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French Folie: Memory and Madness in Buñuel's

Belle de Jour

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Historian Henry Rousso has proposed that the Liberation functioned as a “screen memory” (15) for the postwar French populace. It masked loss and internal conflict while effectively preventing the nation from mourning its traumas. During the postwar Gaullist period, collective amnesia foreclosed resolution and rendered meaningful commemoration impossible. As Rousso notes, “Memory of the war would therefore develop largely outside this official framework [of Gaullist resistancialism], which had gained acceptance only at the cost of distorting the realities” (26). As historian Lynn Higgins points out, literature and film provided arenas where conflicting memories could be worked through, but usually under a self-imposed (when not official) censorship (182). Rousso’s description of the Liberation and its attendant mythologies corresponds closely to the Buñuelian fantasmatic. In *Belle de Jour*, Buñuel captures the fictional character Séverine just as her traumatic memories are beginning to resurface, and we can begin to witness the spectacle of violence and degradation behind the screen of glacial tranquillity.

Belle de Jour opens with a long shot of a carriage approaching, accompanied by the unsourced sounds of bells. A well-dressed French couple transported by carriage through the Bois de Bologne provides a compelling portrait of the professional *jeune cadre* of the Gaullist régime. Yet the image simultaneously recalls a past moment, providing an historical allusion to the landscape of prerevolutionary France, where the decadent nobility traveled by carriage to remote country châteaux. The scene that follows displays the beating and rape of the character Séverine, presided over by her husband Pierre and the coachmen. The coachmen pull Séverine from the carriage and proceed to drag her body across the ground. As Pierre tears the dress from her body, he threatens her, “Don’t scream or I’ll kill you.” The coachmen whip her violently. The final shot of the scene frames Séverine in close-up as she is kissed by the coachman who intends to rape her. On the soundtrack in voice-off narration, a man asks, “What are you thinking about, Séverine?”

The scene then cuts abruptly to a medium close-up of Pierre in a sparkling clean bathroom looking into the mirror. Séverine is visible as a mere reflection in the mirror, lying on the bed. As the young doctor buttons his pajamas, he turns towards her to again pose the question, "What are you thinking about?"

Séverine's response mirrors his expectation, "I was thinking about you... about us... we were driving in a landau..." Her reply is accompanied by a rapid zoom-in that accents her perplexed facial expression. As Paul Sandro points out in *Diversions of Pleasure*, this zoom-in serves as a visual marker within this film, signaling that subsequent shots will portray Séverine's inner thoughts (132). Within this scene, the signified of the zoom-in is inverted, for here it indicates a return from a fantasy. The code of glances between Pierre and Séverine renders the initial segment of the film intelligible as an aberrant moment outside of the normal flow of events, recognized as such from Pierre's dominant point-of-view in the scene. Pierre's glance "cuts off" Séverine from the unconscious space of violent sexual contact to reposition her within a space designated as fictional reality. Séverine's partial response to Pierre's query exposes her duplicitous persona, serving simultaneously as the expression of her conscious will to conform to the conventional role prescribed by her bourgeois marriage as well as the denial of the dream content to which the spectator has been privy. As Sandro points out, this aberrant moment of fantasy that opens the film inaugurates the opposition between separate diegetic spaces: the interior space of Séverine's unconscious activity and the stable exterior space that is the normal flow of narrative events (Sandro 131).

I. Psychoanalysis: The Inviolable Body

Within the opening sequence, the narrative connection between rape and chastity determines a division that structures the film text. I will suggest that this sequence and the film itself can simultaneously be read against the intertextual frame that feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane describes as the representation of psychoanalysis and its incorporation into classic Hollywood cinema (39). Others have read the film from a psychoanalytic perspective on feminine desire, notably Paul Sandro in *Diversions of Pleasure: Luis Buñuel and the Crises of Desire*.¹ I will suggest that while Hollywood psychoanalysis is not the subject of the film, the grammar and codification that the psychoanalytic intertext presupposes inform the film's narrative structure. Doane points to psychoanalysis as the source of a system of symbols and themes that are typically compatible with Hollywood classical

narrative (47). Film theorist Marc Vernet has affirmed that Hollywood films rely on the theme of the “talking cure” as Freud practiced it between 1880 and 1895 (qtd. in Doane 47). In American films such as *Lady in the Dark* (1944) and *The Snake Pit* (1948), the problem of the “talking cure” is translated into visual terms (Doane 47). Mental illness becomes codified as the problem of vision within the Hollywood psychoanalytic film, so optical metaphors abound: the out-of-focus shot, superimpositions, zoom-in, and zoom-out. Within the opening sequence of *Belle de Jour*, the rapid zoom-in that signals Séverine’s return from the interior space of fantasy invites the spectator to speculate, “What is wrong with Séverine? What event caused her to be like this?” The solution to this central enigma becomes, in conformance with the grammar determined by the psychoanalytic intertext, synonymous with the cure to her “complex,” which is defined within the opening bedroom scene as her frigidity with her husband.

Within the film’s opening sequence, the spectator is initiated to the grammar of the psychoanalytic intertext of Hollywood cinema that provides a justification for the classical device of repetition (the compulsion to reenact the trauma, the recurrence of symptoms) and a final solution (the cure) (Doane 47). The spectator is invited to read Séverine’s frigidity as the symptom of a psychoanalytic complex and, consequently, to accord a linear determinism to the recurrent dreams associated with this complex (the dream of the child being kissed by a plumber, the dream of the child being offered a communion wafer by a priest, the dream of Séverine in a coffin overseen by the father). Dreams invite the spectator to speculate on the nature of her complex (which event caused her to become like this?) and provide clarification of her actions within the space of fictional reality (her work at the brothel). It is highly probable that Buñuel was familiar with the codes and grammar that generated Hollywood psychoanalysis, for, as Sandro points out, Buñuel realized how highly codified American cinema was in terms of genre (*Diversions* 12). When Buñuel visited Hollywood in 1930 to observe production techniques, he constructed his own “synoptic table of American cinema,” which he describes here:

The principle was the following: at the time American cinema obeyed such a precise and mechanical codification that it was possible, thanks to my system of sliding columns, by aligning a given setting with a given era and a given character, to know infallibly the main storyline of the film. (qtd. in Sandro 12)

While it is likely that Buñuel was familiar with the codes that generated the Hollywood psychoanalytic film, *Belle de Jour*’s recirculation of this intertext is coincident with the emergence of pop psychoanalysis during the

early to mid-1960s within articles published in periodicals such as *Marie-Claire* and *Elle*, which were devoted to an investigation of women's sexual lives. As feminist historian Claire Duchen points out, "Sexual pleasure was discussed in articles medicalised to give them legitimacy" (196). In November 1960, *Marie-Claire* would ask the question, "Doctor, why are there unsatisfied wives?" while the magazine's resident medical adviser was asked "Are there really women who are frigid?" (qtd. in Duchen 196). In December 1967, *Elle* would disclose to its readership, "The medical truth about frigidity," offering its reflections on the medical fact that frigid women were often blocked by inhibitions that were acquired in childhood (89). In the terms of popular psychology, *Elle* would provide a profile of the frigid woman, "Let's not forget that the frigid woman is often an incredible romantic. She dreams. The sexually active woman accepts herself and accepts her partner as he is" (91). In 1960, a research study conducted by the French Institute of Public Opinion entitled *Patterns of Sex and Love: A Study of the French Woman and Her Morals* was published that was considered the French equivalent of the American Kinsey report, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, published in 1953. In the section of the psychosocial study entitled "Marriage," many of the participants interviewed by "psychological investigators" point to the problem of frigidity:

Many women are frigid, but it's because they've never developed their potentialities. I believe that there are no more than three or four women out of ten who normally experience sexual pleasure. Maître M., attorney

In most cases, not having seen marriage as a gift of the body, the wife was shocked and disgusted by sexual relations from the beginning. It wasn't until I became a confessor that I realized that there are many frigid women. Abbé R.

I'm appalled by the number of frigid women there are in the world . . . There are many women who have always been frigid, who have never known anything else. More than a third of all my women patients are frigid, and most of the others do fairly well . . . Dr. C., Physician

Within this landmark research study, women's sexual pleasure is discussed in most interviews as the locus of a psychosocial and/or medical problem. This discursive rash of interest in the problem of frigidity documented within this research study and reflected within the articles of the popular French press resurfaces in *Belle de Jour*. The medicalized discourse on sexual pleasure that was circulating through the French press from the early to the mid-1960s overlaps with and serves as a supplement to the ready-made grammar of Hollywood psychoanalysis. Thus, the film's cen-

tral enigma, "What is wrong with Séverine? What event caused her to become like this?" does not only indicate the film's conformance to the psychoanalytic intertext of classical Hollywood cinema but also mirrors the medicalized discourse surfacing in the popular press and psychosocial studies published in France during the 1960s

II. Surrealism: The Contaminated Body

In *Belle de Jour*, the pop psychoanalysis of both classical Hollywood cinema and the French press converge at the overdetermined moment of Séverine's gaze, which serves as the metonymical signifier of madness. Her gaze is situated within the filmic fiction at the nexus of a discursive construction designed to perpetuate the ideology of the inviolate bourgeois family. This codification of her vision that conforms to the conventional grammar of classical Hollywood cinema appeals systematically to the spectator's desire for a certain type of conventional narrative, if only to block and redirect this desire. Within the opening bedroom scene, certain oppositions common to the psychoanalytic intertext are established. The divided space of the diegesis determines the representation of the relationship between the couple Pierre and Severine, which is negotiated across oppositional lines of masculine/feminine, health/illness, order/disorder, cleanliness/filth, real/imaginary. The negative connotations of illness that Séverine carries are conventionally codified in conformance with the Hollywood psychoanalytic film as a problem of vision. Within the initial scene of the film, Séverine's inability to frame fictional reality is generated from the grammar of the Hollywood psychoanalytic intertext, and thus, her glance is read as the metonymic signifier of her sickness. Yet, the spectator is simultaneously invited to read this problem of vision that opens the filmic narrative as the emblematic signifier of the surrealists' stance, blindness indexing the internal nature of their quest. Historian C.W. Bigsby has described the surrealist fascination with the problem of vision: "the surrealists deliberately closed their eyes to a reality so empty of imaginative insight. The famous photograph of the surrealists with their eyes shut is only partly a joke" (60). Within the initial scene, the conventional signification determined by Hollywood psychoanalysis intersects with the surrealist subtext at an overdetermined point of fusion—the glance of Séverine.

Throughout the film, Séverine's glance, its inability to frame the reality of the fiction, serves as the surrealist code that signals the opening up of the interior space of her imagination. Louis Aragon had claimed to see a surrealist glow in the eyes of all women (Bigsby 73). André Breton had remarked,

“the act of love, just like the picture or the poem, is disqualified on the part of the person giving himself to it, if it does not presuppose entering into a trance” (qtd. in Bigsby 73). For the surrealists, the recollections of dreams or hallucinations provide the means to an end, for they saw in the dream not evidence of undesirable neurosis or a neural memory of trauma but proof of the power of the erotic imagination (Bigsby 74). “Madness” is the key to perception within the surrealist doxa. While the surrealists’ fascination with the erotic and the unconscious was the product of Freudian influence, unlike Freud, they were not interested in restoring individuals to sanity. Within the surrealist doxa, “madness” is the key to a revolution in consciousness in which the mundane is transformed into the marvellous (Bigsby 74). In Buñuel’s surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1928) (the emblematic surrealist film to many historians), the opening segment graphically depicts the deliberate slitting of the female protagonist’s eye. I will propose that in the film *Belle de Jour*, the psychoanalytic intertext of classic Hollywood cinema fuses with the surrealist subtext at the overdetermined moment of the glance. Séverine’s glance is the site of a semantic reversal insofar as it signifies separate and contradictory readings of the intertextual frame of Freud. Thus, the blindness that serves as the metonymic signifier of Séverine’s unchaste mind can simultaneously be viewed from within a surrealist perspective as the badge of rebellion brandished against the conventional values of the bourgeoisie.

III. French National Identity: The Inviolable Body

I will suggest that the fictional filmic narrative of *Belle de Jour* that is structured around the story of a character who experiences difficulty reconciling herself to her personal history provides an allegory of postwar France, a nation that had experienced similar trauma. The film invites us to read the “complex” of Belle de Jour, her chaste body entombed within a bourgeois marriage and severed from memories of a contaminated past, as the dramatic metaphor for the neurotic evolution of the French nation. Film historian Maureen Turim discusses flashbacks in film narratives such as those that appear in *Belle de Jour*, pointing to the possibility that there “is an implicit analogy between the project of writing history and a phenomenological view of the functioning of personal memory” (105). As Turim notes, the historian imagines the past as the actual experience of individuals or groups and treats archival documents as pieces of a hypothetical memory to be reconstructed (105). Additionally, Turim suggests that attitudes and images from the past do not simply awaken by themselves in the present but

“are framed by mythologies operative in the present” (105). In *Belle de Jour*, the reinvention of the trope of chastity through the discursive frame of pop psychoanalysis that was surfacing in the popular press of the 1960s is historically overdetermined for, as Rousso has pointed out, the year 1964 marked “a turning point and a culmination” in the evolution of a national neurosis that had its source in Vichy (82).² Rousso traces the contours of the neurosis that he has termed “the Vichy syndrome” from its commencement in 1944 to its culmination in the media events of 1964.

In a pivotal speech at the Hôtel de Ville on August 25, 1944, Charles de Gaulle established the founding myth of the post-Vichy period:

Paris! Paris humiliated! Paris broken! Paris martyred! But Paris liberated! Liberated by itself, by its own people with the help of the armies of France, with the support and aid of France as a whole, of fighting France, of the only France, of the true France, of eternal France. (qtd. in Rousso 16)

De Gaulle’s statement to the French people marked the first attempt to effectively rewrite the history of the war years through the invention of the myth of an inviolate and eternal “France,” which would render the memory of the collaborationist Vichy regime null and void (Rousso 17). In this manner, the Liberation would serve Gaullist France as a “screen memory,” which would mask loss and internal conflict, thereby preventing the nation from mourning its traumas. In the year of 1964, Gaullism would consecrate its own legitimacy through a sublimated version of history and seek to confer on France an “invented honor” (Nourissier qtd. in Rousso 82). During the postwar years, the Resistance had become the subject of films, novels, and historical treatises, while Vichy and collaboration were rarely discussed (Rousso 83). By 1964, this nostalgia for the war years had given way to the optimism of a future planned and promoted by the cheerful technocrats known as the *jeune cadre*. Gaullism would thus seek to definitively orient all future memory and to forge an official version of the past suited to the nation’s grandiose self-image (Rousso 82). It was in 1964, as Rousso points out, that the new version of the Occupation achieved its definitive form in which France was cast as a nation that “forever and always resists the invader” (Rousso 82). This “invented honor” called for ceremonial consecration and an auspicious occasion was found: the ashes of martyred Resistance hero Jean Moulin were to be transferred to the Pantheon. The nationally televised spectacle focused on the connection between the martyr Moulin and the General, consolidating the fundamental axiom of Gaullist resistancialism in a series of equations in which, as Rousso points out, “the Resistance equals de Gaulle; de Gaulle equals France; hence, the Resistance equals

France (90). The commemoration was designed to produce a diversion of memory, recasting the martyr Moulin's role in the Resistance within the Gaullist mission to restore France's "grandeur." This retroactive reimagining of French history as an inviolate, commemorated national body provides the reference point to which the film *Belle de Jour* refers for, as we have seen, the trope of chastity resurfaces across the profilmic body of its heroine several years later.

Midway through the decade of the 1960s, French national identity that had been constructed under Gaullism and that had culminated in the televised ceremony would gradually begin to crack. This crack would be reflected in the realm of representation following the cultural revolution of May '68, but it is already evident in 1967 in the film *Belle de Jour*. The severed diegesis of the film, in which the codes of the conventional psychoanalytic intertext coexist beside the revolutionary codes of the surrealist subtext, crystallizes across the oppositional lines of health/illness, order/disorder, cleanliness/filth, real/imaginary. While film historian Susan Hayward has claimed that the political and national schizophrenia created by "the unreal reality" of Vichy has "little to no record in film" (140), the schizoid split evidenced within the fictional narrative of *Belle de Jour* does, indeed, provide a record several decades after the fact of the co-presence of two Frances, which were destined to clash in May '68: right against left, a party of order versus libertine and libertarian tendencies, a culture attached to tradition versus a culture that promoted reform, if not revolution (Rouso 98). The film *Belle de Jour* would provide an arena where conflicting memories could be worked through, for as Rouso points out, "the battle over the past was waged below the surface. Memory resembled not a paving stone hurled in anger but a 'cultural time bomb'" (99).

IV. The Dream: The Psychoanalytic Symptom or Sign of Subversion

The co-presence of intertextual frames in *Belle de Jour*, which refer to the codes of both conventional Hollywood psychoanalysis and revolutionary surrealist cinema, points to the coextensive presence of two Frances that would precipitate the guerre franco-française of May '68. In this manner, the division in diegetic space that structures the split identity of Belle de Jour provides an allegorical metaphor of the "broken mirror" of French national identity (Rouso 98). The severed diegetic space of the film, which self-consciously signifies not only the traumatized identity of Belle de Jour

but of France as well, is most evident in dream events that can be read by the spectator simultaneously as psychoanalytic symptoms or as signs of subversion.

Let's look at Séverine's daydream that follows her first visit to Madame Anaïs's brothel. Séverine retires to her bedroom with the excuse of a headache and then, suddenly, hears the sounds of cowbells and hooves. We are then shown, in the following tracking shot, bulls galloping through an open field. Our reading of the dream beneath the code of the psychoanalytic intertext is determined by the discourse of the men, Pierre and Husson, which anchors the visual images of the dream, bringing together the distant realities of the exterior space of the narrative and the interior space of the dream. Husson asks, "Is the soup ready?" to which Pierre responds, "It's cold and I can't warm it up again." Within this brief exchange, the image of the soup is anchored and given a metaphoric signified, for both the soup and Séverine share the property of coldness. Husson continues, "What's the time?" to which Pierre responds, "Between two and five, not later than five." Thus the phrase that, within the space of the real, denotes Séverine's working hours in the brothel anchors the image of the men shoveling cow shit, and we must conclude that Séverine and the manure share the common property of "dirtiness." The men's discourse forces us to read Séverine's dream as providing retroactive clarification of her actions in the exterior space of the real (her actions at the brothel were the re-enactment of an interior event).

Séverine's lack of vision in the real indexes her lack of desire, delineated within exterior space as the "complex" of her frigidity. Her interiorized vision is the space of her unconscious desire that culminates radically in the final image of the dream. This image shows her face progressively blackened and covered in the cow shit being thrown by the men who chant the invectives, "Bitch! Slut! Whore! Maggot! Pig! Scum! Garbage! Tramp!" to which Séverine can only murmur, "Pierre, Pierre, please stop. I love you." The image of Séverine that opens the dream and the image of her that marks closure share a pictorial sameness, as both represent her illness as "blindness." The conceptual antecedent renders the difference. Séverine's lack of vision, her metaphorical blindness within the space of fictional reality denoted her lack of desire. Her blackened face, her literal blindness, within the interior space of the dream was precisely the mark of her perverse masochism, the mirage of her sickness.

The codification determined by the psychoanalytic intertext would demand that we read Séverine's lack of desire as denoted by her lack of vision as an illness, a sickness, the locus of her complex. Our reading of the dream that fixes its signified as "the return of the unconscious repressed" is pinned

down by the men's invectives that are uttered like a magical incantation. Yet in this film, the shock aesthetic that characterized surrealist erotica is recirculated and narrativized within the dream event. While the surrealist code of blindness that informs Séverine's dream recalls the opening images of *Un Chien Andalou*, the surrealist intertext can also be located in the iconography, the representation of the interior space of the dream. The representation of Séverine's unconscious desire that shows bulls galloping across the plains accompanied by the sound of hooves and cowbells is a citation of the surrealist film *L'Age d'or*, which contains the image of a Jersey cow lying on a bed accompanied by the sound-off of cowbells. The codification of erotica within the surrealist films *Un Chien Andalou* and *L'Age d'or* was intended to defamiliarize conventional representations of erotica and to revolutionize conventional morality. Séverine's unconscious desire was precisely to "shock" and to "be shocked" by men, and it is in this manner that the surrealist aesthetic is recodified within the interior space of dreams, where it serves to index her "subversive" and "transgressive" character. The final image of her blackened face can be read as an overdetermined moment of surrealist erotica, her blindness the emblem of the shock aesthetic. In *Belle de Jour*, "the return of the unconscious repressed" becomes synonymous with the sexual revolution.

The surrealist shock aesthetic that informs our reading of the dream is interlaced with traces of Sadian eroticism.³ This intertextual layering is unsurprising, for as Arnold Heumakers has noted in "De Sade, a Pessimistic Libertine," the surrealists held the Marquis de Sade in high esteem precisely for his moral and sexual candor (119). Sadian eroticism is derived from the philosophical dimension of libertinism, which sees the universe as dichotomized into victims and libertines. From a Sadian perspective, the sincere belief of virtuous people in their own morality and religion marks them as victims, while the libertine has relinquished all prejudice and superstition (Heumakers 117). The Sadian libertine is without scruples and so is free to satisfy all lusts and to find the highest satisfaction possible in criminal acts (Heumakers 117). The dream in which Séverine encounters her father "the Duke" recalls the remote estates, inaccessible castles, and subterranean vaults where the decadent aristocracy of de Sade's novels indulged in uninhibited orgies. In de Sade's cosmology, destruction becomes the universal force of nature and consequently, the natural imperative of the libertine (Heumakers 116). The spectacle of Séverine's annihilation that closes on the emblematic image of her blindness seems essential to the film's

rhetoric of destruction and revolt in which the intertextual invocation of the surrealist shock aesthetic is interlaced with a Sadian erotics of annihilation, prefiguring sexual and cultural revolution.

The film's invocation of Sadian libertinism recreates the ethos of the *ancien régime* as historically associated with the moral depravity and disease peculiar to pre-revolutionary France. Indeed, Séverine's nightmarish phantasm—her blindness, her blackness, and her madness that surface within the interior space of the dream—invokes the mythic specter of the syphilitic, which had continued to haunt the collective unconscious of the French nation since the infamous orgies of the aristocracy. Syphilis, often called “the French sickness” (Quétel 10), had already enjoyed five centuries of colorful history. The disease had served as the status symbol of the philanthropic nobility during the *ancien régime* and was described by one writer as “the exclusive property of gentlewomen and gentlemen” (qtd. in Quétel 71). The virus, conveyed by the blood, would spread throughout the body, and patients would, “lose an eye, and often both, or large portions of their eyelids, and . . . remained hideous to behold, on account of their scarred eyes” (Paré qtd. in Quétel 57). The libertines of Louis XIV's reign, the generation of nobility that had precipitated the French revolution through excessive self-indulgence, had been notorious pox victims. It was within prerevolutionary France that an anti-pox propaganda campaign was waged by the bourgeoisie, who would attempt to define itself strategically as the only viable alternative to the debauchery of the aristocracy. The insurgent bourgeoisie promoted the notion that the disease was the cause of the “decline of the French temperament,” capable of destroying not only “the present race” but also “that yet to be born” (qtd. in Quétel 103).

Contemporaneous with the inter-war surrealist film movement and the popularization of Freudian psychoanalysis, there appeared in France a mythic archetype called the “hérédo,” an abbreviation of “hereditary syphilis” (Quétel 170). Historian Claude Quétel's observation that the whole inter-war generation was literally obsessed with the fear of syphilis seems pertinent to our discussion of the film, which was adapted from Joseph Kessel's novel *Belle de Jour* originally published in 1929 (192). During the 1920s and 1930s, a wave of anti-syphilitic propaganda suddenly surfaced in France, surfeiting the media with thousands of posters, tracts, press articles, and pamphlets, not to mention lectures, radio programs, the theatre, and the cinema (Quétel 180). This obsessive fear of contagion culminated during the Occupation, when syphilis served the Vichy régime as a scapegoat. The disease was seen by the supporters of Maréchal Pétain as symptomatic of the moral degeneracy responsible for France's defeat. As Quétel points out, the three con-

straining watchwords of the time “Travail, Famille, Patrie,” “signaled a concern with the idea of *mens sana in corpore sano* that was far from the former attachment to “liberties,” which had had such disastrous consequences” (206). The remarks of Dr. J. Payenneville published in *Que sais-je?* (1942), dedicated to *Le péril vénérien*, provide insight into the role syphilis played during the Occupation:

We are conscious of the fact that, having supported to the utmost the organization of the anti-venereal struggle in this country, we have made a substantial contribution to the work of rebuilding and regeneration of France, to which Marshal Pétain has dedicated himself with so much courage and self-denial. (qtd. in Quétel 207)

In this manner, the moral degeneracy of the French state was displaced to a “medicalized” degeneracy. The “Ligue française pour le relèvement de la moralité publique,” a product of Vichy dedicated to the improvement of the moral standards of the country and the defense of family spirit, made an appeal to Maréchal Pétain to close all brothels. According to their plan of campaign, soliciting would be firmly suppressed; “male demand” would be reduced thanks to a “climate of moral cleanliness”; “the female invitation” would be reduced by moral surveillance (including the monitoring of women’s magazines, such as *Confidences*, which “distort the minds of hundreds of thousands of young women”) (qtd. in Quétel 246).

While syphilis no longer posed an immediate threat following World War II, the phantom disease would continue to haunt the collective unconscious of the mass public, becoming what Nicole Valleur calls “the living symbol of a past transgression (a curse on two generations)” (qtd. in Quétel 168). French author Louise Hervieu’s description of the mythic *hérédo* in her feverish novel *Le Crime* (1937) discloses the mythic resonance of the contaminated race:

How can we escape the heredity of our Species? We are *hérédos* . . . In the white races the disease concentrates on the most vulnerable parts, the overworked and enfeebled nerve centres. It produces people who are mad, half-mad, quarter-mad, unbalanced, obsessed. (qtd. in Quétel 171)

The mythic archetype of the *hérédo* reappears in *Belle de Jour*, where it serves once again as the symbol of a past national transgression. The inability of Séverine’s glance to frame the real thus becomes not simply the code of her psychoanalytic “complex” but simultaneously the symptom of the contaminated race that had been historically linked to blindness, madness, degeneracy, and death. Indeed, the discourses of hereditary syphilis and psychoanalysis intersect, for Freud acknowledged hereditary syphilis as

a possible factor in the Dora case, speculating that the descendants of syphilitics seemed especially susceptible to grave neuropsychosis. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud further speculates that hysteria and obsessional neurosis could be attributable to hereditary syphilis:

In more than half of the severe cases of hysteria, obsessional neurosis, etc., which I have treated psychotherapeutically, I have been able to prove with certainty that the patient's father suffered from syphilis before marriage . . . I should like to make it perfectly plain that the children who later became neurotic bore no physical signs of hereditary syphilis, so that it was their abnormal sexual constitution that was to be regarded as a last echo of the syphilitic heritage. (102)

As Alain Corbin points out in an article devoted to hereditary syphilis, "it was as if doctors were translating the bourgeois fantasies of their time into scientific language" (qtd. in Quétel 169). The myth of the *hérédé*, which had been generated in the scientific language of the psychoanalytic and medical communities as well as in the fictions that appealed to the popular imagination, was a discursive construction that perpetuated the ideology of the chaste bourgeois family by serving as its scapegoat.

Séverine's unchaste unconscious thus serves as the emblematic return of a repressed national memory that the film intentionally invokes in order to exorcise. Her unconscious mind not only serves as the symptom of a psychoanalytic complex that requires self-abasement as the prelude to sexual ecstasy but also as the invocation of the mythic specter of hereditary syphilis, the emblematic French disease that had historically served as the scapegoat and the scourge of the Vichy régime. The return of Séverine's unconscious repressed in aberrant dream events thus simultaneously serves as the return of repressed national memory, symbolizing the moral stain of Vichyism and collaboration, which in this film is displaced from the female sexual organ onto the female gaze, the metonymical signifier for the female mind. The eruption of the dream event thus poses an implicit political threat not simply to the chaste construct of Séverine's personal identity but to the chaste and homogeneous version of national identity invented and consecrated by the Gaullist state. The trope of female madness, codified as blindness in this film, invokes the memory of a national contagion that would provide the point of comparison between two distinct historical epochs: the French malady not only symbolized the moral scourge of Vichy but simultaneously served as the emblem of the infectious aristocratic libertinism that had originally flowered in prerevolutionary France. Indeed, it is Madame Anaïs who describes Belle de Jour to her prospective client as a "true aristocrat."

The sexual depravity associated with Séverine's aristocratic character is thus seen as the sign of rebellion against the values of the "moral" bourgeoisie. As Rousso points out, the generation of May '68 repudiated the Gaullist vision of France and, therefore, implicitly, the inviolate version of its history (98). The students of May '68 were contesting the Gaullist state that conceived of itself as the heir to the Resistance (Rousso 99). Their challenge was directed not only at its present identity but at its history as well for, as Rousso remarks, "it was because the students sensed something invented in de Gaulle's attempt to substitute himself for the Resistance that it left them unmoved" (99). Unlike their parents, they refused such panaceas, choosing instead to expose the moral contamination at stake in the history of the Occupation. The generation of May '68 would denounce the sublimated revision of history represented in the commemorative ceremony of 1964 and thus would precipitate France's reconceptualization of the Occupation (Rousso 98). Reflecting the mood of pre-revolutionary France, the severed diegesis of *Belle de Jour* reveals the crack in the mirror of French national identity that would create a revolution in memory and thereby mark a fundamental break with what had gone before.

V. Dual Closure: The Broken Mirror of National Identity

Belle de Jour provides dual closure according to the dual hermetic logic of the pop psychoanalysis of classical Hollywood cinema and the revolutionary intertext of surrealist cinema. While each reading is valid according to the internal logic of the given intertext, each reading invalidates the other. As Sandro points out in *Diversions of Pleasure*, the solidarity of the entire narrative system is shattered retroactively, for the dichotomy upon which its logic has been based has been discredited (134).⁴

At this point, I will briefly review the final events of the film that culminate in the confrontation scene between Pierre and Séverine in their Paris apartment. Pierre, who has been shot by Séverine's lover, the young hoodlum Marcel, is seated in a wheelchair wearing dark glasses, completely paralyzed, speechless, and blind. Séverine remarks to Pierre that since "his accident" she no longer dreams. At this moment, the scene is interrupted by the entrance of Husson. When Séverine meets him at the door, Husson insists on revealing to Pierre the truth of the situation, the identity of the assassin, and the secret of Séverine's activities at Anaïs's brothel. While Husson meets with Pierre in private, we must assume that he exposes the whole story of Séverine's clandestine life. When Husson leaves, Séverine reenters the room. A close-up reveals Pierre's expressionless countenance

from behind his dark glasses. Séverine picks up her embroidery and starts to work, but she no longer has the strength. A close-up shows Pierre's hands unclenching in his lap, suggesting that he has died. Startled, Séverine leans forward to look, while the sound of cowbells and the thunder of hooves accompany her glance. We remember that these same sounds had served earlier in the film to signal the shift to an interior vision, the space of Séverine's unconscious. Suddenly, Pierre takes off his dark glasses, sits up in his wheelchair, smiles at Séverine and asks her, "What are you thinking about, Séverine?" She responds simply, "I was thinking of you, Pierre." His question and her response are identical to those at the opening of the film that had signaled Séverine's return to consciousness. Let's not forget that in the opening scene it was Pierre's dominant glance that had reframed Séverine's rape as a dream.

If precedence is accorded to the dominant intertext of psychoanalysis within the final scene, Séverine's vision is reframed beneath Pierre's dominant glance within the exterior space of the real. The internal logic of the Hollywood psychoanalytic intertext provides perfect closure to the fictional filmic narrative, providing a miraculous cure to Séverine's complex—through the elimination of dreams seen as symptoms. This cure to Séverine's complex of frigidity within the exterior space of the real leads us directly back in circular fashion to bourgeois marriage where the story began. The harmonious reunion of the husband and wife is the guarantor of her cure, the cure provided within the code of glances. As the marriage couple raise their glances as if to propose a toast, Séverine comes forward and kisses Pierre on the forehead. They stand momentarily holding one another in their arms. The final shot of the film, the landau that passes below, framed within Séverine's glance, is the final iconic signifier of the cure, for Séverine no longer projects herself into the scene.

Yet, as we had pointed out, the film provides dual closure according to the dual hermetic logic determined not only by the grammar of Hollywood psychoanalysis but by the revolutionary surrealist cinema as well. Within the final scene, the audio cue of cowbells and hooves accompanying the question and answer exchange between Pierre and Séverine had been established as a surrealist code that signified a shift from the exterior space of the diegetic real to the interior space of dream. If precedence is accorded to the surrealist code of sound, then Pierre's return to life and the couple's reunion occurs within the space of Séverine's dream. Yet such a reading of the scene would contradict not only the significance of the code of glances but the couple's question and answer exchange upon which the division of diegetic space has been based.

The surrealist code of blindness had informed the dream events and was localized at the overdetermined moment of the glance. If precedence is accorded to the surrealist intertext, we must read the final scene as the inversion of the reading predetermined by the psychoanalytic grammar. Seen from this perspective, Séverine literally and metaphorically opens her eyes to reframe and fix the scene within the interior space of her vision as her dream. Consequently, Pierre's blindness is literally and metaphorically validated within Séverine's interiorized vision: his shooting, his convalescence, consequent blindness, and death. Séverine's vision determined by the surrealist intertext provides magical closure in which the reunion of the couple occurs with the interior space of her dream.

Within the final scene, the intersection and rupture of the counter-code systems defamiliarizes the codes and the ideologies that the codes presuppose. If the final scene occurs within the space of the diegetic real, it becomes clear that our definition of fictional reality must be radically altered to accommodate a reading in which the sanctity of bourgeois marriage is celebrated. If, on the other hand, the final scene occurs in the space of a surrealist dream, then we must distrust the narrative codes that suggest the contrary. This crystallized moment of dual narrative closure offered to the spectator immediately implodes from the force of the film's logic to offer, instead, a dramatic metaphor for the interrogation of personal and national identity that occurs when memory is cut loose, dispersed—like the dreams of *Belle de Jour* that allegorically invoke the nightmarish phantasms of the national past. We are invited to read this moment of dual closure as allegorically pointing to the co-presence of two Frances—to see the film's shattered diegetic space as the broken mirror of French national identity (Roussou 98).

The film, similar to the surrealist text, calls for the murder of conventional vision and, in this way, aligns itself with a surrealist notion of the radical disorientation of the self. Blindness, which is the condition of true vision, and which is metaphorical in the film's imagery, is extended within the final scene of the film *Belle de Jour* to the profilmic spectator's perceptual process (Sandro, "Assault" 7). The pre-revolutionary body of May '68 constructed itself beneath the banner of perceptual and sexual liberation, promising its apocalyptic vision as the only viable alternative to the inviolate version of national history consecrated under Gaullism. Blindness that serves as the code of perceptual revolution paradoxically predicts the outcome of the May '68 revolution, which would not affect the realm of power but the realm of representation. After the death of de Gaulle in 1970, France suddenly found itself "unable to find the thread of its history and anxious

about not living up to its heroic dream" (Thibaud qtd. in Rousso 100). New images of the past, new representations of Vichy such as Marcel Ophuls's *The Sorrow and the Pity* (1971) marked a definitive break with what had gone before. Ophuls's documentary that focuses on daily life in Clermont-Ferrand, a city regarded as typical of France under the Occupation, shows a diversity of characters, actors in the narrative of history. The film records the eye-witness accounts of Pétainists, collaborators, along with the testimonials of nameless resistance fighters, while it elides the great figures of *la grande histoire*, such as General de Gaulle, who is virtually erased from the film (Rousso 101). The year 1968 marked a turning point in France's conceptualization of the Occupation, the year in which repressed national memory returned in full force, precipitating what Rousso has termed the "broken mirror" of French identity consecrated under de Gaulle (99). In the pre-revolutionary year of 1967, *Belle de Jour* represents the first crack in the mirror, if not a first symptom of the national neurosis that had originated in Vichy.

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Notes

¹ Paul Sandro's compelling discussion of *Belle de Jour* as "an erotic machine" (138) in *Diversions of Pleasure: Luis Buñuel and the Crises of Desire* underlies much of my thinking about the film throughout this essay. The chapter on *Belle de Jour* to which I refer first appeared as "Textuality of the Subject in *Belle de Jour*" *Sub-Stance* 26, 1980: 43-56. See also "Assault and Disruption in the Cinema: Four Films by Luis Buñuel" Diss. Cornell U, 1974, in which Sandro analyzes in detail *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), *L'Age d'or* (1930), *The Exterminating Angel* (1962), and *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972). This valuable study provides an elaboration of the figural discourse of surrealism, using A.J. Greimas's functional classification of roles in narrative fiction. See also Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1981) and Marvin D'Lugo, "Glances of Desire in *Belle de Jour*," *Film Criticism* 2.2-3 (1978): 84-89.

² See also Stephanie Jed's *Chaste Thinking* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1989), in which she traces "the logic of chaste thinking" to its origins in the legend of the rape of Lucretia, which was reproduced in Coluccio Salutati's *Declamatio Lucretiae* in the second half of the fifteenth century in northeastern Italy. Jed offers her perspective on this legend that serves as a master narrative: "The humanistic tradition that has transmitted the legend of the rape of Lucretia has performed a similar function of isolating the meaning of Lucretia's rape from the material circumstances in which interpretation takes place each time this rape is reproduced. In this way, the rape of Lucretia has acquired a universal meaning divorced from historical conditions; in every age and place, it always serves the same function, as a prologue to liberty" (12). Jed points out that the rape of Lucretia has come to serve as the necessary prologue to the act of political liberation, and that consequently, it is essential to identify the tropes of chaste thinking, which persistently reappear in contemporary narratives. Jed's insights seem pertinent to our discussion of *Belle de Jour*, which was released in France at such a pre-revolutionary moment.

³ Paul Sandro in *Diversions of Pleasure* points out that the final segment of *L'Age d'or* represents the last episode of de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom*, depicting a band of men who successfully perpetuate anarchy within the enclosed space of the castle of Selligny. The title reads: "Four well-known and utter scoundrels had locked themselves up in an impregnable castle for one hundred and twenty days to celebrate the most brutal of orgies. These fiends had no law but their depravity. They were libertines who had no god, no principles, and no religion. The least criminal among them was defiled by more evil than you can name. In his eyes, the life of a woman—what am I saying, of one woman, of all the women in the world—counts for as little as a fly's" (66-67).

⁴ In *Diversions of Pleasure* Sandro argues that the film functions like Barthes's *text of bliss*, insofar as this final scene serves as "an interrogation, one that leads cross-referentially to any and all segments of the film, questioning, indeed canceling, the very possibility of narrative causality" (133).

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Sites of Memory

Tracing France's Cultural Self-Consciousness



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*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*

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