

Untimely Resnais:

Muriel's Disarticulations of Justice

In a current global political context haunted by the spectre of the “non-person” – a context which includes illegal yet state-sanctioned acts of war, imprisonment, torture and rendition flights – revisiting Alain Resnais’s 1963 *Muriel ou le temps d’un retour* (*Muriel, or the Time of Return*), a film which has at its absent centre a woman tortured by the French during the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), may appear timely. Indeed, the timeliness of various acts of revisiting and return is precisely what is at stake in *Muriel*, as indicated by the title of the film itself. Yet, Resnais’s film has often been judged *untimely* in its failure to engage directly with the immediate events of the Algerian War (*Muriel* was released just a year after the end of the conflict).¹ For some critics, this failure crystallizes in the film’s refusal to represent Muriel – absent from image and sound, Muriel is neither seen nor heard; we know nothing of her life beyond the event of her torture; we never witness events from Muriel’s point of view. Nor does the film appear to engage with the military and political realities of the Algerian War itself (in contrast to, say, Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* [*La Bataille d’Alger*], released in 1966, three years after *Muriel*). Though censorship in France at the time of *Muriel*’s release limited representation of the Algerian War (evidenced most clearly by the ban upon Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Petit Soldat* [1960]), it has also been suggested that such restrictions were perhaps not obstructive enough to warrant the degree of narrative ellipsis adopted by Resnais’s film (Stora, 1998, p. 41; quoted in Gauch, 2001, p. 48n4).

¹ See, for example, Boudjedra 1971, p. 27; see also Gauch 2001, pp. 47–57.

Thus while *Muriel* foregrounds reflections on questions of memory, testimony and forgetting, Muriel's absent-present position within the film becomes indicative of what Suzanne Gauch calls the "disappearing text" of the war (2001, p. 53).² On this reading, a failure to give a voice and image to Muriel is understood as part of the film's broader failure to engage with the historical and political issues surrounding the conflict in Algeria (viewed, as in Susan Sontag's reading of the film, as a consequence of Resnais's favouring of aesthetics over politics [1963, pp. 23-7]). In this essay, I wish to reconsider *Muriel* beyond the terms of this perceived privileging of aesthetic abstraction over political engagement, and to look at ways in which the spatio-temporal organization of the film is bound to forms of political critique.³ Specifically, I argue that the film's differential, interruptive configurations of history and place can be read as carving out a time and space for justice, through a perpetual revisiting and reanimation of historical and testimonial traces.

Though my primary focus here is on justice rather than mourning, the two issues are deeply interlocked, as Jacques Derrida suggests in *Specters of Marx*: to render justice

² For an important discussion of French cinema, including *Muriel*, as "so often fantasized as empty of Algerians", see Austin, 2007 (p. 182).

³ Here my argument is indebted to the recuperation of the political impetus of *Muriel* proposed by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, 1993, pp. 181–208. To their reading I add in particular a focus on the differential dynamics of justice. Since writing this essay in 2011, I have encountered further very useful discussions of the political dimensions of *Muriel*, including Max Silverman's reading of the film's "palimpsestic structure" of "concentrationary memory" (Silverman, 2013), and Maria Flood's analysis via Butler's reflections on "grievability" (Flood, forthcoming).

is to resist any terminable work of mourning, to refuse to ontologize death (1994, p. 97). Here an opening to justice might be understood as what Ranjana Khanna, drawing on Derrida in her discussion of Algerian history, gender and representation, calls a form of “critical melancholia”, which brings into focus “the inassimilable, the barely incorporated, and the melancholic traces that in turn cause damage to the force field of mournful national history that fails to introject them” (2008, p. xvii).⁴ In resonance with Khanna’s diagnosis of “barely incorporated” histories, which she herself links to a call for justice, *Muriel* is a film in which melancholic traces of the inassimilable surface at critical moments to fissure the protective epistemological screens of (imperial) memory. The fictional crises of *Muriel* – the event of torture and the failures and fault-lines of memory that the film explores – are indicative of a wider historical reality – of French atrocities in Algeria and of collective amnesia surrounding these acts – that is melancholically resistant to memorialization, in that it perpetually calls into question the mournful memory-work of the nation-state.⁵ As I turn to focus on issues of justice in *Muriel*, I seek to bear in mind Khanna’s linking of justice to the “melancholic remainder[s]” of Algeria’s traumatic history of decolonization (2008, p. 15), to the encrypted traces that a French nationalist account

⁴ Khanna argues fruitfully for the ways in which Derrida’s Algerian heritage shapes his thinking of deconstructive justice (2008, pp. 31–67). Derrida’s thought thus intersects with *Muriel* via a range of interwoven concerns.

⁵ As Khanna notes, collective amnesia in the aftermath of the Algerian War was encouraged and sanctioned by French amnesty laws, first introduced through the Evian Accords of 1962. This highlights “the very particularity of the Algerian situation [...] in terms of the forms of exception, marginalization, erasure, and amnesia that characterize it [...]” (2008, p. 3, p. 8).

fails to introject.

What would it mean for *Muriel* – a film – to render justice? This would be a notion of justice understood not in a judicial or legal sense but rather in terms that conjoin the aesthetic to both the political and the ethical. In considering a mode of justice rendered by Resnais's film, I follow Derrida's thinking of justice as incommensurable, as interruptive of the present, as always to come. In contrast to the timeliness of a return to *Muriel* suggested above, justice for Derrida can only ever be *untimely*, for justice operates beyond ontology – it is that which is addressed to those no longer or not yet present (hence the centrality of the spectre and the “hauntological” in his reflections on justice [Derrida, 1994, p. 97]. Justice is thus anachronistic, incalculable, *out of joint* (a phrase which Derrida borrows from *Hamlet*) (Derrida, 1994, p. 18). Such a notion of justice would appear apposite for a consideration of *Muriel* – not only does the film circulate around the untimely absence of its eponymous subject, but, in its irrational cuts and interruptive editing, it also deploys discontinuous forms of temporality, configuring time itself as out of joint.⁶

It is not only time that is out of joint in *Muriel* but space as well. As the film cuts erratically between various locations, space becomes dislocated, disjunctive and incalculable. This spatio-temporal discontinuity appears to exemplify the association between “non-chronological time” and “non-localizable relations” proposed by Gilles

⁶ On untimely cinema in general, see Jodi Brooks and Therese Davis (Eds.), 2012.

This edited issue includes a discussion of untimeliness in Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad*, which draws principally on Badiou's thinking of the event (Ling, 2012).

Deleuze in his reading of Resnais (2005, p. 119).⁷ Yet Deleuze goes on to suggest that space is not the main concern of Resnais's cinema: "The image no longer has space and movement as its primary characteristics but topology and time" (2005, p. 121). Though space and movement remain central to my consideration of *Muriel*, I aim to take up Deleuze's focus on topology in connection with my discussion of time. Topology emphasises both the shifting dimensions of objects under conversion and underlying properties of interconnectedness, offering a fertile framework for considering the spatialization of processes of memory, encryption and association (Colman, 2011, pp. 163-178). In what follows, I thus focus on the event of Muriel's torture – and, by extension, questions of ethical and political responsibility – as configured both hauntologically and topologically by the film. In this sense, the topological emphasis of Deleuze's account of Resnais's cinema adds to the hauntological contours of Derrida's thinking of justice, and vice versa.⁸ Therein may lie the possibility of viewing *Muriel* in terms of an incommensurable justice addressed to a being (or beings) no longer or not yet present – a justice which, in dialogue with the durational and cartographic dynamics of cinema, is (dis)articulated here not only temporally but spatially too.

Though the Algerian War figures as a latent presence in earlier films by Resnais, such as *Night and Fog* (*Nuit et brouillard*, 1955), *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959) and *Last Year at Marienbad* (*L'Année dernière à Marienbad*, 1961), *Muriel* constitutes his most explicit (albeit indirect) engagement with the conflict (Wilson, 2006, pp. 88-89).

⁷ For a Deleuzian reading of time and untimeliness in Resnais, see Boljkovac, 2013.

⁸ On broader connections between Deleuze and Derrida, see Patton and Protevi (Eds.), 2003.

The film is set in Boulogne-sur-mer in France, focusing on the lives of Bernard (Jean-Baptiste Thiérrée), who has recently returned from fighting in the Algerian War, and his stepmother Hélène (Delphine Seyrig). Hélène has invited her former lover Alphonse (Jean-Pierre Kérien) to visit; he has brought with him his current lover Françoise (Nita Klein), under the pretence that she is his niece. Alphonse's visit allows for an exchange of conflicting memories with Hélène relating to a love affair that they had just before the outbreak of World War II. As Alphonse reminisces about the past, he pretends that he has spent time living and working in Algeria. The space of Hélène's apartment thus provides the locus for a reanimation of memories of Algeria and of World War II, both imagined and real. The film situates these domestic dramas of recollection in relation to shots of the city either in ruins or rebuilt, recalling the large-scale destruction and reconstruction that took place in Boulogne during and after World War II. The city thus bears the traces of its own traumatic history, the background against which the memories of the various characters will be revisited and recast, as the film explores *le temps d'un retour* of its title.

"Muriel" is the name given to an Algerian woman whom Bernard apparently witnessed being tortured to death by French soldiers during the Algerian war – an event that he claims not only to have seen but to have taken part in. While pretending to Hélène that Muriel is the name of his fiancée, Bernard spends his time attempting to document the event of Muriel's torture, assembling old journal entries and photographs, filming around Boulogne and viewing home movie footage from Algeria. Yet Bernard's efforts to archive the event reveal only the failure of such an undertaking: as he throws his camera into the sea, the film gestures self-reflexively to the unbridgeable gap between truth and representation. As Robert – a fellow ex-

soldier and now a member of the OAS (Organisation de l'armée secrète) – who was also complicit in the torture of Muriel, remarks to Bernard: “You want to tell the story of Muriel? Muriel is something which can’t be told.” This resistance to retelling is foregrounded in the scene in which Bernard’s tape is switched on by Françoise, playing back a cacophony of male laughter which we may infer to be the sounds of Muriel’s torture. But Bernard rushes to rip the tape out of the machine, silencing the disturbing sounds. He goes on to shoot Robert dead – an act that hovers problematically between a form of retribution for Muriel, a disavowal of his own responsibility, and a further violent silencing of the past.

In its disjointed narrative arc, the film arguably risks allowing Bernard’s failed documentation of the torture of Muriel to figure as symptomatic of a psychological (rather than political) crisis of guilt and memory, thus relegating Muriel, and the Algerian War, to a symbolic function divorced from historical referentiality. As Gauch puts it: “Bernard’s co-option and erasure of Muriel’s battered body in the tale of his personal torment repeats a violence that the film just begins to acknowledge” (2001, p. 51). *Muriel*’s aesthetics of fragmentation and ellipsis further threatens to obscure the truth of Muriel’s suffering, and, by extension, the historical real of atrocities committed by the French during the Algerian War. Indeed, Gauch suggests that it is the very ambiguity of Muriel’s place – and of Algeria – in the film that facilitates this stylized aesthetics of disjunction (2001, p. 51). The criticism here is that by enabling a particular aesthetics, *Muriel* disables a certain politics. Yet what I wish to suggest, through further examination of the film’s hesitations over forms of historical remembrance, is that *Muriel*’s aesthetics of discontinuity plays a key role in its politics and ethics of engagement.

Spectral returns

In probing the limits of filmic representation, *Muriel* raises fundamental issues of memory, testimony and knowledge, asking questions about what it is possible to see, hear, remember and know, in ways that recall Jacques Rancière's notion of the "distribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2006). Through Bernard's attempts to accumulate what he refers to at one point as "preuves" – the term resonates in its double meaning in French as both "proof" and "film rushes" – *Muriel* self-reflexively explores specific links between evidence, testimony and film. In so doing, the film raises doubts, as Emma Wilson suggests, about "the possibilities of testifying, of bringing grief and guilt into the open" (2006, p. 91). *Muriel* gestures to cinema's impotence in the face of any such efforts of recuperation. The fragility of audio and visual forms of evidence is emphasized – both in Bernard's discarding of the tape and in a filmic image (possibly of Algeria) that we see melting when projected in Bernard's studio. The vulnerability and ephemerality of these testimonial media – of tape and of celluloid – furnish a form of self-referential comment on the limits of representation, the mutability of "proof" and the instability of acts of memorialization. As such, the film moves from an avowed emphasis on the stabilizing certainties of "evidence" towards the differential dimensions of the trace. In an early scene, Hélène chastises Bernard for leaving a coffee pot on one of her antique tables, asking how she will sell it if it has a scratch; a close-up shows Bernard's hand brushing the surface of the table, but a slight residue remains. As a concern with physical marks on objects anticipates an engagement with the psychical traces of culpable acts, *Muriel* redistributes the sensible, signalling a surfeit of testimonial remainders that

will surface to unsettle the film's epistemological frames.

Such an engagement with the uncertainties of memorialization points to *Muriel's* hauntological reconfiguring of time. This is exemplified not only by the film's interruptive, non-linear editing (for example, as Celia Britton notes, the abrupt insert of daytime shots of Boulogne within a scene set at night [Britton 1990, 37]) but also by particular moments in which the link between image and sound becomes disjointed; as Britton observes: "the dialogue from one shot is carried over to the next, where it acts as a jarring background to an entirely different image" (Britton 1990, 37). This desynchronized structure also occurs in reverse, for example, when we hear a conversation between Hélène and Alphonse over images of Bernard and Françoise in the street outside the flat, before the film shows Hélène and Alphonse in conversation. Image and sound seem further at odds when apparently banal moments are punctuated by a strident musical score (Gauch, 2001, p. 50), as though the film itself were out of synch. Such formal disarticulations and deferrals appear to give cinematic body to Derrida's configuration of the spectral as "outside of any synchrony" (1994, p. 7). Here image and sound are rendered out of joint, as the film enacts a perpetual interruption of the present moment, elaborating a non-synchronic structure that ushers in a surfacing of "melancholic remainders". (The mise-en-scène further emphasises this anachronistic dimension through the eclectic mixture of antiques in Hélène's apartment.) As the film shifts from a register of ontology to *hauntology*, the present is held in suspension, opening to a perpetual revisiting and reshaping of certain memories (Derrida, 1994, p. 7).⁹

⁹ On amnesia, repetition and deferral in *Muriel*, see Croombs 2010.

This hauntological reconfiguring of time comes to the fore in the scene in which Bernard recounts the torture of Muriel while watching what appears to be an extract of his own home movie footage of Algeria. Through the conceit of the film-within-the-film, *Muriel* reminds us once more of the instability of “proof”, as images here are not what they seem. The grainy footage of French soldiers in Algeria – relaxed, laughing and apparently at ease with the locals – is undercut by the visceral violence of Bernard’s commentary. At stake here is not so much an aesthetics of juxtaposition as one of interrelatedness – as Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit suggest, the sequence invites us to draw (delayed) connections between image and sound, for example, between the soldier diving and Bernard’s description of Muriel looking “as if she had been left under water” (1993, p. 196).¹⁰ What the sequence brings into focus is a logic of inextricability that binds the visible scenes of military life on-screen to the invisible scene of torture off-screen.

Bernard claims to have been unaffected by the torture of Muriel at the time: after viewing her corpse, he slept well. Yet the apparent indifference of his account is undermined not only by the distress in his voice but by one detail in particular: “Muriel’s eyes were not closed.” Echoing the same words in Bernard’s diary (glimpsed when Alphonse rifles through his papers), this phrase recalls an earlier detail of Bernard’s description of Muriel during her torture: “She stared straight at me. Why me?” This memory also resonates, by inversion, through Bernard’s anxious commands to his girlfriend Marie-Do not to close her eyes – a form of ghostly,

¹⁰ Bersani and Dutoit argue that this sequence circumscribes a call to responsibility that extends to the viewer, implicating us in this uneasy proximity between the ordinary and the unimaginable (1993, p. 196).

differential repetition that is exacerbated by Bernard's references to Muriel as his girlfriend.¹¹ Singling him out during the event and perpetually returning to call him to account in its aftermath, Muriel's gaze haunts Bernard, ceaselessly reminding him of his complicity in the crime of her torture (Gauch, 2001, p. 51, p. 55). This spectral gaze, the gaze of another who is no longer present, places Bernard's time – and the time of the film itself – out of joint, holding Bernard to account. Yet such a gaze is one which cannot be returned; it is “without any possible symmetry, without reciprocity”, signalling an infinite demand (Derrida and Stiegler, 2002, pp. 120-1). An incalculable responsibility is thus posed here in excess of Bernard's capacity to respond. And Muriel's gaze figures a calling to account not only of Bernard, but also, by extension, of France, a nation haunted by the unsettled spectre of Algeria and by a demand for justice resisting ontologization, restlessly refusing to be attached to any one time or place.¹²

Yet the risk of abstraction remains: consigning Muriel's experience – and Algeria, by extension – to the realm of the spectral may still be viewed as politically disabling. In an analysis of *Muriel* alongside films such as Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and Claude Chabrol's *Le Boucher* (*The Butcher*, 1970), Emily Tomlinson draws on Derrida's thinking of spectrality in order to address French cinema's “hauntological” engagement with Algeria. Critical of a tendency in these films to decontextualize the events of the Algerian War, Tomlinson contends that, through a series of metaphorical operations, such films “appropriate the pain of torture” via a “generalized ‘hauntology’” whereby “the spectre of colonial brutality is no longer

¹¹ On differential repetition in *Muriel*, see Bersani and Dutoit 1993, p. 199.

¹² On *Muriel*'s dynamic of “ghostly return”, see Hill 1992, p. 797.

perceptible *as such*” (2002, pp. 46-7). Tomlinson argues persuasively that *Muriel*’s spectral operations abstract from historical specificity. Yet I wish to suggest here that while the film invokes this hauntological register, it remains attentive to traces of the historical real; indeed, this very attentiveness takes place through a hauntological engagement with the disjointedness of testimonial recognition and historical remembrance.

As Gauch suggests, Resnais’s choice of the story of an Algerian woman tortured by the French displays an awareness of contemporaneous journalistic and testimonial accounts of the Algerian War (2001, pp. 54-5). Gauch cites the cases of Djamila Bouhired and Djamila Boupacha, who were both tortured and raped by French soldiers. Such cases gained considerable public attention in France at the time: Simone de Beauvoir was instrumental in seeking justice for Boupacha; she then co-authored a book about Boupacha’s experience, which appeared in 1962, the same year as the making of *Muriel* (Halimi and de Beauvoir, 1962). The film engages with the details of torture in ways that suggest familiarity (on the part of both Resnais and the scriptwriter, Jean Cayrol) with such testimonies. Bernard’s disturbing account of the state of Muriel’s corpse (“it was as if she had been left under water”; “With blood all over her body and in her hair...burns on her chest”) implies torture by water and possibly electricity too – methods that were commonly used during the Algerian War. The film also suggests a conscious engagement with the particular gendered dimension of such atrocities. Marnia Lazreg’s study of practices of torture deployed by the French during the Algerian War has emphasized that Algerian women were routinely raped by French soldiers, to the extent that “[a]lthough rape could take place without torture, torture seldom took place without rape” (2008, p. 160). Though

Bernard's account makes no explicit reference to rape, it notes at one point that Muriel's clothes were torn off. Elsewhere in the film, Bernard's perverse references to Muriel as his fiancée suggest ways in which she is configured erotically in his memory and imagination, intimating again the sexual dimension of her torture.¹³ It may be that considerations of censorship influenced Resnais's decision to allow the suggestion of Muriel's rape to remain ambiguous. It may be that this indirect approach indicates a potential failure of the film's responsibility. Yet, it is also possible to read the film's resistance to the ontologization of the event as opening a time and space in which "melancholic remainders" may be called forth, allowing that which has been historically encrypted to surface through the deferrals and dislocations within Bernard's testimony and within the film itself. In evocation of the slippages and displacements of testimonial detail, *Muriel* operates not only critically but also hauntologically, in attentiveness to a historical real that ghosts the frame – implicitly invoked yet never fully present. In this sense, the film's spectral operations, though resistant to ontology, may be seen to elaborate a form of (anachronistic) justice to the historical real.

What *Muriel* gives us to understand is that the encryption of the events of the Algerian War in France's collective memory exhibits a deep-rooted structure of spectrality that is played out here. Through images of Boulogne, suspended between ruins and reconstruction, the film implicitly positions the collective guilt attached to Algeria as haunted by other painful memories – explicitly of World War II, implicitly of Vichy.¹⁴ Through Hélène's and Alphonse's conflicting reconstructions of their love

¹³ See Britton 1990, p. 46, and O'Brien 2000, p. 60.

¹⁴ Cayrol's own experience of betrayal as a member of the Resistance and internment

affair, the film articulates, as Naomi Greene suggests, “the climate of self-serving half-truths, of deliberate amnesia, that, in the early 1960s, characterized French memories of the Vichy era” (1999, p. 46). By bringing into focus a chain of amnesiac operations, *Muriel* ensures that its indirect engagement with French atrocities in Algeria is inseparable from its implicit invocation of a collaborationist past. And although the film foregrounds recent events in Algeria, it intimates the ways in which these events are necessarily haunted by a history of colonial violence. When Françoise tells Bernard that she has been acting in a film about a war in 1830 in which “everyone died”, this is followed by a shot of the deserted dining table; no further elaboration is given, but the date references the French invasion of Algiers and the beginning of imperial expansion into Algeria. The scene appears to bear out Tomlinson’s suggestion that the Algerian War was always already “a spectral conflict”, inextricably bound to past atrocities, to the irrepressible logic of the *revenant* (Tomlinson, 2002). Links between French collaboration and colonialism are emphasized further during the dinner at the restaurant, in which anecdotes and gastronomical reflections sit alongside fleeting references to deportation, Indochina and Algeria (including Alphonse’s racist comment about Arabs). Françoise’s tale of live lobsters cooked in boiling water is preceded by Roland de Smoke’s story of a subsiding house (“It’s new, it’s empty, and we’re waiting for it to fall down”). Together, these seemingly disparate remarks gesture to histories of violence enshrouded by a modernized France. In its summoning of so many *revenants* of a colonialist and collaborationist past, *Muriel* foregrounds an inescapable logic of differential repetition that gestures beyond the fictions of its amnesiac crises towards the traumatic real of historical recurrence.

in a camp during World War II arguably informs such connections here.

Thus *Muriel* resists any restoratively mournful reconstruction of the past – in Deleuzian terms, it refuses to actualize the past in a “recollection-image” (Deleuze, 2005, p. 119). Rather it elaborates what Deleuze describes, with reference to Resnais, as “paradoxical hypnotic and hallucinatory sheets [of time] whose property is to be at once a past and always to come” (2005, p. 119). This “always to come” is as important to Deleuze’s reading of Resnais as it is to Derrida’s conception of justice.¹⁵ For Deleuze, Resnais’s cinema “prevents the past from being debased into recollection” (2005, p. 120); similarly, for Derrida, justice takes place through a resistance to any petrification of the past, by way of a perpetual opening to that which is “to come” (1994, p. 65). This opening to a justice-to-come is akin to what Derrida has called *midmourning* (1987, p. 355), a hauntological suspension of the introjective and incorporative dimensions of mourning – what Alessia Ricciardi describes as an “ethically and politically energized space”, “a domain of remembrance in which the subject is perpetually re-exposed to history rather than removed from it” (2003, p. 34). The dislocated rhythm of *midmourning* and differential repetition that *Muriel* elaborates ensures a ceaseless reanimation of the subject’s relation to historical time. In configuring temporally immediate events as saturated by untimely correspondences, *Muriel* proposes a hauntological model of eventhood, whereby the present is always already haunted by the past and by so many possible future returns.

Topological conversions

¹⁵ In his broader reflections on the time-image, Deleuze, like Derrida, invokes *Hamlet*: “Time is out of joint” (2005, p. 39).

Muriel gestures to the traces of atrocity in terms that are not only hauntological but topological too. As Marie-Do's view through a kaleidoscope fills the screen, multiplying images of Bernard, the film reflexively signals its aesthetics of topological transformation – a pattern of morphing and redistribution visualized in space. As we have seen, Deleuze points to the topological aspects of Resnais's cinema – a cartographical tracing of realms of being, which might be read in *Muriel* as an implicit mapping of the shifting psychical and political co-ordinates of torture. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry argues that torture itself is a process of conversion: transforming suffering into the spectacle of power, it maximizes the perceptual world of the torturer, while aggressively reducing that of the prisoner (1985, pp. 27-38). Scarry elaborates the interrogative encounter between torturer and prisoner in topological terms: "It is only the prisoner's steadily shrinking ground that wins for the torturer his swelling sense of territory. The question and the answer are a prolonged comparative display, an unfurling of world maps" (1985, p. 36). Torture enacts a topology of contraction and expansion, a violent recasting of territories of being, which can be linked, I suggest, to the "contracting/expanding tendencies" of *Muriel*'s organisation of space (Kite, 2009, p. 12). Drawing on Scarry in her reading of *Muriel*, Wilson suggests persuasively that the connection between the psychological effects of torture and the rest of the film may be viewed as one of "inflection and contamination", rather than one of direct representation (2006, p. 100). Deleuze's cartographical framing of Resnais allows for the dynamic of "inflection and contamination" identified by Wilson here to be considered further via a particular emphasis on the political dimensions of *Muriel*'s territorial redistributions of the event of torture. Through a relational mapping of perceptual space, *Muriel* elaborates a topology of contraction and expansion that brings the continuously shifting contours

of remembrance, amnesia and the historical real into view.

Topological effects in *Muriel* signal a connection between “the steadily shrinking ground” of the torture victim and the expansive ground of colonial, sovereign space. Through the disjunctive mapping of zones of Boulogne, enhanced by rapid, disconnective editing, the film is regularly set free from legible co-ordinates of location, with the effect that on-screen space appears to expand. For Claude Ollier, the film elaborates “a kind of spiral or circle opening further and further out so that the whole film seems to be basically centrifugal with everything projected to the outside” (quoted in Britton, 1990, pp. 39-40);¹⁶ similarly, Bersani and Dutoit suggest, “*Muriel* is a wholly centrifugal film” that is “constantly rushing away from a narrative centre never firmly established in the first place” (1993, p. 191). Bersani and Dutoit cite the scene in which a stranger asks a local woman for directions, having failed to recognize that he is in the city centre. (It is presumably with this scene in mind that Deleuze suggests that in *Muriel*, “the new Boulogne has no centre” [2005, p. 112]). As the stranger’s confusion becomes indicative of the way in which legible space is disrupted in *Muriel*, a sense of place becomes dispersed through an apparently increasing extension of urban territory. This is the ever-expanding ground of the sovereign – the centrifugal unfurling of French metropolitan space, invoked by the film in order to map the perceptual and political co-ordinates of colonial power and its inverse. In contrast to the “steadily shrinking ground” of *Muriel*, ever to remain hidden from view, the main characters (particularly Robert and Bernard, the perpetrators of *Muriel*’s torture) freely negotiate their way around the space of the

¹⁶ Britton also addresses the centrifugal force of the film, linking this to the motif of the kaleidoscope (Britton 1990, 40).

city.¹⁷

These topological effects of contrast and morphing are compounded by the mapping of space in Hélène's apartment. Though at times the apartment appears to be configured in claustrophobic terms, it is a space which allows for what Scarry calls "outward unfolding" (1985, p. 39) – Hélène moves sometimes frenetically to and fro inside the apartment yet she also moves freely out of the apartment (for example, on her multiple trips to the casino). The apartment is a place of experiential extension, bearing out what Scarry describes as "the central, overwhelming characteristic of the domestic": that "its protective, narrowing act is the location of the human being's most expansive potential" (1985, p. 40). In the context of torture, however, "the world is reduced to a single room or set of rooms" (Scarry 1985, 40). The topology of torture is such that the physical and perceptual space of the prisoner *contracts*. In Bernard's account of Muriel's torture, she is placed in the centre of the room, under the beam of Robert's torch, so that the officers can "get a better look"; surrounded, she falls from a chair, her arm twisted. Such is the centripetally deforming force of torture – what Scarry calls the "unmaking" of the world – a collapse of the world, a vertiginous folding inwards.

Thus through a system of subterranean correspondences, *Muriel* weaves connections between what we see and what is excluded from view. A recurrent focus on goods in shop windows gestures to the accelerated rise of consumerism in France during the

¹⁷ Having watched Bernard's film, Vieux Jean asks where Robert is now. Bernard says: "He walks around Boulogne, like everyone else." To which Vieux Jean replies: "But so do you!"

period of the Algerian War – a culture of mass commodification further signalled in the film by snippets of speech that parody advertising slogans (such as Alphonse’s claim that “[s]ome people cope with stains better than others – I’m one of them”, followed by a grin). In the apparent disconnection between these motifs of consumerism and the event of Muriel’s torture, the film appears to bear out what Kristin Ross has shown to be an ideological delineation of narratives of Algeria’s “dirty war” and decolonization from discourses of sanitized modernization in France in the 1950s and 1960s (Ross, 1995).¹⁸ Yet the over-determined meanings at stake in Alphonse’s claim about stain removal – in particular the invocation of culpability and disavowal – are indicative of a topology insisting on links between the realms of metropolitan consumerism and colonialist subjugation. As B. Kite suggests of Bernard’s investigations around Boulogne: “perhaps he films café patrons, shop windows, the sliding building that recurs throughout *Muriel* as a minor motif to indicate that these signs of consumer comfort are historically predicated on the “not-here” of a colonial economy, on blood and exploitation” (2009, p. 19). As *Muriel*’s cartographical disjunctions and consumerist visions become indicative of the relation of metropolitan space to its largely unacknowledged outside, the film enacts a series of topological conversions, revealing the fatal interdependence of the realms of the torturer and the prisoner, and of the coloniser and the colonised. Here the spectral contours of *Muriel*’s topology become apparent. For, as Gauch contends, “the film

¹⁸ Revealing one particularly disturbing bleed between the realms of decolonisation and modernisation, Ross notes that the new electrical appliances featuring in French kitchens during that period doubled up as instruments of torture used by the French during the Algerian War (1995, p. 113). Croombs draws on Ross’s study in one of his readings of *Muriel* (Croombs 2010b).

refuses to localize the crime” (2001, p. 55); it refuses to limit the event of Muriel’s death to any one particular place, thereby resisting what Derrida calls “ontopology” (1994, p. 82). As such, *Muriel* elaborates what Derrida refers to as a “topology of mourning”, whereby mourning is understood as “without reliable limit”, that is, without ontologization in terms of either time or space (1994, p. 97).

Thus, read hauntologically and topologically, a different picture of *Muriel* emerges. As the film gestures perpetually to a moment beyond the present and to a place beyond that which is on-screen – “not now” and “not here” – both time and space are rendered out of joint. Tracing events which refuse to be brought fully to representation, suspended as they are in an ethically and politically animated realm of “midmourning”, the film engenders a series of melancholic remainders that, as Khanna suggests, rupture the “force field” of an officially mournful history. What Khanna calls “critical melancholia” emerges in *Muriel* through a hauntological configuration of time and a topological shaping of space. Here the time and space of colonial sovereignty is revealed as intimately and fatally bound to the “not now” and “not here” of the history and location of subjugated others. By intimating such interrelatedness in spectral and topological terms, *le temps du retour* of Resnais’s film disarticulates an untimely, incalculable form of justice. Through this hauntological reading, *Muriel* can be retrieved, to a certain extent, from criticisms of its lack of political engagement. Yet the film’s politics remains framed from the position of metropolitan France, both as a work by a French filmmaker and in the bias of its setting. The reverberations of a colonial history can be deconstructed from within, as *Muriel* intimates, by opening dominant imperial epistemologies to a surfeit of melancholic traces; yet for justice to be rendered – disjunctively, incommensurably –

beyond these epistemologies, it remains vital to revisit and envisage further times and spaces through which the voices and images of Algeria might resonate.¹⁹

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¹⁹ See Austin 2012.

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