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De-facialization and perpetrator trauma in Alain Resnais's *Muriel or the Time of a Return* (1963)

In Alain Resnais's critically acclaimed *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour*/*Muriel or the Time of a Return* (1963), a young conscript named Bernard (Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée) returns to his home in northern France after serving twenty-two months in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962), a war whose cinematic representations have been examined elsewhere.¹ Neurotic, mercurial, and strange, Bernard spends most of the film spiralling either towards or away from the other characters, slowly yet inexorably revealing a pattern of behaviour that bespeaks the latent traces of psychopathology. Psychological trauma, war neurosis, or, somewhat anachronistically, PTSD:² these are just some of the terms that could be used to diagnose Bernard's condition. But in a collection of essays published shortly after the release of *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour* (henceforth *Muriel*), the film's screenwriter, Jean Cayrol, opts for a less precise yet more telling word to describe Bernard's increasingly fragile mental state, suggesting that his experience in Algeria has figuratively 'disfigured' [*défiguré*] him.³ Although Cayrol doesn't elaborate upon the semantic connotations of this adjective, what he seems to suggest through its use is that the film creates some kind of relationship between the psychic depths of Bernard's disorder and the physical surface of his face. And, as we will see, it is this relationship that forms the basis of this article.

Although frequently associated with the French New Wave, or, in a more specific reading, Left Bank filmmaking, *Muriel* is best described as a home-front drama,⁴ a subgenre of the war film often used by anti-war filmmakers to undermine a conception of war as a morally justified and psychologically harmless activity. As James Chapman puts it, 'an anti-war film is one that expresses, through either its content or its form, the idea that war is a moral tragedy and a waste of human lives'.⁵ Or, as Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet writes, anti-war films perform a 'subversive de-centering of the flag-raising narrative: from military victory to the pathos of crushing grief/PTSD'.⁶ Between 1954 and 1962, the French government sent approximately 2 million soldiers to French Algeria, of which around 1.2 million were

¹ See Mani Sharpe, *Late-colonial French Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023); and Maria Flood, *France, Algeria, and the Moving Image: Screening Histories of Violence, 1963–2010* (Cambridge: Legenda, 2017).

² The term PTSD was popularized in 1980, when it first appeared in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, an official guidebook used by mental health professionals in the United States. As such, it is inextricably tied to the bodies of American soldiers returning from the Vietnam War (1955-1975). Other terms that have been used to describe psychological war trauma include soldier's heart (the American Civil War), shell shock (World War I), battle fatigue (World War II), post-Vietnam syndrome (Vietnam War) and Gulf War syndrome (the Gulf War). For more information see John Trafton, *The American Civil War and the Hollywood War Film* (New York: Palgrave, Macmillan, 2015), pg. 88.

³ Jean Cayrol, *Muriel* (Paris: Seuil, 1963), pg. 21.

⁴ For more on home-front dramas see Robert Burgoyne, *The New American War Film* (Minneapolis, London, University of Minnesota Press, 2023), pp. 101–121; and Dan Hassoun, 'A War for Everyone: Strategic Ambiguity in the Home-Front War Drama', In Douglas A. Cunningham and John C. Nelson (eds), *A Companion to the War Film* (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 385–403.

⁵ James Chapman, *War and Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), pg. 117.

⁶ Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet, *Popular Cultural Conceptions of War since World War II* (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Lexington Books, 2021), pg. 91.

conscripts, known as *appelés*. Their job was to fight in the war being conducted in the region, participating in various military operations, including indiscriminate roundups, extrajudicial detention, summary executions, and the widespread use of torture. Whilst the exact number of veterans who were psychologically traumatized by this war remains contested – with estimations ranging from 35,000 to 300,000⁷ – scholars have managed to agree on a general taxonomy of its symptoms. These included depression, depersonalization, isolation, alienation, estrangement and sporadic mutism, all of which formed symptoms of a more general disorder that French psychiatrists called ‘psycho-traumatic syndrome [*syndrome psychotraumatique*]’.⁸ For the French government, this ‘syndrome’ was a disruptive consequence of the war that had to be repressed, hence the regime of censorship that operated during the period.⁹

Claude Juin has highlighted the lack of psychiatric and financial support offered to traumatized veterans returning from Algeria, pointing out that it took until 10 January 1992 – thirty years after the war had ended – for the state to establish a series of ‘rules and scales designed to classify and evaluate the psychological disorders caused by it’.¹⁰ In *Muriel*, the same is true for Bernard, whose disorder is neither treated by any military psychiatrists nor acknowledged by the other characters, even if his stepmother Hélène (Delphine Seyrig) responds empathetically to its symptoms, despite being somewhat emotionally frayed herself. Indeed, much of the plot of *Muriel* appears designed to exacerbate rather than ameliorate Bernard’s military trauma, with this process of exacerbation being linked to the unwanted arrival of three guests. The first of these is a charming yet deceptive man named Alphonse Noyard (Jean-Pierre Kérien), who has arrived in the town after having ostensibly received an invitation from Hélène, under the pretext of rekindling a past relationship. The second is an aspiring actress named Françoise (Nita Klein), whom Alphonse claims is his niece. The third is ‘Muriel’, a figure that Bernard introduces as his girlfriend, even if none of the other characters have seen her. As it turns out, neither claim is true, with Françoise later admitting that she is Alphonse’s lover, whilst Bernard confesses that he has been using the name ‘Muriel’ to refer to an anonymous Algerian woman, possibly raped before being tortured to death by a group of French soldiers in Algeria, including himself.

Through its subtext, *Muriel* contributes to a wider debate about the legitimacy of torture by the French army in Algeria. In her book, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies*, Kristin Ross has identified the paratrooper, Jacques Massu, as a key advocate for this military strategy, describing how he ‘boasted about employing a *clean* torture, one that didn’t leave any traces’.¹¹ As one of the most powerful military officials in the war, Massu’s *modus operandi* was extremely influential, contributing to the institutionalization of waterboarding and electrocution as methods of ‘interrogation’. But this is not to say that these practices went unchallenged. Indeed, for the metropolitan anti-war movement, the proliferation of torture was the *fundamental reason* that the war should be opposed, with this movement being

⁷ Raphaëlle Branche, ‘La dernière génération du feu? Jalons pour une étude des anciens combattants français de la guerre d’Algérie’, *Histoire@Politique*, 3(3), 2007, pp. 1–11, pg. 3 ; Jean-Charles Jauffret, *La guerre d’Algérie: Les combattants français et leur mémoire* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2016), pg. 225, 226.

⁸ Charles Jauffret, *La guerre d’Algérie: Les combattants français et leur mémoire*, pg. 225.

⁹ For more information on censorship see Mani Sharpe, *Late-colonial French Cinema*, pp. 17–21.

¹⁰ Claude Juin, *Des soldats tortionnaires. Guerre d’Algérie: des jeunes gens ordinaires confrontés à l’intolérable* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2012), pg. 292.

¹¹ Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995), pg. 113. Emphasis in original.

composed of various activist communities. These included intellectuals, journalists, disaffected conscripts, students, left-leaning priests, labour militants and artists (poets, writers, painters, photographers, cineastes), some of whom were involved in the famous Manifesto of the 121 (*Manifeste des 121*), an open letter, signed by 121 intellectuals – including Resnais – and which denounced the use of torture, recalling that it was also a practice used by the Nazis.¹² Furthermore, many activists saw torture as generating not one, but two potential victims, both of which were downplayed in Massu's idealized, pro-war, rhetoric. One of these was the Algerian suspect who had been subjected to torture, and who was invariably physically traumatized through this act, like 'Muriel'. The other was the soldier who had conducted the torture session, and who would sometimes emerge from it psychologically traumatized, like Bernard, transforming them into a victim of so-called moral guilt or perpetrator trauma.¹³ Glossing this anti-war idiom, Emma Kuby goes further, suggesting that 'activists used the trope of disrupted family attachments' – for example the fragile relationship between Bernard and Hélène – 'to highlight the damage done to France itself in allowing torture to continue'.¹⁴ Ultimately, if *Muriel* is to be classed as an anti-war film, it is because it furnishes us with an unsettling cinematic depiction of such multidirectional victimization.

In terms of scholarship, it would not be an exaggeration to say that *Muriel* is one of – if not *the* most – theorized films associated with the French New Wave, with scholars tending to approach the film from one of two angles. One common approach to *Muriel*, for example, involves interrogating how it alludes to the brutalization of 'Muriel' through a range of disjunctive audio-visual strategies, with scholars such as Laura McMahon, Emma Wilson, and Maria Flood all focusing on a scene in which Bernard orally confesses to his complicity in this act to a comparatively minor character, although without providing visual evidence of it.¹⁵ 'In depriving us directly of images of 'Muriel' – proof of the torture – [Resnais compels] the spectator to wonder about Bernard's memories of [her]',¹⁶ suggests Wilson, whereas Flood is more direct, stating that 'the visual absence of the scene of torture [...] augments the impact of [its] inhuman violence'.¹⁷ In its concern with the victimhood of the gendered-colonial Other, such an interpretation is characteristic of a wider trend in post-colonial studies.¹⁸ It

¹² Emma Kuby, 'From the torture chamber to the bedchamber: French soldiers, antiwar activists, and the discourse of sexual deviancy in the Algerian War (1954–1962)', *Contemporary French Civilization*, 38: 2 (2013), pp. 131–153, pg. 133.

¹³ For more information on cinematic representations of perpetrator trauma see Alan Gibbs, 'Gulf War Memoirs and Perpetrator Trauma' in *Contemporary American Trauma Narratives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 161–200. In the context of the war in Algeria see François Lebigot, "'Hors les lois de la guerre": À propos du traumatisme psychique chez quatre soldats auteurs de meurtres en situation opérationnelle', *Annales Médico-Psychologiques*, 172, 2014, pp. 463–467.

¹⁴ Emma Kuby, 'From the torture chamber to the bedchamber: French soldiers, antiwar activists, and the discourse of sexual deviancy in the Algerian War (1954–1962)', pg. 131.

¹⁵ Laura McMahon, 'Untimely Resnais: Muriel's Disarticulations of Justice', *Film-Philosophy* 20 (2016), 219–234; Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pg. 94; Maria Flood, *France, Algeria, and the Moving Image: Screening Histories of Violence, 1963–2010*, pp. 47–54.

¹⁶ Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais*, pg. 96.

¹⁷ Maria Flood, 'Torture in Word and Image', *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, Vol. 58, No. 3 (Spring 2019), pp. 26–48, pg. 42.

¹⁸ See, for example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the*

also stands in contrast to a less common reading of the film, which involves examining how it depicts the psychic trauma of which Bernard is suffering. Much of Laure Astourian's analysis of *Muriel*, for example, is concerned with the quasi-ethnographic documentary that Bernard pursues throughout the narrative, wielding the power of his camera to shoot a seemingly arbitrary array of snapshots of the town. As the work of 'a traumatized ethnographer', Bernard's documentary is 'directly connected to his trauma (and guilt)',¹⁹ observes Astorian, drawing from the work of cultural historians such as Benjamin Stora. An even more historical approach is used by Naomi Greene and Barry Nevin,²⁰ both of whom compare Resnais's cinematic vision with a range of historical and political events that took place in the non-cinematic world, whilst Matthew Croombs reads the subtext of trauma that structures *Muriel* through the psychoanalytic concept of 'deferred action' (*Nachträglichkeit*), drawing from the work of Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan.²¹

In the remainder of this article, I would like to radically revise this scholarship, specifically by performing two conceptual manoeuvres. In the first of these, I will depart from the approach adopted by McMahon, Wilson and Flood, suggesting that the type of traumatic testimony that these scholars link to Bernard's oral confession is actually conveyed in many other scenes in the film, through modernist patterns of framing, staging, and editing.²² In the second manoeuvre, I will deviate from the work of scholars such as Astorian, Greene, Nevin and Croombs, eschewing their use of cultural history and cine-psychoanalysis in favour of a methodological lens known as 'facial-film theory'²³ (discussed below), and which harbours two advantages.²⁴ First, facial-film theory is a medium-specific critical approach, that is to say, one that enables us to understand the formal complexity of *Muriel* in a way that cultural history and cine-psychoanalysis do not. And second, *Muriel* is not only a film about military trauma, but a film in which this disorder is mediated through shots of Bernard's *face*, hence Jean Cayrol's evocative suggestion that he has been figuratively if not literally 'disfigured' by the war. Concerned generally with the psychological operations of the face on-screen, facial-

Media (New York: Routledge, 1994) and Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Laure Astourian, *The Ethnographic Optic: Jean Rouch, Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and the Turn Inward in 1960s French Cinema* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2024), pg. 167.

²⁰ Naomi Greene, *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 40–50; Barry Nevin, 'Algeria and the crisis of the *image-mouvement*: checking *cinéma colonial*'s imperial gaze in *Muriel ou le Temps d'un retour* (Resnais, 1963)', *Contemporary French Civilization*, Vol. 47, No. 3 (2022), pp. 357–377.

²¹ Matthew Croombs (2010), 'Algeria deferred: the logic of trauma in *Muriel* and *Caché*', *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 16, <<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2010/february-2010/croombs.pdf>>, last accessed 8 November 2025, pp. 1–15, p. 6.

²² My understanding of trauma as a pathology that can be communicated through cinematic techniques is also shared by other scholars too. See Janet Walker, 'Trauma cinema: false memories and true experience', *Screen*, Vol. 42, Issue 2, (2001), pp. 211–216; and Tarja Laine *Reframing Trauma in Contemporary Fiction Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

²³ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pg. 42.

²⁴ Parts of this article also draw inspiration from the strain of trauma theory famously proposed by Cathy Caruth. In particular, *Muriel* seems to support Caruth's (Freudian) understanding of trauma as a psychopathology that can only be expressed in the negative: that is to say, through the type of deficiencies, absences and silences that we find throughout the film. See Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins Press, 1995) for more details.

film theory therefore offers a more suitable – if underexploited – methodological lens for analysing Bernard's psychopathology. In the conclusion to the article, I also highlight some of the limitations of facial-film theory, propose my own version of it, and open up a potential new direction in the field of film studies more broadly.

Facialization and de-facialization

In an illuminating yet underappreciated work, *Du visage au cinéma/On the Face in Cinema*, Jacques Aumont has explored the medium specificity of two tropes, both of which I will refer to throughout the remainder of this article. One of these is *le visage ordinaire*, a term that has often been translated as 'the ordinary face', although which I would like to translate as 'the standard face'.²⁵ According to Aumont, the standard face was one of – if not *the* – defining trope of classical Hollywood cinema, as featured within *Gone with the Wind* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), alongside innumerable other works. It was also – again for Aumont – a trope that was not so much *captured* in such films as *created* during their production, with this process of creation being facilitated by the implementation, proliferation and standardization of various in-camera techniques. First, the face of the actor was positioned in the upper one-third/central vertical third of the screen, establishing a privileged zone of frame space that resembled the letter T. Second, it was posed at a three-quarter angle, orientating it simultaneously towards the camera/spectator and the other characters or objects, located in off-screen space. Third, it was filmed using relatively long takes (between three and ten seconds), to preserve the temporal continuity of the shots used. Fourth, it was lit using a combination of three-point and three-quarter lighting, bathing it in a stabilized pool of luminosity. And fifth, it was endowed with two perceptual faculties: the ability to look at – and speak to – the faces of the other protagonists, establishing a network of visual and oral communication between them.

At the level of the shot, undoubtably the most powerful amalgamation of such traits and techniques can be found in the classical facial close-up, a formal device to which Aumont dedicates much of his analysis. More abstractly, Aumont demonstrates how classical Hollywood films tended to interweave classical close-ups with two editing strategies – the eye-line match cut and the shot/reverse shot – in turn, further facilitating the expressive, communicative, and intersubjective network of eye-lines and speech acts around which classical narratives revolved. 'The standard face was a face that was always working from shot to shot, setting up exchanges between one face and another',²⁶ Aumont remarks succinctly, implicitly conjecturing that the unity of the close-up was integral to the narrative unity of the classical cinematic text more broadly. Finally, this brings Aumont to a more general observation: that such techniques formed part of a trans-medial operation, not just confined to cinema, but painting, photography, sculpture, etcetera, that Aumont calls 'facialization'.²⁷ Put simply, to facialize a face is to subject it to a process of formal harmonization, unification, and totalization, assembling each of its four primary features – the nose, the mouth, the eyes, the ears – within the same representational space, as well as endowing them with high degree

²⁵ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 1992), pp. 43–64. For me, the term 'ordinary' doesn't quite capture the mechanics of standardization that Aumont associates with *le visage ordinaire*. It is also worth pointing out that – in French – *ordinaire* can mean banal or standardized, hence my decision to propose a new translation of the term.

²⁶ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 58.

²⁷ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pp. 43–140.

of expressivity, intelligibility and – above all – visibility. Whenever filmed in close-up, the subsequently standard faces that featured in classical Hollywood cinema generally displayed each of these qualities.

The second trope that Aumont theorizes in his monograph is *le visage défait*, an equally ambiguous neologism that could be translated as the unmade face, the un-done face, or – in my own translation – the de-face.²⁸ For Aumont, the de-face initially emerged during the late 1950s with the rise of post-WW2 modernist art cinema, although he also finds examples of it in later, quasi-modernist, or experimental, films from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s (*Three Transitions* [Peter Campus, 1973], *Puissance de la parole/The Power of Speech* [Jean-Luc Godard, 1988], *Nikita* [Luc Besson, 1990]). And just as Aumont suggests that classical Hollywood films created the standard face through a process of facialization, so too does he suggest that post-WW2 works created the de-face through a process of ‘de-facialization’,²⁹ although ‘created’ is somewhat misleading term given that Aumont defines the process as both constructive *and* deconstructive, operating according to what could be called a dialectical logic of creative negation, labour of the negative, or disformation.³⁰ Crucially, for Aumont, the de-face was – and remains – a heterogeneous trope that has taken various forms. In his reading of Ingmar Bergman’s *Persona* (1966), for example, Aumont argues that the faces of the two central characters lose their status as faces by being inverted, horizontalized and crushed into compositional arrangements lacking negative space. ‘To submit the face to the pressures of the frame’, he remarks, ‘is to draw it towards the filmic object’.³¹ In an analysis of *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (Sergio Leone, 1966), Aumont initially crafts a similar argument, illustrating how the faces of the protagonists are fragmented through extreme close-ups or so-called choker close-ups, yet then adds an important qualifier, proposing they are also de-facialized through acts of literal disfigurement.³² In his interpretation of *Vaghe stelle dell’Orsa/Sandra* (Luchino Visconti, 1965), Aumont goes further, implying that Visconti de-facializes the eponymous character of the film by stripping her of one of the sonic powers of the standard face: synchronized speech. As a kind of silent mask, Sandra’s face seems to exist in a constant condition of withdrawal, muses Aumont, as if it were ‘folding back in on itself’.³³ Finally, a comparable understanding of de-facialization informs Aumont’s extensive – and often brilliant – analysis of Leo Carax’s *Mauvais Sang/Bad Blood* (1986), in which Michel Piccoli and Juliette Binoche play a doomed juvenescent couple named Marc and Anna. Discussing the faces of the two characters,

²⁸ I have decided to translate Aumont’s term as such to preserve the linguistic parallels between de-facialization and the de-face. In both French and English, ‘de’ is a generally negative prefix, used to connote an act of undoing.

²⁹ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pp. 149–150.

³⁰ Such a reading of the face on-screen has been proposed before, although using different terminology. Noa Steimatsky, for one, has talked eloquently about how Bresson’s films operate according to a ‘principle of negativity’ that is also ‘productive and generative’, whilst Tomáš Jirsa bases his concept of ‘disformation’ on a comparable dialectic. See Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, pp. 76–77 and Tomáš Jirsa, *Disformations: Affects, Media, Literature* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), pp. 1–21. Diana Coole has also talked about this phenomenon, calling it the ‘destructive-creative arc’. Diana Coole, *Negativity and Politics: Dionysus and Dialectics from Kant to Poststructuralism* (London: Routledge, 2000), pg. 86.

³¹ Jacques Aumont, *Ingmar Bergman: Mes Films sont l’explication de mes images* (Paris: Cahiers du cinéma, 2003), pg. 171.

³² Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 157.

³³ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 158.

Aumont explains how they are systematically: crushed against the *mise-en-scène*; pressed against the lens of the camera; displaced from the centre of the frame to other parts of it (the sides, the corners, etc); framed in extreme close-ups, leaving only an ear, a part of the cheek, the forehead, or the brow, visible; morphologically distorted through gestural traits (grimacing, shouting); shaken by volatile camera movements; thrust into zones of high-contrast or low contrast lighting; shifted from a vertical position (as in the classical facial close-up) to a horizontal one; prohibited from attaining visibility through the use of objects and compositionally obscure angles; and – more elliptically – prevented from entering into face-to-face encounters, through shot/reverse shots, for instance. As we will see later in this article, many of these formal strategies are used to film the face of Bernard in *Muriel*.

Beyond Aumont: Facial-Film Theory

Aumont is not the only scholar to have studied the poetics of the face, even if his work provides one of the most comprehensive – if depoliticized³⁴ – readings of it. For example, the very concepts of facialization and de-facialization are originally taken from an important, and noticeably more politicized, chapter by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari,³⁵ both of whom promote the radical potential of de-facialization, as a way of resisting what they see as the facializing logic of racism, capitalism, Christianity, and patriarchy. ‘Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face’,³⁶ they state, before emphasizing, using terminology that is as impassioned as it is opaque: ‘if human beings have a destiny, it is to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facializations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine’.³⁷ In fact, in *On the Face in Cinema*, Aumont implicitly suggests that this utopian fantasy of facial dismantlement has *already taken place*: not within the vaguely semiotic-anthropological-phenomenological world of which Deleuze and Guattari speak, but within the visual grammar of late-modernist art cinema.

In *On the Face in Cinema*, Aumont also draws from Deleuze’s single-authored monograph, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (originally published in 1983). Whenever Aumont talks about the totalizing and unifying effects of facialization, for instance, we may be reminded of Deleuze’s evocative suggestion that classical facial close-ups combine ‘a minimum of movement’ with ‘a maximum of unity’.³⁸ In a more recent article, Mary Ann Doane has traced this functionalist concern with facial unity back to the work of Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, suggesting that both scholars – writing during the early years of film theory – understand the close-up as a ‘fragment that mimics the effect of a self-sufficient totality’.³⁹ As Noa Steimatsky reminds us, throughout the history of film studies, ‘the face [has been] both a compelling iconographic and discursive nexus and a critical lens’,⁴⁰ inspiring a range of further hypotheses regarding self/other relations by philosophers such as Frantz Fanon,

³⁴ I talk more about the political limitations of Aumont’s chapter in the conclusion to this article.

³⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ‘Year Zero: Faciality’, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 167–191.

³⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ‘Year Zero: Faciality’, pg. 178.

³⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, ‘Year Zero: Faciality’, pg. 171.

³⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, [1983] 1997), pg. 88.

³⁹ Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema’, *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 14 (2003), pp. 89–111, pg. 109.

⁴⁰ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, pg. 2.

Micheal Taussig, Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler and Elizabeth Grosz,⁴¹ as well as other film theorists.⁴² As for de-facialization, one of the most compelling if not elliptical uses of this concept within the domain of film studies can be found in the work of Isabelle McNeill, who argues that, in neo-New Wave films such as *Level Five* (Chris Marker, 1997), and *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1988-1998), the de-facialized face of the witness-survivor functions as ‘an alternative form of witnessing’, transforming the former into ‘a site of testimony to the horrors of violence’.⁴³ Likewise, in her monumental work *The Face on Film*, itself greatly inspired by Aumont’s *On the Face in Cinema*, Noa Steimatsky suggests that *Journal d’un curé de campagne*/*Diary of a Country Priest* (Robert Bresson, 1951), operates according to a similar logic, with Bresson using various framing and staging strategies to de-facialize the faces of his characters. These include: averting their gazes away from others, turning their faces away from the camera, plunging them into a state of reticence, depriving them of facial expressivity, and de-framing their faces, positioning them not towards the upper one-third/central vertical third of the frame, as within the classical facial close-up, but in an altogether different part of screen space, or in off-screen space.⁴⁴

One question that recurs throughout many facial film theories relates to how cinematic images of the face have been used to create an impression of psychic interiority, specifically in relation to the character depicted on-screen. In classical film theory, it is the classical facial close-up that is frequently associated with this psychological-aesthetic illusion, with scholars such as Béla Balázs poetically suggesting that facial close-ups enable us ‘to see that there is something there that we cannot see’.⁴⁵ According to Balázs, close-ups do this by eschewing the techniques of perspectival realism inherited from Renaissance painting, replacing the illusion of spatial depth and psychological flatness that characterizes the latter with one of psychological depth and spatial flatness.⁴⁶ Drawing from Balázs, Mary Anne Doane writes that close-ups establish oppositions ‘between surface and depth, exteriority and interiority’, and that ‘[i]t is barely possible to see a close-up of a face without asking: “what is

⁴¹ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press [1952] (2008); Micheal Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, Ca: Stanford University Press, 1999); Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* (The Hague, Boston and London: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1979); Judith Butler, *Precious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London, New York: Verso, 2004); and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994).

⁴² See, for example, David Bordwell, ‘The classical Hollywood style, 1917-1960’, in David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson (eds), *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 1–84; Thomas Austin, ‘Interiority, identity and the limits of knowledge in documentary film’, *Screen*, Vol. 57, Issue 4 (Winter 2016), pp. 414–430; Therese Davies, *The Face on the Screen: Death, Recognition and Spectatorship* (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2004); Paul Coates, *Screening the Face* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Mary Ann Doane, *Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021); Alice Maurice (ed), *Faces on Screen: New Approaches* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022); and Libertad Gills, ‘Facing Archives/Facing Cinema: The Face-Image, Reappropriation and Experimental Cinema’, unpublished doctoral thesis (2022).

⁴³ Isabelle McNeill, *Memory and the Moving Image: French Film in the Digital Era* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pg. 121.

⁴⁴ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, pp. 228–265.

⁴⁵ Béla Balázs, *Theory of the Film (Character and Growth of a New Art)*, pg. 76.

⁴⁶ For more information see Mary Ann Doane, *Bigger Than Life: The Close-Up and Scale in the Cinema*, pp. 53–88.

he/she thinking, feeling, suffering?,”⁴⁷ whilst Gilles Deleuze postulates that ‘the close-up [has] the power to tear the image away from spatio-temporal coordinates in order to call forth the pure affect as the expressed’.⁴⁸

In discussions related to de-facialization, meanwhile, this argument is generally replaced with one that is similar but less definitive, more equivocal, or ambivalent. In *On the Face in Cinema*, for example, Aumont appears to hesitate between two theoretical positions, on the one hand suggesting that faces subjected to de-facialization are ‘plagued by an interminable movement inwards’,⁴⁹ and, on the other hand, asserting that they are ‘devoid of interiority, expression, meaning and feeling’.⁵⁰ In *The Face on Film*, Steimatsky reaches a similarly equivocal but more nuanced conclusion, intimating that ‘the constitutive illegibility of the face might render it inscrutable’, ‘but the illegible face can also be sensed as ineffable, inward, mysterious or absorbed’.⁵¹ Although she neither draws from Aumont’s work nor uses the term de-facialization, a comparable if more definitive argument can be found in Chiara Quaranta’s *Iconoclasm in European Cinema*, edging us further towards the theoretical position that I will adopt in this article. In this work, Quaranta examines what she calls the iconoclastic ethics of Ingmar Bergman’s *Viskningar Och Rop/Cries and Whispers* (1972), proposing that the fades to red which frequently accompany facial close-ups ‘are a way of representing [mental] suffering’.⁵² Similarly, in an excellent chapter, James Harvey examines the facial close-ups that feature in Paul Thomas Anderson’s *The Master* (2012), illustrating how they revolve around an ‘ethics of erasure’ that conveys the wartime trauma of the film’s central protagonist.⁵³ And finally, working with concepts derived from war culture studies and trauma theory, John Trafton has analyzed the opening scene from *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), illustrating how Coppola effectively de-facializes the face of the character depicted on-screen – an American veteran of the Vietnam War named Willard – through a complex constellation of staging, framing, and editing strategies.⁵⁴ These include: relegating Willard’s face to the lefthand margins of the frame, placing it in a full-face position, vertically inverting it, and superimposing shots of it onto wide shots of a napalm-struck jungle, using partial-dissolve transitions. Crucially, Trafton asserts that the compositional instability of Willard’s face should be understood not merely as an expression of psychological depth but *psychological trauma*, a disorder from which Bernard also suffers in *Muriel*.

Taking *Muriel* as a case study, the remainder of this article will therefore unfold as follows. In section one, I discuss how Resnais depicts Bernard’s face as a principally negative entity, focusing firstly on his inability to speak to other characters and then on his inability to look at them. Both of these facial deficiencies, I will argue, are rendered intelligible to the spectator through strategies of framing and staging. In section two, I explore the visual trope

⁴⁷ Mary Ann Doane, ‘The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema’, pg. 95.

⁴⁸ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, pg. 96.

⁴⁹ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 158.

⁵⁰ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 150, pg. 183.

⁵¹ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, pg. 13.

⁵² *Iconoclasm In European cinema: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Image Destruction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2023), pg. 154.

⁵³ James Harvey, ‘The Unknowable Soldier: Ethical Erasure in The Master’s Facial Close-Ups’, in Christina Hellmich and Lisa Purse (eds), *Disappearing War: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post 9/11 World*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp. 92–110, pg. 95, 97.

⁵⁴ John Trafton, *The American Civil War and the Hollywood War Film*, pg. 18.

of facing away, discussing the performative techniques used by Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée to play Bernard, as well as Resnais's use of discontinuous editing and dorsal compositions. Section three is more specifically about the use of a lighting technique known as self-shadowing, before I move into section four, which focuses on the representational props that are used in *Muriel*. In each section, I argue that Resnais uses an aesthetics of de-facialization to figuratively represent the psychologically 'disfiguring' effects of the war on Bernard, in other words, the symptoms of his perpetrator trauma.

Facial deficiencies

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, one of the qualities that Aumont associates with de-facialization is a lack of speech, illustrating how this sonic motif operates generatively: to convey the invisible presence of psychological impulses. Writing about Luchino Visconti's *Sandra*, for example, Aumont claims that the sporadic muteness of the eponymous protagonist forms the sign of a hidden history of incestuous sexual trauma, plunging her into various moments of introspection, and establishing a simple formula: the less she speaks to the other characters, the more she is imbued with psychological depth. In *Muriel*, meanwhile, Bernard's silence forms a symptom of his perpetrator trauma, a condition initially catalyzed in the past, through his participation in torture, yet exacerbated in the present, through his involuntary participation in conversations about the war. For instance, when Bernard first engages in dialogue with Alphonse and Françoise, the former soldier responds to Hélène and Alphonse's joint anecdotes about Algeria with a discernible shift towards reticence, as if unable to verbally recount his traumatic experience in the region. Shortly after, Bernard recoils into a comparable state of uncommunicativeness in the presence of Françoise, with her articulating three questions – 'Did you [join the army] before being conscripted?' 'Weren't you happy?' 'It is Boulogne that is bothering you?' – that he conspicuously evades, muttering 'yes' after the first, and avoiding the others. Banal yet suggestive, such scenes contain some of the longest takes in the film, a formal tactic that recalls Stan Link's suggestion that 'the power of silence depends on the persistence of image in the absence of sound',⁵⁵ reminding us, in turn, of the type of silent long takes used in Claude Lanzmann's documentary *Shoah* (1985), although, in this case, to communicate the trauma experienced by victims of atrocity.⁵⁶ These scenes are also filmed using an established staging convention, deployed throughout the history of classical Hollywood cinema, and known as frontal staging.⁵⁷ For instance, after being introduced to Françoise and Alphonse, Bernard is shot in profile, with the left half of his face clearly visible in the upper right-hand corner of the frame, whilst much of his exchange with Françoise pivots around medium shots in which Bernard's face is positioned just off centre frame, at a three-quarter angle. 'Since the late 1910s, mainstream

⁵⁵ Stan Link, 'Going Gently: Contemplating Silences and Cinematic Death', in Nicky Losseff (ed), *Silence, Music, Silent Music* (London: Routledge, 2007), pp. 67–86, pg. 74.

⁵⁶ In an important article on *Shoah*, Libby Saxton has explained how 'Lanzmann's camera [often] continues to linger on the witness's face after he or she has fallen silent', in turn, emphasizing 'the ethical significance of non-verbal forms of expression'. Libby Saxton, 'Fragile Faces: Levinas and Lanzmann', *Film-Philosophy*, Vol. 11, no. 2 (2007), pp. 1–14, pg. 10.

⁵⁷ As Brandon Colvin explains, frontal staging involves 'the positioning of actors' faces and bodies in full, three-quarter, or profile view in relation to the camera'. Brandon Colvin, 'The other side of frontality: dorsality in European art cinema', *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, Vol. 15, no. 2 (2017), pp. 191–210, pg. 191.

cinema has characteristically positioned characters at a three-quarter frontal angle',⁵⁸ opines David Bordwell, illustrating how this device was used to maximize the expressivity and intelligibility of the faces on-screen. But there is also an important difference between how frontal compositions were used in classical Hollywood films and how they are used in these scenes. In the former, frontal staging was generally implemented to visualize the face of a character as they spoke to another, producing what Michel Chion calls 'visualized speech',⁵⁹ whilst in the latter, it is Bernard's silence that is visualized through the frontal composition of his face, visually expressing the repression of his speech. For the spectator, the function of this visualized silence is crucial. It enables them to perceive the words that Bernard's mouth *doesn't* make, hence rendering one of the central symptoms of his perpetrator trauma intelligible within the frame. In fact, according to Dieter Daniels, 'silence is *always* an "audiovisual" and "spatial" phenomenon, either because we see what is happening in a "live" silence' – as in the shots of Bernard's face, discussed above – 'or we imagine a visual correspondence to what we are listening, even if it is silence'.⁶⁰

Such scenes may strip Bernard of his ability to speak to the other characters, rendering him vocally deficient, but they also strip him of a further power: his ability to maintain eye contact with them. During his initial encounter with Alphonse, for example, Bernard breaks their line of sight for around ten seconds, gently peering away from the face of his interlocutor and towards the glass of wine that he holds in his hands (Figure 1). After Françoise accompanies Bernard to his bedroom, he performs the same gesture no less than four times in her presence, averting his eyes away from hers each time she asks him a sensitive question about conscription (Figure 2), with this encounter reminding us of the 'displaced, blocked, diverted, and withdrawn glances' that feature in Bresson's *Diary of a Country Priest*.⁶¹ Combining performative techniques used by Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée to play Bernard with figure staging techniques used by Resnais to position Bernard, this micro-movement may be almost imperceptible, but it is nonetheless meaningful. It deprives him of the faculty of sight that is often excised by the so-called standard faces of classical Hollywood cinema; it transforms him into a symbol of what could be called visual or ocular deficiency, even if this lack, like his silence, depends on the frontal visibility of his face to be perceived on-screen; and it provides us a further symptomatic clue to the fact that he has been psychologically traumatized by the subject of the conversation, with the downward movement of his head discreetly expressing a figurative movement inwards: from an exterior world of material beings, to a silent world of thoughts and feelings – the realm of his memories of 'Muriel'. Interestingly, this argument has more often been made about the audio-visual grammar of Hollywood melodramas, in which the heightened expressivity of non-verbal gestures – eyes

⁵⁸ David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), pg. 162.

⁵⁹ 'Visualized speech', states Chion, is a spoken 'event whose source' – usually the mouth – 'we can see onscreen'. Likewise, Jacques Aumont suggests that when the faces of actors speak in classical Hollywood cinema, 'they speak *visibly*'. See Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pg. 18, and Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 53.

⁶⁰ Dieter Daniels, 'Silence and Void: Aesthetics of Absence in Space and Time', in Yael Kaduri (ed), *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Western Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 315–332, pg. 321.

⁶¹ Noa Steimatsky, 'Of the Face, In Reticence', in Angela Dalle Vacche (ed), *Film, Art, New Media: Museum Without Walls?* (London: Palgrave, 2012), pp. 159–177, pg. 161; Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, pg. 231.

brimming with tears, glances exchanged and averted, fists clenched and shaken – indicates the absent presence of emotions so painful that they are unspeakable.⁶²

It is also an argument that is supported by a shot included later in *Muriel*, when Bernard awkwardly stumbles into Hélène after drifting into a local bar, alone (Figure 3). In its formal properties, this shot notably shares certain parallels with the classical facial close-up, with Bernard's face being both abstracted from its surroundings and placed in close proximity to the camera. But where the spatial geometry of classical close-ups has generally revolved around a logic of centrifugal movement, with the gaze of the character depicted being orientated outwards, towards off-screen space (usually frame left or frame right), here, Resnais creates the illusion of centripetal movement, orientating Bernard's gaze literally downwards but figuratively inwards: away from others and towards himself. Likewise, if the classical facial close-up has conventionally been used to 'set up dramaturgical relations within a scene, connecting spatial depth with narrative potential',⁶³ here, Resnais *ruptures* the relations between Bernard and Hélène, achieving this effect by turning his face directly towards the camera, placing it in an inclined full-face position. Ultimately, if this shot therefore appears to chronicle a breaking point in Bernard's trauma – the moment at which he seems the *least* connected to the people that surround him and the *most* affected by his complicity in an act of atrocity – it is not because of what he says, but rather because of the unconventional staging and framing techniques that Resnais uses to film his face.

Facing away

In fact, evidence suggests that this gesture – of looking, turning, or facing away – forms part of a recurring leitmotif in *Muriel*, structuring other scenes too. When Bernard inadvertently bumps into Françoise in the street, for example, he executes a variation of this gesture, beginning their conversation by facing directly towards her, apparently relaxed, comfortable, eager to converse. Only after casually philosophizing that 'people know each other better when they use their first names', a comment that evokes 'Muriel's' ambiguous status in the film, does this masquerade of psychological stability falter, triggering two micro-movements. One of these is performed by Bernard's neck, as he rotates his face away from Françoise, breaking eye contact with her, rupturing the continuity of the conversation, and altering the screen direction of his head: from three-quarter frame left, to three-quarter frame right. The other micro-movement that Bernard performs is with his facial features, with his eyebrows and his mouth suddenly plummeting downwards, rearranging their coordinates into a compositionally incoherent scowl. In their eccentric blend of lateral rotation and vertical fluctuation, these micro-movements furnish us with a dramatic example of what James Naremore has called 'expressive incoherence',⁶⁴ when a character tries to 'repress their "sincere" feelings' yet does not succeed in doing so, leading to the consternation or perplexity of those that surround them. In a similar vein, Paul Coates has spoken about the iconography of 'the facial mask that fails',⁶⁵ conceptualizing it as a shot in which a face is 'visible yet

⁶² Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (California: University of California Press, 2000), pg. 242.

⁶³ Allan Cameron, 'Face, Frame, Fragment: Refiguring Space in Found-Footage Cinema' in Susanne Ø. Sæther and Synne T. Bull (eds), *Screen Space Reconfigured* (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 2020), pp. 127–151, pg. 132.

⁶⁴ James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 39–40.

⁶⁵ Paul Coates, *Screening the Face*, pg. 2, 14, 21.

shadowed by an imperceptible succession of inward psychic events',⁶⁶ such as those linked to Bernard's memories of 'Muriel'. 'What is wrong with you?', gently enquires Françoise in the final seconds of their encounter. 'Does it show?', replies a wild-eyed Bernard, suddenly conscious of how his facial features could potentially reveal the secret of his psychic trauma, involuntarily expressing the inner workings of his mind through the outer surface of his face. For all that, Bernard's mask never completely 'fails' in *Muriel*, with his trauma remaining just beyond the realm of the visible and the audible, un-seen and un-heard. Nor – more obliquely – does the continuity of Bernard's 'acted image' ever completely break down in the film, hence the complete lack of to-camera direct address, whether visual or verbal.⁶⁷

Elsewhere, Resnais uses discontinuous patterns of editing to generate a similar ambiance of visual discontinuity between characters. Such is the case when Bernard incongruously encounters an older man (played by Jean Dasté) during a coastal horse ride, with Resnais using two key shots of the former to document his encounter with the latter. The first of these is an extreme wide shot of Bernard's body as he pauses momentarily on the clifftop: his torso poised atop the horse, his face orientated towards the ocean. The second is a medium close-up of Bernard's windswept face, held at a three-quarter angle, the sea now behind him (Figure 4). Despite their scalar differences, both of these shots recall what is commonly known as the thousand (or two thousand) yard stare, a visual rendering of trauma that is widespread in anti-war media.⁶⁸ Such renderings include Tom Lea's painting *Marines Call It That 2000 Yard Stare*, published by Life Magazine in 1945, Don McCullin's photograph *Shellshocked US Marine, Hue, Vietnam*, taken in 1969, and the opening prelude of *Apocalypse Now*, all of which 'condense the experience of war trauma into a single, hollow glare into nothingness'.⁶⁹ In the first of the two shots identified above, this 'nothingness' takes the form of the ocean, the unfathomable but majestic space upon which Bernard vertiginously gazes, even if the distance of his body from the camera means that his gaze is not visually perceptible within frame space. In the second shot, this schema is inverted, and what we are presented with is a shot of Bernard's face in which his gaze *is* visible, yet the object of his gaze is not. Not only that, but immediately after, Resnais then crucially withholds the reverse shot that would typically follow this one, further bolstering our impression that Bernard's gaze is expressly *not* directed towards the face of the older man that initially features in this scene, operating instead, like his silence, as a sign of his alienation from others. During his discussion about de-facialization, Aumont makes a similar point about the formal strategies used in *Nikita* and *Bad Blood*, claiming that a facial close-up without a reverse shot creates an ambiance of psychological 'fragmentation, division and disconnection'.⁷⁰ Likewise, in his analysis of *Muriel*, François Thomas reformates this observation as a question, asking: 'if the characters can't communicate [with each other] then why should shots match?'.⁷¹

There is also a compelling dialectic – between visibility and invisibility – that is woven into this scene, with Bernard's face being simultaneously orientated towards and shadowed

⁶⁶ Paul Coates, *Screening the Face*, pg. 14.

⁶⁷ James Naremore, *Acting in the Cinema*, pg. 74.

⁶⁸ John Trafton, 'The American Outlaw and Civil War Shock', *Film International*, Vol. 15, Issue 2, (2017), pp. 86–98.

⁶⁹ John Trafton, 'The American Outlaw and Civil War Shock', pg. 87.

⁷⁰ Jacques Aumont, *Du Visage au cinéma*, pp. 151.

⁷¹ Cited in David Sterritt, 'Muriel, or The Time of Return', *CINEASTE*, Winter 2016, pp. 60–61, p. 61.

by the off-screen space onto which he gazes.⁷² This dialectic is in operation in two other scenes as well: first, when Bernard initially meets Alphonse and Françoise, an encounter that is filmed using a static medium shot of the former, and second, when Bernard is pictured lying in bed with his on-off girlfriend, Marie-do (Martine Vatel) (Figure 5). As with many of the shots included in Resnais's narrative, both of these feature formal techniques used within classical Hollywood cinema, with Bernard's head being positioned at a three-quarter angle, and his sightline being orientated frame right, towards the edge of the screen. Yet, once again, neither of them is followed by a reverse shot, with the result being that Bernard seems less to be experiencing a moment of visual perception than one of psychological reflection. We have seen this before: when Bernard is filmed languishing in a café with his stepmother, Resnais crafts a similar illusion, producing a sense of psychological depth within the image by collapsing the spatial depth of what lies beyond it. But I think that Resnais's use of avoided reverse shots – I have taken this terminology from Michel Chion⁷³ – functions on another level here too, gesturing towards the so-called structuring absences or absent presences that compose much of the formal language of the film, when the spectator is made aware of what lies beyond the frame of audio-visual representation. According to Maria Flood, for instance, by excluding visual evidence of 'Muriel's' torture from the image-track, Resnais forces us to 'feel its deficiency more keenly because our awareness is drawn to its absence',⁷⁴ whilst Leslie Hill has suggested that 'we might understand "Muriel" as a ghostly presence that haunts the screen'.⁷⁵ In different ways, both scholars encourage us to read the shots of gazing discussed above as examples of this 'haunting', with Bernard appearing to experience a fantasmatic vision of someone who seems to occupy his visual field, in off-screen space, yet cannot be visualized, on-screen: in other words, 'Muriel'. The result is a hallucinatory effect, as if 'Muriel' had inexplicably leapt: from the past to the present, from death to life, and from a state of invisible absence to one of *invisible presence*, or better, *imagined presence*, considering that her image can only plausibly exist within the realm of Bernard's mind.⁷⁶

During Bernard and Marie-do's encounter, Resnais also uses an equally disorientating form of staging, exacerbating the sense of visual discontinuity established by his deployment of avoided reverse shots. In the composition of the frame, Bernard's face is thus initially positioned towards the camera yet away from Marie-do, whereas Marie-do's face is initially

⁷² For more on this tension between visibility and invisibility see Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2013), pg. 56.

⁷³ Michel Chion, *Film, a Sound Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pg. 471. Equally relevant is David Bordwell's concept of the 'incomplete shot-reverse-shot sequence'. See David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, pg. 162.

⁷⁴ Maria Flood, *France, Algeria, and the Moving Image: Screening Histories of Violence, 1963–2010*, p. 53.

⁷⁵ Leslie Hill, 'Filming Ghosts: French Cinema and the Algerian War', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 38, no. 3 (1992), pp. 787–804, p. 795.

⁷⁶ Two scholars who have proposed a similar if not identical argument to this one are Tarja Laine and Libby Saxton. For Laine, off-screen space frequently functions in contemporary horror films to create 'a traumatic mood, functioning as the shadowed space of unspeakability, the origin of menace that cannot be represented'. For Saxton, this phenomenon is at play in Michael Haneke's *Caché/Hidden* (2005), in which 'off-screen space emerges as the site of historical trauma'. For more details see Tarja Laine, 'Traumatic Horror Beyond the Edge: *It Follows* and *Get Out*', *Film-Philosophy*, Vol. 23, issue 3 (2019), pp. 282–302, p. 294, and Libby Saxton, 'Secrets and revelations: Off-screen space in Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005)', *Studies in French Cinema*, 7:1 (2007), pp. 5–17, p. 9.

positioned both away from his face and the lens of the camera, a gesture that corresponds to her state of slumber. Even if the extent of their conversation remains minimal, these structurally dissonant – indeed contrapuntal – staging configurations perform an important role during this shot, implying that Bernard’s perpetrator trauma has rendered him unable to maintain face-to-face relations with even the most intimate of his acquaintances, even when they endeavour to establish such relations with him. Two of Marie-do’s questions go unanswered during their ‘interaction’, provoking not so much as a flicker of sensory-motor activity on the inanimate surface of Bernard’s numb, de-personalized, borderline catatonic face, or, rather, de-face, recalling notably, Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the pure optical-image. As Deleuze explains, pure optical-images are shots in which an act of motor-sensory action is replaced with an act of unmotivated seeing, subsequently making the thought processes of the character perceptible, and enabling the spectator to grasp the presence – or, in this case, the absent presence – of ‘something intolerable and unbearable’.⁷⁷ In fact, only a third question posed by Marie-do during their encounter prompts Bernard to finally turn his face towards hers, before he delivers a peculiar directive. ‘Don’t close your eyes’, Bernard intones, ambiguously, as Marie-do peers at him, *her* face now clouded with anxiety.

In other scenes, Resnais reiterates this assemblage of faces in space but reverses its structure, creating shots in which Bernard’s face is turned away from the camera, visualizing the dorsal part of his body (composed of his back, neck, and occiput [the back of his head]), whilst the faces of the other characters are turned towards the camera, revealing their torsos, arms, and facial expressions. This configuration is one that notably occurs during the first (Figure 6) and third of the three meals that take place in *Muriel*, both of which are generally filmed using a combination of wide shots, deep focus, and staging-in-depth, with Resnais largely avoiding the type of facial close-ups or reverse shots conventionally used to shoot dinner-table conversations.⁷⁸ The result is what Slavoj Žižek has called an ‘interface effect’,⁷⁹ with the faces of Hélène, Alphonse, and Françoise operating as a kind of affective mirror, or *substitute reverse shot*, of Bernard’s own. As Žižek observes, ‘when a shot occurs to which there is no reverse shot, the only way to fill this gap is by producing a shot that contains its own reverse shot’.⁸⁰ Moreover, both scenes also – and this is an important point – characterize the diners differently, depending on where their bodies are placed within the frame. Therefore, if the frontal framing of Hélène and her guests yields the impression that they occupy a space of facial legibility and corporeal expressivity, a space in which *visible faces face other visible faces*, communicating with each other through attuned eye lines and reciprocal speech-acts, then the dorsal framing of Bernard implies that he languishes within an altogether different realm: one marred by communicative breakdown, expressive repression, facial invisibility and post-conscription isolation. Where they are facialized by frontal staging, we might say, echoing Jacques Aumont, he is de-facialized by dorsal staging, transforming his face into a still more disturbing example of the de-face.

A similar argument can be made about other shots used in *Muriel* too, although, in these, Bernard’s head is angled slightly differently within the frame. For example, four other scenes feature what could persuasively be called three-quarter dorsal mid-shots of Bernard,

⁷⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, [1985] 1997), pg. 18.

⁷⁸ David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, pp. 1–4.

⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory* (London: BFI, 2001), pp. 52–54.

⁸⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Fright of Real Tears: Krzysztof Kieślowski Between Theory and Post-Theory*, pg. 54.

shots in which the upper one-third/central vertical third of the screen is occupied by the outline of his shoulder, the nape of his neck, and the back of his ear. Furthermore, in one of these scenes, Resnais cuts to an even more defamiliarizing dorsal close-up of Bernard's occiput, with much of the dark power of this shot resulting from the fact that it is taken from a position of extreme proximity to something that is hidden yet liable to dramatically reveal itself at any given moment: his face (Figure 7). For some viewers, such dorsal shots may conjure up memories of those used in *Staroye i novoye/The General Line* (Sergei Eisenstein, 1929), with Eisenstein famously filming the character of the kulak using a series of extreme close-ups of his ear and neck.⁸¹ For others, they may evoke the type of contorted poses depicted in Surrealist art, with Man Ray's *Neck (Lee Miller)* (1930), featuring a paradigmatic example of this posture, itself inherited from a style of portraiture known the *profil perdu*.⁸² For still other – more perceptive – viewers, they may recall the type of dorsal compositions crafted in two anti-war home-front dramas, filmed in France around the same time as *Muriel*. One of these is *La Belle vie/The Good Life* (1964) by Robert Enrico, in which a traumatized former soldier is recurrently framed using dorsal staging, especially during moments of emotional anguish (Figure 8). Another is *Adieu Philippine/Goodbye Philippine* (1963), by Jacques Rozier, in which a dorsally staged, traumatized veteran is surrounded by a group of frontally staged non-traumatized civilians (Figure 9).⁸³ Indeed, according to Brandon Colvin, dorsal shots were actually a central element of many European films released during the late 1950s and early 1960s, forming what he calls a minor tradition in art cinema. These included: Agnès Varda's *La Pointe Courte* (1955), Jean-Luc Godard's *Vivre sa vie/To Live Her Life* (1962), and Michelangelo Antonioni's *Red Desert/Il Deserto rosso* (1964). Interestingly, Colvin also points out that one of the central aesthetic effects of dorsal staging is that it creates a modernist ambiance of 'compositional and spatial isolation', as if the protagonist depicted is 'alone and detached from the world around them'.⁸⁴ Analyzing a corpus of films made by Kenji Mizoguchi and Theodoros Angelopoulos, David Bordwell makes a similar assertion, reasoning that – insofar as they do not visualize facial expressions – dorsal shots should be understood as "'inexpressive" shots', even if they function to 'express lassitude, anomie, suppressed pain, or emotional distances between the characters'.⁸⁵ Even though neither Colvin nor Bordwell conduct analysis of *Muriel* specifically, the affective language that both scholars use – isolation, detachment, suppressed pain – certainly evokes the psychological qualities that are projected onto Bernard's character, not only when, but *especially when* he is positioned dorsally within the frame.

The head, a shadow

⁸¹ Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film*, pg. 46.

⁸² For more details see Angela Dalle Vacche, 'Surrealism in Film and Art: Time and Face', in Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, (eds), *Global Art Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 181–197; Mani Sharpe, 'Guilt Displacement: Representing the Algerian War of Independence in *Le Retour* (Goldenberg, 1959) and *Secteur Postal 89098* (Durand, 1961)', *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 42(3) (2023), pp. 1–37, pg. 9; Susanna Caviglia, *History, painting, and the seriousness of pleasure in the age of Louis XV* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pg. 101, 133; and Jennifer Higgie, 'How to Look Away', *Freize*, issue 124, 22 June (2009), <<https://www.frieze.com/article/how-look-away>>, last accessed 27 December 2025.

⁸³ Mani Sharpe, *Late-colonial French Cinema*, pp. 41–42.

⁸⁴ Brandon Colvin, 'The other side of frontality: dorsality in European art cinema', pg. 195, 198.

⁸⁵ David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, pg. 154.

Resnais was not the only person involved in creating the idiosyncratic visual syntax of *Muriel*. Any sustained discussion of the film must also acknowledge the impact of Sacha Vierny, with Vierny's pioneering lighting design being most starkly realized during the first meal of the narrative. During this pivotal scene, Vierny uses two sources of light to visualize the bodies of the diners: one located above them (a ceiling light), and one located towards the corner of the room (a standard lamp), with both illuminating the frontally positioned faces of Hélène, Alphonse and Françoise in a similar fashion, bathing them in a harmonious pool of diffuse, low-key, light. Like them, Bernard is also sporadically illuminated in this scene, especially during the shots that depict him darting in and out of the kitchen, or standing next to the doorframe leading to this room. But whenever Bernard adopts a dorsal position within the composition of the frame, the lighting contours his body differently, and what the spectator is presented with is a *self-shadow*, a visual phenomenon that has traditionally been created through strong backlighting and a lack of frontal key light.

In *The Semiotics of Light and Shadow*, Piotr Sadowski identifies *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941), as containing a paradigmatic example of this visual phenomenon, one engineered by Gregg Toland (the cinematographer on *Citizen Kane*), and that takes place when Kane (Orson Welles), reads his Declaration of Principles to two other characters.⁸⁶ During the first meal in *Muriel*, Vierny crafts a similar image of self-shadowing, specifically by using the standard lamp positioned in the corner of the room to backlight Bernard, projecting a thin rim of light around the dorsal surface of his body, and, in so doing, turning it into a silhouette (see Figure 6). Admittedly, this highly unusual visual configuration – unusual as backlighting is traditionally combined with frontal staging, as in *Citizen Kane* – is only present in three of the twenty-seven shots used in the scene itself. However, in each, the aesthetic effect is nothing but confounding, leaving no discernible trace of Bernard's visual identity on screen: no eyes, no mouth, no hands, no torso, none of the physical markers that would traditionally be used to qualify him as human. Indeed, all that *is* left of Bernard's physique within these shots is the indeterminate and inanimate outline of what appears less to be someone than *something*, or better, *nothing*: a black void, a lacuna, an absent presence, located – somewhat paradoxically – towards the centre of the image.⁸⁷ Here, Resnais and Vierny go way beyond any of the forms of de-facialization theorized by Aumont, turning Bernard's head itself into an almost totally unrecognisable abstract-object.

But the dramatic innovation of this scene does not end there. Looking further, it is also possible to understand Bernard's self-shadow as a figurative representation of the black hole of despair into which he has fallen, positioning *Muriel* in close proximity to a corpus of texts – at once philosophical and artistic, visual and literary – which have equated a lack of light with a loss of mental stability.⁸⁸ To support this reading, we may draw from the work of Lara

⁸⁶ Piotr Sadowski, *The Semiotics of Light and Shadows: Modern Visual Arts and Weimar Cinema* (London, Bloomsbury, 2017), pg. 32.

⁸⁷ Interestingly, such terminology is usually used to describe 'Muriel's' torture. Speaking of this act, Matthew Croombs, for instance, identifies *Muriel* as a film 'composed around a missing kernel', whilst Naomi Greene diagnosed the "missing" scenes of Bernard's film as 'a black hole at the centre of *Muriel*'. Matthew Croombs, 'Algeria deferred: the logic of trauma in *Muriel* and *Caché*', pg. 1, Naomi Greene, *Landscape of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), pg. 48.

⁸⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun, Depression and Melancholia* (New York, Columbia University Press: 1989), pp. 151–152, 173.

Thompson. ‘The independent relationship between darkness and illumination is most clearly visualized when lighting becomes sparse and intense’, observes Thompson, ‘creating stark shadows and black silhouettes that can be understood as *external manifestations of internal processes*’, such as Bernard’s perpetrator trauma.⁸⁹ Moreover, in two of the three dorsal shots discussed above, Bernard’s self-shadow seems to encroach still further into the dining room, bleeding into the equally darkened forms of the antique furniture scattered around it, and spawning the illusion that his trauma has once again involuntarily erupted: from the realm of his mind, to the surface of his face, and from the surface of his face, to that of the exterior world. Indeed, we might even claim that the domestic landscape becomes *facialized* in this scene, not in the sense that it looks like a face but rather in that it performs a function that was historically performed by faces on-screen: to express Bernard’s psychological state.⁹⁰

De-facializing objects

There is a final way that Bernard’s psychopathology is mirrored in the mise-en-scène of *Muriel*, generating a range of still more beguiling scenes. But in these, his facial-image is more specifically *de-facialized* through the surface of the objects that belong to him, although never to the point of total effacement. One of these objects is the teleidoscope – a type of kaleidoscope – that Marie-do picks up approximately halfway through *Muriel*, before looking at Bernard through it. This gesture is filmed using two shots: one of her, as she places the viewfinder to her eye, and one of him, taken from her optical perspective (Figure 10). Despite its brevity, the second of these two shots is particularly visually arresting, radically altering our perception of Bernard’s visage in various ways. In it, his face is subsequently split into eight ersatz copies, each positioned at a full-face angle but in a different section of the frame, and each subjected to the refractive and de-focusing twisting movement – at once centripetal and centrifugal, leftwards and rightwards – generated by the teleidoscope. Forming a radical

⁸⁹ Lara Thompson, *Film Light: Meaning and Emotion* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017), pg. 90. Italics added by author.

⁹⁰ Despite its complexity, this is an argument that is comparable to those that have been proposed by various thinkers, in film studies and beyond. Drawing from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, John Welchman, for example, has suggested that certain portraits by Henri Matisse create ‘face-landscape correlations’, displacing the former onto the latter, whilst Anton Kaes makes a similar claim about *Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari/The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (Robert Weine, 1920), arguing that the fragmentation of the mise-en-scène into anti-perspectival shards mirrors the psychic turmoil of shell shock. Furthermore, it is also an argument that James Monaco has applied to *Muriel*, although without referring to the lighting strategies used by Vierny, nor to Bernard’s combat-traumatized psyche, nor still to the architectural properties of this scene specifically. ‘Like *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* (Alain Resnais, 1959) and *L’Année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year at Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), *Muriel* situates its examination of the world of the mind in a geographical place which has its own concrete significance and which serves, in addition, as the locus for states of mind’, hypothesizes Monaco. See John C. Welchman, ‘Face, Mask, Profile: From Affect to Object in the Work of Henri Matisse and Fernand Léger’, *Contemporary French Civilization*, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 176–191, pg. 180; Anton Kaes, *Shell Shock Cinema: Weimar Culture and the Wounds of War* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 45–86; and James Monaco, *Alain Resnais* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), pg. 74.

iteration of what has alternately been called ‘deframing’⁹¹ or ‘spatial détournement’,⁹² this shot is vaguely reminiscent of the inverted facial close-up that appears at the start of *Apocalypse Now*, although where Coppola preserves the compositional stillness, focal clarity, and ontological unity of Willard’s face, Resnais evacuates Bernard’s face of each of these qualities, creating what could be called, *pace* Aumont, a spiral of de-faces. In a film conspicuously devoid of images of explicit violence, of physical pain, it is the closest any scene comes to depicting an act of literal disfiguration, as if Bernard’s head, or rather *heads*, were being ripped apart then put back together, drastically ruptured then magically sutured.

More importantly, this shot can be seen to gesture towards the psychic fragmentation from which Bernard is suffering, symbolizing the slow deterioration of his mental condition through the compositional dispersal of his facial-image. Granted, this argument is predicated upon a specific understanding of trauma, although it is one that has been supported by scholarship on the subject. In an instructive study about traumatized Vietnam veterans, John Wilson, for one, claims that trauma leads to ‘massive psycho-formative decentring’, involving the ‘disintegration of self-structures’. He continues: ‘disintegration is a psycho-formative mode of inconsistency in the self-structure which has no coherency or images to counterbalance the feelings and images of being broken apart into a fragmented identity’.⁹³ Likewise, in a brilliant analysis of *Muriel*, Max Silverman gives credence to this reading, commenting that the film ‘captures [an] existential state of anxiety [...] by investing objects with the charge of trauma [...], a charge which is constantly deferred from one object to another and never finally arrives at a sense of closure’.⁹⁴ Drawing from Wilson and Silverman, we might say that the teleidoscope that Marie-do uses to distort, decentre and thus defacialize Bernard’s facial-image functions to reveal the interior disintegration of his self-structure, characteristic of his trauma, to her and the spectator. Moreover, Silverman is correct about the associative links that bind different objects in *Muriel*, with this claim being particularly relevant to objects that do not just function as props (guns, rings, etc.), but *representational* props⁹⁵ (photographs, dolls, portrait paintings), with the latter providing us with various clues as to Bernard’s state of mind. Two representational props that bear certain affinities with Bernard’s teleidoscope, for example, are the graphic illustrations that appear, briefly yet conspicuously, twice in the film. Although we do not see Bernard composing either of these illustrations, their location within the *mise-en-scène* suggests that he is the author of both. One of them, for instance, can be glimpsed in the background of a shot of Marie-do, taken from within Bernard’s workshop, whereas the other is discovered by Alphonse as he rummages through Bernard’s military diary, encouraging us to interpret it as the creative expression of an even more private – intensely private – state of mind, recalling the kind of trauma-drawings that would be later used as a plot device by Michael Haneke in

⁹¹ Pascal Bonitzer, ‘Deframing’, in David Wilson (ed), *Cahiers du cinéma Vol. 4, 1973-1978: History, Ideology, Cultural Struggle* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 197–203.

⁹² Allan Cameron, ‘Face, Frame, Fragment: Refiguring Space in Found-Footage Cinema’, pg. 130.

⁹³ John Presten Wilson, ‘Identity, Ideology and Crisis: The Vietnam Veteran in Transition’, Part I. Paper presented to the Disabled American Veteran Association, Forgotten Warriors Project, Cleveland State University, Cleveland, OH, as cited in Richard B. Ulman and Doris Brothers, *The Shattered Self: A Psychoanalytic Study of Trauma* (London: Routledge, 1993), pg. 160.

⁹⁴ Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*, pg. 59.

⁹⁵ David Bordwell, ‘The classical Hollywood style, 1917-1960’, pg. 54.

Hidden/Caché (2005).⁹⁶ But just as important as the location of these illustrations is their content, with both of them depicting what can only be described as a sprawling tableau of identical faces, none of which bear any distinct resemblance to any of the characters, preventing us from unequivocally categorizing them as either portraits or self-portraits, and none of which exhibit any traces of a specific mental condition, remaining locked into an uncanny state of inexpression. Most importantly, whilst neither the rationale behind nor the subjects of these illustrations are disclosed within the film, their unnerving content nonetheless contributes to Bernard's characterization: as someone whose complicity in atrocity has made him mentally unstable, psychologically 'disfiguring' him.

If Bernard's teleidoscope and illustrations stage a comparable tension, between facial singularity and multiplicity, then other representational props function in a slightly different way, crystalizing an equally disconcerting dialectic, between facial visibility and invisibility. One prop that operates in precisely this manner is the holographic pair of glasses that Bernard incongruously puts on towards the end of the first meal that the characters share together (Figure 11). Operating as a kind of partial-facial mask, these glasses perform various functions in the *mise-en-scène*. First, they impede our view of Bernard's eyes, preventing us from ascertaining his line of sight. Second, they create the illusion that his eyes have been replaced by the eyes of another, eyes which are not brown but blue; are not circled with light smooth skin, but skin that has been etched with deep dark wrinkles; and eyes that do not appear to be governed by the normal physiological functioning of the face, but rather a kind of expressive anarchy, as if each eye was operating independently of the other, deliriously, convulsively, spasmodically. Usually, scholars writing about *Muriel* have tended to either oversimplify or underemphasize the significance of these glasses, with James Quandt, for instance, arguing that 'the film associates Bernard with unyielding sight and instruments of vision (projector, film, slides, camera, kaleidoscope, gag glasses)',⁹⁷ whilst Robert Benayoun points out that Resnais included them in the film after being inspired by the zany aesthetics of *Mad* magazine.⁹⁸ Whilst both of these observations are useful, neither identify what is arguably the most important intertextual reference at play here – Surrealism – with Angela Dalle Vacche describing Surrealist art as frequently populated by faces that are masked or accompanied by a mask, or otherwise, 'turned away, effaced, cracked or distorted'.⁹⁹ Nor, more importantly, do either Quandt or Benayoun mention the psychological function of Bernard's glasses, whose holographic illusion – that his eyes have yielded to two manic eyes, convulsing wildly – provides us with a further example of a compositionally unstable representational prop that symbolizes his increasingly unstable psychological state, of another *facial mask that fails*, to re-cite Paul Coates. Only Max Silverman has come close to capturing the complexity of these glasses, stating that 'objects hide the real and are banal substitutes for it, but they are also the containers of the affective weight of traumatic

⁹⁶ Guy Austin, 'Drawing trauma: visual testimony in *Caché* and *J'ai 8 ans*', *Screen*, No. 48, Vol. 4 (2007), pp. 529–536, pg. 533.

⁹⁷ James Quandt (2016), '*Muriel, or The Time of Return: Ashes of Time*', *The Criterion Collection* <<https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/4140-muriel-or-the-time-of-return-ashes-of-time?srsId=AfmBOopql4sjOi-fNKpUAClxJr8bPYTD-0V7U1-JSihGgHtPhlPI2Q3q>>, last accessed 2 June 2025.

⁹⁸ Robert Benayoun, *Alain Resnais, arpenteur de l'imaginaire: de Hiroshima à Mélo* (Paris: Ramsay, 1985), pg. 135.

⁹⁹ Angela Dalle Vacche, 'Surrealism in Film and Art: Time and Face', pg. 184.

experience'.¹⁰⁰ Or, to put it another way, by partially concealing the surface of Bernard's face, they paradoxically reveal the traumatized psychological depths that lie behind it.

And yet, there is still one final object on which Bernard's face is de-facialized in *Muriel*, providing the spectator with what I consider to be the most aesthetically compelling and psychologically troubling shot in the entire film. Here, I am thinking specifically of the harrowing photograph (Figure 12) that Alphonse finds in Bernard's military diary, alongside other personal belongings (diary entries, letters, military photos, one of the two graphic illustrations examined above). To the finding of this photograph – this found photograph – Alphonse responds in the following way. He plucks it from the pages of the diary, isolating it from the military mementos contained therein. He rotates it ninety degrees, from a vertical position to a horizontal one within the frame. And he holds it still in close proximity to the (static) camera, for approximately four seconds. Filmed using a single point-of-view shot, this act of reframing is subtle. However, it is also significant: it charges the photograph with unspoken meaning, and it enables the spectator to ascertain at least visual knowledge of the two individuals that feature therein, both of whom pose from a viewing platform located at the top of the Eiffel Tower. On the left is an anonymous young woman, whose face remains visible, frontally positioned, and materially unblemished. On the right – judging, again, from the location of the photograph, as well the diary entry that surrounds it within the frame¹⁰¹ – is presumably Bernard, although without this contextual information, such an assumption would be impossible. The reason for this is because the photograph has been graphically defaced, with a thick layer of black ink forming a jagged circular shape at the top of Bernard's torso, where his face would usually be positioned.

It is hard to imagine a clearer example of the aesthetics of de-facialization of which Aumont has written, with this shot divesting Bernard of almost all of the qualities that he associates with the so-called standard faces of Hollywood cinema: their expressivity, their three-dimensionality, their mobility, their vocality, their subjectivity, their visibility, and so on. Indeed, all that remains in this shot are the obscure ruins of a quasi-facial thing, a face that has been de-facialized to such an extent that it hardly even resembles the *de-faces* that Aumont analyzes in his book, let alone any kind of standard face. In a compelling analysis of classical Hollywood films, David Bordwell has illustrated how characters often use representational props to express the trauma of infidelity, enacting symbolic revenge over an unfaithful partner by subjecting a photo of the latter to an act of defacement: ripping it up, burning it, etching parts of it out, scribbling all over it.¹⁰² In *Muriel*, meanwhile, it is the trauma of having participated in an act of atrocity that is expressed in this photo, with Bernard defacing, or, better, de-facializing, an image of own face, once again to discreetly express the symptoms of his pathology. Like Bernard's teleidoscope, his drawings, and his holographic glasses, it forms an external expression of how he feels internally yet fails or refuses to express vocally.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film*, pg. 59.

¹⁰¹ Resnais frames this shot meticulously so that at least some of the words from the diary entry are legible, reading: 'an idiotic photo of us'.

¹⁰² David Bordwell, 'The classical Hollywood style, 1917-1960', pg. 54.

¹⁰³ As with Bernard's non-verbal gestures, these objects once again evoke those that frequently feature in Hollywood melodramas. In films like *Stella Dallas* (King Vidor, 1937) for example, 'signifying material' is displaced onto the 'nonlinguistic register' of the mise-en-scène, whilst Sarah Kozloff suggests that melodramatic films compensate for 'the words that cannot be spoken' through the

Conclusion: rethinking de-facialization

At the start of this article, I described existing scholarship on *Muriel* as being composed of a frequently non-medium specific combination of post-colonial studies, cultural history and cine-psychoanalysis. Against this critical tendency, this article has drawn from facial-film theory, generating a range of medium-specific arguments that bear few similarities with those that have previously been proposed by thinkers in the field. This doesn't mean that I necessarily disagree with *all* of the critical literature that exists on *Muriel*, with my emphasis on Bernard's trauma recalling certain aspects of work by Matthew Croombs, Naomi Greene and Laure Astourian. But it does mean that the formal properties of *Muriel* are significantly more complex than any of these scholars – indeed *any* scholar – has acknowledged, with this article being the first to identify de-facialization as the specific technique through which Resnais communicates the symptoms of Bernard's perpetrator trauma, rendering what was invisible, visible, and what was imperceptible, perceptible.

Whilst writing this article, I have also found myself pushing up against the limits of Aumont's own theory of de-facialization, requiring me to expand that too. For example, Aumont dedicates only one line of his monograph to the poetics of dorsal staging, asking 'is a face viewed from behind still a face?',¹⁰⁴ whereas the topic of self-shadowing is absent from it altogether. In order to conceptualize these formal strategies, I have therefore found myself looking elsewhere for theoretical inspiration. Similarly, whilst Aumont is attuned to the aesthetic complexity and psychological nuances of de-facialization, what remains entirely absent from his musings on the topic, and indeed, much of his work published in the 1990s, is the question of politics.¹⁰⁵ For scholars writing about an anti-war film such as *Muriel*, this blind spot poses a challenge, requiring me to revise Aumont's notion of de-facialization: as not just an aesthetic and psychological device, but a political one too. More specifically, the reason that de-facialization functions politically in *Muriel* is because it communicates the psychic traces of Bernard's complicity in an act of torture, a military strategy that anti-war campaigners such as Resnais had already opposed in the non-cinematic world. As Alyssa O'Brien states, 'as an aesthetic product that captures and comments on the alienation endemic to contemporary French society, *Muriel* provides fertile ground for an investigation of how film can interrupt normative social and political discourses', such as Jacques Massu's

'heightened expressivity' of non-verbal objects. For more information see Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire: The Women's Film of the 1940s* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1987), pg. 85; and Sarah Kozloff, *Overhearing Film Dialogue* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 242–245.

¹⁰⁴ Aumont includes this question under two screenshots: one from Robert Bresson's *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966) and one from *De la nuée à la résistance/From the Clouds to the Resistance* (Jean-Marie Straub et Danièle Huillet, 1979). Both screenshots include examples of dorsal staging, although Aumont doesn't identify it as such. *Du Visage au cinéma*, pg. 42.

¹⁰⁵ Such a blind spot is surprising, for two reasons. First, as I point out in the Introduction, Aumont appropriates the concept of de-facialization from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, both of whom conceptualize it as method of resistance against the facializing logic of racism, capitalism, Christianity, and patriarchy. And second, Aumont was at least initially affiliated with the highly politicized Althusserian Marxism that had dominated *Cahiers du cinéma* in the post-1968 period. For more information, see Daniel Fairfax, *The Red Years of Cahiers du Cinéma (1968-1973): Aesthetics and Ontology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2021), pg. 592.

endorsement of torture.¹⁰⁶ Ultimately, if we had to define the political logic of Resnais's narrative, we could say that it works something like this: the more Bernard's face is de-facialized in *Muriel*, the more the traces of his perpetrator trauma becomes perceptible, and the more we become aware of these traces, the more the war in Algeria seems unethical.

Clearly, there is more to be done – much more to be done – on the type of de-facializing imagery that features in *Muriel*, with such a study ideally tracing the historical origins of de-facialization, identifying its formal precursors, its stylistic forms, its trans-medial iterations, its psychological operations, and its political functions. Such a study might also endeavour to engage with questions that I have neither asked nor answered in this article. For instance, if – as I have suggested – *Muriel* uses the formal fragmentation of the face to convey psychic trauma, then what formal devices (realist? modernist?) have been used to depict the physical traumatization of the face, in other words, faces that have been subjected to acts of literal disfigurement?¹⁰⁷ Or, how might we read films such as *Soleil Ô* (Med Hondo, 1970), and *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (Lynne Ramsey, 2011), in which de-facialization is used to respectively communicate the psychological trauma of colonial racism and postpartum depression?¹⁰⁸ Or, finally, how have directors responded to the accelerated *facialization* of contemporary society – notably through the exponential rise of biometric facial recognition software and social networks (Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok) – precisely through an aesthetics of de-facialization?¹⁰⁹ In an age in which the facial-image is increasingly instrumentalized as a mode of control and disempowerment, perhaps the motif of the de-face offers the best possibility of resistance.

¹⁰⁶ Alyssa O'Brien, 'Manipulating Visual Pleasure in *Muriel*', *Quarterly Review of Film & Video*, Vol. 17: 1 (2000), pp. 49-61, pg. 49.

¹⁰⁷ See Suzannah Biernoff, *Portraits of Violence: War and the Aesthetics of Disfigurement* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2017); Jenny Edkins, *Face Politics* (Oxon: Routledge, 2015); and Tomáš Jirsa, *Disformations: Affects, Media, Literature*, for more details.

¹⁰⁸ See Paula Quigley, "'Sheer Epidermis": "Face Politics" and the Films of Lynne Ramsey' in Alice Maurice (ed), *Faces on Screen: New Approaches* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 178–193.

¹⁰⁹ See Zara Dinnen and Sam McBean, 'The Face as Technology', in Alice Maurice (ed), *Faces on Screen: New Approaches* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 330–346. Equally relevant is Michael Newman's chapter 'Decapitations: The Portrait, the anti-portrait... and what comes after?' in Fiona Johnstone and Kirstie Imber (eds), *Anti-Portraiture: Challenging the Limits of the Portrait* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), pp. 25–68.