Melancholic Nostalgia, Collective Memories, and the Cinematic Representations of Nationalistic Identities in *Indochine*

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This essay provides a rhetorical analysis of the French film, *Indochine*. The authors argue that this cinematic representation constitutes a good example of “melancholic nostalgia,” where producers and viewers used archetypal characters and romantic entanglements as a way of explaining the strengths and weaknesses of various French and “Indo-Chinese” colonial relationships. The essay argues that the producers of the film tapped into collective longings for symbolic pasts that may never have existed. The authors conclude that *Indochine* should be considered as a negotiated compromise that tells us more about the needs of modern Western, French and Vietnamese audiences than it does about any “real” colonial past.

**KEY CONCEPTS** archetypes, collective memory, colonial, *Indochine*, melancholic nostalgia, rhetoric

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Individual and collective feelings about some subjects often demand temporal distancing and cultural repression, and this clearly has been the case with many international memories of Vietnam. As Dittmar and Michaud (1990) explain, the wars that were fought in Southeast Asia involved not only issues of military power but symbolic contests over the meaning of such notions as “patriotism,” “heroism,” “imperialism,” and “class oppression” (p. 1). Our debates over the relative importance of these terms are played out in a variety of forums, including our textbooks, monuments, libraries, and museums. These sites of memory—*les lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989)—supply the touchstones that we need for coping with the traumas of the past.

Although communication scholars have provided us with a wealth of material on America’s involvement in Vietnam (e.g., Morris & Ehrenhaus, 1990), very few...
studies have attempted to critically evaluate the ways that other communities and nations have remembered and forgotten these conflicts. In recent years, however, communications scholars have begun to explore characterizations, *topoi*, archetypes, narratives, and other figurations that circulate in a variety of colonial and post-colonial visual representations (Buescher & Ono, 1996; Gaonkar, 1999; Hasian, 2000; Nakayama & Vachon, 1991; Shome, 1996).

In this essay, we augment our existing investigations of these key postcolonial and imperial representations by examining the film, *Indochine*, and responses to it. We argue that *Indochine* provides communication scholars and laypersons with an example of “melancholic nostalgia,” where key archetypes and romantic relationships are used as allegories for colonial and postcolonial relations, both historical and potential. Although several scholars external to our discipline have addressed some of the romantic or imperial dimensions of the film (Deming & Ivey, 1992; Heung, 1995; Norindr, 1996; Vincendeau, 1993), we believe that these scholars have not attended to the ways in which the producers and promoters of the film invited audiences to consider both the benefits and the detriments of competing types of colonial relationships. Rather, these scholars have classified the film as either “a critique of colonialism” that is conveyed through “the depiction of aberrant familial and sexual relations” (Heung, 1995, p. 238), or as entirely supportive of imperial ventures. For example, Norindr (1996) has recently argued that “*Indochine* is an elaborate fiction, a modern phantasmatic assemblage invented during the heyday of French colonial hegemony in Southeastern Asia,” a “discursive construction that supported financial and political ambitions” (p. 1). It is his contention that *Indochine* uses the frame of a “stormy love affair” to lament France’s loss of “the eastern part of the Indochinese peninsula” (p. 132).

Each of these critiques has contributed to our understanding of *Indochine*, but by taking a binary approach to the colonial/postcolonial question, they collectively have neglected to investigate the possibility that *Indochine* advances multiple colonial solutions to the “problem” of the French-Indochinese relations. As we argue below, the strategic use of romantic and nationalistic entanglements has major implications for both historical and contemporary analyses of imperial and colonial relationships. By extending the work of communication scholars who have looked into the culturetypal (Lucaites & Condit, 1990) and archetypal (Bates & Garner, 2001; Cypherd, 2001; Rushing, 1990; Rushing & Frentz, 1991; Rushing & Frentz, 1995; Terrill, 1993; Terrill, 2000) dimensions of rhetorical constructions, we provide a balanced perspectival framework that takes into account the range of colonial possibilities that appear in this popular cinematic representation. Moreover, we hope to show how *Indochine* invites audiences to take a stance on the question of just which forms of colonialism were most desirable. We contend that the film serves as a celluloid construct that allows both filmmakers and their audiences to reminisce about French colonialism in Southeast Asia.¹

Throughout this essay, we defend the contention that some cinematic representations help audiences mourn for a past that never was, that provide forms of “melancholic nostalgia” for failed imperial relationships. Our analysis of both the conscious and unconscious dimensions of the film takes seriously the suggestions that have been made by Rushing and Frentz (1991), who advocate the use of an integrated approach to rhetorical criticism of filmic objects. Their stance “assumes that the external world of historical conditions and the internal world of psychological processes

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are separate, but interrelated, domains of human experience” (p. 336). We engage this integrative approach in an attempt to access both the societal impact of the film and the “embodied material cinematic experience” of viewers (Cyphert, 2001, p. 163).4

We have chosen this particular artifact and the discourse surrounding it for a host of textual and contextual reasons. Producer Régis Wargnier’s _Indochine_ (1992) would win the Oscar for Best Foreign Film (as well as a Goya and a Golden Globe award), and it received rave reviews from international audiences (Norindr, 1996). Moreover, this “postcolonial allegory” (Heung, 1995, p. 238) was one of the first French attempts to examine some of the complexities that attended the colonization of Vietnam. For almost one hundred years, French colonialists maintained a presence in Indochina, but before the early 1990s, very few films touched on this volatile subject. With the passage of time, generational feelings changed, and the imaginative recollections that appear in _Indochine_ invited audiences to rethink their beliefs about events that have shaped a nation’s histories and memories. At the same time, this film was one of several cinematic representations that were actually filmed in the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, and the censors sought to ensure that the film did not damage the reputation of the communists involved in regional confrontations. Many key Vietnamese roles in the film were played by actual Vietnamese rather than European actors, and the film was touted as an example of how at least some of the French were finally dealing with the complexities of decolonization. It is our contention that the lines between fact and fantasy were blurred as _Indochine_ became an important strand in the diplomatic texts that were being woven by both French and Vietnamese politicians who were trying to “work through” the past and heal some traumatic memories. Debates about this celluloid construction were enmeshed in conversations about post-war economic markets, tourist resorts, and improved social relations.

In an effort to unpack some of the symbolic complexities involved in the creation and reception of _Indochine_, we have divided this essay into four major parts. In the first part, we provide a brief overview of some of the interrelationships that exist between melancholic nostalgia, collective memory, and nationalistic identities. In the second segment, we augment these insights by performing a detailed close textual analysis of the major archetypal figures that appear in the movie _Indochine_. In the third section, we explain how these figures are then deployed in various representations of possible romantic and colonial relationships; we elaborate on our argument here by including some of the critical and public reactions to the film. Finally, in the concluding section, we discuss the significance of this filmic analysis and assess the heuristic value of critical interrogations of such cinematic representations.

**MELANCHOLIC NOSTALGIA, COLLECTIVE MEMORIES, AND THE FABRICATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITIES**

Scholarly interest in the manifestations and consequences of nostalgic thinking has a lengthy and complex past. This special type of collective memory, which “works as an interpretative strategy” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000, p. 419), is a Western “concept” (p. 435) that dates back to a time when “nostalgia” was used to describe the medical ailments of traveling Swiss missionaries.5 This sort of “homesickness” was believed to incline people to consider ways of returning to an “idealized past,” a way of coping with present exigencies (Steinwand, 1997, p. 9). As Klein (2000) recently explained in his trenchant summary of some of the interdisciplinary work that has been done on “memory” and “history,” the “old key words of psychoanalysis

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have given way to a new preferred lexicon: trauma, transference, melancholia, mourning, and working through . . .” (p. 141).

“Melancholic” nostalgia is therefore a special type of individual and collective mourning because it involves a form of bereavement for objects that are considered lost or displaced. As Freud (1957/1915) explained in his seminal “Mourning and Melancholia,” there are times when individuals feel that they are losing their self-esteem because of the abasements that accompany feelings of loss (pp. 245-247). Nostalgic longings help to heal these personal wounds by providing idealized situations through which people can rebuild their lives and their egos. Notably, melancholic nostalgia can involve desperate searches for objects or items that may not have any material referents. As Marshall (1993) explains in her extension of Freud’s work, “[M]elancholy acknowledges an apparent paradox—a subject may feel bereft, despite a crowded set of identifications” (p. 390). The solution, of course, involves the provision of the right set of emotional symbols.

In most studies of nostalgia, this yearning for imaginative reconstructions is often treated as some social “problem” or character flaw. More recent commentators noted the perilous mental and ideological aspects of the disease that might accompany this feeling of homesickness. Longings for the past were sometimes viewed as “defeatist” in nature (Dudden, 1961, p. 517), and politicians sometimes created political personas that brought together “myth, nostalgia, and narrative” (Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, 2000, p. 435). Lasch (1984), one of the most renowned critics of these nostalgic longings, was convinced that too many people were now trying to live in a “reactionary” world that bore little resemblance to reality (p. 65). The advent of modernity was blamed for having created the social and political conditions that brought on the pathologies associated with nostalgic thinking.

We contend that these nostalgic feelings involve more than simply individual or psychological disorders. In colonial and postcolonial contexts, they also furnish us with psychic and social cues that remind us of the imaginary terrains, the fictive protagonists, the “fantastic adventures,” and the “chromolithography” that maintain the power of “emblematic colonial figures and prestigious sites” (Norindr, 1996, p. 3). As Steinwand insightfully noted in 1997, nostalgic feelings are “not simply to be dismissed as a distortion of ‘the other,’ because every reflection on where we are going and where we have been depends on such distortion” (p. 10). Gronbeck (1998), in his analysis of the relationship between history, argument and collective memory, averred that since many parts of the past are “inaccessible,” critics needed to realize the partiality and self-interestedness that was involved in the crafting of particular accounts of the past (p. 48). Buescher and Ono (1996) go even further to assert that in the “process of telling a story of romance,” some films resurrect the “features, attributes, actions, and values” that are “typical of characters within the colonial narrative” (p. 134).

Perhaps the best way to think of melancholic nostalgia is to understand it as something that needs to be “worked through” rather than mastered, where viewers and critics come to understand some of the psychological forces that are operating when we blend together national memories, aesthetics, and collective longing. Rather than categorically dismissing these romantic creations, we might recognize that such representations help to fill the void in some people’s lives. The selective nature of cinematic representations means that all rhetorical fabrications—including various forms of collective memories—are inevitably truncated remnants of a much larger, unknow-
able past. As a result, both individuals and nations are constantly making “use of nostalgia in the construction of national identity” (Steinwand, 1997, p. 10). In the next section of the essay, we illustrate how the film *Indochine* played on the melancholic feelings of many audiences who longed for an idyllic colonial past.

**COPING WITH THE TRAUMA OF MELANCHOLY: INDOCHINE AND NOSTALGIC RENEGOTIATIONS OF FRENCH COLONIALISM**

Although many postcolonial scholars will perhaps argue that international colonialism has never really ended (e.g., Buescher & Ono, 1996; Shome, 1996), there is little question that many Western nations believed that they had experienced a tremendous loss with the rise of nationalism that followed the end of World War II. The psychic pride that accompanied the “scramble for Africa” and other exotic lands meant that national identities were no longer tied to fixed geographic boundaries. At the same time, the “ex-colonial world” was now being portrayed as a place where there was an “imagined history of Western endowments and free handouts” (Said, 1994, p. 22).

Yet perhaps some communities experienced these losses in different ways. Unlike some European colonists who segregated themselves from other “races,” French colonizers prided themselves on their “assimilation” practices, which blurred the line between the homeland and the occupied territory. Within this alluring narrative, French imperialism was unique because it treated the denizens of the world as equals, all potential members of the greater French empire. This milder form of the mission civilisatrice was an attractive picture for those who believed in benign forms of colonialism. By dissociating the activities of organizations like the Sûreté Générale de l’Indochine (the police) from other French colonial institutions, audiences might be able to discriminate between the more benevolent “new” imperialism and the more problematic “old” colonialism.

For decades, the defeat of the French forces in Indochina in the mid-1950s had meant that the geographic space known as “Indochine” was not always a welcome part of France’s collective memory. This changed in the early 1990s, when a series of new films invited French audiences to rethink their nation’s history and colonial legacy. European filmmakers took advantage of a growing fascination with historical memories by promoting such films as *L’Amant*, the remake of *Germinal*, and *Le Reine Margot* (Norindr, 1996). This genre of movie making, known as “heritage” cinema, is said to provide both producers and audiences with a way of “re-assessing French national history and identity in an era when the political integration of Europe has been one of the main topics of political debate” (Nicholls, 1996, p. 34). Such films are nostalgic in that they invite viewers to look back on a time of mythic state unity, when a nation like France could take pride in both its colonial destiny and international power. We would go further to claim that such films tell us more about the melancholic feelings of those who want to take pride in a colonial period that never really existed.

*Indochine* is a nostalgic film that takes viewers to a colonial past that preceded World War II, a temporal move that allows audiences to reminisce about the final two decades of French rule in that region and the geopolitical power of a once massive French empire. Unlike other films that might have decided to center the action around key political events, legal trials, or military battles, this is a cinematic production that creates textured good feelings by highlighting the affective dimensions of
colonial traditions. Part of the allure of this film inhere in its “recasting colonization as romance”; in the process, it appears to be an apolitical text that ostensibly reveals many sides of the colonial project (Worthy, 1993, p. 39).

An effective means of identifying and assessing melancholic nostalgia in a narrative text is to evaluate the characters through which the narrative is conveyed. As strategically located symbols, characters often function in these texts to facilitate a nostalgic, ideologically specific reading of the historical events depicted; in many cases, particular archetypes emerge that virtually ensure such an interpretation. Frenz and Rushing (1993) argue for a “critical posture that conjoins ideology and archetype” (p. 62). In their analysis of Jaws, they demonstrate the ways in which “gender-as-archetype”—especially as manifest in the characters of the hunters and of the prey—and “ideology-as-class structure work together to promote the American project of conquering the frontier” (p. 79). We argue that melancholic nostalgia itself constitutes an ideological narrative of historical events predicated largely on tropes articulated by characters available in these texts. We assess Indochine as one such example, populated by archetypal characters who function to romanticize and rationalize colonialism.

Part of the reason that Indochine’s characters and images resonate with Western audiences inheres in the fact that these nostalgic reconstructions are based on well-known archetypes in Orientalist representations (Said, 1994) that have been available for decades. Many of the modern representations of French and Vietnamese lands, situations, and relations apparent in Indochine are based on the conscious and unconscious appropriations of a host of historical and colonial commonplaces. For example, one popular generic storyline that entails the complex images of lovers torn by war and ethnic diversity appeared originally in Madame Chrysanthemum, an autobiographical novel by Pierre Loti (Behr & Steyn, 1991, p. 18). Loti, who had served with the French Navy in the Far East during the 1880s, would write a self-serving tale that explained the trials and tribulations of a fictional naval officer named Pierre. Pierre, who entered into a “routine arrangement” with the heroine Ki-Hou-San (Chrysanthemum), is crestfallen at the thought of leaving this foreign “other”—until he finds her counting coins “with the competence and dexterity of an old moneylender” (pp. 18-19).

In countless European and American imperialist narratives, these generic storylines functioned as cautionary tales that warned travelers of the relational complications that came from the clash of diverse cultures. Hundreds of books, plays, and even operas were written about the complications that came from the interracial sexual politics of the more modern forms of colonialism or imperialism. “Eroticized native bodies,” explains Stoler (1997), dotted the landscape of the Orientalist texts that “feminized colonies, and the women in it” (p. 174). Travel abroad yielded adventure and boredom, imperial domination and responsibility, desire and disgust.

Within these cultural milieus, Pierre Loti’s story of Madame Chrysanthemum was presented as an opera in 1893, and American renditions of the tale appeared in 1898. In that year, the American Century Magazine contained an essay that had transformed the character of Madame Chrysanthemum into “Madame Butterfly” (“Cio-Cio-San”). The author of this work, John Luther Long (1898), revised his story so that the affable French naval captain became the nefarious “Lieutenant Pinkerton.” Cio-Cio-San, a geisha, has to relinquish her son to Pinkerton, who had abandoned her after a brief affair. At the end of Long’s version of the tale, Cio-Cio-San commits
suicide with her father’s sword. “Long’s story,” note Behr and Steyn (1991), “caused a sensation in the United States” (p. 20) as Broadway producers fought over the rights to turn this manuscript into theatrical performances and musical scores.

Throughout the twentieth century, various spin-offs of the generic forms featured in Madame Butterfly appeared in many transatlantic operas, plays, and melodies, and these representations intervened in modernist debates about the desirability or feasibility of cross-cultural romance. As Heung (1995) explains, “Butterfly’s enduring mythic stature” comes from her symbolism as “the wronged woman of interracial romance” and the “sacrificial heroine of maternal melodrama” (p. 231). Oscar Hammerstein II, who was intrigued by some of the problematics of post-World War II racism, put these words in the mouth of a “native” woman who appears to challenge the commonplace of the 1950s:

You’ve got to be taught to be afraid
Of people whose eyes are oddly made
And people whose skin is a different shade,
You’ve got to be carefully taught.
You’ve got to be taught
Before it’s too late,
Before you are six or seven or eight
To hate all the people your relatives hate . . . (quoted in Behr & Steyn, 1991, p. 22).

Forty years later, another American musical that took advantage of the “butterfly” motif, Miss Saigon, was considered to be one of the major theatrical events of its day. This time, the permutation involved a story about the tragic love affair between an American G.I. and a Vietnamese worker at a local bar. More than $30 million were spent on advance ticket sales for Miss Saigon (Behr & Steyn, 1991).

Indochine thus occurs in the context of this prefigured colonial tale of romantic and nationalistic entanglements, and it utilizes various rhetorical tropes and strategies to romanticize French colonization of Indochina, many of which are clearly manifest in the character of Eliane Devries (Catherine Deneuve). A wealthy rubber plantation owner, Devries has lived nearly all of her life in Indochina, on the same plantation that her father founded during her early childhood years. Devries moves with grace and ease among the people and culture of Indochina; she understands and respects their customs, she speaks the language, and she frequently dresses in their clothing, especially when relaxing at home. She explains to her adopted daughter, Camille, that skin color does not account for difference: “a [French] child who only crunches apples can’t be like me. I’m an Asian. A mango” (21:59). Nevertheless, Devries is the epitome of classic French sophistication and refinement; she is beautiful, passionate (yet disciplined), elegant, and poised, in herself an excellent and ideal representative of French imperialism.

The fact that Devries, the quintessential symbol of the French empire in the film, is a woman is significant, especially insofar as her characterization in the film revolves largely about her role as a mother—specifically, as mother to her adopted Indochinese daughter, Camille, and later, Camille’s son, Etienne. While contemporary sensibilities allow for modifications of the racial logics implicit in the older Orientalist texts, the nostalgic longings for an exotic “other” demand the presence of

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such subalterns. These circumstances and characterizations intersect to articulate Devries—and thus France—as a nurturing, generally benevolent colonizer, one of the dominant archetypes that Indochine offers in its cultivation of melancholic nostalgia. She is the vehicle for conveying the strengths and weaknesses of some of the older, assimilationist imperial projects. Although she can be ruthless and exploitative, at other times she functions as a cipher for benign colonialism—she becomes one of the “objects” in the film imbued with “memory-traces” and melancholia (Freud, 1957/1915, pp. 256-257). Devries is often depicted as loving and affectionate, very maternal, with Camille and Etienne, a characterization that is designed to symbolize France’s colonial attitude toward Indochina; that of an adoptive, loving parent who has only the best interests of her child at heart and will go to any lengths to protect and nurture her child. So committed is Devries—and, we are led to infer, France—to supporting her child that, upon being heckled by a child whose parents have told him that she is “a red, a dirty communist,” she responds, “tell them it’s true” (2:16:11), even as her actions and behaviors clearly belie that statement. This nurturing benevolence ultimately manifests in profound and painful parental self-sacrifice on Devries’ part in the form of her eventual withdrawal from Camille’s life at her (Camille’s) request. Devries’ decision to make this sacrifice in order to please the demanding child is offered as an allegory of France’s withdrawal from Indochina, an artful, particularly nostalgic reconstruction of the political nuances of that event.

A number of archetypal foils in the film serve to enhance and reinforce the representation of Devries as the commercial venturer and benevolent colonizer. The first of these is the cruel imperialist advanced primarily in the character of Guy Asselin, or the “archetypal colonial policeman,” as Nicholls (1996, p. 37) describes him. Asselin, resentful in any event of his lengthy post in Indochina, projects his resentment and even revulsion onto the Indochinese; he is brutal with them, commanding and participating in their torture and execution, and he generally makes clear his extreme disdain for them. Cultivating Asselin’s cruel persona is his association with another, related (if minor) trope in the film, the irresponsible imperialist, portrayed in the character of Yvette. The immoral (as revealed by her adulterous nature, which entailed leaving her husband and children, as well as her rather crude burlesque nightclub act) Yvette revels in the decadence available to her in Indochina as a member of the privileged expatriate elite; her attention to Indochinese culture is determined by what she can appropriate, exploit, and eroticize in her act. Her crassness is frequently contrasted in the film with Devries’ cool, patrician elegance. The cruel imperialist also is featured in other characters in the film; early in the film, a French admiral and Devries observe a rowing race in which French rowers compete with Devries’ Indochinese workers—whose coxswain, significantly, is Devries’ father, also endowed with the same benevolence toward the people and culture of Indochina that characterizes his daughter. The admiral champions the general superiority of the French and, specifically, of the crew, but Devries defends her Indochinese men’s fortitude and strength. The Indochinese appear to have won, and Devries’ maternal faith seems to be justified, despite the admiral’s admonition that “we shouldn’t give these people ideas of victory” (7:13).

Other cruel imperialists include the French officer who cultivates and oversees the “voluntary” slave trade on Dragon Island, a remote outpost of Indochina, and who brutally tortures and kills those would-be slaves who express a desire to remain with their family members. Indeed, the blatant dehumanization inherent in the vol-
untary slave trade suggests strongly that the colonialism available in Devries’ Indochina is far more humane and preferable to that endorsed and practiced by this cruel imperialist. His murder by Camille enrages yet another such imperialist, Inspector Castellani, who also oversees the slave trade and becomes determined to find Camille; he refers to her and other Indochinese who obstruct his search, intentionally or not, as “chinks,” “dogs,” and “monkeys” (1:27:23; 1:27:34; 1:39:15). Cruel imperialism also is evident initially in the character of Jean-Baptiste, lover of both Devries and, later, Camille; he commands the torching of the houseboat of an Indochinese family, vehemently citing the necessity of controlling and disciplining those who commit even minor infractions. Notably, the cruel (and irresponsible) imperialist is nearly always established by virtue of his/her destruction of families and attendant lack of nurturing, parental qualities; this functions to throw Devries’ maternal benevolence into sharp relief and articulate it as desirable and even critical.

Another prominent archetypal characterization in _Indochine_ that cultivates further melancholic nostalgia for the era of French colonization is that of the assimilated, colonized “other,” manifest in two distinct character types: the grateful and dependent servant and the Indochinese elite. The assimilated servant is articulated primarily in the characters over whom Devries has control—her house servants and her plantation workers. For instance, when Devries sells her plantation in preparation to depart for France, her housemaid, Shen, panics, frightened at the prospect of her own liberation as an indirect consequence of the communist pressure that has prompted Devries’ departure. Devries—who has sold her plantation to her wealthy Indochinese friends—reassures her that she and the other house servants will continue in the employment of the new owners; that was a condition of the sale. Again, we see Devries’ maternal, if patronizing, benevolence at work here, and we also witness Shen’s relief and gratitude at the prospect of her continuing servitude. Assimilation also is articulated in very much the same way in Devries’ plantation workers. Upon physically disciplining one of her “coolies,” or plantation workers, who tried to run away, Devries says, “You made me beat you. You think mothers like beating their children?” The coolie responds, “You are my mother and father” (14:44). In this vein, Heung (1995) has observed that Devries was cast in an “archetypal mold” that “unmasks not only the violence inherent in employer/employee and colonizer/relations, but also Eliane’s conception of mothering as control through physical punishment” (p. 241). Later, following a fire likely set by communists, the workers step forward one by one to do Devries’ bidding; their loyalty to her appears to outweigh their concern, even as their own emancipation looms before them. Similarly, when a prominent mandarin is assassinated during a ceremonial ritual, the numerous onlookers cry, “It’s the communists! They’ll kill us all! Run!” (36:50)—portraying the preference of the Indochinese masses for French colonization. Also, the fact that the nefarious voluntary slave trade exists elsewhere offers implicit proof that the Indochinese are willing to be colonized, and Devries’ particular brand of colonization appears, in contrast to what they are facing, tantamount to a haven.

The Indochinese elite, characterized by wealth, power, and tradition, also contribute to the archetype of the assimilated colonized, insofar as they are presented as full equals of the French colonizers. This archetype is apparent primarily in the character of Madame Minh Tam, who is the mother of Tanh, Camille’s fiancé. Tam is wealthy and powerful; she perceives her ability to participate easily in French culture as promoting her own prestige relative to “common” Indochinese. Her status is of

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supreme importance to her; she is preoccupied with engineering the future of the ancient, royal Indochinese dynasty by arranging the marriage of Camille and Tanh. She informs Devries on several occasions of what she must do or may not do, for instance with respect to her participation in certain Indochinese rituals, and Devries consistently acquiesces meekly. Tam is also very imperialist in her attitudes, both politically—she recognizes her advantageous position in relation to French colonization insofar as that relationship reflects and preserves her own elite status—and personally, as demonstrated by her insensitive and patronizing treatment of her servants. This archetype of the assimilated colonized elite also is available in various other representations of ancient Indochinese culture, including the mandarin who is assassinated before Devries’ eyes at a ceremonial function. He had had a longstanding, mutually respectful relationship with Devries and her father before her, perfectly at peace with and welcoming of the colonization that they represented. These elite Indochinese personas are presented as “authentic,” characterized by ancient native tradition and lineage, and they are conflated with the history and cultural traditions of Indochina. Their endorsement of French imperialism thus reads as acceptance of colonization on the part of the “true” Indochinese, which sets up a congruency between French colonization and preservation of Indochinese culture and a concomitant juxtaposition between that culture and those conversely inauthentic, traitorous Indochinese who would oust the colonizers, thus destroying Indochina. The references to ancient Indochinese cultures and traditions and the establishment of the French as their protectors certainly romanticizes colonization and contributes to a particularly melancholic nostalgic representation of it.

The final archetype that functions as a foil against which Devries’ French colonialism emerges as justifiable and desirable is, of course, the impetuous rebel. This trope is manifest in the communist characters, most of whom are a nameless and/or faceless mass, although they include Tanh and, eventually, Camille. Their impetuosity is their defining feature; they are given to wanton acts of destruction, including torching Devries’ beautiful, mystical rubber plantation and assassinating the mandarin, who represents the ancient beauty, culture, and tradition of Indochina. As we have noted, melancholic nostalgia often requires some selective forgetting, and in Indochine we encounter very little discussion of the political forces that might have brought about nationalistic or anti-colonial feelings. Indeed, the political bases for the communist/nationalist movement are never articulated; rather, as symbolized by Camille’s relationship with Devries, their rebellion is cast as a childish willfulness, the immature desire of a young, unprepared child to be independent. Even Tanh, the only communist character who appears relatively mature and less volatile than the others, is cast in this light; the scene in which he gives voice to his political allegiance is featured as a reaction to and rebellion against his mother. She orders him to his knees in deference to his ancestors as he reveals to her his communism; he refuses her, saying, “Obedience has made slaves of us” (1:16:11). Interestingly, he says to her also in this scene that he will use the French concepts of freedom and equality—which he learned via his education in France—against them, again evoking the rebellion of the child against the parent (as well as simultaneously crediting France with any virtues that might be attributed to communist impulses).

Camille, ultimately the most notorious communist character in the film, also comes to her communism less via political conviction than a love affair gone awry; although she becomes increasingly aware of the injustices perpetrated by (notably) cruel French
imperialists, this occurs as a direct consequence of her running away from her mother, who has intercepted Camille’s pursuit of Jean-Baptiste. Notably, her first encounter with Jean-Baptiste is a direct result of her being slightly injured as a result of an act of impetuous communist rebellion. Camille’s later shooting of a cruel French imperialist—the act is responsible for elevating her to the legendary status of the “Red Princess,” as she comes to be known by the communist underground—is less political than it is highly emotional and personal, a manifestation of the shock and rage she experiences at seeing her friends tortured and killed. Indeed, her eventual sheltering by members of the communist underground is purely accidental—they rescue her (and Jean-Baptiste) from near death. Rather than consequently honing her political awareness, she is occupied with her love for Jean-Baptiste and her pregnancy as her saviours—masquerading as an theatrical troupe—move from venue to venue, destroying property and generally committing what is depicted as wanton murder and mayhem on their travels. She is arrested and imprisoned very soon after Jean-Baptiste and the baby are taken captive; several years later, when she is released, she rejects the waiting Devries’ love by saying, “I’m leaving. I can’t go backwards. I have no past. I’ve forgotten everything” (2:23:04). Devries, of course, has been both her romantic rival and the obstacle to her lover, which was the original reason for her emotional break from her mother. Again, Camille’s communism appears to be founded on emotional reaction and rebellion rather than on political reasoning. In contrast to Indocheinese communism as articulated in this film, Devries’ colonialism is advanced as calm, reasonable, mature, constructive, organized, and reflective, all qualities that warrant fond remembrance.

The intersection of the characters of Devries, Camille, Jean-Baptiste, and Etienne bears further analysis in terms of their functions as individual and collective symbols of French colonization and Indochina as depicted in the film. As established, the parent-child relationship between Devries and Camille is a clear allegory for France’s beneficent or maternal colonization of Indochina. Devries’ adoption of Camille, of course, functions as the metaphor for colonization. Furthermore, the evolution of Devries’ and Camille’s relationship mirrors a heavily romanticized generational history of French colonialism. Idyllic at first, this relationship theoretically blossomed when France respectfully participates in (rather than appropriates and exploits) Indocheinese culture, represented by Devries’ wearing Indocheinese culture, eating Indocheinese cuisine, speaking the native tongue, and being invited to various cultural events and rituals. This is reciprocated by the Indocheinese, who benefit from French colonization; they are protected, like Camille is—she, of royal descent, has been taken under Devries’ wing after her parents’ death. Indeed, Devries’ investment in Camille reflects that of France in Indochina—she controls her “like her most important property,” according to one French critic (Siclier, 1992, para. 3). Like Camille, the Indocheinese partake of and enjoy French culture, including learning to speak the language, as Camille does exclusively. Camille also initially dresses in Western clothing, goes to a French private school, learns Western art (music and dancing, particularly) and history, and she is thoroughly enchanted by France—she is certain that Tnh will be similarly enchanted by the fair women of France when he journeys off to Paris. Just as Devries and Camille become estranged through a long and painful process, so, too, do France and Indochina. As we have argued earlier, this estrangement is presented in the film as a parent’s loving self-sacrifice in reluctant accordance with her child’s somewhat irrational wishes: “Go to France,” Camille commands Devries.
and thus all colonizers. "Your Indochina is no more. It's dead!" (2:24:26).

But additional elements in the relationship between Devries and Camille are brought to the fore via the character of Jean-Baptiste, who forebodes "the first tremors of nationalism" ("Indochine," 1993, para. 3). This creates another subtextual layer; a subtle sexual motif appears to underlie Devries' and Camille's relationship. For instance, they are often shown dancing together, especially the tango; in one significant scene at a formal Christmas party, as Camille and Devries both nervously await the imminent arrival of Jean-Baptiste—Camille not yet aware of his status as Devries' lover but totally infatuated with him, and Devries seeking to prevent Camille seeing or speaking with Jean-Baptiste—tango music is played. Camille at first resists Devries' invitation to dance, but Devries pulls her onto the dance floor anyway; Devries, wearing a black silk sleeveless dress, pulls Camille's white silk scarf and jacket from her shoulders to reveal her white silk sleeveless dress. Camille, uncomfortable, nonetheless follows Devries' commanding lead in a quite beautiful and rather erotic tango. As they dance, Devries whispers to her: "I'd like to be alone with you in a small mountain chalet. With a smoking chimney, like in fairy tales" (54:52). Camille pulls away with a gasp as Jean-Baptiste materializes at the door. In a later scene, as Camille prepares herself for her engagement ceremony, she waits and watches, her breasts bared, in a darkened room as Devries approaches her silently from behind. When Devries justifies her decision to Jean-Baptiste to have him sent away in order to prevent any contact between him and Camille, she explains, in response to his defense that he barely knows Camille, "You won't be able to resist her. She's irresistible" (56:11).

As Freud (1957/1915) explained, feelings of ambivalence often occupy a sense of loss, and this is apparent in the character of Jean-Baptiste. At first, he is portrayed as a young, rather naive, and brash naval officer, unsure of himself and how to behave. This is established via his torching of the houseboat, which he soon regrets deeply, as well as his pursuit of Devries—he seems to have little control over his desire for her, even developing a nosebleed in her presence: "I'm retreating to childhood," he says (18:13). But very soon, it is Devries who cannot control her passion for Jean-Baptiste—he holds her in sexual thrall, forcing her to reveal her vulnerability to him. Later, however, it is Devries who is in control again, arranging for his posting in a remote part of China; Jean-Baptiste, although angry, is impotent. Later, when he encounters Camille at the slave trade, he plucks her from the others. He is very protective of her, securing her escape and accompanying her even after she kills the cruel French general. He makes this decision in a split second, at great cost to himself—he effectively sacrifices his career. As they drift in the South China Sea for many days, Jean-Baptiste protects her, shielding the sun from her face, giving her the last bit of water, even working up saliva to give to her in order to rehydrate her—similar to how a mother might suckle her vulnerable young. When they are found by members of the communist underground, he implores them weakly: "Save her; I want her to live" (1:34:40). In short, Jean-Baptiste assumes the role of maternal, self-sacrificing protector in Camille's life—he replaces Devries in this respect. Very soon thereafter, of course, he and Camille embark on a passionate affair. Although the character of Jean-Baptiste appears to function as a projection of Devries' and Camille's competing desires, we argue that he is actually a projection of Devries; his intense sexual relationships with, respectively, Devries and Camille function to realize a sexual link and forge a genealogical lineage between the two women. The conflation of Devries' and Jean-Baptiste's characters arguably functions to masculinize the feminine and specifically maternal.

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dimensions of Devries’ colonialism without mitigating them, thus endowing it with some measure of conventional authority and affirming Devries’ fundamental strength. This is evidenced by the consistently complementary qualities of these characters, even as their respective qualities shift. More to the point, however, Jean-Baptiste becomes the vessel through which Devries can consummate her relationship with Camille and, consequently, produce Etienne.

Etienne thus is the interracial child born of French and Indochinese parents. He is a complex figure who must make choices about his own identity when presented with a range of possible colonial archetypes and political positions—benevolent colonialism, communistic nationalism, or moderate reformism. He is the symbolic future of the merger between benevolent colonial France and ancient, authentic Indochina overlaid with a veneer of communism. He is endorsed by several audiences, among them those that can understand his loyalty to France as well as his descendence from ancient Indochinese elite, yet he is also the prince of the common Indochinese people. As Jean-Baptiste traveled the countryside as a prisoner with Etienne, he enjoined his captors to stop in each village and find a nursing mother who would feed the child. Devries tells Etienne that “All the women claimed they had fed you—even some who had been dry for years. Even some who had never seen you.” (2:01:03). Devries elaborates by recounting his parents’ tale and her role in his life on the eve of France’s official relinquishment of its interest in Indochina. Devries explains to Etienne that upon Camille’s release many years earlier, Camille stated that she wanted nothing to do with Devries or Etienne, and she commanded that Devries take Etienne to France. Devries sold the plantation, which she had been saving for Camille, and moved with Etienne to France, where he has been raised as French. Camille thus is articulated as selfish and unfeeling, distinctly nonmaternal, in contrast to Devries’ nurturing benevolence, self-sacrifice, and strength. Devries has provided the opportunity for Etienne to meet Camille, who is part of a Vietnamese delegation visiting France to oversee the signing of the independence treaty. Etienne goes to the hotel to meet Camille, but he then decides to forego the opportunity. He explains to Devries that he imagined various melodramatic and irrational scenarios but preferred, instead, to leave. “You are my mother,” he says to her (2:29:26). Unlike Camille, Etienne is reasonable, calm, mature, and reflective—he is, indeed, like Devries. He represents the ultimate romanticization and rationalization of French colonization of Indochina—he is the projected, potential future of Vietnam, the product of benevolent colonialism, a figure who temporally and geographically traverses ancient Indochina and contemporary Vietnam. Etienne thus represents the hybridity of the postcolonial moment, that location that Bhabha (1994) described as the contingent, “in-between” space that becomes a part of imperial relations (pp. 5-8). Unlike Devries/France, he is not burdened by any melancholic nostalgia because the past that he is leaving behind is one that was dominated by either mandarins or communists. Etienne literally and figuratively brings France and Indochina back together again, and his erasure of the past becomes a precondition for international harmony. At the same time, he becomes an emblematic reminder of the enduring power of French ideology—it is his European education that helps him to learn about the importance of freedom and the need for revolutionary change. He is the one who represents the true spirit of the Geneva conference, even as we learn of his mother’s presence at that gathering. Significantly, he chooses Devries and thus France, the quintessential justification of colonialism in the film. Etienne becomes the final and definitive lens through which to look nostal-
gically, melancholically back upon Indochina’s colonial past.

Each of these archetypal figures independently invites us to reflect on some fragment of colonial pasts, but part of the genius and allure of Wargnier’s movie comes from the suturing of romantic and colonial possibilities. This helps to create complications and ambivalences as we watch some of the symbolic journeys of the major players in these colonial dramas. The textured feelings that we are invited to experience regarding the status of key relationships in the movie are closely connected to some of the colonial possibilities that marked French-Indochine relations between the 1930s and 1954. For example, the “friendship” between Asselin and Devries serves as a visual vehicle to explain some of the rhetorical dimensions of any transition from “old” to “new” forms of colonialism. At times, they both perform as paternalistic protectors of the Indochinese people, both of them clinging to a pre-communist past. In their world, the alliance of police and commercial ventures will help bring stability to the region, where Paris is reproduced in Saigon, where phonographs close the aural distance between France and Indochina. At one point in the film, Devries is openly blamed for representing a system that runs colonies by not letting others “breathe” or treating people like “trees”—buying them and draining them (55:56). Devries identifies herself at times as “Asian,” yet she takes pride in the size of her rubber plantations and does not hesitate to think of her workers as her “coolies” (17:50). Asselin wants to maintain colonial order and the empire, and he is willing to use torture and prisons as a means of containing the forces of communism and nationalism. The failure of the Asselin/Devries relationship parallels the decline of the “old” forms of coercive colonialism. She is sometimes more compassionate and understanding of “Asia” and its denizens, but she, like Asselin, is heavily invested in the illusion of French permanence.

The Devries-Jean-Baptiste romance also is filled with colonial possibilities, and in this configuration, audiences are invited to consider how French Indochina might be saved by having alliances between benevolent colonizers and reformist martial figures. This quest for a “simple and stable past” acts as a refuge “from the turbulent and chaotic present” (Lowenthal, 1989, p. 21). Will the spread of enlightenment thinking, changes in naval policies, the amelioration of working conditions, and the reformation of individual colonizers save the empire? Certainly, when Jean-Baptiste sees the slave pens in Northern Indochine, he is no longer interested in simply wanting to see the world (28:54). This romance also fails, for both historical and personal reasons, and once again we are left to contemplate what might have been. Individual awareness helps, but neither character is able to accept the possibility of total decolonization or to foster between them a viable alternative to it.

The Jean-Baptiste/Camille relationship is the most tragic of all. This relationship frames a narrative that gestures toward alliances between French liberals (as we have argued, Jean-Baptiste’s moves toward liberalism also can be understood as reflections/projections of Devries’ own moments of liberalism) and more radical Indochine nationalists, but even the possibilities of interracial marriages cannot alleviate the hunger and misery of the 1930s and 1940s. In these lovers, as with the colonial/political alliance that their relationship represents, we have the sense of great potential, of soulmates united in their shared perspectives and affection for each other. But each is destroyed or at least rendered nonviable by the political alliances that s/he represents. Jean-Baptiste is killed by the old French regime, and the communism that Camille claims as emotional salvation while imprisoned—“Otherwise, I would have died of
sorrow” (2:23:36), she tells Devries—removes her irrevocably from reason. They are each too close to their respective political geneses; their union is thus doomed to failure. However, Etienne, as the product of their union, represents a synthesis, a harmonious and moderate blending of their competing alliances. Notably, he is the only major character who remains free of romantic—explicitly political—entanglements; rather, he emerges whole in himself, a symbol of the new and future Vietnam in whom the French presence is indelible.

In sum, each of these personal relationships leaves us with feelings of both melancholy and nostalgia, a longing for a variety of bygone Indochines. We are left with yearnings that involve “deep-seated, heartfelt, romantic” desires for the “yesterday that is gone but is never to be forgotten” (Dudden, 1961, p. 516). Our analysis clearly provides another example of how the creation of nostalgic memories entails complex symbolization, where national models of patriotism are amalgamated with “aesthetic and political programs” (Steinwand, 1997, p. 11). Such rhetorics are not only viewed on the screen but are constantly being reenacted by social agents who may enthusiastically take up such models as blueprints for individual and national orientations. Buescher and Ono (1996) explain how some colonial interpretations of romantic liaisons get reinscribed in neocolonial tales that “present or produce a feminist heroine and privilege her romance” as a way of deflecting attention away from “contemporary social problems” (pp. 134-135). Some critics might argue that such nostalgic affections are temporary infatuations with few material consequences, but we hope to reveal some of the deeper complexities that attend particular types of colonial remembrances.

The selective nature of each of the personal and colonial relationships that we have described may provide temporary comfort for those who reminisce about real or imagined colonial situations, but this memory-work also can be problematic. At first glance, it appears that nostalgic representations allow us to invoke tropes and figurations that “establish one’s innocence,” but this also means that we must attend to what has been destroyed (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 108)." As Freud (1957/1915) noted in his discussion of melancholy, the loss of objects hurts the egos of those who are unable to mourn, and these individuals need some form of “catheisis” (p. 258). Remembering to forget, or strategic forgetfulness, can be employed by communities who must cope with a host of anxieties, fears, and jealousies (Sturken, 1997, p. 8), but this means that the rapacious activities of the past can be reinterpretated as incidental occurrences that had little to do with the guiding missions of enlightened colonial leaders.

The Asselin/Devries, Devries/Jean-Baptiste, and Jean-Baptiste/Camille relationships can thus be viewed as competing melancholic romances that evoke ambiguous feelings of varying degrees of pleasurable remembrances, stability, and lost innocence, as does the character of Etienne, the product and synthesis of those entanglements. The present, past, and future are blurred in personal and colonial gestures that allow a variety of audiences to vicariously participate in the wealth and imminence of glorious eras. For example, Rushdie (1991), in his Imaginary Homelands, attended to the ways in which television and filmic productions of The Jewel in the Crown and A Passage to India allowed English men and women to relive the “lost hour of their precedence” (p. 92). Many of these feelings may be based on empirical “impossibilities,” but that does not “diminish their siren power” (Baucom, 1998, p. 286). How would critics and viewers react to such melancholic moments? In the next section, we present a brief overview of some of the national reactions to Indochine.

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MELANCHOLIC NOSTALGIA AND PUBLIC REACTIONS TO INDOCHINE

Not all films that take on such controversial topics fulfill their promise, but Indochine was an immediate critical and popular success at the box office. Critics noted that the film demonstrated how the French, unlike the Americans, did not suffer from “Vietnam syndrome” but were now willing to shoulder their share of the blame for the evils of colonization. Corliss (1992), for example, pointed out that the French filmmakers involved in the creation of Indochine were goaded by a combination of “conscience,” “retrospection,” and the “success of Hollywood movies about the U.S. war in Southeast Asia” (p. 72). Approaching the situation from a slightly different angle, Worthy (1993) remarked that “the production of Indochine helped open the way for friendly relations between” the Social Republic of Vietnam and France (p. 38).10

These critics, who focused on the veracity of the film, argued that the dominant gestures in Indochine pointed us in the direction of anti-colonialism. The movie’s purported realism, they argued, was a consequence of the producers’ and scriptwriters’ willingness to present both the strengths and weaknesses of France’s colonial heritage—a blend of mourning and valorization. One exuberant reviewer opined that “[I]f you were to choose a film to express the agony and ambiguity of Vietnam in this century, it should be Indochine” (Corliss, 1992, p.72).

More critical commentators worried that the film’s political correctness meant that we learned more about the needs of the present than we did about the actual events that transpired in Indochina between the 1920s and 1950s. As Klein (2000) recently explained, not all “memory” work involves “a salutary feature of decolonialism” (p. 143). The protean nature of collective remembering and forgetting means that our recollections of the past can be appropriated for a variety of agencies, and Indochine was not filmed in a rhetorical vacuum.

What if the film’s subtexts revealed more about the enduring power of various neo-colonialisms than about the inevitability of decolonization? A common complaint among Indochine’s critics was that the film’s storylines invited a longing for the past that undermined its postcolonial messages. For example, Deming and Ivey (1992) claimed that the “current crop of movies” show how “the French look back on their colonial era in Indochina with nostalgia rather than anger—as a doomed love affair” (p. 52). Siclier (1992), writing for Le Monde, similarly argued that the film’s “emotions, feelings, passions, adventures, and destinies...are distinguished by their social, economic and political environments which are fundamentally ultra-romantic in their representation” (para. 5). Vincendeau (1993) similarly remarked that this “self-serving French version of history” provided an aesthetic spectacle that “reinforced the film’s deep sense of nostalgia” (p. 49).11 Such critiques have advanced our understanding of the relationship that exists between colonialism and nostalgia, but they have not addressed in any detail the range of plausible scenarios that were put together by Wargnier and his supporters.

CONCLUSION

The film Indochine could be read as both an accurate depiction of French “assimilationist” policies and as a document that grapples with the complexities of colonialism. No doubt, this is a film that “struck a chord in the imagination—if not the conscience—of French audiences” (Jackel & Duverger, 1993, p. 23). This cinematic representation might be viewed as a multi-layered artifact that allows French, Viet-
nameless, and other audiences to see characters who symbolize both the best and the worst aspects of colonization. The film could be applauded for depicting many of the harsh labor realities of colonial years—we are allowed an occasional glimpse of the rapacious nature of European colonialism. The grey and murky scenes in the film, for example, that dwell on the collection of rubber—mists shrouding a darkened, exotic landscape, silhouettes of plantation workers burdened with lanterns and machetes looming anonymously in the darkness—remind us of both the coercive and hegemonic powers that were involved in the exploitation of natural resources and human labor. Moreover, the film invites critics and viewers to unpack some of the ethnic and class implications of French imperialism. The adaptations of the “Orientalized family romance” (Heung, 1995, p. 238) that frame Indochine certainly invite some self-reflexivity and revision of French colonial histories.

Yet any selective memory work simultaneously involves some forgetting and repression, and Indochine seems to be a text obsessed with assuaging the melancholic fears and anxieties of the colonizer rather than the colonized. All of the individual and national entanglements featured in the film are coded in ways that privilege romantic longing while downplaying some of the more tragic elements of a complex past. For example, Vincendeau (1993) averred that Indochine “erases military conflict and most significantly the crushing defeat of the French army at Dien Bien Phu in 1954” (p. 49). Moreover, audiences are presented with a plethora of perspectives that highlight the ambiguous feelings of the French occupiers, but we get relatively little insight into the ideologies of the peasants or the vernacular claims of nationalists who complained of their mandarin rulers. In spite of attempts to position the film as an international masterpiece with little political valence, many of its messages are clearly geared toward instilling ameliorative ideologies that “work through” the past. The focus on familial relations in the film becomes highly symbolic in Indochine because it allows the audience to believe that remembrances of the traditional ties between Vietnam and France can help to heal some old wounds. “The French bathed us in blood and fire,” noted Hoang Xuan Dien, a 70-year veteran of the French-Indochine war, “but the true France brought us a very humanist culture and we respect the true French” (quoted in Mallet, 1994, para. 13). The trajectory of the film invites readers to contemplate the possibility that new forms of recalibration or neo-colonization exist in some mythic renegotiated future.

In sum, Indochine ought to be apprehended as a rhetorical masterpiece replete with discursive and iconic compromises. In spite of claims that the movie accurately represents reality, what we encounter are symbolic constructs that are constrained by audience expectations in the context of particular national imaginaries. Norin and (1996) contends that the imaginary “Indochina continues to arouse powerful desires,” a “particular fecund lieu de mémoire [site of memory],” filled with “erotic fantasies,” exotic adventures, and appeals to “the French nostalgia for grandeur” (p. 1). These mass-mediated representations clearly have commercial and cultural ties. “Such films set in the colonial era,” notes Mallet (1994), “have encouraged thousands of sentimental tourists to visit France’s colonies in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos” (para. 1). Both the marketability and the popularity of this celluloid creation depended on some key absences and memory losses, and we are left with characters from the past who provide us with caricatures of what life must have been like in the Indochine of the 1920s and 1930s. One of the harshest critics of the film, Vincendeau (1993) lamented the ways that this “mainstream entertainment” picture refused to deconstruct “the

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underlying political and economic reasons for the French presence in Vietnam” (p. 48). Instead, Indochine dwelt “on exotic and nostalgic iconography: Deneuve’s exquisite outfits, cars and gramophones, the ‘inscrutable’ faces of the locals, pointed hats, and the obligatory opium-smoking paraphernalia” (pp. 48-49). Terrill (2000) recently observed that archetypal texts can only function if they are “familiar enough for an audience to recognize” in them “their concerns and conflicts” (p. 496), but we contend that, in this case, the film ends up telling us more about the needs of the present than it does about the Indochine past.

Are we asking too much of filmmakers when we expect them to complicate matters even further? Are defenders and detractors of the movie—who are in search of the “real” Indochine—ignoring the rhetoric of filmic representations? If Freud (1957/1915) was right when he discussed some of the ego functions involved with mourning and melancholy, then international audiences may have rejected outright a more nuanced or realistic account of colonial life. How many viewers sought deeper commentaries on the mandarins who profited from the creation of European marketplaces, the elites in search of European educations, or the participation of the Vietnamese in the slave markets at Dragon Island? How many of them wanted to witness the defeat of the French forces, or the growing popularity of communist regimes during the 1940s? Regardless of our own political proclivities, there is little question that our colonial memories will continue to be both a volatile subject and a rich narrative resource for decades to come.

NOTES

1. It is not only the participants in a war who experience its trauma and effects. As Sturken (1997) observed in a moment of personal reflection, “[M]y generation witnessed the Vietnam War from a temporal distance, too young to have been directly affected, yet old enough to be fascinated with it and to partake of the nostalgia for the intensity of its time” (p. 15).

2. An “archetypal myth,” explains Rushing (1990), “must be expressed in the symbols of the society, and thus can never be totally free of cultural biases” (p. 143). Six years later, McMullen (1996) echoed these claims, averring that analyses of archetypes allow a critic to see the “complementary connection” that exists between “film and society” (p. 31).

3. We have chosen to concentrate on French cinematic representations because we agree with Greene’s (1999) recent claims that film “is the perfect medium for the expression of the leitmotifs and repetitions, the ellipses and distortions, that are defining impulses of both [history and memory]” (p. 5). For an excellent overview of some of the historical contrasts that operated in the French film industry before the 1990s, see Andrew (1995), Crisp (1994).

4. Benson (1980) argued that critics must bear in mind that the film itself “is a structure,” and that the “social behavior in the film” can also be structured (p. 234).

5. The discursive roots of “nostalgia” can be traced back to the Greek words “nostos” (to return home) and “algia” (a painful condition) (Rosaldo, 1989, p. 108). For commentaries on the linkages that can be made between the physical and cultural dimensions of nostalgia, see Lowenthal (1985), Chase and Shaw (1989).

6. Rushing and Frentz (1995) similarly explain that the sedimented nature of archetypes means that individuals and societies need to work with, rather than destroy, these enduring figurations (p. 215).

7. The Eliane Devries character is loosely based on real life activities of a Madame de la Souché, who was once a rubber planter in the Cochín-China region in Southern Vietnam, (Nicholls, 1996, p. 34).
8. Jean-Baptiste is, of course, the “young French officer” who resembles “a kind of Lieut. Pinkerton in this Madame Saigon” (Corliss, 1992, pp. 72-73). Heung (1995) argues that “Puccini’s popular opera [Madame Butterfly] is in many ways a foundational narrative of East-West relations, having shaped the Western construction of “the Orient” as a sexualized, and sexually compliant space that is ripe for conquest and rule” (p. 224). Puccini’s work was based on an even earlier literary work, Madame Chrysanthème, written in 1897 by Loti. For other variants of the “Madame Butterfly” tale, see Belasco (1929); Long (1969). Discussions of similar Orientalist figuration can be found in Alloula (1986); Behr and Steyn (1991); Bernstein (1997).

9. Melancholic forms of nostalgia would be those that tie this loss to individual deficiencies instead of externalizing factors (Freud, 1915). For some trenchant discussions of the general role that nostalgia plays in our colonial memories, see Rosaldo (1989) and Bongie (2001).

10. François Mitterand’s visit to Hanoi in 1993 also helped improve Vietnamese-French relations (Worthy, 1993, p. 38).

11. This focus on “nostalgia” was mentioned by the vast majority of critics who have looked at the film. Nicholls (1996), for example, has gone so far as to argue that even the title, “Indochine,” is “nostalgic” because it “conjured up a lost world from which the affix ‘French’ is inseparable” (p. 34). Heung (1995) remarked that Indochine was an “allegory” where “the historical processes of colonial annexation and decolonization are enacted through a maternal melodrama doubly charged with the aura of colonial nostalgia and the mythic resonance of the Orientalized family romance” (p. 238).

12. Of course, just who initially writes the script and produces the movie always is significant. “Simplistic dichotomies,” noted Worthy (1993), “often mark narratives of colonization, particularly those produced by the imperialist colonizer” (p. 38). This film is better than most in at least providing some voice for the “other,” but the disparate power relations that existed outside the film nonetheless bear noting.

REFERENCES


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