Torture in Word and Image: Inhuman Acts in Resnais and Pontecorvo

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Abstract (100):

This article examines the interplay of word and image in two depictions of torture during the Algerian War: *Muriel* (Alain Resnais, 1963) and *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966). While Resnais offers the spectator a desynchronized sound-image sequence wherein torture is narrated verbally, Pontecorvo’s depiction shuns words, instead offering soft focus close-ups accompanied by soaring classical overtures. Drawing primarily on Jacques Rancière’s work on history, cinema, and the idea of the unrepresentable, this article argues that the director’s choice to privilege either the verbal or the visual illuminates deeper concerns around gender, discursive violence, and the cinematic representation of the inhuman.

Marked and tortured bodies do not light up anything.

– Jacque Rancière.[[1]](#endnote-1)

The Algerian War (1954–1962) was a bloody decolonization struggle between the French military and Algerian insurgents that produced some of the most extreme political violence of the twentieth century. The Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) was one of the many groups fighting for the liberation of Algeria and ultimately the most dominant, and they took the most hardline approach: guerilla warfare, assassinations, bombings, terrorist tactics, and beheadings were used as military strategies, both against the French soldiers and civilians, as well as dissenting Algerians.[[2]](#endnote-2) The FLN’s underlying ideology was one that supported the use of violence in overthrowing the yoke of colonialism, summarized in FLN activist and anti-colonial theorist Frantz Fanon’s thinking of anti-colonial resistance: “colonialism is not a thinking machine, nor a body endowed with reasoning faculties. It is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.”[[3]](#endnote-3) From the French perspective, the liberation of many West African colonies, defeat at Dien Bien Phu, and the experience of national humiliation due to the German occupation in World War II meant that the public mood in France was initially strongly in favor of retaining Algeria.[[4]](#endnote-4) Many of the generals fighting in Algeria had been battle-hardened in World War II as well as in Vietnam, and they included members of both the French resistance and the fascist Vichy regime.[[5]](#endnote-5) Conscripts formed a large part of the French Army, and the majority of the French soldiers who were drafted into Algeria were naïve, inexperienced, and radically unprepared for the horrors that awaited them.[[6]](#endnote-6) Rape was used by French soldiers as a weapon of war, particularly in the Algerian countryside, and the use of torture was so extensive that Darius Rejali has given it the overall moniker of “French modern” style.[[7]](#endnote-7)

Many historical grey areas and absences punctuate accounts of the war in both historical and political debates, due to the political climate of negation and censorship that surrounded the conflict, both at the time and in the decades following the Evian Accords. For example, the 17th October 1961 massacre of hundreds of peacefully protesting Algerians in Paris by French police was only resurrected as a topic of memorial and historical debate in the 1990s, and Jacques Panijel’s documentary film about the massacre, *Octobre à Paris* (1962), was not screened publicly in France until 2012.[[8]](#endnote-8) In terms of torture, the state attempted to shield its practices from the French public through apparatuses of denial that reached from the soldier who committed the act right up to the Prime Minister, what Pierre Vidal-Naquet calls the “a whole machinery of deception.”[[9]](#endnote-9) Henri Alleg’s account of his torture at the hands of the French army, *La Question* (*The Question*), was forcefully censored on its appearance in 1958, as was conscript Benoît Rey’s 1961 memoir, *Les Égorgeurs* (*The Throat-Cutters*).[[10]](#endnote-10) Torture occupied a zone of shadowy legality and limited public visibility and the title of Alleg’s book points to the euphemism used to veil the practice in the French Army. Fiction films and historical accounts referencing the Algerian war and torture were also censored, including Godard’s *The Little Soldier* (*Le Petit Soldat*, 1960), René Vautier’s *L'Algérie en flammes* (*Algeria in Flames*, 1958), Claude Autant-Lara’s *Tu ne tueras point* (*Thou Shalt Not Kill*, 1961), and Jacques Rozier’s *Adieu Philippine* (*Goodbye Philippine*, 1962). *The Battle of Algiers*, which depicts torture directly in visual form, was subject to what Stora describes as a kind of unofficial censorship, whereby promoters and cinemagoers staged an unofficial boycott for fear of arousing protests among *pied-noir* groups and veterans.[[11]](#endnote-11) *Muriel*, a film that does not offer a visual account of the torture scene, was officially censored by the state and Naomi Greene even argues that the absence of images in the torture sequence is itself “an indictment of the harsh restrictions imposed by French censorship at the time of the Algerian war.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

The on-going significance of the Algerian War, a conflict in which a Muslim civilian population was caught between a Western occupying force and a violent insurgents employing terrorist tactics, is evident in present-day struggles in the Middle East, particularly Iraq and Afghanistan. Representations of the Algerian War also have continuing relevance to present-day global politics. *The Battle of Algiers* was screened in the Pentagon in 2003 with a tagline that referred to the tactics used by anti-occupation rebels in Iraq, “children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar?.”[[13]](#endnote-13) Moreover, just as the US army used torture in its Iraqi prisons and ultimately failed to quash radicalism (and perhaps increase it in the form of ISIS), *The Battle of Algiers* show how the French use torture, and consequently, losing any remaining support in the civilian population and the war itself.[[14]](#endnote-14) The racial and religious divides that informed the conflict also find an echo in contemporary debates around immigration, Islamophobia and Otherness in Western societies: Resnais’s *Muriel* demonstrates how the discursive violence of racism leads to the physical violence of torture and death. Certainly, both Pontecorvo and Resnais are politically motivated filmmakers, the former broadly within the tradition of anti-colonial “Third Cinema” and the latter within the French New Wave, who were deeply aware of the cultural and social conditions in which their works were produced. However, I argue that while their decisions regarding the audio-visual depiction of torture have political motivations, these aesthetic choices also relate to the particular material and psychological conditions and effects the torture scene produces.

**Screening Torture**

The questionable moral and legal legitimacy of torture in the political sphere is coterminous with the ethical concerns around the representation of human suffering, situating torture at the nexus of debates around aesthetics, representation and trauma. Central to these debates is the gap opened up between the visual and verbal aspects of torture, both in the act itself and in its representation. Indeed, gaps between the visual and the verbal haunt both documentary and fictional representations of torture in cinema. In Errol Morris’s *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), a documentary about the torture of prisoners in Abu Ghraib, blurry images and blacked-out portions of the screen create a keyhole effect, pointing towards the absence of the prisoners’ perspectives, and the role higher military officials played in sanctioning these acts. Indeed, the words of the torturers and their testimonies dominate the film and they seem radically at odds with the brutality of the images of the cloaked figures: the torturers’ words fall radically short of their imaged actions. Within the context of the Algerian War, recent films like Laurent Herbiet’s *Mon colonel* (2006) and Jean-Pierre Lledo’s *Un rêve algérien* (*An Algerian Dream*, 2003)refer to torture, yet there seems to always be a space or remainder, a refusal to offer a full sensory account of the act. The torture scene in *Mon colonel* is stylized, with a heavily Christian classical music soundtrack and brief, rapidly edited images of the victims. Jean-Pierre Lledo’s account follows left-wing journalist Henri Alleg’s journey back to Algeria, decades after his torture there at the hands of the French army, and therefore we are offered no visual images of the violence, only verbal accounts overlaid by images of present-day Algeria. Matthew Croombs has also offered a reading of Chris Marker’s *Le Jetée* (*The Jetty*, 1962) that ties Marker’s depiction of torture not to the Nazi occupation, but to Alleg’s memoir and Algeria. Croombs highlights how Marker “makes the spectator imagine the screams that cannot be heard,” and I would further argue that although Marker does depict the torture scene, the gap between the stasis of the photographic images and the leaps in space and time, as well as the contrast between the menacing mutterings of the torturers and the flowing poetry of the voiceover confers a similar sense of the limitations of audio-visual representation.[[15]](#endnote-15)

On first glance, the material and visible conditions that surround the act of torture appear to offer little in the way of moral ambiguity: a helpless human is subjected to intermittent or relentless physical pain of the most extreme order by another human who is in possession of physical and mental power conferred by the authority of a state or organization. Ariel Dorfman highlights the affective distancing required by the act of torture: “[it] presupposes, it requires, it craves the abrogation of our capacity to imagine others’ suffering, dehumanizing them so much that their pain is not our pain. It demands this of the torturer, placing the victim outside and beyond any form of compassion or empathy.”[[16]](#endnote-16) The torturer must affectively disavow any feelings of compassion or empathy – and perhaps, disconnect himself or herself from the concept of the human. Ali-Yahia Abdennour, an ex-‐FLN member, lawyer and human rights activist at the forefront of the campaign against torture in post–1988 Algeria, has reiterated this debasing and dehumanizing aspect of torture: “la torture […] est, après l’esclavage, le plus grand fléau de l’humanité, un revers de la démocratie, la corruption ultime de l’être humain, la négation de l’humanité” (after slavery, torture…is the greatest plague on humanity, an overturning of democracy, the ultimate corruption of the human being, the negation of humanity).[[17]](#endnote-17) This position is summarized by an ex-‐member of a South American military regime in the BBC documentary, *We Have Ways of Making You Talk* (2005). He states that if he were given time with the perpetrators of 9/11, “I would torture them because they are not human beings. They are nothing.” This man’s statement can be seen as offering a “justification” for torture, but less overtly dehumanizing rationalizations, both during the war and since, have centered on the idea of saving lives: if the victim informed on collaborators, civilian lives could be saved.[[18]](#endnote-18) However, as Todorov points out, this excuse of needing to obtain information to save lives is not valid; for one thing, bombers are rarely caught before their bombs go off.[[19]](#endnote-19) Torture as a dehumanizing practice both proceeds from and results in a discursive and emotive gap: the inability to recognize the victim as human leads to their abuse, while this violence produces a trauma that leads to silence, separation and exclusion. This notion of a negation of the human applies to both the torturer and the tortured: the tortured must deny their own humanity to commit the act, and they must refuse to see what is human in their victim.

These conditions produce an ethical and aesthetic minefield around the depiction of torture: the act itself operates as a form of outrage, transmuting the victims suffering into a spectacle of the perpetrator’s power, and the representation of the act risks exposing the victim to the gaze of an indifferent or even hostile public. Critical theory has attempted to address the representation of extreme political violence and its effects through the elaboration of a notion of the “unrepresentable,” as an excess of experience that exceeds artistic depiction in relation to the traumas of the Holocaust, particularly in the work of Cathy Caruth, and Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman.[[20]](#endnote-20) This unrepresentable element has been theorized as a perspective on a trauma that remains unrecoverable within historical, testimonial, or representational discourse and an excess that exceeds cognition and cannot be rendered in visual representation. However, Jacques Rancière interrogates and undermines the idea of an unrepresentable in art by considering the epistemological frameworks in which this notion has been, and could be, elaborated. Firstly, he contends that certain experiences, feelings, places, and events could be said to exceed the capabilities of art to render them. There are no artistic techniques, forms, artists, or genres that can adequately and accurately capture these objects or occurrences: this is due to the internal limitations of art itself, “an incapacity on the part of art.”[[21]](#endnote-21) Secondly, he suggests that the notion of an unrepresentable has been elucidated in relation to the properties of art itself. The materiality of art, its physical presences, betrays the uniqueness of the thing to be represented, makes it ‘unreal’, and risks delivering the event or object over to effects of pleasure or triviality. Rendering the event or object in art distances it too much from the real and original event or object: “its surplus of presences, which betrays the singularity of the event or situation […] this surplus of material presence has as its correlate a status of unreality, which removes from the thing represented its weight of existence.”[[22]](#endnote-22) These excesses and insufficiencies, whereby the event or object to be represented surpasses the capacities of art, or where the characteristics of art corrupt the represented object or render it commonplace, have lead to the emergence of the witness narrative as a new mode of art. This form “involves not so much recounting the event as witnessing to a *there was* that exceeds thought.”[[23]](#endnote-23) This is a form of art that aims not to capture the experience in its sensory and factual totality, but rather to record a trace of the event’s existence and to underscore the difficulty of inscribing it in representation. Thus, rather than attempting to represent the object or experience, art simply inscribes and records its occurrence.

Rancière links the idea of the unrepresentable to Jean Lyotard’s work on the unthinkable, as “the essential discrepancy between what affects us and such of it as our thinking can master.”[[24]](#endnote-24) For Lyotard, the modern sublime in art resides in this recording, the registration of an unthinkable inhuman act, using the witness narrative. This is a form that simply attests to an event’s existence, an event that exceeds full intelligibility because of its inhuman excess. For Lyotard, there is a gap between feeling and thinking: we can be touched by something without fully grasping its consequences, its “essence” intellectually, and the unthinkable comes to reside in this breach between the perceptible and the intelligible. In this sense, Lyotard’s conception of the unthinkable rests in between the two notions of an unrepresentable that Rancière has outlined: “a coincidence between something unthinkable at the heart of the event and something unrepresentable at the heart of art.”[[25]](#endnote-25) For Lyotard, there is no longer an appropriate language in which to convey certain forms of experience, and this is why the best art can do in this case to record the sublime excess of experience in the form of incomplete traces. Yet Rancière argues that Lyotard falsely intertwines the logic of the ethical and the representative regimes in his conception of the art of the unthinkable. Lyotard appeals to the notion that forms should be appropriate to the subject represented, producing the “correct” effects on the spectator, while drawing on an ethical framework of art to suggest that some objects or experiences are beyond the capacity of art to represent them: no worthy form can be found.

However, Rancière reads this reconfiguration and readjustment of the role of art quite differently. He suggests that novelistic realism in the 19th century, notably in the work of Flaubert and Balzac, shattered any stable conflation of aesthetic form and signification through “the emancipation of resemblance from representation […] the loss of representative proportions and proprieties.”[[26]](#endnote-26) This ushers in what he calls the “aesthetic regime”, an order in which art is no longer restricted to or restrained by a logic of appropriateness of form to subject. Instead, there is “a general availability of all subjects for any artistic form whatsoever.” [[27]](#endnote-27) Art is freed from the constraints of genre and appropriate language – lofty techniques could be used to describe the banal, the everyday. In the reverse sense, banal language could be used to describe extra-ordinary experiences, such as Robert Antelme’s journey to the Nazi concentration camps in *L’Espèce humaine* (*The Human Race*, 1947, 1998).[[28]](#endnote-28) Antelme uses an already constituted aesthetic form, the realist novel, to describe an extraordinary experience because the levels, genres, and criterion of appropriateness inherent in the representative regime no longer exist. Thus, “everything is now on the same level, the great and the small, important events and insignificant episodes, human beings and things. Everything is equal, equally representable.”[[29]](#endnote-29) It is for this reason that a notion of the unrepresentable in art is untenable for Rancière. The aesthetic regimepromotes the equality of represented subjects, the indifference of meaning in things themselves, destroys system of the “arts” and isolates art in the singular. The aesthetic regime calls into question the distinction between art and other activities, and form and signification can be harmonized in endless possibilities. There is nothing that is unrepresentable, only the possibility of finding a language (and not necessarily appropriate or verisimilitudinous language) in which certain things can be expressed and rendered. He summarizes: “nothing is unrepresentable as a property of the event. There are simply choices.”[[30]](#endnote-30)

In relation to the depiction of the inhuman act of violence that is most often evoked within a discourse of unrepresentability, Rancière writes that this depiction must inscribe itself, like Antelme’s writing, in an already constituted language. Choices are made about how to depict this experience:

This extreme experience of the inhuman confronts no impossibility of representation; nor is there a language peculiar to it. There is no appropriate language for witnessing. Where testimony has to express the experience of the inhuman, it naturally finds an already constituted language of becoming-inhuman, of an identity between human sentiments and non-human movements.[[31]](#endnote-31)

The manifestation of the inhuman act, like torture, does not have a language peculiar or particular to it, but is instead represented in pre-existing artistic forms. Indeed, Rancière suggests that at its limit, the unrepresentable might reside precisely in the “impossibility of an experience being told in its own appropriate language.”[[32]](#endnote-32) There are many ways to deploy aesthetic form to convey the experience of the inhuman, and of course, a notion of unrepresentability belies the fact that representations of traumatic events can, and do, persist. Even if the unrepresentable does not exist, or only exists in so far as an traumatic experience cannot be told in its own language, the aesthetic choices that are made tell us something about the experience in question. Moreover, although the aesthetic regime no longer coordinates and regulates form in order to manage its effects on the spectator, different formal choices, such as the privileging of the visual or the verbal in cinema, will produce different effects. This paper thus asks a three-fold question: how can the interactions of word and image in each of the depictions of torture be understood through Rancière’s wider thinking of speech and visual form in cinema? Secondly, what can the aesthetic choices made by Pontecorvo and Resnais tell us about experience of torture, from both the perspective of torturer and tortured? And finally, how do aesthetic choices reflect historical issues surrounding modes of torture according to the gendered identity of the victims?

***The Battle of Algiers*: Politics and Pathos**

As several critics have described, *The Battle of Algiers* employs an aesthetic of contrasts: there is the stark play of light and shadow in its colour and texture, the contrasting of vertical and horizontal spaces of the French quarter and the Kasbah respectively, and of course, the dramatization of the conflict between the old colonial regime and the new world order represented by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and the Algerian people.[[33]](#endnote-33) I would add that the film also stages a dynamic contrasting between the power of speech and language and the power of silence, music, and voice, each associated with different visual and narrative elements and different affective registers. Questions of speech and voice infuse the narrative of *The Battle of Algiers*, and it is crucial to distinguish between the two terms in Rancière’s schema. Drawing on Aristotle’s distinction between *logos* and *phōne* as speech and voice respectively, Rancière contends that speech can be read as a political enunciation, while voice is the term given to the noises, sounds, emanations of those without political power, used in corporeal expressions of pain and pleasure. He writes: “whoever is in the presence of an animal that possesses the ability to articulate language and its power of demonstration, knows that he is dealing with a human – and therefore political – animal.”[[34]](#endnote-34)

From the outset, Pontecorvo stresses the ways in which both the French colonizers and the FLN use the power of words and speech to dominate physical, affective, and political space. Language and the weight of words are used to control and direct the action. Inter-titles, part of the film’s faux-documentary style, immediately and consistently situate the viewer in a heavily politicized space. Words, in the form of the voiceovers that read FLN communiqués, the letters that are passed between FLN members, the loudspeakers that pump French propaganda into the Kasbah, and the rhetorical rationalizations of the army and journalists are all fundamentally associated with attempts to gain and seize power. This form of political speech offers explanations and justifications for the actions of both the French colonial administration and the FLN, lending a kind of credibility to the images, as the dramatization of these words comes to be enacted through the film’s visual, narrative sequences, for example, in the scene where Ali La Pointe attempts to shoot the policeman.

The character of Colonel Mathieu comes to embody the power of words, their rationalizations and effects, and he displays a form of linguistic dexterity that renders his rhetoric seductive and his character deceptively sympathetic. Screenwriter Franco Solinas explicitly links the Colonel’s mien to Western modes of rhetoric and civilization, suggesting that the Colonel is “elegant and cultured, because Western civilization is neither inelegant nor uncultured.” [[35]](#endnote-35) The Colonel’s rhetorical aptitude is most evident in his assessment of the tactics and methods needed to win the war. He states explicitly that this is a war of information, of words and that they must work like policemen rather than soldiers because “the basis of this work is information.” Mathieu also tells a group of European journalists that their words and their writing will win the war. Asked what he believes his chances of victory in the battle will be he replies: “that depends on you […] All you have to do is write, and if possible, write well. We have more than enough warriors. [We need] a political will, which is sometimes present, sometimes not.” He also cites Jean-Paul Sartre’s opposition to the war and the articles he has published condemning both its continuation and the use of torture: “can anyone tell me why the Sartres of this world are always born on the same side?.” This is a war that the Colonel seems to know will be engaged not only in the conflict spaces of the city and the mountains, but in the minds of the Algerian population. The loudspeakers that pour forth French propaganda in the Kasbah as soldiers distribute bread to reluctant Algerians underscores this attempt to win over Algerian civilians through rhetorical means: “the FLN wants to prevent you from working. Inhabitants of the Kasbah! Rebel against the orders of the FLN!.” Moreover, Mathieu frequently stresses how he is a man of his word. When Jaffar and Zohra Drif request a written confirmation that they will not be killed if they surrender, he tries to reassure them with the power of a verbal promise: “I give you my word that we won’t harm you.”

The FLN also deploy the authority of the written and spoken word to achieve their aims. Mathieu states that the FLN are so difficult to catch because “they contact each other solely through writing.” Indeed, when two FLN members are trapped in the second story of a building in the Kasbah, Mathieu’s spoken word is not enough: they demand his promise of a fair trial in writing and Jaffar’s last action before being captured is an exhortation to Drif to “burn all the papers”. Therefore, words are not only used as political rhetoric in power struggles, but also act as forms of evidence, an issue which will resurface in my discussion of *Muriel*. Moreover, just as the French use megaphones to amplify their speeches to the inhabitants of the Kasbah, these can be hijacked, as in the scene where the young boy steals the microphone from the French authorities and chants “Algerians! Brothers! Take heart! The FLN tells you not to be afraid. Don’t worry, we are winning.” These words produce an eruption of shouts, noise and *youyous* (traditional North African chants of joy performed by women) among the crowds assembled. This highlights the emotional impact of the FLN’s use of language on Algerians, an affective identification with their cause that the French consistently fail to inspire. Indeed, the short program, “*The Battle of Algiers*: A Case Study” that accompanies the Criterion Collection 2005 edition of the film includes an interview with two US counterterrorism experts, Richard Clarke and Mike Sheehan. Clark highlights how failing to appeal to the emotions and the politically intellect of a population can mean defeat, remarking that the French army fails in Algeria by not winning “hearts and minds” and by “doing only intelligence, doing only police work, and not winning politically.” He argues that in a conflict, one must use pathos and appeal emotionally, as well as to prove “who’s got the winning idea” to the civilians who are caught between terrorists and an occupying force.

Thus words become the ground of discursive and political engagement, and the control of the linguistic sphere comes to dominate the struggle for power and control of Algeria, a fight for the “hearts and minds” of the Algerian population. This leads to the principal battleground in this war of words: the obtainment of information through the use of torture, neatly and euphemistically named by Mathieu as “the interrogation”: “the method is interrogation and interrogation becomes a method when it is conducted in such a way as to always obtain a response.” The opening sequence of the film shows the aftermath of a session of torture and its effects: the act of torture has produced this sought after information. The framing of the victim of torture, pictured from a high-angle shot, partially clothed, seated and hunched, surrounded by a semi-circle of upright, uniformed soldiers stresses the dynamics of power present in the act. As one of soldier states, “he finally spat it out,” that is, the information that Ali La Pointe and three other members of the FLN are hiding in the building at 3 Rue des Abderrammes. While the visual mise-en-scène of this opening tableau stresses the hierarchies of power that are fundamental to the workings of torture, the fact that this has lead to the successful targeting of Ali La Pointe points problematically to one of the rationalizations for torture used throughout the film: the procurement of “life-saving” information.

(Place Figure 1 Here)

Figure 1. Power relations inscribed in the framing of the torture victim in *The Battle of Algiers* (Criterion Collection, 1966)

Language and speech emerge as key concerns not only in relation to the obtaining of this “life-saving” intelligence, but also in offering justifications for the act itself. As Hannah Arendt writes, verbal rationalizations can distract listeners from the physical and emotional effects of violence upon its victims: “a motive is of course only one way of deflecting the natural reflex of sympathy away from the actual sufferer.”[[36]](#endnote-36) For Elaine Scarry, in the act of torture, language becomes an instrument of power through the discursive and linguistic supremacy of the torturer. The torturer obtains their power from a military or political system or situation, which gives them dominance, as their words torment the victim. Torture also functions like a language, in that it contains within itself a whole system of assumptions and justifications for the act. Moreover, within this linguistic schema, torture operates a “perceptual shift, which converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power.”[[37]](#endnote-37) In the scene where Colonel Mathieu defends the use of torture to a group of journalists, his convincing rhetorical strategies operate as cloaks that conceal the brutal physical realities of the violence. Torture adopts the language of the everyday and transforms it into its grotesque mirror image, as Mathieu’s frequent use of words like “method” and “interrogation” suggest. As Scarry outlines, “the torturer’s idiom not only indicates but helps bring about the process of perception in which all human reality is made […] invisible, inaudible.”[[38]](#endnote-38) Mathieu suggests that the victories of the army in Algiers are as a result of the “tactics” he employs, the “interrogation”: “the successes you are talking about are as a result of this method. One presupposes the other.” Even when he is asked to clarify his words by an enterprising journalist who directly poses a question about the use of torture, Mathieu manages to evade its overt implications: “the word ‘torture’ does not appear in our directives. We have always spoken of interrogation as the only valid method for police to use against an illegal organization.” Mathieu’s speech is convincing, and he turns the inquiry back onto the journalists in the form of a denotative proposition: if they agree that France should stay in Algeria, and the “interrogation” is the only method to ensure this result, how can they then say that it should not be employed? Yet Pontecorvo seems to hint at the limitations of these words, their inadequacy: “it’s a vicious circle. We could talk about it for hours without reaching a conclusion […] Should France stay in Algeria? If you still answer “yes”, you must accept all the necessary consequences.”

The “necessary consequences” are brutally highlighted for the viewer in the stark transition from Mathieu’s rationalizations to a brutal visualization of the reality of inhuman violence. As Scarry writes, the disjunction between the visual and the verbal dimensions of torture alter our moral apprehension of the act itself:

Almost anyone looking at the *physical* act of torture would be immediately appalled and repulsed by the torturers. It is difficult to think of a human situation in which the lines of moral responsibility are more starkly or simply drawn […] yet as soon as the focus of attention shifts to the *verbal* aspect of torture, those lines have begun to waver and change their shape in the direction of accommodating and crediting the torturers.[[39]](#endnote-39)

It is for this reason, I suggest, that Pontecorvo abruptly cuts between these verbal and visual elements in relation to the act of torture: by moving from the controlled space of Mathieu’s press conference to a brutal visual rendering of the act itself, he highlights the insufficiency of words, their ability to conceal horrific physical realities. As Rancière writes, “Speech ‘makes visible’, but only in accordance with a regime of under-determination, by not ‘really’ making visible.”[[40]](#endnote-40) Indeed, the audio-visual framing of both sequences is sharply contrasted. While Mathieu proselytizes from the top of a barracks room to a group of seated journalists in medium and long shot, in the torture sequence, close ups of individual faces predominate. In the press room, there is an excess of words (and indeed no character in the film speaks as much as Mathieu), while the torture sequence is dominated by an excess of images of emotional and physical pain, accompanied by the soaring organ strains of Morricone’s score. This stark contrast highlights the absences in Mathieu’s words, their sublime insufficiency. Speech, and particularly the politicized speech of the dominant, leaves gaps and spaces that again relate to Rancière’s conception of the difference between speech and the voice: “if there is someone you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing him as the bearer of signs of politicity, by not understanding what he says, by not hearing what issues from his mouth as discourse.”[[41]](#endnote-41)

Yet the act of torture goes further than the failure to recognize voice as speech; it creates and promotes the conditions of voicelessness. In fact, this is the fundamental purpose of torture. If speech is associated with political power, torture is an act that aims to radically sever the voice through pain, and thus gain power over the victim. In the torture sequence, French soldiers employing a variety of techniques that inflict physical pain on the Algerian victims: electrocution, beating, suspension, and waterboarding. The soldiers mouth words, the brutal language of interrogation, while the tortured victims open their mouths, emitting inaudible screams, as their bodies are reduced the non-linguistic modes of voicing that are the expression of unbearable pain. This pain, according to Scarry, results in the destruction of language itself, in a context where language is the vector of political power: “intense pain is also language-destroying: as the content of one’s world disintegrates, so the content of one’s language disintegrates.”[[42]](#endnote-42)

(Place Figure 2 Here)

Figure 2. Close ups of inaudible screams and the loss of language in the torture scene in *The Battle of Algiers* (Criterion Collection, 1966)

This scene enacts in stark visual form the resounding disconnect between the civilized words Mathieu speaks, and the destruction of humanity that torture entails, a destruction that takes place through the body and through language. The destruction of language is enacted in *The Battle of Algiers* through the depiction of the open mouths, and also in the correlative cutting of the sound of the victims’ screams. Pain, Scarry writes, is an experience that remains inaccessible to those who witness it: its visual depiction can only gesture towards extreme physical anguish. She suggests that this is why representations of “the scream” occur frequently in the visual arts: Edvard Munch’s *The Scream* (1893), Francis Bacon’s *Study after Velasquez* (1950), and Hocine Zaourar’s photograph *La Madone de Benthala* (1997) constitute some notable examples. The image of a body that cries out in pain without the corresponding auditory impression conveys something of the inaccessibility of that suffering: “a human being so utterly consumed in the act of making a sound that cannot be heard coincides with the way in which pain engulfs the one in pain but remains unsensed by anyone else.”[[43]](#endnote-43) Thus, Pontecorvo’s close-ups of the victims, their eyes closed or half-closed, the gaping mouths emitting unheard screams, point towards what Scarry calls the “world-destroying” aspect of pain, its ability to reduce sufferers to nothing but the experience of pain itself. In torture, she states, this witnessed pain is translated by the torturers into the operations of power: “the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power […] the transformation of pain into power is ultimately a transformation of body into voice.”[[44]](#endnote-44)

It is for this reason that the torturers in the scene appear utterly unmoved: torture is not primarily a question of inflicting pain, but of manifesting power. The potent emotional impact that spectators feel watching the scene (it is almost impossible not to be “appalled and repulsed”, as Scarry describes) does not apply to the torturer. Indeed, both *The Battle of Algiers* and *Muriel* suggest that the torturer does not experience this affective shock during the act of committing violence on another person. While empathy may be present, and we see this in the tear-stained faces of the Algerian women who watch their loved ones being tortured, the torturers, smoking and gazing at these scenes with blank expressions, remain unmoved. Just as Rancière suggests that it is possible to read the sounds of those who we wish to see as less than human, or at least non-political beings, as voice or noise, torturers read these aural expressions of pain as evidence of their own power, smothering the “animal pity” that Arendt memorably describes in relation to Himmler.[[45]](#endnote-45) Even the screams of victims can be cut off, by plunging someone’s head into water, or damaging them to such an extent that they are no longer conscious, which of course undermines the rationalized basis of the act itself: the procurement of information.

Emily Tomlinson has argued that the torture sequence stands apart from the rest of the film, “lifted outside of the film’s cycle of victory and defeat.”[[46]](#endnote-46) Yet reading this sequence within the film’s general visual and verbal schema, the torture sequence is part of an overall aesthetic where the heavy verbosity of the political action is broken by silence, music, and slow, intimate, visuals. In fact, each time Pontecorvo presents the viewer with images of pain and destruction of human life, the camera slows or halts, the vigorous drumbeats that accompany the military sequences cease, the spiralling violins that reference the FLN abate. Language and words recede, leaving only music and the moving image. In the depiction of the bombing the houses of the Rue de Thèbesby the French, the explosion gives way to silence, and images of the bodies of children being carried out of the rubble. Similarly, when the FLN bomb the milk bar in retaliation, the sound of the explosion transitions to a similar Classical score, as the image depicts victims stumbling blindly from the wreckage, amid corpses strewn in the debris. Moreover, it is not only in sequences that portray total bodily and structural devastation; even in shorter episodes that depict vulnerable individuals, words give way to images: for example, the case of the drunken Algerian man who is chased down the stairs by a gaggle of children, the elderly Algerian man who is chased by police through the French quarter, or the child in the racecourse who is attacked by a hoard of adults seeking revenge following the bombing. These sequences also share the use of alternating high and low angle shots, tracking shots, and close ups to convey the hierarchical registers of power that make innocent and vulnerable civilians targets of mob violence.

Therefore, it is not only the torture sequence that breaks the film’s historically providential cycles of “victory and defeat”, but every scene that depicts human vulnerability in the face of inhuman acts of violence. Moreover, as I have described, these sequences are devoid of language: the verbosity that characterizes the political machinations of both the French and the FLN is replaced by silence and music, and the torture sequence represents perhaps the most potent instance of these non-verbal, visual and musical tropes. The play between the visual and the verbal in the film reaches an inverted climax in the final sequence, which as Nicholas Harrison remarks, seems to stand outside of the circular narrative of the rest of the film, leaping forward into a future where the “Battle of Algiers”, “won” by the French, becomes the war of Algerian Independence, with its known, and, the film suggests, inevitable outcome.[[47]](#endnote-47) The opening of the final sequence depicts an apparently spontaneous and riotous demonstration has broken out in the streets of Algiers. This populous excess, the extemporaneous uprising of the people, seems to overflow both the ability of Algerian and French political powers to express its meaning in words. The voiceover reports that the FLN members in exile in Tunisia knew nothing about it, and the words of the journalists who hurriedly phone information back to France seem unable to contain the surfeit of the events and emotions they are attempting to describe.

The noise of the crowds overwhelms the descriptions of journalists in the voiceover, as the police in riot uniforms clash on a horizontal plane with the bodies of the Algerian demonstrators in the street. The individuals that Pontecorvo selects for close-ups are overwhelmingly female; the noise and the voices of Algerian women that fill the auditory space and their bodies, gyrating, dancing and swaying, are radically active. The rationalizations, methods and strategies of the male protagonists give ways to a chorus of women’s voices, which seem to overpower both the declarations of the journalists and the narration itself, as one journalist describes the *youyous* of the women as “these incomprehensible, rhythmic, terrifying cries.” The political power of the French and of the FLN members, conveyed throughout the film in the letters, communiqués, voiceovers, press meetings, and public addresses, yields dramatically to a riot of the female bodies *en masse*, deafeningly, raucously emitting the sounds of triumph.

Although the *youyous* and non-verbal utterances represent the triumph of the Algerians over the dominance of French speech, the fact that women in the film almost never speak, can, and has, been read problematically.[[48]](#endnote-48) The reduction of a group of people to voice or noise rather than speech has, as Rancière suggests, been used as a method to regulate these populations participation in the political sphere:

Traditionally, in order to deny the political quality of a category – workers, women, and so on – all that was required was to assert that they belonged to a ‘domestic’ space that was separated from public life, one from which only groans or cries expressing suffering, hunger or anger could emerge, but not actual speech.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Women in *The Battle of Algiers* are depicted collectively as agents of violence or as passively suffering patriots. This correlates with an imaginary of Algerian woman that emerged during the War of Independence: on the one hand, there was the proud, emancipated and self-emancipating figure of the female bomb carrier, and on the other, the silent and suffering Algerian woman, a mother and a wife, stoically supporting her male relatives as fought for national liberation. Both images ultimately sustained patriarchal ends. While the FLN proudly flaunted its strong female figureheads, among them Zohra Drif, Djamila Amrane Minne, Djamila Bouhired and Djamila Boupacha, FLN documents from the 1956 onwards suggest that women’s emancipation was always conceived of as a temporary measure. A note taken by a senior member of the FLN, Captain Si Allal in Wilaya V, supposed to have been made in 1957, confirms this: “dans l’Algérie indépendante, la liberté de la Femme musulmane s’arrête au seuil de sa porte. La femme ne sera jamais l’égale de l’homme” (In independent Algeria, a Muslim woman’s freedom ends on the threshold of her door. Women will never be equal to men).[[50]](#endnote-50)

The scene depicting the female bomb carriers and their transformation and Westernization in the private boudoir to the long sequence, which outlines their movements through the city, can certainly be read as a representation of the pivotal role played by women during the conflict. The women cut and dye their hair, don make-up and Western clothes, and take enormous risks crossing the checkpoints that have been set up by the French. The spectator is privy their trepidation and anxiety as they alter their appearance as they pass the soldiers. Pontecorvo employs a series of close ups that draw the spectator into their moral struggle, as they plant the bombs that will kill French civilians. Indeed, during the war, the FLN proudly flaunted the female resistance fighters on an international stage as an example of their progressive gender agenda, as well as promoting this myth in the hope of politicizing other women. Fanon memorably describes this interweaving of female and national liberation, tying the trope of sexual violation to national incursion: “every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haïk* […] was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and accept the rape of the colonizer.”[[51]](#endnote-51)

(Place Figure 3 Here)

Figure 3. Algerian women modify their appearances before planting bombs in *The Battle of Algiers* (Criterion Collection, 1966)

Yet even outside of the difficult trope of the silent and suffering Algerian women, the non-speech of FLN women in opposition to the verbosity of their male counterparts seems to exclude them from political action. As the women modify their appearances, Ennio Morricone’s rousing military drum score overlays the image completely, and throughout the rest of the sequence, the women speak very little, in fact only in response to questions from either French or Algerian militants. Female silence and suffering is, in fact, a consistent feature throughout the film, from the adolescent FLN bride who wordlessly shields Ali and his compatriots, to the close ups of women who watch, silently weeping, as their male family members are tortured in their own home. In a film dominated by male discourse, from the imposing military rhetoric of Colonel Mathieu to the lofty Socialist expostulations of Jaffar (the fictional representations of Colonel Massu and Saadi Yacef respectively), the silences imposed on women stand in stark relief. Perhaps the most troubling instance of this enforced wordlessness is a sequence depicting Zohra Drif, a woman whose vital role in the historical “Battle of Algiers” is undisputed. In this scene, Jaffar and Drif have been captured and brought by car to the army barracks with Mathieu. As Mathieu and Jaffar engage in a calm and poised conversation, each sizing up the character and designs of the enemy, Zohra turns from the front of the car and bursts forth with charged and angry discourse that is not translated by the subtitles, unlike all of the speech of the male FLN members in Arabic throughout the film.[[52]](#endnote-52) Nor was it meant to be – Mathieu turns to Jaffar for clarification, and thus the political words of an Algerian woman are mediated and translated by men.

**Absent Images: *Muriel***

*The Battle of Algiers* stages this problematic disconnect between women as active agents in conflict, and passive, silent figures, while foreshadowing the exclusion of women from the national narrative. The mediation of the experience of Algerian women by a male protagonist leads to the heart of the issues raised by the non-visualization and absence of the torture and death of Muriel, an Algerian woman, from Resnais’ film. Recent readings of *Muriel* have focused on issues of the body, memory and trauma (Wilson), psychoanalysis (Croombs), and time and continental philosophy (McMahon).[[53]](#endnote-53) In my analysis, I focus on how the visual absence on the torture scene from Resnais’s representation, the gendering of methods of torture, and how the words and images interact to augment the impact of the inhuman violence represented in this scene. *Muriel* demonstrates how the lives of Algerian women were established by colonial and patriarchal discourses as beyond a certain conception of the human. Despite the rhetoric of the *mission civilisatrice* [“civilizing mission”, or “white man’s burden”], for the soldier on the ground, the bodies of Algerians, and Algerian women in particular, were objectified and dehumanized. Raphaëlle Branche further remarks in relation to tortured female resistance fighters that “soldiers came to see the victims less as fellow human beings but instead as wholly different – i.e. women, Algerians and enemies.”[[54]](#endnote-54) Indeed, according to one veteran Branche interviewed, “le problème des Algériennes c’est qu’elles étaient sales et voilées” (the problem with Algerian women was that they were dirty and veiled).[[55]](#endnote-55)

Given that Resnais places a female resistance fighter at the centre of his consideration of torture during the war, the gendering of methods of “interrogation” should be considered. That Algerian women were “wholly different” adds a new dimension to the instrumentalization and dehumanization of the specifically female body. The Algerian woman’s body is not only that of the enemy and the cultural other, but also the gendered other, and according to Marnia Lazreg, “although rape could take place without torture, torture seldom took place without rape.”[[56]](#endnote-56) Indeed, veterans interviewed by Branche recall the routine checking of genitals as prisoners were brought in, ostensibly due to the utilisation of the veil as a method of concealment by male FLN members, as well as an atmosphere of “striptease séance” when female prisoners would be forced to remove their clothes. Another soldier recalls extensive proliferation of pornographic images pinned up and passed around army barracks and some soldiers, many of them barely out of their teens and sexually inexperienced, arrived in Algeria with badges announcing “Bon pour le service” (Good for Service), with its sexual and military *double entendre*.[[57]](#endnote-57) Within this context, the torture and rape of women also became a means of building solidarity between paramilitary groups, and as an officer of the Second Class, Alain Boeuf points out, “même des gens peu enclins *à priori* à avoir des comportements violents, dans l’ambiance, dans le climat général, dans le travail psychologique qui était mené, dérapaient” (even those who at the start had little inclination towards violence, lost control because of the atmosphere, the overall climate, and the psychological pressure we were put under).[[58]](#endnote-58)

Darius Rejali describes the form of torture most characteristic of liberal democracies in the twentieth century as “clean”. This form of torture leaves no long-term scars, and the techniques most often employed in this way include waterboarding, electrocution, sleep deprivation, static positioning, and torture using intermittent noises or relentless, repetitive and intrusive music. Torture in *The Battle of Algiers* is overwhelmingly represented as “clean”: torturers who seem experienced commit it in a relatively public context where soldiers seem both indifferent to the act itself, as well as to the presence of Algerian witnesses, and they use techniques that leave few or no marks. The torturers seen on screen are shown to “successfully” deploy a variety of techniques in order to forces the victims to give information. The torture of Muriel, on the other hand, can be described as what Rejali terms “dirty”. Bernard and the other soldiers must be naïve and inexperienced, because they take the torture to such an extreme that the principal stated aim, the obtainment of information, is utterly negated: Muriel dies. As Rejali writes, “Pain is not a constant, which they can simply increase. As the body is damaged, its ability to sense pain declines. More injury does not produce more pain, but its opposite.”[[59]](#endnote-59) Moreover, the torture of women was never officially sanctioned by the French Army, and the space in which it takes place, a disused shed, as well as the fact that Muriel remains anonymous, suggest that this was an event of highly questionable legality, even within the context of an already bitter, dirty, and divisive war.

*The Battle of Algiers* places the visual depiction of torture in a wordless space embedded in a narrative that highlights the political potency of speech. *Muriel*, by contrast, offers the viewer a detailed verbal account of the scene of torture. Just as the relation of word and image in the overall aesthetic schema of *The Battle of Algiers* contributes to the viewer’s apprehension of the torture sequence, the verbal space in *Muriel* consistently highlights the failures of language and the incommensurability of word and image. Throughout the film, reframing takes place through camera pans and tilts, shots of restricted mobility that enhance the impression of the static intransigence of the characters lives, while also refusing to give the viewer a firm grasp on the spatial and temporal coordinates of the diegesis. Images also function as a means through which the reality of on-screen space is fragmented. Shots of individual household objects like tea-pots, telephones and tables at various times of day and night are intercut and accompanied by the desynchronised operatic soundtrack of Hans Werner Henze. Indeed, the lyrics of this soundtrack, sung by Rita Streich, initially contained words that referred to and reflected the images represented, but Resnais played them backwards in order to further disorientate the viewer.

Words consistently bemuse, perplex, and mislead. Alphonse weaves a fabric of untruth around his invented life in Algeria, and Hélène frequently equivocates about her gambling habit and leaves sentences suspended, hanging in mid-air. On several occasions, Françoise, who possesses a youthful lucidity that is markedly absent in the other characters, implores people to say what they mean, to finish their sentences. She even shouts emphatically after Bernard on one occasion, “I understand!” although what she could garner from their bemusing interaction remains unclear. The characters’ exchanges are punctuated by confusion, and the viewer is compelled to partake in this disorientation. Events occur out of sequence, and even within the same conversation, Resnais omits blocks of words and phrases that might offer clarity. Furthermore, dialogue that seems to carry some emotional importance and narrative illumination is almost always interrupted by an abrupt cut, a transition to another scene, other characters, or the return to a banality of interaction that characterizes the majority of the dialogue. Indeed, if an excess of political speech marks the verbal in *The Battle of Algiers*, *Muriel* can be characterized by the dull a-political nature of the characters interactions. Of course, this was precisely the milieu Resnais wanted to depict, that of “l’idée de Bonheur style ‘France-Dimanche,’ du petit Bonheur confortable à base de gueuletons et d’idées toutes faites” (an idea of Happiness in the style of “France Dimanche”, a comfortable little Happiness, based on squabbles and preconceived ideas).[[60]](#endnote-60) This is a setting in which people speak about anything and everything, as long as it is insignificant. Again, an incongruity between image and word emerges: intimate close ups, often accompanied by creeping violin tones, lead to vociferations of the deadly dullest variety: “a mustard sauce!” or “what a funny bird!.” Hélène even praises the comforting nature of the mundane and the commonplace, noting “at the end of the day, it’s a banal story. That reassures me.” Yet words in the form of written documents do offer some narrative illumination. The excerpts from Bernard’s diary point to the breakdown of modes of civilized behaviour in the context of the war, as well as drawing distinctions between civilian and soldierly existence: “we’re at war, Little Red said to me eventually. When you’re a civilian you can think what you like: I noticed for the first time he no longer washed his hands.” They also point to Bernard’s slow psychological disintegration following his participation in her torture: “I’ve had it – I think I want to die, at least, I’m no longer afraid of it […] Really, it all began with Muriel – when I understood – since Muriel I am no longer really living.” Yet it is worth noting that even though comprehension is offered in the form of words, these words are written, not spoken, and come to us in the form of images. In this sense, neither words nor images gain primacy in Resnais’ exploration of the experience of torture. There is even a denial of the power of cinema itself to represent historical trauma: Bernard says, “I don’t want to make films. I’m gathering evidence, that’s all.”

(Place Figure 4 here)

Figure 4. Excerpts from Bernard’s diary which offer some narrative illumination in *Muriel* (Argos Films, 1963).

The culmination of this evidence gathering process is the sequence in which Bernard describes in brutal verbal detail his involvement in the inhuman act of Muriel’s torture and death. This scene can be read as rupturing the verbal and audible schema of the rest of the film. The texture of the filmic image changes abruptly, and as the grainy Super-8 footage rolls, it shows what appear at first sight to be reasonably innocuous depictions of soldiers in Algeria. We see what have now become standard war-time images: soldiers smiling at the camera, shooting a wooden targets, eating, resting, tinkering with guns, all the while Bernard carefully describes the torture of Muriel. This narrative hovers at the edge of the visual frame; it becomes impossible to regard the wartime images as innocent recordings. Moreover, as the sequence progresses, the images on screen alter, becoming less predictable; we see soldiers dancing ludicrously, shots of mosques and Algerian women in burkas, and as the story reaches its close, the images are edited rapidly, intercut at speeds that inhibit us from reading them as a coherent narrative.

This rapid editing process contrasts with the immobile and numbed word-images Bernard uses to describe Muriel’s death:

Nobody had seen this woman before. I crossed through the office where I worked […] The shed was at the back, with the ammunition. At first, I didn’t see her. It was as I approached the table that I stumbled over her. She seemed to be asleep but she was trembling all over. I was told her name was Muriel. I don’t know why, but that mustn’t have been her real name. There were five of us around her […] It was necessary for her to speak before nightfall. Robert bent down and turned her over. Muriel groaned. She had put her arm over her eyes. They let go of her, she falls, lifeless. That’s when it began again. They drag her by her ankles into the middle of the shed to see her better. Robert kicks her [in the hips]. He takes a torch and points it at her. Her lips are swollen, foaming. They tear off her clothes. They try to sit her on a chair, but she falls off. One of her arms seems to be broken. They have to bring this to an end. Even if she had wanted to talk, she wouldn’t have been able to. I started into her too. Muriel groaned as she was beaten. The palms of my hands were burning. Muriel’s hair was all wet. Robert lights a cigarette. He goes up to her. She screams. Then she stared at me. Why me? She closed her eyes, then she began to vomit. Robert recoiled, disgusted. I left them all. That night I came back to see her. I lifted the tarp. It was as if she had been underwater for a long time…Like a sack of potatoes that had been spilled open…she had blood all over her body and in her hair…burns on her chest. Muriel 's eyes were not closed. It hardly affected me, perhaps it even had no effect on me at all. The next morning, Robert had got rid of her.

Bernard’s voice dominates the sequence, and the gut-wrenching description he offers of Muriel uses a series of visceral verbs to highlight her physical condition: she groans, falls, screams, and vomits. Specific parts of her body are isolated, arms, eyes, ankles, hips, lips, hair, chest, and the body parts listed in Bernard’s narration further the fragmentation of Muriel’s disintegrating, dying body. Moreover, these words highlight the potentially sexual nature of the torture scene: apart from the arms, all others could be counted as secondary sexual characteristics. Moreover, Muriel’s broken body also inspires a vocabulary of revulsion: she is swollen, crooked, covered in scum, split open, a disgust which echoes the words of the veteran Branche interviewed: Algerian women were “dirty and veiled.” For a body that is so conspicuously absent from the visual world of the film, Muriel’s corporality nonetheless occupies a significant space in Bernard’s description. Muriel’s body is broken, and therefore her voice, as a projection of the self that is dependant on the physical, is also silenced. She cannot even speak her own name – all that is accorded to Muriel are the non-verbal sounds of extreme pain, a pain which has, in Scarry’s words, “the ability to destroy language, the power of verbal objectification, a major source of self-extension, a vehicle through which the pain could be lifted out into the world and eliminated.”[[61]](#endnote-61)

Bernard’s verbal control of Muriel’s experience aresonates with Scarry’s description of the scene of torture: “ultimate domination requires that the prisoner’s ground become increasingly physical and the torturer’s increasingly verbal, that the prisoner become a colossal body with no voice and the torturer a colossal voice […] with no body.”[[62]](#endnote-62) Torture is an event that often erases its own witness, as is the case with Muriel, and it could therefore be argued that Muriel reiterates this destruction of language by denying the victim of torture a voice. I would suggest that the film is attempting to do something else: to evoke not the experience of torture itself, and certainly not Muriel’s experience, but rather the absence of the event itself, its quality of *Vernichtung*, which Rancière describes as not only eliminations of people or populations, but eliminations of the traces of that process of elimination: “[the] reduction to nothing, annihilation, but also annihilation of that annihilation, the disappearance of its traces, the disappearance of its very name.”[[63]](#endnote-63) Art can capture this precisely through the mise-en-scène of the impossible coordination of word and image. While many critics, including Susan Sontag and Michael Shapiro, evoke the superiority of images in evoking empathic identification with the suffering of others, for Jacques Rancière it is words that ultimately conjure the excesses of trauma.[[64]](#endnote-64) He argues that the “third stage” of cinema, after silent films and sound, “would surely involve reversing the original relationship and making images the appropriate medium for making words heard, wresting them from the silence of text.”[[65]](#endnote-65) In *Muriel*, the images are juxtaposed with the muted horror of the audible narrative. Their semantic referentiality is altered and the off-screen voiceover undermines these images, slowly drawing our attention in rather ominous fashion to their normative designs as what Judith Butler has called “frames of war”. In relation to the photographs from Abu Ghraib, Butler writes, “the circulation of the image outside the scene of its production has broken up the mechanism of disavowal, scattering grief and outrage in its wake.”[[66]](#endnote-66) For the American soldiers in the time and space of war and in an Iraqi prison, the images appeared “standard” routine, but when exposed to a wider public they took on a radically altered meaning that the soldiers themselves could later perceive (see *Standard Operating Procedure*, 2008).

(Place Figure 5 here)

Figure 5. Blurred images of soldiers at rest from the footage of Algeria in *Muriel* (Argos Films, 1963).

During the war, and perhaps in 1963, Bernard’s footage of Algeria would have conformed to a fairly standard image of the war: mountains, mosques, and soldiers. However, placed within the context of Muriel’s story, it becomes evidence of a broader unwillingness to confront wartime atrocities, atrocities for which no tangible proof remained. Even when Bernard tries to express his involvement in fragmented, desultory form, gathering vague proofs that seek some form of retribution for the dead woman, the social context in which he is attempting to articulate this is not prepared to listen. Robert, the only character apart from Bernard to make reference to the political situation in France says, “you’re still worrying about Muriel? It’s up to others to hide. [The French] put barbed wire around their little selves, they don’t like scandals.” Resnais’s presentation of the torture of Muriel in the context of French censorship in the 1960s is fundamentally a political act, an attempt to dismantle the barbed wire erected around obscured and difficult histories. For Rancière, politics makes what was unseen visible, “making what was audible as a mere noise heard as speech and in demonstrating that what appeared as a mere expression of pleasure or pain is a shared feeling of a good or an evil.”[[67]](#endnote-67) However, he is not describing a form of seeing that relies on the image, but rather a form of visibility that re-frames the sensible so that forgotten, repressed, and excluded stories are brought to light. As Rancière notes in relation to the representation of the inhuman act of violence, “it’s not a matter of picturing the horror but of showing something that precisely has no “natural” image – inhumanity, the process of negating humanity.”[[68]](#endnote-68) Muriel cannot speak, but she can see, and her look that fixes, her eyes that do not close, and Bernard’s refrain, “why me?”, reverberates outward to the spectator. Muriel’s look challenges us to see her history in Bernard’s account, for incomplete, partial and fragmentary though it may be, it is also the only trace of her that remains.

The torture of an unknown woman in rural Algeria is quite different in historical terms from that of FLN members in Algiers. In *The Battle of Algiers*, the brutal physical and human realities of war are rendered through pathos, and an affective identification with the image, contrasted with the insufficiencies of verbal justifications and political speech. *Muriel* attempts to evoke recognition of an act for which no proof remains, while highlighting the social context in which such exclusion can occur. While Resnais strives to preserve something of the incommunicability of the experience of torture while registering the precise details in verbal, narrative form, Pontecorvo chooses to enact the voicelessness that torture produces. In the end, however, both films point towards the role of absence, the space between words and images, in the evocation of the inhuman brutality, suffering, and abuse of power inherent in the act of torture. Although Rancière seems to privilege words over images in the evocation of the inhuman act, ultimately he suggests that it is the interaction of the verbal and the visual, or rather the gap between them, that opens than apprehension of extreme suffering in art:

Art always entails the presence of an absence; because it is the very job of art to reveal something that is invisible, through the controlled power of words and images, connected or unconnected; because art alone thereby makes the inhuman perceptible, felt.[[69]](#endnote-69)

Aesthetic absence may be central to the process of art itself, and particularly art that strives to capture the experience of violence at the limits of the human, and the humane. Ultimately, both films evoke absence by excluding words or images, provoking in the spectator a consciousness of the limits of representation in relation to the inhuman: the stories, places, perspectives, and individual lives that hover on the blurry, faint margins of what is seen and heard.

1. Rancière, Jacques, “The Cause of the Other,” trans. David Macey, *Parallax*, 4, no. 2 (1998): 25–33. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. For an account of the FLN in Algeria based on their archived documents, see Mohammed Harbi and Gilbert Meynier, *Le FLN, documents et histoire: 1954-1962* (Paris: Fayard, 2004). Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962* (London: Pan, 2002) and Mouloud Feraoun, *Journal, 1955–1962*([Éditions du Seuil](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%89ditions_du_Seuil), Paris, 1962) also offer useful insights on the tactics employed by the FLN, with Feraoun focusing on the groups treatment of Algerian civilians. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington(London: Penguin Modern Classics [1967] 2001), 48. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. For an account of the connections between the occupation and Algerian decolonization, see Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. See Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l’oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1992) on the historical motivations of the war in a broad sense, and Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization:* *The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: [Cornell University Press](http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/publishers/?fa=publisher&NameP=Cornell%20University%20Press), 2008) for a more detailed psychological account. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Both Agnès Varda’s *Cléo de 5 à 7* (*Cléo from 5 to 7*, 1962) and Jacques Demy’s *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (*The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, 1964) reference the troubled situation of unwilling conscripts. For historical accounts and testimonies, see in particularPatrick Rotman and Bertrand Tavernier, *La guerre sans nom: les appelés d’Algérie (1954 – 1962)* (Paris: Seuil, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Darius Rejali, *Torture and Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton Univeristy Press, 2007), 20. On the widespread nature of rape during the war, see Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l’armée pendant la guerre d’Algérie (1954-1962)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. On censorship during the war and of *Octobre à Paris* in particular, see Maria Flood, “(Un)Familiar Fictions: The 17th October 1961 Massacre and Jacques Panijel’s *Octobre à Paris* (1962),” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Torture: Cancer of Democracy* (London: Penguin, 1963), 78. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Henri Alleg, *La Question* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1958), and Benoît Rey, *Les Égorgeurs* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1961). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. # Benjamin Stora, “ Still Fighting: *The Battle of Algiers,* Censorship and the ‘Memory Wars’,” trans. Mary Stevens, *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*,9 (2007): 365–370.

    [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Naomi Greene, *Landscapes of Loss: The National Past in Postwar French Cinema* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 48–9. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Micheal Kaufman, “What does the Pentagon see in *The Battle of Algiers*?*,*” *The New York Times*, September 7, 2003, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/weekinreview/the-world-film-studies-what-does-the-pentagon-see-in-battle-of-algiers.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Andrew Thompson and Jeremi Suri, “How America Helped ISIS,” *The New York Times*, October 1, 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/02/opinion/how-america-helped-isis.html. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Matthew Croombs, “*La Jetée* in Historical Time: Torture, Visuality, Displacement,” *Cinema Journal* 56, no. 2 (2017): 25–45. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Ariel Dorfman, “The Tyranny of Terror: Is Torture Inevitable in Our Century and Beyond?,” in *Torture: A Collection*, ed. Sanford Levinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 8. Dorfman is the author of *Death and the Maiden* (London: Penguin, 1994), a play about an encounter between a woman and her rapist and torturer years after the event in a post–dictatorship South American country. The reference to the Argentinian regime is not out of place in this context: French generals, who had practiced torture in Algeria, trained members of the Argentinian military. See Eric Stener Carlson, “The Influence of French ‘Revolutionary War’ Ideology on the Use of Torture in the Argentine ‘Dirty War’,” *Human Rights Review*, 1, no. 4 (2000): 71–84. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Abdennour Ali-Yahia, *Algérie: raisons et déraison d’une guerre* (Paris: Harmattan, 1996), 30. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. See the interview with Paul Aussaresses, a French general in Algeria condemned for his use of torture, in *We Have Ways of Making You Talk.* [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Tzvetan Todorov, “Torture in the Algerian War,” trans. by Arthur Denner, *South Central Review*, 24 (2007): 18–26, 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) and Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Jacques Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2007), 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Ibid., 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Ibid., 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Jean-François Lyotard, *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994); as discussed in Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 111. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid., 130-131. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Ibid., 118. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Robert Antelme, *L’Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard Flammarion, 1998). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Ibid., 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Some of the path-breaking analyses of *The Battle of Algiers* include Jeffrey Louis Decker,

    “Terrorism (Un)Veiled: Frantz Fanon and the Women of Algiers,” *Cultural Critique*, 17 (1990): 177–195; Mike Wayne, *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (London: Pluto Press, 2001); and Micheal G. Vann, “The Colonial Casbah on the Silver Screen: Using *Pépé le Moko*and *The Battle of Algiers* to Teach Colonialism, Race, and Globalization in French History,” Radical History Review 83 (2002) 186–192. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloombury Academic, 2013), 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Quoted in Pier Nico Solinas, “An Interview with Franco Solinas,” in *The Battle of Algiers* booklet accompanying the Criterion Collection 2004 DVD release, 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books, 1969), 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid., 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 35. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Ibid., 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Ibid., 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London, Penguin Classics, 2006), 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Emily Tomlinson, “‘Rebirth in Sorrow’: *La Bataille d’Alger,*” *French Studies*, 58, no. 3 (2004): 357–370, 368. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. Nicholas Harrison, “Pontecorvo’s Documentary Aesthetics,” *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2009): 389–404, 402. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. On the role of women and gender in the film, see Norma Claire Moruzzi, “Veiled Agent: Feminine Agency and Masquerade in *The Battle of Algiers*,” in *Negotiating at the Margins: The Gendered Discourse of Power and Resistance*, ed. Sue Fisher and Kathy Davis (New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 1993), 225–277; Ranjanna Khanna, *Algeria Cuts: Women and Representation, 1830 to the Present* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2008); andDanièle Djamila Amrane Minne, “Women at War,” trans. Alistair Clarke, *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 9, no. 3 (2009): 340–349. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Harbi and Meynier, *Le FLN, documents et histoire,* 607. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Frantz Fanon, *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, trans. Hakkon Chevalier (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1965), 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Drif’s words were not translated in the 2003 Argent Films (UK) version of *The Battle of Algeirs*, but they are translated in the 2004 Criterion Collection release. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. Emma Wilson, *Alain Resnais* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006); Laura McMahon, “Untimely Resnais: *Muriel*’s Disarticulations of Justice,” *Film Philosophy* 20, no. 2-3 (2016): 219–234; Matthew Croombs, “Algeria Deferred: The Logic of Trauma in *Muriel* and *Caché*,” *Scope: An Online Journal of Film and Television Studies* 16 (2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. Raphaëlle Branche, “Sexual Violence in the Algerian War,” in *Brutality and Desire: War and Sexuality in Europe’s Twentieth Century*, ed. Dagmar Herzog (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 247–260, 256. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Branche, *La Torture et l’armée*, 290. The case of tortured Algerian fighter Djamila Boupacha brought to light the army’s practices around the torture and rape of female detainees during the conflict and illustrates the sexualization of the Algerian conflict as a whole. See Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962). For more on the implicit sexual implications in *Muriel*, see Wilson, *Alain Resnais*, and Maria Flood, *Screening Histories of Violence: France, Algeria, and the Moving Image* (Oxford: Legenda). [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Marnia Lazreg, *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 160. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Branche, “Sexual Violence in the Algerian War,” 256. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. Quoted in Rotman and Tavernier, *La Guerre Sans Nom,* 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., 447. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. Quoted in René Prédal, *Alain Resnais* (Paris: Minard, 1968), 153. This is the society that Kirsten Ross maps in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Jacques Rancière, *Figures of History*, trans. Julie Rose (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014), 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Ibid., 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 45. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrer, Strauss & Giraux, 2001) and Michael J. Shapiro, “Slow Looking: The Ethics and Politics of Aesthetics,” *Millennium Journal of International Studies*,37, no. 1 (2008): 181–197. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. Rancière, *Figures of History*, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. Butler, *Frames of War*, 100. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Rancière, *Dissensus*, 38. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Rancière, *Figures of History*, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)