War in Film: Semiotics and Conflict Related Sign Constructions on the Screen

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FRANK JACOB (ED.)

WAR IN FILM

Semiotics and Conflict Related Sign Constructions on the Screen

BÜCHNER

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Frank Jacob (Ed.)

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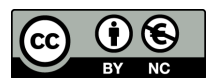

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Contents

Introduction: The Visual Semiotics of War

Frank Jacob

Wars interrupt history, at least according to our modern consideration of a historical process whose innate nature is peaceful. In reality, violent conflicts determined most of the historical developments in the last two centuries, when modern technology and ideological ideas turned classic cabinet wars into destructive abysses that nobody could fully escape.[1] However, the impact of wars is also felt in peacetime, be it through the fear of another violent escalation in the near future,[2] the commemoration of heroic acts related to the last war,[3] or the speculation about warfare and its possible consequences for the next generations.[4] War seems to be a particularly dominant aspect in our lives, regardless of the fact that humanity considers itself to have advanced to a more peaceful level of co-existence.[5]

1 Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).

2 See exemplarily Rachel L. Holloway, »The Strategic Defense Initiative and the Technological Sublime: Fear, Science, and the Cold War,« in *Critical Reflections on the Cold War: Linking Rhetoric and History*, eds. Martin J. Medhurst and Henry W. Brands (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2000), 209–232.

3 Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl, eds., *War and Memorials*, 2 vols. (Paderborn: Schöningh/Brill, 2019).

4 Stig Förster, ed., *Vor dem Sprung ins Dunkle: Die militärische Debatte über den Krieg der Zukunft 1880–1914* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016).

5 Such a view seems to be quite popular and is advertised by some well-read authors, e. g. Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (New York: Penguin, 2012). Others disagree with such an evaluation, e. g. Pankaj Mishra, *Age of Anger: A History of the Present* (London: Allen Lane, 2017). The rise of nationalism since the end of the Cold War has also intensified tensions on a global scale, as nation states have considered themselves threatened by globalization and transnational migration. See Frank Jacob and Adam

While (Western) Europeans in particular are inclined to believe in a peaceful world, because they have had the luxury of forgetting about wars and their violent and destructive consequences in the years since the end of the Second World War, the conflicts related to the end of the Cold War and the rise of nationalism in the post-Soviet world show how fragile the peaceful order of the continent is in reality.[6]

In the 19th century, wars were turned into public events, and photographs allowed newspaper correspondents and soldiers to share an insight into events related to these violent conflicts, even if the latter took place in faraway countries against unknown enemies.[7] Wars became a central element of national identities and were initially nationally and later ideologically charged to take a hold on whole societies that were mobilized for the war effort. Critics were silenced as the violent struggle was not only perceived as gallant and an expression of chivalry[8] but also a necessity to prove masculinity and national

Luedtke, eds., *Migration and the Crisis of the Modern Nation State?* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018). Peaceful co-existence therefore seems to be quite unlikely, especially once the struggle for resources really begins. Nicholas Spulber already reflected on the challenges of the 21st century more than two decades ago. See Nicholas Spulber, *The American Economy: The Struggle for Supremacy in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207–252.

6 Elisa Satjukow, *Die andere Seite der Intervention: Eine serbische Erfahrungsgeschichte der NATO-Bombardierung 1999* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020). On the reinvigoration of nationalism since the end of the Cold War, see also Frank Jacob and Carsten Schapkow, eds., *Nationalism in a Transnational Age: Irrational Fears and the Strategic Abuse of Nationalist Pride* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2021).

7 Frank Jacob and Mark D. Van Ells, *A Postcard View of Hell: One Doughboy's Souvenir Album of the First World War* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018), xvi–xvii. For a discussion of the depiction of colonial wars in post-Second World War British cinema, see Wendy Webster, »›There'll Always Be an England‹: Representations of Colonial Wars and Immigration, 1948–1968,« *Journal of British Studies* 40, no. 4 (2001): 557–584.

8 Allen J. Frantzen discusses this interrelation with a focus on the First World War. See Allen J. Frantzen, *Bloody Good: Chivalry, Sacrifice, and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

greatness.[9] The expansion of Europe and the establishment of a capitalist world-system[10] not only created exploitation and underdevelopment[11] to serve capitalist accumulation,[12] but it also created struggles between colonizing and colonized peoples, as well as between the great powers as they began to expand at the expense of their rivals.

After the medium of film was added to the portfolio of war correspondents and entertainers alike, the public—i. e. cinema and, later in the 20th century, TV audiences—was regularly confronted with war and the respectively created semiotics of these wars,[13] be it in the form of news coverage, documentaries,[14] or films that were shown in the local cinemas.[15] Once Hollywood turned to war films, an ever-growing number of these were produced and have become, and not only in the US, an essential aspect of popular culture ever since.[16] War

9 Ann-Dorte Christensen and Palle Rasmussen, »War, Violence and Masculinities: Introduction and Perspectives,« *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies* 10, no. 3–4 (2015): 189–202.

10 Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Essential Wallerstein* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 71–105.

11 Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1972).

12 Rosa Luxemburg, *Die Akkumulation des Kapitals: Ein Beitrag zur ökonomischen Erklärung des Imperialismus* (Berlin: Paul Singer, 1913).

13 Frank Jacob, ed., *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence* (London: Routledge, 2020).

14 Bernd Kleinhans, »Der Erste Weltkrieg als Medienkrieg: Film und Propaganda zwischen 1914 und 1918,« *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 16–17 (2014): 32–38. See also Christian Götter, *Die Macht der Wirkungsannahmen: Medienarbeit des britischen und deutschen Militärs in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015).

15 On the genre of war films see Heinz-Bernd Heller, Burkhard Röwekamp and Matthias Steinle, eds. *All Quiet on the Genre Front? Zur Praxis und Theorie des Kriegsfilms* (Marburg: Schüren 2006).

16 Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, *The Hollywood War Machine: U. S. Militarism and Popular Culture*, 2nd ed. (London/New York: Routledge, 2016); Robert T. Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Kathryn Kane, *Visions of War: Hollywood Combat Films of World War II* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982); Andrew Rayment and Paul Nadasdy, eds., *Hollywood Remembrance and American War* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020);

is therefore often quite present within society, and depending on the intentions of the filmmakers and the expectations of the audiences—or, more precisely, the interplay between their *Erfahrungsraum* and *Erwartungshorizont*, as Reinhart Koselleck termed it[17]—the films can transport different narratives. Audiences can be encouraged to be attracted to or influenced by the filmic depiction of wars and their history, the relations between wars as historical events, their commemoration according to patriotic and nationalist reinterpretations of the past, and the political agenda inscribed into the filmic presentation of collective violence in relation to emotionally triggered reactions like honor, pride, or demands for revenge.

Wars in films are consequently always more than just the staging or presentation of a historical event; they offer an interpretation of these events that usually corresponds with other aspects, e. g. society's evaluation of war per se, or wishes about how specific events related to war should be commemorated within the public conscience. Of course, films can also act as a medium to criticize war, but the functionality of the filmic stagings of collective violence is usually determined by the interaction between producers and the audience of the film. While this interaction also becomes a message about war,[18] whether the original meaning can still be deciphered by an audience or not depends on the time of its creation and screening. This also emphasizes the fact that films about war are not always to be understood, but only if the events and moral positions portrayed remain in accordance with those shared by the society and the (national) context in which the film is shown.

Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts and Glory: Great American War Movies* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Guy Westell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (London/New York: Wallflower Press, 2006).

17 Reinhart Koselleck, »›Erfahrungsraum‹ und ›Erwartungshorizont‹: Zwei historische Kategorien,« in Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 349–375.

18 For a detailed analysis of the communicational aspects of media, see the classic text by Marshall McLuhan: Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: Mentor, 1964).

The following chapters try to provide a variety of insights into these relationships, and although they focus on different time periods and aspects related to the semiotics, narratives, and perceptions of war in film, they all circle around certain questions related to war films in general. These are:

1. To what extent do war films present historical events that are already socio-culturally embedded within national narratives, and to what extent do their semiotics support or challenge common views about wars and collective violence?
2. Which conscious or subconscious images or visual semiotics are used within war films to connect the audience to the film and its narrative?
3. How do films create, transport, or intensify the perception and interpretation of wars within societies?

To answer these, each of the contributions of the present volume engages with specific war films and connects their respective war-related motifs and narratives with these questions.

First, Bruno Surace discusses the Garibaldian motif in *Il grido dell'aquila* (1923, dir. Mario Volpe) and *1860* (1934, dir. Alessandro Blasetti) to show how the Fascist regime in Italy used such films to connect itself to the historical legacy of Giuseppe Garibaldi and the national unification of the country. The next chapter deals with the semiotic construction of jihad in the science fiction novel *Dune* by Frank Herbert and the homonymous films of 1984 and 2021. In this chapter, Frank Jacob shows the extent to which the novel is based on orientalist semiotics that are also depicted and evoked in the films, especially when one considers the prominent story of Lawrence of Arabia that acts as a historical and cultural reference point in both the novel and the films alike. Giuditta Bassano then takes a close look at Christopher Nolan's *Dunkirk* (2017) to analyze the semiotic aspects related to the film that offer some kind of open reading for the audience, one that swings between the patriotic visualization of

classic Hollywood films about war and a more original staging of the plot. In her chapter, Nicole Beth Wallenbrock examines the semiotic aspects of French actor Alain Delon's role in war films related to the Franco-Algerian War and bases her analysis on the theoretical concept of Roland Barthes' writings about myth. In the following chapter, Jessica Wax-Edwards provides a comparative case study of Amat Escalante's *Heli* (2013) and Fernando Frías' *Ya no estoy aquí* (2019, *I'm No Longer Here*) to analyze the necropolitical conditions depicted in relation to the daily lives of young Mexicans and the drug war in the country. The final chapter of the volume examines how far films can be used to display traumatic memories and commemorate war experiences. Cecilia Canziani therefore takes a close look at the video works of Omer Fast, Steve McQueen, Maya Schweizer, and Clemens von Wedemeyer and offers deep insights into them.

All in all, it seems clear that the volume as a whole can hardly offer more than some methodological and theoretical reflections based on some case studies, but this should also be considered an advantage, because it thereby offers a broad variety of ideas and considerations that could and hopefully will be applied in further studies that take a closer look at specific aspects presented here, especially since there are many aspects of the interrelationship between war and film that seem to be interesting and important areas of study. The editor therefore hopes that this volume will inspire scholars in different fields to look further into topics presented herein related to war in film.

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The Cinematographic Face of Garibaldi

Fascist Propaganda as a Model for the War to Come[1]

Bruno Surace

Introduction

Cinema has occupied a peculiar position in the propaganda strategies adopted by authoritarian and totalitarian states. In fact, if we analyze the three most famous 20th-century dictatorships (German Nazism, Italian Fascism and Soviet Communism), we see in all of them a particular form of encoding of film messages during the periods of the regime.[2] The purpose of this contribution is to investigate the Italian manifestation, and especially the strategies implemented in the creation of cinematographic propaganda on the Garibaldi-Risorgimento theme. In this regard, I will discuss, with the help of different disciplines, *Il grido dell'aquila* (1923, dir. Mario Volpe (1894–1968))

1 This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement no. 819649—FACETS). This paper is the updated version of a section of my Italian volume *Il destino impresso: Per una teoria della destinalità nel cinema* (Torino: Kaplan, 2019).

2 See, for example, Andrea Giuseppe Muratore, *L'arma più forte: Censura e ricerca del consenso nel cinema del ventennio fascista* (Cosenza: Pellegrini editore, 2017); Francesco Fabiani, *Cineprese di regime: Il cinema nei regimi fascista, nazista e sovietico* (Brescia: Temperino rosso, 2017); David Gillespie, *Early Soviet Cinema: Innovation, Ideology and Propaganda* (London/New York: Wallflower, 2000); Richard Taylor, *The Politics of Soviet Cinema: 1917–1929* (London/New York/Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Linda Schulte-Sasse, *Entertaining the Third Reich: Illusions of Wholeness in Nazi Cinema* (Durham, NC/London: Duke University Press, 1996); Eric Rentschler, *The Ministry of Illusion: Nazi Cinema and its Afterlife* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

and *1860* (1934, dir. Alessandro Blasetti (1900–1987)), both films that make the Garibaldian motif their thematic fulcrum and which are relevant from the point of view of a historiographical analysis of the merits of Fascist propaganda. The aim is to provide insight on the use of the means of communication in the historical epoch of the Fascist regime and to propose a historical framework that transcends simplistic opinions as to merits and restores complexity, both at an aesthetic-hermeneutic level and at a historical-sociological one, to the debate regarding the devices deployed in the creation of specific messages by the Mussolinian propaganda organs.

Propaganda during the Fascist regime was, as is understandable in an authoritarian state model, pervasive. It touched on multiple media and social life spheres, from the anchoring of Catholic sensitivities (which had been tense since the capture of Rome and had become increasingly troubled thanks to the climate of conflict initiated by Pope Pius IX's (1792–1878) rejection of the Legge delle Guarentigie (1871), or the Law of Guarantees) to the state through the gargantuan operation of the Lateran Pacts (1929), to the intense symbolic intervention on urban spatiality that was invested with the values promoted by the regime, both in a purely linguistic-toponymic key (Predappio, in Emilia-Romagna, for example, was apostrophized as the »city of the Duce«) and certainly also from an architectural point of view through the operations highlighted by George Mosse, among others, in his *The Nationalization of the Masses* (1975).

There were also interventions in education, sport, and any other form of cultural activity that could in some way contribute to the formation of a sought-after shared imaginary capable of conveying adhesion—and conviction—to Benito Mussolini's (1883–1945) conception of the state. As can be easily understood, cinema was not exempt from certain more or less evident processes of manipulation, either in its forms or in its contents, even if it should be specified that Mussolini was not immediately aware of the propaganda scope of this medium, since he »did not rate fictional cinema as highly as he did

documentary, and did not follow the example of Hitler and Stalin who took over cinema as soon as they came to power.«[3]

The dictator's interest in stories narrated through the screen was, in fact, only very gradually aroused, although following the March on Rome in 1922—a highly symbolic event—he had publicly declared that cinema was »the strongest weapon,« and in 1924 he founded the famous *Istituto Luce* (The Educational Cinematographic Union), a real cinematographic production house designed to propagate Fascist ideology.[4] Thus, despite an initial lack of awareness, particular attention slowly began to be paid to that organ of representation, which exercised a notable influence on Italian audiences, perhaps also due to its innate predisposition to offer an »escape route« from a reality that was certainly difficult for many citizens to bear. If cinema existed and was especially popular when it staged fictional stories, then these too had to be subservient to the Fascist state through submission to censorship and strenuous control of the content produced. Fascist cinema can therefore be defined as being *channeled towards a unicum*, which, as we will see, is symbolic rather than thematic. Inevitably, it is very difficult to find Italian films produced during the Fascist period that contradict the dictates of Fascist »philosophy,« since it is unlikely that a director would have produced a work that, from the outset, might risk eventually being banned. Nonetheless, it must be borne in mind that, although the opposite may easily be posited, of the approximately 800 films produced in Italy during the Fascist era, only a low percentage constituted an exercise in the faithful, unexpurgated exposition of Fascist ideals; the others were constructed according to more complex aesthetic schemes, which enabled the transmission of specific contents by encoding them under precise symbols and narrations, capable of eliciting allegiance even if they were not superficial-

3 Gianfranco Casadio, *Il grigio e il nero: Spettacolo e propaganda nel cinema italiano degli anni Trenta (1931–1943)* (Ravenna: Longo Editore, 1989), 12. All translations from Italian are my own.

4 On the Istituto Luce, see Ernesto G. Laura, *Le stagioni dell'aquila: Storia dell'Istituto Luce* (Roma: Istituto Luce, 1997).

ly »very fascist« (or »*fascistissime*,« an unfortunate term proposed by Mussolini in 1925).[5] Indeed:

> An overall evaluation of Fascist film policy must necessarily include judgments of a different kind. The Mussolini regime did not create cinema in Italy but limited itself to recognizing—indeed, with a certain slowness—its precious propaganda potential and to taking various measures aimed at ensuring its conformity with the cultural and political objectives of Fascism. After the hesitations of the 1920s, the regime began to move more resolutely towards the integration of the film industry into the larger cultural organization of the state.[6]

It should be remembered, in fact, that not all the directors who in some way contributed to Fascism (and this also applies to art forms other than cinema) subsequently found themselves in the years to come professing the same ideology they had upheld in the past; for some of them, it had mostly been a passage, and had not always been voluntarily embarked upon:

> The fact of having collaborated, during the years of the regime, in the realization of various works containing, in a more or less evident and convincing way, elements of war propaganda does not compromise the maturation of the director and does not hinder his arrival at openly anti-Fascist positions, albeit more moral in character than political in the strict sense. Like Rossellini, … Mario Camerini and Alessandro Blasetti found their artistic and political sensibilities naturally maturing in the transition to open criticism of their Fascist past.[7]

5 By ›very fascist,‹ I refer to the term used for that group of Mussolini's laws enacted between 1925 and 1926 which allowed the transition to the fascist police-authoritarian regime.

6 Philip Cannistraro, *La fabbrica del consenso: Fascismo e mass media* (Bari: Laterza, 1975), 321.

7 Maurizio Zinni, *Fascisti di celluloide: La memoria del ventennio nel cinema italiano (1945–2000)* (Venezia: Marsilio, 2010), 19.

In this contribution, I will therefore investigate the aforementioned symbologies, focusing on two emblematic films that embody the filmic styles used in the creation of consensus and were, in general, the hermeneutics and aesthetics of reference adopted by the Fascist propaganda machine in the cinematographic sphere. The choice of *Il grido dell'aquila*, »the first full-fledged Fascist film,«[8] by Mario Volpe (1923) and *1860* by Alessandro Blasetti (1934) was motivated by precise requirements of semiotic and historiographic relevance since both share the *mythologization* of the Risorgimento in a popular key, and, in particular, the figure of Giuseppe Garibaldi (1807–1882):

> The films of the Risorgimento from the period 1923–1927 reflect this debate precisely. In the first place, by explicitly trying to connect the Risorgimento and Fascism, placing old and new fighters, red shirts and black shirts, side by side. Thus was relaunched a Garibaldi filmography that looked to Fascism. A typical example of this cinematography was *Il grido dell'aquila*, a 1923 film of Florentine authorship, [the scriptwriter] Valentino Soldani and the director Mario Volpe, commissioned by the Fascist Institute of National Propaganda of Florence, with a well-identified project: to connect the First World War, Fascism and the army, making a connection between Garibaldi's red shirts and the Fascist black shirts with the daring link between the enterprise of the Thousand and the March on Rome …[9]

Furthermore, if the first in some way initiates the Fascist style of cinema, which will in any case be rather complex and rich, as already mentioned, the second refers to an already more mature phase (12 years after the symbolic establishment of the regime), and it will

8 Alberto De Bernardi and Scipione Guarracino, *Il fascismo: Dizionario di storia, personaggi, cultura, economia, fonti e dibattito storiografico* (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), 210.

9 Fabio Bertini, *La cineteca di Clio: Il film come riflesso della storia e come autobiografia sociale* (Firenze: Università di Firenze, 2008), 4.

therefore be stimulating to compare the two filmic texts, highlighting both their similarities and differences.

Il grido dell'aquila and *1860*

The films of Volpe and Blasetti, although united by the figure of Garibaldi and the Risorgimento theme that will be discussed later, are constructed in radically different ways from many points of view. *1860* is in fact what can be strictly defined as a historical film, since it is set—except for the contemporary ending—in the year of the expedition of the Thousand, whereas *Il grido dell'aquila* is mostly a tale of current events (in 1923) while evoking images of 1860–61 through interesting dreamlike statements: »… the historical film by definition refers to a past reality known to most viewers prior to the film, either from experience or from representations, they enjoy the effect of recognition …«[10]

In Volpe's work, various stories, more or less complete, intertwine to converge at the end in the mythicization of Garibaldi and his enterprise: there is a central episode with a strongly anti-communist slant which shows an attempted proletarian revolt, and around this is woven a tale of unrequited love, the story of a bumbling soldier who becomes a street puppeteer, an account (not so marginal) of intergenerational communication focused precisely on the meaning of history. In *1860*, in contrast, there is no such narrative-episodic profusion: the main plot—although also interwoven with more implicit references—is unique, telling the story of the Sicilian Carmeliddu who travels northwards along the Italian peninsula and then, after various vicissitudes, participates in the Garibaldian expedition and can finally embrace his beloved Gesuzza again before fighting in the glorious Battle of Calatafimi (1860) against the Bourbons.

10 Marcia Landy, *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 183.

However, the identification of a difference on the plane of manifestation of the two texts[11] does not mean denying their indisputable shared polysemy. In fact, both conceal surreptitious meanings and multiple and often shared symbologies underneath their respective events. Fascist cinema, as already mentioned in the opening words, was not necessarily characterized by explicit propaganda, but often acted at deeper levels.[12] In this case, the Risorgimento theme is conveyed as a reason for the pride and unification of Fascist supporters, called upon to render possible the culmination of the values embodied by the Garibaldian epic. However, Fascist propaganda hinged on numerous other themes, many of which were far more effective—for socio-cultural reasons—than the central Garibaldian one; examples include the exaltation of the Italian colonial spirit[13] or a certain representation of ruralism as a symbol of immaculate purity,[14] rather than the numerous idolatries of the Roman Empire or auto-epideictic works on the March on Rome, the epitome of which is probably Blasetti's *Vecchia guardia* (*Old Guard*) from 1934. In other words, it was not an indispensable requirement that each film necessarily concern

11 The plane of manifestation cited here is a concept referring to the canonical generative path proposed by Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917–1992), a well-known Lithuanian linguist and semiologist. For present purposes it is not considered necessary to go into the technical level of Greimas' semiotic taxonomy, but it is enough for the reader to know the proposed subdivision of the emergence of meaning into three levels: content, manifestation, and expression. For further information, we recommend any basic manual of narrative theory or general semiotics.

12 For an analysis of persuasive strategies in propaganda, see Gladys Thum and Marcella Thum, *The Persuaders: Propaganda in War and Peace* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

13 For further information on this specific theme, we recommend watching the contemporary film *Pays Barbare* (2013, dir. Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi).

14 An entire chapter could be devoted to, for example, the choices of costumes made by Blasetti in *1860*. He in fact contrasts the uniforms of the Bourbons and the elegant clothes of the Roman and Genoese bourgeoisie with the ragged sheepskins worn by Carmeliddu in conformity with the emphasized ruralism of his Sicilian village.

one semiosphere[15] exclusively, and in fact some of the themes mentioned, among others, may appear only briefly in the films that will be analyzed, creating interesting veins of meaning and denoting one of the fundamental characteristics of Fascist propaganda: the creation of an interrelated narrative network, a *Gestalt* where every element was of support to others and where solid and untouchable internal coherence reigned, indispensable to obviate a structural collapse of the entire system.

In support of this particular conception, one may consider the dialogue that might be established between *1860* and *Il grido dell'aquila*, which support each other, together forming a potential macro-text in which they are united through Fascist isotopies (to all intents and purposes, the entire Blasetti film could constitute one of the episodes of memory present in that of Volpe). Nonetheless, and we thus come to the heart of the matter, in order for the aforementioned narrative network to sustain itself, it is necessary for the deeper layers, the symbolic or semi-symbolic ones, to know how to communicate with one other, and therefore how to be governed by an architecture of a certain type.

Key Elements

The Masks

The two films under analysis were previously described as polysemic, precisely because of the strong presence of allegories built around their central narratives. To all effects, indeed, Fascist cinema exhibits, as in some ways Soviet cinema does, a tendency towards visual meta-

15 The term is drawn from the semiotics of Jurij Lotman and was coined in 1984. It defines the complex environment in which the signs of a given space-time culture circulate and which defines what is part of this culture and what, conversely, should be excluded and considered as a non-culture. See Jurij Lotman, »O semiosfere,« *Sign Systems Studies* (*Trudy po znakovym sistemam*) 17 (1984): 5–23.

phor in most of its films, which aims to establish marked semantic links between one shot and another, capable of creating causal relationships supported by precise ideological bases through a certain stylistic mannerism. It is a strategy designed to achieve a specific symbolic effectiveness.[16] Brunetta writes:

> If, at the level of propaganda, Fascist cinema preferred »mild« and watered-down tones to those of a glorious and triumphant epic, this fact favored the creation of a common ground of stylistic convergence in which very different personalities found themselves side by side. The lack of a unitary style, a »fascist style,« wanted and imposed from above, favored … the contamination of all styles, from the imitation of the Soviet film to the American one, from the documentary to avant-garde research, but it also helped an entire generation of filmmakers free themselves from a series of genuinely critical reviews of their own role and the degree of their own »compromise« within the structures of the regime.[17]

In *Il grido dell'aquila,* very evocative symbolic-allegorical highlighting can be observed. One of the very first semiotic operations that Volpe carries out is that of inserting popular masks into the film, which from a position of initial inertia then progressively intervene in the narration. The reference to these precise »figures of the popular imagination« constitutes a strong act of engagement of the audience, a request for active participation. In fact, the masks of the *commedia dell'arte*[18] (Arlecchino/Harlequin, Pulcinella/Punch, Balanzone, Gianduja, Meneghino, and many others) are carriers of stories that are different but intertwined and, above all, rooted in the *Erfahrungs-*

16 On the idea of effective images, see Massimo Leone, ed., *Lexia 17–18: Effective Images/Efficacious Images* (Roma: Aracne 2014).

17 Gian Piero Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre: Fascismo e politica cinematografica* (Milano: Mursia, 1975), 91.

18 On the *commedia dell'arte*, see Allardyce Nicoll, *The World of Harlequin* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1963).

raum und Erwartungshorizont of a certain audience.[19] Knowing how to exploit them as a vehicle for certain messages implies awareness of the leverage exercised by a »delegated enunciation«: it is no longer the Duce who tells you about the ignominy of certain Italians and the glory of others, but rather some of his symbolic emissaries, whom the audience already knows and *trusts*. Volpe, in fact, proves his ability to operate through specific communication registers, which, curiously (or maybe not so curiously), are also those of today's advertising when it entrusts its messages to the testimonial or mascot.

The masks therefore act in place of Volpe; they are a simulacrum of him, just as he himself in turn acts on behalf of Mussolini, assuming the role of delegated enunciator. The masks, however, have an added value on account of the contents they convey *per se*, since they profess to be representations of a lively and multicolored Italy, initially somnolent in the film but then awake and ready for action. In this case, Harlequin acts as a fundamental episodic pivot and in some way also as a more subterranean exercise of analysis, since on stage he somehow anticipates the double superimposition of the unknown soldier—a reference to a patriotic nostalgia—in the rest of the film. The evolution of the events of the masks is thus an allegory of the construction of Italy. If the masks are a reference to the respective Italian regions that they commonly represent, they constitute only the starting point of Volpe's symbolic apparatus.

The Abjection of the Snake

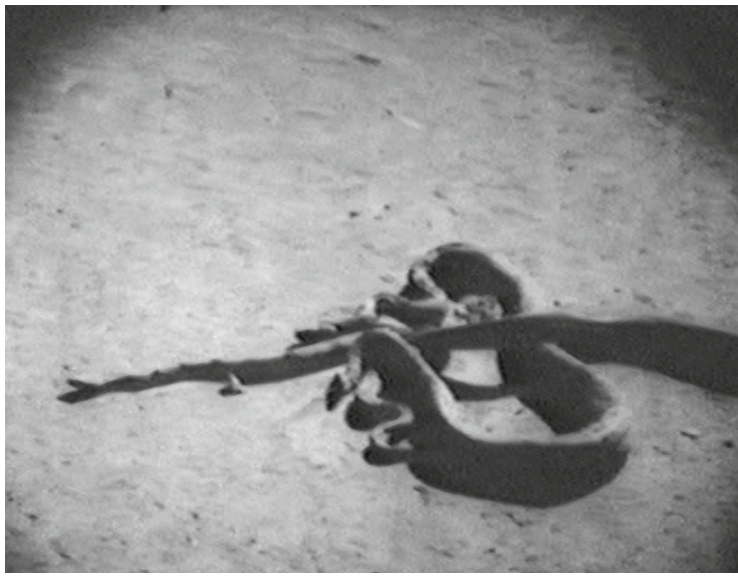
»Now the serpent was the most cunning of all the wild animals that the Lord God had made« (Genesis 3.1). This biblical verse triggers the widespread sense of wariness experienced by humans around these animals, atavistically associated with a specific symbolism, which

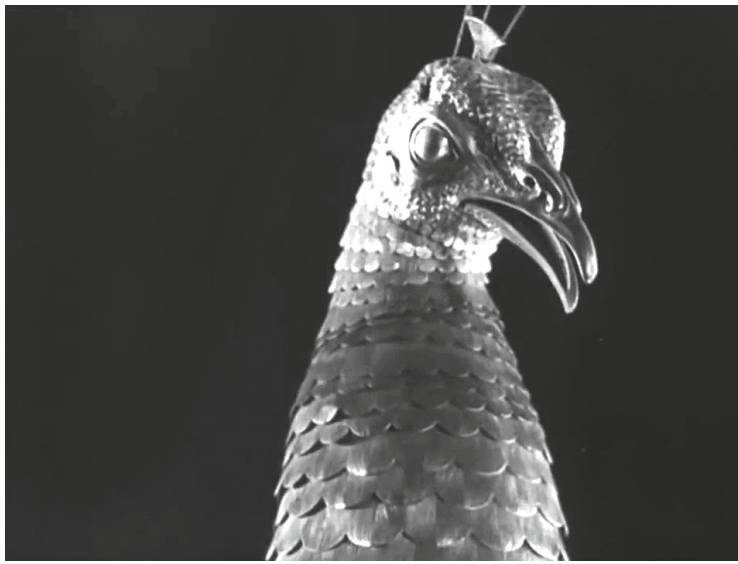
19 See Reinhart Koselleck, »›Erfahrungsraum‹ und ›Erwartungshorizont‹: Zwei historische Kategorien,« in Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2010), 349–375.

portrays them as devious and abject. A prominent role in *Il grido dell'aquila* is occupied by the figure of the snake, absolutely decontextualized from the events represented. This is not a unique case, nor is it a prerogative of Fascist cinema, as demonstrated by the famous mechanical peacock, an allegory of the vain Alexander Kerensky (1881–1970) in *October* (1927) by the Soviet master Sergej Mikhajlovič Ejzenštein (1898–1948).[20] Three times during the film, Volpe inserts a brief shot consisting solely of two entangled snakes (probably small pythons) contorting themselves.

> While in relation to masks the interpretative exercise was in some ways relatively obvious, the current example bears more thorough investigation. In fact, these three shots are not random, but are artfully placed at particular points in the montage, coinciding with the presentation of the communist (highlighted by a zooming in that displays his pin with the hammer and sickle motif, further proof of a certain interest in the symbolic codification of the narrative) or the inciter of the crowds, and with the proletarian revolt of the workers who will lose their battle. The snake is therefore the *other,* and in this case the communist *other*, that is, what is identified as the ideological nemesis of Fascism. The choice of this animal implies an appeal to specific spectatorial encyclopedias, relying on widespread popular biblicalism and on the well-known—at least in a folkloristic dimension—episode of the temptator snake in Eden. There is no more efficient emblem than that figure which, in Catholic Italy, is responsible for the original sin, thus being identified with incomparable perfidy. Volpe's rhetorical strategy therefore turns out to be rather subtle, as he knows how to manipulate the viewer by playing on the xenophobic

20 »The figure of Kerensky was also born from the commutation of the characters of major ›peacock‹ and the haughty and contemptuous baron Wilhelm von Ejrick, satirically portrayed by Maupassant in *Mademoiselle Fifi*. … Ejzenštein talks about this short story in *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, in relation to the exchange of structures.« Maurizio Del Ministro, *Cinema tra immaginario e utopia* (Bari: Dedalo, 1984), 190.





Figs. 1 and 2: Snakes in *Il grido dell'aquila* and mechanical peacock in *October*.

> predisposition configured by the regime and pointing to *otherness*—in this case towards the most fearful of *others*: the communist—without directly representing it. The director thus approaches a very high level of symbolism, rendering the idea without explicitly staging it: »The eidetic image is an image that achieves a fusion of visual configuration and idea, form, vision and concept. It is an image-idea, a visual structure, impregnated with a particular intellectual content. It is an image that unifies and renders indissoluble the visual and the intellectual, configuration and concept.«[21]

Like an advertiser, Volpe knows how to prevail on his viewers through appeal, working on unconscious levels, evoking specific causalities in an *agreed penetration*. As will be seen in the next section on the merits of Garibaldi's central theme, the director works in the balance between will and representation. In other words, he works on the visual sign, starting from its connotation:

> On the basis of ideas developed by Hjelmslev, the French semiologist Roland Barthes proposed in the 1960s an important definition of connotation, that effect whereby in certain signs, to a central and denotative meaning would be added a second meaning, often of an emotional nature, a semantic halo, in short, a parasitic communication. … For example, if the tricolor designates (arbitrarily and in a denotative way) Italy, this sign can, in a certain political context, become the signifier of a new sign, which recalls values such as patriotism, or perhaps in other circumstances the national football team.[22]

The masks are Italy asleep or awake, while the snake is the perfidy of the communist troublemaking *other*; elsewhere, Volpe adds shots of donkeys and rabbits, but, above all, he constructs the entirety of his film on Garibaldi.

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21 Paolo Bertetto, *Lo specchio e il simulacro* (Milano: Bompiani, 2008), 159.

22 Ugo Volli, *Il nuovo libro della comunicazione: Che cosa significa comunicare: idee, tecnologie, strumenti, modelli* (Milano: Il saggiatore, 2010), 53.

1860 by Blasetti

If the detection of primary allegorical devices in *Il grido dell'aquila* proves easy due to its predisposition to a certain type of exegetic, in the case of *1860*, a procedure of this type is more difficult. As already mentioned, the film is, unlike that of Volpe, rather linear. It does not follow an episodic trend interspersed with dreamlike moments and memories; on the contrary, the story of Carmeliddu, a Sicilian »*picciotto*« (a sort of low-level, trainee mafioso), has a fixed beginning and end, and the focus is essentially on his experiences, except in the initial and final moments, where the most markedly epic tone emerges and the crowd occupies the scene. However, just as Volpe, through a repertoire of strongly codified symbolic images, aimed to convey the Fascist conception utilizing the figure of Garibaldi as the greatest Mussolinian archetype, in the same way, Blasetti—with rather refined formalism—deposits a precise ideological transliteration in the sub-text, which is also found in *Il grido dell'aquila*: Mussolini and Garibaldi are the mirror of a shared, Italic heroism. The figure of Garibaldi has in fact been used propagandistically on several occasions in Italy, especially when there was a need to identify a symbol that was at the same time a war leader and an authentic patriot:

> This use of Garibaldi to (re)associate militarism with national unity led, in turn, to his appropriation by Mussolini's Fascists, who were seeking to co-opt the Risorgimento and rewrite it as their own foundation story. An attempt was made to ›Fascistise‹ Garibaldi by stressing continuities between his and Mussolini's actions (red shirts and black shirts; the marches on Rome) … In the mid-1930s, the first professorial chairs in Risorgimento history were established at Italian universities, and in 1934 Blasetti's film 1860, about the expedition of Garibaldi's Thousand to Sicily, appeared on Italian screens. Fascism was not, however, the last word on Garibaldi and the Garibaldian cult. Also during the 1930s, the opposition to Fascism sought to combat the aggressive nationalism of the Fascist regime by reinvoking

> Garibaldi as the symbol of popular liberation and internationalism. Agitating against Mussolini's intervention on the side of Franco in the Spanish Civil War, Carlo Rosselli, leader of the new Action Party, proclaimed ›today in Spain, tomorrow in Italy‹. Volunteers for Spain were organised into groups called ›Garibaldi brigades‹, and these fought with the Republican Popular Front against Franco and his supporters. The ›second Risorgimento‹ (1943–5) also saw communist Garibaldi brigades fight in the Resistance in Italy and Yugoslavia.[23]

In *1860*, specific dynamics of symbolization clearly emerge, and metaphors of various kinds are nevertheless detectable. For example, the xenophobic theme is evident, here codified in terms of linguistic and national *otherness*: the Bourbons who threaten peaceful Sicily with their militarized presence are *others*; the French who exhibit an obvious feeling of superiority and a total lack of cooperation towards Carmeliddu in Civitavecchia are *others*; the Germans are also *others*. National identity solidifies on the representation of an *other,* iridescent and imbued with its own peculiar monstrosity.[24] The theme of the different as hostile to the unity of the Italian homeland therefore stands out in both films without being explicitly stated in direct terms: in Volpe's work, this is embodied in the communist, and, in that of Blasetti, in the foreigner or non-Italian. It matters little if the object of the representation enjoys dubious verisimilitude (the epic of the Sicilian *picciotto* sometimes takes on completely caricatured connotations, as in fact the events in Volpe's film do), »because *1860* is a crossroads of contradictory determinations and impulses, of dissonant yet honest and sincere voices,«[25] and what is important is that

23 Lucy Riall, *Garibaldi: Invention of a Hero* (New Haven, CT/London: Yale University Press, 2007), 6.

24 On the relationship between representation and otherness, see Tarcisio Lancioni, *E inseguiremo ancora unicorni: Alterità immaginate e dinamiche culturali* (Udine: Mimesis, 2020).

25 Alessandro De Filippo, »*1860* di Blasetti, l'intenzione di andare al vero,« in *Sulla strada dei mille: Cinema e Risorgimento in Sicilia*, ed. Sebastiano Gesù (Catania: Brancato, 2011), 79.

the viewer is able to grasp a series of contents without these being forcibly imposed on him. What takes place is more than anything else a mechanism of suggestion, a request that is made to the viewers of the film to put themselves in the protagonist's shoes.

Technical Specifications

At the end of this brief allegoresis of the two films in question, it is important to note how the ideological architecture is not governed exclusively by narrative and symbolic components, but also by some formal choices. An example of this is a shot from *1860*, relevant precisely because of its metaphorical-allegorical value.

After various tribulations, Carmeliddu manages to reach Genoa to exhort Garibaldi to descend into Sicily. It is a step towards liberation and a life of serenity and, after an initial moment of discouragement due to some *fake news*[26] about Garibaldi's alleged abandonment, the expedition starts. Shortly afterwards, the narrative moves to Sicily, at the dawn of the Battle of Calatafimi, but Blasetti lingers on some white flowers in the foreground, similar to peach blossoms.

This shot is perfectly unnecessary within the narrative, yet it is presented as the opening frame of Garibaldi's arrival in Sicily, immediately after the textual insertion, also not strictly necessary for narrative purposes, bearing the following words: »Considering that in times of war it is necessary that civil and military powers be concentrated in the hands of a single man, I assume in the name of Vittorio Emanuele, King of Italy, the Dictatorship of Sicily. Giuseppe Garibaldi. Salemi, May 14, 1860.«[27] It is a so-called »establishing shot« or, maybe, a »pillow shot,«[28] that is, shots »which have little or

26 On this topic, Marc Bloch's *Réflexions d'un historien sur les fausses nouvelles de la guerre* (Paris: Allia, 1994) is recommended reading.

27 My translation from the Italian caption.

28 See Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and Meaning in the Japanese Cinema* (Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979).

Figs. 3 and 4: Different focus in the same shot.

no narrative significance.«[29] In fact, Blasetti wants to communicate here through completely de-narrativized and purely iconic-visual symbolic registers. The flowers are almost motionless, merely stirred by a light breeze, and the camera captures their still beauty, and then, with an almost imperceptible zoom-out movement, focuses in a different way on their background, constructed around precise codes of figuration since it depicts the bayonets which in turn are immobile and intertwined one with the other. The extremely codified value of this image is undeniable, rendered with the technical and stylistic care of a director who during the entire film does not hesitate to play skillfully with the registers of the cinematographic medium, examples of which are the constant camera movements (especially in situations of battle but also and above all of dialogue), a characteristic and not obvious use of the off-screen (as in the formidable sequence when Carmeliddu finds himself isolated in the endless sea), and so on.

In short, it is not only the choice of the symbol that reigns supreme, and the same—albeit with different tones—applies to Volpe, but also and in equal measure the manner of its staging.

> The visual and auditory distinctions paint a melodramatic canvas in which the lines are clearly drawn between friend and foe, patriot and interloper. The assignment of horizontal and vertical positions is metaphoric. The images of reclining and rising, like movement and stasis, become important as a way of measuring progress, but are also proleptic insofar as the notion of rising is associated with the notion of Risorgimento. The enemy is also identified with jarring sounds, abrupt interruptions, entrances and exits, while softly played patriotic music identifies the Sicilians.[30]

29 Martha P. Nochimson, *World on Film: An Introduction* (Malden: Blackwell, 2010), 209.

30 Marcia Landy, *The Foklore of Consensus: Theatricality in the Italian Cinema, 1930–1943* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press 1998), 145.

Numerous other examples of the value of technique in Fascist propaganda cinema exist, but we will limit ourselves here to underlining two more: the use of sound in *1860* compared to silence in *Il grido dell'aquila*, and the final march in the latter. In Blasetti's film, there are three different types of sounds: the voices in the dialogues, music, and voices-off. The sound goes hand in hand with the visual and indeed often overdetermines its essence, starting from the most evident element: a marked use of musical tones, which may be distinctly epic at times, as in the case of the final battle, while at others decidedly gloomier, as Landy points out, and which are often halfway between the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic. The off-screen voices mark the rhythms of the narration, permitting the necessary temporal ellipses. Finally, speech plays a further prominent role when Blasetti highlights the accents and the linguistic discrepancies between the Italians (united by an idiom and characterized by individual dialects) and the *others*. Without going into a deeper analysis, this tripartite division of sound, which is variously significant in terms of conveying the message of the film (and basically of Fascism), stands as an observation of the importance of technique in the evolution of the cinematographic medium. In *Il grido dell'aquila*, in fact, it is not possible to identify elements of this type since it is a silent film, although it would still be naive to consider it a simpler film or one that lacks an expressive component. In it, instead, other stylistic choices intervene, such as the aforementioned oneiric-episodic progression and the permeating allegorical charge. For his part, therefore, Volpe does not fail, although perhaps to a lesser extent than Blasetti, to perform some stylistic exercises that are anything but obvious. An example of this is one of the last shots showing the arrival of Fascists from all parts of Italy, ready to march on Rome. In this brief scene (slightly longer than Blasetti's flower shots), Volpe outdoes himself with a masterfully calculated long shot. The troops can be seen arriving in the distance and crossing the screen, and what clearly emerges is the multitude of people within the frame that follow one another in an endless flow, an ideal counting of the presumably boundless consensus in favor of Mussolini. Of course, the manipulative and

propagandistic intent of stylistic operations of this kind, aimed at building an apologetic view of the March on Rome, is clear, but this does not prevent us from being able to analyze its aesthetic value in order to grasp the peculiarities that make the films we are analyzing objects of study that can be explored in a historiographical context in which we try to abstract the production strategies of the persuasive message. In particular, a wonderful essay by Pierre Sorlin cautions against any simplistic or one-sided interpretation of this type of film:

> However, if we compare all the elements listed above, we must admit that [the film] was not Mussolini's and that, in many respects, it proposed a political line that did not correspond to that of the Duce. *Il grido dell'aquila* was not addressed to the daring or the *squadristi*, it was aimed at two types of spectators: on the one hand to the discharged soldiers, and on the other to the middle class; he was able to comfort the veterans, happy to be seen again, in the last sequence, the monument of the unknown soldier, and to reassure that part of the bourgeoisie that the red danger had terrified. … In the context, we cannot speak of the spectator's identification with the characters, it is rather an automatic adhesion, the figures are too contrasting to give space to a moment of hesitation, the audience must necessarily hate the bad guys.[31]

Technique and style, symbols and superficial narration are therefore not elements to be considered as watertight compartments but components that cooperate in the rendering of the defined product. During the Fascist era, this was never necessarily a mass product but was very often achieved according to several keys, in such a way that it was intended for different types of audience, in other words, channeled or targeted. In fact, as Sorlin points out, the Risorgimento theme would certainly resonate more with some subjects than it would with others.

31 Pierre Sorlin, »›Il grido dell'aquila‹, ultima tappa del primo cinema italiano,« in *A nuova luce: Cinema muto italiano*, ed. Michele Canosa (Bologna: Clueb, 2001), 253–254.

Figs. 5 and 6: Marching crowd in *Il grido dell'aquila* and an unconscious Carmeliddu in *1860*.

Garibaldi Between Will and Representation

The Garibaldian Risorgimento is therefore the strong symbolic nucleus in the two films under analysis and, to a large extent, is present in a whole series of films dating back to the Fascist era. In *Il grido dell'aquila*, Garibaldi is the memory of the glorious exploits of the Thousand who unified Italy, and, in *1860*, a hope for a better present no longer subject to the oppression and atrocities of foreign tyrants. As said before, the rhetorical modalities of the presentation of the theme are different but potentially intertwined, since they rest on the basic assumption that Garibaldi is a sort of Mussolinian alter ego, a model for the Duce himself, symbolically united with him as a war hero, as demonstrated by the ceremonies in honor of Garibaldi organized by the Duce:

> For Mussolini, Genoa was meant to be a period of respectful silence and mourning; a brief period, however, which was not to be extended to the whole nation—not even to the communities along the path of the train carrying Anita towards Roman resurrection. At the same time, the Genoese spectacle was to stimulate the narrative memory of its audience by means of its aesthetics, so as to ensure the symbolic historicization of *garibaldinisimo* as a nineteenth-century phenomenon. In correspondence with Mussolini's express directions, the core of the parade which accompanied the precious coffin appeared like the central room of a historical museum. Framed between the municipal valets (dressed in their historical uniforms) and the funeral carriage, the Garibaldians, all dressed up in their glorious red shirts and riding in open horse-drawn carriages, were separated from both the Blackshirts and the first world war veterans who followed the carriage. They were being put on display as *living relics* of Garibaldi's time. The parade's implicit codification of this memory-time was then reinforced by another *coup de théâtre* devised by Mussolini himself: Anita's coffin was carried in a solemnly decorated funeral carriage pulled by four black horses.[32]

32 Claudio Fogu, »Fascism and Historic Representation: The 1932 Garibaldian Cel-

So, from a stylistic point of view, a parallel emerges in the endings of both Volpe's and Blasetti's films, which are orchestrated and contrived in such a way as to bring their respective events to their only possible conclusion: the confirmation of the Fascist ideal. Only Blasetti was subsequently to »renege« on his ending, adducing some sort of constraint (a not unlikely circumstance), and in fact the version of *1860* reissued after the war no longer shows the Fascists' march on the Foro Mussolini:

> For example, a film like Mario Volpe's *Il grido dell'aquila* (1923), even if set at the end of the First World War, shows an ex-Garibaldian who participates together with the Blackshirts in the March on Rome. Roughly, such a conclusion serves to highlight the continuity between Risorgimento ideals and Fascist »revolution.« And again, in Alessandro Blasetti's *1860* (1934), something happens that is the same and contrary to Volpe's film. The film, starting after the war, is presented in an amputated version, trying to make people forget that in the original version, the film ended with a pompous vision of the Fascist phalanxes that paraded in front of the Garibaldian veterans against the background of the Foro Mussolini.[33]

But which Garibaldi is being staged? In what form and in what guise? In both films, the »hero of two worlds« basically never appears in first-person and yet is always present in the background in stories, anecdotes, events, and icons. Volpe evokes him—among other ways—through the words of his grandfather Pasquale, a blind »Garibaldino of the Mountains« who, prostrated by an existence now nearing its end, is galvanized by the memory of the invigorating expedition of the Thousand in which he took part in a glorious past. Garibaldi here is nothing more than a name, a tension towards something, a sort of presence halfway between will and representation. Only for brief, epic moments does his image appear, already deeply iconized, in an effigy

ebrations,« in »The Aesthetics of Fascism,« special issue, *Journal of Contemporary History* 31, no. 2 (1996): 328–329.

33 Giancarlo Giraud, »Dieci film sul Risorgimento,« *Il tempietto* 9 (2009): 159.

that shows his solid and incorruptible posture. It is his absent image that acts as the engine for the whole narrative, just as it is in *1860*. Here, in fact, it would have been easier to use a real actor to impersonate the leader drawing his brave soldiers with him, but this figure is seen very rarely and never well, and is again a pretext around and behind which to build specific messages, which are as aesthetic as they are political for the director. This is how Blasetti himself described his relationship with the image of the leader:

> The only precise intention that I had was to frame Garibaldi at a great distance, so that he would remain like a historical aura in relation to these Garibaldians and so that a disturbing close-up would not emerge. I made only one, a half close-up of Garibaldi, who was eating an onion or an apple—I don't remember what he was holding—while giving orders; and it was a three-quarter view, like this … precisely because I was repelled by [the idea of] taking this figure and bringing it thus to the fore.[34]

Therefore the central theme exists precisely because it is fragmented (and this is specific to the cinematographic medium, which, through montage and other linguistic features, operates a constant fragmentation of the representation); as an evocation, Garibaldi is suspended between the universe of diegesis and that of the spectator, not portrayable as completely fictional because in this way he would be assimilated to a character, admirable but nevertheless inscribed in a precise narrative context, nor at the same time can he be denied an albeit minimal appearance, lest nothing be perceived of him. Thus, through a mechanism of passages balanced between exposure and concealment, Garibaldi becomes a myth imbued with a »superhomistic« aura, and, moreover, being a myth in the shadows, the way is paved for him to be a direct reference to Mussolini.

34 From an interview with Blasetti. Tullio Kezich, *Cinecittà anni Trenta* (Roma: Bulzoni, 1979).

Perlocutionary Garibaldi

Garibaldi (his memory) gives new life to Volpe's blind man; Garibaldi (the hope he embodies) spurs the young and naive Carmeliddu on to improbable Italic heights; Garibaldi, as we have seen in the previous section, is also in what does not appear, a *praesentia in absentia*. Garibaldi can be seen because *he makes things happen*.

The experiential dimension is strongly present in Fascist propaganda, and cinema does not exempt itself from this characteristic. There is a need to create a passionate (and unconditional) involvement in the regime, and one of the tactics for this is to not let a restrictive attitude be directly perceived but rather to rouse the recipients of the communication to participate in the first person, to become protagonists—in the Italic proscenium—of the heroic messages they are witnessing. Let us not forget that Mussolini's speech from the balcony of Palazzo Venezia in Rome on 10 June 1940, announcing Italy's entry into the war, was a solo performance delivered in the first person plural and filled with vocatives from the very beginning: »Fighters by land, sea and air! Blackshirts of the revolution and the legions! Men and women of Italy, of the Empire and of the Kingdom of Albania!«[35] Therefore, a further value of the Garibaldian construct in Fascist cinema is centered on experience »because it is not the General who is waging the war, but the Italian people as a whole who are fighting to free themselves.«[36] For this reason, too, the leader is never directly represented but essentially exists in indirect references, from which it can be deduced that while he is the guide that the people need, it is the people themselves who make the enterprise possible. This approach is *de facto* imbued with populism, since it is precisely on this that one of the major dynamics implemented by certain communicative organs hinges. Although *1860* cannot in fact be defined

35 Original quotation: »Combattenti di terra, di mare e dell'aria. Camicie nere della rivoluzione e delle legioni. Uomini e donne d'Italia, dell'Impero e del Regno d'Albania.«

36 De Filippo, »*1860* di Blasetti,« 80.

as a »crudely propagandistic«[37] film if not in the finale (subsequently eliminated) with its »bold vision of the fascist phalanxes parading in front of the Garibaldi veterans, against the imperial background of the Mussolini Forum,«[38] it proposes »a ›populist‹ vision—omitting, of course, the bloody repressions carried out by the Garibaldians—in which the popular classes play a role; while Fascist historians—but also others—have pointed out, almost unanimously, how the unification of Italy was achieved by an elite of aristocrats and bourgeois.«[39] Proof of the aforementioned vision, in addition to the preponderance of the popular classes, is the strenuous ruralism that emerges in both films, as well as a certain not always veiled mockery of the bourgeois classes. But Garibaldi, who unites people and incites them to action, eliminates class differences in the creation of his utopian Italy. In *1860*, he is awaited by the whole community of the Sicilian village, including the priest who at the end exclaims in relief: »Garibaldi has arrived!« Eventually, from Civitavecchia to Genoa, everyone agrees that »the time to discuss is over, the time to act has begun.«

The »politics of doing,« a rhetorical expression that resonates with numerous echoes even in the 21st century, is therefore intrinsically connected to the strong—we might say »laterally persuasive«—perlocutive dimension proposed in both films.[40] Even in *Il grido dell'aquila*, it is the memory of Garibaldi that becomes the trigger from a state of inertia to one of action, producing one of the most obvious connections with Fascism. Pasquale's grandson, Beppino, listens attentively

37 Gianfranco Gori, *Alessandro Blasetti* (Firenze: La nuova Italia, 1983), 41.

38 From Filippo Sacchi's review of the film in *Il Corriere della Sera*, March 30, 1934.

39 Gori, *Alessandro Blasetti*, 44.

40 »The perlocutionary act relates to the effect that is induced in the audience. Persuading, infuriating, calming or inspiring someone are perlocutionary acts. They can be intended or unintended, but what distinguishes perlocutionary from illocutionary acts, for Austin, is that while illocutionary acts always rely upon the existence of conventions, perlocutionary acts are natural or non-conventional.« A. P. Martinich, »Philosophy of Language,« in *Philosophy of Meaning, Knowledge and Value in the Twentieth Century*, ed. John V. Canfield (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), 24. The general theory is in John L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

to the glowing tales about his grandfather's heroic past, which see him marching twice on Rome, until—moved by a sort of invisible spirit—he decides to act himself, and not by chance, in the following way: he goes to where some people are writing pro-Lenin slogans on a wall and joyfully sets about driving them away with blows from his truncheon (which he nicknames »Saint Truncheon«). From a narratological point of view, not only does Beppino act in chasing the writers away but they too are acting in their decision to write. This banal observation indicates how Garibaldi's appeal to experience refers to a Manichean experience, which clearly distinguishes between morally right and regrettably wrong, fully in accordance with the Fascist dictates constructed by the numerous allegorical references mentioned above. Consistency must reign supreme in the construction of careful propaganda, and the call to action is valid only if it conforms, even morally, to Fascism.

The Stereotype and the Prototype

For memory, allegory, delegated enunciators, connotation, implicit reference, and more or less evident rhetorical exercise, there is a rigorous conceptual place (or rather a space): the Past. Mussolini is the Present, and indeed is the new Garibaldi, his explicit extension, which is not symbolized but reified, shown in his immanence.

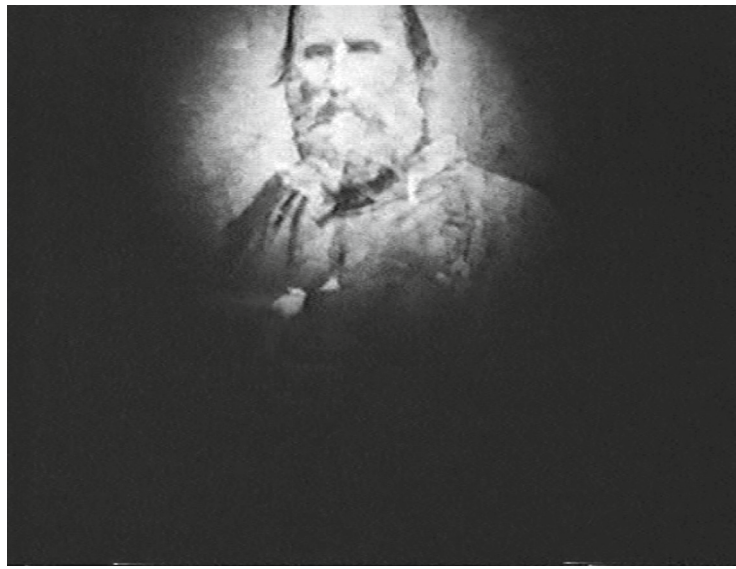
> *1860* was set in the year of the Enterprise of the Thousand, but it embodied the theme of popular participation in the enterprise also against the »political« hesitations and the functionality of the Garibaldian enterprise to national cohesion, always and in any case on the assumption that in those synergies was concealed the fundamental synergy between leader and people that Fascism attributed to itself.[41]

41 Bertini, *La cineteca di Clio*, 5.

This consideration emerges from an analytical reading of the two films examined so far. The whole system that has been analyzed seems to be subservient to the creation of a fertile ground for the Duce's *mise-en-scène* as a direct consequence of metaphor, the highest (and only) appropriate exegesis. In this sense, the ending of *Il grido dell'aquila* is exemplary: the memory of Garibaldi's enterprise, in a mixture of dreamlike and real that in other contexts we would not hesitate to define as typical of the postmodern, blends with symbolic Italian images: there is the eagle and the ›fasces,‹ and then concreteness increasingly takes hold with images of fields, industries, and ships, symbolizing the utopian opulence to which Fascism would lead, all culminating with a still image of the Duce (this cinematographic strategy was considered so effective that it constituted the dominant rhetoric of *Triumph des Willens* (1935) by Leni Riefenstahl (1902–2003), the most important Nazi propaganda film). Shortly before that, sumptuous images of the March on Rome, in which the Garibaldian veteran participates with renewed vitality, follow one after the other in a longer-than-average sequence of the film to trace the grandeur of the Fascist enterprise. These sequences have never been judged positively by critics, nor have those at the end of *1860* which similarly link the Garibaldian Risorgimento with Mussolini's march, and which Blasetti himself cut in the post-war period by virtue of his subsequently attained anti-Fascist awareness.

As De Filippo points out, the choice of such manifestly celebratory endings does not always prove effective, which is quite understandable from the point of view of an audience who, up to a certain point, is stimulated by a rich symbolic production, only to then be subjected to a mere exercise in self-praise.[42] Nonetheless, it must be considered how Fascist cinema was in any case constantly being scrutinized by powerful censorship and review bodies, and if choices of a certain type cannot therefore be justified from an aesthetic perspective, they are nonetheless comprehensible from a historiographical point of view.

42 Alessandro De Filippo, »*1860* di Blasetti, l'intenzione di andare al vero,« in *Sulla strada dei mille: Cinema e Risorgimento in Sicilia*, ed. Sebastiano Gesù (Catania: Brancato, 2011), 79.



Figs. 7 and 8: Effigies of Garibaldi in *Il grido dell'aquila* and *1860* respectively.

What emerges is a Garibaldi who is at the same time stereotype and prototype: stereotype in that he is stripped of any introspection, reduced to an icon conveying a predefined set of values with which ›good‹ Italians must bond unless they want to be accused of deviance (and subjected to the dire reprisals that would follow such an accusation in a dictatorial Fascist state); and prototype since his figure seems to constitute a basis for experimentation for the construction of a certain image of Mussolini. However, it should be remembered that the pyramid concept[43] of a media monopoly that inculcates a series of contents into an inert mass is, to put it mildly, highly simplistic; it does not take into account all those feedback mechanisms that inevitably condition the spheres of power, even in situations of authoritarian regimes where, and this is worth bearing in mind, the possibilities of dialogue with the highest hierarchies are limited, if not almost entirely absent. It follows that the figure of Mussolini was constantly revised also on the basis of popular consensus and that cinema and the imaginary he helped to form could act as a valid sociological laboratory in this sense.

In fact, it was between 1929 and 1934 that, according to De Felice, Italy experienced »the five-year history called the band of *maturity* of fascism, that is, the years of greatest prestige and of greatest plebiscite adherence to the regime.«[44] And *1860* came out in 1934, ten years after *Il grido dell'aquila*, following a whole series of other media products which—some more and some less—contributed to this rise in consensus. Mussolini therefore at the same time creates and rides this wave, and Garibaldi, or rather the icon of him that is gradually being

43 The theory of the hypodermic needle or magic bullet theory was developed by authors such as Paul Lazarsfeld (1901–1976), in the context of the sociology of communication, around the studies of *mass media* in the 1920s in the USA: »The theory equates the media with an intravenous injection: certain values, ideas and attitudes are *injected* into the individual media user, resulting in particular behaviour. The recipient is seen as a passive and helpless victim of media impact.« Pieter J. Fourie, *Media Studies: Media History, Media and Society* (Cape Town: Juta, 2007), 232.

44 Vito Zagarrio, *L'immagine del fascismo: La re-visione del cinema e dei media nel regime* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2009), 93.

built, his idol, serves him as a springboard but also as an experimental prototype. Sealing this union is the mythicization of the March on Rome, associated with the expedition of the Thousand, as happens in the film by Volpe and, with slight modifications, in the first version of that of Blasetti.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have often spoken of the effects of the meaning of a film on the audience and of specific encodings of messages capable of provoking different reactions. It is indispensable to consider the role of the public in the propaganda communication process that is commonly often thought of as being one-way. In fact, if this were the case, why strive to create films that are so complex in the construction of their symbols and, above all, why relegate Garibaldi to a position of quasi-absence? It would make no sense, except perhaps to play with the stylistic registers of the medium used to create an aesthetically innovative or stimulating product, but then one would fall further into a paradox, since one of the decisive factors of innovation, if not the main one, is precisely the public.

The propaganda machine was therefore well aware of how the dynamics from below contributed, through tendencies, conceptual movements, common thought, and identity mechanisms, to influencing media production, and cinema was fully inserted into this logic. Instead of a vertical vision of media communication, it is therefore preferable to place oneself in the perspective postulated by Carlo Ginzburg.[45] This author introduced the model of circularity, whereby the working classes are able to influence the upper classes and consequently the producers of communication through a return mechanism (although it is not clear to what extent this influence occurs),

45 Carlo Ginzburg, *Il formaggio e i vermi. Il cosmo di un mugnaio del '500* (Torino: Einaudi, 1976).

and that of configuration, which presupposes a social dynamism in which the movement of each element leads to a global shift in a perspective of interdependence. This explains the accuracy of the rhetorical constructions of Volpe, Blasetti, and the numerous other authors who contributed to the development of cinema in the Fascist era. The film and the public, especially in a regime context where artistic freedom was largely suppressed, behaved—and behave—like two complementary levers, and it is probably for this reason, as well as for those previously discussed, that Garibaldi never appears directly and lives in a dimension other than that which can be experienced by the spectator: he must never obscure Mussolini but only assist in his rise and consensus. Directors could therefore not afford to stage a product built according to improvised or poorly calculated models because the audience constantly re-elaborated—and re-elaborates—and is able to accept or reject a certain message, as well as manipulate it.[46] Conformity to Fascism had to be studied; it was not enough to do everything in an exercise of exaltation. The entire critical debate on the aesthetic value or otherwise of films written and directed in an era where any media content was strictly subject to constraints and serious acts of censorship can be summed up in the comment to *1860* in Morandini's dictionary of cinema:

> Much appreciated by the critics (but not by the public) of the time, considered after the war one of the incunabula of neorealism, then the object of a long historicist controversy, crucified for its obvious or implicit consonances with the propaganda of the Fascist regime (the missing 5 minutes from the original edition contained the grossest signs of it), today it counts for its stylistic dryness (not without influ-

46 In this regard, it is advisable also to view the reader models proposed by Umberto Eco (1932–2016) in texts such as *Lector in fabula* (1985): he postulates, for example, the possibility of a model reader (that is, as conceived by the author), but also that of a resistant reader who can reject or manipulate the interpretation of the message beyond the limits desired by the author. In the same way, there would also be a model author, that is, the one imagined by the empirical reader.

ences from Soviet cinema), the discovery of the landscape, the courageous choice of types and popular characters, the effectiveness of the editing, and Garibaldi's role as hero and demiurge who physically appears only in six quick shots.[47]

In conclusion, a closeness between political history and the history of cinema can be deduced, which must lead to a particular examination of the media in different historical periods. Decoding a film—or a photograph, text, military report, and so on—in the awareness of how mediums and receivers build an interrelated system,[48] and taking into account the absolute importance of the aesthetic-hermeneutical processes elaborated by the builders of communication, therefore becomes a further and fundamental methodological stage in the understanding of the historical and sociological processes in operation in a given epoch. This is even more important in the case of films produced within war contexts, for propaganda purposes, in which we can detect a specific *Zeitgeist*, peculiar aesthetics, imaginaries, and rhetorical strategies which—with the aid of an in-depth textual analysis—acquire a proper documental dimension.[49]

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47 *Il Morandini* is one of the most famous dictionaries of Italian cinema. This review is taken from the 2009 edition.

48 I discussed this thesis in 2019. See Bruno Surace, »Le intenzioni della memoria. Ipotesi per una teleologia semiotica da *Das Ghetto* a *A Film Unifinished*,« in *Lexia—Intentionality*, eds. Massimo Leone and Zhang Jiang (Roma: Aracne, 2019), 29–30.

49 A fundamental work with this approach is Nicholas Reeves, *The Power of Film Propaganda. Myth or Reality?* (London/New York: Continuum, 1999).

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Jihad in Outer Space

The Orientalist Semiotics of Frank Herbert's *Dune* and the Image of Lawrence of Arabia[1]

Frank Jacob

Introduction

»Over [50] years ago, Frank Herbert crafted a remarkable depiction of our time, so, read, or reread, Dune—and read it hard.«[2]

Not everyone agrees with William A. Senior's evaluation of the plot and importance of *Dune* (1965), the novel by Frank Herbert (1920–1986), which has been turned into another movie, directed by Denis Villeneuve, and shown on the big silver screen again in 2021. British journalist Janan Ganesh even demands that intellectual debates about the plot and its depiction be stopped, although he offers at least some interpretations himself when he argues that »[t]he grandiose silliness of *Dune* cost [him] 155 minutes of LA sunshine.« Although *Dune* (2021) »might be the handsomest thing committed to screen since *Lawrence of Arabia*,« Ganesh argues that the film is not »profound. Showing a dust bowl of a planet is not an insight into climate change. Showing a case of imperialism is not a rumination on imperialism. Whispering a sentence does not make it wise. If the big idea is that power is a burden, it is a Harry Potter film.«[3] However, such an eval-

1 The present chapter is a shortened and condensed version of the author's monograph *The Orientalist Semiotics of* Dune*: Religious and Historical References within Frank Herbert's Universe* (Marburg: Büchner, 2022).

2 William A. Senior, »Frank Herbert's Prescience: ›Dune‹ and the Modern World,« *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 17, no. 4 (2007): 320.

3 Janan Ganesh, »Stop Intellectualising Pop Culture,« *Financial Times*, October 30, 2021, https://www.ft.com/content/cf224502-1f57-4204-8da4-9720e39bd509.

uation neither considers nor understands the vast semiotics that lie within *Dune* and have kept the story alive and even ready for two more blockbuster movies in the third decade of the 21st century. Ganesh wants to de-contextualize the movie and understands it purely as something entertaining when he states that »[t]he problem is its investiture by critics and audiences with more meaning than it can bear.«[4] I disagree with such an evaluation and would rather claim that there is more meaning to the film, drawn to it from the original novel, than the audience can take in while watching the film only once, especially if those who watch it are unfamiliar with Herbert's novel. In fact, every form of literature or visual media is in a way impacted by the time of its creation and the message the author or creator wants to transport with the story. Consequently, it is hard to read or watch *Dune* without constructing a connection to motifs or historical contexts Herbert had in his mind when he drafted the plot for his story about a future universe. The present chapter will therefore show the extent to which Herbert used orientalist semiotics for the creation of the universe his plot is related to. Furthermore, I will show the extent to which Paul Atreides, the central protagonist of the first of his *Dune* novels, resembles the history and perception of T. E. Lawrence (1888–1935), better known as Lawrence of Arabia. The chapter is thereby to be understood as an attempt to decode the sign system the first novel of the *Dune* series was based upon and the extent to which these semiotics, especially the orientalist ones, have been conserved and represented to later generations on the big silver screen as well.

The central conflict of the novel, between two aristocratic houses—the progressive Atreides and the villainous Harkonnens—as well as the influence of the Space Guild, representing contractors and oil companies within this global conflict, points to the Cold War but also to more historical conflicts related to the history of the First World War in the Middle East.[5] It is not surprising that Paul Atreides, or

4 Ibid.

5 Senior, »Frank Herbert's Prescience,« 318.

later Paul Muad'Dib, just like T. E. Lawrence in the Western imagination, acted as if »he were a contemporary imam promising glorious salvation for all [suppressed Fremen, representing the people of the Middle East] willing to die for their cause.«[6]

These orientalist semiotics of the novel have been preserved over the years and are even more visible in the film released in 2021, directed by Denis Villeneuve, than they were in David Lynch's *Dune* in 1984. The sign system Herbert based his considerations on has consequently not been separated from his vision for a future universe, a fact that makes *Dune* sound and look very orientalist in its perception and depiction of Middle Eastern culture. Therefore, this chapter presents a discussion of these specific aspects of orientalism and the semiotics related to them in the novels and films, showing how deeply the semiotic and stereotypical motifs related to Islam and the history of the Middle East affected and still affect the creation of popular media.

I will therefore show how orientalism is semiotically constructed and preserved within *Dune* in multiple ways. Eventually, I will take a closer look at the depiction of Paul Atreides, the novel's heroic main character, in relation to the (hi)story of T. E. Lawrence, an orientalist role model for the former, and the role of a holy war, the jihad, whether it be considered as part of the First World War in the Middle East or Herbert's story in outer space.

Orientalist Semiotics

Herbert stated in an interview that he did not just start writing *Dune* but actually spent five years on research, reading mostly works that were non-fiction.[7] Some of the names he created for his protagonists do obviously resemble Arabic words, and, considering his intensive research work and his education, it cannot be assumed that Herbert

6 Ibid., 319.

7 M. S. Winecoff, »Frank Herbert: Author of Dune,« *Friends* 23, February 2, 1971, 11.

was unaware of his semiotic constructions when crafting the universe his story takes place in and the people that determine the course of history in it. With Paul Muad'Dib at the center, the resemblance with *mu'adeb*, the Arabic term for »private tutor,«[8] seems to be one of those aspects pointing directly to the question of how far Herbert thought about the terminology and how far it was chosen for a specific semiotic purpose. The latter, willingly or not, often replicates orientalist stereotypes and considerations and must therefore be seriously taken into consideration when one takes a closer look at the orientalist semiotics of *Dune*. Haris Durrani has already emphasized »the books' engagement with Islam to transcend linguistic wordplay and obscure intertextuality.«[9] The deep »Muslimness« of *Dune* and its links to Middle Eastern culture, history, and religion almost demands a closer analysis of these aspects and the presented orientalist semiotics in particular. In fact, »*Dune* does not cheaply plagiarize from Muslim histories, ideas, and practices, but actively engages with them.«[10] However, at the same time, the novels and the films alike reconvey orientalist stereotypes and narratives about the Middle East that have been widely perceived in Western popular culture since the late 19th century. While Herbert's deeper interest in Middle Eastern culture and reflection is clearly obvious, and although the novel's »Muslimness reflects a serious engagement with those sources and histories, a conversation with their underlying ideas and affects that surpasses exotic aesthetics, easy plagiarism, cheap appropriation, the assumption of unchanging religion or language, and even scintillating references,«[11] there are orientalist elements in it that were maybe unconsciously replicated by Herbert as well. In that regard, Herbert without any doubt »enjoy[ed] rifling cultures almost as much as Tolkien, but there is less logic to

8 Haris Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*: A Close Reading of ›Appendix II: The Religion of Dune‹,« *tor.com*, October 18, 2021, https://www.tor.com/2021/10/18/the-muslimness-of-dune-a-close-reading-of-appendix-ii-the-religion-of-dune.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

his semantics.«[12] One of these aspects, which will later be taken into closer consideration, is the resemblance of Lawrence of Arabia in Paul Muad'Dib. First, however, it seems to be in order to introduce some essential thoughts related to orientalism and semiotics.

Edward Said (1935–2003), in his famous work *Orientalism* (1978), argued that »[t]he Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.«[13] He furthermore considered orientalism to be »a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience.«[14] Northern Africa, the Middle East, and the Far East were used as projection surfaces that were needed to define the self-image of Europe or the West in abstraction to this orientalist otherness. Therefore, the perception of the former regions within the latter was essential for the creation of what Said understands as orientalism, especially since it »expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.«[15] The starting point for these developments was supposedly the end of the 19th century, and Said used French philosopher Michel Foucault's (1926–1984) thoughts about discourses as a base for his reflections about the establishment of this particular semiotic system related to the »Orient.«[16] Discourse about the latter in the West eventually led to the establishment of a particular semiotic system that became related to and essential for perceptions of the respective regions, particularly that of the Middle East. Signs that

12 Anthony Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« *Friends* 21, January 1, 1971, 16.

13 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1995), accessed November 13, 2021, http://www.ricorso.net/rx/library/criticism/guest/Said_E/Said_E3.htm.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 On this aspect, see Seumas Miller, »Foucault on Discourse and Power,« *Theoria: A Journal of Social and Political Theory* 76 (1990): 115–125; Stephen Frederick Schneck, »Michel Foucault on Power/Discourse, Theory and Practice,« *Human Studies* 10, no. 1 (1987): 15–33.

were accepted by Western societies to be linked to and to represent the »orientalist Other« were systematized step by step and thereby inscribed into images and narratives that consciously or unconsciously were transported over decades until Herbert eventually accessed them for his future vision of the *Dune* universe.

Semiotics in general can be very shortly defined as the study of any human-made or interpreted signs, which are »traditionally defined as ›something which stands for something else‹ (in the medieval formula, aliquid stat pro aliquo) [and a]ll meaningful phenomena (including words and images) are signs.« This then means that »[t]o interpret something is to treat it as a sign. All experience is mediated by signs, and communication depends on them.«[17] What the study of semiotics is consequently particularly interested in is the meaning-making that is achieved by the use and implementation of visual or textual signs.[18] Semioticians consequently look at the intentional creation of signs and the perception of these signs within larger sign systems, i. e. the semiotics of beings, things, or actions.[19] Semiotics as such, therefore, is the science related to the creation, knowledge, and intention or perception of signs in different historical and cultural contexts and seems to offer a very suitable approach to study the orientalist signs represented in Herbert's *Dune*. In other words, one can—and in the case of *Dune*, this actually makes sense when one wants to reflect upon the semiotic system related to Herbert's universe, Arrakis itself, the spice, the worms, or the Fremen—»approach signs as objects of interpretation indistinguishable from our responses to them. But we can also approach signs in such a way that we suspend our responses to them so that deliberation is possible.«[20] In fact, as semioticians Su-

17 Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (London/New York: Routledge, 2017), 2.

18 Gary Genosko, *Critical Semiotics: Theory, from Information to Affect* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 1.

19 Kalevi Kull, »On the Limits of Semiotics, or the Thresholds of/in Knowing,« in *Umberto Eco in His Own Words*, eds. Torkild Thellefsen and Bent Sørensen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 42.

20 Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio, *Semiotics Unbounded: Interpretive Routes through the Open Network of Signs* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 3.

san Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio argue, »[s]emiotics as human semiosis or anthroposemiosis can scour the entire universe for meanings and senses that can then be treated as signs.«[21]

Of course, signs do not always stand out but are linked within a system and a kind of chain as well as a historical context, which means that sign systems change according to time and space.[22] Some semiotic meanings of Herbert's *Dune* are consequently more obvious than others, or perhaps more accurately, more prominent than others. Some are hidden and some are in plain sight, some are Western and some are not, but some are, without any doubt, a Western interpretation of the Middle East, i. e. orientalism, in accordance with Herbert's own time and the time of the creation of the first *Dune* novel. Although often accused of being an unfitting academic field,[23] I consider the semiotic approach to Herbert's text and its later presentations in visual media a very suitable one, as it highlights which attempts were made, intentionally or unintentionally, to fill *Dune* with some kind of common orientalist semiotics that people around the world, but especially in the US, shared with regard to their reading of *Dune*.[24] This attempt is therefore closely linked to the demands for semiotic research, which were summed up by Gary Genosko: »A properly semiotic investigation into meaning ends up on the side of how it is produced, and what sort of systems are involved; what kind of mediations need to be taken into account, and how to account for the relationalities involved, not to mention the veils that have to be lifted in the process.«[25]

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 4.

23 Paul Cobley, »What the Humanities Are For: A Semiotic Perspective,« in *Semiotics and Its Masters*, vol. 1, eds. Kristian Bankov and Paul Cobley (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 4.

24 For a discussion of this law of signification, see Julia Kristeva, »Introduction: Le Lieu Sémiotique,« in *Essays in Semiotics/Essais de Sémiotique*, eds. Julia Kristeva et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), 1–2.

25 Genosko, *Critical Semiotics*, 1.

In the *Dune* films, Herbert's text and the filmic visualization also created a communicative unity,[26] although, depending on the film, the orientalist semiotics were more or less strong than was perhaps intended. This, however, requires a detailed comparison of the films and mini-series, which is not the intention of the present text. The focus here is rather on the substance as well as the limits—generally an aim for semiotic or semiological studies[27]—of the orientalist semiotics of Herbert's *Dune*, and thus the present study is also linked to general systems theory,[28] in the sense that it not only looks at a semiotic system per se but at a system of semiotic orientalism as presented by Herbert in one of the most successful science fiction (SF) novels of all time. This approach was chosen to open a dialogue oriented towards the representation and perceptions of cultural images in Western popular media.

Considering »the strong historical link between names in the Fremen culture and real-world Middle Eastern societies,« Herbert consequently continues orientalist semiotics, which »juxtaposes the Fremen as an exotic Other with the Western, ruling-class Atreides family.«[29] It is without any doubt more than obvious, when one takes a closer look at the Middle Eastern elements in *Dune*, that the novel can be evaluated as a misrepresentation of Arabic communities and societies in Western SF.[30] Herbert actually seems to have been relying on

26 Thomas Friedrich and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, *Bildsemiotik: Grundlagen und exemplarische Analysen visueller Kommunikation* (Basel/Boston/Berlin: Birkhäuser, 2010), 16.

27 Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 9. See also Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979); Thomas A. Sebeok, *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

28 Ludwig von Bertalanffy, »General Theory of Systems: Application to Psychology,« in *Essays in Semiotics/Essais de Sémiotique*, eds. Julia Kristeva et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), 191.

29 Kara Kennedy, »Epic World-Building: Names and Cultures in *Dune*,« *Names* 64, no. 2 (2016): 100.

30 For a broader discussion of this issue, see Hoda M. Zaki, »Orientalism in Science Fiction,« in *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and*

»the ignorance and ethnocentrism of his American audience« when he presented »foreign neologisms to create exotic effects.«[31] Paul, of course, becomes part of the Fremen society but transforms it, even militarizes it, according to his needs, which are related to his concurrent role of being the Duke of House Atreides. The supposedly symbiotic relationship between the West and the East would eventually be perceived as the former dominating the latter. The name Paul, in this regard, is also a problematic reference to Saint Paul, who founded the Christian Church and initiated »missionary work.« Another biblical name is also represented in Jessica.[32] The House's name, however, is a reference to ancient Greek mythology and refers to Atreus, whose sons Agamemnon and Menelaus played important roles during the Trojan War. The use of the name of Leto, Paul's father, also points towards Greek mythology, as this name is also that of the titan mother of Artemis and Apollo.[33] Although Herbert sometimes changed names, e. g. Bene Gesserit, which probably stands for »good or benevolent Jesuit,«[34] the connection still remains quite visible, maybe more so for readers in the 1960s than today. Besides the names, however, there are also some central references to the history, culture, and religion of the Middle East, which shall be taken into closer consideration in the remaining part of this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, the references to Jewish people and their traditions appear relatively late in Herbert's *Dune* series, namely in the sixth and last book by the author, *Chapterhouse: Dune* (1985).[35]

Arab-Canadian Feminists, ed. Joanna Kadi (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1994), 181–187.

31 Istvan Csicsery-Ronay Jr., *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. 2008), 41, cited in Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 100. See also Marie-Laure Ryan, *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

32 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 100.

33 Ibid. For a broader discussion of historical references in SF, see Adam Roberts, *The History of Science Fiction* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 106, 214 and 235.

34 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 101–102.

35 Frank Herbert, *Chapterhouse: Dune* (New York: Putnam, 1985).

Surprisingly, »unlike other faiths, the Judaism of the far future has changed not a whit,« and therefore, as Michael Weingrad emphasized in contrast to everything else that is different in Herbert's universe, the »Jews are as they have always been.«[36] In his final book, he therefore uses as many Jewish and even antisemitic stereotypes as he had used orientalist ones in his first novel. However, Paul, »the most heroic SF hero since Gully Foyle,«[37] is used to make a positive reference to Jewish religion in the novel. He could, due to the breeding program of the Bene Gesserit and Jessica's decision to bear a son instead of a daughter, become the super being, the *Kwisatz Haderach*. The term is a reference to the Hebrew *kefitzat haderech* (shortening of the way),[38] which is used in Jewish sources and Hasidic folktales to describe some kind of magical transportation or teleportation.[39] And this is what Paul eventually achieves, namely the possibility to travel through time and space without actually moving. In addition, he can see the future much clearer in the end, while his initial visionary experiences often seem to have been blurred or unclear. It is the spice that allows Paul to access his visions, which, however, are often not clear but only offer possible alternatives of the future that he has to eventually let happen or somehow avoid. In that way, the visions appear to be what Dietmar Dath called sideviews on alternate timelines for the future and there-

36 Weingrad, »Jews of *Dune*.«

37 Haden-Guest, »Fave Rave,« 16.

38 Chaim Bentorah, *Hebrew Word Study: A Hebrew Teacher Finds Rest in the Heart of God* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford, 2013), 16–18. See also »Kwisatz Haderach,« in Peter Schlobinski and Oliver Siebold, *Wörterbuch der Science Fiction* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), 193. For the use of the term, e. g. by Ben Gurion, see David Ohana, *Nationalizing Judaism: Zionism as a Theological Ideology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 29.

39 Sandherin 95a, *The William Davidson Talmud*, accessed November 23, 2021, https://www.sefaria.org/Sanhedrin.95a.16?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en. The belief that a person could appear in distant places almost simultaneously was not uncommon in other ancient contexts either. See Frank Jacob, »Die Pythagoreer: Wissenschaftliche Schule, religiöse Sekte oder politische Geheimgesellschaft?,« in *Geheimgesellschaften: Kulturhistorische Sozialstudien*, ed. Frank Jacob (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 17–34.

by present possibilities that must be seen from the perspective of what is actually an optional view of what could happen.[40] This motif of the *Kwisatz Haderach* is quite central within *Dune*; however, it seems to be the only strong Jewish element in the first novel, where orientalist semiotics are much stronger in regard to the presentation of Muslim elements within Herbert's universe.

In his novels, he intended to present the future of something his readers would be quite familiar with, i. e. the development of Islam into a religious belief that would still be part of the known universe thousands of years later. The specific »Muslimness of Dune«[41] is particularly and sophisticatedly described in the appendix about the »Religion of Dune.« It provides a deeper insight into the Orange Catholic Bible that is mentioned in the novel as well as the religious beliefs of the Fremen. It has been emphasized by Haris Durrani that »[w]hile the appendix incorporates a variety of religious and philosophical references—including to Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, Navajo traditions, Roman paganism, and even Nietzsche—the thrust of the historical narrative is overwhelmingly Muslim, and perhaps specifically Shi'i.«[42] The allegories used by Herbert to describe the conflict between indigenous people and the ones who intend to exploit them is, however, only one way to read the novel, as the supposedly existent conflict between Islam and modernity is presented by Herbert as well. In an interview,[43] he argued that his Middle Eastern friends considered the book to work more as a kind of religious commentary and understood it rather as a work of philosophical fiction and not SF.[44] It has been suggested that Herbert used different existent Islamic narratives as the base for his own universe building. In the appendix, Herbert mentions a *Kitab al-Ibar* (Book of Lessons) as an

40 »Dune: Interview with Dietmar Dath.«
41 Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*.«
42 Ibid.
43 Accessed November 25, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZGJ3pGEuas&t=63s. Durrani referenced the interview in his analysis.
44 Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*.«

essential text for the Fremen's religious views and assumably is making a reference to the Arab historian and philosopher Ibn Khaldun's (1332–1406) work of the same title.[45] The title of Paul's own work, *The Pillars of the Universe*, is at the same time an obvious reference to T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom.*[46] Taking into account that Herbert must have been familiar with the film about Lawrence that premiered in 1962 and that he had a copy of *Seven Pillars* as well as a later translation of Jordanian historian Suleiman Mousa's (1919–2008) *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View*,[47] the resemblances between Paul and Lawrence, which will be discussed in some more detail in the following part of this chapter, are hardly surprising.[48]

Nevertheless, there are some other references to Islam and the Muslim Middle East that should not be omitted when talking about the orientalist semiotics of *Dune*. The Padishah Emperor of the *Dune* universe, the title in itself being a reference to Middle Eastern history,[49] is named Shaddam IV, referencing the Arabic word *Ṣaddām*, »one who confronts.« One could therefore argue here that Herbert's naming of his novel's characters was already a way of pointing towards their position within the newly created universal order of his book. When Paul is riding the worm, he uses a *kiswa* maker hook, and the term *kiswa* is explained as »any figure or design from Fremen mythology« by Herbert.[50] The *kiswa*, however, is the black brocade cloth that covers the *Kaaba* in Mecca. Considering just these few terms, it already seems more likely that Herbert was very sensitively crafting linguistic meanings for his figures, which is why the orientalist

45 James W. Morris, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue, Arabic Edition and English Translation of Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yaman's Kitab al-›alim wa‹l-ghulam* (London/New York: IB Tauris/Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2001), 13.

46 T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (London: Penguin, 1922).

47 Suleiman Mousa, *T. E. Lawrence: An Arab View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967).

48 Durrani, »The Muslimness of *Dune*.«

49 Padishah is an old Persian term for »Master King.«

50 Herbert, *Dune*, xvii.

semiotics of the overall work can hardly be considered orientalist by accident. That Herbert also actively references historical events is visible in Paul's personal guard, the *Fedaykin*, a reference to *Fedayeen* (»those who sacrifice themselves«), the term used for Arab commando groups, e. g. for Egyptian groups in the 1940s who fought against British rule there or Palestinians fighting against Israel in the 1950s.[51]

The term used for the worms, Shai-hulud, might also be pointing towards the Arabic words *sai'*, which translates to »thing,« and *khulud*, which means »to live forever.« The sandworms are also called the Makers, and considering the ecological system of Arrakis and the production process of the spice, it is obvious why this is the case.[52] Similar to the orientalist semiotics applied to the worms, the Fremen are depicted with images that strongly link them to the Middle East and Arabic or Islamic cultures.[53] According to Kara Kennedy, it is this »strong association with real-world Arabic and Islamic societies th[at] helps to construct the Fremen's identity as a religious people with a history of persecution, which leads to their desire for retribution and, ultimately, a jihad against off-worlders.«[54] The religion of the Fremen was linked, as mentioned above, to old Arabic texts like the *Kitab al-Ibar*, while the priestesses' name, i. e. *Sayyadina*, and the role taken on by Jessica after she and Paul were granted access to the Fremen's society refer to an Arabic term, i. e. *sayyid*—»to be lord over.«[55] This meaning might also be related to the fact that the *Sayyadina* were the ones who could transform the Water of Life and would thereby become superior over the death this liquid held ready for anyone else who would try to drink it. The appearance of the Fremen reminds readers of the Bedouins, nomads of the desert. However, they are pre-

51 Zeev Schiff and Raphael Rothstein, *Fedayeen: Guerillas Against Israel* (New York: McKay, 1972).

52 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 102.

53 Gwyneth Jones, »The Icons of Science Fiction,« in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction*, eds. Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 170.

54 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 102.

55 Ibid., 103.

sented in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, the Fremen »appear as a quasi-Arabic and Middle Eastern people bent on jihad to avenge their historical oppression, unable or unwilling to think rationally and modernize their way of living,«[56] while on the other, they seem to be unable to achieve this without the leadership of an outsider who enters their own society to save and lead them alike.

The fact that Paul is referred to and greeted as the *Mahdi*[57] is another reference, albeit one that, in a way, reverts the historical events related to the Mahdist War in Sudan between 1881 and 1889. In contrast to the historical case, where a British officer, General Gordon, was sent to Khartoum to suppress a rebellion, in *Dune*, the foreigner is actually considered to be the Mahdi and leads it. At the same time, the Mahdi is not really going native but uses the Fremen for an extended war, supposedly a jihad, to defeat his enemies across the whole universe. This turns the independence-oriented fight of the Fremen into an expansionist religious war that supports pragmatic aims that are in no way related to the original needs and demands of the indigenous people of Arrakis anymore. Paul uses the legends about the »Lisan al-Gaib, the Voice from the Outer World.«[58]

The orientalist semiotics of *Dune* eventually all point towards another jihad, a holy war in the name of the Atreides, led by Paul Muad'Dib, the Lisan al-Gaib of the Fremen, who not only won power on Arrakis but intends to expand this power across the whole known universe. This part of the plot, in a way, could be understood as a resemblance of a spread of Islam across the MENA region, but one wonders if Herbert really wanted to emphasize violent expansion as the most important aspect of this jihad. In fact, the jihad rather

56 Ibid., 104.

57 The term translates as »the guided one« and is used as the »honorary title of the expected deliverer or messianic figure in Islam.« Marcia Hermansen, »Madhi,« in *Encyclopedia of Islam and the Muslim World*, vol. 2, ed. Richard C. Martin (New York: Macmillan, 2003), 421, cited in ibid., 105.

58 Herbert, *Dune*, 97, cited in ibid. According to Kennedy, »Lisan al-Gaib is a combination of the Arabic lisān, meaning ›tongue‹ or ›language,‹ and ḡaib, meaning ›invisible‹ or ›supernatural‹.« Ibid.

finally links all kinds of strings of the novel to one climax, when Paul's acceptance of a partial Fremen identity also becomes uncontrollable, and he accepts unleashing a universal jihad as the ultimate consequence of his claim for leadership of the Fremen. Paul and his mother Jessica have turned into hybrids,[59] members of both worlds, the Great Houses and the Fremen alike, but this link seems to be responsible for setting in motion a much bigger danger for the whole universe, i. e. a universal jihad that will eventually lead to a renegotiation of power in all its galaxies.

In the end, Paul is unable to prevent the jihad, although he had feared it as well.[60] He had set powers in motion that could no longer be controlled,[61] an aspect that very much relates to Herbert's intention to warn of false leaders and the populist control of religiously motivated masses. These elements are essential for the inner order of Herbert's universe, but they are similarly related to historical events and future dangers he would refer to in his fictional work. Nevertheless, the images he creates are ambivalent. Herbert describes an anti-colonial struggle leading to colonialism in the name of religion, maybe even something one could call an ideology, and thereby emphasizes the menace religious fundamentalism seems to pose. While anti-colonial in nature, the signs presented are very often related to an orientalist semiotic system, which was not fully decolonialized in 1965, and, considering the new film, not in 2021 either. One particular image shows this particular ambivalence as well, namely the white savior narrative in relation to the history of T. E. Lawrence during the First World War. The following part of this chapter must consequently take a closer look at Paul of Arrakis and Lawrence of Arabia.

59 Kennedy, »Epic World-Building,« 105.

60 Lorenzo DiTommaso, »History and Historical Effect in Frank Herbert's ›Dune‹,« *Science Fiction Studies* 19, no. 3 (1992): 320.

61 Herbert, *Dune*, 482.

Paul of Arrakis vs. Lawrence of Arabia

The focus on Paul as the male savior of Arrakis and the universe as a whole clearly establishes an almost fetishization of masculinity within the first *Dune* novel, as only a man can become the Kwisatz Haderach.[62] At the same time, Herbert's narrative draws from and relates to another famous story related to the Middle East, namely the one about T. E. Lawrence, or Lawrence of Arabia, as he has commonly been referred to since the end of the First World War.[63] The historical Lawrence served in the British Department of Intelligence in Cairo as a map officer. He had no sense for rules and hierarchies, and as »[a] subaltern on the staff, without a Sam Browne belt, and always wearing slacks, scorching about between Cairo and Bulaq on a Triumph motor-cycle, he was an offence to the eyes of his senior officers.«[64] In contrast to some of his superiors, Lawrence seemed to be really interested in the fate of the Arab people, and it was during a guerilla war against the Ottoman Army in the Middle East that he received his nickname of »Prince Dynamite«[65] before he would become known to the world as Lawrence of Arabia. His story was eventually filled with legends and stereotypes, which were particularly strong in the film about him that premiered in 1962, with Peter O'Toole (1932–2013) becoming the incarnation of T. E. Lawrence for a wide audience. The film tends to highlight the ambivalence of the famous man; when the journalist Jackson Bentley, who had accompanied Lawrence during the war, said that »[Lawrence] was a poet, a scholar and a

62 This kind of super-masculinity, however, is not an exclusively Western phenomenon. See Man-Fung Yip, *Martial Arts Cinema and Hong Kong Modernity: Aesthetics, Representation, Circulation* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2017), 24.

63 On the man and the myth see, among others, James Barr, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916–1918* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011); Nicholas J. Saunders, *Desert Insurgency: Archaeology, T. E. Lawrence, and the Arab Revolt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

64 David Garnett, ed., *The Letters of T. E. Lawrence* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), 182.

65 Ibid., 184.

mighty warrior,« he then adds that »[h]e was also the most shameless exhibitionist since Barnum and Bailey.«[66] When Lawrence is depicted receiving the order to go and find Prince Feisal in the desert, he cheers, but Mr. Dryden, a diplomat from the Arab Bureau, warns him about the venture: »Lawrence, only two kinds of creature get fun in the desert: Bedouins and gods. And you're neither. … For ordinary men, it's a burning, fiery furnace.«[67] Since Herbert was probably not only familiar with Lawrence's history but also the film, both seem to be important sources for his novel, especially since there are important similarities between Paul of Arrakis and Lawrence of Arabia. The present chapter therefore intends to take a closer look at these two characters to show which elements of the historical Lawrence might have had an impact on the creation of the fictional Paul.

Just as Paul is challenging the rule of the Harkonnens on Arrakis, Lawrence, during the early period of the war, is thinking about the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East in similar ways, as he »wanted to root them [the Ottoman rulers] out of Syria, and now their blight will be more enduring than ever.«[68] However, internal quarrels about the most suitable policy in the region destroyed his plan to take over Damascus quickly to push the French out of Syria.[69] In the early years of the First World War, Lawrence's »own hopes for promoting a rebellion of Mesopotamian Arabs against the Turks and for co-operation between them and the British Ary came to nothing. The last thing that the British Indian Army officers wanted was the Arabs as allies. And the Indian administration was looking forward to annexation.«[70] Just as Lawrence had understood that a war in the Middle East needed the support of the Arab tribes, Paul realizes in *Dune* that an alliance with the Fremen is of utter importance on Arrakis. The

66 *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, dir. David Lean).
67 Ibid.
68 Letter to Mrs. Fontana, Oxford, October 19, 1914, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 186–187, here 187.
69 Letter to D. G. Hogarth, Port Said, March 22, 1915, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 195–196.
70 Garnett, *The Letters*, 202.

tension between the Arab natives and the Ottoman occupiers was historically as intense[71] as the one that was so endemic with regard to the relationship between the Harkonnen rulers and the exploited Fremen. Lawrence also described the region as such as harsh and hard to live in for non-natives, a description that would fit for Arrakis, too: »It will be a wonderful country some day, when they regulate the floods, and dig out the irrigation ditches. Yet it will never be a really pleasant country, or a country where Europeans can live a normal life.«[72] Feisal, one of the sons of the Sherif of Mecca, prominently portrayed in the film by Sir Alec Guinness (1914–2000), confirms this view on the cinema screen as well when he says that Lawrence might only be another »desert-loving English« on the search for adventure: »No Arab loves the desert. We love water and green trees.«[73]

When the revolt of the Sherif of Mecca began in June 1916,[74] Lawrence must have felt that another chance to undertake his ambitious plans in the Middle East was presenting itself. That he would eventually be sent to get in contact with Feisal and that he was able to mobilize the Arab forces to wage a guerilla war against the Ottoman Empire was the base for the legends that would later be attached to his person, but it was, without any doubt, also inspiration for Herbert's novel.

In *Dune*, the time also seems to be ripe for a revolution against Harkonnen rule, and just as Lawrence seems to be an important aspect of the Arab success, Paul's appearance is a trigger for the successful guerilla war of the Fremen against the Harkonnens.[75] The orientalist semiotics are in this regard therefore also greatly highlighted by the environment, i. e. a desert, where the events take place.[76] However,

71 Letter to his mother, May 18, 1916, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 203–208, here 206.

72 Ibid., 208.

73 *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962, dir. David Lean). Later in the film, Lawrence explains why he loves the desert: »It's clean.«

74 Garnett, *The Letters*, 210.

75 »Dune: Interview with Dietmar Dath.«

76 Karin Christina Ryding, »The Arabic of *Dune*: Language and Landscape,« in *Language in Place: Stylistic Perspectives on Landscape, Place and Environment*, eds.

Fig. 1: T.E. Lawrence; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 73535.

while the British officer coordinates the military actions of the indigenous people and in a way solely uses their potential in the name and for the sake of the British Empire, which Lawrence initially seems to have wanted to avoid so as to create an independent Middle East instead, Paul not only uses the Fremen locally but leads them straight into an intergalactic jihad. Other Western powers had tried to exploit the idea of a holy war of the Muslims against foreign rule before, but Lawrence acted rather pragmatically, and Feisal seemed politically experienced enough not to mix religion and politics. While Paul is also the center of a myth related to his military victories and his final

Daniela Francesca Virdis, Elisabetta Zurru, and Ernestine Lahey (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2021), 106–123.

transformation into the Kwisatz Haderach, this myth is destroyed by Herbert in the second novel.

Dune, although it clearly shows some resemblances to the story about Lawrence, is, however, not »a mere copy of the story of Lawrence of Arabia with some science-fictional window dressing.«[77] Of course, superficially, the stories look very much alike. Two foreigners move into desert lands where they find indigenous people who are ready for rebellion against exploitative rulers. Both lead them to military victory, yet while Lawrence was really interested in providing the Arab people with their own choice for the future, Paul is leading the Fremen into a holy war against the whole universe instead. Regardless of these differences, Herbert, maybe too influenced by orientalist semiotics about religiously motivated violence and the jihad, »saw messianic overtones in Lawrence's story and the possibility for outsiders to manipulate a culture according to their own purposes.«[78] These overtones, however, might relate to the film rather than Lawrence's actual experiences, although *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*,[79] Lawrence's most well-known description of his time with the Arab people, is sometimes also written in an almost prophetic tone. Since the story of Lawrence itself, told in many ways and by numerous authorities, be they journalists[80] or historians,[81] however, became part of the Western semiotic system about the Middle East, it is not surprising to find similarities between the events related to the

77 Kara Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia, Paul Atreides, and the Roots of Frank Herbert's *Dune*,« *tor.com*, June 2, 2021, https://www.tor.com/2021/06/02/lawrence-of-arabia-paul-atreides-and-the-roots-of-frank-herberts-dune/.

78 Ibid.

79 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*.

80 Lowell Thomas, *With Lawrence in Arabia* (New York/London: Century, 1924). Thomas also contradicted rumors related to speculations about Lawrence supposedly having turned Muslim during his time in the Middle East: »Another ›bazaar rumor‹ that has been going the rounds is to the effect that Colonel Lawrence has renounced Christianity and turned Mohammedan. This also is the offspring of some feverish imagination! From what I saw of Lawrence I rather believe that he is a better Christian than the most of us.« Ibid., viii.

81 Basil H. Liddell Hart, *T. E. Lawrence: In Arabia and After* (London: Cape, 1934).

First World War in the region and the war Paul is leading the Fremen into in Herbert's novel.

Lawrence's story gained momentum once Lowell Thomas (1892–1981), an American journalist, made the events in the Middle East known to a larger audience as part of other travelogues related to his experiences during the First World War.[82] While Lawrence had a rather ambivalent perception of his own role, especially as somebody whose work was related to the war effort of the British Empire, even though he wanted to secure the Arabs' interests and eventually independence,[83] in the public perception of his activities, he was the lonely white hero among savage people. His successes stimulated the Western idea that people in the Middle East needed a »white savior« figure to actually achieve something.[84] For Lawrence himself, as he later emphasized in *Seven Pillars*, »[i]t was an Arab war waged and led by Arabs for an Arab aim in Arabia.«[85] Similarly, his own relationship with the Arab people and the Bedouins he lived and fought with was much more complex, and the former and Lawrence must have felt betrayed by the course history took, regardless of their achievements during the second half of the war: »We lived many lives in those whirling campaigns, never sparing ourselves: yet when we achieved and the new world dawned, the old men came out again and took our victory to re-make in the likeness of the former world they knew.«[86] In the end, Lawrence confessed that he »was continually and bitterly ashamed« of the way his superiors and the British politicians would exploit the Arab people, a clear difference between him and Paul, as the latter only frees the Fremen to use their military potential for his own advantage. The Duke of House Atreides consequently falls more

82 Clio Visualizing History, *Lowell Thomas and Lawrence of Arabia: Making a Legend, Creating History*, accessed December 6, 2021, https://www.cliohistory.org/thomas-lawrence.

83 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 23.

84 Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«

85 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 21.

86 Ibid., 22.

in line with the political nature of British foreign policy in the Middle East than Lawrence actually did. Until the end of his Arab dream, the latter had hoped »that, by leading these Arabs madly in the final victory I would establish them, with arms in their hands, in a position so assured (if not dominant) that expediency would counsel to the Great Powers a fair settlement of their claims.«[87]

However, when it comes to blending in with a foreign and different culture, Lawrence's experiences, in a way, seem to be closer to the ones Paul went through on Arrakis. Life in the desert was hard for both men, but it was essential for their respective adaptations. Lawrence described the life of his army in the desert as follows:

> For years we lived anyhow with one another in the naked desert, under the indifferent heaven. By day the hot sun fermented us; and we were dizzied by the beating wind. At night we were stained by dew, and shamed into pettiness by the innumerable silence of stars. We were a self-centered army without parade or gesture, devoted to freedom, the second of man's creeds, a purpose so ravenous that it devoured all our strength, a hope so transcendent that our earlier ambitions faded in its glare.[88]

There are also differences with regard to the acceptance of the foreign intruder. While Paul was protected in a way by the Missionaria Protectiva of the Bene Gesserit, Lawrence had to gain acceptance first: »I was sent to these Arabs as a stranger, unable to think their thoughts or subscribe to their beliefs, but charged by duty to lead them forward.«[89] However, the life of the Arab people, as well as that of the Fremen, was quite harsh, or as Lawrence formulated it: »Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, and for strangers, terrible: a death in life.«[90] While Paul never really questions his identity, which is an

87 Ibid., 24.
88 Ibid., 27.
89 Ibid., 28.
90 Ibid., 29.

amalgamation of his roles as Duke of House Atreides, Paul Muad'Dib, and Kwisatz Haderach, Lawrence ultimately seems to have been more bothered by his existence among the Bedouins as a foreign intruder:

> A man who gives himself to be a possession of aliens leads a Yahoo life, having bartered his soul to a brute-master. He is not of them. He may stand against them, persuade himself of a mission, batter and twist them into something which they, of their own accord, would not have been. Then he is exploiting his old environment to press them out of theirs. Or, after my model, he may imitate them so well that they spuriously imitate him back again. … In my case, the efforts for these years to live in the dress of Arabs, and to imitate their mental foundation, quitted me of my English self, and let me look at the West and its conventions with new eyes: they destroyed it all for me. At the same time I could not sincerely take on the Arab skin: it was an affectation only. Easily was a man made an infidel, but hardly might he be converted to another faith. I had dropped one form and not taken on the other.[91]

The idea of the »white savior« was consequently nothing that Lawrence himself considered but was instead interwoven with his story through the audience's perception. Although this semiotic image also can be perceived by the readers of *Dune* or those who watch the films, it is more actively transported by the way the heroic figure, i. e. Paul Atreides, acts. This orientalist semiotic, related to the idea that Middle Eastern people need Western leadership to be successful, has never disappeared from the screen—nobody so far has thought of a black Paul saving white natives yet—and it will continue to appear as long as existent stereotypes that continue the replication of orientalist semiotics are applied by film-makers and expected by the respective reading or viewing audiences. Emmet Asher-Perrin emphasizes this when he states that

91 Ibid., 29–30.

Fig. 2: View of the desert near Wejh; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59014.

Fig. 3: T.E. Lawrence, n.d.; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59314.

> Hollywood has a penchant for the white savior trope, and it forms the basis for plenty of big-earning, award-winning films. Looking back on blockbusters like *The Last of the Mohicans*, *Avatar*, and *The Last Samurai*, the list piles up for movies in which a white person can alleviate the suffering of people of color—sometimes disguised as blue aliens for the purpose of sci-fi trappings—by being specially ›chosen‹ somehow to aid in their struggles.[92]

These films continue a literary tradition in which earlier novels had adopted ideas about white men who entered a culturally different space in which they would act as the saviors of savage and inferior people who could not free themselves. This idea of exporting one's own revolutionary past to other parts of the world might have played into the sustainability of this particular narrative as well, especially in the United States, although other revolutionaries, e. g. in Cuba in the late 19th century, were soon to be identified as inferior due to racist stereotypes and the realization that while the rebellious Cubans were trying to get rid of European colonial rule, they were themselves not white like the American revolutionaries were considered to have been.[93]

Herbert intended to use Paul as a figure to criticize hopes related to the expectation of a super hero or a super being, but this criticism does not really evolve in *Dune* itself but later on during the series.[94] The similarities between Lawrence's depictions of the Arab people, which in a way also resemble the ideas of inferior races and peoples as an intrinsic element of the British Empire and its self-perception, and the Fremen, who seem to be hardly more than a suitable tool

92 Emmet Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important to Consider Whether *Dune* Is a White Savior Narrative,« *tor.com*, March 6, 2019, https://www.tor.com/2019/03/06/why-its-important-to-consider-whether-dune-is-a-white-savior-narrative/.

93 For a detailed survey and a critical source edition, see Frank Jacob, *George Kennan on the Spanish-American War: A Critical Edition of »Cuba and the Cubans«* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

94 Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important.«

for exploitation to serve Paul's political agenda, are hardly surprising. Whether Paul is a good leader might be questioned by the reader or the viewer at the end, but that he actually led the Fremen cannot be doubted. Lawrence described the people of the Middle East as simple, yet radical in a sense, when he later stated that

> Semites had not half-tones in their register of vision. They were people of primary colours, or rather of black and white, who saw the world always in contour. They were a dogmatic people, despising doubt, our modern crown of thorns. They did not understand our metaphysical difficulties, our introspective questionings. They knew only truth and untruth, belief and unbelief, without our hesitating retinue of finer shades. … Their thoughts were at ease only in extremes. They inhabited superlatives by choice. … They were a limited, narrow-minded people, whose inert intellects lay fallow in incurious resignation. Their imaginations were vivid, but not creative. … The Bed[o]uin of the desert, born and grown up in it, had embraced with all his soul this nakedness too harsh for volunteers, for the reason, felt but inarticulate, that there he found himself indubitably free. He lost material ties, comforts, all superfluities and other complications to achieve a personal liberty which haunted starvation and death.[95]

The simplicity of the Arab people is considered by Lawrence to be the consequence of their actual living environment, which leaves hardly any room for »human effort.«[96] At the same time, the British officer understood the cultural differences that were a result of the Arabs' way of life: »His desert was made a spiritual icehouse, in which was preserved intact but unimproved for all ages a vision of the unity of God. To it sometimes the seekers from the outer world could escape for a season and look thence in detachment at the nature of the gen-

95 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 36–38.
96 Ibid., 38.

eration they would convert.«[97] At the same time, Lawrence emphasized that the »Arabs could be swung on an idea as on a cord; for the unpledged allegiance of their minds made them obedient servants.«[98] While he argued he had acted on behalf of their interests, in this statement, it is visible that Lawrence also realized how these people could be exploited by false leaders and promises, something that was not stressed to the utmost in Herbert's *Dune*, although similar concerns were expressed in later volumes.

Like in the novel, however, the experience of »[s]uppression charged the [Arab people] with unhealthy violence. Deprived of constitutional outlets they became revolutionary. The Arab societies went underground, and changed from liberal clubs into conspiracies.«[99] In *Dune*, it is exactly this situation that forces the Fremen to resist against the Harkonnens on Arrakis, a resistance that was eventually shared by the former and the »voice from the outer world,« Paul, the Lisan al-Gaib. The Fremen culture in itself is consequently used by Herbert to craft yet another »noble savage« image that falls in line with »the narrative's juxtaposition of their militant austerity with their susceptibility to being used by powerful people who understand their mythology well enough to exploit it.«[100] The Fremen seem to have no real political consciousness because although they deal with their life in the desert and their relation with the worms, they were obviously not able to defeat the Harkonnens. It needed the appearance of one man to solve this problem, to use the full power of the desert for his personal advantage, in some way also applying the almost Machiavellian formula »the enemy of my enemy is my friend«[101] that was

97 Ibid., 40.
98 Ibid., 41.
99 Ibid., 44.
100 Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important.«
101 The phrase in some variation even goes back to the ancient »Indian Machiavelli« Kautilya, who described such a situation in Book VI of his *Arthashastra*. Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, trans. R. Shamasastry (Bangalore: Government Press, 1915), 319–325, accessed November 27, 2021, http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/kautilya/book06.htm.

applied by so many colonial invaders, maybe most prominently by Hernán Cortés (1485–1547).[102]

The choices made by Herbert to build Arrakis in his imagination were not really unbiased, and even if he intended to create something that would focus on the anti-colonial struggles of his time and of the first half of the 20th century, the perspectives he provides are still very much attached to a Eurocentric or Western-centered worldview that had been so dominant in the centuries before. While intending to decolonialize his universe, Herbert was not fully able to decolonialize his own mind—at least when he wrote *Dune*, as later novels in the series seem to highlight his awareness about this fact. Emmet Asher-Perrin outlined that fans defend these sometimes antiquated views by pointing out that the novel was written decades ago, and therefore the time of its creation can be considered »as an explanation for some of its more dated attitudes toward race, gender, queerness, and other aspects of identity.«[103] However, the adaptations of the novel in later years, and this includes the film from 2021, did not stop replicating the orientalist semiotics of the work, and thereby also continued to represent images related to Lawrence of Arabia in an unfiltered and still heavily orientalist version to the global audience of the 21st century. Both Lawrence and Paul are able to blend in, but they never change their identity to the fullest. In the last resort, they will remain the foreigner or the outsider. They will not adapt themselves to the world they entered, but they will try to activate the people's power in that context to fit their own needs, although Lawrence at least later stated that he had the intention to work on behalf of an independent Arab nation. This exploitative element becomes particularly obvious when the focus is put on »desert power.« The way the Fremen under Paul's leadership wage war against the Harkonnens was without any doubt inspired by the reports about Lawrence's military campaigns and successes in the Middle East.

102 Hernán Cortés, *Letters from Mexico*, ed. and trans. Anthony Pagden (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

103 Asher-Perrin, »Why It's Important.«

Lawrence needed to unify the Arab tribes to follow Sheikh Feisal and to support his rebellious bid against Ottoman rule. The Fremen were equally important for Paul's bid for power, although they did not need unification and were rather religiously and ideologically radicalized by the young Duke. The concept of desert power, however, is a clear reference to Lawrence, and the worms are almost like an allegory of the camel forces used by the British officer and his men to constantly attack the Ottoman supply lines in different places and with great speed between their respective actions. In a way, they also resemble the fast and unexpectedly attacking force represented by the timeless travel of the Kwisatz Haderach, as »Camel raiding parties, self-contained like ships, might cruise confidently along the enemy's cultivation-frontier, sure of an unhindered retreat into their desert-element which the Turks could not explore.«[104] Paul, who proves his own worth to the Fremen by riding the worm on a planetary scale, uses the latter like Lawrence used the camels to overcome the desert and attack the Harkonnen spice production, severely damaging the spice supplies for the whole universe. The military actions, as well as their impact, are therefore obviously quite similar.

In *Dune*, desert power is essential, and Leto referred to it early on with regard to what is necessary to rule on Arrakis:

> »Our supremacy on Caladan,« the Duke said, »depended on sea and air power. Here, we must develop something I choose to call desert power. This may include air power, but it's possible it may not. I call your attention to the lack of ›thopter shields.« He shook his head. »The Harkonnens relied on turnover from off planet for some of their key personnel. We don‹t dare. Each new lot would have its quota of provocateurs.«[105]

104 T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph* (New York: Alden Press, 1946), 345, cited in Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«

105 Herbert, *Dune*. Quote taken from http://readonlinefreebook.com/dune/c-six, accessed November 27, 2021.

Fig. 4: Stilgar explaining how to ride the sandworm on Arrakis to Paul, *Dune* (1984).

Fig. 5: Lawrence on a Camel, Akaba, n.d.; T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 60212.

Ultimately, this desert power is not solely based on the Fremen but also, and equally as much, on the worms, who present, as the camels did for Lawrence, the means of transportation, powerful support for the final attack on Arakeen, the capital of the planet, and the source of valuable resources, i. e. spice in the case of the worms and meat in the case of the camels, if food was more important than transportation.[106] It is therefore not surprising that both men had to prove their ability to actually ride these animals in order to be fully accepted by the respective indigenous people.

Just as life on Arrakis depended on the worms, the lives of the Arab people and the success of Lawrence's operations depended on camels, as »[t]he economic life of the desert was based on the supply of camels, which were best bred on the rigorous upland pastures with their strong nutritive thorns. … The camel markets in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt determined the population which the deserts could support, and regulated strictly their standard of living.«[107] Initially, traveling on a camel was hard for Lawrence,[108] but the Arab forces were »mostly camel corps.«[109] In his letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson on 8 January 1917, Lawrence describes Faisal's troops in some detail, not forgetting to highlight how uncommon the appearance of this army might have been in the West:

> The order of march was rather splendid and barbaric. Feisal in front, in white: Sharaf on his right in red headcloth and henna dyed tunic

106 T. E. Lawrence, »The Occupation of Akaba,« *Arab Bulletin* 59, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 231–236. »The situation at Akaba was now rather serious, economically. We had no food, 600 prisoners and many visitors in prospect. Meat was plentiful, since we had been killing riding camels as required, and there were unripe dates in the palm groves. These saved the day, but involved a good deal of discomfort after the eating, and the force in Akaba was very unhappy till the arrival of H. M. S. *Dufferin* on the 13th with food from Suez.« Ibid., 236.

107 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 34.

108 Letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson, Yenbo, December 6, 1916, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 211–213, here 212.

109 Letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson, January 8, 1917, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 214–221, here 217. The letter was also printed in *Arab Bulletin* 42.

Fig. 6–8: Images of Camels related to Lawrence's operations, 1916–1918; T. E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59073, Q 58861 and Q 59018.

> and cloak; myself on his left in white and red; behind us three banners of purple silk, with gold spikes; behind them three drummers playing a march, and behind them again, a wild bouncing mass of 1,200 camels of the bodyguard, all packed as closely as they could move, the men in every variety of coloured clothes, and the camels nearly as brilliant in their trappings, and the whole crowd singing at the tops of their voices a warsong in honour of Feisal and his family. It looked like a river of camels, for we filled up the Wadi to the tops of its banks, and poured along in a quarter of a mile long stream.[110]

In addition to this detailed image about the troops he had encountered, Lawrence also reports on the best possible strategy for using them in a war effort against the Ottoman Empire. In this moment, Lawrence seems to be thinking and reporting as a superior white officer of the British Empire. He writes that the Bedouins

> still preserve their tribal instinct for independence of order, but they are curbing their habit of wasting ammunition, have achieved a sort of routine in matters of camping and marching, and when the Sherif approaches near they fall into line and make the low bow and sweep of the arm to the lips which is the official salute. … Man by man they are good: I would suggest that the smaller the unit that is acting, the better will be its performance. A thousand of them in a mob would be ineffective against one fourth their number of trained troops.[111]

Nevertheless, and especially since requests for tanks by Lawrence and Faisal had not been granted by the British War Office,[112] Lawrence

110 Ibid., 216–217.

111 Ibid., 217–218.

112 General Headquarters, Egypt to War Office, December 29, 1918, The National Archives, UK, Records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies, WO 32/5729; Note by Major Maughan, December 30, 1918, The National Archives, UK, Records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies, WO 32/5729.

had to fight a guerilla war, the same kind of war Paul began with the Fremen against the Harkonnens' spice production. While, in the Arabs' case, the Ottoman supply lines could be weakened,[113] the steady attacks on the spice production eventually stimulated the development to move toward the final battle on Arrakis for the future of the universal empire.

What made Lawrence known as a military genius and more important for the overall campaign of the British military in the Middle East was his occupation of Akaba, a geostrategically important spot in modern-day Jordan.[114] The Arabs had

> needed to secure a base—they needed Akaba—but from his visit in 1914 he knew it was hopeless to take it from the sea, and impossible to march an army across the desert to take it in the rear. But what an army could not do, a band of enthusiasts might attempt with some hope of success. Lawrence therefore decided to cross the desert with Auda Abu Tayi who recently joined the Arab Revolt, with a small party, to raise the northern tribes and take Akaba in the rear.[115]

Lawrence had therefore crossed the desert with a couple of men, in itself a sheer unimaginable act, and then began to recruit Arab tribesmen in the region around Akaba;[116] by 18 June 1917, he had enrolled »535 Toweiha (of whom twenty-five were horsemen), about 150 Rualla … and Sherarat …, and thirty-five Kawachiba … Of these we chose nearly 200 and left them as guards for the tribal tents in Wadi Sirhan. With the rest we marched out of Kaf in the afternoon, and on

113 Letter to Colonel C. E. Wilson, Wejh, March 9, 1917, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 222–223.

114 On the events related to the sacking of Akaba, see Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 234–321.

115 Garnett, *The Letters*, 223–224.

116 Extract of a report on Captain T. E. Lawrence's journey from WJH to NEHL—1,300 miles—contained in a letter from Sir. R. Wingate to Sir William Robertson, July 11, 1917, The National Archives, UK, Records of the Cabinet Office, CAB 45/76, 1.

[20] June … entered Bair.«[117] The men stayed there until 28 June, further negotiating with local tribes, i. e. »the smaller sub-sections of the Howeitat on the Akaba road.«[118] The Battle of Aba el-Lissan, where Ottoman troops camped near a well, was in reality more important and less glorious than the assault on Akaba that was later overemphasized in the film about Lawrence. The Arab tribesmen had taken the higher ground on 2 July and were

> sniping the Turks steadily all day, and inflicted some loss. The Turks replied with shrapnel from a mountain gun, firing twenty rounds, which were all they had. The shells grazed our hill-tops, and burst far away over the valleys behind. When sunset came, Auda Abu Tayi collected fifty horsemen now with us, in a hollow valley about 200 yards from the Turks, but under cover, and suddenly charged at a wild gallop into the brown of them, shooting furiously from the saddle as he came. The unexpectedness of the move seemed to strike panic into the Turks (about 550 strong), and after a burst of rifle fire, they scattered in all directions. This was our signal, and all the rest of our force (perhaps 350 men …) dashed down the hillsides into the hollow, as fast as the camels would go. The Turks were all infantry, and the Arabs all mounted, and the mix-up round the spring in the dusk, with 1,000 men shooting like mad, was considerable. As the Turks scattered, their position at once became hopeless, and in five minutes it was merely a massacre. In all I counted 300 enemy dead in the main position, and a few fugitives may have been killed further away, though the majority of our men went straight for the Turkish camp to plunder it, before the last shots were fired.[119]

The Arab assault was actually quite dangerous, and Sheikh Auda Abu Tayi, who would later be portrayed by Anthony Quinn, only »had a

117 T. E. Lawrence, »The Occupation of Akaba,« *Arab Bulletin* 59, in Garnett, *The Letters*, 231–236, here 231.

118 Ibid., 232.

119 Ibid., 233.

narrow escape, since two bullets smashed his field glasses, one pierced his revolver holster, three struck his sheathed sword, and his horse was killed under him. He was wildly pleased with the whole affair.«[120] The Ottoman soldiers who had actually been taken prisoner did not survive long on the road due to the lack of water and food and an insufficient number of camels. Akaba was eventually handed over to Lawrence and his men by Sherif Nasir on 6 July 1917, especially since the latter wanted to avoid a massacre. So, on this day, Lawrence triumphantly entered the city and would soon enough be well-known for this military success.[121] The same day, Lawrence and eight men left the city and arrived in El Shatt in Egypt three days later to give an immediate report about the events, although he was »somewhat exhausted by 1,300 miles on a camel in the last 30 days.«[122] The news about Lawrence's victory spread fast, and his achievement was considered a »very remarkable performance, calling for a display of courage, resource, and endurance which is conspicuous even in these days when gallant deeds are of daily occurrence.«[123]

Herbert, maybe also more drawn by the visualization of Lawrence's story on the big screen, uses the worms as an essential part of the Fremen's final military attack on Arakeen, where the shield wall is destroyed by an atomic attack and opens the way for the worms to transport the Fremen on their backs to the battle zone, while they also are part of some kind of hammer and anvil tactic that could be compared with Alexander the Great's (356–323 BCE) cavalry attacks against the Persian armies.[124] The sandworms »handily plow through

120 Ibid., 234.

121 Letter to General Clayton, Cairo, July 10, 1917, S. 225–231. S. 228 L1

122 Extract of a report on Captain T. E. Lawrence's journey from WJH to NEHL—1,300 miles—contained in a letter from Sir. R. Wingate to Sir William Robertson, July 11, 1917, The National Archives, Records of the Cabinet Office, CAB 45/76, 2.

123 Ibid., 2.

124 Frank Jacob, »Der Aufstieg Makedoniens: Eine Erfolgsgeschichte antiker Kavallerie,« in *Pferde in der Geschichte: Begleiter in der Schlacht, Nutztier, literarische Inspiration*, ed. Frank Jacob (Marburg: Büchner, 2016), 19–38.

Fig. 9: The triumphal entry into Akaba, 6 July 1917, T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 59193.

the Emperor's forces in their surprise appearance,«[125] almost like a massive wall of camels when they hit the enemy lines during a full-speed advance.[126] As efficient mounted forces, the description of the sandworms and their final attack consequently closely match Lawrence's story about camels and their use during his campaigns.

However, it is not only their use of animals in a traditional way but the combination of this with knowledge that is related to either Lawrence or Paul that secures the Arab and Fremen victories, respectively. It therefore seems like both men act as a link between the impe-

125 Kennedy cites Herbert's description of the sandworms' attack: »Out of the sand haze came an orderly mass of flashing shapes—great rising curves with crystal spokes that resolved into the gaping mouths of sandworms, a massed wall of them, each with troops of Fremen riding to the attack. They came in a hissing wedge, robes whipping in the wind as they cut through the melee on the plain.« Herbert, *Dune*, 464, cited in Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«

126 Lawrence, *Seven Pillars*, 145.

Fig. 10: Ageyl bodyguard, n.d., T.E. Lawrence Collection, Imperial War Museum, Q 58858B.

rial worlds both represent and the indigenous one the two men dive deep into. Lawrence's superiors also had no doubt at all that it was the part played by the British officers that was decisive for victory, an aspect that Herbert, consciously or unconsciously, also emphasized, as the Fremen only began to be successful in their military operations after Paul joined them.

General Sir Reginald Wingate (1861–1953), for example, in his description of the successes of the military operations between June 1917 and June 1918, was not hesitant to explain why the Arab forces were so efficient, and so his report shall be quoted here in some detail:

> Throughout September and October the railway was again subjected to constant attack at various points between Tebuk and Medina, resulting in the effective dislocation of traffic and inflicting upon the enemy considerable loss in material and personnel. … Although the record of these operations thus briefly surveyed contains few mili-

> tary achievements of outstanding importance, yet the general results attained by the persistent aggression of the Arab's against the enemy's communications must not be under-estimated. … Constantly harassed by a mobile and almost invulnerable enemy, the moral and material pressure to which the enemy has, during the past twelve months, been continuously subjected, may be estimated by the fact that between Tebuk and Medina during this period an aggregate of more than fifteen thousand rails, fifty two culverts and five bridges have been destroyed, two trains have been completely wrecked with electric mines, several station buildings and considerable quantities of rolling stock have been burnt, communication by telegraph and telephone has been interrupted almost daily, four hundred and fifty Turkish dead have been buried by the Arabs and nearly double that number of prisoners taken, whilst material captures during the same period include five field guns, four machine guns, nearly one thousand rifles and large quantities of ammunition, in addition to £.T.25,000 in Turkish gold, and several big convoys conveying livestock and supplies to Medina from the east. … Such success as the Arabs have achieved must be attributed largely [orig. almost entirely] to the unsparing efforts of the British and Allied Officers attached to the Sherifian forces, to whom, working often under intensely trying conditions of climate, [erased: and constantly obstructed by native jealousy and incapacity,] have been due to the conception, the organization and, in great measure, the execution of these operations.[127]

A similar impression is generated in *Dune*, where the Fremen seemed to be unable to free themselves from foreign rule before Paul arrived to deliver their »liberation.« The image of the indigenous people in Herbert's novel consequently remains in some way a romanticized one: »The overall characterization of the Fremen may be considered

127 Report by General Sir Reginald Wingate on military operations conducted by the King of Hedjaz, June 1917—June 1918, Ramleh, June 15, 1918, The National Archives, Records created or inherited by the War Office, Armed Forces, Judge Advocate General, and related bodies, WO 32/5577, 5–11.

an overly romantic vision of Arab Bedouin society: long, flowing robes and dark or tanned skin; the practice of polygamy; values such as honor, trust, and bravery; and tribes that live primitive and simple lives in response to a brutal environment.«[128] As Lawrence, Paul accepts that he needs these indigenous people to be successful militarily, but the latter often remain limited, in the sense that, when depicted by Lawrence and Herbert alike, they remind the reader of the »noble savage.«[129]

In contrast to these indigenous leaders, Paul and Lawrence—at least the one in the film—develop some kind of hubris as well, as they consider themselves to be superior beings, ones that are in control of everything and are thereby unable to fail.

In reality, Lawrence was rather burnt out, especially since »every year out in Arabia counts ten.«[130] The British officer actually confessed in a letter to a friend on 24 September 1917 that »I'm not going to last out this game much longer: nerves going and temper wearing thin, and one wants an unlimited account of both.«[131] Lawrence felt that he needed to explain why he felt this way in some detail, which he did as follows:

> … on a show so narrow and voracious as this one loses one's past and one's balance and becomes hopelessly self-centered. I don't think I ever think except about shop, and I'm quite certain I never do anything else. That must be my excuse for dropping everyone, and I hope when the nightmare ends that I will wake up and become alive again. This killing and killing of Turks is horrible. When you charge in at

128 Kennedy, »Lawrence of Arabia.«

129 When Paul first meets Stilgar, such an image is created: »A tall, robed figure stood in the door … A light tan robe completely enveloped the man except for a gap in the hood and black veil that exposed eyes of total blue—no white in them at all … In the waiting silence, Paul studied the man, sensing the aura of power that radiated from him. He was a leader—a *Fremen* leader.« Herbert, *Dune* [1984], 92, cited in ibid.

130 Letter to a Friend, Akaba, September 24, 1917, in ibid., 237–238, here 237.

131 Ibid., 238.

> the finish and find them all over the place in bits, and still alive many of them, and know that you have done hundreds in the same way before and must do hundreds more if you can.[132]

For Paul, on the other hand, it is violence that paves his way to become the Kwisatz Haderach, something that is emphasized in the film directed by Denis Villeneuve as well. Paul has to kill a man to be accepted by the Fremen and to be able to rise as the super being in the future. He continues by killing Harkonnens and, in the end, only fears being unable to contain the jihad of the Fremen, a fear not shared by Lawrence at all, especially since religious aspects are relatively absent in the latter's writings. Regardless of these differences, however, it is safe to argue that Herbert was inspired in multiple ways by the story of and about T. E. Lawrence, and he used several elements of it when he crafted Paul's relationship with the Fremen. However, Herbert did not always consider the historical but rather and primarily the imagined Lawrence when he found inspiration for life on and the war for Arrakis. Furthermore, the jihad that Paul is worried about might actually have been inspired by the conflicts in the Middle East that were created after Lawrence of Arabia had motivated the Arab tribesmen to join the rebellion against the Ottoman rulers.

Conclusion

Every new generation might be attracted to *Dune* because it is so rich in motifs and topics that do not lose any of their actuality. While readers today will probably relate more to the ecological aspects of Herbert's work, those who read it in earlier decades might have been drawn into the *Dune* universe due to its resemblance with the history of »Lawrence of Arabia.« Herbert was not really trying to write SF, although the universe he built supposedly exists thousands of years

132 Ibid.

in the future. Inspired by semantics, religions, and other aspects, like considerations about political power and leadership, Herbert offers the reader a fascinating yet at the same time somehow familiar world to dive into.

However, the author, consciously or unconsciously, also adopted a lot of orientalist semiotics that had been circulating in Western popular culture and the cultural imagination of Western readers for quite a long time. While Herbert's novel seems to lead directly into the post-colonial struggles of the post-Second World War world and the global conflicts related to anti-colonial movements—often perceived as a menace, a global jihad leading to the clash of civilizations Huntington later predicted—and caused by a long history of abuse and exploitation, *Dune* actually replicates many stereotypes about the Middle East and its peoples. Although the Fremen can be considered to be suppressed indigenous people who eventually rise in rebellion, they are led by Paul Atreides, a heroic figure who clearly represents a »white savior« narrative, which had been forged in close connection with the stories about T. E. Lawrence and the Arab Revolt during the First World War, and which continued to be displayed that way on the big silver screen in 2021 as well.

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Double Dunkirk

Giuditta Bassano

Disputing Dunkirk

In 2017, Christopher Nolan's First World War film *Dunkirk* gained worldwide praise but was curiously attributed with the same conviction both to the tradition of classic Hollywood blockbuster war films and to the paradigm of experimental films. There have also been interpretations, of a critical-aesthetic type, proposing a comparison between Nolan's work and Stanley Kubrick's cinema as a kind of possible third way, that is to say, in an interpretative proposal which seemed to be advanced precisely to keep the two horns of the dilemma together, that of movie genre and that of art film.[1] Moreover, in an extremely interesting way, this debate, or rather this panorama of several reviews and comments, seems to intertwine with a controversy on the ideological sense of the film. Somebody has indeed accused *Dunkirk* of being an »unselfconscious and conventional account of British national identity. Whatever his intentions, *Dunkirk* celebrates an arrogant insularity.« And yet, the contrasting analyses, which enhance the antifascist trend that supposedly characterizes the film, are equally vehement.[2]

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1 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, »Dunkirk Part 1: Straight to the Good Stuff,« *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, August 2, 2017, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2017/08/02/dunkirk-part-1-straight-to-the-good-stuff/; David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Christopher Nolan: A Labyrinth of Linkages* (Madison, WI: Irvington Way Institute Press, 2013), 45.

2 Anthony King, »Homeward Bound: Dunkirk is a Myth Out of Fuel,« *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/homeward-bound-dunkirk-is-a-myth-out-of-fuel/; Patrick Porter, »Dunkirk: a deliverance worth

Our interpretative hypothesis claims that the effects of meaning of the cinematographic text at issue cannot be separated from each other, are not to be given, shall we say, in an orderly and univocal way, and that it is therefore interesting to analyze in detail a number of semiotic aspects that actually keep the reading of the film open. They make the film swing between patriotic rhetoric and the codes of the Hollywood war film on the one hand, and, on the other, they make it a work that is in many respects original and characterized by a lucidity far from trivial. I will conclude by proposing that *Dunkirk* is characterized by a rather interesting aspect: its production, which in a semiotic sense we will frame as an »enunciation,« has some particularities that on the one hand are linked to those posed by the text itself, that is, to use a technical term, to those »of the utterance,« but, on the other, are independent of it and give life to a level of meanings that is like a second text which runs parallel to that of the story being told.

The Film as a Text

A Canonical War Film? A Matter of Structure

A first question that should be asked is what »a canonical war film« consists of in terms of the structure of the narration. Namely, what are the standard strategies that have settled over the last sixty years, giving rise to classic ways of representing certain types of actions, classic ways of connecting them to other footage, and classic ways of using these actions with an allegorical value? *Dunkirk* depicts, first and foremost, an escape combined with a rescue—in military terms, an evacuation—in one of the crucial moments of the first part of the Second World War. As is known, after the conquest of Poland, Nazi Germany attacked Luxembourg, Belgium and France. In the

cheering,« *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/dunkirk-a-deliverance-worth-cheering/.

late spring of 1940, the French Army was trapped in quite a small area but strengthened by a last precious access to the English Channel and fought alongside the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) to keep the sea passage back to Britain safe. ›Operation Dynamo,‹ the name of the British (French) withdrawal approved by Winston Churchill, took place between 26 May and 4 June 1940, mostly on the beaches around the port of Dunkirk and on a protective pier.[3] Three problems affected the outcome of the operation, excluding the German Army advancing from the hinterland and the surrounding coastlines: about 400,000 Allied troops were incessantly bombed from the sky by the German Luftwaffe and from the ocean by the Kriegsmarine, Nazi Germany's navy; then, there was the matter of the tides, which heavily influenced the embarkment from the beaches; finally, the weather determined the number of air attacks day by day. Nolan's movie deals with how, consistently exceeding Churchill's expectations, the withdrawal ended with the rescue of 338,226 soldiers, including almost one-third of the French troops. The film showcases the vicissitudes of seven characters involved in the Dunkirk evacuation, both soldiers and civilians: four of them will be saved, while three will perish in various ways (one because of a patriotic sacrifice, another in a tragic accident, and the last one after being overpowered by the war conditions).

3 See Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London: Pimlico, 1994); Paul Addison and Jeremy A. Crang, eds., *Listening to Britain: Home Intelligence Reports on Britains Finest Hour—May to September 1940* (London: Vintage, 2010); Gregory Blaxland, *Destination Dunkirk: The Story of Gort's Army* (London: Kimber, 1973); Douglas Dildy, *Dunkirk 1940: Operation Dynamo* (London: Osprey, 2010); Christopher Hill, *Cabinet Decisions on Foreign Policy: The British Experience October 1938-June 1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian Morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007); Emma Newlands, *War, the Body and British Army Recruits, 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014); Nigel Sharp, *Dunkirk Little Ships* (Stroud: Amberley, 2015); Julian Thompson, *Dunkirk: Retreat to Victory* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 2008); Patrick Wilson, *Dunkirk—1940: From Disaster to Deliverance* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2002).

Finally, the film divides the adventures of these seven characters into three groups. Thus, on the one side, there are the intricate transformations of a couple of young soldiers who try to leave the beach—this part of the plot takes place over a period of a week; on another side, we see air combat that features two British pilots struggling with the threatening enemies of the Luftwaffe—the events of this part are presented as a single hour of air combat; and on the third side, we see civilians (a father, his teenage son, and his son's friend of the same age) sailing on a private boat from Folkestone, Kent, and crossing the English Channel to rescue British Army fugitives—this last part unfolds over a day. Nolan constantly chooses to split the action scenes of one group, quickly switch to another for a while, and then follow the third one. This happens in an alternation of more than thirty cuts, such as: for three minutes, we see the young soldiers on Dunkirk beach attempting to board a ship that is setting sail; then, for one minute, we see the pilots managing to shoot down a German airplane; then, for five minutes, we see the citizens from the coast of Kent saving a man from the water; then, finally, the action returns to the young soldiers on the beach, and the »rotation« begins again.

According to Riccardo Eugeni, Andrew Kelly and Jeanine Basinger,[4] we are able to gather a classic tripartite structure in Western war movies through the 21st-century epic movie industry: the recruit's training, their arrival at the front and the first epic battle, and their regeneration through the experience of violence. The model derives from depictions of the First World War, as in the films by Lewis Milestone (*All Quiet on the Western Front*, 1929) and G. W. Pabst (*Westfront 1918*, 1930). It then reproduced itself not only for the Second World

4 Ruggero Eugeni, »Sentire la battaglia. Tattiche della percezione nel cinema di guerra contemporaneo,« in *Guerre di segni. Semiotica delle situazioni conflittuali*, eds. Giovanni Manetti, Paolo Bertetti, and Alessandro Prato (Torino: Centro scientifico editore, 2005), 319–329; Andrew Kelly, *Cinema and The Great War* (London/New York: Routledge, 1997); Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

Fig. 1: Movie Poster *Westfront 1918*.

War but also, with some specific variations, for the Vietnam War in unusual movies like Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Michael Cimino's *The Deerhunter* (1978), extending to Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) and Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) (although Vietnam created the opportunity to implement some specific variations).[5]

In this respect, *Dunkirk* is not atypical, or at least not too much. Its specificity is rather that of dissolving the structure into three blocks at the general level of the story. Nevertheless, in one of the three »groups« around which the film revolves, as we have defined

5 See Michael Hammond, »Some Smothering Dreams: The Combat Film in Contemporary Hollywood,« in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 62–76.

them, that is, in the group of young soldiers trapped on the beach, three ideas are repeated and fragmented into several sub-sequences. These are the idea of a moment of »acquisition of competence,« which in the aforementioned model is the training at the military camp; the idea of »a full-fledged performance,« which is the great battle (or more than one) that takes place, staking life and death; and the idea of a »sanction,«[6] which is the regeneration through the experience of violence, which takes the form of growing anguish and warnings of madness for the young soldiers' group. If this part of the film actually displays this classic paradigm quite clearly, the other two groups incorporate canonical elements of two specific subgenres into the canonical war film: the aviation genre, for the group of British pilots, and one that we could call the »hagiography of the common hero-man,«[7] for the group of civilians who left Kent on one of the many »little ships« that really intervened in 1940.

Dunkirk is not particularly innovative in this sense, nor if we consider another well-known theoretical proposal on the structure of the classic plot. Kristin Thompson developed a model based on four phases: Set Up, Complicating Action, Development, and Climax.[8] David Bordwell presents this idea in an article he wrote about *Dunkirk* together with Thompson:

6 The concepts of Competence, Performance and Sanction are part of a general theory that several literary sciences, including semiotics, consider omnipresent in any type of meaningful story. The theory involves four phases: a Contract, which shows the circumstances that motivate the actions in progress; a Competence, a moment in which means and knowledge are acquired in view of the action itself; a Performance, which is the narrative cornerstone of the development: a »great fight,« a »battle,« the »achievement of an aim,« etc; and a Sanction, in which social, collective sense is given to what has happened in the Performance through an acknowledgment and an interpretation that establish its value. See Martin Bronwen and Felicitas Ringham, *Dictionary of Semiotics* (London/New York: Cassell, 2000), 32.

7 See e. g. the case of Aaron Schneider's *Greyhound* (2020).

8 Kristin Thompson, *Storytelling in the New Hollywood: Understanding Classical Narrative Technique* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

> … the film is actually both a Development and a Climax … A Development section consists of obstacles and delays, which comprise most of the action of this film before the climactic bomber attack. Still, Nolan's point is well-taken. In most climax sections (third acts), we know everything we need to know about the action. All the relevant motivations and backstory have been supplied in the earlier stretches, so we can concentrate solely on what happens next. In *Dunkirk*, we don't see those prior sections, so we're plunged into the prolonged suspense characteristic of climaxes.[9]

The two scholars are supporting a position that we could slightly correct from a semiotic point of view: if, in *Dunkirk*, a phase of preparation for the great battles and collisions is missing, as Bordwell and Thompson rightly point out, it is nonetheless restored by the multiplication of performances, namely the »climax sections,« in their words. If we only look at the sequences identifiable as climaxes in the group of the soldiers on the beach, we will find at least eight (which we could refine further). The soldiers

1. escape the bombs dropped from the sky,
2. reach the boarding ship and are allowed on board,
3. remain on board even after being expelled,
4. survive from drowning in the hold of the second ship,
5. return ashore,
6. survive the bullets,
7. survive from drowning after the fishing boat is hit by German bullets, and
8. are rescued.

In this wearisome repetition of serious crises always characterized by the risk of dying, the audience is offered a cognitive dimension in

9 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, »Dunkirk Part 2: The art film as event movie,« *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, August 9, 2017, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2017/08/09/dunkirk-part-2-the-art-film-as-event-movie/.

which all the fixed points that are usually established at the beginning of a story are affirmed—the definitions of the circumstance, of the antagonists, and of the feelings and abilities of the main character, as well as the routines and the change of scenery. Lastly, in a third sense, we could say that *Dunkirk* is definitely consistent with other contemporary theories on the characteristics of the structure of the contemporary war film. In agreement with Michael Hammond,[10] Paul Virilio,[11] Guglielmo Pescatore,[12] Geoff King,[13] and Riccardo Eugeni,[14] starting from the nineties, the narrative design of war films has entered a crisis in favor of a large space being dedicated to perceptive design, both visual and sound. If we think of the »new classics« of this film genre, it is impossible not to mention works like Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (1998). In the battle scenes that all three films share—the fighting based on assaults on bunkers from which the enemy shoots mercilessly at the exposed soldiers (which, according to Eugeni, is a »canonical motive of the First World War, the obscene exposure of the bodies to the steel storm«[15])—, the story »empties, loses weight, while the battle scene becomes more and more a show of shapes in motion, of colors, of sounds.«[16]

This perceptive design has a pivotal role in *Dunkirk* too. For instance, if relatively little of *Dunkirk* takes place at night, it is clear how darkness and light are cornerstones of the different parts of the

10 Michael Hammond, »Some Smothering Dreams: The Combat Film in Contemporary Hollywood,« in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 62–76.
11 Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception* (London: Verso, 1989).
12 Guglielmo Pescatore, *Il narrativo e il sensibile: teoria e semiotica del cinema* (Hybris: Bologna, 2002).
13 Geoff King, *Spectacular Narratives: Hollywood in the Age of the Blockbuster* (London: Bloomsbury, 2000).
14 Eugeni, »Sentire la battaglia.«
15 Ibid,. 324.
16 Ibid., 323.

film. The bright and golden views of the blue sea crossed by the little ships, together with the sunny and clear sky where the pilots face each other, contribute to defining a sort of Manichean space of the heroes, while, on the contrary, the white-grey of the beach under siege, and the black of the water in which, against their will, the young soldiers continue to find themselves immersed, constitute a kind of fixed theatrical background that indicates the space of drama and despair.

It is fairly evident that we can speak of a sort of war of the natural elements: rain, seawater, wind, and sand are actors in all respects, almost close to being synesthetic effects, and hence the text forces the body of the spectator to align with the perceptions of the characters so that they almost feel what the soldiers in the group on the beach are going through, burdened by salt and sand, dripping wet and frozen. In the section »Nolan as Watchmaker,« we will deal with some of these perceptive elements in more detail, discussing the soundtrack of the film and some of its aesthetic constants.

A Conventional War Film: Issues and Semiotic Values

In a semiotic sense, the themes and values that a contemporary Western war film expresses when it is canonically considered as a genre constitute a very different issue from the previous one. A vast amount of literature[17] connects the war narrative of the First World War to

17 E. g. Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994); Daniel Pick, *War Machine: The Rationalisation of Slaughter in The Modern Age* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Bernd Hüppauf, »Introduction. Modernity and Violence,« in *War, Violence, and the Modern Condition*, ed. Bernd Hüppauf (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997) 1–30; Andrea Cortellessa, ed., *Le notti chiare erano tutte un'alba. Antologia dei poeti italiani nella Prima guerra mondiale* (Milano: Bompiani, 2018); George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, *14–18: Retrouver la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000); Federico Montanari, *Linguaggi della Guerra* (Roma: Meltemi, 2004); John Keegan, *The Face of Battle* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976); Mario Insenghi, *Il mito della Grande Guerra* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2014); Eric Leed, *No*

the establishment of canons that the European and American cinema of the following century carried on and partly brutalized. *Dunkirk* is perfectly in line with several of these issues: from the character of mass warfare as waste to the representation of war as resistance to an attack, a »viscous friction«;[18] from the idea of Van Gennep[19] of war as a rite of passage—the soldier is first ripped from his life, from the community in which he grew up and lived, and then, after the war, after the pseudo-community formed by the other soldiers, he has to re-enter a world that would like him as the same as before[20]—to the great topic of the dematerialization of the enemy in modern wars.[21] In *Dunkirk*, the visual device of the empty beach, exposed to bombs and scattered with wrecks and corpses, lapped by the sea, could be considered in turn as a variation of a theme that likewise comes from the First World War—that of the trench as a space for the buried alive, as a sort of »pre-grave« which hosts men who are actually »pre-deceased.«[22] Nonetheless, in *Dunkirk*, there are two less popular elements in terms of the handling of the war theme and its facets. The first one is a certain determination in avoiding scenes of violence concerning physical devastation, blood, wounds, and mutilations. In this respect, *Dunkirk* is a »dry« film that does not dramatically indulge in death and physical pain, except to the extent of a really specific treatment dedicated to the waiting, to the tension with destiny; the text introduces death, alludes to it, but never

Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

18 Carl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege* (Berlin, 1832–37).

19 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1960).

20 On this issue see also Frank Jacob and Stefan Karner, eds., *War and Veterans: Treatment and Reintegration of Soldiers in Post-War Societies* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

21 Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992); Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1989).

22 Andrea Cortellessa, ed., *Le notti chiare erano tutte un'alba. Antologia dei poeti italiani nella Prima guerra mondiale*, new ed. (Milano: Bompiani, 2018), 72.

stages it fully, neither as a state of affairs (close-up shots of corpses, bodies bullet-riddled by enemy fire) nor as a transformation in progress (there are no scenes insisting on the agony of dying soldiers, nor, as mentioned, direct representations of the wounded, shot, pained body). The second element is a refined investment in the narrative component of the lie. Undoubtedly, if we think in general about the sinister effect of a cognitive structure in which something »appears but is not« (according to the most technical definition of what a lie is in semiotics),[23] it is not difficult to find this framework as a constant in several films in the contemporary universe of war films. However, it is uncommon to see a representation of it being as insistent and varied as it is in *Dunkirk*. The entire span of the film is covered by lies: there is a lie in the first four minutes of the film, the part telling the vicissitudes of the young soldiers; and there is a final lie, which punctuates the conclusion of the part about the heroic citizens, who risked (and lost) their lives to save the fleeing British troops. That is to say, to save themselves, the two boys on the beach pretended to be stretcher-bearers carrying an injured person towards a hospital-ship; and, just before that, one of the two boys, who is actually a simple French soldier, stole the uniform of a deceased British soldier under the pretext of burying his body.

Therefore, if on the one hand we must lie in order to survive, that is, we must pretend to be something that we are not, on the other hand, anything that is axiologized as positive in the film is profoundly ambivalent, different from how it appears. It is the case of the final lie, that is, the patriotism with which the violent death of a boy is masked, the boy who simply comes to the aid of the troops on a little cruise, and dies due to an absurd fight with one of the soldiers he has rescued. This is also the case with two »rescue vehicles,« which will prove crucial in the economy of the performance: the destroyer, on which many soldiers apparently find salvation in the middle of the film, and the stranded fishing boat of the final part of the action on the beach.

23 Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Du sens II* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), 198.

In the case of the destroyer, the two protagonists are received by nurses who distribute tea as well as bread and jam in an overcrowded hold: it looks like a picture of domesticity, efficiency, a prelude to the returning home of the young soldiers, gathered and welcomed by their military institutions, which will rescue them. But while the destroyer tries to sail towards England, one of the two young characters—the French soldier who pretends to be English—notes with dismay that the hold full of men is closed by a hatch that opens only from the outside. When a German torpedo hits the ship, causing severe damage, chaos breaks out, and the ship begins to sink. In this circumstance, the hold turns into a death trap that, in the general panic, none of the crew remember to open to save hundreds of men from drowning. The institutional responsibility vanishes in the immediate emergency, and British efficiency turns out to be pure fabrication.[24]

In the case of the fishing boat, something very similar occurs: a group of exhausted English soldiers on the edge, among whom are the two young protagonists, find refuge in a stranded fishing boat and reflect that the boat shall float away with the high tide and thus take them to safety. Nonetheless, the tragic accident is that, at some point, someone whom we never see, presumably a German soldier, begins to use the fishing boat as a target for a shooting contest. Thus, the British group finds itself in a paradoxical situation: on the one hand, they must avoid the bullets that are making holes in the sides of the hold, in which they are slumped; on the other hand, since the tide has risen and the fishing boat is actually sailing off, they must try to delay the flow of water coming from the bullet holes. The interesting detail is that the fishing boat is another little ship that has come to the rescue of the army; or rather, the soldiers »capture« the owner of the boat, who introduces himself as a Dutch merchant who came to Dunkirk to help the Anglo-French troops against the Germans. However, in the surreal atmosphere that arises inside the hold, it is fairly clear that the Dutchman is not very happy to find his boat occupied by a dozen

24 This could also be meant as a metaphor for the Allied positions at Dunkirk.

soldiers. Although he introduces himself as an ally, it is clear that he would have preferred to wait for the tide to try to save himself alone. Here it is again the profound ambivalence of an element that should have been »positive,« a »safe« means of escape, but which turns out to be very different from what it appears. The construction of this discourse about a remarkable and subtle ambivalence definitely gives *Dunkirk* a less obvious and mainstream character than other contemporary war films and puts it in an original position also with respect to great experimental films on war, such as Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* or Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, where the cognitive construction is less focused on lying and ambivalence and instead looks rather more openly at the absurd and the lack of sense.

Nolan as Watchmaker

A series of really original aesthetic-rhythmic choices characterize *Dunkirk* from the point of view of editing and soundtrack. The fact that, with respect to the structure of *Dunkirk*, someone has spoken about Nolan as a »watchmaker« is not accidental.[25] I will briefly examine three aspects. First, as Thompson and Bordwell point out,[26] Dunkirk has a theme, »evacuation,« which immediately links it with another subgenre of war movies—the Big Maneuver. The two authors remind us that this subgenre often features certain conventional scenes:

> We see briefing rooms fitted out with maps and models of the terrain. Because the cast is vast, officers are sometimes distinguished by titles (as well as being played by instantly recognizable stars). Granted, sus-

25 Brendan Hodges, »Surviving Time on Dunkirk Beach,« *RogerEbert.com*, August 7, 2017, https://www.rogerebert.com/features/surviving-time-on-dunkirk-beach.

26 Kristin Thompson and David Bordwell, »Dunkirk Part 2: The art film as event movie,« *David Bordwell's Website on Cinema*, August 9, 2017, http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2017/08/09/dunkirk-part-2-the-art-film-as-event-movie.

> pense is an ingredient of any war picture. Alongside GHQ debates about strategy, the Big Maneuver movie includes episodes aiming at momentary tension. The dive into the French village in *The Longest Day* offers the painful spectacle of men being shot down like a flock of geese, while *A Bridge Too Far* shows Urquhart (Sean Connery) trapped in a Dutch household as Nazis surround him.[27]

However, according to the two authors, Nolan does not adopt the stereotypes of the Big Maneuver films, even though his strategy is »to make virtually the entire film an exercise in suspense.« We will highlight the reasons why this observation can be endorsed. First of all, *Dunkirk* does not have a center, a principal spatial scenario that subordinates the others; there is no control room, no secret bunker, no building where operations are coordinated. In the part on the beach, there is a pier, which we will discuss in the next section, but it does not play a structuring or hierarchizing role compared to the other spaces in any way. What is more, the development of the three parts and their confluence is twisted and unbalanced—after these moments are briefly pinned together (the script calls it the confluence), the timescales diverge again. It is a particularly courageous and disorienting choice that all parts do not reach their peaks at the same time, always maintaining at least one wherein the tension is at its maximum. As will be shown later, if, towards the end, elements emerge that lead the entire text to recognize the rhetorics of the Big Maneuver, the rest of the time, *Dunkirk*'s plot represents one of the most daring examples of plot even among recent triple chronotope masterpieces, like Thomas Anderson's *Magnolia* (1999) or Alejandro González Iñárritu's *Babel* (2006) and *Amores Perros* (2000).

A second aspect concerns the rather sui generis relationship between characters and action. Above, it was claimed that there are seven main characters, but, in fact, to these we must add at least four others: the captain who leads the evacuation operations on the pier;

27 Ibid.

the soldier in shock saved by the civilians from Kent, this being their first encounter on the path to the real war zone; and two other young soldiers who join the main couple of fugitives on the beach. Now, on closer look, none of these nine characters can be identified as the sole protagonist—even if three of them, that is, the two pilots and the civilian sailor who left with his son to rush and help the British army, are characterized by standard heroic traits, all the three of them are »saviors.« This aspect is confirmed, or rather shamelessly displayed, by the camera, which never coincides with a character's point of view, other than for a few moments. On the contrary, the eye of the film surrounds them, follows them, often even disregards them to give the spectator perspectives, landscapes, and details, which, logically, cannot be seen by any of the characters. This detail, namely, that of a real strong metacinematographic presence in the role of the point of view, and the impossibility to assign a stable and unambiguous role to a hero protagonist, distinctly separates *Dunkirk* from the most highly acclaimed recent blockbuster among war films, Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, and rather brings it closer to Sam Peckinpah's *Cross of Iron* (1977), which lies in the vein of the literary avant-garde expressed in 1961 by Joseph Heller's bestseller *Catch-22*.[28]

Thirdly, the soundtrack plays a crucial role. Much has been written about its peculiarities and about the work Nolan carried out in concert with the composer Hans Zimmer;[29] however, what is interest-

28 *Catch-22* is the classic satyrical novel about war that coined the term describing impossible situations. It describes the wartime experiences of B-25 bombardier Captain John Yossarian; Heller himself had served as a US Air Force bombardier in the Second World War. The novel tells the story of a group of Second World War airmen stationed on a small island off the coast of Tuscany, taking in the brutal nature of war. Yossarian adopts drastic measures to avoid flying an ever-increasing number of dangerous missions until he understands that the only way to avoid such deadly assignments is to plead insanity, but to do so exposes a desire to live—a core aspect of the sane. The circularity of such a military rule about insanity—precisely called »catch 22«—accounts for the absurdity of war as a whole.

29 See Matt Zoller Seitz, »Dunkirk,« *RogerEbert.com*, July 21, 2017, https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/dunkirk-2017; Manohla Darvis, »Review: Dunkirk Is a Tour de Force War Movie, Both Sweeping and Intimate,« *New York Times*, July 20,

ing from the point of view of a semiotics of music is the absolutely independent and innovative role it plays with respect to images. First of all, it is composed of three lines, which for long sections are autonomous. One is a virtual cricket field of violins that mainly accompanies the part on the civilians who set sail on the little ship. It is the least original line, which is part of an idea of the dramatic accompaniment of the chorus-orchestra with respect to the action, already present in classical theater. The other two lines are far more interesting because they are a relentless metronomic beat—which most reviews lead back to the familiar sound of a clock ticking—and the sound of nose-diving synths and guitars that ring like air raid sirens.

With regard to these two lines, it is not difficult to talk about what Chion has called »acousmatic listening«:[30] that is, we could in some way search for the sound source in an intra-diegetic element,[31]

2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/movies/dunkirk-review-christopher-nolan.html; Wu Ming, »It's Not Fair. Note su #Dunkirk di Christopher Nolan e su dove siamo adesso,« *Wumingfoundation*, September 8, 2017, https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2017/09/dunkirk/. Nolan said in an interview with Jason Guerrasio: »The screenplay had been written according to musical principals. There's an audio illusion, if you will, in music called a ›Shepard tone‹ and with my composer David Julyan on ›The Prestige‹ we explored that and based a lot of the score around that. And it's an illusion where there's a continuing ascension of tone. It's a corkscrew effect. It's always going up and up and up but it never goes outside of its range. And I wrote the script according to that principle. I interwove the three timelines in such a way that there's a continual feeling of intensity. Increasing intensity. So I wanted to build the music on similar mathematical principals. Very early on I sent Hans a recording that I made of a watch that I own with a particularly insistent ticking and we started to build the track out of that sound and then working from that sound we built the music as we built the picture cut. So there's a fusion of music and sound effects and picture that we've never been able to achieve before.« Jason Guerrasio, »Christopher Nolan explains the biggest challenges in making his latest movie ›Dunkirk‹ into an ›intimate epic‹,« *Business Insider*, July 11, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/christopher-nolan-dunkirk-interview-2017-7?op=1&r=US&IR=T. In 2018 the film won three Oscars: Best Film Editing Award; Best Sound Editing Award; Best Sound Mixing Award.

30 Michel Chion, *L'audio-vision. Son et image au cinema* (Paris: Nathan, 1990), 43.

31 Gerard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 278.

in some source belonging to the world of narrated facts, but the accelerations, disappearances, and sudden reappearances soon show that this bond between the environment of the scene and the sounds is illusory. The sound editing does not renounce to a profusion of ambient sounds, and this adds to the confusion. The roar of the waves, the howling of the wind, as well as the sounds of bullets, propellers, engines, the rattles of weapons and chains, and anti-aircraft sirens, genuinely intradiegetic, mix in conflict with the entirely arbitrary nature of the three »aesthetic-rhythmic« lines of the soundtrack. It is to be noted that the sound lines' editing between the continuous cuts in the visual track, that is, the way in which the soundtrack changes in the transition of the story from one of the three parts (soldiers, air battle, civilians) to another, is deliberately very undidactic and clean, and in a number of cases it maintains a slight dissonance.

Basically, the sound discourse, including on the aesthetic-rhythmic lines, breaks continuously, and this represents one of the most peculiar features of the entire cinematographic text of *Dunkirk*. Here, the epithet of »watchmaker« is suited to the rhythmic choices on which Nolan's aesthetics relies, but, perhaps, only as long as we consider that he is a rather psychedelic watchmaker.

From Rhetoric to Ideology

Having highlighted these aspects, it is time to deal with the accusations made against the film for its presumed pompous and banal, if not straight-up conservative and shamelessly patriotic nature. In semiotics, considerations have been carried out that in part link and in part distinguish the concepts of »rhetoric« and »ideology.« In our view, the two concepts are separate, and we will try to show how *Dunkirk* holds both rhetorical aspects and others that are actually attributable to the concept of ideology.

Roland Barthes is the founder of a critical view on images that is condensed precisely on the concept of ideology: according to the

French semiologist, a cultural fact, or rather a social order, is ideological if it presents itself as spontaneous, exact and natural.[32] An order that neutralizes doubts about its own legitimacy by presenting itself as correct a priori (Barthes has made bitter remarks, in this regard, both on political issues, such as the legitimization of colonial discourse through the celebration of itself, and on ethical-moral topics, such as the idea of heterosexual marriage as the »natural« crowning of a love relationship). In the logic of Barthes, rhetoric is the signifying face of an ideology, that is, every ideology as a concept or group of meanings passes through standardized expressive frames, namely through images and verbal formulas called rhetoric. Umberto Eco, for his part, developed an independent theory on the concept of ideology, instead considering a certain kind of discourse that links a series of argumentations together in succession.[33] The ideological discourse here is a progressive stiffening of the possible directions of a reasoning. These might be: if argument A can be connected to arguments G, F, Z and B with the same plausibility, and argument B to arguments S, T, M and C, the ideology is a bit of a stretch that gradually suppresses these alternatives, reinforcing a single set of links, in order to obtain an ABC reasoning. Subsequently, in the framework of studies of a mostly aesthetic kind, Pierluigi Basso recovered the concept of rhetoric to propose that all texts can be linked to others through a rhetorical potentiality in such a way that some internal element of a text can be connected to extra-textual values of a moral or figurative nature.[34]

Here, we assume that it is actually useful to keep the two terms separate, and we share the emphasis Basso places on rhetoric as a field of more vague connections, and of a mainly aesthetic order, while maintaining Eco's interpretation of ideology, that of a cognitive discourse in which the outcomes are somehow the result of a forced,

32 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

33 Umberto Eco, *La Struttura assente* (Milano: Bompiani, 1968); Umberto Eco, »Ur-Fascism,« *New York Review of Books*, June 22, 1995. 1973

34 Pierluigi Basso, *La promozione dei valori: Semiotica della comunicazione e dei consumi* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2009), 320.

manipulated path. In this sense, therefore, *Dunkirk* is not devoid of either type of feature.

Some rhetorical remarks can be traced, for example, in the almost total absence of female characters—due to which, for instance, Peter Bradshaw spoke about the film as a »grimly male world with hardly any women on screen.«[35] Regardless of what each of us may think of this choice, it inevitably links *Dunkirk* to many other examples of war films, where war is the domain of men, both in the imagination as well as in the strategies and in its most violent aspects.

The rhetorical element is also relevant in the fact that, even if there is no hero protagonist, as mentioned above, the character who is given more space is a beardless and totally innocent soldier; this confirms several clichés about the »survival of the purest,« and in fact the conclusion of the story sees the boy rescued.

Finally, we can mention an emblematic scene, subject of several comments, in which the captain of the British troops on the beach (Kenneth Branagh), who is directing the evacuation operations from the only pier in the bay, spots the multitude of little ships that have rushed to help the army with his binoculars. When asked by a sergeant what he is inspecting, the captain replies with a single idyllic word: »Home« (1 h 13 m 38 s).

Whether or not we see an element of historical-realistic coherence in this passage of the screenplay, it is clear that the dialogue opens the way to an idea of predictability and a heartfelt patriotic cliché that is not seen in many other parts of the cinematographic text. On the other hand, the final part is characterized by two elements that we ought to identify as ideological. The first is a clear cut in the soundtrack: as Tony King recalls, when the fleet of small ships arrives at Dunkirk,

35 Peter Bradshaw, »Dunkirk review—Christopher Nolan's apocalyptic war epic is his best film so far,« *The Guardian*, July 17, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/17/dunkirk-review-christopher-nolans-apocalyptic-war-epic-is-his-best-film-so-far.

> The sound of the film is transformed. The percussive dissonance of the main theme is dispelled by the radiant harmonies of Edward Elgar's *Nimrod*. International audiences may miss the significance of this musical interlude. For a British person, its resonances are unmistakable. In the United Kingdom, Elgar, whose career reached its peak in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, is revered as the quintessentially English composer. *Nimrod* has become the anthem of national pathos and pride; it is a hymn to the bucolic homeland and the English way of life. Any ambiguities in the film are eliminated at this point.[36]

Indeed, as original as the acoustic choices that precede this narrative exploit are, it is plausible to share with King the idea of a paternalistic solution, which somehow removes and overcomes the complexity and the multiple planes of the film to bring their meaning back to the underlined heroism of the British citizens.

Finally, in support of this sound aesthetics switch, there is another strong feature. In the last two minutes of the film, as a train brings the surviving young soldiers »home« through the green English countryside, one of them buys a newspaper and starts reading the front page aloud. Here follows the famous speech by Winston Churchill to the nation, delivered after the end of Operation Dynamo in the House of Commons on 4 June 1940 and known to history with the title »We Shall Fight on the Beaches,« which corresponds to a central sentence of the plea in the speech.[37]

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36 Anthony King, »Homeward bound: Dunkirk is a myth out of fuel,« *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/homeward-bound-dunkirk-is-a-myth-out-of-fuel.

37 This is the full text of the last paragraph of the plea: »Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the Gestapo and all the odious apparatus of Nazi rule, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our island, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets,

The soundtrack turns the voice of the soldier into a voiceover that embraces a final panning shot over the desert beach, at night, then at sunset, then scattered with abandoned military helmets, and which somehow embraces and comforts even the last character whose destiny has yet to be fulfilled—one of the two hero pilots, who, peacefully, goes to his death at the hands of the Germans, on that very beach, after having patriotically accomplished his duty as an aviator.

Intertexuality and Enunciation: The Second *Dunkirk* in the Film as an Act

History and Semiotics of War

To sum up, we might say that, on the one hand, *Dunkirk* is somehow conventional, mainly in terms of its structure and topics, and that it presents a number of features ascribable to the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster standard; on the other, it shows a complementary effort in the sophisticated expression of the complexity and senselessness of the war by means of its rhythmic narrative construction and its main figures. However, there is yet a field to explore. Indeed, *Dunkirk* is based on an intricate network of textual references, and we argue that this aspect can be seen as independent from the previous ones. If we assume with Gilles Deleuze and Eric Hobsbawm that the war is inseparable from its account,[38] then it immediately becomes very clear how any story of war in fact rewrites it incessantly. In this sense, the relevance of a dialogue between historiography and

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we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender, and if, which I do not for a moment believe, this island or a large part of it were subjugated and starving, then our Empire beyond the seas, armed and guarded by the British Fleet, would carry on the struggle, until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old.«

38 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinéma 2: L'image-temps* (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 200; Eric John Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1994), 49.

semiotics appears clear, in particular for all those cases—the majority, probably—in which the meaning of a historical event is debated.[39] Joshua Levine explicitly wonders what the meaning of the dangerous Operation Dynamo is.[40] Three perspectives based on interviews with witnesses are considered: Was it the French who allowed, with their sacrifice, the favorable outcome of the evacuation? Was it, as the British patriotic rhetoric states, the superhuman effort of the little ships that constituted a decisive factor? Or, again, as confessed by many, should Operation Dynamo be considered as just one among several testimonies of the total absurdity and lack of meaning of war? Federico Montanari recalls how the narrative translation processes of a war event are often the only worlds, which, in the plural sense, even if it may seem an oxymoron, construct the meanings of some event, otherwise singularly unattainable. In his words:

> In certain cases, wars may be fought also, or predominantly, at the level of their moral and mythological construction effects: hence for the future, and therefore at the level of self-representation effects that are produced and prefigured for the fighters. Here, the term »mythologizing« as Hobsbawm employs it has a far from negative connotation. It means recognizing the power and effectiveness of the narration and representation of events. We believe that the question should not be underestimated or trivialized, and it is above all important to search for a less overused and more semiotically oriented concept of representation.[41]

39 On the interrelation of war and semiotics see also Frank Jacob, ed., *War and Semiotics: Signs, Communication Systems, and the Preparation, Legitimization, and Commemoration of Collective Mass Violence* (London/New York: Routledge, 2020).

40 Joshua Levine, *Dunkirk: The History Behind the Major Motion Picture* (London: William Collins Books, 2017).

41 Federico Montanari, *Linguaggi della guerra* (Roma: Meltemi, 2004), 31.

Enunciation and Intertextuality

Taking Montanari's suggestion to search for a less abused approach to the concept of representation seriously, we should mention the endeavors already made in this sense within semiotic studies. The first is a concept proposed by an English jurist, Bernard Jackson,[42] who worked closely with Greimasian semiotics and who was involved, for instance, in giving a theoretical consistency to the scene of the judicial process. Jackson recalled how crucial it is to distinguish the succession of facts at the center of a trial, the facts on which one must judge, which he called the story in the trial, and the facts of the hearing, that is, the entire series of events, speeches and phases ranging from the opening of a trial to its conclusion. Jackson calls this the second »level« of existence of the judicial fact, where the story of the trial must be considered.

With another classical author,[43] we could say that the difference between the two levels is that between enunciation—the production of a story, speech, picture, or communicative act of any kind—and utterance—that is, that certain text produced by the enunciation with its speech, specific structures, codes, narrative elements, actors, and scenarios, potentially visual. Here, however, the production of a film in this sense appears to present problems that are extremely similar to those that Jackson invites us to separate into the enunciation of the trial and the utterance at the center of the judgment. In other words, just as some aspects of the process itself, as an enunciation, namely, as the story of the trial, are completely independent from the story in the trial, that is, from the utterance, from the fact on which one must judge, the production of a film stands on a level where independent elements act with respect to the story that ultimately becomes the

42 Bernard Jackson, *Law, Fact, and Narrative Coherence* (Liverpool: Deborah Charles, 1988), 56; Bernard Jackson, »A Journey into Legal Semiotics,« *Actes Semiotiques* 120 (2017): 8, doi:10.25965/as.5669.

43 Algirdas Julien Greimas and Joseph Courtés, *Sèmiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la theorie du langage* (Paris: Hachette, 1979), 322.

outcome of the production process. Just consider the choice of the set, the role of the actors of the production per se, the problem of shooting in a natural environment, the issues of light, bad weather, possible political obstacles, etc.

Something else must be said about what then happens to each of these two levels, about how it is possible, or rather inevitable, to interpret, even very differently, elements of the film and elements at the level of the production of the film. Umberto Eco proposed always considering the textual meaning as connected to a very broad and open repertoire of all kinds of knowledge, including contextual information.[44] This assumption underpins his idea that the interpretation of a text, and, of course, of a film as a cinematographic text too, and then of its level of production as an enunciation, would always be an operation that involves a more or less vast portion of a multidimensional space of semiosis, a space that Eco calls the space of the »encyclopedia.«[45] His theoretical proposal is not the only one to underline the profound connections among different texts, which are necessarily activated so that what we call the understanding of a single text may take place. In this regard, Eco's encyclopedia comes very close to Julia Kristeva's idea of intertextuality, according to which »no text stands alone; all texts have their existence and their meaning in relation to a practically infinite field of prior texts and prior significations.« It is a position that emphasizes how »no speaker creates their language from scratch; all linguistic utterances depend upon the employment and redeployment of already existent utterances. Intertextuality is part, then, of a radical rethinking of human subjectivity and human expression, a rethinking that at its

44 However, Eco also argued that the semiotics rely upon the interpretation of the text and visual images. So it would be a textual-visual space, in which both levels interact consciously and unconsciously with each other and the reader/spectator. That would then also clearly link to his encyclopedia term, i. e. a form of public knowledge or the identification of signs according to an already existent collection thereof.

45 Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979), 134.

most extreme argues it is language rather than human intention that generates meaning.«[46]

At this point, we propose three hypotheses; we will develop the second and third in the next section:

(i) The notions of encyclopedia and intertextuality account for the fact that *Dunkirk* can be interpretable, and in fact interpreted, on levels that go well beyond the relationship with other war films.
(ii) Given that the level of enunciation of a film is for its part a level to which strategies, declarations, and political actions can be attributed, we assume that the disputes around *Dunkirk* may be particularly explained in terms of disputes over its enunciation, rather than on the story it tells.
(iii) The levels of the enunciation and of the utterance are not impermeable:[47] the case of *Dunkirk* seems to show some instances of interpretations that collapse one onto the other, i. e. that attribute to the utterance something that should possibly concern the enunciation.

Dunkirk as Enunciation and its Disputed Intertextuality

In itself, the amount of comments and reviews of the film is not surprising: after all, it is a great production from a director in the midst of success, a work entirely dedicated to one of the central turning points of the first part of the Second World War. Nonetheless, it is impressive how the quantity of topics on *Dunkirk* seems never-ending and how its interpretations, often in the first instance for or against an emotional patriotism (we will return to this later) and genre conventionalism (as we have discussed so far), actually soar towards completely different issues. As previously said, we believe that

46 Bronwen and Ringham, *Dictionary of Semiotics*, 93–94.
47 See e. g. the notion of »métalepse« coined by Gerard Genette in *Figures III* (Paris: Seuil, 1978), 289.

the circumstances of the enunciation of the film are crucial in this: that is, perhaps, the relationship between the historical event and its production in 2017 to be mainly discussed, and not the elements of the film as a narrative utterance. We will briefly list some points of the matter and then draw a conclusion concerning the relationship between enunciation and utterance as levels which, in the case of *Dunkirk*, somehow duplicate the film.

(i) *Direct Memory of the Beach/Disputed Memory of the Beach*: One of the most sensitive reasons seems to be the fact that a film directed in 2017, exactly 77 years from the event that it recounts, is in balance on a thin line between the existence of surviving direct witnesses and its definitive historicization. Furthermore, the beach is not the same for the British, the Americans, and the French: Emma Graham-Harrison[48] recalls how the Dynamo museum in Dunkirk is designed for a British audience, while the French do not study the event in their history courses, and evidently the subsequent Vichy government did not promote the memorial stabilization of the value of the French sacrifice either. In this respect, taking into consideration the bombings that basically burnt down the town of Dunkirk during and after the year 1940, the choice to shoot in this place takes upon itself the sense of an unprecedented responsibility: It was the first time in decades that a film about Operation Dynamo had actually been made in Dunkirk. Graham-Harrison notes that around 1,500 people signed up to work as extras, and a quarter of the town's population of 100,000 saw the movie in the first two weeks. Furthermore, the majority of tourists visiting Dunkirk on the history trail are traditionally British, because the United States had not yet joined the Second World War in 1940. So, the Americans who swell visitor numbers at the Normandy beaches used for the D-Day landings rarely continue on to

48 Emma Graham-Harrison, »Dunkirk blockbuster goes global, locals look for an upturn in their fortunes,« *The Guardian*, July 30, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/29/as-dunkirk-movie-goes-global-locals-look-for-upturn-in-fortunes.

Dunkirk. *Dunkirk* might change this situation, and French tourists could be pushed to investigate their history.

(ii) *From Kubrick to Nolan*: Paul Virilio emphasized film theory concerning some of Kubrick's famous statements on the proximity between war and war film.[49] It has nothing to do with establishing a naive homology between the evacuation of the beach of Dunkirk and the vicissitudes of the film shot on that same beach (as one could actually have read in recent years) but is rather about considering some deeper aspects in a serious way. On the one hand, in fact, the perceptual and social changes prompted by technology reach their highest revolutionary peaks in both fields; on the other hand, the logistical construction of a film involves so many and such problems that it approaches those of planning a military action. Lastly, if we look again at Kubrick's cinema,[50] it is worth reflecting on how much war cinema and war action constitute a meta-semiotic reflection on the structure of rhythm: on times and counter-times, on waitings, spasms, restarts, accelerations.

(iii) *Dunkirk and Contemporary Migration*: It should not be surprising that both at the time of the film's release and several times in the following years, editorials and commentary articles linked the condition of the soldiers trapped on the beach—willing to make hopeless gestures and not infrequently suicides to get away from it—to contemporary global migrations, to the situation of migrants and refugees who mainly, but not only, died in the Mediterranean Sea. This is already a small example of the collapse mentioned in the previous section: it is clear that this connection does not pertain to the meaning of the film as an utterance, but only potentially to the level of its enunciation, yet it is not rare to read of the soaking corpses of the soldiers, who, in some scenes of the film, are slowly taken from the beach by the tide, as metaphors of the tragic sea migrations of the last ten years.

49 Virilio, *War and Cinema.*

50 Deleuze, *Cinéma 2*, 267–268.

(iv) *Dunkirk and Terrorism*: Along a similar line, seizing a connection around the »invisible enemy« theme, Dunkirk has been read as a tribute to, if not a metaphor for, the West's actions following the attack on the Twin Towers in 2001. To cite one review among many,[51] there is, for instance, the correlation between a frame that appears in the trailer and no longer in the film, in which we see a multitude of corpses aligned on the beach, almost invisible due to the haze and rain. The connection here is with »the sensation caused in 2009 by the images of the coffins covered with American flags, containing the bodies of the marines who died during the ›war on terror‹ in the Middle East.«

(v) *Dunkirk and Brexit*: As we mentioned in the introductory section, there are several readings suggesting an overtly conservative operation in Dunkirk, to the point of indicating a very unhappy timing with respect to the circumstances of Brexit:[52] Nigel Farage's repeated claims of the patriotism of the film actually reinforced this interpretation and aroused heated reactions. The position of those condemning this overt nationalism (as well as those who claim it) concerns a pragmatic problem of timing: that is, they blame the utterance—the film as a historical reconstruction—for having complicated features in terms of action, that is, the enunciation, which sings the praises of an anachronistic and toxic patriotism; in short, it is the same patriotism that animated the vote to leave on 23 June 2016.

51 See »*Dunkirk* e la nuova estetica del cinema bellico,« *Magazzino26*, September 25, 2018, https://www.magazzino26.it/dunkirk-e-la-nuova-estetica-del-cinema-bellico/.

52 See Anthony King, »Remembering Dunkirk: Art, Commemoration, and Memory,« *War on the Rocks*, August 24, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/re-remembering-dunkirk-art-commemoration-and-memory/; Zoe Williams, »As ›tiny ships‹ Dunkirk blockbuster goes global, locals look for an upturn in their fortunes,« *The Guardian*, July 30, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2017/jul/29/as-dunkirk-movie-goes-global-locals-look-for-upturn-in-fortunes; Nathan Akehurts, »The Dunkirk Story Stills Matters, Just Not In The Way Farage Thinks,« *The Huffington Post*, July 27, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/nathan-akehurst/nigel-farage-dunkirk_b_17600838.html.

(vi) *Dunkirk and Antifascism*: Conversely, the position of those[53] who broadly support the value of the film as a text celebrating the fight against fascism seems to do the opposite, that is, to emphasize the transparency of the level of the enunciation in favor of the simple meaning of the story told. If Dunkirk changed the outcome of the Second World War, then a film about that occurrence reminds us, 77 years later, of the importance of fighting all kinds of fascism, and reinvigorations of Nazi ideology in particular.

(vii) *Dunkirk as a Capitalist Film*: Lastly, a final reading of this short list,[54] according to which *Dunkirk* is a mis-educational text, is of great interest. As a matter of fact, from this point of view, the text of the film does nothing for the new generations, who might sooner or later be involved in another global military conflict and be dragged into the field against their will and at their own risk. The film does not in any way thematize the responsibilities of military institutions and the British state, which, in fact, is fighting the war at the expense of its teenage sons. According to this interpretation, therefore, whatever the judgment on the film as utterance is, the absence of any political criticism on the level of history makes the film seriously collaborationist with capitalism on the level of enunciation.

Conclusion

In the first part of the paper, I discussed some aspects that are needed to better understand how the idea of a blockbuster war film can be understood today, in view of the enormous success of *Dunkirk* and the disputes on its triviality/originality. In the latter pages, it was

53 Patrick Porter, »Dunkirk: a deliverance worth cheering,« *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2017, https://warontherocks.com/2017/08/dunkirk-a-deliverance-worth-cheering; Williams, »As ›tiny ships‹ Dunkirk blockbuster goes global.«

54 Goffredo Fofi, »Le false emozioni di Dunkirk,« *Internazionale*, September 7, 2017, https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/goffredo-fofi/2017/09/08/dunkirk-nolan-recensione.

attempted to clarify another aspect, maintaining that the enormous energy of the cultural commentary around this film—understood as an often autopoietic form of a social world that reflects on itself and on languages—depends on a further characteristic. Namely, the possibility of conceiving a film that is so well known and was so widely distributed, in 2017, that thematizes a crucial historical event such as Operation Dynamo on two levels, that is, duplicated according to the level of its enunciation and its utterance. The film as an enunciation is configured as an act, and therefore it may be interpreted in the sense of a claim, a reminder, an allusion, an allegory, a metaphor, etc. The problematic aspect here is that this vast space of commentary often worked precisely because of the collapse of a level of enunciation on that of the utterance and vice versa. That is, many of the film's interpretations take elements of the »story in the movie,« to follow Jackson, and place them on the plane of the »story of the movie,« or they operate the reverse collapse. This distances us, predictably enough, from any univocal conception of the meaning of the film as a text, but it is undoubtedly useful to free us from a referentialist distinction between fact and narration, demonstrating, on the contrary, that the majority of the disputes and interpretative issues concern internal links among textual levels.

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Alain Delon in the Franco-Algerian War: A Barthesian Myth

Nicole Beth Wallenbrock

Introduction

By 1957, when a revolutionary war had already been raging for three years in Algeria, the collapsing French Empire was on the verge of erasure. In this year, the semiotic-influenced critique of consumerism *Mythologies* was published in which the author, Roland Barthes, dissected media's manipulative techniques with cynicism—often, he implies that Orientalism is at the root of popular French opinion.[1] Also in the same year, the charismatic box office sensation Alain Delon made his screen debut, starring in *Quand la femme s'en mêle* (*Send a Woman When the Devil Fails*, dir. Yves Allégret) as a hired killer. Delon would soon be labeled a myth in France, binding both the actor and Barthes' book in the distress and denial of decolonization.

Previously, Alain Delon has been studied as an icon of auteur films, 1960s mass consumerism, and as the subject of an erotic gaze—yet scholars have seldom noticed the representation of war in his oeuvre, and in particular his relationship with the Franco-Algerian War, which was raging during the early years of his stardom.[2] Largely associated with the torture technique practiced by the French military and the state censure of the media, the Franco-Algerian War years were marked by political division in France and a grow-

1 Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1957).

2 An exception is Mani Sharpe, who studies Alain Delon's performance and framing in relation to the Franco-Algerian War in *L'Insoumis*. Mani Sharpe, »Star Faces and Star Bodies in an Age of Atrocity: Alain Cavalier's *L'Insoumis* and Mark Robson's *Les Centurions*,« *French Studies* 74, no. 1 (2019): 55–70.

ing leftist anti-colonialism movement. As Charles de Gaulle finally leaned towards granting Algeria independence, some French generals in Algiers attempted a coup, from which began the Organisation de l'armée secrete (OAS, Secret Armed Organization), a French terrorist organization with roots in the military. Memories of the OAS, who, among other massacre and assassination operations,[3] attempted to assassinate de Gaulle, remained topical but painful for France during Delon's highest-earning years. Although the latter's military service in Indochina predated the Franco-Algerian War by a year,[4] his stardom's contemporaneous rise made it the subject of three of his films (a total of eight Delon films from the 1960s and 70s generally involve warfare).[5] *Mythologies*' side-long view of decolonization and the birth of star studies were simultaneous—several essays in *Mythologies* discuss film matter and personas, and Edgar Morin's *Stars* was also published in 1957—, further knotting Barthes and perhaps his most famous book to Delon.[6] This chapter views Delon's performance of

3 Some of the most serious were as follows: The mayor of Evian, Camille Blanc, was murdered by the OAS on March 31, 1961 for agreeing to host the accord meetings; a bomb on the Paris–Strasbourg line derailed a train and killed 24; and 9 died when the OAS attacked a peaceful communist demonstration on February 8, 1962.

4 »L'heure bleue« radio show, *France Inter*, May 6, 2019.

5 The three that picture (however briefly) the Franco-Algerian War are those discussed in this chapter: *L'Insoumis* (1964, dir. Alain Cavalier), *Lost Command* (1966, dir. Mark Robson), and *Diaboliquement vôtre* (1967, dir. Julien Duvivier). Other films starring Delon from the 1970s and 80s that also reference war are *La Tulipe Noire* (1964, dir. Christian-Jaque), a swash-buckler film with references to the Revolution; *Paris Brûle-t-il?* (1964, dir. Réné Clément), which concerns the liberation of Paris at the end of World War II; *Monsieur Klein* (1976, dir. Joseph Losey), which surrounds the round-up at *Vel d'hiver*; and *Le Toubib* (1979, dir. Pierre Granier-Deferre), which takes place during a fictional World War III. In addition, Delon plays a Franco-Algerian War veteran with loyalty to the other friends he met while serving in *Mort d'un pourri* (1977, dir. Georges Lautner) and a military doctor who has just returned with a former trooper played by Charles Bronson in *Adieu l'ami* (1980, dir. Jean Herman).

6 Two recent books analyze and develop arguments concerning Barthes' relationship with cinema throughout his oeuvre. However, neither book confronts the question of Algeria or colonialism more generally in *Mythologies*. Phillip Watts,

the Franco-Algerian War under Barthes' sardonic, mythological lens, asking: Does Barthes' *Mythologies* unravel a Delon screen myth of the French Empire? In what ways do the same false truths invade both *Mythologies* and Delon's films? Like many of *Mythologies*' subjects (which include steak frites and the Tour de France), Delon upholds and recalibrates French hypocrisies, and Barthes' specific vocabulary and references of the late 1950s situate Delon's performance of nation in a dwindling and bereft 1960s France.

Diouf Birane and Alain Delon

To begin this undertaking, let us compare Delon in French military regalia to the most cited example of *Mythologies* from the book's concluding essay, »Mythology aujourd'hui« (»Mythology Today«). This is the longest essay in *Mythologies* and the only one that was not previously published in the bi-monthly *Les Lettres Nouvelles*. Here, rather than studying one artifact for its signification, Barthes instead imparts his semiotic formula to the study of cultural objects. In reference to the cover photo of *Paris Match* in which a young African by the name of Diouf Birane (called principally »*un jeune nègre*« by Barthes) in French military apparel salutes with uplifted eyes, Barthes writes, »let's suppose« (*supposons-nous*) that a French flag might wave before him—yet there is not such a flag. Barthes unveils Birane's salute in French military gear as a *form* (a term that he develops to replace signifier in linguistic semiology) and is, as such, the form that carries the *concepts* (which corresponds to signifieds in linguistic semiology) of Frenchness, military, and colonization. Together, the form and concepts combine to yield the *signification* (what had previously been labeled a sign) that Barthes reads as »France is a big empire.« Obviously, this statement would have been a defensive claim

Roland Barthes and Cinema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); Patrick Ffrench, *Roland Barthes and Film: Myth, Eroticism, and Poetics* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

Fig. 1: Cover of *Paris Match*, June 26, 1965. The parade *La Nuit des Armées* is noted on the photo but is not referenced by Barthes.

in 1956/57, the year of the book's publication; not only had France lost Indochina and continued to wage war over ownership of Algeria, but the Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA, African Democratic Assembly) had also been fueling movements in West Africa, where independence was imminent. The *Match* photo illustrates the political axis of the mainstream press in the thrall of censorship for any content about war in the French colonies and instead bolsters French patriotism. Barthes' commentary on the image's manipulation of its readers suggests the governmental and societal pressure to uphold a lie, though his blame in this essay is but implied.[7]

7 Michel Winock, *Le XXe siècle idéologique et politique* (Paris: Perrin, 2002), 429–452.

While the photo's description serves as a model by which to explain a new analytical system for visual media, Barthes' choice of object presents the ongoing charade surrounding French colonies and reveals the reader/spectator as a participant, much like Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* that was published a little more than a decade later (Patrick Ffrench observes that *Mythologies* very much anticipates *Society*'s conclusions[8]). Peter Bloom maintains that the stereotype of the African sharpshooter working for the French army (*tirailleur sénégalais*) »was so abundantly present in French interwar and postwar consciousness that it remained the point of reference for Barthes' analysis of the African figure even though that was unspoken in the essay itself.«[9] If so, the image of Diouf Birane speaks to multiple French associations encouraged by caricatures and advertisements from years past and present—of special note is the French breakfast beverage Banania, whose *tirailleur sénégalais* in its adverts had been abstracted to a simple child-like cartoon with racist features by 1957 by H. Morvan.[10] However, an invocation of *tirailleur sénégalais* publicity artifacts would have strayed from Barthes' primary use of the *Match* cover. Barthes explains that the context of representing the French military unification over many areas of the world deforms the original meaning of the green military uniform on the black soldier (as I will note later, the word *soldier* is also inaccurate). However, if we examine the wording of colors, we find that, according to Barthes, the meaning of Birane's skin color (»*the black of his face*«) has been deformed by the colonizing context to evoke French domination.[11]

Although Barthes teases this observation, reversely he repeats the word *nègre* (30 times in the article—a fact that Lydia Moudelino de-

8 Ffrench, *Roland Barthes and Film*, 19, 24.

9 Peter Bloom, *French Colonial Documenatary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2008), 37. For a thorough treatment of this subject, see Chapter 2: »Mythologies of the Tirailleurs Sénégalais: Cinema, Shellshock, and French Colonial Psychiatry.«

10 Jean Garrigues, *Banania, histoire d'une passion française* (Paris: Du May, 1991).

11 Barthes, *Mythologies,* 195.

cries in »Barthes' Black Soldier: The Making of a Mythological Celebrity«[12]). As Mounir Laouyen notes in his close reading of »Sur un emploi du verbe être« (»On the usage of the verb to be«), Barthes' only strong anti-*Algérie-française* essay written two years after *Mythologies*,[13] the theorist's early »compositional strategy usually consists of restating in his account the arguments of the adversarial thesis to better mislead them.«[14] If Barthes reiterates the word *nègre* to draw attention to its racist vigor, a technique that pervades *Mythologies*, he nonetheless reinscribes the cadet in the mythology of a French Empire. Barthes prefers to demonstrate myths' falseness and incongruity but never fully dismantles such lies by exposing the truth beneath the dissimulation. For example, in dissecting the photo of Diouf Birane, Barthes fails to reveal the original subject of the article to which the cover photo is attached, a patriotic parade in Paris, *Les nuits de l'armée*, in which various colonial armies perform. Furthermore, this fact, as well as the subject's name and city of origin (the capital of Burkina Faso, Ouagadougou), are even indicated on the cover of *Paris Match* with minuscule text in a black box, placed directly on the lower image of the boy![15] Such a disclosure would have damaged Barthes' primary technique and argument that rely on the power of the image and its lack of context, which sway the French spectator towards patriotism. Thus, Barthes further anonymized Diouf Birane; by presenting the

12 Lydie Moudileno, »Barthes's Black Soldier: The Making of a Mythological Celebrity,« *The Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 62 (2016): 62.

13 Roland Barthes, »Sur un emploi du verbe ›être‹,« *Lettres Nouvelles*, April 19, 1959, 52–53.

14 »La stratégie compositionelle consiste le plus souvent à reprendre à son compte les arguments de la thèse adverse pour mieux les dévoyer.« Mounir Laouyen, »Roland Barthes et l'Algérie française: être ou ne pas être,« *L'Esprit Créateur* 41, no. 4 (2001): 22.

15 The box in the lower left corner reads: »Le petit Diouf est venu d'Ouagadougou avec ses camarades, enfants de troupes d'A. O. F., pour ouvrir la fantastique spectacle que l'Armée française présente du palais des sports cette semaine« (»The little Diouf has come from Ouagadougou with his friends, children of troops of the A. O. F., to open the fantastic spectacle that the French army is putting on at the Palais des Sports this week«).

Fig. 2: Alain Delon in *Lost Command* (1966, dir. Mark Ronson).

boy's photo as but a signifier, the theorist imposes the logic he refutes. That *Mythologies*' original format included an inlet of photos that did not include this cover portrait of Diouf Birane implies that Roland Barthes was very possibly aware of this discrepancy.

Rather than Birane in uniform representing the French military as a global power, the uniform on the star actor Alain Delon years later provides a visual link to a generation of Franco-French men's experiences. Many young French men had been drafted in the controversial Franco-Algerian War as part of their required military service,[16] and the wounds were still fresh in the years of these films' release, as many of those who did return suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.[17] Thus, nearly a decade after the *Match* cover of Diouf Birane, Delon in uniform rewrites the signification of the devastating recent past as optimistic, even trendy, and proffers a model with whom many young French veterans would have liked to identify. Unlike the *Match* cover of the unknown Birane, Delon contributes to the contexts with

16 For decades an estimate was that 2.5 million French served, but this number can be questioned. Charles-Robert Ageron, *Genèse de l'Algérie algérienne* (Saint Denis: Editions Bouchène, 2005), 655–662.

17 Jean-Charles Jauffret, *Soldats en Algérie, 1954–1962: Expériences contrastés des hommes du contigent* (Paris: Autrement, 2000).

his unique and already established *meaning*. Barthes uses the word *sens* (meaning) to describe the past associations that a person or object brings to their present significance: »The meaning is already full, it postulates a knowledge, a past, a memory, a comparative order of facts, ideas and decisions.«[18] In the mid-1960s, Delon, a *vedette* and sex symbol, was the opposite of anonymous! Delon broke through to superstardom after René Clément's *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*) in 1960 and became one of the highest-paid French actors. The meaning of Delon wrapped in uniform then combines with the spectators' knowledge of defeat (still dissimulated and self-censored in the media but confronted in varying ways in these years). Ripped or opened to reveal the chest of a Franco-French sex symbol (as in *Lost Command*), the uniform exudes sensuality as well as a limited rebellion, complicating the loss of Algeria with the notion of romance. Rather than the austere salute and the pretense of a black soldier who demonstrates colorblindness and fraternity by serving his »alleged oppressors,«[19] the mystery inherent in Delon's micro-expressions and persona, clothed suggestively in uniform, instead projects the Franco-Algerian War's lingering ambiguity on the definition of Frenchness.

In case the photo was illegible, the *Paris Match* cover reveals the subject's name, Diouf Birane, and home city, Ouagadougou, and designates him as a child with the words *petit* and *enfants*. Yet Barthes disregards the African cadet's child status and the ways that presenting the colonized as children visually demeaned their peoples. Harkening from a colonial *mission civilisatrice* is a desire to picture the colonized as children in need of protection and instruction. In addition, the French military offered Africans a civilizing service—as the French General Charles-Marie-Emmanuel Mangin wrote in 1909 of the African soldier, »He has barely learned to think before he enlists.«[20] If the

18 »Le sens est *déjà* complet, il postule un savoir, un passé, une mémoire, un ordre comparative de faits, d'idées, de decisions.« Barthes, *Mythologies*, 190.

19 Ibid., 189.

20 Charles-Marie-Emmanuel Mangin, *Troupes Noires* (Coulommiers: Impr. P. Brodard, 1909), 21, cited in Bloom, *French Colonial Documenatary*, 52.

black skin in uniform implied France's power over Africa on the *Paris Match* cover, which Barthes' words further mythologized and anonymized, Delon's household name, whiteness, and perceived Frenchness exude the illusion of a continued Franco-French power in the wake of a colonial collapse. While the few photos of Delon's service in Indochina portray the tragedy of the soldier's youth, when he played a soldier ten or so years later, the actor's baby face had been transformed and a side grin had replaced his naive innocence. It is not irony or chance that the Italian photographer of this *Paris Match* cover, Willy Rizzo, also photographed the Indochina War in which Delon served,[21] or that he more importantly remade his career as a photographer of celebrities including Delon, Brigitte Bardot, and Jane Fonda. Both Willy Rizzo and Alain Delon represented a generation that covered the crumbling European empires with a glamourous façade.

L'Insoumis

The title of Delon's first film to address the Franco-Algerian War, *L'Insoumis* (whose literal English translation is *The Unsubmissive*), subverts the government's linguistic tool that Barthes dissects in his essay »Grammaire Africaine« in *Mythologies.* Barthes here exposes the deceptive use of language by dissecting individual words such as war, dishonor, and population and their usage; he thereby demonstrates the verbal dissimulation of the truth of independence movements and warfare in the colonies from citizens. While the term *insoumis* did not make Barthes' shortlist, it could have; in a 1965 review of *L'Insoumis*, *Image et Son* gently reminds readers of its former meaning: »[The title] could cause confusion. The term *l'insoumis*, a few years ago, designated someone who refused to participate in the war against the Algerian ›rebels.‹ However, the hero of the film, Thomas,

21 Michel Guerrin, »Willy Rizzo, chasseur de stars et pionnier de *Paris Match*,« *Le Monde*, February 28, 2009.

is, on the contrary, on the side of the OAS.«[22] *Insoumis* was indeed the government's preferred way to refer to such men who refused war against Algerians and, more politely, to those who had defected.[23] Thus, in the title that the reviewer finds confusing, we locate a critique of the government's language that, like Barthes' rhetoric, repeats the language of the accused in order to expose its duality. Like the language exposed in »Grammaire Africaine,« *l'insoumis* »give[s] a real cynic the guarantee of a noble moral,«[24] for the sermonizing tone of *insoumis* warns both soldiers and citizens of straying. Yet Alain Delon updates the government critique of the *insoumis*. Three years after the war's conclusion, impacted by Delon's status as a rebel and sex symbol, coolness underpins the negative connotation. Much like Marlon Brando as *The Wild One* (1953, dir. László Benedek) and James Dean as the titular *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955, dir. Nicholas Ray), the young male lead embodies the film's societal revolt—the French protagonist struggles against a war whose public disapproval has only grown in the years since the French exodus.

The first scene of *L'Insoumis*, the only combat scene, provides the context of the Franco-Algerian War and reveals the duplicitous nature of Thomas (played by Delon), a character who embodies the French military's contradictions. Delon remains half-hidden in his first close-up; he is seen between his fellow soldiers, who are shooting, squinting under a tall hat with a black rim that immediately identifies him as a member of the French Foreign Legion. Delon's Thomas is

22 »[Le titre] pourrait prêter à confusion. Le terme l'Insoumis, il y a quelques années, désignait celui qui refusait de participer à la guerre contre les ›rebelles‹ algériens. Or, le héros du film, Thomas est tout le contraire puisqu'il se trouve du côté de l'O. A. S.« *Image et Son: revue de cinéma* 64 (January 1965), 150.

23 One example is this report of the Minister of Arms press conference »Le nombre des insoumis et des déserteurs,« *Le Monde*, September 26, 1960, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1960/09/26/le-nombre-des-insoumis-et-des-deserteurs_2107986_1819218.html.

24 »[L]anguage chargé d'opérer une coincidence entre les normes et les faits … et de donner à un reel cynique la caution d'une morale noble.« Barthes, *Mythologies*, 128.

Fig. 3: Alain Delon in a Foreign Legion hat in *L'Insoumis* (1954, dir. Alain Cavalier).

from Luxembourg, a country foreign enough to be in the Legion but French enough to be played by a French icon.[25] Legionnaires fought most notably in the Franco-Algerian War as Paratroopers, the military group also most associated with the practice of torture.[26] Under this distinctive hat with his lower face obscured, the audience recognizes

25 The French Foreign Legion has a specific reputation—foreigners who join can become French citizens after three years, or after being wounded in war, whichever comes first, and some join to escape criminal charges in their home country. Furthermore, it has geographic associations with Algeria; historically, the Legion was begun to ease France's conquest there. For more on this topic: Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (Brattleboro: Skyhorse Publishing, 2010).

26 More notoriously, Pierre Sergeant, a general of the Foreign Legion, helped to orchestrate the coup and was a key member of the OAS. »La mort de Pierre Sergeant l'homme de l'OAS,« *Le Monde*, September 17 1992, https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/1992/09/17/la-mort-de-pierre-sergent-l-homme-de-l-oas_3901188_1819218.html; Eckerd Michels, »From One Crisis to Another: The Morale of the French Foreign Legion during the Algerian War,« in *The Algerian*

the Foreign Legion just before the actor, who served as the primary publicity for the black and white film made by a virtually unknown director. The warfare and hat place Delon in a new liminality; he is defending France but is narratively an unscrupulous outsider—a role that melds with the actor's previous filmography in spite of its new Algerian context.

Much like Delon's appearance and reputation on- and off-screen inform the film title's meaning, it also infuses the actor's role with his *meaning* or *sens.* A specific example from *L'Insoumis* occurs in this war sequence when Thomas disobeys his general to retrieve a stricken soldier. After Thomas stoops to listen to his fellow soldier's heart and finds it silent, a close-up of the dead man's wrist exposes an ulterior motive—he swiftly takes off the dead soldier's metal ID tag and places it in his right chest pocket before the scene cuts, a maneuver reminiscent of Delon as Thomas Ripley in his first success as a lead, *Plein Soleil* (*Purple Noon*, 1960, dir. Réné Clément), in which he steals his dead friend's passport to insert his own picture. In this way, the director Alain Cavalier reintroduces the duplicitous and doubling nature associated with Delon to a war in Algeria (this is also combined with the known story of Delon's four years of service in Indochina, which Cavalier claims was inspirational in his writing for and direction of Delon[27]). Although the final version of *L'Insoumis* does not develop

War and the French Army, 1954–62, eds. Martin S. Alexander, Martin Evans, and J. F. V. Keiger (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 88–100.

27 Paul Thomas and Loïc Mahe, *L'insoumis, Alain Cavalier revient sur sa rencontre et le tournage avec Alain Delon*, *Arte France Cinéma,* 2017. »J'ai fait *L'Insoumis,* expliquait Alain Cavalier, parce que je voulais tourner un film avec Delon. J'ai parlé avec lui, il m'a raconté sa vie, et le plus intéressant pour moi était cette période très incertaine qu'il a passée en Indochine pendant trois ans. Petit à petit, je me suis dit que le meilleur moyen d'approcher le comédien serait de profiter des circonstances mêmes de sa vie pour écrire une histoire qui tienne debout« (»I made *L'Insoumis*,‹ Alain Cavalier explains, ›because I wanted to make a film with Alain Delon. I spoke to him, he told me about his life, and the most interesting part for me was this uncertain period he spent in Indochina for three years. Little by little, I told myself that the best way to approach the actor would be to benefit from the circumstances of his proper life to write a story that stands out‹«).

the theme of stolen identity,[28] this trait of duality and unreliability only expands in the film's ensuing intrigue involving desertion, the OAS, a lawyer for the Algerian independence group known as the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), and romantic love. Delon's future oeuvre would interreference duality further, most notably in *La Tulipe Noire* (1964, dir. Christian-Jaque), the soon to be discussed *Diaboliquement vôtre* (1967, dir. Julien Duvivier), and *M. Klein* (1976, dir. Joseph Losey).

The success of Delon's previous features allowed him to create his own production company that would produce *L'Insoumis*; its name, *Beaudel*, cleverly melded the name of his manager, Georges Beaume, which also happens to be the masculine form of *beautiful* in French, and the first syllable of Delon to sound like *bordel*—the French word for brothel.[29] Although the company's name evokes the narcissism and sexuality of the Delon persona, in *L'Insoumis*, Delon never looks in a mirror. Nonetheless, his image dominates, filling nearly every shot of *L'Insoumis*; the setting and the story feature frequent close-ups of Delon's face and torso. Barthes, in his essay »Le visage de Garbo« (»The Face of Garbo«), and Edgar Morin in *Stars* both address how the silent star's deification has been replaced by actors who share their fans' humanity, yet the exploration of Delon's face also seems to present the actor as an archetype of essential male beauty.[30] Furthermore, Delon's body and body movement relate more than any words ut-

Samuel Blumenfeld, »Dans *L'Insoumis*, Alain Delon en animal blessé de la guerre d'Algérie,« *Le Monde*, July 24, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/series-d-ete-2018-long-format/article/2018/07/24/dans-l-insoumis-alain-delon-en-animal-blesse-de-la-guerre-d-algerie_5335357_5325928.html.

28 An abridged version of the script sees the character Thomas imprisoned for stealing a soldier's identity to desert. However, this is not in the finished film. Jean Cau, »Sous l'oeil du cinéma (texte de la personnalité), *l'Insoumis*, Alain Delon,« *L'Avant-scène Cinéma*, 1964, 6–45.

29 Blumenfeld, »Dans *L'Insoumis*.«

30 Barthes writes, »Le visage de Garbo représente ce moment fragile, où le cinéma va extraire une beauté existentielle d'une beauté essentielle, où l'archétype va s'infléchir vers la fascination des figures périssables« (»Garbo's face represents this fragile moment, where cinema will extract an existential beauty from an essential

tered—the script and acting style are reminiscent of the gangster film that followed Delon into his Melville and *policier* features.[31] Barthes would label such preference for gestures over words in the *Mythologies* essay »Puissance and Désinvolture« (»Power and Casualness«) when discussing gangster and heist films and notes the French affect of the style, a trend begun, he states, by *Grisbi* (1954, dir. Jacques Becker).[32]

The heat of Algeria pervades in the sweat covering Thomas' face, open shirt, and often shirtless torso so that his discomfort in Algeria becomes physical and tactile. Gérard Legrand writes in *Positif* that »[h]e [Delon] sweats incessantly, and this skin reaction ends up conveying to the viewer the impression of the inexorable.«[33] Mani Sharpe recognizes that the heat as well as the plot utilize the opportunity to expose Delon's torso. Early in the first quarter of the film, the other guardian holding the lawyer hostage shoots Thomas in the side; this obliges the camera to return frequently to the wound that slowly kills him as he investigates and redresses it with gauze. The incessant pain of the wound, like the heat, and the sweat that evokes both reveal a reversal of the torture committed by the French on Algerians, a practice that alarmed and awakened the anti-war movement while the government's censure sought to dissimulate its truth. Delon's Thomas, who kidnapped a lawyer and locked her in a bathroom for the OAS and whose service with the Foreign Legion may have indeed included torturing, now suffers from similar unwavering pain. The dialogue writer of *L'Insoumis*, Jean Cau, writes of the way his words depended on the

beauty, where the archetype will bend towards perishable figures«). Barthes, *Mythologies*, 66–67.

31 All directed by Jean-Pierre Melville: *Le Samourai* (1967), *Le Cercle Rouge* (1970), *Un Flic* (1972).

32 »*Le Grisbi* avait déjà institutionalisé ce gestuaire du détachement en lui donnant la caution d'une quotiennété bien française« (»*Grisbi* had already institutionalized this gesture by giving it the guarantee of a very French, everyday quality«). Barthes, *Mythologies*, 67.

33 »Il [Delon] transpire sans cesse et cette reaction épidermique finit par communiquer au spectateur l'impression de l'inexorable.« Gérard Legrand, »Singulier et le duel, *l'Insoumis*,« *Positif* 66 (January 1965): 130.

Fig. 4: A close-up of the wound that ultimately kills Thomas, played by Alain Delon in *L'Insoumis* (1964, dir. Alain Cavalier).

star's tormented body: »Alain Delon's body inflates and deflates with the close-ups and long shots.«[34] The cinematography closely captures Delon wincing in mortal pain, his sacrifice, and the bullet slowly and painfully moving through his idolized body. Sharpe finds the director Alain Cavalier equalizing pain and beauty: »For every unblemished portrait of Thomas's divine profile, there is an image of his festering gunshot wound … Cavalier subjects Thomas to a grueling physical ordeal, arguably to compensate for his flawless beauty.«[35] Sharpe ultimately finds that this beauty distracts France from confronting the true acts of war and terrorism, much as Jean-Paul Sartre suggested for the television show *Vous êtes formidable* that was performed for the French public during the war. However, as a black and white film by a new auteur, *L'Insoumis* had little success at the box office (711,339 tick-

34 Jean Cau, »Le corps d'Alain Delon se gonfle et se dégonfle au gré des gros plans et des plans d'ensemble,« *L'Avant-scène cinema* 41 (1964): 6.

35 Sharpe, »Star Faces and Star Bodies,« 64.

ets), and Delon referred to the film as a complete disaster.[36] Perhaps its nebulous but narratively present pro-Algerian independence message deterred a bigger audience in spite of the camera being beholden to Delon's image with its known status and draw. On the surface, Delon was a flattering physical portrayal of France's loss, but under the tape and gauze, an incurable wound rendered his beauty too truthful.

L'Insoumis' failure at the box office may have been a factor when Delon was inspired to move to Hollywood the following year and become, in his words, »the next Gary Cooper«[37]—an American actor whose starring roles included internationally successful action-war films. In opposition to the new wave and film noir that stylistically determined *L'Insoumis*, the bright colors of *Lost Command* (*Les Centurions*, 1966, dir. Mark Ronson) showcased elaborate battle scenes with an upbeat score. Delon's roles could not have been more different; he had been a penniless deserter affiliated with the OAS in *L'Insoumis*, while as the military historian Philippe Esclavier in *Lost Command*, Delon condemns the torture practiced by his sadistic platoon mate (played by his co-star in *Plein Soleil*, Maurice Ronet). In some instances, Esclavier even declares sympathy for the colonized in Indochina and Algeria. Ronet, whose size and appearance still resemble Delon's, thus provides the other side of the torture coin, and he is joyful in praising its military benefits. While the film was modestly successful, it did not advance Delon as a star in Hollywood, which Ginette Vincendeau attributes to his secondary role and what she labels »his feminization,«[38] or a more overt display of his body, and lack of military prowess in the script.

I would only add that the terms of Delon's secondary role in this Hollywood feature are to Frenchify, beautify, and complete the star

36 Les Archives de RTS, »Alain Delon, ›J'ai un très très mauvais caractère‹ (1975),« https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VzrdQ45YGmo.

37 Ginette Vincendeau, »The Perils of Trans-National Stardom: Alain Delon in Hollywood Cinema,« *Mise au point*, https://journals.openedition.org/map/1800?lang=en.

38 Ibid.

actor Anthony Quinn as Pierre Raspeguy. Quinn's mother was Mexican, and he began in Hollywood by playing Native Americans. His imposing size and non-traditional leading man features consistently led him to be cast as any ethnic other; he played Mexican (*Viva Zapata!*, 1952, dir. Elia Kazan), Arab (*Lawrence of Arabia*, 1962, dir. David Lean), Greek (*Zorba the Greek*, 1964, dir. Michael Cacoyannis), and Mongolian as Kublai Khan (*Marco the Magnificent*, 1965, dir. Denys de La Patellière and Noël Howard) with great success and had also won international credibility in Federico Fellini's *La Strada* (1954). George Segal, in tan-face, played Algerian and fulfilled the other's role, Quinn's usual casting; Quinn's challenge instead was to play Frenchness amongst French actors (Delon and Ronet). A seldom-mentioned Basque identity and name (Raspeguy) were initial attempts to remedy this; the Basque language differs greatly from French, but the region's shared border with Spain would land Quinn closer to a Hispanic country.

Although the American actor playing Algerian reduces Anthony Quinn's outsider rank, Alain Delon was in fact the film's most ambitious attempt to mediate Quinn's American ethnic status—at a distance, his perfect features refined Quinn's irregularities.[39] Furthermore, his more exposed body, in a ripped and open canvas shirt, would feminize him and freshen the now 50-year-old Quinn's distinctive rough masculinity. The pairing is tight to oblige a visual blurring that can unintentionally lead to a comparison; the camera rarely frames Delon or Quinn separately (though several heterosexualizing scenes with women are exceptions). Instead, they stand, sit, shoot, and walk together, Delon's Captain Esclavier often gazing with admiration at Quinn's Colonel Raspeguy. If the men exchange dialogue, the camera frames them both at a distance with a medium or long two-shot. Delon generally appears at his side as a known symbol of

39 Quinn had been irregularly typed, and, with a substantial make-up transformation, had even played the Hunchback of Notre Dame (*Notre Dame de Paris*, 1956, dir. Jean Delonnoy).

Fig. 5: Alain Delon and Anthony Quinn in *Lost Command* (1966, dir. Mark Ronson).

France, which his accent enhances; Delon contrasts with Quinn, but only to brighten his dominant spotlight.

Emblematic of the intertwining sexism and racism, in *L'Insoumis*, Delon's Thomas hits the French lawyer and romantic interest played by Léa Massari, while he tortures and possibly rapes the Algerian woman played by Claudia Cardinale in *Lost Command*, neither of which was noted in any of the films' contemporary reviews that I consulted. While Vincendeau labels the question of rape unclear,[40]

40 Vincendeau describes the relationship in *Lost Command* between the characters played by Delon and Cardinale as follows: »Additionally, his romantic interlude with her is truncated, corrupted by the possibility of rape, and undermined by the fact that unbeknown to Esclavier she is using him as an escort to the Casbah with a bag full of detonators.«

and while no character refers to Esclavier's actions as such, they define torture—he hits Aicha (Claudia Cardinale) when he learns she has been working with the FLN and then continues hitting her forcefully, pinning her on a bed for the specific reason of learning the whereabouts of her brother, an FLN leader—and the camera cuts during the action. Thus, the script and camera never allot the Algerians the respect of a moral exploration of this behavior. The public was informed with a *meaning* of the actors as a couple in their previous successful film together, *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963, dir. Luchino Visconti), where their characters share love scenes and marry. This memory intertwines with the star actors' caressing bodies, revealed in swimsuits in a beach scene to mitigate the violence committed by Esclavier on Aicha in anger—narratively, it resembles relationship or domestic violence, which was accepted by both American and French societies more than the torture. The justification of military duty lessens the burden of such contradicting, unbecoming behavior, for Quinn, as the leader and father figure, shows no regret in receiving this information or the use of torture tactics. While there are allusions to torture when Esclavier protests his comrade's behavior and scenes with Algerian male prisoners, the only scene that pictures a Frenchman torturing has an Algerian woman as the victim (who furthermore sleeps after the violence and awakens well-rested). These are not the only films in which Delon hits women, and this violence towards women extends to his off-screen persona in a more judgmental context today. The 2019 Cannes Film Festival was pressured by a highly publicized petition to withhold the honorary Palme d'Or award from Delon because of his comments concerning the necessity of slapping women and his son's testimony of his violence towards his mother. Nonetheless, he accepted the award. In the 1960s context, however, these scenes of violence towards women only enhanced his persona's virility and rendered his characters more complex.

As demonstrated, both *L'Insoumis* and *Lost in Command* convey considerable negative information about the French army in Algeria (FLN and OAS defectors, French torturers), yet their endings project

positive portraits of the military (a legionnaire's sacrifice for France and Algeria, a victory at the Battle of Algiers). Barthes' essay »L'opération Astra« describes this technique of manipulation, citing the Astra margarine ads and the depiction of the American military in the film *From Here to Eternity* (1953, dir. Fred Zinnemann) as primary examples. He writes of the Hollywood film: »Take an army: show without disguise its chiefs as martinets, its discipline as narrow-minded and unfair … And then, at the last moment, turn over the magical hat, and pull out of it the image of an army, flags flying, triumphant, bewitching … one cannot but be faithful.«[41]

Delon's character Thomas in *L'Insoumis* did mitigate the crimes of the terrorist organization (even more so after the government censure's cuts to the script made his relationship with the OAS less clear). Thomas' bullet wound symbolically acts for both the nations of France and Algeria; the pain efficiently equivocates the torture suffered by the Algerians (without ever witnessing this on-screen) and saves a French lawyer in a chivalric manner. Equally, the title *L'Insoumis*, which seemed contradictory to the *Image et Son* reviewer, ultimately fits, for he sacrifices his life to help the Algerian cause.

Similar to Barthes' example from Hollywood, *L'Insoumis* and *Lost in Command* ultimately offer a portrait of national uplift; despite the admittance of torture and the question of sexual violence, *Lost in Command* denies the ways in which the French military's violence further inspired the independence movement that eventually succeeded (a moving current in the controversial film, publicly banned in France, *La Battaglia di Algeri* (*Battle of Algiers,* 1966, dir. Gillo Pontecorvo), which was released in the very same year[42]). *Lost Command*

41 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 40. »Prenez une armée: manifestez sans fard le caporalisme de ses chefs, le caractère borne, injuste de sa discipline … Et puis, au dernier moment renversez le chapeau magique, et tirez-en l'image d'une armée triomphante, drapeau au vent … on ne peut-être que fidèle.« Barthes, *Mythologies*, 42.

42 Patricia Caillé, »The Illegitimate Legitimacy of *The Battle of Algiers* in French film Culture,« *Interventions* 9, no. 3 (2007): 371–388. I would also add that *La Battaglia di Algeri*, like *L'Insoumis*, shows torture to be an effective way of procuring information.

concludes with a medal ceremony, complete with a military band, which Delon's Esclavier, now out of uniform and wearing a suit, does not attend. Finally, Delon and Quinn are separated but receive close-ups, which, without dialogue and cross-cut, suggest their internal thoughts for one another. Delon, framed in a window, gazes at Quinn being medaled with admiration, and Quinn, beaming with pride and with a furrowed brow and teary eyes, remembers his departed comrade's misgivings. Delon modifies the *forms* of each imagined version of Algeria with the *meaning* of his significant oeuvre and personal story, as his four years of service in Indochina brought credibility to the roles. Ultimately, Delon's *meaning* and appeal impacted both films' *significations*, whether it be that young French men were sacrificed by the war (*L'Insoumis*) or that the conflicted were still courageous and victorious (*Lost Command*). Delon facilitates these finales' »*opération Astra*« by regretting the most atrocious crimes with an already established *meaning* of beauty and *francité*. Barthes presents *opération Astra* as a formula by which to present information and dissimulate its evils with a happy ending—again emphasizing media's manipulation, rather than the truth it hides. If Barthes does not indicate *opération Astra*'s function in the press coverage of Algeria, its proximity to the essay »Grammaire Africaine« should perhaps lead the reader to such a comparison. In any case, the English-language and French-American co-production *Lost Command*, released nine years after the essay, borrows Hollywood's military grandeur to cover France in the wake of losing Algeria.

Delon as the Franco-Algerian War Veteran: *Diaboliquement vôtre* (1967)

Diaboliquement vôtre (1967, dir. Julien Duvivier) shifts to depict the fractured memories of colonization on the French psyche as threatened by memories of warfare and responsibility. This was the last feature film by Julien Duvivier, a director principally associated with the

exoticization of Algeria in the poetic realist film *Pépé le moko* (1937); *Diaboliquement vôtre* thus appears as his last embrace of colonial nostalgia, now threatened by the impeding memories of the Franco-Algerian War and their damage to the French psyche. Delon's star rescues such trauma and reincorporates it into the Orientalist domain of home luxury, fashion, and romance through the cinematography of Henri Decaë, who had helped establish Delon's visual presence in his breakthrough leading role in *Plein Soleil* and had also shot him as a double in *La Tulipe Noire*. In the original novel upon which *Diaboliquement vôtre* is based, the primary location is a mansion adorned with refined furniture with a subservient butler from Indochina.[43] The film replaces the geographic setting for Hong Kong (a colony that still existed in 1967, though it was never French). A gold statue of Buddha, red carved furniture, opium pipes, tea accessories, and a kimono worn by Delon glitter the screen with imperial theft and consumer culture. Barthes' essay on the documentary *Continente Perduto* (1954, dir. Leonardo Bonzi, Enrico Gras, and Giorgio Moser), called *Continent Perdu* by Barthes, can be extrapolated to describe the function of the Oriental in *Diaboliquement vôtre*: »Deprived of all substance, repulsed in color, disembodied by the very luxury of ›images,‹ the Orient is ready for the concealment that the film has in store for it.«[44] The film enhances the luxury of such Asian objects by setting them in a French mansion, in which Delon dwells, sips, and changes. The mise-en-scène accessorizes Delon and his co-star Christine (Senta Berger) within a brilliant memory of French colonial power in Indochina, which the objects in fact do not specifically represent. Asia here has neither a geography, nor a history, nor a people. The Chinese servant played by the German actor Peter Mossbacher, who had also played a Chinese character in *The Face of Fu Manchu* (1965, dir. Don Sharp) two years earlier, waxes shoes and mends un-

43 Louis C. Thomas, *Manie de la persecution* (Paris: Denoël, 1962).

44 »Privé de toute substance, repoussé dans la couleur, désincarné par le luxe même des ›images‹, l'Orient est prêt pour l'opération d'escamotage que le film lui réserve.« Barthes, *Mythologies*, 152.

Fig. 6: Alain Delon in a kimono on the set of *Diaboliquement vôtre* (1967, dir. Julien Duvivier) with an Asian mask and an opium pipe on the coffee table.

derwear for the lady of the house, Christine. Such a perversion of the Other only serves to enhance Delon's sensible, straight French sexuality, as his character longs for actual intercourse that will, he hopes, produce four children.

However, the simplicity of French colonial conquer and its nostalgia in 1967 are at odds with the memory of the Franco-Algerian War, which threatens to miscolor the capitalist function of the colonies, artfully presented as house and lounge wares. The doubling at root in Delon's *meaning* again allows him to be two men at once; he is truthfully George Campo, the Franco-Algerian War veteran and alcoholic who crashes his car and suffers from amnesia, but the conniving couple Christine and Freddie attempt to convince the amnesiac George that he is the millionaire Pierre La Grange as a cover-up for the mur-

der they committed.[45] This creates what he confesses is a mixture of exoticisms (»un mélange des exoticismes«), for although he longs for the couscous and mint tea of Algeria, he is told that he prefers Chinese cuisine. Despite the memories of repeating the name Aicha, he finds a suggestive picture of an Asian woman, Mina, whom he is told was his lover. In this way, the film presents both regions of the world as vague, timeless pleasure centers for the French consumption of exotica and even erotica. Barthes writes, »By appending to the oriental reality a few positive signs which mean ›native,‹ one surely immunizes them against any responsible content. A little ›situating,‹ as superficial as possible, provides the necessary alibi and dispenses with any deeper situating.«[46] The alibi here allows France to ignore not only the history of these countries but also the loss of the French Empire. Just as Barthes' study of the *Paris Match* cover fails to suggest the plain truth of the related article and its child centerpiece, his query of *Continente Perduto* does little to expose the reality the film denies. However, Barthes hints at his knowledge of the region and its political turmoil in the essay's last line: »it cannot be innocent to lose the continent that found itself again at Bandoeng,«[47] for in the year the essay was written, an anti-colonial conference of 29 countries was held in the capital of Indonesia. This statement puts the rest of the essay in relief and asks us to consider a contradictory context: the general geography and history of colonization in Southeast Asia. While the superficial situation in *Continente Perduto* and *Diaboliquement vôtre* exhalts colonial nostalgia, Barthes' essay demands our forceful critique of ex-

45 In the novel, the main character was not a war veteran but had instead worked on a plantation in Brazil, and he suffered from memories of beating the workers there.

46 »… la réalité orientale de quelques bons signes indigènes, on la vaccine sûrement de tout contenu responsable. Un peu de ›situation‹, la plus superficielle que possible, fournit l'alibi nécessaire et dispense d'une situation plus profonde.« Barthes, *Mythologies*, 154.

47 »[I]l ne peut être innocent de *perdre* le continent qui s'est retrouvé à Badoeng.« Ibid.

Fig. 7: The first of two flashbacks of Algeria in *Diaboliquement vôtre* (1967, dir. Julien Duvivier).

oticism's illusion and, in this last sentence, suggests an awareness of a strong resistance to colonialist ideology and representations.

Also relating to the function of exoticism, amnesia, which deletes and exchanges colonial cultures in *Diaboliquement vôtre*, also represents a post-traumatic disorder associated with warfare. Furthermore, the interference of a flashback of torturing situates Delon at the intersection of war and colonial nostalgia. We see Delon in red walking towards the camera in film that has been tinted red, with a bluish-white acetate background, to represent the dream state, violence, and the tri-color. In the next shot, we see a small turbaned man run towards our protagonist with a sword. Although the canted shot's angle hides the face of Delon/Campo, we understand from his outline that he has whipped the Algerian several times into a crouched position. In a film that otherwise presents Indochina/Hong Kong and North Africa as generalized shopping and sexual theater, this flashback reconnects such reflections with the insidious pain of torture guilt. Such shame expands when the awakened Campo/La Grange

asks the Chinese servant to expose his shoulder with scars that he is told he inflicted—the French torturer's victims include numerous colonized peoples who haunt him in his nightmares, all of which could be lies concocted by others.

The trauma of torturing returns in a more circuitous way through the tape recordings that Christine and Freddie plant under Campo/La Grange's bed that attempt to brainwash him about his past—»You are Pierre La Grange!«—and at one point attempt to convince him to commit suicide. Such *lavage du cerveau* or brainwashing was in fact one of the most evident ways that the wars of decolonization in Indochina and Algeria connected in military policy—the *lavage du cerveau* that many French prisoners of war experienced in camps run by the Viet Minh was incorporated into French policy in Algeria, where psychological warfare was a dominant phrase in policy and instances thereof were frequent.[48] Here, Delon's Campo, as a veteran of the war in Algeria, suffers from the technique that was practiced by the French. Yet psychological warfare's roots in the First Indochina War muddle a direct link between the plot and its inspiration. In any event, the film features Delon as a veteran of the Franco-Algerian War who continues to suffer from his untenable past and whose act of torturing was possibly committed for survival. Ultimately, in the war between colonial nostalgia and post-war trauma, it is the consumer that wins—in order to maintain his fantasy home and lifestyle, Campo/La Grange commits to his new name and murders the Chinese servant with his »new« wife before lying to the police.

In this way, the myth of Delon acts as a detergent for the past wars of decolonization and French guilt. As Barthes describes with regard

48 »L'expérience des camps du Viêt-minh représente, à n'en pas douter, une étape décisive dans la reconnaissance du phénomène de la guerre psychologique comme préoccupation dominante au sein de la société militaire« (»The experience of the camps of the Viet Minh undoubtedly represents a decisive step in the recognition of the phenomenon of psychological warfare as a dominant concern within military society«). Marie-Catherine Villatoux, »Traitement psychologique, endoctrinement, contreendoctrinement en Guerre d'Algérie: Le cas des camps de détention,« *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains* 4, no. 208 (2002): 51.

to these cleaning agents' ubiquitous 50s publicity, bleach kills dirt, whereas soap powders' role is to force out dirt (»*chasse la salété*«[49]). Delon, in his various ensembles sipping teas with melancholy, chases the dirty Asianness from his accessories while maintaining their exotic function. Simultaneously, Delon washes away the residue of war and launders his dwindling guilt. The sparkling white of glamour extends to the presented racial hierarchy, and thus these films can be likened to the bleach ads in which dirt is personified as »a diminutive enemy, stunted and black, which takes to its heels from the fine immaculate linen«[50]—the racial hierarchy embedded in the ads and Barthes' colored description. Such a simplistic race equation anchors the Delon Franco-Algerian War films; the killing of the already negotiated Algerian (George Segal in tan-face) in *Lost Command* guarantees the French medal ceremony, and here the colonized Chinese man (played by a German actor) with perversions is killed to make room for the future French family (albeit murderous). If we fall under the star charm of Delon as a bleaching agent, then we are accomplices in the whitening process that extends past the film, for »the matter is endowed with value-bearing states,«[51] such conditions that perhaps absent a direct depiction of the truth in Barthes' *Mythologies.* Delon can be likened to a cleaning mousse, whose signification of luxury is well known, first in the appearance of uselessness, and next in the abundant proliferation of his image. When casting Delon and applying his *meaning*, the filmmakers utilized a primary technique of bleach ads and »disguised the abrasive function of the detergent.«[52] As these quotes indicate, *Mythologies* exposes such a popular process of enforcing a racial hierarchy, yet the short essays lack a description of the »abrasive« consequences of such brutality and finally repeat such errors in a problematic, if witty, rhetorical refutation.

49 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 37.

50 »[L]a salété est un petit ennemi noir qui s'enfui à toutes jambes du beau linge pur.« Ibid.

51 »[L]a matière est ici pourvue d'états-valeurs.« Ibid.

52 Ibid., 36.

Conclusion

In consideration of the three films studied in this chapter and the ways in which Barthes' *Mythologies* exposes and confronts their overt French nationalism and racist impulses even when reiterating a bias, a quote from the book's preface is pertinent: »What I claim is to live to the full the contradiction of my time, which may well make sarcasm the condition of truth.«[53] Barthes thus acknowledges that, within *Mythologies*, he repeats falsehoods with irony, the truth buried not in the words but their delivery in the prose. While we do not locate sarcasm per se in *L'Insoumis, Lost Command*, or *Diaboliquement vôtre*, we do witness a repetition of recent mistakes in order to reassess and alter recent history's inconsistencies. Although *Mythologies*, in its tight focus on visual grammar, exposes the lies of power structures, it also, like the Delon bleaching agent, denies the colonized a voice in the era's contemporary culture. *Mythologies* deconstructs many French myths of its period (for example, the right-wing politician Pierre Poujade and the government's linguistic dissimulation of the war in »Grammaire Africaine«) but only insinuates the ruinous colonial structure that such myths uphold and/or the actuality of war in Algeria.

This mirrored Barthes' fraught relationship with politics, as he preferred to remain unassociated with a strong position or party. Despite his expansion of the hypocrisy of the term »war« and the government's ability to hide it in »Grammaire Africaine,« he did not sign the *Manifeste de 121* signed by many theorists and artists in 1960 that demanded that the ongoing war officially be called as such. Furthermore, Barthes' relationship with the Arab world later fell under scrutiny. He lived in Rabat for a year in 1968, where he wrote the posthumously published *Incidents*, which critics find to be filled with stereotypes and claims of French cultural and linguistic

53 »Je reclame de vivre pleinement la contradiction de mon temps, qui peut faire d'un sarcasme la condition de la vérité.« Ibid., 11.

superiority.[54] Despite this later biographical sketch of Barthes, *Mythologies* represents the theorist at an earlier stage that corresponded to decolonization and a rising commodity culture in which actors, and specifically Alain Delon, took part. That both ventures nearly erase Algerians even when investigating the nature of the state at war (contemporaneously in the case of *Mythologies*, in the recent past in the case of the Delon films) speaks to the limits of their era's thinking, which was overwhelmed by the weight of French self-concern. Although I have found no record of Barthes' self-censure, *Mythologies* was published during the government's attempts to control knowledge of Algeria as a war, and this demonstrates his bravery, if not directness, in consideration of such pressure. The insights offered by *Mythologies* reveal the unique cultural plane upon which Delon pivots as a Franco-Algerian War deserter/soldier/veteran; France is a superior country that has atoned for and cleansed the past. Nevertheless, the question of *Mythologies*' participation in Orientalist imagery deserves further scrutiny.

In 1971, Barthes revisited *Mythologies* in the essay »Changer l'objet lui-même«(»To change the object itself«), in which he maintains that neither French society nor its myths have changed in the fifteen years since *Mythologies*' publication.[55] However, according to Barthes, the deconstruction of the sign is part of *la doxa*—the new semiology he proposes must contest symbolism itself.[56] This essay might have been an occasion for the theorist to reassess his essays' anti-colonial gestures

54 Ridha Boulaabi, »Barthes et le monde arabe: survivance de l'Orientalisme?,« in *Intinéraires intellectuelles entre la France et les rives sud de la Méditerranée*, ed. Chistiane Chaulet Achour (Paris: Lettres du Sud, 2010), 273–303.

55 »Quelque chose a-t-il changé ? Ce n'est pas la société française … ce ne sont pas non plus les mythes« (»Has anything changed ? It's not French society … it's not its myths either«). Barthes, »Changer l'objet,« 614.

56 »Ce n'est plus les mythes qu'il faut démasquer, c'est le signe lui-même qu'il faut ébranler … ne pas changer or purifier les symboles, mais contester le symbolique lui-même« (»It's not myths that need to be demasked, it's the sign itself that must be shaken … not to change or to purify the symbols, but to contest the symbolic itself«). Ibid., 613–614.

or to comment on French culture's evolution in the face and aftermath of the Empire's purported death. However, his essay instead demands something more radical (albeit in a very abstract manner): one should expose the very system distributing ideological value. While this chapter has presented Delon as a Frenchifying agent performing the Franco-Algerian War in the context of *Mythologies*, such conclusions will hopefully drive a larger quest into the nature of the symbolic, such as Barthes demanded in 1971, and thus contribute to a grander interrogation of the reasons why a nation rewrites, reframes, and replays historical violence.

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Collateral Damage: Necropolitical Lives in the Mexican Drug War

Jessica Wax-Edwards

Introduction

It is widely agreed that the 2006 militarization of parts of Mexico by President Felipe Calderón resulted in a terrifying escalation of drug war violence. The conflict has intensified to date, causing extreme increases in brutality, mounting kidnappings and disappearances, and (over the course of the presidency) more than 100,000 deaths.[1] While this war existed prior to 2006, the impact of the militarization strategy permanently altered the landscape of power relations in Mexico.

There is no shortage of films on this war and the violence it entails. The topic has provided material for countless Hollywood interpretations (*Sicario*, 2015, dir. Denis Villeneuve; *Sicario: Day of the Soldado*, 2018, dir. Stefano Sollima; *The Mule*, 2018, dir. Clint Eastwood; *Miss Bala*, 2019, dir. Catherine Hardwicke), domestic cinema in a wide variety of genres (*El Infierno*, 2010, dir. Luis Estrada; *Salvando al Soldado Pérez,* 2011, dir. Beto Gómez; *Días de Gracia*, 2011, dir. Everardo Valerio Gout; *Miss Bala*, 2011 dir. Gerardo Naranjo; *Tigers Are Not Afraid*, 2017, dir. Issa López), documentary features (*El velador*, 2011, dir. Natalia Almada; *Cartel Land*, 2015, dir. Matthew Heineman; *El Sicario, Room 164*, 2010, dir. Gianfranco Rosi and Charles Bowden), and an entire B-movie industry of *narco cine*. This limited list of titles points to the abundance of cinema that takes this war, its impact and its proponents as central premises. There are also myriad other films

1 Proceso, »Más de 121 mil muertos, el saldo de la narcoguerra de Calderón: Inegi,« *Proceso*, July 30, 2013, http://www.proceso.com.mx/?p=348816.

that incorporate the war as a minor plot point, a gag or an unspoken but understood presence, lurking in the narrative but never engaged with directly. From a research standpoint, the topic of Mexico's drug war and its cinematic representation has also provided ample material for many articles,[2] theses,[3] as well as book chapters and monographs.[4]

Amat Escalante's feature film *Heli* (2013) and Fernando Frías' debut feature *Ya no estoy aquí* (2019, *I'm No Longer Here*)[5] form part of this corpus, namely national cinema[6] concerned with the impact of the war's resulting violence on daily life. In both films, that bearing is specifically on young men and their families. Highly lauded at international film festivals, these fiction features adopt a slow, realist approach to representing the impact of cartel violence and a fail-

2 Robert J. Bunker and José de Arimatéia da Cruz, »Cinematic representations of the Mexican Narco War,« *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 4 (2015): 702–716; Carlos A. Gutiérrez, »Narco and Cinema: Notes on Media Representation in Mexico,« *Cinema Tropical*, April 9, 2011, https://www.cinematropical.com/cinema-tropical/narco-and-cinema-notes-on-media-representation-in-mexico; Kenneth Maffitt, »Visualizing the ›War on Drugs‹: ›Sicario‹ and ›Cartel Land‹,« *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 31, 2015, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/visualizing-the-war-on-drugs-sicario-and-cartel-land/; César Albarrán-Torres, »Spectacles of Death: Body Horror, Affect and Visual Culture in the Mexican Narco Wars,« *Senses of Cinema* 84, no. 9 (2017), https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2017/feature-articles/mexican-narco-wars/.

3 Daniela Franco Velázquez, »Disturbing Mexico: drug war victims and victimizers in Mexican film« (unpublished Master's thesis, Boston University, 2016).

4 Adriana Estrada Álvarez, Nicolas Défossé and Diego Zavala Scherer, *Cine político en México (1968–2017)* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019); Miriam Haddu, *Violence, Conflict and Discourse in Mexican Cinema (2002–2015)* (London: Palgrave, 2022); Jessica Wax-Edwards, *Documenting Violence in Calderon's Mexico: Visual Culture, Resistance and Memorialisation* (London: Tamesis Books, 2023).

5 All translations are the author's unless specified otherwise.

6 It is worth noting that, from a financial perspective, both films are co-productions that received funding from entities of diverse national origins. Alongside Mexico's Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes (CONACULTA) and Fondo para la Producción Cinematográfica de Calidad (FOPROCINE), *Heli*'s production details list the German unafilm, France's Le Pacte, and the Netherlands' Lemming Film as co-producers. Similarly, *Ya no estoy aquí* is a US/Mexican co-production, though it was funded by the comparatively smaller productions firms Panorama Global (Mexico) and PPW Films (USA).

ing government strategy on everyday life and existence in Mexico. The protagonists, both young working-class men, are trapped by the socio-political contexts in which they lead their lives. Though superficially *Heli* and *Ya no estoy aquí* contain highly distinct subject matter, through their use of audio and visual distancing techniques combined with ›slow‹ or ›minimalist‹ approaches, both films successfully capture the banalities and subtleties of necropolitical life during this war.

While *Heli* follows the plight of a young father and factory worker who tries to protect his family from the violent consequences of police corruption, *Ya no estoy aquí* sees a young man forced to illegally cross into the USA after embroiling his family in cartel warfare. The catalyst for the unfolding of both narratives hinges on the vulnerability of youth; misunderstandings and missteps result in multiple cold-blooded killings, and those that survive remain irremediably altered.

Via these exemplary case studies, this chapter explores cinema's ability to capture the ongoing effects of war on citizens. The works discussed demonstrate how individual agency is denied to these protagonists. As part of this, the ability to live life without the constant threat of violence is an impossibility.

This investigation is undertaken through a comparative analysis of both films that will consider how adherence to characteristics of the slow cinema aesthetic and the Mexican minimalist movement expose the necropolitical nature of daily life in Mexico. This chapter seeks to establish the extent to which necropolitical conditions dictate the lives of the young protagonists. This will be achieved by examining the framing of political discourse in the narratives which attempts to justify the war, as well as the way State rhetoric frames young working-class men as complicit and the ways the protagonists attempt to challenge this framing.

Necropolitics and the Disruption of the Everyday

Despite their differences, both *Heli* and *Ya no estoy aquí* pertain to what critics and academics commonly term Mexican minimalism and, or even part of, the transnational aesthetic of slow cinema. On the subject of narratives, for example, Bolesław Racięski clarifies that »Mexican minimalist films usually focus on individuals, frequently lonely and excluded from mainstream social life and consumed by a poignant fatalism.«[7] Broadly speaking, this description can be applied to both films, though I will evidence how the protagonists' so-called fatalism in this context is directly linked to the necropolitical spaces they inhabit. Likewise, their social isolation is one entirely enforced by circumstance. These distinctions are salient in that they unite the struggles of the protagonists in these texts. Prior to the violence they experience, they are active participants in social life. It is the violence of conflict which propels them into situations of irremediable isolation.

Minimalist cinema, by its very nomenclature, falls neatly within the definition of slow cinema, which Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge define as containing »elliptical and dedramatized narrative structures, minimalist mise-en-scène, and/or sustained application of elongated and self-reflexive temporal devices such as the long take.«[8] Matthew Flanagan also describes slow cinema as featuring »long takes, de-centred and understated modes of storytelling and a pronounced emphasis on quietude and the everyday.«[9] Both films fit these descriptions comfortably, with Flanagan's reference to ›the everyday‹ taking on particular resonance in the context of *Heli* and *Ya no estoy aquí*. The use of non-professional actors combined with

7 Bolesław Racięski, »Mexican Minimalist Cinema: Articulating the (Trans)national,« *Transmissions: The Journal of Film and Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2016): 122.

8 Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barradas, »Introduction: From Slow Cinema to Slow Cinemas,« in *Slow Cinema*, eds. Tiago de Luca and Jorge Nuno Barradas (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 9.

9 Matthew Flanagan, »Towards an Aesthetic of Slow in Contemporary Cinema,« *16:9* 6, no. 29 (2008), http://www.16-9.dk/2008-11/side11_inenglish.htm.

the long takes that immerse the viewer in the diegetic world provide a closer understanding of the protagonists' daily lives. Chiefly, it provides clear indications of how their lives change.

Both films are award-winning international arthouse favorites. After taking the Academia Mexicana de Artes y Ciencias Cinematográficas awards by storm (the film won 10 Ariel awards from 13 nominations), *Ya no estoy aquí* was selected as Mexico's entry to the Best International Feature Film category at the 93rd Academy Awards and was shortlisted but not nominated. The film was picked up for distribution by the online streaming platform Netflix, securing a broad and international audience for the feature. Frías' film has been lauded for its direction, editing, costumes, script, sound, cinematography, art direction, and make-up. But the film's lead actor, Juan Daniel Garcia Treviño, was also acclaimed for his breakthrough performance as Ulises, the leader of the *Terkos* crew. Garcia Treviño was the last to join the cast, a troop of »non-professional« actors found by Frías during his research in Monterrey and chosen to embody this community.[10]

Similarly, *Heli* was widely acclaimed by the European arthouse scene and international festival circuits, ultimately winning Best Director for Amat Escalante at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival. The film was also selected as Mexico's entry for the 86th Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film but was not ultimately nominated. Despite this popularity, the film's representation of torture and extreme brutality proved highly divisive. In its depiction of the Mexican drug war, *Heli* features scenes of extreme violence (against both humans and animals), including torture, genital mutilation, and clear allusions to the rape of a minor resulting in pregnancy. Indeed, the opening sequence of the film sets the tone for the atrocities to come. The film begins with a close-up of the eponymous protagonist, his mouth bound by duct tape, a boot resting on his head, and lifeless bare and bruised feet right beside him as he is transported in the back of a

10 James Linhardt, »Fernando Frías de la Parra Turns Up the Volume on Kolombiano Culture in ›I'm No Longer Here‹,« *Variety*, March 4, 2021, https://variety.com/2021/biz/news/netflix-kolombiano-culture-im-no-longer-here-1234919955.

pick-up truck. The sequence culminates in the abandonment of that tortured and as yet unidentified body, hung from a public overpass, his face covered and trousers pulled down. The narrative then re-commences at an earlier point, the viewer now prepped for the murder and violence to come. Such unrelenting scenes caused many critics to leave the screening room and write philippics about the film's »sadistic use of ultraviolence.«[11] *New York Times* critic Manohla Dargis called it »one of those exploitation films that sells its violent goods with art cinema pretension.«[12] However, as Mexican film critic Fernanda Solórzano nuances, »*Heli* es inquietante porque aborda lo que en México se ha convertido en cotidianidad« (*Heli* is disturbing because it deals with what in Mexico has become an everyday occurrence).[13] While most citizens do not personally experience this level of violence every day, such images and reports are commonplace in mainstream media. This is an aspect reflected in the representation of news media in both films, as will be explored in more detail in the next section.

Frías' *Ya no estoy aquí* also opens with a scene that marks a pivotal shift in the story of the protagonist—his forced clandestine migration to the US. Set across two timelines, the film follows the plight of the young Ulises Sampiero, the leader of *Los Terkos* (The stubborn ones), a group of young people in Monterrey united in their love of Colombian cumbias and the unique style of the Kolombia subculture. The first thread captures Ulises' life in New York after his illegal crossing into the USA to escape the threat of violence from a local cartel. The second, set »algunos meses atrás« (some months earlier), follows Ulises' life in Monterrey, where he spends his time dancing to cumbias and listening to the radio with his close group of friends. The interweaving of the two temporal strands allows us to compare and contrast Ulises' experiences in these two environments and his daily life before and after the unfortunate events that compelled his unwelcome departure from his home.

11 Fernanda Solórzano, »Heli de Amat Escalante,« *Letras Libras*, August 6, 2013, https://www.letraslibres.com/mexico/cinetv/heli-amat-escalante.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

Fig. 1: Opening shot from *Heli*: feet, bound head, and boot in the bed of a truck.

Among the many similarities between these films, the presentation of both stories disturbs linear time: *Heli* to create a looming sense of peril, and *Ya no estoy aquí* to show a before and after in the protagonist's life. In both cases, the rupture of timelines gestures to the very essence of life under the necropolitical system. That is, the chaos, terror and monotony of living with the constant threat of violence and death. As both films illustrate, this is an unliveable scenario where conditions of precarity and insecurity reign supreme.

Building on Michel Foucault's development of biopower—the power exercised by the State over citizens to force them to live and allow them to die[14]—Achille Mbembe establishes necropolitics as the dominion of death over life.[15] Under these conditions, citizens are constantly subject to the tyranny of death, where authority designates which lives are collateral.[16] Dehumanization via desubjectivization is

14 Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–76* (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 241.

15 Achille Mbembe, »Necropolitics,« *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 39.

16 Ibid., 27.

an essential part of the necropolitical agenda. Individuals no longer possess sovereignty over their own existence, and instead of life as sacred and protected by the State, it is abandoned and left vulnerable to forms of death and violence.

When discussing Mexico's feminicides and related terror, Rosa Linda Fregoso argues that necropower »operates on the principle of hypervisibility in which atrocities committed against women represents a ›new language‹ … through which the emerging necropolitical order communicates its total domination over the region.«[17] This same logic in the context of the feminicides can be applied to both regions depicted in the film. The protagonists are tortured or terrorized, and their families or people linked to them are murdered as a symbol, a warning, and a form of communication that articulates this necropolitical domination over their lives and their surroundings. In *Heli*, the highly recognizable symbol of the hanging tortured body commences the narrative, providing a clear indication of the necropolitical dynamics treated in the film. But equally, the setting, in extremely impoverished, remote towns in the state of Guanajuato (unidentifiable in the film and therefore indicative of many more locations), highlights the neglect and desolation that confront this sector of Mexican society.[18] However, both films also point to the hypervisibility of these atrocities that surround the characters through their presence on news media. In *Ya no estoy aquí*, characters are depicted carrying out daily activities with just such news or radio reports continually dominating the diegetic sound and thus asserting the powerful reach of violence across the country. These interruptions utilize actual footage, reporting and speeches from the period narrativized. One poignant example comes 45 minutes into the film and propels the viewer back into the second timeline. Following directly after a scene with Lin and Ulises sitting in silence in New

17 Rosa Linda Fregoso, »›We Want Them Alive!‹: The Politics and Culture of Human Rights,« *Social Identities* 12, no. 2 (2006): 114.

18 Sergio Raúl López, »›Heli‹, de Amat Escalante o la vida no vale nada en Guanajuato,« *Revista Toma*, August 10, 2013, https://revistatoma.wordpress.com/2013/08/10/heli-amat-escalante-guanajuato/.

York, the shot cuts to a close-up of a postcard with a praying Jesus Christ on it and then cuts again to the source of the diegetic sounds: a televised news report where a schoolteacher encourages her children to duck, cover and sing during violent gunfire outside the building. As the report continues, the camera reverses to a family of four watching the report (including Ulises' friend Chaparra). The camera cuts back to the screen as gunfire is heard and then to a shot behind the family from the darkness of the doorway, where we can see the glow of Chaparra's phone in her backpack, though the audience's focus here aligns with that of the family, fixed on the television. We are separated from them, watching them watch the report. When the camera cuts to Ulises in New York, ringing Chaparra from a payphone, we understand that, once again, the manifestations of necropower prevent Ulises from remaining connected with his friends. This is not simply an example by Frías of the constant terror that necropower entails but is footage from a real report and a real local shooting that took place in May 2011 in the state of Nuevo León.[19] Since 2010, the government of Nuevo León has offered courses to thousands of teachers on how to react during possible shootings at schools and their surroundings.[20]

With the abduction of Estela (Heli's sister) alongside Beto (Estela's boyfriend) and Heli, and her later return, mute and pregnant, in the final ten minutes of the film, *Heli* acknowledges the gravity of gendered violence under necropolitical conditions. While neither film engages directly with issues of racialized violence that also form part of Mexico's necropolitical order, the socio-economic conditions of the protagonists are clearly identifiable as key factors.

A forgettable scene that follows the brutal opening sequence of Escalante's film shows Heli interviewed on his doorstep by an agent of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI, the

19 RT en Español, »Maestra pone a cantar un kinder en México mientras tiroteo,« YouTube Video, 1:25, May 30, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OAeT_OfqEYY.

20 EFE, »Maestra pone a cantar a sus alumnos de kinder durante tiroteo en Monterrey,« *Crónica*, May 28, 2011, https://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2011/581523.html.

National Institute of Statistics and Geography). The young woman conducting the survey wears a polo shirt with the INEGI logo on the breast and asks Heli questions for what seems to be the 2010 census. Though only discernible for a moment (the shot then switches to a close-up of Heli, the interviewer and her clipboard barely visible in the foreground), the logo and the ensuing survey questions serve a dual purpose. The first is a subtle, even subconscious nod to the timing of the narrative, which falls during the Calderón administration and, more specifically, 2010. The second is the exposition of Heli's living situation and socio-economic background in the form of anonymous census data. Given the subtlety of the logo detail as well as the juxtaposition of such a banal scene with the previous disturbing and violent imagery, viewers may struggle to consciously draw the connections here between the year and the violence. Instead, a universality is created. This doorstep could be any impoverished locality in Mexico. It could be any recent time, any family. There is a dreariness and tedium to their lives that highlights their own vulnerability.

As working-class men/boys, Heli's and Ulises' lives are entirely disposable. As one film reviewer articulates in relation to *Heli*: »la vida no vale nada in Guanajuato« (life is worthless in Guanajuato).[21] Both young men wield no power or influence, and there is no retribution for the crimes that they suffer. The extent of the power exercised by each of them is a replication of violence by Heli and an illegal migration to the USA resulting in later deportation for Ulises. As Edward A. Avila suggests, »impunity emerges as a de facto exercise of social and political power akin to the right to kill and/or expose to death.«[22] The impunity of the State and drug trafficking organizations for these violent acts in *Heli* and *Ya no estoy aquí* is representative of a national crisis, where the dead and disappeared are not found or memorialized, and their murderers are not sought or held accountable.

21 López, »Heli.«

22 Edward A. Avila, »Conditions of (Im)possibility: Necropolitics, Neoliberalism, and the Cultural Politics of Death in Contemporary Chicana/o Film and Literature« (PhD diss., University of California San Diego, 2012), 23.

Figs. 2 and 3: Stills taken from *Heli*:
1) Heli opens the door for the census survey;
2) counter-shot of Heli completing the census on his doorstep.

Collateral Damage: Official Discourses on the War

Regardless of their dislocated timelines and distinct approaches to asserting the period depicted, both films take place at a similar time: *Heli* was filmed in 2012, the final year of the Calderón administration, while *Ya no estoy aquí*'s plot unfolds in the year 2011, notably one of the most violent years during this sexenio. Calderón's militarization strategy contributed directly to this escalation. Before Calderón assumed office in 2006, the Mexican daily newspaper *Reforma* registered just over 2,000 deaths linked to narco activity. Following the launch of Calderón's drug war offensive, this figure rose annually and peaked at more than 12,000 in the year 2011.[23] Furthermore, more recent reports suggest that these figures are much higher, particularly when considering the many disappeared.[24] Quite simply, the government's punitive war on drugs propagated concentrated violence across the nation with devastating consequences for civilians. This, however, was an expected and admissible consequence in the eyes of Calderón. Despite never formally declaring a war, upon launching his State offensive, in a speech delivered in July 2007 Calderón openly spoke of

> »una guerra frontal« (a full frontal war), and, crucially, »una guerra de largo plazo, que no será fácil ni rápido ganarla, que tomará tiempo, que tomará recursos económicos, vidas humanas, pero es una guerra que vamos a ganar con el apoyo de la sociedad« (A long-term war that will not be easy or quick to win, that will take time, that will claim economic resources, human lives, but it is a war that we will win with the support of society).[25]

23 Ejecutómetro, »Muertos Violentos en el País,« *Reforma*, October 7, 2013.

24 Proceso, »Más de 121 mil muertos.«

25 Felipe Calderón, »El Presidente Calderón en el evento ›Limpiemos México‹ Estrategia Nacional de Seguridad,« *Gobierno de México*, July 2, 2007. https://issuu.com/frph/docs/d_presidenciales_fch_f1b7de68888db6.

From its very initiation, the notion of human lives as collateral in this war was established in government rhetoric. This declaration openly acknowledges the surrender of individual lives to the material demands of war. Human lives are placed on a level with financial and temporal resources, all framed as expected and accepted overheads of these so-called security measures.

Government discourse is featured in both films, but it is only in Frías' picture where actual radio announcements from Calderón are included in the diegetic sound of the film. Such an inclusion further exposes the impact of this necropolitical war-waging strategy on the individual citizen. One example early in the film is observed when Ulises calls the local radio station in Monterrey from Queens, New York, to make a shout-out. The call is interrupted by an official government announcement where Calderón highlights his administration's keen focus on national security, stating:

> En Mexico están occuriendo muchos cambios. Desde mi primer día como presidente, la seguridad ha sido la más alta prioridad de mi gobierno. / No hay otro tema al cual estemos prestando más atención y aumentando cada día los recursos humanos …
>
> (Many changes are taking place in Mexico. Since my first day as president, security has been the highest priority of my government. / There is no other issue to which we are paying more attention and increasing our human resources every day …)

The emptiness of Calderón's words is underscored by the filmmaking. When Ulises' call is answered, the radio DJ is captured in a close-up, accompanied in the frame only by the microphone and the padded blue walls of the recording room that comprise the backdrop. The lens proximity is intimate, focusing the viewers' attention on the conversation between the DJ and the sound of Ulises' voice on the line. The shot reverses to reveal a producer on the other side of the glass holding a sign that reads »Institucional,« indicating that a government an-

nouncement must be played. At this point, the shot returns to the DJ, but a wider, medium shot frames him from the other side of the glass, with the producer (sign still in hand) now silhouetted in the bottom right-hand corner. Not only does the distance provide a jarring shift from the prior shot of the DJ and space, but also both DJ and producer leave the shot as the announcement begins to play, leaving the viewer alone, stagnant, and obligated to listen to the President's words. The cacophony of taxi horns and city sounds bridges the empty shot with one of Ulises on the other end of the phone. At this point, the announcement is barely audible, and Ulises is forced to abandon the call early. This sequence foregrounds the worthlessness of the words, which are ignored by all parties involved. Similarly, the inclusion of the announcement here represents a clear hurdle to Ulises' happiness and self-expression, preventing him from communicating with his family and friends and accentuating how the escalation of the war via this government strategy continues to impede his quality of life and revoke his claim to fulfillment. His futile attempts to connect to his former life are constantly denied by the necropolitical order.

As Mbembe asserts, »[w]ars of the globalization era … aim to force the enemy into submission regardless of the immediate consequences, side effects, and ›collateral damage‹ of the military actions.«[26] The destroyed young lives of the *Terkos* and many others in the film function as examples of this. Calderón's own reference to »human resources« as a means of ensuring national security takes on a notable double-meaning.

Ya no estoy aquí frequently and pointedly locates itself in a specific time (2011) and place (Queens, New York, or Monterrey) through the Kolombia counterculture movement, news reports, and government announcements, but there is less specificity in *Heli.* Its criticisms are more broadly aimed at institutions including the State, its proponents, the military, the police and foreign factories that profit off cheap labor in Mexico. Focusing on State discourse, this critique

26 Mbembe, »Necropolitics,« 30.

is exemplified in one scene 25 minutes into the narrative where uniformed soldiers are seen burning contraband. A camera pans right, tracking packets of cocaine as they are passed from one man to the next to be emptied into a pile. The camera continues right past a burning pile of contraband with armed uniformed anonymous officers in front as a diegetic voice is heard on a microphone announcing:

> Dear public, today we're carrying out the destruction of 22 tons of marijuana / 7 tons of cocaine / 3881 counterfeit products, including CDs and DVDs, and 10 slot machines. With these actions, the federal government reaffirms its commitment to a law-abiding environment in which people are confident that they can rely on government institutions to guarantee their rights and protect their property by enforcing the law.

The camera finally settles on the source of the announcement, a uniformed comandante at a podium which reads »MÉXICO« and »GOBIERNO FEDERAL« and features the logo from the Mejor Vivir campaign—an initiative of the 2006–2012 Federal Government of Mexico's social program, which aimed to promote »el Desarrollo Humano Sustentable, es decir, impulsa un proceso permanente de ampliación de capacidades que les permita a todos los mexicanos vivir una vida digna sin comprometer el patrimonio de las generaciones futuras« (Sustainable Human Development, i. e. it promotes a permanent process of capacity building that allows all Mexicans to live a dignified life without compromising the heritage of future generations).[27] Ironically, the events of the film make clear that the objectives of the Mejor Vivir program as well as the capacity of the State to protect citizens were both empty gestures. The scene highlights the performance of this press conference, attended by bored journalists, politicians and military officials and intended for propagation by the news media. Miriam

27 Secretaría de la Función Pública, *Vivir Mejor: Presentación de Estrategia* (Mexico: Gobierno de México, 2006), 7.

Haddu labels this as part of »the State's carefully choreographed victory campaigns, involving the federal forces taking prime position as performers of justice, … confirmed through public announcements.«[28] The performance aspect is further emphasized by the focus on news cameras, which capture a musical number by the military band as well as more off-screen content for their broadcasts. As a final nod to the farcical nature of the event, the camera frames a young man who wanders up to the abandoned podium giggling to himself and poised to speak in imitation of the earlier performance, however after more than 20 wordless seconds, the shot cuts and the scene ends.

As *Heli*'s script co-author Gabriel Reyes writes of the story, »la línea invisible que separa a la autoridad de los delincuentes es una división borrosa en donde es complicado encontrar una diferencia clara« (the invisible line that separates authority from criminals is a blurred division where it is difficult to find a clear difference).[29] It is uniformed special forces that kidnap Heli, murder his father, and commit atrocities against Heli, Estela and Beto. Despite Heli's noble efforts, he is unable to escape the constant threat of death that dominates his existence. While Reyes' words point to the often corrupt role of the State in facilitating rather than combatting drug trafficking, the official response to and framing of the victims of this corruption is obtusely hypocritical.

Counternarratives: Seeking Justice and Asserting Identity

Alongside the inclusion of actual government discourse and the representation of institutions that generate and propagate official messages, both films put forth narratives that challenge official representations; chiefly, the notion that young people and those who are dead

28 Miriam Haddu, *Violence, Conflict and Discourse in Mexican Cinema (2002–2015)* (London: Palgrave, 2022).

29 Gabriel Reyes, *Heli* (Mexico City: Los Cuadernos de Cinema23, 2017), iv.

or disappeared are complicit in illegal activity. Victims of Mexico's drug war have been grouped together with those complicit in the narcotics trade in official statistics, such as those from the Latin America *Strategic Survey* (2009), categorizing them as an enemy of national security and thus rendering their deaths justifiable and, by extension, ungrievable.[30]

Likewise, Calderón's government has justified the escalation of drug war violence by reporting that 90 % of those killed as a result of this war were involved in the drug trafficking trade.[31] This in turn constitutes an act of violence on the part of the State, which, by strategically and erroneously accusing civilians killed in the drug war of being complicit in some way, reduces the validity of their suffering in order to downplay the shortcomings of its war.

This notion of ungrievable lives and the mislabelling of innocent civilians plays out distinctly in the two films. For Heli, this arises when he seeks justice for the murder of his father and the kidnapping of his sister and is forced to take matters into his own hands. In contrast, Ulises and his group of friends known as *Los Terkos* attempt to assert the validity of their lives through their unique appearance and adherence to the Kolombia subculture. Both filmic narratives provide alternative depictions of young working-class men who are not cartel members but who nonetheless become embroiled in the violence of warfare by circumstance alone.

Seeking Justice—*Heli*

Forty-five minutes into *Heli*, the protagonist's father is murdered and he, Beto and Estela are sequestered by four individuals dressed as the special police, who are looking for the drugs that Beto stole and Heli disposed of. Beto and Heli are tortured, which culminates in Beto's

30 »Latin America,« *Strategic Survey* 109, no. 1 (2009): 109.
31 Ibid., 108.

lifeless body being hanged from a public overpass and Heli beaten and abandoned on top of it. The events return full circle to the disturbing opening sequence of the film. But the runtime of the film is only halfway complete, and here begins a stark tonal shift. The remaining 45 minutes of the narrative focus on Heli's life after the trauma. Eschewing standard narrative conventions where the pace of the film might rise and fall with increasing tenseness that is relieved in a final crescendo of action and resolution, the final half of *Heli* is typical of the popularly termed slow cinema and what Juan Llamas-Rodriguez considers a »cinema of slow violence.«[32]

Upon his return, Heli attempts to cooperate with the police in order to find his sister and have the attackers brought to justice; however, the police insist that his father was part of a criminal movement. They ask him to sign official declarations that state his father was involved in criminal activity and threaten that they will not investigate his sister's disappearance unless he signs.

Heli is seen with a neck brace and arm sling putting up missing person posters, watching cartoons only for them to be interrupted by news reports of decapitations, crying with his head in the lap of his wife, making violent outbursts against his wife, and eating silently alone at work. He is fired by the factory. Heli's behavior following the kidnapping is indicative of the trauma he experienced, and yet he receives no support. The reality of his existence post-kidnapping is bleak. When Estela returns, pregnant, she draws a map for him to where she had been kept. Heli's final act of justice-seeking sees him follow the map to a small building in a field where he murders the man inside.

The retaliatory murder is captured by an over-the-shoulder tracking shot that follows Heli into the building after he kicks in the door. The man inside climbs out of a window, and though Heli follows him, the camera stays fixed in the building, the window and the con-

32 Juan Llamas-Rodriguez, »Toward a Cinema of Slow Violence,« *Film Quarterly* 71, no. 3 (2018): 27.

Fig. 4: Still from *Heli*: frame within a frame and violence from a distance.

trast of the building's interior creating a dark frame around the shot. Heli chases the man to the middle of the frame, tackles him, and begins to kick and hit him until his body stops resisting and lies still. The sound of the murder is barely audible over the diegetic sound of the TV program the man was listening to. Instead, we hear a presenter talk about how to make God hear our prayers. The words create a stark contrast with the actions of Heli, which reflect his taking justice into his own hands.

Since the beginning of the film, when he was interrupted by the census, Heli has been unable to successfully have sex with his wife (who is still recovering from childbirth) without some form of interruption. As if symbolic of the restorative nature of his act of retribution, the scene that follows captures Heli and his wife in the act. The scene lasts longer than any of the previous attempts to have sex and therefore suggests a breakthrough. However, the sound bridges the final shot of the movie: Estela and the baby in another room of the house. They are resting on the couch in the left of the frame, the baby's tiny shoes in the bottom right corner, and the wind gently

blowing the curtain in the top right. The shot is both peaceful and sad: Estela still suffers from her inability to speak due to her monumental experience of trauma, and, just a child herself, she is pregnant. In the words of director Escalante, »Al final, las cosas que pasan después, como la tortura y todo eso, son consecuencia de los niños que nacen así, casi como huérfanos, pero de otra forma. Son niños teniendo niños, moralmente desubicados« (In the end, the things that happen afterwards, like the torture and all that, are a consequence of the children who are born like that, almost like orphans, but in another way. They are children having children, morally misplaced).[33] Escalante's words speak to the value allotted to the lives of the young working class. Heli and Estela are left without a father, and the institutions that are intended to support them, such as the police, prove wholly corrupt. As Escalante continues, »No hay ningún narco [en esta película], realmente. Hay militares y muchachos vulnerables, digamos. Y son vulnerables no sólo porque carecen de educación, sino económicamente« (There aren't really any narcos [in this film]. There are military officers and vulnerable kids, let's say. And they are vulnerable not only because they are lacking education, but economically).[34]

Kolombia Culture and Reclaiming Identity

Ulises and his friends are equally vulnerable to the ongoing war. At the start of the second timeline, when he is still living in Monterrey and is the leader of *Los Terkos*, his group pass a local gang at night. After encouraging *Los Terkos* onwards, Ulises is held back by a member of the cartel, who tells him, »Me hubiera gustado tener un compa como tú de morro que anduviera cuidando la banda« (I wish I'd had someone like you to watch out for me when I was a kid). Under Ulises' pastoral guidance, *Los Terkos* band together to protect one another. When he

33 López, »Heli.«
34 Ibid.

is forced to leave, they are left vulnerable to the military and cartel conflict that is saturating their town. Indeed, when Ulises returns, the majority of his group are involved with the dominant local cartel, and Isaí has been murdered as a result.

While the film self-consciously takes place during the Calderón presidency, its thematic focus on Kolombia subculture eschews this direct framing. The introductory quotation that commences the film emphasizes this point. It reads: »Hace algún tiempo en el noreste de México y en particular en la Ciudad de Monterrey, floreció un movimiento contracultural que por su amor a la cumbia se autodenominó ›KOLOMBIA‹« (Some time ago in the northeast of Mexico, particularly in the city of Monterrey, a countercultural movement flourished that called itself »KOLOMBIA« for its love of cumbia). Despite clear indications that the film is set in 2011—a period where drug war-related death tolls reached record heights—continually punctuating the narrative, Frías directs our focus on the period as being linked to the countercultural movement. According to press interviews with the director, this focus reflects a part of the aims of the subculture itself. While his initial investigation stemmed from an interest in why young people were dressing and dancing in this way, he discovered that it functioned as »an opportunity to reinvent themselves, knowing that there's not many options in life for them.«[35]

Thus, with the framing of the narrative, via the Kolombia movement and through the charismatic portal of Ulises' personal journey, Frías is able to establish the identity and self-expression of the characters and abjure political framings of the youth as criminals and delinquents, another framing proffered by the Calderón administration to account for the inordinate number of civilian deaths during this period of war. This is buttressed by the many positive framings of the group interacting in the second timeline. Immediately after the cartel mem-

35 Mandalit del Barco, »Mexico's Oscar-Winning Directors Embrace Rise Of Fernando Frías De La Parra,« *NPR* January 23, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/01/23/959458175/mexicos-oscar-winning-three-amigos-embrace-rise-of-fernando-frias-de-la-parra.

ber compliments Ulises' ability to protect and guide *Los Terkos*, we are presented with a makeover of its newest member, the very young Sudadero (sweatshirt). The male members of the group crowd around him, styling his hair and offering their own clothes to complete his look. A close-up of their feet at this moment highlights their unity and proximity in terms of style but also by emotionally supporting and caring for each other. Likewise, they are constantly shown singing, dancing and generally expressing joyful moments together.

As Frías comments: »People assume that if you're brown, poor and from that settlement, then you're dangerous and ugly« and to counter this, there is »a rejection of the marginalization and the creation of an identity.«[36] The necropolitical conditions of Mexico's drug war consign these young people to roles of criminals, and Frías' film captures precisely how this occurs. *Los Terkos* are a group of passionate and close-knit individuals, but they are unable to escape the circumstances to which they are condemned, resulting in, for example, Ulises' forced flight and Isaí's death. Large-scale violence has the power to reshape national identities,[37] but at a regional and personal level, *Los Terkos* resist this change. Their refusal to conform to mainstream culture or the pressures of local gang culture represent a rebellion against the forces acting to recategorize them. Choosing instead to pertain to this group empowers the Kolombianos to choose their own path, banding together around the music they love and broadcasting this loudly via their unique hairstyles and baggy clothing. However, while the film captures Kolombia at its zenith, the subculture has since faded, an extinction likely fuelled in part by the militarization of the country as well as cartels recruiting young members.

36 Fernando Frías, quoted in Corina J. Poore, »›I'm No Longer Here‹ Dir Fernando Frías de la Parra,« *Latino Life*, accessed April 1, 2021, https://www.latinolife.co.uk/articles/%E2%80%98im-no-longer-here-dir-fernando-fr%C3%ADas-de-la-parra.

37 Antonius C. G. M. Robben and Marcelo M. Suarez-Orozco, *Cultures Under Siege: Collective Violence and Trauma* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 2–3.

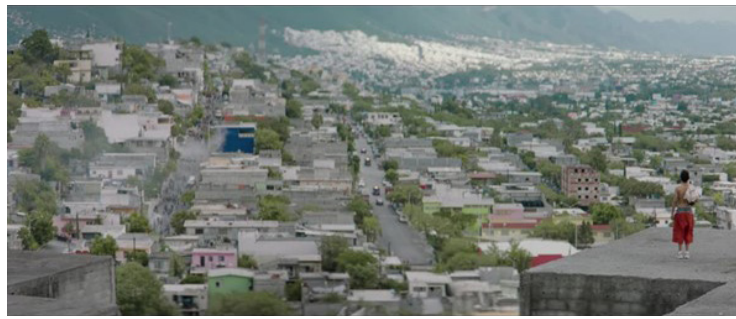

Fig. 5: Still from *Ya no estoy aquí*: Ulises stands over the city. The music stops, but the sounds of turmoil associated with the war continue.

The sounds of these cumbias dominate the aural scape, but they are continually interrupted by TV and radio announcements that remind the viewer of the wider socio-political circumstances in which this cultural moment exists. The final scene of the film is exemplary of this motif. Ulises is back home in his old spot overlooking the city. The final shot captures him dancing on a rooftop in a long shot that features the town's buildings and the foot of its surrounding hills as his backdrop. Having put in headphones and turned on his MP3 player, the sound is subjective, and we hear only the slow-downed cumbia that he dances to despite two roads traversing the center and left of the shot from top to bottom. The left shows protestors running downhill, with smoke indicating chaos, while the center road features speeding police cars racing uphill with cherries lit and sirens on. Ulises' dancing, which was always interrupted in the US, returns him and the viewer to the happy and supportive times that characterized his life before the forced migration. However, the sound of the cumbia rebajada stops suddenly, and a double-beeping noise suggests his device has run out of battery. Ulises stops dancing and remains still in the bottom right corner of the screen. The sounds of the sirens as well as protestors and a police helicopter now dominate the diegetic sound of the frame. Unaffected by the MP3 player's silence, the chaotic scene

continues to have vehicles powering up one road and people running down the other. As the screen cuts to black, the sounds continue, bridging the two shots and implying that this is the only constant in Ulises' life. Although Ulises is now home, things are no longer as they were before, and the negative shift that started with his forced migration will continue to affect his life back in Mexico. The scene encapsulates Frías' assertion that the cumbia rebajada functions as a metaphor for how fast youth perishes in this atmosphere. He summarizes this relationship between the music and the precarity of youth as follows: »You don't want the music to stop … because [after that] there is no future.«[38]

Conclusion

The necropolitical nature of the drug conflict speaks to the type of war under scrutiny. Despite the 2006 militarization strategy to combat the rising threat of drug trafficking and ensure national security, this is an ungoverned war, or rather, one without the normal rules or legal limitations and boundaries that accompany an official war. Perhaps unlike other chapters in this book where war is a finite thing and can either be relegated to the past or captured within a particular period, the current conflict is ongoing and shows no signs of abating. Both films take a pivotal moment in the conflict—seen in the massive escalation of violence in 2010/11—as the context and backdrop of their respective narratives. In doing so, both filmmakers wield the full potential of cinema to scrutinize the ideologies and actions that drive warfare and terrorize the lives of citizens. In each case, this is achieved through the disruption of linear timelines in storytelling which mirrors the disruption of the protagonists' lives. Likewise, the films highlight the potency of cinema's relationship to history and the archive through the use of real-world examples—through re-use,

38 Poore, »I'm No Longer Here.«

reproduction or performance—to supplement and evidence the accusations made.

Rather than the official framing and high-octane Hollywood thrillers on the topic, through their slow realist approaches, these films offer a view of what it means to lead a necropolitical life—that is, to live in these constant conditions of unrest and death.

Both films adhere to a style of filmmaking that is consistently popular at international film festivals and on the arthouse scene. The aesthetic approaches to *Heli* and *Ya no estoy aquí* offer many points of convergence when dealing with the necropolitical impact of the increasing ruthlessness that characterizes this war. Though they focus on different stories, both directors attempt to capture the similar realities of poverty and youth that characterize those most affected by the brutality of daily events and news reports. Despite hailing from totally different regions of Mexico, the protagonists share similar struggles that are born from their lack of control over the domain of their existence. They are forced to navigate the conditions of State-sponsored sustained conflict that categorizes them as expendable and even complicit.

As part of their engagement with the period in question, these films offer direct critiques of State rhetoric as well as mediatized actions intended to demonstrate the success of the government offensive to date. Likewise, in distinct ways, the films offer counternarratives to the official State discourse that labels the young and impoverished, the deceased and disappeared as complicit in the drug trade. In *Heli*, this is achieved through the protagonist's attempts to use official channels (like the police) to find his sister, but he is ultimately forced to take justice into his own hands. In *Ya no estoy aquí*, this is articulated through the focus on Kolombia culture and the efforts of Ulises and his friends to demarcate their identities through their clothes, hair and music. Despite the lack of agency allotted to these young men and their families or peers, given the necropolitical order of their State, they are undeterred in their efforts to seize control of their futures.

However, the ending of each film offers no relief to their suffering. Neither narrative strikes a hopeful chord for these young men's futures. Given the turmoil they must navigate and the precarity of their social position, these endings are truthful to the reality of young, marginalized/impoverished Mexicans today, and both Escalante's and Frías' films succeed in reflecting the bleakness of that reality.

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Traumatic Memory and the Commemoration of War in Video Works of Omer Fast, Steve McQueen, Maya Schweizer and Clemens von Wedemeyer

Cecilia Canziani

Introduction

The landscape is saturated by traces of wars: public sculptures scattered in our cities celebrate armistices or commemorate the lost lives of soldiers and common people in wars, while toponyms and street names bear the memories of fights and battles. Both monuments and place names represent a situated archive of the collective memory.[1]

Until the Second World War (WWII), the monument served a pivotal social and aesthetic function in the construction of public memory, narrative, and consciousness. Afterwards, in its traditional form of commemorative public sculpture, the monument seemed incapable of representing history to a community: the aftermath of WWII is characterized by a crisis of representation that has also placed the relationship between testimony and document under discussion.[2] However, the monument has not disappeared, it merely

1 On war memorials, see the recently published two-volume work *War and Memorials* that offers a broader survey about forms of and issues related to war related commemoration. Frank Jacob and Kenneth Pearl, eds., *War and Memorials*, 2 vols. (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2019).

2 See the writings of Giorgio Agamben, specifically *Quel che resta di Auschwitz: L'archivio e il testimone* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1998); *Lo stato di eccezione* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); »Che cos'è un campo?,« in *Mezzi senza fine: Note sulla politica* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2008), 35–41. See also Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Dori Laub and Shoshana

ceased appearing exclusively in its previously recognized forms. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the *counter-monument*[3] reconsidered commemorative public sculpture in an anti-monumental and processual light, revealing, even in its subtractive form, a »desire for a monument.« How must we represent history, transmit memory, and give form to trauma today?

As early as 1903, in *The Modern Cult of the Monument*, Alois Riegl proposed that the sense and significance of a monument do not depend on its original destination but on the way in which it is received by a community.[4] This change of perspective allows us to reconsider the monument through its performativity[5] and re-interpret the monument through the notion of group memory as trans-generational[6] and multidirectional work.[7]

The memory of a traumatic event that strikes an entire community and imprints its collective history is more faithfully portrayed today by an image—a media and mediatically retransmitted image—than by a monument. The image of 9/11, for example, is that

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Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). With reference to language and the performativity of witnessing, see Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

3 The term was initially proposed by James Young, who borrowed it from the artists Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, who defined their work *Monument Against Fascism* (Hamburg, 1986) as »*Gegendenkmal*.« For an analysis of the form and rationale of counter-monuments, see James E. Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994); James E. Young, *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History* (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 1994).

4 Alois Riegl, *Der moderne Denkmalkultus: Sein Wesen und seine Entstehung* (Vienna: W. Bramwüller, 1903); Alois Riegl, »The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origins«, trans. Kurt Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 21–51.

5 Mechtild Widrich, *Performative Monuments: The Rematerialisation of Public Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

6 Jan Assman, »Collective Memory and Cultural Identity,« *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–133.

7 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009).

of a body plummeting into the void past a skyscraper's windows, rather than the Memorial recently built where the World Trade Center once stood. No monument has ever been raised to the students killed on Tiananmen Square, but the photo of a row of tanks aimed at one unarmed person standing alone in defense of liberty is stronger, longer-lasting, and perhaps even more effective than its translation into marble or bronze, as are the two empty caverns previously occupied for centuries by two standing Buddhas carved into the rock in Afghanistan. Emptiness and fullness, voids and presences, but in any case images are part and parcel of a shared memory that we have assimilated through the mass media. The monuments we have never built, those that appear incongruous because their syntax and rhetoric do not correspond to the way in which history is translated in its representation today, even those that fail in the attempt to inhabit our memory and become shared images do not at all disavow our need to portray a publically grieved event, but only demonstrate very clearly that our memory is cinematic and that an image is capable of constructing a shared story with greater force than a representation in another register.[8] Above all, images can be widely and rapidly distributed, in this way succeeding in becoming »common places.«

Even as early as midway into the previous century, Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer[9] observed the capacity of moving imagery to make a lasting impression on the collective unconscious. Kracauer considered Nazi camps documentaries among those films that, while unable to prevent the repetition of events, redeem their memory,

8 On the media turn in memory, see Andrew Hoskins, *Media and Memory* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006); Joanne Garde-Hansen, ed., *Collective, Mediated and New Memory Discourses* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Molli Neige, Oren Meyers and Eyal Zandberg, eds., *On Media Memory: Collective Memory in a New Media Age* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

9 In particular, Walter Benjamin, »The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,« in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (London: Random House 1969), 217–251; Siegfried Kracauer, *The Mass Ornament: Weimar Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

which is the highest function of the »film of fact.«[10] For Kracauer, it is the editing, or rather the dismemberment and subsequent re-composition of a linear sequence, that guarantees the moving image the chance of impacting historical consciousness. Like Benjamin, Kracauer was thinking of the dialectic, out of joint, unexpected image as a historiographic model capable of restituting a higher degree of truth, precisely because it is capable of redeeming a fragment of the past and articulating it in the present.[11] After WWII, it was in fact a cinematographic document that provided the most appropriate response to the trauma of the Holocaust: Alain Resnais's film *Nuit et Bruillard* (1956) was immediately recognized as a memorial film.[12] Can an attempt therefore be made to redefine the category of monument in a performative dimension that interweaves a cinematic reading of the monument with a memorial reading of film and video works?

This is a possibility that Andreas Huyssen already foresaw in the performative and single-event forms that could be assumed by the counter-monument: »The fate of the monumental in our postmodern times … has migrated from the real into the image, from the material into the immaterial, and ultimately into the digitalized computer bank« to the point that »fifty years and some later, our own monumental seduction may indeed no longer tied up with real built space at all.«[13]

10 Siegfried Kracauer, *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 305–306.

11 On the analysis and interpretation of film and photography in the work of Benjamin and Kracauer, see Miriam Brathu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2012). See also Susan Buck-Moss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

12 See Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman, »Concentrationary Cinema,« in *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog*, eds. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 1–54; Alistair Duncan, »The Problematic Commemoration of War in the Early Films of Alain Resnais,« in *Memory and Memorials: The Commemorative Century*, eds. William Kidd and Brian Murdoch (London: Ashgate, 2004), 207–219.

13 Andreas Huyssen, »Monumental Seduction,« in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, eds. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe and Leo Spitzer (Hanover: Dartmouth College University Press of New England, 1999), 205.

It is therefore in this sense that we may seek what traditional memorials in stone have in common with art videos that reflect on past and recent traumatic events as wars.

In this chapter, I will analyze the work of four video artists whose practice focuses on the politics of memory and the representation of history through the use of archive images and footage, oral testimonies, fictional narratives, and re-enactment. *Continuity* (2012) by Omer Fast is the story of a soldier who reunites with his family following his term in Afghanistan, re-enacted by the surviving parents over and over. *Caribs' Leap* (2002) and *Ashes* (2002–2015) are meant by Steve McQueen as tributes to the lives of people and individuals whose lives would otherwise be forgotten: the first remembers the mass suicide of the inhabitants of the island of Granada who refused to submit to the Europeans in 1651, and the second narrates the death of a young man, through which the artist aims at recalling all the premature and avoidable deaths from drugs, shootings, suicide and AIDS. *A Memorial, a Synagogue, a Bridge and a Church* (2012), *Der sterbende Soldat von Les Milles* (2014, The Dying Soldier of Les Milles), *Sous les Jardins, Villa Torlonia* (2014, Under the Garden Villa Torlonia) and *Texture of Oblivion* (2015) by Maya Schweizer, categorized by the artist as »memorial films,« attempt at reading the traces of recent wars in the cityscape that we practice and abridge present with past. Clemens von Wedemeyer took the documentary footage of Captain Freiherr Harald von Vietinghoff-Riesch, who, as an amateur cameraman, filmed in Europe during WWII, as the starting point of a body of work that he presented at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein in 2016. In the following pages, I will specifically read their works through those categories that are common to traditional memorials—the body as shaping absence and space as the location of memory—while looking at film as a medium capable of translating the specific quality of traumatic memory.

Body

In his analysis of the lines of fracture and continuity in commemoration between the two World Wars, Jay Winter identifies in the fallen a term of contact between the various communities of war victims that in the aftermath of the Armistice of 1918 took symbolic form in the *Cenotaph*, a tomb without a body that ideally, due to its emptiness, contains every single body that war has slain, and in the revenant, who made his apparition as early as in 1919 in Abel Gance's film, *J'accuse*.[14] In both the memorial and the film, trauma binds the subject to a circularity from which no exit is foreseen, bringing the protagonist to continuously relive the horrific experience.

In this sense, the body-tomb dialectic pair continues even now to reproduce itself and to subsume the victims of all recent conflicts as the place of an impossible conciliation between the need both to forget—in other words, to complete the labor of mourning—and to warn, and identify in circularity, in repetition, and in the absence of the vocabulary that is capable of restituting the excess that the memory of the trauma cannot restitute by linear narration alone.[15] The idea of memorial is central in British artist and film director Steve McQueen's works, and he has always addressed it through the representation of the body as a witness to historical or social trauma both in his artistic productions, since his first major video *Bear* (1993), as well as in his films, such as *Hunger* (2008) and *12 Years a Slave* (2013). In his videos, the cinematic image intersects the levels of both testimony and commemoration, identifying in the fallen a figure that

14 Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (New York: Cambridge University Press. 1995), 15–28.

15 The narrative structure of trauma is analyzed and interpreted as a historiographical model in Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For an analysis of the language of trauma and commemoration in its relation with political power, see Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

permeates the corpus of his work and that contaminates, with its presence, reality.

Caribs' Leap/Western Deep (2002) comprises two complementary films that are shown together as a three-screen, synchronized color video projection. Commissioned by Documenta 11 and co-produced by Artangel, an agency for the commissioning and production of public works, the work was presented in 2002, first in Kassel and then at the former Cinema Lumière in London. The tryptic was McQueen's first full-length video. *Caribs' Leap* is projected onto two of the three screens. One screen shows us a vast blue sky that is suddenly traversed by a body flying through the air. We see neither the act of leaping nor the landing, only its freefall. On the second screen, another video recounts a day on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean Sea and locates us on a beach overlooking a promontory across the bay; time passes slowly, and the camera lingers over small occurrences in the bay, waiting until a boat enters the frame before shifting its attention to something else. It records various activities taking place on the beach: a little boy flying a kite, people strolling, dogs asleep in the shade, and kids playing. We see a man concentrated on opening a coconut, a column of smoke in the distance. Then the camera changes location, and we find ourselves in a funeral chapel surrounded by coffins. The footage ends at dusk, once again facing the promontory, thus giving us the idea of circular space, while the loop emphasizes that the film's temporal dimension is also cyclical. The promontory on the isle of Grenada that the camera films at the start and the end of *Caribs' Leap* is the height from which the island's last natives reputedly leaped to escape their destiny of a life of slavery under the French crown in 1651. The film takes its name from the location of this mass suicide, and the body filmed in freefall without preamble works as a sort of synecdoche. *Caribs' Leap* is in this respect a film that returns the figure of the fallen into circulation by linking it to the iconography to the traditional image of a body in a state of abandon, subjected to the force of gravity, offered on display, and which in its derivation from the figure of *La Pietà* suggests in First World War (WWI) related memorials

the idea of sacrifice. But at the same time, the film evokes another more recent and equally recognizable image of the fallen: those bodies plummeting to earth from the burning World Trade Center. Recent history does not only rewrite laws, political orders or boundaries, it also rewrites symbols.

Just one body is capable of representing many others leaping to their deaths here. This is the image of one of the fallen, whose falling never stops, one of the fallen, who keeps falling. It is a disturbing, intolerable image, particularly in its capacity to evoke trauma. It provides a counterpoint to the narrative sequences of the other two films and restitutes the meaning *in figura*.

If the two narrative films comprise a diptych on modern slavery and the violence of colonialism, situating the story in two precise places and times, this image conveys the meaning of multi-directional, widespread memory. The work's various constituent parts ensure the legibility of each; one overwrites the other, one provides a counterpoint to another. Together they restitute the trauma through the combination of space and time that film affords.

The fallen is also investigated in the work that McQueen made following his participation in the UK's official war artist program—a sculpture this time, instead of the video he had planned to make, yet retaining film's idea of circulation and transmission. Co-commissioned by the Manchester International Festival and the Imperial Museum, *Queen and Country* (2007) is an oak cabinet with sliding vertical drawers to present 98 sheets of postage stamps featuring photos of each British soldier who fell in Iraq between 2003 and 2007 in chronological order. Inaugurated in the Great Hall of Manchester's Central Library in March 2007, the work has been presented in various cities in Great Britain. The Royal Mail has not yet granted permission to issue the series for public use despite the petitions circulated by members of the victims' families, who were involved in the creation of the work. Returning the image of the fallen into circulation (literally) is one way to preserve the memory and to re-evoke the history of which it is part. The opposition raised against this work

comes therefore as no surprise, given the British intervention in Iraq is still to this day the object of a political denial. The body of an individual continuously rewrites the history of the community, testifies to it, and returns the events into circulation: making our history visible provides opportunities for an investigation into the reasons behind it. In this respect, *Queen and Country* resembles the most renowned British memorial to the fallen: the *Cenotaph*—an empty tomb that returns an absence to the heart of the city—realized by Eduard Lutyens, first as a temporary monument, then as a permanent memorial due to a public petition, similarly adopting encircling and absence as motifs that translate into a form of traumatic narrative.[16]

While *Queen and Country* evokes the circularity of cinematic imagery and its capacity to contaminate public space, the mechanism of distribution as a symbolic form of memory returns in a recent group of works generated around a film clip originally edited out of *Caribs' Leap* and rediscovered by chance ten years later, and is composed of a film, a series of posters, and two sculptures.[17] The video, *Ashes,* based on found footage, features a boy in his boat off the coast of Granada. He smiles and talks to the camera, then dives into the water, the camera capturing the arc of his dive: a body suspended under a light blue sky. This image is one of joy and life. After finding the lost clip, McQueen returned to Granada asking for the boy, only to learn that he had died in the meantime. *Ashes* provides footage of the boy while still alive with the voices of two people in the background, who inform us that the boy had found a sack stuffed with drugs on the beach and told others he intended to sell it himself and make a fortune but was killed instead. The contrast between the voiceover and the images is heartbreaking: does McQueen not perhaps re-appropriate the romantic iconography of the fallen here, young and handsome, prematurely torn from life? In order for the memory of a life to remain alive, an image of the deceased must be placed in circulation; thus, the artist

16 Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*, 60–72.

17 The works were presented in the frame of the solo exhibition *Steve McQueen: Ashes* at the Thomas Dane Gallery, London, from October 14–November 15, 2014.

made a poster with a half-bust of the boy for members of the public to take home with them. The third element of this work consists of two sculptures: two broken columns that immediately evoke the earliest monuments to WWI's fallen erected in many European cities that symbolize lives prematurely brought to a violent end. The artist intended *Ashes* to be a monument to lives lost, lives truncated too soon on account of drugs, disease, or suicide. Deaths that have been provided neither memorial nor monument. Bodies and memorials are returned to us here through various media that are equivalent and allude to circulation as the *conditio sine qua non* for remembrance.

This video ultimately reinforces an appraisal of *Caribs' Leap* as a memorial too. Both are composed of two parts, one that locates the body's place of final rest, the other offering a narrative element, which takes form as an epigraph in some cases and as a figurative composition in others. In reiterating and re-semanticizing the iconography of the fallen—which we have seen stand at the center of the artist's poetics and research, multiplied in the bodies and in the cenotaphs of *Queen and Country* and *Ashes—Caribs' Leap* is a memorial to all the fallen and to all the victims that official memory has not yet been proven capable of recalling.

The body of the fallen in its presence or its absence, in any case, remains the shifter and the irreducible testimony of a death. *Continuity,* by the Berlin-based Israeli video artist Omer Fast, is an immaterial memorial constructed, like most of his video works that address the psychology of contemporary trauma, on repetition, re-enactment, and absence. In this 40-minute film, a family reunites with their son following his term in Afghanistan, but the story becomes immediately more complicated. It continues to repeat, with variations, his homecoming with a series of strange encounters with different young men.

This video neither shows nor allows any overcoming of the loss because the narrative mechanism does nothing else but re-present the evidence of an irredeemable death. It is composed of the three archetypal figures of a mother, a father and a son—a composition that evokes the memorial made by Käthe Kollwitz for the German War

Cemetery in Roggevelde, Belgium, between 1914 and 1931. *Grieving Parents* consists solely of the figures of the parents, a self-portrait of the artist and her husband, and the empty space between them. The two figures are developed from the iconography of mourning over the body of Christ, but here, the body as object of ritual is significantly absent. Deep mourning is manifested by the inability to separate oneself from the lost object:[18] in the sculpture by Kollwitz, the loss of the beloved object is represented literally as absence, as void. But trauma is also manifested by an opposite symptom: the inability to »localize« the lost object, which in this way occupies a space-time continuum. *Grieving Parents* represents the fallen through his absence, as does the *Cenotaph.* An empty tomb is the element of symbolic mediation that permits the deep grieving to be confined and overcome, and that in its formal characteristic—separation, emptiness, absence—is also a figure of trauma. In Omer Fast's *Continuity*, the absence of the fallen is instead represented through a multiplication of his presence. The film has an apparently linear narrative structure with a start and an end, however the »continuity« that gives the work its title is a technical concept in filmmaking relating to the production of a sense of linear time, which is instead constructed from disparate shots. »In a mainstream film, different temporal and spatial techniques are used to smooth over the inherent discontinuity of the material from which a story is made. When thinking about the work, I was interested in how this concept applies psychologically in the context of loss and mourning.«[19]

The film opens with a cross-cut of a soldier waiting at a small train station in the countryside and a middle-aged bourgeois couple riding in a car. The couple reaches the train station, and we assume that the soldier is their son just back from Afghanistan. The three drive home.

18 Sigmund Freud, »Mourning and Melancholia,« in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14 (London: The Hogarth Press, 1959), 239–260.

19 MAC Montréal, *Omer Fast: Continuity*, accessed August 20, 2017, http://macm.org/en/exhibitions/omer-fast.

We next see them seated around the dinner table. This is where the story becomes surreal. The relationship between the three is dysfunctional, and the gestures between the mother and son and between the father and son are disturbing and oscillate between violence and sexual allusion. Coming home, which had promised to be a celebration, more closely resembles a nightmare. The episode terminates with the father leaving the house and placing a large black plastic bag in the trunk of the car. The film starts all over again, but this time the boy is played by another actor. This second episode is even more unsettling than the first. We begin wondering whether the boy has really returned from the war at all. The film does not explicitly say if the boy is merely an escort rented by the couple in order to stage some strange bereavement ritual in which young people disappear or if the boy's presence—and the entire story—is merely hallucinated by the two parents, who are unable to deal with the loss of their son.

In its repetition of the same, the film stages melancholy at work and seemingly represents the deeply grieving person's incapacity for symbolic elaboration: »Let us keep in mind the speech of the depressed—repetitive and monotonous. Faced with the impossibility of concatenating, they utter sentences that are interrupted, exhausted, come to a standstill.«[20] The film's linearity is shattered by the impossibility of narrative progression; the story crumbles, and the plane of reality appears to crack. »A repetitive rhythm, a monotonous melody emerges and dominates the broken logical sequences changing them into recurring, obsessive litanies. Finally …, the melancholy person appears to stop cognizing as well as uttering, sinking into the blankness of asymbolia or the excess of unorderable cognitive chaos.«[21]

In each of *Continuity*'s three episodes, the plane of the present is perturbed by images that do not belong there, undermining the chance for linearity that the film's title seems to declare. On the other hand, the melancholic person's experience is an off-centered relation-

20 Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 37.

21 Ibid.

ship with time: »Riveted to the past, regressing to the paradise or inferno of an unsurpassable experience; melancholy persons manifest a strange memory: everything has gone by, they seem to say, but I am faithful to those bygone days; I am nailed to them, no revolution is possible, there is no future … An overinflated, hyperbolic past fills all the dimensions of psychic continuity.«[22]

If the father and mother continue staging this reunion that we may imagine never happened, the character of their son, in his three different versions, also reveals, in his stories, memories, and visions—rendered cinematically through flashback, but also as a *tableau vivant*, a suspension of diegetic time—that he is trapped as well, in turn, in cyclical time. What we see on film might then be a representation from the point of view of the person afflicted by post-traumatic stress disorder. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Sigmund Freud identified the repetition of the traumatic event as a characteristic of the survivor of a catastrophe; the trauma seems to pervade present time and reappear in dreams or hallucinations literally without symbolic mediation.

This film, in which the artist intends to place in public view the reality of a war that Western governments preferred to call a peace-keeping mission, in this way stripping away its true meaning, is a film in which fiction is avowed and structural. The evocation of the traumatic event that provides the story with its narrative drive is not entrusted to an archival image. The battle scenes are, in turn, presented as *tableaux vivant* or modeled on representations lifted from art history. In one of these inserts, we see the young man who played the part of the son in the first episode lying on the ground with other American soldiers after an attack as an Afghan soldier walks past the corpses and steals their weapons. This is a reference to a lightbox by Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol Near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)*, made in 1992. This work by the Canadian artist, a scene recreated in the artist's studio and played by actors, developed in turn from Francisco Goya's *They*

22 Ibid., 57.

Fig. 1: Omer Fast, *Continuity*, 2012. Film still.

Avail Themselves (*The Disasters of War,* 1810–1820) is a contemporary version of the history painting. Susan Sontag sees in the staging of this scene—where the mutilated, bloody bodies of Russian soldiers are represented as they laugh and chat—the ability to depict reality more precisely.

If the mass media has over-accustomed us to images of violence, then the highest level of fiction is that which brings the truth of history back into the story. This army of undead is not interested in us, the living: not one of them seeks our gaze, for the reason that we cannot understand how dreadful war is.[23] If Wall's work recounts the unsurpassable distance (the unspeakableness) of war, the sequence shot by Fast that puts war on stage sends us an even more chilling message: history never seems to stop repeating itself. Also, for Fast, history is more effectively narrated through construction: re-enactment is a narrative possibility specific to cinema itself, one that permits the emergence of hidden memories and stories. Fast employed re-enactment either as *tableaux vivant* or a screenplay strategy in his

23 See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 25–26.

previous films, such as *The Casting* (2007), *Spielberg's List* (2003), and *Godville* (2005).

Re-enactment permits the overlapping of time, space, and memory and is the reification of the thought image, which, for Walter Benjamin, is capable of reflecting truth: »Certain events of the past reemerge continuously in the present as representations, stories, and films, cultural productions. These allow me to juxtapose different segments of time and look at how the past in the light of the future interacts with the present in the light of the past … They are also interesting for the fact that a traumatic historical event is transformed into a representation of such magnitude that the reproduction of the event becomes itself a historical event that is fixed over the original.«[24]

The *tableaux vivant* and the reference to Wall work in the same way because both allow us to focus better on reality than the authentic document in the archives, however nearly all the artist's works begin with an interview, a story told in first person, a testimony. The texts are then edited, in the same way that a film's scenes are edited. Testimony—as is the relationship with recent history—is a fundamental part of his work and is delivered through an interpretation. The pauses and omissions then become slits through which the story gains power and consistency by means of fiction and rewinds back on itself. If most of the artist's films are structured with a fragmentation of time that reports a traumatic time, *Continuity* seems to be an exception, because even if there is a circularity to its single scenes, the film has a beginning and an end. In any case, there is no catharsis in this story because the different repetitions we observe provide us with evidence of an unrelievable pain. If the war in Afghanistan »isn't a real war,« how do we explain the fallen? How can we portray them? How can we separate ourselves from them?

The war monument expresses neither the conditions nor the reality of war but trivializes the story through the celebration of nation-

24 Claudia Löffelholz, »Omer Fast: A Nice Breaded Schnitzel: Su narrazione e concettualismo, verità e costruzione,« *Arte e Critica* 15 (2009): 52.

al virtues. War is re-contextualized also through language, however, and in such a way as to reformulate its representations in the interest of a certain particular group.[25] From the perspective of linguistic criticism, the field of visual communication provided by the mass media also has a role:[26] removing the images of war's violence and suffering—from the First Gulf War to today, narrated »via remote,« the objectives are always unanimated' we never see the effect of the bombing on human bodies—and thereby also removing the sense of responsibility. Not only does the visual text fail to take a position, the action it takes in regard to the viewers is hegemonic and does not allow them to read the images with criticism.

Mass media and monuments work in the same way. They are places in which language manifests an intent to mystify that enables the continuation of a power perpetuation mechanism typical of the nation state that has remained in force to the present age in the world's current geopolitical configuration, albeit in different forms. *Continuity*, on the contrary, brings the work of deep grieving to light without offering the viewer any consolation. The film warns us that we must call things by their proper name, otherwise that which we repress will continue to resurface.

Space

Identity, as composed of the site and the work, is a constituent element in the restitution of the memory of the conflict and its commemoration. War cemeteries, concentration camps, and the sites of massacres are characteristic in this sense.[27] However, if the site records the historical events, the passage of time rewrites the space and

25 See Gill Abousnnouga and David Machin, *The Language of War Monuments* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7–12.

26 Lilie Chouliaraki, »Spectacular Ethics: On the Television Footage of Iraq War,« *Journal of Language and Politics* 4 (2005): 143–159.

27 See Pierre Nora, ed., *Les lieux de mémoire,* 3 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

its perception. Grass grows over the ruins and buildings are demolished: how then can the past be redistributed in the present? How can the memory of an event that was traumatic for a community be spatialized without being museified? This is one of the questions that *Night and Fog*, which represents a *topos* of the relationships with site, memory, and trauma, addresses. The same question is central in the recent works of Berlin-based French artist Maya Schweizer, whose work with video and photography is concerned with identity, biography, history, and memory.

A Memorial, a Synagogue, a Bridge and a Church, *Der sterbende Soldat von Les Milles*, *Sous les Jardins, Villa Torlonia* (2014), and *Texture of Oblivion* (2015) are parts of a system of films characterized by a common analysis of the »stone memories« scattered throughout the landscape, an investigation conducted over a period of history that ranges from WWI until today. In all these videos, the narrative is entrusted to sound that counterpoints the absence of dialogue, while the subjective point of view of the camera situates the viewer in a given time and place.

The films open with a view of the place that Schweizer is offering to our scrutiny. The use of panning shots mapping the space in her films seems to evoke Resnais's use of orthogonal movements questioning the capacity of space to connect us with the historical events it hosted: »Even a peaceful bucolic landscape, a field with crows flying above, haystacks, burning grass, also a road with passing cars, farmers, couples, even a vacation resort, complete with a fair and a tower bell can lead us to a concentration camp … It's daytime on the same road today and the sun is shining. We go down that road slowly, in search of what?«[28] The opening gesture of Resnais's *Night and Fog* is a tracking shot, overwritten by the voiceover, which is used to reconstruct a spatial unity between the concentration camp ruins and the surrounding countryside in order to render intelligible the fact that,

28 Jean Cayrol, screenplay for Alain Resnais and Chris Marker's *Night and Fog* (1956), trans. for English subtitles by Alexander Allan.

unlike prisons, these places where every right was suspended were in plain sight, surrounded by barbed wire, but not far from homes and villages.[29] The camera first makes a movement from up to down, then from inside to outside, then from right to left, widening our gaze from the inside of the camp to the outside, and then bringing us back inside the camp every time, as if we were trapped there ourselves and represented in this circular footage, once again in the circularity of post-traumatic memory.[30]

Similarly, Schweizer's films analyze the relation between landscape and memory, or, better said, the form that memory takes into space and its capacity to redistribute historical facts to the collectivity. The landscape is never revealed as a whole but is given as a palimpsest of details, points of view, connections and inscriptions of past and present that the camera—juxtaposing panning movements and close-ups—isolates and combines again, mimicking the work of memory as a texture of interwoven apparitions and voids. The artist uses the camera to explore the surface of things that inform our notion of place, as if by such attentive looking she could find a crack to penetrate a more complex story: the squares where we play, the bridges and streets we cross, tourist destinations, and public gardens are all

29 Resnais's use of the tracking shot never implies a transcendental omnipresence, nor unlimited movement. The false subjective transfers the subjective view onto public spaces (*Night and Fog*) or is a marker for subjective memory *(Hiroshima mon amour)*. The moral implications of the tracking shot in Resnais's films was first commented on by Jean-Luc Godard. See Jean Domarchi, Jacques Doniol-Valcroze, Pierre Kast, Jean-Luc Godard, Jacques Rivette, and Eric Rohmer, »Hiroshima notre amour,« in *Cahiers du Cinema*. *The 1950s: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*, ed. Jim Hiller (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 59–72. See also Jacques Rivette, »Of Abjection,« *Cahiers du cinéma* 120 (1962): 54–55; Serge Daney, »Le travelling de *Kapò*,« *Trafic* 4 (1992): 5–19. Despite his criticism of *Night and Fog* for its use of archival images, Claude Lanzmann in *Shoa* (1985) films the camps with the use of panning shots, thus indicating in Resnais's false subjective a *topos*.

30 Joshua Hirsh, »Night and Fog and Posttraumatic Cinema,« in *Concentrationary Cinema: Aesthetics as Political Resistance in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog*, eds. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2012), 183–198.

Fig. 2: Maya Schweizer, *Der sterbende Soldat von Les Milles*, 2014.

observed through the analytical lens of the camera that moves across space and yet never gives us a full sense of it.

Typically, in *A Memorial, a Synagogue, a Bridge and a Church,* the camera attempts to bring together the scattered elements of the former fish market square of Bratislava: a bronze sculpture dedicated to the Holocaust victims, commissioned in 1996 to the Slovak sculptor Milan Lukáč; a church; a synagogue destroyed in the 1960s whose contours are evoked in a marble wall; and the Bridge of the Slovak National Uprising. Each element bespeaks a different time in history, overlapping and indifferent to the traffic of cars and citizens inhabiting the space. The film is shot as if it were set in the past. The black and white, originally chosen to highlight the surface of the memorial in its materiality, ultimately confers to the image its displaced temporality; space is revealed as a palimpsest, and the monuments that punctuate the urban landscape—listed in the title itself—testify to conflicting and opposite memory.

Der sterbende Soldat von Les Milles (2014) can be considered as its ideal continuation, the second part of a diptych. Shot in color, this is also a movie without spoken words, where the narrative is carried

out by the carefully edited sound, interwoven with a very specific syntax articulated by the camera movement. In this film, the artist alternates stills and slow tracking shots that retrace the scars left by the two World Wars in a small town in the south of France. In this case too, the artist analyzes space as a system of fragmented memories. In a commemorative monument dedicated to the soldiers who lost their lives in battles during WWI, WWII, and the Algerian War of Independence, we can discern the figure of the fallen sculpted in stone; street names, souvenir shops, and signs evoke the deportation; and a former brickyard used as an internment camp evokes WWII and the memory of the Holocaust. History is engraved in this space. Wars rewrite one another. But in the present that the camera captures, there is almost no trace of life except for a group of men, apparently the only inhabitants of the village that summer afternoon, playing *pétanque*, apparently indifferent to yet part of the history that each element of the landscape seems to evoke. Panning movements are interrupted by close-ups; the diegetic sounds—steps, trains, the clacking of one ball against another—unfold time and evoke the past.

Like Resnais, Schweizer suggests that this landscape has to be examined from the perspective of an archaeologist who digs into the ground in search of the past. As Georges Didi-Hubermann argues:

> The ground bears great importance for visitors to these places. You have to look through the archaeologist's eyes: an enormous human desolation lies hidden amidst the greenery, this rectangular foundation and these piles of bricks conceal the horror of the gas chambers; this abhorrent place is the repository of all the madness behind a rational organization of humanity conceived solely as material, merely as scrap to be processed; these quiet marshlands are the resting place of the ashes of innumerable assassinated women, children, and men.[31]

31 Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Scorze* (Rome: Nottetempo, 2014), 41.

Departing from Resnais's use of the false subjective, in Schweizer's films, the tracking shot is always perceived as offering a bodily perspective. However concerned with the relation between history and space, the point of view on the places and events that Schweizer recounts is always situated, always located in the gaze and position of the artist herself and her family's story.[32]

The ruins that mark the present are juxtaposed with the documents of history, i. e. archive images, the one necessary for the decoding of the other. *Sous les Jardins*, *Villa Torlonia* explores hidden spaces of the city and intentionally repressed narratives of recent Italian history. *Sous les Jardins, Villa Torlonia* shows a public park with an ancient, elegant palazzo at its center. The gardens are empty. The buzz of cicadas and the singing of birds suggest that the film is set during a hot summer day. The camera moves in the direction of the building, looks up, then sideways. The past floats to the surface in the form of archival footage superimposed onto the space filmed in the present and seems to exude from the architecture itself. In this sequence, we see people gathering for a festivity: nurses and children on parade, people sitting at tables, toasting. These ghostly bodies occupy the very same space that the artist has been shooting, literally bringing the past to life. The archival footage is Edda Mussolini's wedding to Galeazzo Ciano; we understand this in a sequence where we can identify the woman in the same gardens of Villa Torlonia, built by Giuseppe Valadier and later used by Benito Mussolini as his private residence until the Anglo-American occupation in 1944. There is something of singular intensity in the way in which Schweizer edited the archival

32 This is explicit, for example, in a film from 2007, *Passing Down, Frame One*, which abridges her present life in Berlin as an artist and young mother with her grandmother's memories of the Resistance in Vichy France. The film is concerned with the work of memory, whose structure it mimics. It wanders and meanders, gets lost, tries to make sense, but fails. Most importantly, *Passing Down, Frame One* is a pivotal film in Schweizer's practice as it anticipates elements that the artist would develop further in her following works, and marks the passage from an account based on oral stories to a preoccupation with urban space as the place in which history is signified through built structures.

material and superimposed it with her documentary shooting, for we cannot escape imagining, even in the face of history, the hopes, desires, and feelings of the people depicted. What we know, and they could not, is that history would shortly thereafter erase everything they had and that the columns, the stairs, and the walls they touched would not be able to recount their passage over the earth.

Archival material—when it is employed and not just evoked through oral memories or evocative sound—is always presented in a mediated form: in *Sous les Jardins, Villa Torlonia*, it is a ghastly image haunting the space of the present; in *Textures of Oblivion*, the devastated cityscape of Warsaw is looked at through a set of photographs commented on by a guide or grainy found footage that we recognize as having been filmed from a screen. The frame that sets us and the artist in the present constitutes the point of view through which we contemplate the past, try to make sense of it, and often fail to.[33]

As in all her films, space itself does not disclose a story. Film can tell us things the way memory does, however: in fragments, with gaps, putting fiction and reality together (because memory is always a product), and traveling through time. As affirmed in *Night and Fog*, the landscape does not disclose historical truth: but montage and fiction do. The presence of the past does not live in archival documents, in the place that is filmed, in oral testimony, or in the pretense of a continuous and linear narrative, but rather in the discontinuity of a past that emerges from the very surface of the now—involuntarily, faultily, despite one's intention. Such a Freudian conception of memory pertains to film as an image processed through time and made of fragments that stand one next to another, allowing the possibility for a story to be told from many different points of view and directions. Schweizer's filmic inquiries—conducted on daily performed spaces interwoven with the superimposition over the texture of the present of the past that emerges as archival images, recovered footage, and

33 On the problematic articulation of the legibility of history through archival images and footage, see Georges Didi-Hubermann, *Images in Spite of All* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 120–149.

eminently sound[34]—are referred to by the artist as film-monuments that »ritualize the memorial within its cinematic performance as its subject.«[35]

Documentary is thus employed by the artist both to analyze the relation between memory and monuments and as a language that offers configurations of the contemporary memorial. The investigation of space conducted through such a critically employed camera transforms our gaze from that of a bypasser observing a landscape into one of a witness whose eye is able to read, search and evoke the events and the people that have been erased from the picture. In the cultural construction that the memorial represents, the notion of testimony is central, yet—more straightforwardly than a memory set in stone—film can allow the archive to be rearticulated, questioned, and performed, or even contradict itself. Film, as a medium, offers itself as a place where the work of memory finds an appropriate bodily, and yet fleeting, form that can help us to critically address the relation between document and testimony that is central to postwar memory.

Georges Didi-Huberman indicates that Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin first argued that the quality of the cinematic image does not pertain to the single frame but rather the fragmentation of images and their reconfiguration into a new sequence.[36] Such a notion of cinema and the concern for the relation between individual and collective memory is structural in the work of German artist Clemens von Wedemeyer and was specifically addressed in a recent body of work, made in 2016, generated by and around documentary footage of Captain Freiherr Harald von Vietinghoff-Riesch, who, as an amateur cameraman filmed in Europe between 1938 and 1942 behind the front line—and was incidentally the grandfather of the artist. Presented together in summer 2016 for his solo show *P. O. V.*

34 Volker Pantenburg, »Remains to Be Seen,« in *Lieux de Mémoire and Desire*, ed. Maya Schweizer (Berlin: Archive Books, 2015), 11–16.

35 Maya Schweizer, »Introduction,« in *Lieux de Mémoire and Desire*, ed. Maya Schweizer (Berlin: Archive Books, 2015), 4.

36 Didi-Hubermann, *Images in Spite of All*, 172–179.

(Point of View) at the Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, the works make use of the exhibition as format as a way to expand the notion of point of view and its political implications addressed in the films into the space of the spectator.

The spatial articulation of the video had already gained relevance in von Wedemeyer's work, for instance in *Afterimage* (2013), a 3D animation projected onto a semicircular screen, and in *Rushes* (2012),[37] which consists of three interconnected films that revolve around Breitenau, a concentration camp later converted into a reform school, narrated through three separate stories: the liberation of the camp from a convict's perspective, a remake of *Bambule* (1970), a film on the reform school written by the co-founder of the Red Army Faction and journalist Ulrike Meinhof, and the visit of a school class to the museum into which the site was transformed. The parts of the film are projected onto three screens installed to form a triangle, and the installation translates in space the interrelations that the site has had over time as an institution of repression and punishments, while visually allowing the specificities of the concentration camp system versus the prison and those of memory work versus the museum[38] to be maintained. In both *Afterimage* and *Rushes*, the body of the spectator is ultimately the subject, who can activate and mediate the point of view of the camera by moving in the exhibition space, thus reconfiguring, combining, or disconnecting—editing, in fact—the cinematic sequences that are projected onto the screen.

The address to an active spectatorship discloses the connection between von Wedemeyer's video work with memorial sculpture when we compare these works with monuments that advocate for a performative apprehension and identification with the victim, such as the

37 In this film, we are also informed of the finding of the Captain's footage in the attic of the artist's family house.

38 It is interesting in this regard to analyze the work through Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory. See also Zoltan Kekesi, *Agents of Liberation: Holocaust Memory in Contemporary Art and Film Documentary* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2015), 189–205.

Vietnam Veterans Memorial[39] and the *Monument to the Martyrs of Fosse Ardeatine* in Rome (perhaps the first memorial to deliberately adopt a diffused dimension that induces the viewer to retrace a topography of the event, thus allowing the coincidence of two distant times, two points of view).[40]

In the exhibition *P. O. V.*, the title of which aptly highlights the importance of the position taken in front of the projected images, such performativity is structured through the spatial relations between the videos and their articulation in the exhibition space, and it is also addressed in the single works through the different treatments given to the footage, which has been compressed into four minutes from the original three-hour length of *Ohne Titel (Alles)* (Untitled (Everything), 2016); edited isolating the figure of the horse, which serves as a stand-in for the war victims in *Die Pferde des Rittmeisters* (The Horses of the Cavalry Captain, 2016) or by selecting a scene in which the camera unwittingly makes the point of view of the perpetrator visible in *Im Angesicht* (In View, 2016). The same scene is translated into a computer game animation in *Against the Point of View* (2016), and the entirety of the footage is discussed by cultural theorist and writer Klaus Theweleit, the director of Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, Marius Babias, and von Wedemeyer himself in *Was man nicht sieht* (What You Don't See, 2016).

The presence of the frame as a threshold between diegetic and extradiegetic space is highlighted eminently in the last two works. What we perceive as a subjective shooting reveals itself as being mediated by

39 The monument by Maya Lin was inaugurated in 1982. With reference to its cinematic apprehension, see Filippo Fimiani, *Fantasmi dell'arte* (Naples: Liguori Editore, 2012), 103–130; Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politcs*, 57–110.

40 The memorial was built in 1949 on the site of a mass murder of 335 civilians by the Nazi command in Rome on March 24, 1944. A historical survey on the monument and its reading as counter-monument is offered in Adachiara Zevi, *Monumenti per difetto: Dalle Fosse Ardeatine alle pietre d'inciampo* (Rome: Donzelli, 2014). For a historical analysis of the execution, see the detailed and conclusive book by Alessandro Portelli, *L'ordine è già stato eseguito: Roma, le Fosse ardeatine, la memoria* (Rome: Donzelli, 1999).

a screen, so that the projected space appears as a *mise en abîme*, and the conversations we witness advocate adopting multiple points of view. The camera, we are told, acquires and constructs, and therefore we have to look through the image, we have to frame what we see, and we have to learn to read that frame too.

The advocacy for a frame that locates the gaze and guarantees the condition of readability of the testimony offered by the archive is a *topos* in films that deal with Holocaust memory. In *Night and Fog*, it is the present, filmed in color, that makes the past discernible; in *Histoire(s) du Cinema* (1989) by Jean-Luc Godard, it is narrative fiction that allows the images of Auschwitz to surface and interrogate the present and to restore a political role to cinema. In *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* (Images of the World and Inscriptions of War, 1988), *Respite* (2010), and *Videograms for a Revolution* (1993), Harun Farocki investigates the relation between document and testimony as a politics of seeing. All these films show us that in order to make testimony visible, it is necessary to provide them with a narrative frame that juxtaposes past and present times; by adopting a shifting point of view, von Wedemeyer employs a similar strategy in *Was man nicht sieht* and *Against the Point of View.*

»When does the editing amount to commentary?« asks the artist while looking at the footage in *Was man nicht sieht.* The footage shot by Captain von Vietinghoff-Riesch gives us a temporal and geographical dimension of the war. Donated to a public archive, the reels bring us back to the invasion of Belgium, occupied France, and the arrival of the German Army in Ukraine, but even though they document the war, they rarely say much about it. As Theweleit remarks in the same video, the footage seems for the most part to adopt a touristic film syntax, such as when the operator's eye lingers on the castles in France, the Arc de Triomphe (resting on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier), or records a group of naked soldiers bathing, laughing and joking (which our knowledge of history turns into an image of horror). Or it resembles a first contact documentation, such as when the Captain films the encounter with African soldiers of the Belgian

Fig. 3: Clemens von Wedemeyer, *P.O.V.* (2016), multiple video installation.

Army, or that with the local population in small Ukrainian villages. Only seldomly, unwillingly, does the frightened gaze of a prisoner or the gesture of a mother hiding herself and her children from the scrutiny of the camera reveal the film's very nature as an inscription of war from the point of view of the winner *a futura memoria.*

The editing that von Wedemeyer addresses here is that operated by the Captain onto reality, through his selection of the fragments that he would send home, the editing the artist himself carried out on the same material in order to disclose the narratives hidden and silenced therein, and ultimately the editing that the spectator performs in moving across the films as they have been articulated in space, making sounds and images flow one into another, respond with one another, contaminate one another. By reclaiming a politics of spectatorship, Clemens von Wedemeyer's films also offer us the possibility to reconsider the monument from a cinematic point of view as the remains of a mediated, edited memory that can be analyzed in its elements in order to be read through and redistributed.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed works by the artists Omer Fast, Steve McQueen, Maya Schweizer, and Clemens von Wedemeyer, the subject of which is post-traumatic memory: an excess of memory that manifests itself through removal (the loss of the archive) or re-enactment (the repetition of trauma). While these works do not retain the traditional form of the monument, they build on symbols, figures, and rituals of mourning that are typical of collective memory. Film is interpreted by these artists as a medium capable of translating the specific quality of traumatic memory: it keeps in its formal construction a relation between absent body and site that is functional to the collective remembrance of a traumatic event, yet is able to elaborate the past through repetition and montage, re-presenting it and redistributing memory in the present. In other words, the discussed works offer a re-articulation of the past that is specific to the medium they employ; rather than a mere commemoration, trauma is herein configured through a medium that is able to elaborate memory precisely because, by resisting objecthood, it remains in a state of constant »becoming,« and is therefore capable of inscribing the past into the present.

Looking at memory and commemoration through video- and film-based art practice can therefore help both to reassess the public transmission of complex and contested collective memory as well as to explore new notions of public space and the public sphere.

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Contributors

Giuditta Bassano is Lecturer in Semiotics at Libera Università Maria Santissima Assunta (LUMSA) in Rome. She received her PhD from the University of Bologna in 2014. Her major research fields are Theory of Semiotics; the relation between Semiotics and Phenomenology; the issue of social normativity, as the link between culture and law. She founded the IULM Research Group in Semiotics, in Milan, headed by S. Bartezzaghi, which focused on the analysis of the rhetorical techniques involved in contemporary social discourses about »Innovation« and »Credibility« on social media. She is member of CUBE, Centro Universitario Bolognese di Etnosemiotica and Bassano carried out research on social normativity in contemporary France and Palestine, in Italy and France, thanks to a PhD Mobility Programme by the Italian Institute of Human Sciences, then Scuola Normale Superiore di Pisa. Her publications include *Maupassant: La semiotica del testo in esercizio* (Bompiani).

Cecilia Canziani is an independent curator and professor at Accademia di Belle Arti di Bologna. She also serves as adjunct professor of Contemporary Art History at the University of Rome Tor Vergata and the American University in Rome. Recent curatorial projects include: I say I, Galleria Nazionale di Arte Moderna di Roma, curated with Lara Conte and Paola Ugolini (February 2021), Anastasia Potemkina, MAXXI Aquila (January 2021), and »The right measure« with artist Chiara Camoni (ongoing—Palazzo Bentivoglio, Bologna 2018; Murate Art District Firenze 2019; Società delle api, Grasse 2019, MOSTYN, UK; 2020 GAM, Torino 2020). She has been writing ex-

tensively on international artists and her texts appear in catalogs and monographs. She is co-founder of the art publishing project Les Cerises and of the curatorial space IUNO.

Frank Jacob is Professor of Global History (19th and 20th centuries) at Nord Universitet, Norway. He received a PhD in Japanese Studies from the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, Germany in 2012 and a DBA from University Jean Moulin Lyon III, France/BSI, Luxembourg in 2021. Before coming to Norway, Jacob held positions at the University of Würzburg, Germany and the City University of New York, USA. His research foci include Modern German and Japanese History, the history of transnational anarchism as well as revolution theory and comparative revolutionary history. Jacob is the author or editor of more than 90 books, including the recent monographs *Emma Goldman and the Russian Revolution* (De Gruyter, 2020), *Rosa Luxemburg: Living and Thinking the Revolution* (Büchner, 2021), *Ernst Papanek and Jewish Refugee Children: Genocide and Displacement* (De Gruyter, 2021) and *Emma Goldman: Identitäten einer Anarchistin* (Hentrich & Hentrich, 2022).

Bruno Surace holds a PhD in Semiotics and Media at the University of Turin, and is Post-Doc Research Fellow at the ERC Project FACETS (Face Aesthetics in Contemporary E-Technological Societies) as well as Adjunct Professor of Semiotics and Cinema and Audiovisual Communication at the University of Turin and Lecturer at the Renato Einaudi Interuniversity College. He is a member of CIRCe, AISS and CUC (Consulta Universitaria Cinema). He is the author of the monograph *Il destino impresso: For a Theory of Destinality in Cinema* (Turin: Kaplan 2019). Surace has published articles in several peer reviewed journals, as well as book chapters and has participated as a speaker at numerous conferences in Italy, Europe, China and the United States.

Nicole Beth Wallenbrock is an Assistant Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Hostos Community College and also film at the Graduate Center, both of the City University of New York. She wrote *The Franco-Algerian War through a Twenty-First Century Lens* (Bloomsbury, 2020) and co-edited with Frank Jacob *Migrants' Perspectives, Migrants in Perspectives: World Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021). Her essays and chapters have appeared in numerous publications including the J*ournal of Cinema and Media Studies*; *French Politics, Culture and Society*; *French Cultural Studies*; and the *French Review*.

Jessica Wax-Edwards is an honorary research fellow at Royal Holloway University of London. Her research interests include memory, violence and politics in 20th-century and contemporary Mexican visual culture. She has published articles on Latin American fiction and documentary cinema, graphic art and photography. Her first monograph *Documenting Violence in Calderón's Mexico: Visual Culture, Resistance and Memorialisation* will be published by Boydell and Brewer in 2023.