facial close-ups depended on "the suspension of (action) time" (Aumont 2003, 134). It is sustained by the complete silence of the Young Woman, with this lack of vocality preserving her in an idealized state of mute immobility, untouched by the facial convulsions catalyzed by synchronized speech.[10] It is bolstered by Lucie Arnold's restrained acting style, a style that she discreetly performs through a series of micro-movements, including an eyebrow that arches slowly, a lip that curls discreetly, and a smile that flashes suddenly under eyes lost in thought. And it is upheld by Goldenberg's use of continuity editing, predicated, as many of these shots are, on an optical logic of eye-line matching. In this respect, the unity of the Young Woman's face is both paradigmatic (within a single shot) and syntagmatic (between multiple shots).

But the longer the Young Woman waits at the station, the less her face is preserved in a state of unity. The effects of this perceptual-ontological shift are first apparent when the Young Woman is depicted peering voyeuristically through the window of a waiting room: an unmotivated—and therefore psychologically discordant—gesture which bears no causal relation to the arrival of her partner. Coinciding with an equally discordant excerpt of stringed-percussive music composed by Jacques Guyonnet, Goldenberg notably dramatizes this moment by framing the Young Woman from *within* the space of the waiting room, yet whilst she remains *outside* of it, staring directly at the camera from behind a translucent door window (Figure 2). As a result, this shot cleaves open a distance conspicuously absent from the proximity of the close-ups and medium close-ups that precede it, with this distance being amplified still further by the fact that the

Figure 1. The Young Woman waits at the station.

Figure 2. The Young Woman peers through the door of the waiting room.

Figure 3. The back of the Young Woman's head.

text imprinted on the window—"Second Class: Waiting Room"—impedes our view of her face, partially masking it. No longer is the spectator permitted to contemplate the harmonious contours of the Young Woman in close-up, but rather confronted with a defaced image of her face, as she appears to scrutinize *us* from afar. Shortly after, Goldenberg choreographs the Young Woman in a comparable manner, once more concealing the contours of her countenance from the spectator by instead focusing on the back of her head, until an abrupt twist of the neck thrusts her face back into visibility (Figures 3 and 4). Subverting the harmonious visible unity of earlier close-ups, both of these shots point towards the influence of

Figure 4. The Young Woman turns her neck so that her face is visible once again.

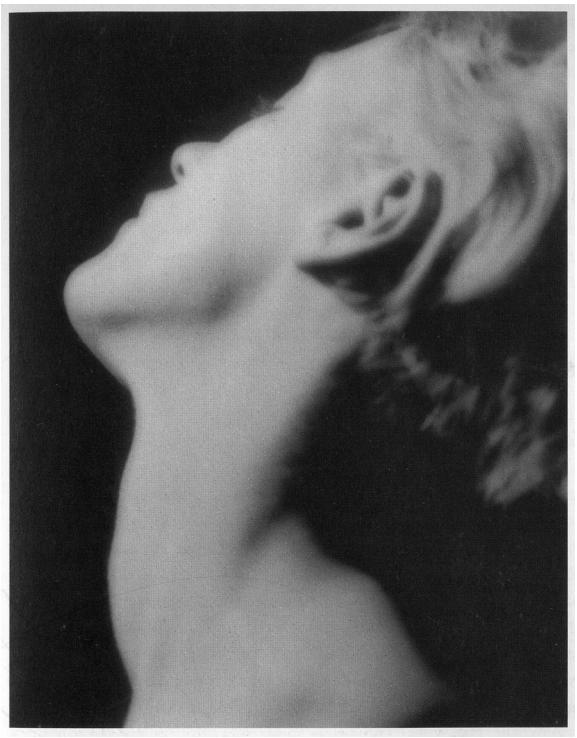

Figure 5. *Neck (Lee Miller)* by Man Ray.

Surrealist and late-modernist aesthetics on the narrative, with Angela Dalle Vacche defining Surrealist art as populated by "faces that are turned away, effaced, cracked or distorted" (Vacche 2010, 184), as within Man Ray's *Neck (Lee Miller)* (1930; Figure 5), Salvador Dalí's *Mae West's Face which May be Used as a Surrealist Apartment* (1935), or René Magritte's *The Son of Man* (1964), whilst Margaret Werth has pointed out that "identity, physiognomy, and expression become increasingly opaque in visual modernism, producing [the type of] unreadable faces" that we see in Odilon

Redon's *Dans mon rêve, je vis au Ciel un VISAGE DE MYSTÈRE* (1885) (Werth 2006, 83). In their imagery of masking, these shots lastly forecast those used in the final scene of the film, although in this later scene—as I show below—the act of concealment is neither physical nor visible but psychological and invisible, akin to deception.

Just as Goldenberg uses the image-track to express the increasing obscurity of the Young Woman's face, so too does he use the sound-track used to express the looming ambiguity of the Soldier's face. This ambiguity is introduced when the spectator hears the following excerpt of disembodied commentary, presumably articulated by the Soldier (considering its timbre and content), yet *before* his train has arrived at the station, that is to say, *before* either the Young Woman or the spectator has been exposed to a visible image of his visage.

> I know, you are at the train station. I am looking for your face. What I have gone through might prevent you from recognising me. My train arrives in a few minutes. Yes, I have changed. I am free. You should smile, with that smile I love. Yes, I always touch my eyebrow whilst thinking.

Revolving, as it does, around the complete visual absence of the Soldier—his body, his face, his mouth—this monologue is an unquestionably important moment in *Le Retour*. Not only does it eschew the illusion of voice-body unity and presence that classical sound cinema crafts through synchronized speech (often facilitated through shot/reverse shots that visualize the faces/mouths of characters, as they speak from a clearly demarcated position within the mise-en-scène) (Doane 1980, 34, 47). But it also destabilizes the specificity of the medium itself, edging the film notably toward the non-imagistic esthetics of other media, for instance, radio broadcasting or literature. Tramor Quemeneur goes further than this,[11] suggesting that the Soldier's commentary should specifically be understood as an example of the type of spoken letters that scaffold much of the sound-track in *Secteur postal 89098* (see below). Yet if it is true that later excerpts from the Soldier's commentary allude to the act of letter-writing—"I regret writing those letters," he ruminates at one point, before emphasizing: "but who would I have sent them to, if not you?"—then it is equally true that at no point do the audio-visual properties of the sound-track confirm this reading unequivocally. Indeed, I would argue that much of the power of the Soldier's commentary arises precisely from the questions it poses without answers: can it justifiably be viewed as a spoken letter? Does the Soldier inhabit non-diegetic space or, less plausibly, off-screen space? And from which temporal plane is the Soldier speaking (the past, the present, or future)?

If the Soldier inhabits a liminal space, between (visual) absence and (acoustic) presence, then he is also positioned indeterminately, between

empowerment and disempowerment. Before his arrival, the Soldier is therefore portrayed as someone who possesses an apparently transcendental ability to perceive the Young Woman, even if he is temporally and spatially removed from the immediate mise-en-scène she inhabits ("I know, you are in the train station," "I am looking for your face"). This ability has been theorized before. Michel Chion, for instance, famously coins the term "acousmêtre" to identify an invisible voice-character who derives "omniscient powers" (Chion 1999, 23) of perception from this state of invisibility, leading Mary Ann Doane to define the same type of disembodied voice as "capable of interpreting the image, producing its truth" (Doane 1980, 42). After the Soldier's arrival, however, everything changes—and he is revealed to be little more than a defeated antihero, incapable of the type of bombastic romantic gesture famously performed, for instance, by the returning sailor subject of Alfred Eisenstaedt's photo, *V-J Day in Times Square* (Figures 6 and 7). In an important monograph on masculine subjectivity, Kaja Silverman has explored the iconographies of the Hollywood "reintegration drama," a category of cinema in which "the 'hero' returns from [war] with a physical or psychic wound, marking him as somehow deficient, and rendering him incapable of functioning smoothly in civilian life" (see *The Best Years of Our Lives* [Wyler, 1946] or *It's a Wonderful Life* [Capra, 1946]) (Silverman 1992, 53). In my book, *Late-colonial French Cinema: Filming the Algerian War of Independence* (Sharpe 2023c, 33-101), I make a similar assertion, deducing that one of the defining visual motifs of French films made during the decolonization of Algeria is the figure of the "lost" soldier, who returns from Algeria both traumatized and victimized by a conflict beyond their control. Deeply implicated in this military

Figure 6. The Soldier drifts along the platform towards the Young Woman.

Figure 7. *V-J Day in Times Square,* by Alfred Eisenstaedt.

imaginary, this scene thus stages various forms of "loss," all of which are tied to the "deficient" body of the Soldier, as he drifts listlessly along the platform. These include: a loss of vocality, in that the Soldier is completely silent, addressing nobody; a loss of mobility, in that the Soldier's gait is alternately brittle, listless, or static, certainly compared to the other travelers; a loss of visuality, in that the Soldier is curiously unable to optically locate his partner, even if she is able to optically locate him; and, lastly, a loss of facial expressivity, in that the Soldier's countenance is notably immobilized by a lack of gesticulation, forming an example of the type of "cold mask" (Sharpe 2023c, 64) adopted by actors such as Alain Delon and

Jean-Louis Trintignant to play demobilized soldiers (see, for example, Alain Cavalier's *L'Insoumis/The Unvanquished*, [1964] and *Le Combat dans l'île*). Inverting the ontological logic of power that subtends his commentary, once visualized, the Soldier thus emerges in *Le Retour* as a principally negative entity: rather than all-knowing, he does *not* know that his partner is waiting for him; rather than all-seeing, he does *not* see that she is hidden right beside him; and rather than uttering impossible truths, he conspicuously says nothing, to anyone, about anything. Functioning synecdochally, it is through the "lost" body of the Soldier that Goldenberg conveys the imminent loss of a conflict for the French army collectively.

The Mask That Fails

In one of the rare readings of *Le Retour*, Joseph Daniel summarizes the plot of Goldenberg's film as comprising "the heartbreak of departure, couples torn apart by absence, and the uncertainty of the return" (Daniel 1972, 338). The first time that this "uncertainty" manifests itself in the film is when the Young Woman recognizes her soldier-lover as he descends from the train. Turning, as it does, around three wide shots of the Soldier on the platform, edited together with three close-ups of the Young Woman, as she gazes both directly at him *and* at the spectator, this event is stylistically notable insofar as it features an instance of a 180-degree direct address reverse shot, a formal technique famously used by Fritz Lang in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (1933) (Chion 1999, 42–43) (Figure 8). It also catalyzes two further peripeteia (turning points) in the film. Thus, at the precise moment when we expect the Young Woman to rush amorously toward her soldier-partner, she does the opposite, remaining paralyzed by a stream of unverbalised emotions; and at the precise moment when we expect the two lovers to embrace each other in ardor, the Young Woman

Figure 8. The Young Woman peers both directly at the camera and at the Soldier after the latter disembarks from his train.

further thwarts our expectations, hiding from the Soldier within the crowds that surround her (Figures 9 and 10). Intertextually speaking, Goldenberg's masterful audiovisualisation of this failed encounter is in dialogue with at least three cinematic traditions. First, both the pantomimic[12] acting style adopted by Lucie Arnold and the static medium long shots used by the director remind us of earlier cinematic works, for example, *The Adventurer* (Chaplin, 1917), in which the camera frames Charlie Chaplin as he performs a series of comic actions, usually during unbroken long takes. As Marilyn Fabe contends, "the movements of Chaplin's character must occur in real-time (as opposed to the artificial time created through editing), in order to be as convincing and funny as they are" (Fabe 2004, 53). Second, this scene draws from a cycle of post-World War Two Hollywood films—for example *Tender Comrade* (Dmytryk, 1943), *Since You Went Away* (Cromwell, 1944), *Pride of the Marines* (Daves, 1945), and *Waterloo Bridge* (LeRoy, 1940)—in which train stations provide a "stage" for "the rupturing of individual heterosexual couples," "strongly emphasizing female affect" (this trope can also be seen in late-colonial French films, including Enrico's *La Belle vie* and *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg/The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* [Demy, 1964]) (Wojcik 2023). And third, it approximates the sexual and gendered politics of the various post-Liberation French films listed at the start of this article. When Susan Weiner describes André Cayatte's aforementioned work, *Avant le déluge* (1954), as turning around a young woman who indulges in "inexplicable behavior," "victimizing boys who have already been traumatized by wartime," she could have been

Figure 9. The Young Woman gazes at the Soldier after hiding herself from him.

Figure 10. The Young Woman conceals herself within the crowd that surrounds her.

summarizing this scene (Weiner 2001, 136–137). Ultimately, to rephrase the quotation attributed to Joseph Daniel at the start of this paragraph, it is not the Soldier who threatens to "tear the couple apart," but his emotionally "uncertain" partner.

This "uncertainty" is expressed in other ways too. In his work *Screening the Face,* Paul Coates has talked about how certain late-modernist art films—for example *Persona* (1966), by Ingmar Bergman—feature the recurring trope of "the facial mask that fails" (Coates 2012, 2, 21). According to Coates, this trope is predicated upon a dialectic: between, on the one hand, images of a character—often a young woman—who deceives others by adopting certain facial expressions (hence the facial mask), and, on the other hand, the use of audio-visual strategies that expose this behavior as an act of dissimulation or deception (hence the *failure* of the mask in question). In *Le Retour*, a similar dialectic can be discerned in two scenes, both of which take place towards the end of the narrative. In the first of these, Goldenberg pairs a mid-shot of the Young Woman's becalmed face with an interior monologue—that is to say, an excerpt of internal, and thus invisible, speech—with this monologue providing further details about her ambivalence toward the Soldier ("you came back and I'm alone. I couldn't call out for you. You didn't line up with what I remembered," etcetera).[13] Cleaving open a disjuncture between sound and image, voice and body, it is a scene in which the anguish of Young Woman's monologue encourages us to interpret the composure of her face as an emotional façade, or *mask*, that does not correspond to her feelings (Figure 11).

Figure 11. The Young Woman's becalmed face as she agonises about the Soldier's return.

Figure 12. The Soldier and the Young Woman.

A comparable example of this trope occurs after the Young Woman has paid an impromptu visit to the Soldier's apartment, when the couple are depicted clenched in embrace (Figures 12 and 13). Fifty-eight-seconds long, the final shot of this scene, and indeed of the film, is notably one that bears many similarities with those used in Bergman's *Persona* (Figures 14 and 15), emphasizing the conspicuous silence of the Young Woman by combining an extended long take with an instance of visual direct address (also known as a fourth wall break). As Tom Brown claims, "direct address presents a clear challenge to voyeuristic fantasies of [spectatorial] separation" (Brown 2012, 7),

Figure 13. The Young Woman turns to face the camera as the Soldier embraces her.

Figure 14. An instance of visual direct address during the final seconds of the film.

Figure 15. Elisabet Vogler in Bergman's *Persona*.

fissuring the hermetically diegetic world characteristic of classical Hollywood cinema, and—in the case of *Le Retour*—reminding the spectator of the tremor of "uncertainty" that the Young Woman experiences when the Soldier disembarks from his train, captured as it is, through comparable sound-image relations. This shot also features a slow facial track-in, a formal technique that has often been used to amplify the impression that a character is psychologically distant from others, by increasing the spatial proximity between them and the camera. Both *Citizen Kane* (Welles, 1941) and *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), for example, revolve around this psycho-spatial dialectic, with the effects of it being most evident at the end of Hitchcock's film, when the camera famously tracks toward the face of Norman Bates, "depicting a drive towards the revelation of [the] secret" that he withholds from other characters (Bordwell and Thompson 1997, 252) (Figure 16). In Luchino Visconti's film, *Vaghe stelle dell'Orsa/Sandra* (1965), meanwhile, we find each of the audio-visual strategies parsed above—characterological silence, extended long takes, *and* slow camera movement (although this "movement" is an optical illusion performed by zooms)—all of which are employed in a similar way: to gesture toward the incestuous desire that the central character, Sandra, secretly harbors for her brother (Aumont 1992, 158–159). Hence Jacques Aumont's claim that the face of Sandra "seems to fold back on itself," insistently "undone," as it is, by the form of the film (Aumont 1992, 158). Ultimately, although the act committed by Sandra in Visconti's work is both more sexual and transgressive than the one committed by the Young Woman in Goldenberg's work (incest vs. uncertainty), the final scene of *Le Retour* can be said to operate in a comparable manner. Thus, even as this scene dramatizes the Young Woman as she performs a masquerade of innocence and affection (visiting her partner, letting him embrace her, shedding tears when he does so), so too do the Surrealist-modernist formal techniques used therein defamiliarise her face, recalling Mary Ann Doane's description of the figure of the *femme fatale* as exemplifying "a disparity between seeming and being, the visible and the knowable" (Doane 1991, 46). And even as

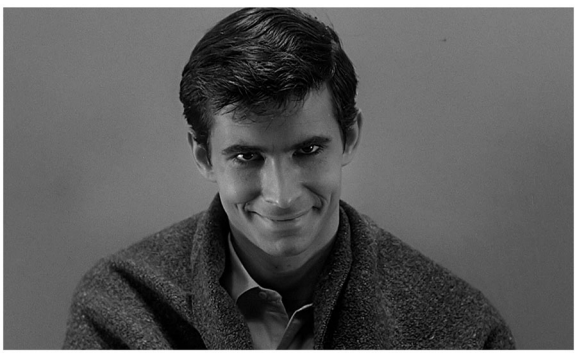

Figure 16. Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho*.

this scene depicts the Soldier as he unquestionably accepts the affective authenticity of her face, so too do the same techniques obliquely *reveal* to the spectator that the Young Woman is *concealing* something underneath it, pointing toward the repressed presence of guilty secrets. As we will soon see, this visual idiom—of a female facial mask that fails—is one that is also embedded into the plot of *Secteur postal 89098*.

Secteur Postal 89098 (1961)

Filmed over the course of four weekends in 1959 by Philippe Durand, a former soldier whose service in Algeria was cut short in 1956 after losing a leg in combat, *Secteur postal 89098* is unequivocally one of the most deeply affective yet critically neglected[14] French films released during the decolonization of Algeria. As with *Le Retour*, *Secteur postal 89098* focuses largely on the figure of an unnamed young woman (played by Nathalie Pasco, listed as "Her/She" in the screenplay, and henceforth referred to as "the Woman"), who does little more than meander melancholically around Paris and its environs (including the 1st, 7th, 16th and 18th arrondissements), thinking about, and waiting for, her soldier-boyfriend, Pierre (Claude Debord) to return from Algeria, and traveling to, and from, her workplace (an office located in the 7th arrondissement), all the while dreaming about becoming a model. Set largely in the streets of the capital, and totally devoid of scenes of combat, that is to say, of soldiers frozen into a state of fear or belligerence by the war, to look at the image-track of *Secteur postal 89098* is thus to be exposed to a series of episodic urban perambulations that appear sometimes prosaic, sometimes poetic, often temporally disorientating, but seldom psychologically traumatic, and never explicitly physically violent. Raymond Borde, for example, compares the image-track to "photos taken during a family outing on a Sunday" (Borde 1962, 16). It is only once we attune our critical and perceptual faculties to the repertoire of late-modernist formal strategies weaponised by Durand—notably his decision to completely replace all synchronized sounds, including speech, with a series of what Michel Chion has called unvisualised monologues (Chion 1994, 73), unvisualised in that they are never articulated by a mouth that we see—that we realize how aesthetically ambitious, politically singular, and thematically disturbing, *Secteur postal 89098* really is. We will return to the question of the voice in the final section of this analysis, for now, all the reader needs to know is that, as within *Le Retour*, the provenance of the speech woven into the sound-track is often extremely ambiguous.

Made with a combination of private funds and financial support from friends (Arnault 1970, 32), *Secteur postal 89098* was first screened in June

1960, when it was awarded the coveted *Prix des Offices* at the UFOLEIS amateur cinema contest in Beaune, France (Layerle 2016, 280). Nonetheless, the exposure generated during this event proved to be short-lived, when the film was almost immediately subjected to a total ban by the censorship commission in October 1961, under the pretense that it formed an "intolerable" advertisement for "military insubordination" (Lefèvre 1997, 42–43). Not that this ban dissuaded Durand from replying to the censors with an equal amount of opprobrium: "you have banned my film. But I don't think that I should feel guilty or ashamed about anything," he wrote bluntly in a letter addressed to them (Lefèvre 1997, 42–43). Nor did it dissuade him from contributing to further films about the situation in Algeria. As Sébastien Layerle points out (Layerle 2016, 285, 288), Durand would go on to participate in at least two other projects about the war: one, a short film entitled *Le Passager/The Traveler* (Cros, 1964), about a young woman who helps a member of the FLN to hide from the police (Durand was the screenwriter); one entitled *La Permission/On Leave* (Chevalier, 1968), about a soldier who returns from Algeria to his family in 1958 (Durand provided both "artistic advice" and spoken commentary to this project). In fact, during his lifetime (1932–2007), Durand directed more than fifty films (captured mainly on 35 mm and 16 mm); wrote four illuminating academic textbooks on film theory (including one published by the internationally renowned, Éditions du Cerf); taught classes on film theory and practice at *l'Institut Lumière*, in Lyon, and *Les Beaux-Arts de Quimper*; co-organized the *Premier Festival* (set up in 1964 to promote independent cinema); and co-edited the renowned journal *Image et son* (Layerle 2016, 276–291). Despite this prodigious output, Durand was, and remains, an almost entirely unknown figure in the anglophone academic world. For readers interested in consulting *Secteur postal 89098*, the film can currently be watched for free online; likewise, for Cros's *Le Passager*.[15]

Two Faces: One Absent, One Eroticised

In the second shot of *Secteur postal 89098*, a face—the Woman's face—held in abeyance at a three-quarter angle, in close-up, presents itself to us. A pair of refined eyebrows arch above two dark eyes, ringed with under-eye skin, cast into shadow. A curve of full lips, pursed in non-speech, lie perpendicular to a stretch of glossy hair, which edges, in turn, down the right-hand margin of the screen. A vast envelope of porcelain skin, unscathed by the ravages of age, illness or epidermal functions (perspiration, twitching, blotchiness), constitutes a central facial column of sorts, evoking the pale composure of Audrey Hepburn. Unembellished by excessive make-up, this skin is preserved in a state of unsullied purity, of exquisite chastity, of

limpid beauty. Tentatively, a female voice rings out in the sound-track, apparently alluding to the name of a man who had once stood upon the unoccupied bucolic pathway, visualized in the opening shot of the film, yet now absent from it: "Pierre."

Subtly subverting the cinematic convention of the shot/reverse shot by conjugating the face of a woman with a space in which a face *is not* rather than *is*, together these two shots form a deceptively beguiling, and subtly disorientating, start to the film. They also gesture toward one of the main themes in *Secteur postal 89098*: absence, or to be even more precise, Pierre's absence from Paris, having been shipped off to fight in French Algeria before the narrative is launched into orbit. True, in the very next scene—as within certain other parts of the film—the spectator is disarmed by idealized images of Pierre and the Woman, frolicking amorously in backstreets, parks, and woodlands, located in and around the commune, Chaumont-en-Vexin, suggesting that the central temporality of the narrative perhaps chronicles his return (Figure 17). But, actually, close examination of these scenes, which are sometimes, although not always, bracketed by close-ups of the Woman as she closes her eyes, apparently indulging in a moment of recall, alongside the commentary with which they are paired,[16] reveals that they are most likely composed of distant flashbacks that emanate from her psyche, leading us to a somewhat startling conclusion: that not once in the present-tense of the story does Pierre feature as an embodied image.

The subtext of absence is a subtext that pervades many late-colonial French films made during—and in response to—the Algerian War of

Figure 17. Pierre embraces his partner in a wooded enclave.

Independence. Most of the time, these films are populated with soldiers who endeavor to reintegrate themselves into a society from which they have been absent, for example, Frédéric in Enrico's aforementioned *La Belle vie*; Bernard in Alain Resnais's *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour/Muriel, or The Time of Return* (1963); Antoine in Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1962); Gérard in Carpita's *Demain L'amour*; the soldier protagonist of Guy Chalon's *58 2/B* (1959); alongside the "lost" veteran of Goldenberg's *Le Retour*. Other times, the protagonist in question endeavors to live in a society from which they will soon be absent, for example, Michel in Jacques Rozier's *Adieu Philippine*, and the prospective soldier of Ado Kyrou's Surrealism-inspired *Parfois le Dimanche/Sometimes on Sunday* (1959). Less common are films dedicated to exploring the emotional fallout of military duty as the individual in question is performing it, as within *Secteur postal 89098*. In his monograph *Guerre et cinéma/War and Cinema*, Joseph Daniel identifies one such film, classifying Jacques Demy's aforementioned musical, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, as a narrative that is largely, if not exclusively, devoted to chronicling how the departure of a young soldier-mechanic named Guy (Nino Castelnuovo) "has deformed the memories" of his girlfriend Geneviève (Catherine Deneuve), "eroding their love" (Daniel 1972, 348), and catapulting her, somewhat guiltily, into a relationship with another man. Despite being draped in an aesthetically pleasing haze of Eastman colors and operatic dialogues, at the core of Demy's psychodrama thus lies a dark psycho-sexual message: that no matter how amorous or ardent soldiers in Algeria might be, the devotion of their partners cannot be guaranteed, and betrayal is not just to be expected, but practically inevitable. In his compelling book, *Stars in Modern French Film*, Guy Austin goes further, conjecturing that the control Geneviève willingly surrenders in her body, through infidelity, is recuperated and channeled into the lineaments of her face, as the latter, slowly but surely, morphs, from a landscape redolent with emotions, with affect, with feelings, to one positively devoid of them: a de-personlised, de-subjectified, "white mask" (Austin 2003, 42). It is a motif upon which I have already touched in relation to *Le Retour,* and to which we will shortly return.

Like Geneviève in *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, and the Young Woman in *Le Retour*, the Woman in Durand's film is someone who presents herself, at least initially, as devoted to her absent partner, Pierre. Apart from the aforementioned close-up that opens the narrative, numerous early scenes depict her alone, strolling plaintively through the capital, pensive and contemplative, drained of volition, thinking about him, and reminiscing about their past together. Often, these images are conjoined with monologues that support such a reading, painting a picture of the Woman as a lover bereft, sullen and sedate, pining for her soulmate, without whom

she cannot—will not—survive. It is only once the Woman has taken time to reflect upon how lacking in excitement her life is in Paris, and how long Pierre has been in French Algeria ("one hundred and thirty-four Sundays without you," she intones at one point), does the anesthetised innocence of her porcelain face suddenly begin to crack, in a scene that is as elliptical as it is disturbing.

The scene in question begins when the Woman is captured perambulating at Montmartre, a topographic vantage point offering unimpeded views over Paris. As we gaze at her profile, she gazes at the horizon, smoking a cigarette. Calm reigns. It is at this point that diegetic footage of the Woman's face yields to a rapid montage of twenty-one, non-diegetic visual inserts, some of which are composed of still images, transposed, for example, from advertising material used to promote the release of popular films, few of which last more than two seconds, and many of which feature young white female film stars, in various stages of undress. Two shots in this montage, for instance, are taken from promotional photographs, alternating between Brigitte Bardot, a *brisé* fan in-hand, on the set of *La Femme et le Pantin/The Devil is a Woman* (Duvivier, 1959), and Romy Schneider, peering salaciously into a mirror in *Die Halbzarte/Eva* (Thiele, 1959). Others are plucked from promotional posters used to advertise the release of Luis Saslavsky's 1959 film, *Ce corps tant désiré/Way of the Wicked*, and Alessandro Blasetti's 1959 documentary, *Nuits d'Europe/European nights*. In the former, the spectator discovers the legs of a scantily clad Belinda Lee—the star of Saslavsky's erotically charged drama, whereas the latter visualizes the fetishized heads of three cabaret dancers, bedecked in feathers. Still other shots represent nothing more than a fragment of an unidentified female body: two eyes, looming, like orbs; a knee sheathed seductively into a stocking, and so on.[17]

Ricocheting frantically between the bodies of these women, none of whom have previously appeared in the narrative, nor will reappear in the narrative, nor even have any direct relevance to the narrative, other than the fact that they have attained the status of cover-girl stardom to which the Woman discreetly aspires, it is no exaggeration to describe this as a supremely disconcerting moment in the film. Part of the reason that this scene is *so* disconcerting, I think, is because it illustrates, even exemplifies, the radical potential of film form to alter the meaning of film content, echoing, in turn, Durand's own compelling and comprehensive historical-theoretical research on Soviet Montage, as elaborated in his book, *Moteur! Coupez!/Motor! Cut!* (Durand 1988, 261–319). Durand's use of editing during this scene, for example, not only clearly evokes the parameters of high velocity cutting at play in many of Sergei Eisenstein's films, including *Stachka/Strike* (1925), *Bronenosets Potyomkin/Battleship Potemkin* (1925), and

Oktyabr': Desyat' dney kotorye potryasli mir/October: Ten Days That Shook the World (1927), but also pleats the bodies of the aforementioned female stars—the content of the shots—into a grotesque slide-show of heads and limbs that flicker spasmodically in and out of on-screen space. To this use of excessive editing, we may add a similarly excessive use of framing, with Durand's frenzied combination of close-ups, extreme close-ups, wide shots, and long shots, again approximating the scale and proportion-orientated formalism of Eisenstein's films, where one witnesses perceptual leaps, "from face to body, and from body to other detail, to the setting, and the image as a whole"—all of which is symptomatic of an "eccentric-ecstatic" focus on "corporeality" (Steimatsky 2017, 47). Aggressively funneled through Durand's Soviet-inspired montage, the female film stars that feature within this "scene" are instead reduced to nothing more than a vulgar agglomeration of over-sexualized, and under-represented, body-parts.

But perhaps the most discordant—and most confounding—aspect of this montage can be found in neither the literal cuts that Durand carves in the filmic image through editing, nor the representational cuts that he carves in the female star-body through framing, both of which are characteristic of a modernist emphasis on bodily fragmentation (Coates 2012, 24), but rather in the connections cultivated through these cuts, and, more specifically, the ways in which the camera returns insistently to the face of the Woman, three times, as the montage develops. To be sure, at no point in this scene does Durand assemble any kind of explicit or specific analogy between *their* bodies and *her* visage, both of which seem to jostle for visibility, whilst the screen splinters into quasi-abstraction. Rather, the overarching logic of this scene seems to be governed by a more supple, associative logic, evoking Lev Kuleshov's famous experiments in Soviet Montage, during which the impassive face of Ivan Mosjoukine was intercut with three different images—a bowl of soup, a girl dead in a coffin, and a woman lying seductively on a sofa—in turn, assembling the illusion that Mosjoukine was experiencing three different emotions: hunger, sorrow and lust.[18] Lodged syntagmatically in-between the non-diegetic female star bodies that frame her, as Mosjoukine was lodged syntagmatically in-between the non-diegetic objects that framed him, the face of the Woman thus exits this scene irrevocably and indelibly altered. No longer pristine nor pure, through the power of montage, the lineaments of her visage seem to darken, accruing the burden of the "grotesque" shots of female sexuality that surround her, and therefore ultimately intimating that just beneath the glossy weave of the Woman's blank face lurks a mind aroused by an aberrant maelstrom of erotic desires.[19] For the first time in the film, the Woman is depicted as sexually guilty.

Sexual Guilt and Emotional Deception

In the opening remarks of this article, I listed a number of postwar films in which women are framed as deceptive: from the post-Occupation *noir* deception that pervades *Panique* and *Quai des Orfèvres*, to the late-colonial deception that pervades *Les Yeux sans visage*, *Le Petit soldat* and *Le Retour*. Like these narratives, *Secteur postal 89098* too envisions the female face as an elusive territory that expressly does not divulge the thoughts, feelings, fantasies of its owner. But where directors such as Duvivier, Franju and Godard generally stage this deception through synchronized dialogue, performed between two protagonists—a woman who lies, and a man who doesn't—Durand adopts a subtly different approach, cleaving open a comparable epistemological crisis within a single protagonist, who appears, curiously, to lie to herself: the Woman. Two facial close-ups in particular illustrate this point, both of which occur when the Woman is alone. During the first of these—a nocturnal shot, set again at Montmartre—we are invited to contemplate the Woman's becalmed face, positioned at a three-quarter angle, as a unvisualised voice rings out, ostensibly tracing the train of her thoughts: "Pierre, you should know that you need to come back, that I am waiting for you." There is just one problem: the Woman articulates this internal monologue almost immediately after she has been seen entwined in a romantic embrace with an unidentified male character (henceforth referred to as the "Other Man," played by Claude Hainaut); in short, when her patience with Pierre has already expired, and her loyalty has already snapped, following an implied struggle with illicit carnal cravings. Even more startling is a further shot that occurs not long after this one, when the Woman is likewise captured abruptly from close-up, her lips now curled into a delicate smile. Yet even as Durand represents the Woman's face as open and innocent, so too does he juxtapose it against a further troubling monologue that again appears to flow out her mind. "How can you think that the passing of time won't affect our love?" the Woman barks, bitterly—as her face, beams, blissfully—before insisting: "How can you think that things are going in the same direction as the desires of the heart?"

Evoking both David Bordwell's understanding of the art film as one in which teleological logic is broken in favor of episodic ambiguity (Bordwell 1979, 60), and András Bálint Kovács's conception of the late-modernist film as one that foregrounds an alienated and abstract individual "who has lost the foundations of her personality" (Kovács 2007, 66), in different ways, shots such as these are clearly designed to worry rather than reassure the spectator, forcing us to radically question not only the authenticity of the information that the Woman transmits through the quivering cadence of her words, but also the authenticity of the emotions that she telegraphs

through the surface of her now mask-like face. Throughout much of the psychologically jarring and temporally hazy second half of *Secteur postal 89098,* uncertainties about the Woman thus abound. Why does the Woman promise to remain devoted to Pierre ("nobody will ever make me smile like you"), if this promise is emphatically broken almost as soon as it has been made? Why does the Woman constantly mutter Pierre's name when in the presence of the Other Man?[20] Does she engage in sexual activity with the Other Man, as one, particularly elliptical scene, set in woodland, ostensibly suggests, or is this a flashback of a moment of erstwhile intimacy with Pierre?[21] The only thing that we can be sure of (or can we?) during all of these scenes is that the Woman has guiltily entered into a relationship with a new lover who is not Pierre—compensating for the loss of love engendered in his absence through lust—before naively convincing herself, consciously or unconsciously, that some kind of future with her beloved former partner is still not only possible, but positively probable. And that, due to her increasingly mercurial behavior, which often teeters so close to the precipice of the illogical that it seems potentially pathological, the Woman is not to be trusted. Especially as she herself is apparently incapable of separating truth from illusion.

Epistles and Atrocity

At the start of this section, I alluded briefly to the audio-visual virtuosity of *Secteur postal 89098,* pointing towards, without elaborating upon, Durand's decision to erase all traces of synchronized sound (and therefore all traces of synchronized dialogue), from his film, which instead features a series of incredibly rich, yet obscure, unvisualised monologues, performed by the Woman and Pierre. Sometimes these monologues seem to be instances of the type of interior diegetic speech that we find in *Le Retour*, specifically when the Young Woman is depicted sitting outside a café. In fact, we have already examined two examples of this phenomenon in *Secteur postal 89098*: firstly, in the close-up of the Woman that surges forth into on-screen space in the first few seconds of the film, whilst a female voice—presumably echoing the Woman's thoughts—softly pleads "Pierre," and secondly in the aforementioned shots of the Woman "deceiving herself." Frequently, however, this interpretation does not seem to hold water, and the monologues we hear in *Secteur postal 89098* instead appear to be exercises in the kind of non-diegetic "voice-over dialogues" (Martin 2013, 270) woven into Alain Resnais's 1959 film, *Hiroshima mon amour*, before we realize that Durand's film is even more unconventional than this, and the words spoken in the sound-track actually correspond to a series of written *letters*. Hence the title of the film, which translates as *Postal Sector 89098*.[22]

At once paralleling and re-configuring the conventions of what have been called "epistolary films" (Rascaroli 2017, 143–163) and "film-letters" (Naficy 2001, 101–132), close examination of the sound-track of *Secteur postal 89098* reveals that it features approximately 15 verbalized epistolary correspondences: seven from the Woman, six from Pierre, although, in contrast to the vast majority of "film-letters," at no point do we see the characters actually engaged in writing. Sometimes these correspondences display lexical traces of a dialogue between Pierre and the Woman (as when he confirms that she is "bored" with her job after she has suggested precisely that), yet frequently they seem to be written/articulated by two people who either don't listen to each other's concerns or are more concerned with their own (as when she responds to his extended testimony regarding "mutilated" soldiers by immediately dragging the conversation back to her emotions: "one hundred and thirty-four Sundays without you"). Not only that, but often these correspondences seem to form no more than a de-contextualised fragment of a much longer epistle to which we are neither visually nor orally exposed ("Pierre"; "A Sunday without you"). It is during these moments that the boundary between verbalized thoughts and verbalized words becomes blurred (especially when the monologue in question is matched with a close-up), preventing the spectator from grasping the ontological contours of the speech heard, and positioning the film in proximity to similar modernist experiments in "image-over narration" (Naficy 2001, 146–151), conducted, for example, by Chris Marker, in his 1957 *Lettre de Sibérie/Letter from Siberia*, or Jonas Mekas, in *Lost, Lost, Lost* (1976). As Hamid Naficy claims, "image-over narration casts doubt on the identity of the speaking subject, the addressee of the epistles, and the voice that is reading them" (Naficy 2001, 122). Other times, the sheer length of the spoken epistles included in *Secteur postal 89098* (many of which are over twenty-five lines long in the screenplay, lasting between 2 and 3 minutes in the film, and bridging several shots), suggests that they represent an entire letter, transposed in its totality, from pen to voice, from page to speech.

In his book, *France's Undeclared War*, Martin Evans has talked about the stream of letters, send by conscripts and reservists engaged in combat in Algeria, to partners and family members, in France (Evans 2012, 169–170). Sometimes testimonial, often personal, and occasionally harrowing, it was effectively through these letters, these epistles, that the metropolitan public first privately learnt of the atrocities being committed during the war, before a small group of anti-colonial publishers, flouting the parameters of official censorship, began to make them available, publicly. Hence, the publication of *De La pacification à la répression/From Pacification to Repression* (Muller 1957), a compilation of letters written by a Christian soldier named Jean Muller, fatally wounded during service; *Des rappelés témoignent/Mobilised*

Reservists Bear Witness (Anon 1957), a pamphlet of twenty-four texts, composed of letters, diary entries, and written testimonies, to which the publication of two more recent epistolary collections can be added.[23] "Written to loved ones during long bouts of lassitude and boredom," rarely did these letters "hold back," parses Evans, but rather "confided, in detail, the horror of the war" (Evans 2012, 169). Raphaëlle Branche has come to a slightly different conclusion, describing how the same letters formed both a source of joy and anxiety for French soldiers in Algeria, especially if the letter in question contained distressing news (the death of a loved one, the end of a relationship), or didn't arrive as expected (Branche 2003, 408).

Drenched in a similar tenor of "horror" and "anxiety," and often paired with Baroque, non-diegetic chords, played by a lute (the only music we hear in the film), much of Pierre's correspondence sounds like a verbalized version of these written epistles. At one point in the film, for instance, he recalls "finding three squadron leaders naked and mutilated," in what could plausibly be interpreted as an allusion to an infamous ambush-massacre committed by Algerian nationalists against French conscripts in Palestro, a town in French Algeria, in 1956.[24] At another, Pierre remembers hearing "jackals howling in the distance" on night-duty, before adding: "armed guards must have been beating them to shut them up." Reimagining Algerians tortured by the army as jackals struck into submission, the latter anecdote, in particular, is a brief yet especially disquieting moment of metaphor that regurgitates, almost verbatim, certain lines from *Des rappelés témoignent* ("yesterday, I thought I heard jackals, but as it continued […] I realized it was a child being tortured"[25]). It also evokes Jean-Paul Sartre's 1960 play, *Les Séquestrés d'Altona/The Condemned of Altona* (Sartre 1960), in which both "the victims and the perpetrators [of torture] become insect, vermin, cockroach, or crab" (Sanyal 2010, 61), or Stanislas Hutin's description of electrotorture as producing screams that sound "like a pig whose throat has been cut."[26] In each case, decolonization is envisioned as a nauseating and nightmarish, dehumanized dystopia. Still more intriguing is the fact that Pierre does not once implicate himself in the perpetration of these atrocities, the vast majority of which he associates with unnamed others: "men fighting over water"; "armed guards"; "a colonel in Constantine," who complains farcically about "being too hot." Nor are they generally articulated when Pierre occupies our field of vision—he is, after all, only visible as a flickering figment of his lover's memory in the first half of the film, and almost completely absent, as an embodied image, from the second half of it—but when our gaze is, instead, tellingly towed toward the fetishized face of the Woman, captured in close-up. As with Chris Marker's *Level Five* (1997), and Jean-Luc Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988-1998), *Secteur postal 89098* can, in this respect, be said to revolve around

what Isabelle McNeill has called "an alternative form of witnessing": one that, according to McNeill, "moves away from the face of the witness-survivor," and toward the female face, as "a site of testimony to the horrors of violence" (McNeill 2010, 121). In *Level Five*, this "violence" is linked to the Battle of Okinawa, in *Histoire(s) du cinéma,* to the Holocaust, and in *Secteur postal 89098*, to the Algerian War of Independence.

I have already outlined the ways in which Durand's narrative frames the Woman as guilty of precisely the two crimes imputed to the Young Woman in Goldenberg's *Le Retour*: betrayal and duplicity. Yet, like Georges Franju's representation of a young woman consumed by a desire to procure a new face for another through torture (*Les Yeux sans visage*), and like Jean-Luc Godard's representation of a female citizen who may or may not be guilty of delivering her lover into the torturous hands of the FLN (*Le Petit soldat*), *Secteur postal 89098* does more than that: it also elliptically intimates that the Woman is somehow guilty of complicity in the perpetration of colonial atrocities committed in French Algeria. In *Secteur postal 89098*, perhaps the most disquieting instance of this displacement of guilt occurs just after the eleventh minute of the film. Composed of nothing more than a single, thirteen-second long, close-up of the Woman, as she leans back against a tree, gently rocking her head from side to side, whilst languidly blinking, as if withdrawing in and out of the recesses of her psyche, in and of itself, there is nothing in this facial-image to suggest anything other than a pleasurable moment of apperception, contemplation, or perhaps erotic reverie, especially as the forest is the site of a previous erotic encounter. Still, when it comes to what we hear rather than what we view, disturbing emotions abruptly write themselves into the lineaments of her features, evoking Michel Chion's notion of screen speech,[27] when a protagonist located in off-screen or non-diegetic space orally addresses a protagonist on-screen, with our visual perception of the latter being subsequently altered by the auditory properties of the former. "Last night, three soldiers didn't come back. In one month, seventeen dead, twenty-one wounded," gravely intones an unseen Pierre, as the Woman's visage offers itself to us. The effect is stark, brutal, abhorrent: impossible to spirit away the epistolary allusions to "the dead and wounded" that seem to coarsen the mineral-white surface of the Woman's skin, metamorphosing the gentle horizontal swaying of her head into a nightmarish expression of psychic distress, and transforming the fluttering of her eyelids into what now appears to be an agonized attempt at shielding her vision, and therefore her memory, from the scenes of atrocity that she, rather than he, seems to have seen (Figure 18). A similar but even more brutal instance of "screen speech" occurs just over halfway into the film, when the Woman is pictured languidly strolling alongside the Seine.[28] Composed of almost

Figure 18. A close-up of the Woman's face as Pierre intones: '… seventeen dead, twenty-one wounded'.

2 minutes of tightly cropped tracking shots, depicting nothing other than the Woman's profile—her sleek brown hair esthetically framed against the tonalities of bleached-white clouds, suspended, in turn, in a gently overcast sky—one could hardly ask for a starker example of the fetishization of the female face that characterizes many of the peripatetic shots in *Secteur postal 89098*. But the calmer the image-track, the starker the sound-track, with Pierre practically assaulting the Woman's image with a litany of harrowing anecdotes about the war, for example, when he nostalgically rhapsodizes about a "soldier-friend who used to be a beekeeper," before clarifying: "his coffin was send to Lille"; or when he recalls his squadron "dragging wounded fellaghas [Algerian nationalists] to a mountainous ridge" after engaging in combat. Over and over does Pierre deliver such revelations, with the cumulative effect of this audio-visual montage being that the Woman's radiant skin seems once again burdened by Pierre's colonial guilt, a guilt at once articulated and distorted, shared and displaced: from his invisible body to her visible face. In this respect, *Secteur postal 89098* not only chronicles the trials and tribulations of a soldier who "confides the horror of the war" to his partner through a range of spoken epistles, to re-quote Martin Evans, but crucially goes further: transforming the face of the Woman into a silent screen onto which this horror, and guilt, is projected.

Conclusion

In an important chapter on how European cinemas represented female and national identities in the post-World War Two period (1945–1951), Ulrike Sieglohr opines,

> in contrast to cinematic narratives produced in a country which did not have to come to terms with the past but only post-war social changes [such as Britain], the cinema of a politically compromised country, such as France [after World War Two], stresses repression of the past and a traumatic rewriting of history by assigning guilt on a division of gender [and] constructing women as scapegoats. (Sieglohr 2000, 6, 10)

In this article, I have shown how *Le Retour* and *Secteur postal 89098* can be seen to perform a similar ideological gesture, "rewriting" the Algerian War of Independence: first, as a psychological rather than military battle; second, as propelled by psycho-sexual impulses rather than colonial and anti-colonial ideologies; third, as a drama that takes place in metropolitan France rather than French Algeria; and fourth, as a conflict in which female French citizens act in a psychologically abusive way toward their partners, a visual idiom that recalls Sieglohr's theories about how women in "politically compromised countries" are constructed as "scapegoats," alongside the process of gendered guilt displacement that I outlined in the introduction. In *Le Retour*, this displacement is facilitated through the emotional dynamics of a failed encounter: between a lost soldier and his increasingly ambivalent partner, with the latter slowly emerging in the intrigue as the film's duplicitous antagonist. In *Secteur postal 89098,* meanwhile, it is Pierre that adopts the position of the wounded soldier-victim, whilst his emotionally guilty lover indulges in a comparable campaign of psychological deception, as conveyed through the trope of the facial mask that fails. Finally, by repressing the guilt and emphasizing the trauma of returning French soldiers, both films craft what is fundamentally a military-centric, Eurocentric, and thus distorted, vision of the war, evoking Raya Morag's assertion that "members of societies that facilitate perpetration by putting soldiers in atrocity-producing situations are not interested in perpetrators acknowledging the traumatic deeds carried out in their name" (Morag 2013, 8), or Laura Mulvey's suggestion that colonial culture revolves around a "blind spot": "the site of crimes unseen or (overlooked) by its perpetrators" (Mulvey 2011, 254). Who *exactly* was guilty of committing the torture, rape and killing of Algerian nationalists and civilians in French Algeria? In their "traumatic rewriting of history," it is ultimately this question that neither film answers.

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Notes

1. Dilating the scope of our inquiry even further, Raya Morag has talked eloquently about how *Z32* (2008)—an Israeli documentary directly by Avi Mograbi—features non-fictional footage of an Israeli soldier who "transfers his guilt to his girlfriend" through what Morag calls "guilt transference." See Morag (2012, 107).
2. See, for example, Stora (1998, 2004), Scharold (2016), Croombs (2013), Donadey (2020), Flood 2017), Wallenbrock (2020), Astourian (2018) Sharpe (2003). This list is far from exhaustive.
3. During decolonisation, the state used four central tactics to dissuade directors from representing the war in a negative light: prohibition to spectators under the age of 16;

modifications and alterations; the establishment of pre-censorship (facilitated by the introduction of an interest-free loan, known as *l'avance sur recettes*); and a total ban for the most serious of infractions.

4. In Varda's film, the central protagonist's cancer-stricken body operates allegorically for the figurative colonial "cancer" consuming the nation, whilst Malle represents the war through the equally allegorical body of an impotent alcoholic.
5. Much has been made of this scene and how it challenged the regime of censorship in place at the time. Many scholars have pointed out that Godard effectively frames Algerian nationalists as guilty of partaking in precisely the type of torture methods that were—in reality—cultivated by the French army (electro and water torture), although whether Godard performs this act of subversion in a (failed) attempt at circumnavigating the censors is open to debate. It is also worth pointing out that Véronica's involvement in this act of betrayal is only ever obliquely implied. Much of the film, in fact, is permeated by an oblique modernist logic, raising many questions about Bruno's motivations that ultimately go unanswered. For a short yet informative summary of these discussions see Adams (2016, 108–117) or Sellier (2008, 134–139).
6. Liner notes for DVD release of *Le Combat dans l'île* (Radiance Films, Sharpe 2023a).
7. *Demain L'amour* can be seen here: https://www.cimalpes.fr/.
8. I have taken this term from Kovács (2007, 57, 59).
9. The film can be seen here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dVTLe8sAJb4>.
10. For more on this tension—between filmic images of open and closed mouths—see Doane (2021, 54, 61).
11. See Quemeneur (2023), details found at 19.30.
12. For more on this style of acting see Hansen (1991, 80).
13. For more on internal diegetic sound see Bordwell and Thompson (1997, 333).
14. For more information see Lefèvre (1997, 42–43), Daniel (1972, 338), and Chevassu (1962, 23–31).
15. The two films can be viewed here <https://www.cinematheque-bretagne.bzh/base-documentaire-secteur-postal-89-098-426-13144-0-1.html?ref=39508742be312ead8b9a686ddb0e0929> and here <https://louiscros.fr/le-passager>.
16. One of the reasons that these flashbacks are so ambiguous is because they are not framed by the constellation of visual, aural, and verbal cues that traditionally mark shifts in time in the classical Hollywood narrative. Instead, the spectator is forced to join the dots between the temporality of the Woman's monologues ("our bridge from long ago"; "I used to like your mouth on my stomach, the sun used to warm my skin"), and the content of the shots (the Woman and Pierre standing next to a bridge; images of Pierre kissing her bathed in sunlight). Often the relationship between these two elements, is however, tenuous.
17. As with many of the other scenes that I discuss here, this montage of shots is actually even more formally complex than this. For example, immediately before this montage takes place, the Woman makes an elliptical spoken reference to feeling "ashamed" about "reading promises in the newspapers," which at once appears to predict the promotional material that follows, whilst emphasising her status as "sexually guilty." This montage also includes a close-up of the Woman that will later re-emerge when she is first seen with the Other Man (see below), again scrambling conventional notions of causality, in favour of a more episodic, even hallucinatory, temporality. Moments such as these again encourage an understanding of the film as an example of modernist art cinema, on par with Alain Resnais's much more well known, and acclaimed, *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour*, or, for that matter, *Le Retour*.

18. As many scholars have pointed out, Kuleshov's experiment also generated two further illusions: firstly that Mosjoukine was looking at the objects in question, and secondly, that the emotions detailed above were being acted out through barely perceptible tremors in the landscape of his face.
19. Close examination of these images reveals a certain gendered-thematic inconsistency in Durand's imaginary. If, as I suggest, these images are intended to represent a visualisation of the Woman's (heterosexual) erotic urges, then a much more logical motif would be the *eroticised male body*. That Durand decides against this, consciously or not, is surely evidence of the heteronormative conventions that governed 1960s' French cinema.
20. The first time this occurs is when the spectator is introduced to the Other Man, fostering a sense of perceptual confusion. In other words, even as our gaze dimly registers the arrival of a new character in the diegesis, our ears are encouraged to falsely believe that this is Pierre.
21. In the two-shot scene we watch as an individual that vaguely resembles Pierre clambers down a precipice with the Woman, however as both are framed from behind, we cannot be sure that it is indeed him. The next shot—of limbs on a grassy embankment, presumably entwined in sex—could therefore hypothetically depict either Pierre and the Woman, or the Other Man and the Woman.
22. Postal sectors formed the crux of a system that enabled civilians to send letters from France, to their soldier-partners, in Algeria. For example, a letter might be addressed to "Sargent Loupin, SP 69421."
23. See, for example, Lefeuvre and Jungerman (2004); and Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger (2017).
24. As Raphaëlle Branche has detailed, these soldiers were mutilated in several ways, including having their lips, noses, and testicles cut off. See Branche (2020).
25. Cited in Chapeu (2004, 94–95).
26. Cited in Branche (2001, 59).
27. Chion pertinently notes that "screen speech" often appears at its most devastating when the disembodied voice in question is male and aggressive, and the embodied protagonist in question is a *guilty*, *duplicitous* and *beautiful* young woman. For example, in Juan Antonio Bardem's film *Death of a Cyclist* (1955), which dedicates "a large share of the shots to showing the exquisite Lucia Bosé in frontal close-ups, whilst she hears remarks that invariably echo her secret" (she is complicit in an unintentional murder) Chion (2009, 360–362).
28. According to François Chevassu, the buildings that we see in the background of this scene are abattoirs—an observation that, if true, would support an understanding of the Woman as someone literally and figuratively framed by death. See Chevassu (1962, 27). Likewise, whether Pierre actually survives his ordeal in Algeria is a question *Secteur postal 89098* leaves unresolved. This ambiguity is most apparent in the final few minutes of the film, when the camera tracks slowly through the streets of Paris, before finally arriving at the gates of the Val-de-Grâce military hospital. If this climax certainly *suggests* that Pierre has returned, wounded, from Algeria to Paris, the fact that he does not feature as an embodied image in any of these tracking shots prevents us from confirming this hypothesis unequivocally.

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