Chapter 6

FILMIC MEMORIALS AND COLONIAL BLUES

Indochina in Contemporary French Cinema

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Nostalgia for Indochina: those who have not experienced it cannot understand its bewitchment.
(Hougton, "Preface" xiii).

In 1984, Salman Rushdie deplored the fact that the vogue for the British Raj had made a comeback in Great Britain. Among the numerous films, television shows, and novels that forlornly hark back to the British Empire, Rushdie is particularly critical of the revisionist enterprise of English filmmakers such as Richard Attenborough and David Lean, whose works he sees as an unfortunate attempt at "refurbish[ing] the Empire's tarnished image" (91). Rushdie examines the complex relation between history, politics, and fiction, focusing his attention more specifically on the discursive context that enabled this type of cultural production to emerge. He concludes that the critical success and commercial appeal of these colonial fictions can be ascribed, in part, to a nostalgia for a "defunct empire" and "the rise of conservative ideologies in modern Britain" (92), at a moment when the influence of Great Britain in the world stage has declined considerably.

Rushdie's penetrating observations find resonance in the French context; a similar trend can be perceived in France today, where "the French colonial empire" has aroused the interest of artists, scholars, and experts in all fields. Films and documentaries on the colonies have been produced, novels written, surveys conducted, and colloquia organized around this problematic issue.1 Thirty years after the end of the Algerian War, or "Guerre sans nom" as Bertrand Tavernier and Patrick Rotman called it so provocatively,2 the French are confronting the question of the colonies in an attempt to reevaluate l'idée coloniale and come to terms with their role as a colonial power.
Indochina has recently achieved prominence as the privileged subject of a great many French writers and filmmakers. The publishing and cinema industries have further contributed to the creation of an aura surrounding Indochina, commodifying it through the reissuing of novels and publication of new travel narratives on Indochina. The story of Pigneau de Béhaine, the French missionary responsible for the "opening" of Cochin China in the eighteenth century, even inspired Christophe Bataille's novella Annam which, significantly, won the Prix du Premier Roman. Whereas creative and critical works that dealt with the French colonial subjugation of the Maghreb and Africa have fostered new lines of inquiry, it is my contention that our understanding of the imperial domination of Indochina by France continues to be reassessed nostalgically, in rather problematic terms. The privileged and most pervasively used metaphor for describing the conquest, colonization, and subsequent loss of the eastern part of the IndoChinese peninsula remains to this day that of a passionate romance or a stormy love affair. One revealing example should suffice to convey the tenor of this problem: Bruno Masur, the most widely watched French television news anchor, described the historical ties that bind France and Indochina for almost a century thus: "France and Indochina... it's an old love story" (France 2, 9 février 1993). The bloody history of French colonial rule is entirely missing from this romantic fantasy.

French contemporary cinema resorts to similar analogies, translating and displaying what I will call the erotic and libidinal dimensions of the French "romance for Indochina" in readily recognizable cinematic figures. In fact, the elaborate mise-en-scène of Indochina in recent French films may be largely responsible for reconfiguring and accommodating many of the phantasms that have sustained the myths of the legitimacy of the French colonial presence in Indochina—foundings myths of this "geographical romance" first elaborated by writers such as Claude Farrère, Myriam Harry, and André Malraux in the interwar period. One of the aims of this chapter is to show how the desire for Indochina is signified in French cinema. The modalities of a libidinal economy—the affective investment or romance for the country, its people, its landscape—appear to be the primary modes by which French directors represent Indochina and perpetuate received ideas about the country and its people. Three recent films, operating within that "romantic" nostalgic framework, characterized by what I will call "colonial blues," partake in what Fredric Jameson calls "nostalgia film" and merit our critical attention: Régis Wargnier's Indochine (1992) triumphed as best foreign film only a decade after Attenborough's Gandhi (1982) won the Oscar for best film, Jean-Jacques Annaud's film adaptation of Marguerite Duras's novel, L'Amant (1984), shot in English for wider commercial distribution and aptly called The Lover (1992), and Pierre Schoendoerffer's "docudrama" war movie, Dern Bien Phu (1992), a fictional reenactment of the battle that ended French colonial hegemony in Indochina. Incidentally, these three feature films, all shot on location in Vietnam at the same time, have been among the most expensive films ever produced in French cinematic history: The Lover reached $30 million, Indochine required the same amount, and Dern Bien Phu cost $25 million.

In his classic study What Is Cinema?, André Bazin described cinema as "the creation of an ideal world in the likeness of the real, with its own temporal destiny" (10). The French directors discussed below seem to have taken heed of Bazin's 1945 formulation. In their films, they have created "an ideal world in the likeness of the real," what I would call a phantasmatic world. This mimetic conception of cinema is problematized by Teresa de Lauretis, who sees cinema as "an apparatus of social representation" (Alice 15) involved in "the production of signs" (4). To analyze these movies as "signifying practice" in a given sociohistorical situation, one must therefore consider both the material conditions that have allowed their productions and their implications "in the production and reproduction of meanings, values and ideology" (37). In other words, a politically consequent materialism in film demands that we examine the mediation that intervenes between 'reality' and 'representation,' representation as a process of translation, as the central mode of production of strategies of containment, an issue of particular importance to postcolonial studies. Translation creates "coherent and transparent texts and subjects" and "participants—across a range of discourses—in the fixing of colonized cultures, making them static and unchanging rather than historically constructed" (Niranjana 3). This chapter also attempts to determine to what extent these films text "fix" and mediate historical memory and participate in the construction and reconfiguration of a collective memory of Indochina.

Régis Wargnier's movie is engaged in recreating a coherent vision of
Indochina by relying on a melancholic (hi)story and "geographic romance." Naming his film Indochine signals, in a most lapidary fashion, Wargnier's faith in the evocative power of the name. The title puts in place and condenses in its more reductive and phantasmagorical form a certain “imaginary” of Indochina. The film's strategies deployed by Wargnier in Indochine "construct images or visions of social reality," inscribe "the spectator's place in it" and "produce effects of meaning and perception, self-images and subject-positions for all those involved, makers and viewers" (de Lauretis, Alice 37–38). De Lauretis describes this predicament as "a semiotic process in which the subject is continually engaged, represented and inscribed in ideology" (37). Thus, particular attention must be paid to the film's vision/filmsc construction of space and the address of the film as well as the ideology of vision, the way it constructs narrative space, and the implication of space and spectator in the narrative.

The film's opening sequence foregrounds many of the issues to which we have just alluded. The opening shot strikes the viewer in its blank whiteness. The first image of what appear to be white clouds has the ephemeral and insubstantial quality of a dream. The sound track features a chanting chorus of unaccompanied voices. The spectator seems to have been transported into a phantasmic world. The effect is broken when numerous boats filled with Asian officials dressed in white, mauve, and black emerge from the mist, partially resolving the unintelligibility of the shot. At the same time, the credits begin to roll. The first credit, in white letters, records the movie star, Catherine Deneuve. The sounds and sight of a lone drummer seem to guide this exotic procession of boats. The mystery of this sequence is not fully penetrated until the two cenotaphs which have been laid side by side come into view. The viewer's suspicion that the "exotic" and enigmatic ritual appertains to a funeral are confirmed by the medium close-up of Deneuve, veiled and dressed in black. The voice-over—in the actress's voice—begins the narration and informs us that we are the witnesses to the funeral of Prince NGuyen and his wife, lost at sea in a plane accident off Saint-Jacques Cape. Eliane, the narrator, goes on to furnish details about the identity and legal status of the little orphan girl, Camille, all dressed in white standing beside her. Eliane has lost her best friends but gained a daughter when she adopted Camille, the little princess from Annam.

The opening sequence of expository scenes situates the characters in space and time. The viewer quickly realizes that the preceding shots were seen from Eliane's vantage point and organized from her point of view as well. As both protagonist and narrator, she exerts complete control over the filmic narration, its development, its resolution. In fact, Indochine adopts and emulates every cinematic convention of classical Hollywood cinema, including plot linearity, the reliance upon an axis of action and upon the love story, the use of the protagonist as the principal causal agent and chief object of audience identification (Bordwell 18), and so on, to produce and anchor its images of Indochina.

Mary Ann Doane remarked that "rather than activating history as mise-en-scène, a space, the . . . love story inscribes it as individual subjectivity closed in on itself. History is an accumulation of memories of the loved one" (Desire 96). In Indochine, French colonial history becomes visible as Eliane's memories of events in her colonial past and of individuals she has loved. These "memories" are recorded as a unified or preconstituted visual space. One mediation specific to cinema is spectator positioning. Indochine exploits the identificatory mechanism of cinema on behalf of the colonizer: the spectator is sutured into a colonialist perspective. Through a cinematic mechanism of identification such as "suture," Eliane becomes the embodiment of the French colony in symbol and image, the "colonial Marianne," simply put, she personifies Indochina.

Eliane's relation to the "geographical" narrative is made unambiguous when the narrator/protagonist describes herself as "une Asiate." Here the term "Asiate" does not have its common pejorative signification such as the one popularized by Jean Hougron, the novelist who wrote an entire novel on the subject (Les Asiates [1954]). It does not mean "to give in to the milieu, to become 'Asiate', in sum, to lose one's identity" (xii); here, it describes more simply a French woman born in Indochina who has never left it. The term also suggests, however, that the Françai d'Asie (the French from Asia) also considered themselves to be the legitimate heirs of the great and powerful civilizations that once dominated the Indochinese peninsula.

A découpage (segmenting) of the film into analytic scenes would reveal that all of the scenes where Eliane appears are merely clichéd images,
It can be argued that, rather than "activating history as a mise-en-scène, a space," as Doane noted, these images construct a feminized space which allows the erotic overinvestment of the white female "colonizer." As the substitute mother, the viewer identifies Eliane as the embodiment of "Indochina in the 30s, a colonial paradise" the "belle époque of French Indochina" (Noury 8). As I suggested earlier, the opening scene constructs Eliane as a caring mother who protects the natives. The irony of the term "protectorate," which designates a juridical regime that grants control over a subjugated country for a colonial power, can hardly be lost on the film’s audience.

In contrast, the native protagonist Camille is divested of her "femininity" as the film unfolds. In this manner, she can be represented as the masculine "princess rouge" who, after killing a navy officer, escapes the company of another naval officer (of course, Eliane’s ex-lover). She bears his child, is tracked down, captured, and condemned to spend the rest of her life in the Poulo-Condore penal colony. Annoyed by the representative of the newly elected Front Populaire government, Camille chooses to commit herself exclusively to the national liberation struggle, effectively abandoning her child to Eliane’s care. By the end, she has become literally invisible to the viewer, completely elided from the filmic text. In the last sequence of the film her son, while expressing a desire to see his "birth mother," who is part of the Vietnamese delegation at the 1954 Geneva Peace Conference, simply gives up on the idea of seeking her out and mutters that Eliane is his "mother." Camille is denied not simply the status of mother but more problematically the status of subject on the screen, erasing at the same time "ethnic" female sexuality.

One of the projects of colonialism, as Gayatri Spivak reminds us, is to constitute the colonial subject as Other. By exploiting the figure of the "monstrous" native mother, Wargnier deflects our attention from the colonialist projects of appropriating and exploiting the land and of

dominating its people economically, culturally, and politically. In Wargnier’s film, French colonialism in Indochina as an oppressive economic, social, and political apparatus is merely used as a backdrop, diffused and "screened" into the background to bring the "mother-daughter plot" and the parallel love stories to the fore. And although the filmic text evokes certain aspects of French colonialism, in particular, the carceral universe of enslaved peasants and the repression, torture, and killings of suspected nationalists performed by the French Sûreté, these "events" are staged to underscore the fact that "Indochine française," or 'Indochina before the hurricane [Indochine avant l'ouragan]" as one writer put it, "needs to be saved and protected from a barbaric (native) society whose population can only act out irrationally and violently. The raging anger of a nationalist/Communist mob and its ensuing reign of terror are dramatized in a scene where the nationalists torture a local mandarin whose ostensible support of French colonialism led to his summary execution: death by fire on a makeshift pyre erected from his worldly possessions. Similar tragedies may have indeed occurred in the history of the Vietnamese fight for independence from France. The inclusion of a well-known French historian as a consultant to the film ought to deter anyone from contesting the film’s historical accuracy. What is disturbing, however, is the manner in which "historical events" are used and framed to advance the plot and to play up and render more harrowing the predicament of our "heroines," rather than to question French colonialist practices. The most revealing example that comes immediately to mind concerns the way the Sûreté chief confronts Thanh, Camille’s intended husband, who has been expelled from France for supporting the Yen-Bay rebellion. Furthermore, he participates in the Vietnamese student demonstration against French colonialism in front of the Elysée Palace, an episode discussed earlier that received much attention in daily papers in France and Indochina in the 1930s.

A more comprehensive analysis of the movie would attend to its blindness and omission, particularly in its use of female protagonists. Feminist film theory can be invoked to show that the "representation of woman as image (spectacle, object to be looked at, vision of beauty)" (de Lauretis, Technologies 37), women as the privileged site of desire (Mulvey), the locus of filmic position of woman as "narrative image" (de Lauretis), as
a construct for ethnic female spectator (Chow) determine the centrality of female subjectivity in the construction of cinematic representation. These theories can help us better assess cinematic signification and representation and the ideological subtext of the movie. *Indochine* offers a particularly striking example of how a different (Other) culture can be "produced" as a feminized spectacle. This idea is confirmed by the film’s reception in the French press. Jacques Siclier, the film critic for the French daily *Le Monde*, symptomatically entitled his review "Indochine, ton nom est femme" (*Indochine, your name is woman*). He goes on to explain the reasons that made *Indochine* strike a responsive chord in so many spectators: "It’s splendid because the novelistic clichés are acknowledged and evident, and transcended by the lyricism of a mise-en-scène which links closely the lighting, the decor, the costumes, the sound and the music." For Siclier, romantic excess is a deliberate strategy, a cinematic convention designed to frame and narrate a love story. But as others have remarked, Siclier is also a "film critic who dislikes being anything but positive" (Forbes 408) and who therefore does not have any misgivings about Hollywood cinema. The director of *Indochine* can therefore feminize the Other culture with impunity by relying on a cinematic representational practice that privileges visual pleasure. The spectator is "penetrated" by the image of the Other. The blue-green hue cast by the Bay of Halong, the blue-gray of the bleeding of the rubber trees, and the smoky blue squalor of an opium den arise strong visual responses because these "postcard" images of colonial life in French Indochina are always already part of the French collective memory and have been assimilated by the public at large. Hence, Eliane remains the paradigmatic figure of the bâtisseur d’empire (empire builder), the female epitome of French colonialism who is clothed in elegant costumes, designed especially for Catherine Deneuve by the Oscar-winning Italian designer Gabriella Pescucci.

The movie’s opulence and lavishness overwhelm its manifest content, displacing its ostensible subject (*Indochina*) onto the woman at its center, Catherine Deneuve. *Indochine* is not about French colonialism in Indochina at all, but about Wargnier’s fantasies of colonial Indochina. Critical and popular acclaim notwithstanding, Wargnier’s representation of Indochina exerts a dangerous fascination precisely because it brings visual pleasure without questioning or subverting any preconceived ideas about French colonial rule in Southeast Asia. *Indochine* merely displays beautiful images and should only be remembered as a symptom of the current French fad for things exotic.

Restaging Indochina: Annaud's Phantasmic Love Affair with Indochina

Jean-Jacques Annaud’s filmic vision of Indochina is entirely mediated by Duras’s novel, *L’Amant*. Annaud is unabashedly candid about the effects Duras’s novel had on him and his attempt to locate it in space and translate it into the filmic image:

I was on a quest for the emotions I had felt when reading *The Lover*. Marguerite Duras had plunged me into Asia. The pages smelled of jasmine, charcoal fire, and incense. With her I crossed the breathtaking immensity of the Mekong; I wandered the flatness of the delta’s rice paddies that run as far as the eyes can see. I followed the rosewood-hatted young girl that she had been along the wide, tree-shaded avenues of the colonial city. I ambled beside the gardens overflowing with flowers, caught glimpses of the villas with their verandas in the white part of town. I accompanied her up to the haughty French High School building. Then I lost her in the red-and-gold exuberance of the Chinese part of town. And at dusk, in the silent solitude of the dorm, with her I heard, carried over on the wind from the [lagoon], the faraway singing of a beggar-woman... ("Impressions" 174)

Like many readers, Annaud is seduced by Duras’s lyrical evocation of Indochina. Duras’s imaginative geography, however, has assumed the status of the "real" for Annaud. Distinct urban and rural markers circumscribe his mediated Indochina: the Mekong River, the rice paddies, the colonial city with its white villas and gardens, the lycée, the boarding house, and Cholon. Rumor has it that Duras herself wandered these wide streets on her way to the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat or to the Pension Lyaut in when she was not meeting her Chinese lover in Cholon.

To remain faithful to the spirit of her work and make his film more "real," Annaud believes he has no alternative but to shoot it on location. He scouts Vietnam in the hope of finding appropriate sites, that is to say,