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Author

Siegel, Marc

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Clichés of Unity: History and Memory in Postwar French Film

Marc Siegel

The final scene of Claude Autant-Lara's 1947 film, *Le diable au corps*, takes place at Marthe's funeral. As the pallbearers carry her coffin down the church steps, they hear the bells, raise their heads, and smile. The bells ring out peace, the Armistice, thus the end of World War I. But for François, Marthe's lover, who hovers in the background, the funeral is not a day for rejoicing. "Go hang your flags!" he shouts as he retreats into the darkness of the church. His personal grief, however, is no match for the pallbearers' joy. In the foreground of the image, they continue walking into the light of day (the brightness of the country's future?), while François, with his memories of Marthe, remains in the shadows behind them.

With its juxtaposition of two different orders of commemorative events, Marthe's funeral and Armistice Day, this overdetermined image can serve as a starting point for a consideration of the complex relationship between history and memory in postwar French film. After World War II, French society was divided by internal conflicts stemming from competing opinions about the war, the Occupation, Vichy, and the Resistance. According to Henry Rousso, the bitter experiences under the Nazi Occupation and the Vichy Regime resuscitated a history of ideological differences among the French people dating as far back as the Revolution. Of these various "*guerre[s] franco-française[s]*," the Occupation has remained the most divisive, as a result largely, though not exclusively, of the significance of the home-grown Vichy regime. As Rousso notes, "civil wars have always been the hardest to deal with afterward, for in a foreign war the enemy goes home when hostilities end—in a civil war the 'enemy' remains" (8). De Gaulle's triumphant return to France in 1944 was in itself insufficient cause for the unification of the country after such a hostile civil war. Whence the emergence and importance of what Rousso calls the "Gaullist resistancialist myth," a unifying vision for the country with the "unavowed objective [of presenting] an interpretation of the past in light of the urgent needs of the present" (18). This myth served in part to subsume the bitter personal differences among the French beneath the image of an eternal France united in resistance to external enemies.

Made soon after De Gaulle's return, *Le diable au corps* is an adaptation of Raymond Radiguet's 1923 novel by the prolific "tradition of quality" screenwriters Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost. The novel is a remembrance of the

adolescent narrator's torrid love affair with an older soldier's wife during World War I. Claude Autant-Lara has explained that he was led to make the film because he saw Radiguet's book as an "anti-war novel" (qtd. in Truffaut 236). Instead of making an anti-war film, one that could explicitly draw attention to the complexity of emotions raised by World War II, Autant-Lara retained the time period of the Radiguet novel. His turn to the past, however unwittingly, exemplifies one of the central components of the resistancialist myth, the assertion of a "thirty years' war." By forging a link between the two wars, Gaullism attempted to suppress the disparate personal memories of the Occupation in favor of the more unified image of World War I remembrance—Armistice Day (Rouso 22).

Marthe's funeral scene, as described above, depicts the occurrence of two different commemorative events, the funeral and Armistice Day, indicating two different orders of memory, personal and national. In a crucial departure from the novel, the film joins in one image these two competing relationships with the past. In fact the desire for some kind of unification of memory within history was apparently so great that the filmmakers created Marthe's funeral scene (nonexistent in the novel) and set it on Armistice Day. This can be viewed as an attempt to remember Marthe's death, and the death of her relationship with François, through the lens of the Armistice. More specifically, it can be seen as an effort to suppress personal memory in favor of history. As Pierre Nora notes, "history is perpetually suspicious of memory and its true mission is to suppress and destroy it" (9).

This Gaullist revisionism runs counter to the interests of the novel within which the order of personal memory, specifically childhood memory, reigns.

In spite of appearances, however, nothing in the world has the power to age us, and it was as a child that I took part in the adventure which a grown man might well have found confusing. I was not the only one. My comrades will retain of that epoch a memory unlike that of their elders. Let those already hostile to me consider what the war meant to many very young boys: a four year holiday. (9)

From the perspective of the twelve-year-old narrator, the war offered great liberties. His parents and schoolmasters, conveniently distracted by the grave events, did not pay such close attention to his comings and goings. Thus his relationship with Marthe and his corresponding series of truancies were allowed to flourish. The intensity of the narrator's personal concerns was such that even the collective celebration on the occasion of the Armistice could not distract him from his "four year holiday."

I must confess that this rejoicing inspired me with little envy. I considered that I alone was capable of feeling emotions which are attributed to the crowd. I looked for patriotism, but in my unfairness, perhaps, I saw only the gaiety of the unexpected furlough . . . This spectacle, which I had thought would distress me, or make me jealous, or even infect me with the contagion of a sublime emotion, seemed as dull to me as any Saint Catherine's day. (135)

The novel, with its depiction of a dull Armistice unable to infect the narrator's emotions, differs from the film in which the first signs of peace are celebrated precisely *for* their ability to disrupt the couple's union. Leaving Marthe's house after peace has been declared, François is chastised by the landlords. Laughing at him, they place their flags into position outside their window. Though Marthe's neighbors had previously expressed their disapproval of her adulterous relationship by turning their heads, they now do so by displaying their flags. Thus what was previously a moral conflict in a small town has taken on national proportions. Separating the couple has become a patriotic gesture.

Cloaked in patriotism, this attack on Marthe's sexual relationship by fellow French citizens raises the specter of France's postwar purge, in which women were publicly humiliated as punishment for their sexual relationships with the Germans. The juxtaposition of Marthe's funeral scene with Armistice Day thus takes on connotations specific to World War II. For her death may be read as a punishment for her wartime sexual relationship with not an external but an internal enemy. In this reading of the film, Marthe's death appears to be a necessary sacrifice that paves the way for the nation's future.

As expressed in the novel, however, Marthe's death is linked instead to the future of the couple's child. "In the end order takes things in hand. Had I not just learned that Marthe had died calling for me, and that my son would have a reasonable life?" (144). This order which organizes the events of memory into some kind of timeless meaning ("my son [will] have a reasonable life"), is not the order of patriotism, or Gaullism, which emerges in the film. Yet, both means of transmitting memories from one generation to another—the metaphysical order invoked by Radiguet's narrator and the Gaullist myth reflected in the film—are relics of the past, according to Pierre Nora:

We have seen the end of societies that had long assured the transmission and conservation of collectively remembered values, whether through churches or schools, the family or the state; the end too of ideologies that prepared a smooth passage from the past to the future or that had indicated what the future should keep from the past—whether for reaction, progress, or even revolution. (7)

Order can no longer be expected to “take things in hand” because memories are not so easily gathered together. They escape containment and instead secrete themselves within what Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*, or symbolic, material, and functional sites of memory.

The Gaullist desire for unity in the face of conflict and ambiguity is perhaps what Gilles Deleuze refers to as the “properly French ‘dream’” which hindered the creation of a new cinematographic image in postwar France (*Cinema I* 211). Seeking a smooth passage from the past to the future, French cinema attempted to reconstruct what Nora might call *milieux de mémoire*, or “real environments of memory” (7). In *Le diable au corps*, for example, the relationship between the present and the past is not mediated by *lieux de mémoire*. Instead, these different temporalities are united within individual consciousness as signaled by the use of the flashback. The flashback, often used in New Wave films to emphasize a disjuncture between past and present—the films of Alain Resnais are exemplary in this regard—is employed by Autant-Lara to suggest the possibility of an unbroken continuity between memory and experience. The subject thereby remains intact as the transmitter of memory from one discrete present to another. Without any intermediary between memory and experience, the “spatio-temporal coordinates which were left over from the old Social Realism” remained dominant (Deleuze, *Cinema I* 213).

The *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics also bemoaned the inability of French postwar cinema to create a new image. François Truffaut, for instance, in his diatribe against the “tradition of quality” films, points to Jean Aurenche and Pierre Bost’s theory of equivalence as one stumbling block. By substituting equivalent scenes in the screen adaptation for presumably unfilmable ones in the original, Aurenche and Bost privilege, according to Truffaut, the literary idea over the *mise-en-scène*. These equivalent scenes are only ways “of resolving on the soundtrack problems that concern the image, plundering in order to no longer obtain anything on the screen but scholarly framing, complicated lighting-effects, and ‘polished’ photography” (Truffaut 230). In other words, the tradition of quality directors were simply *metteurs-en-scène*. They created a polished image without developing a new visual style. For Jacques Rivette, this new visual style could only emerge when linked to “a conception of the new world:”

I defy anyone . . . to find any conception of the world in Clouzot’s films, or Becker’s or Clément’s films. At very best it would be a conception of the world that is banal, literary, and twenty or thirty years out of date. (Bazin et al. 34)

By linking the creation of a new image to a conception of a new world, Rivette echoes Deleuze's claims that a new cinema can only come about when the spatio-temporal coordinates of the old world, the old literary realism, are recognized as "out of date."

One of the escape routes from the old world taken up in New Wave films, according to Deleuze, is the "voyage-form" (*Cinema I* 215). In the movements of New Wave narratives, the journeys of the characters through the city or from the city to the provinces, the coordinates of a new world are mapped out. By forging new spaces, the New Wave characters generate as well kinks or breaks in the sensorimotor mechanism which enabled them to function so smoothly in the "old world." Exemplary of the voyage-form is Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* (1957), an early New Wave film that depicts two generations of lovers implicated in two different murders.

The movement of the world in *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* is ironically generated by a central character's immobility (Deleuze, *Cinema II* 60). Julian's murder of his boss, designed to ensure his and his lover's (the boss's wife's) freedom, only leads to his own more severe immobility. When an efficient building attendant turns off the power, Julian finds himself trapped in the elevator. His inability to meet his lover Florence leads her to wander aimlessly throughout the streets, while his abandoned automobile becomes the means by which the young couple, Louis and Véronique, move from the city to the suburban motel. Since the characters cannot be said to generate the reasons for their own actions, they would seem to be implicated in what Deleuze calls "white events, events which never truly concern the person who provokes or is subject to them, even when they strike him in the flesh" (*Cinema I* 207).

For Deleuze, white events occur in a disconnected world where characters' actions do not effectively unify disparate spaces. Though Florence's initial wanderings throughout the city are motivated by a desire to find Julian, her actions only serve to map out the coordinates for a new spatiality of the city, "the city as horizontal or at human height" (*Cinema I* 207). Louis and Véronique's horizontal movement leads them away from the city. In their flight they link up with the German tourists who redirect them to a new space, the motel. Even Julian, though confined to the elevator, etches out the lines for a different, in this case, vertical space, the burrow of the elevator shaft. These chance actions suggest the spatial configurations of a different world, a world in which connections between situations, actions, and reactions are not predictable or formalizable. Without the usual unifying links between movement and action, the only place in this world where one can find unity is within what Deleuze calls "the cliché."

We ask ourselves what maintains a set in this world without totality or linkage. The answer is simple: what forms the set are *clichés*, and nothing else. Nothing but clichés, clichés everywhere ... (*Cinema 1208*)

These clichés, which surround us and invade our psyche, are images or conceptions of the past which circulate in the present. These could be both literal images, like snapshots for instance, or figurative, mental images.

The opening scene of *Ascenseur* establishes the importance of the cliché as a reference point in the film. An extreme close-up of Florence's face introduces her character as she proclaims her love and her desire to join her lover: "You know I'll be there. I'll never leave you." We then cut to Julian also proclaiming his love. The passion expressed by the lovers suggests a physical proximity. Through alternating zooms-out, however, they are each revealed within separate, enclosed spaces—Florence within a phone booth; Julian within a modern high-rise. Their only connection with each other is through the phone lines over which they express a desire to be together. Florence's emphatic demand ("Kiss me!") only reinforces our awareness of the spatial distance between them and calls attention to its incommensurability with their passion. In contrast to *Le diable au corps* where the lovers' expression of passion is coincident with their physical proximity, *Ascenseur* presents us with an image of passionate embrace as an impossibility. The disjunction between Florence and Julian's dialogue and their situation thus reveals this image of lovers as a cliché.

In such a love story it is only appropriate that Florence and Julian's eventual union occurs within the space of another cliché, the photo. After her wanderings, Florence finds herself in darkroom. Here we (and she) encounter(s) the first literal image of the lovers united within a single space and time. A close-up reveals the image appearing within the photographic liquid, while on the soundtrack the detective provides his reading of the photo, namely that it proves their guilt. Visually, this scene recalls the opening moments of the film, as an extreme close-up of Florence's well-lit face in an undifferentiated dark space dominates the screen. As in the scene where she was only linked to Julian by the phone lines and their jointly invoked image of a passionate embrace, her connection to him here is mediated through the photo/cliché. Unable to touch her lover, she contents herself by "reading" the photos with her hands. Revealed in a close-up, her hands arrange the images in the liquid while we hear her attempting to arrange her memories in her head: "I did love you. But we are together. Somewhere. We are together." Florence is so enraptured by the image of passionate love that she ignores the image's signification as proof of her

guilt (for involvement in the plot to murder her husband). This relationship between a photo and the past is not missed by the detective beside her. Nor does it escape Louis who has entered the darkroom in an attempt to recover another photo precisely because he knows that it proves his culpability in the murder of the German tourists.

In contrast to Florence and Julian, the younger generation, Louis and Véronique, displays an acute awareness of the signification of clichés. In our first glimpse of Louis, he is assessing himself and his new leather jacket in a reflection on the wall while Véronique is praising a romanticized image of Julian Tavernier. Noting Tavernier's paramilitary action in Indo-China, North Africa, and the Foreign Legion, his "English chic," and his successful present career as a businessman, Véronique fantasizes about a life she could only "dream of." For Louis, however, these comments, which glorify a continuum between war and business, are "outdated." Later in the film Véronique also reveals a sensitivity to the contemporary function of the cliché. When she realizes that her and Louis' actions, namely stealing cars and killing tourists, will lead to their separation by the police, she takes comfort in the existence of another world, that of newspaper photos: "They'll separate us. We'll only be together on the front page." As their love is inevitably destined to become a cliché, she suggests that they end their own lives in order to generate a caption for the front page photo: "Tragic Lovers." Louis' desire not to "leave any traces," and Véronique's awareness of the power of providing captions for her newspaper photo distinguish them from the older generation that still believes in a smooth passage from past to future. As Louis tells the middle-aged German tourist, Louis' generation "thinks of other things, four years of Occupation, Indo-China, and Algeria." The younger generation's present alienation then is derived in no small part from an awareness of the failure inherent in unifying complex experiences, in obscuring attention to the traces of those memories which remain in the present. That Louis and Véronique's movements in the film, however, are still circumscribed by traces of Tavernier's identity—his car, gun, camera, and jacket—positions them as the prototypical New Wave characters in embryonic form.

With its reconfiguration of space and its relegation of unity to the closed set of the cliché, *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud* offers a conception of the world that is anything but "banal, literary, and twenty or thirty years out of date." In contrast to *Le diable au corps*, which attempts to contain personal memory within the continuum of history, Malle's film suggests instead that memory often escapes history's grasp, that memory, as Pierre Nora has noted, accrues into localizable sites. These *lieux de mémoire* are "moments torn away

from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded" (12). By acknowledging these sites of memory, by attempting to incorporate, not brush away, "the shells on the shore," Malle's film and the New Wave films that followed it generated new possibilities for the cinematographic image.

Marc Siegel is a doctoral student in Film Studies at UCLA.

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Sites of Memory

Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness



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Special Issue

Volume 16.2 1998

*Selected Proceedings from
UCLA French Graduate Students'
Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference*

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Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness

Selected Proceedings from
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Third Annual Interdisciplinary Conference
April 17-18, 1998

*Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici
l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.*

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

PAROLES GELÉES

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