

Mourning, Memorials, and Filmic Traces:
Reinscribing the *Corps étrangers* and
Unknown Soldiers in Bertrand Tavernier's Films

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The *tirailleurs indigènes*, as cinematic figures, occupy an ex-centric place in contemporary French cinema. They are virtually absent from the screen or appear in the background as *figurants* or “extras,” which explains, in part, why they have been completely overlooked by the spectator-critic. Their inscriptions in the filmic image, however marginal, may reveal the “cinders of the unconscious” (Derrida, *Cinders* 7) and give insights into the confrontational strategies used by French cinematographers in their attempt to represent and question French colonialism and its legacy.¹ My purpose is to go on the “trail” or “cinder path” of the *corps étrangers* and attempt to locate their “remains without remainder,” that is to say, to exhume the *tirailleurs indigènes* as filmic traces in French films set during the Great War, which will allow me to examine a peculiar type of “retrait” ‘withdrawal’ of these figures from our collective memory and their “reappropriation or mourning” in the filmic image and in public memorials. I will be particularly attentive to a mode of filmic representation that both bears witness and memorializes, and paradoxically, induces forgetting, divesting the viewer of the obligation to remember.²

To understand how a French filmmaker such as Bertrand Tavernier constitutes the *tirailleurs indigènes* as marginal subjects of cinema in his filmic practice, I first want to trace the vicissitudes of the figure of the *tirailleur* and its transfigurations, placing them in a more complex cultural memory. The *tirailleurs indigènes* entered French consciousness during the Great War. Mobilized in great numbers, they fought alongside French soldiers and acquired, very

early on, the reputation of being fierce and loyal combatants.³ As *troupes de choc*, these native infantrymen were deployed in some of the bloodiest battle zones, in the Somme, on the Marne, and in the Chemin des Dames, suffering heavy casualties while serving, some say, as “chair à canon” ‘cannon fodder.’ Gramsci postulated long ago that “the war of position demands enormous sacrifices by infinite masses of people” (Forgacs 230). To distract public opinion, and to boost the troops’ morale, the French high command focused on their courageous military deeds, on their loyalty to the Republic, releasing these heroic *faits d’arme* to French newspapers, information carefully disseminated by military propagandists for public consumption. Military filmmakers, for instance, selected images of smiling *tirailleurs*, marching in military parades,⁴ proudly posturing in their exotic costumes or dancing around campfires,⁵ producing the image of happy, invincible infantryman. The psycho-pathological effects of war on these geographically and culturally dislocated soldiers were carefully concealed and edited out.

Newspapers and illustrated magazines such as *Le Petit Parisien* and *L’Illustration* also diffused images of the courageous and virile *tirailleurs*, while at the same time propagating cartoons of *tirailleurs* in the arms of pretty French nurses, *marraines de guerre*, and society women. Even when these *tirailleurs* are represented in scenes of war, as in the famous poster commemorating the *Journée de l’Armée d’Afrique et des troupes coloniales*, they seem unconquerable, as the postcards of the well known series of *Gloire à la plus Grande France* also suggest.⁶ The abundance and proliferation of these types of images contributed to confer upon the *tirailleurs* a new identity that I have dubbed the *drôle de zouave*.

What is implied in the term *drôle de zouave*? The etymology of the word *zouave* provides us with a fascinating genealogy. The name was used as early as 1830 during the French conquest of Algeria. *Zouave* comes from the Arabo-Berber *zwâwa* and describes a Kabyle tribe of Djurdjura where the “dey recruited a militia,” from which the first contingent of *zouaves*, “auxiliary troops,” was drawn. Progressively organized and integrated to the *Armée d’Afrique*, these men participated in many French military campaigns, in far-flung regions of the world such as Crimea, Mexico, and Indochina. Non-French elements were removed from both the *zouaves* and the *chasseurs d’Afrique* when the native corps of Algerian *tirailleurs* or *turcos* and *spahis réguliers* were created (Bouche 30). How a French army corps takes on the attributes of an “indigenous troop”—even dress-

ing the part—is indeed paradigmatic of the ambivalence of colonial mimicry.⁷ The *zouaves* were literally and metaphorically eliminated from that army corps, dispossessed of their own name and reassigned to other army units. The name *zouave* was in fact reclaimed by the French army for a battalion constituted exclusively of French nationals (as in the famed *le 8e zouaves*).⁸ Henceforth, the indigenous troops were known as *tirailleurs*, *turcos*, or *spahis*, or, as I argue, as *drôle de zouave*.

The name *zouave* therefore functions as a catachresis as Gayatri Spivak defines it, “a concept-metaphor” without an adequate referent (Spivak 225). The *zouaves*, once synonymous with Kabyle warriors, now simply describe members of an exotically dressed corps of “white” soldiers, perhaps best embodied by Jean Gabin in *Gueule d’Amour*, a 1937 Jean Grémillon film, where the wearing of the military uniform elicits desire but also determines masculinity and subject-position.⁹ More recently, the importance of proper military garb was also not lost on the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembene, who in *Camp de Thiaroye* (1987) problematizes the “port de la tenue militaire” ‘the wearing of the military uniform.’ In an attempt to put the *tirailleurs sénégalais* back in their proper place, the French officers make them take off the spiffy crisp khaki uniform given to them by American soldiers, and have them wear their *drôle de zouave* uniform, the subaltern sign par excellence of the native. The distinction between *zouave*, *spahis*, and *turcos* may in fact not be as clearly delineated as I have suggested here, because what remains in the popular French imaginary is a rather vague idea as to the identity of the *zouave*. What’s more, the popular meaning of *faire le zouave* adds to the confusion:

Fam. 1888. Play the fool, to show off, to go around bragging; by extension, to draw attention to oneself for one’s eccentricities (to act the idiot, the imbecile, the fool). To waste one’s time, to devote one’s energies to inane behavior (to act the clown).

“Ye gods, one cannot spend the entire day playing the fools [*à faire les zouaves*].” (Martin du Gard), *Les Thibault*, t. VIII, p. 178.¹⁰

The exotic costume, the signifier that once constituted them as “courageous” soldiers, now marks them as different, subaltern, and *drôle*.

The disjunction between an ontological “being a *zouave*” and a performative *faire le zouave*, “pretending to be a *zouave*,”

reconfigures a problematic liminal space, one assigned to the *tirailleurs indigènes* in recent French films. Hence, the *tirailleurs* are and are not *zouaves*. The *tirailleurs sénégalais*, in particular, became instantaneously recognizable in their uniform and red chechia. This type of insertion in the French imaginary, as I have rapidly sketched out, owes as much to their actions and courage as to the ways they were re-figured in official and popular media. In fact, the aura surrounding the *tirailleur* was recuperated very effectively by commerce. The *tirailleur sénégalais* was, for instance, further commodified during the war to promote a product like Banania, “un exquis déjeuner sucré, aliment délicieux pour les estomacs délicats” ‘an exquisite sweet breakfast, a delicious food for delicate stomachs’ (*Négripub* 64). The transformation of an aura into an a well-known brand name, the circulation of the *tirailleur* as a sign and a commodity “caught in between the vicious circuits of surplus value that link First World capital to Third World labour markets” (Bhabha 20) at this particular historical conjuncture deserves an in-depth analysis that goes beyond the scope of this essay.¹¹ Suffice it to say here that Banania’s *tirailleur sénégalais*, nicknamed “Y’a bon,” with his red chechia, smiling face, holding a spoon, becomes the emblematic figure of the *drôle de zouave*.

For a distinguished imperial historian such as Raoul Girardet, what remains in the French collective memory of the Great War are not these advertising images, but those belonging to the war iconography:

The war iconography had multiplied these images of charging, fierce Senegalese *tirailleurs*, bayonet forward, or of the impassive Algerian, on the look-out in the slit of the trench, feet in the mud. These images will remain present a long time in the collective memory, *forever linked* to the mythology of the *poilu*, to memories of his glory and of his sufferings. (Girardet 178; my emphasis)

Girardet does not even acknowledge the existence of “Y’a bon,” as if this type of commercial resignification did not belong to the same discursive field, a blindness which allows him to postulate the following:

But above all, on an elementary level of popular feeling, the figure of the black soldier and that of the North African soldier find themselves, in the years following 1919, integrated in the

body of the legendary “veteran,” inseparable from all the manifestations and all the expressions of French life. (Girardet 178)

A number of assumptions are made here: the questions of shared histories, of memory, mythologizing and commemoration, and ultimately of a collective experience of “nationness,” issues that are, here, conflated and linked together unproblematically in a fantasy of incorporation. Girardet seems certain that the French remember these “native troops” who have died for the French *patrie*, by a process of remembering that “associé à jamais” ‘forever linked’ them in the popular imaginary with the mythology of the *poilu*. The Great War placed men of different races and ethnicities in the same battlefields, the same trenches, men who suffered the same unbearable trauma, and died the same death from artillery bombardments and machine-gun fire. After the war, many of these men would join the many chapters of the *Union des anciens combattants*,¹² creating an imagined fraternity of men known collectively as the *ancien combattant*, the veteran of the Great War. In all, 8 million men served in the French army. 1,500,000 men died, among them 205,000 colonial soldiers (out of 545,000 indigenous combatants mobilized).¹³ French flags, decorations, and decorated regimental flags were given as tokens of official gratitude, honors meant to reward the native troops’ sacrifices (Deroo 113). These medals and signs persuaded many *tirailleurs* that the army was a more “egalitarian” institution than white colonial society, that France herself was poised to grant them certain civic and political rights. Some, like the colonized *assimilé* Blaise Diagne, the first African deputy from Senegal, sent by the French government to French West Africa (Afrique occidentale française) on a mission to recruit African soldiers, were convinced that military service could be used as an access to greater civil and political liberties, parliamentary representation, and perhaps even citizenship: “My black brothers,” he exhorted “by spilling the same blood, you will earn the same rights as your French comrades” (Blaise Diagne, 1918; quoted by Deroo 112). That was never to be. Diagne failed to consider the resistance of white colonizers such as the “Français d’Algérie” ‘the French from Algeria’ who did not want “Arabs to become soldiers and citizens” (Bouche 300). Even modestly progressive bills such as the Violette-Blum Bill never passed into law.¹⁴

The *tirailleurs indigènes* would have to settle for a different type of “re-presentation”/recognition. They were “honored” and

took part in many official commemorations, the most elaborate and prestigious ceremony undoubtedly being the funeral scenography of the *Grand cortège* accompanying the remains of the Unknown Soldier to the Pantheon and to his final resting place under the Arc de Triomphe. The figurative role and presence of native troops in parade grounds and *champ d'honneur* merely supplement what is lacking or was always absent.¹⁵

Many of the points at issue here are refigured in Tavernier's films. But before turning to his filmic texts, the idea of commemorating the Great War and the construction of a collective memory, that is to say, the production of a single official memory of the war, best illustrated in its most emblematic and permanent incarnation, the war memorial, and embodied in such figures as the Unknown Soldier or even Pétain as World War I war hero and the savior of France, must also be discussed if only in a cursory fashion. There are obvious political ramifications to this type of selective remembering and historical amnesia. The controversy that tormented Mitterrand for laying a wreath, in the name of the Republic, on the grave of Pétain, the World War I hero, the "Conqueror of Verdun," glossing over his role in France's collaboration with Nazi Germany, is one of the most dramatic manifestations of France's *politique mémorielle*. The underlying issues that subtend some of these questions, in particular, the construction of symbolic battlefields like Verdun, described by a French historian as "a site of memory and a national symbol" (Prost 116), the constitution of a "national memory" and of a "combatant memory," converging onto a cult of memory in the figure of Pétain, are addressed in a sustained fashion in this volume. This essay will limit itself to raising the following questions: Are war memorials public symbols, and if yes, what do they commemorate? Who is being remembered in these war memorials? Do war memorials honor heroes and martyrs of the war, pay homage to all dead or commemorate death "for the nation" as an abstract patriotic notion, that is to say, do war memorials simply reinscribe particular notion of patriotic duties? What kind of memories are mediated by war memorials? Does the design of war memorials shift our understanding of the idea of commemoration of the Great War?¹⁶ What does funeral architecture (monument to the fallen) signify or mourn? How is it that the public memory of the war comes to be inscribed in monuments? How are the people to remember the war?

In most cases, the project to memorialize the war dead took concrete shape in war memorials. More than 38,000 war memorials were erected in France—most of them built before 1922, and as late as the early 30s. Antoine Prost has examined 564 war memorials in 35 different French *départements* in order to identify the emblematic attributes in the design of French war memorials. His findings are revealing: the war memorial takes on a variety of forms: figurative designs of a bust or statue of veterans might cost from 2,000 francs for “a plain bust of a *poilu*” to 4,800 francs “for a bronzed cast-iron statue of a *poilu*” (Prost, “Les Monuments aux morts” 223), and many exceeded 25,000 francs, for more abstract or allegorical designs. Some are unabashedly patriotic, others are pacifist and anti-militarist. In an attempt to create a typology of war memorials, Prost divides war memorial into three different categories: civic monuments, civic-patriotic monuments, and civic funeral monuments. I want to take issue with Prost because of one conspicuous omission in an otherwise very well-researched study. Prost fails to even acknowledge the existence of war memorials dedicated to native troops. But more importantly, his study fails to question the ideology behind the erection of (phallic) war memorials that are memorials to the idea of war. These monuments also represent the act of remembering the war through dead heroes.

In his defense, one must acknowledge the fact that only a few war memorials were dedicated to native troops. They constitute, however, another important category of funeral memorials worthy of our critical attention. The war memorial dedicated to the *tirailleurs indochinois*, located in Saint-Pierre cemetery in the city of Marseille, is a case in point. It was officially inaugurated by then Governor-General of Indochina, Martial Merlin, on July 13, 1923. A local organization, the *comité d'assistance aux travailleurs et tirailleurs indochinois* (“assistance committee to Indochinese workers and *tirailleurs*”), created by Henri Gourdon, and aptly called *Souvenir Indochinois*, gathered “the mortal remains of 819 victims of duty [*victimes du devoir*] buried in Saint-Pierre cemetery in a private plot” (“Inauguration du monument funéraire de Marseille” 1)

The design of this war memorial may shed some light on the French logic of commemoration. M. Delaval, an *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* trained architect, who was also “chief inspector of civil buildings in Indochina,” conceived the “monument in reinforced concrete” “in Annamite style”:

At the center is a tall rectangular column. On its principal face a black marble slab has been affixed, bearing an inscription in golden characters specially composed by His Majesty the Emperor of Annam. Beneath it is a second black marble slab, on which the following words were engraved in golden letters: To the Indochinese who died for France. The Indochinese recollection [*Le souvenir indochinois*]. (“Inauguration du monument funéraire de Marseille” 1)

The dead *tirailleurs*, euphemistically called the “819 victims of duty,” will remain unknown, since their names were never etched on the black marble, in contrast with other war memorials. They are simply remembered as a collective, the “Indochinese” who died for France. More importantly, obliterating their proper names means a refusal for proper subject identification. Refusing to name, to give a proper name, is also a refusal to acknowledge or designate an identity, to secure the identity of the subject over time.

Another important war memorial working within the same economy is the one dedicated “Aux héros de l’armée d’Orient et des terres lointaines” ‘To the heroes of the army of the Orient and the faraway lands.’ “Le croissant et l’étoile” ‘The half-moon and the star’ conjures the emblem of this army that took Austro-German troops from the rear during World War I (Joutard 20). But as Joutard notes, “the funeral monument calls to mind the ‘heroes from faraway lands,’ and not colonial soldiers” (Joutard 22). These two memorials dedicated to the *tirailleurs* also do not list names. The dead remain anonymous. Prost’s oversight or his unwillingness to deal with this other type of memorial weakens the force of his analysis, whose explicit aim is to undermine and complicate the notion of war memorials as an expression of nationalist cult.

This ambivalence towards the memorialization and representation of the *corps étrangers* can also be seen at work in Tavernier’s film *La vie et rien d’autre*. Tavernier’s film can be used to question and undermine the types of claims made by historians like Girardet and Prost, and in particular, their unquestioned belief in the incorporation of the black soldier and that of the North African soldier—it should be noted that the Indochinese *tirailleur* is completely absent from their discussion—into the legendary figure of the *poilu* or *ancien combattant*.¹⁷ Girardet’s words bear repeating: “the figure of the black soldier and that of the North African soldier find themselves, in the years following 1919, integrated in the body of the legendary “veteran,” inseparable from all the manifestations and all

the expressions of French life" (178) Tavernier's 1989 film *La Vie et rien d'autre* interrogates to a degree the way the native *tirailleurs* have been linked to the mythology of the *poilu*.

Cinema as Filmic Memorial: Memorializing the alien body

Tavernier's resolve to historicize his filmic vision is apparent in an interview he granted *The Los Angeles Times*:

I've wanted to do this film since Philippe [Noiret] and I made *Coup de torchon*. We were making that film in this very small town in Senegal, and we met the president of their World War I veterans' organization.

He was 82 or 83 at the time and told us incredible stories about that period. He stayed in Verdun and in the east of France one or two years after the war. He told us about the women who would come to the battlefield searching for their husbands or brothers or fathers or at least some token of them. This image stayed in my mind. Then one day I read in a book that in 1920 there were still 350,000 soldiers missing in action! That's the equivalent of the total number of men in the French army today! (Thomas F8)

Tavernier's desire to do this film is mediated by a testimonial, an eyewitness account, an oral history that needed to be fixed in the filmic image before it is forgotten. His African interlocutor's "incredible stories" became the pre-text and motivating force behind Tavernier's filmic narrative. But their authenticity is implicitly questioned, and must be tested against hard evidence ("in the form of a book") before Tavernier can fully accept the information conveyed. The African veteran remains also nameless, and is not given any credit or any form of acknowledgment for the screenplay. Ultimately, it is Tavernier's inability to give voice to and to fully account for the *corps étrangers* (except only in an anecdotal and peripheral fashion) that weakens the radical force of his screenplay. Tavernier seems content to deal with more mainstream characters. In the same interview, he goes on to describe how the main character came into being:

We made a list of characters. One of them, a minor character, was an officer in charge of the search for the dead. For me, he was the hero, someone obsessed, living in the world of death, fighting against the Establishment, trying to prevent people from

forgetting. This character came out from the background and imposed himself. (Thomas F8)

But there are residual traces of this inaugural encounter that re-emerge in his films. In *Coup de torchon* (released with the English title *Clean Slate* in 1987), for instance, one of the main characters, played by Isabelle Huppert, takes target practice at a recruiting poster for the *troupes coloniales*. Or, the main character, the local French police chief of the small town of Bouskassa in Bangui, upon meeting the new French school teacher, exclaims:

Oh, it is a beautiful profession, mademoiselle, it is, as one could say, an apostolate. There are so many Africans who died for France without knowing a single word of French; thanks to you, the young blacks, they will be able to learn how to read the name of their papa on funeral monuments.

Many controversial subjects are broached and condensed in this very short exchange: the role played by education and religion in the conquest and establishment of French colonies, the hypocrisy of the French "civilizing mission," the sacrifice of African *tirailleurs* who died for France. But what I found most compelling is the implicit (if sarcastic) comparison of the memorial to a school blackboard: the names of the dead can be used as a teaching tool, a means to edify, to learn a language other than one's own. The dead, by metonymic displacement, become "the historical objects of a nationalist [colonialist] pedagogy" (Bhabha 145). It is all the more ironical given that the names of African soldiers do not appear on metropolitan funeral monuments.

Major Dellaplane, the main character in *La Vie et rien d'autre*, is placed in a remarkably similar situation. As "chef du bureau de recherche et d'identification de militaires tués ou disparus" 'chief of the bureau of investigation and identification of killed or missing soldiers' in charge of finding the identity of the missing in action, his task is to put names to the bodies he continues to find. He investigates all leads, catalogs all information, inventories all traces or potentially useful "signs." He faces insurmountable odds because his small staff cannot possibly account for the 350,000 soldiers still listed as missing, which bring him to define the *disparus* in much broader terms. It includes not only the dead, but also the "deaf, blind, legless, amnesiac, . . . and desertors." At the war's end, many families were still searching for the missing, hoping that their

loved ones were still alive, recovering in some military hospital; some were resigned to the idea of their death and eager to find and retrieve their bodies. This search is also the rather conventional plot of the film: An aristocratic *Parisienne*, Irène de Courtil, is searching for her husband, François, and a school teacher, is looking for her lover. Their paths cross. By the end of the movie we discover that the two women are searching for the same man. Dellaplane falls in love with Irène but is unable to commit himself.

Film critics have not paid much attention to the post-New Wave films of Tavernier precisely because they appear to lack a certain critical edge. In fact, *La vie et rien d'autre* has been criticized for “la molesse du découpage” ‘the feebleness of the cutting/editing’ and its refusal to be fixed in and defined by “a precise genre” (Mazabrard 62). I contend that the critical acuity in Tavernier’s film is not to be found in the *découpage*, nor in the plot of the film, but on the edge of the frame, and more specifically, in Tavernier’s unstable representation of the *tirailleurs indigènes*. Their very absence on the screen or rather the inadequacy of their presence reveals the strategic approach used by Tavernier. The entire movie can in fact be seen as a serious (if not altogether successful) meditation on the subaltern role played by “native troops” during the Great War, and an attempt on the director’s part to reinscribe them in our filmic memory. Among the missing soldiers figure thousands of colonial troops. But unlike for the French missing in action, no one is searching for them or claiming their bodies.¹⁸ How is this translated in the film?

The viewer encounters early on in the movie the first image of the *corps étranger*. This sighting takes place in Military hospital No. 45 where Irène first gets a glimpse of a boorish Dellaplane who shouts at her for not knocking at the door before entering. Irène storms out of the room and finds herself, disoriented, still searching for Professor Mortier, whose patient fits her husband’s description. In a very short sequence (lasting seven seconds), Irène goes down the corridor and sees a man confined to his “hospital” cell. He rests his head against the glass window of the door of his room. No words are exchanged, and a discrete glance from Irène is not returned by the *tirailleur* who casts his eyes down. This man is marked by the easily recognizable signifier, the red chechia or fez, the metonymic subaltern sign of the native, which identifies him immediately as an African *tirailleur*, and thus, not her husband. His silence and his pose convey a state of melancholia or depression as defined by Freud who wrote that “the distinguishing mental features of melan-

cholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity . . ." (Freud 244). The symptoms exhibited by the *tirailleur* suggest a deep state of melancholia. He must be "atteint de mélancolie" 'suffering from melancholia,' in a state of depression, not responsive to any stimulus, incapable of returning her gaze. What are the viewers to make of this seemingly gratuitous and peripheral scene?

I contend that this unremarkable scene, rather than being merely gratuitous, makes manifest some repressed and unacknowledged realities that operate on different levels. On the most manifest level, the *tirailleur's* silence and aphasia subvert the image of the jovial and voluble *drôle de zouave* disseminated by military propagandists. It also displaces, albeit in a rather oblique fashion, the question of sexual desire and fantasy, neutralizing the potentially transgressive romance between "la femme mondaine" 'the high society woman' and the virile Senegalese *tirailleur* (displacing, in a way, Laforge's caricature of the "assault"). But most importantly, this sequence also begins to question the entire process of mourning, both in its absence and its official display, an issue under scrutiny in the movie.

If mourning, as Freud conceptualized it, "is regularly the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 243), the *tirailleur*, who is also "alien in his own country, in a state of absolute depersonalization" (Fanon, quoted by Bhabha 40), having been colonized by the French, no longer has a country of his own that he can mourn. Concepts such as "liberty" and "ideal" in this particular historical conjuncture mean very little for the men who find themselves in France for the sole purpose of liberating the colonizing *mère-patrie*.

The question of mourning is, in my view, one of the central issues raised by *La Vie et rien d'autre*. How does a nation like France go about mourning the loss of 1,500,000 lives? Tavernier's film attempts to find an imaginative (if ambivalent) answer to this question. One of the most interesting aspects of this film is precisely the marginal images surrounding the production of a single Unknown Soldier.

In another interview, Tavernier claims that

The rush to find the Unknown Soldier is completely true though we had to guess how it took place. Just imagine. How do you

find a body which is impossible to identify and still be sure he is French? The instructions were surreal. They said, you can tell a German by his teeth, by his dental work. It was mad. (Riding 13)

Thus, Tavernier “invents” and reconstructs an imaginative sequence of events surrounding the location and selection of that unidentified body for “enthronement,” using the doubly marginalized figure of the *tirailleurs indigènes* as filmic extras or supplements.

As I have already argued, Tavernier represents soldiers of these indigenous troops on the margin, in the background of the frame. Their actions do not advance the plot. The *tirailleurs* appear in short sequences which seem to have little relevance to the main story. And yet, these *corps étrangers* refigure hidden or repressed events, and allude to a forgotten history. How does the scene set in a small *auberge* transformed into a military canteen become central to conveying cultural, ethnic, and religious difference? What does the disorientation of the uprooted and ill-equipped Annamite infantrymen convey in Tavernier’s film?

In the film, the high command wants Dellaplane to produce an unidentified body for interment under the Arc de Triomphe within three days. Because the general in charge of “memorializing” the war dead feels the pressure of “press campaigns, petitions, questioning on the Chamber floor,” he wants an “unknown *poilu*,” at any cost. The orders are explicit: each military region is required to exhume the body of an unidentified French soldier.

“Bodies from the 9 military zones are due in the Citadelle of Verdun at the latest on Tuesday, November 9, 1920.” He orders Dellaplane to find him a body “signed, sealed, and delivered tomorrow”: “Je le veux demain dans sa boîte, signé, avec les bordereaux, les tampons, les étiquettes, et tout” ‘I want him tomorrow in his box, signed, with the dispatch and delivery notes, stamps, labels, the whole thing,’ illustrating perfectly what Derrida called, albeit in a different context, the postal imperative. Dellaplane refuses to obey the order because his duties require him to identify the bodies of the missing, not surrender them, unidentified, even for the Republic’s sake. For a lack of a more appropriate body, the general “le met en boîte” ‘mocks him,’ labeling him appropriately “a Dreyfusard,” and assign Dellaplane’s second, Perrin, the arduous task of finding a suitable body. And the General adds: “Et n’allez pas me mettre un English ou un Boche sous l’Arc de Triomphe” ‘No Brits or Huns under the Arc de Triomphe.’

A number of incidents involving our “alien bodies” surround Perrin’s search. Much to his surprise, a platoon of *tirailleurs annamites* has been assigned to help him, causing Perrin to lament: “Vous avez vu ce qu’ils m’ont refilé. Une équipe d’Annamites. Puis, il y en a un qui est très petit” ‘See what they sent me? A team of Annamites. Moreover, one of them is tiny.’ “The recognition and disavowal of ‘difference’ is always disturbed by the question of its representation or construction” (Bhabha 81). Dellaplane replies tersely: “They’re good diggers.” Perrin’s initial lack of confidence in the Annamites’ ability to perform their assigned task is confirmed in subsequent comic scenes or *cocasses* (funny) situations. In another scene, after having unearthed the coffin of a dead, and perhaps anonymous, soldier, the Annamites refuse to lift it out because their religion forbids them to touch a dead man: speaking pidgin French, one of *tirailleurs* answers: “Bois touche homme mort est homme mort” ‘Wood touch dead man is dead man.’ A solution is found. A rope is tied around the coffin which can then be raised. Perrin promises the Annamites that they will be rewarded for their effort: “You pull rope, you’ll eat rice.” These sequences function as comic interlude, scenes designed to relieve the viewer from the morbid atmosphere. But unwittingly, the effectiveness of Tavernier’s critique is undermined when he reintroduces filmic image of the *tirailleurs* as *drôle de zouave*, at the very moment he attempts to debunk its myth.

When Dellaplane asks Perrin if he has found his “sacrée relique anonyme” ‘anonymous holy relic,’ Perrin proudly answers that he took care of “the packaging first” [*l’emballage d’abord*], which refers literally to his having found an oak coffin without any traces of shrapnel. And he adds: “Je sais. Je sais. Pas d’Anglais. Pas d’Allemand. . . . Pas de nègre non plus” ‘I know. I know. No English or Germans . . . and no Negroes either.’ The “idea” and “production” of the Unknown Soldier do not transcend national or racial determinants.

If the notion of the “packaging” of the dead points to the commodification of the memory of the war dead, it is made even more explicit in a scene where the packaging takes on a more openly commercial form, that is to say when the assignment of war memorials becomes the object of artistic and financial speculation. The army is said to have commissioned one of the characters in the film, Mercadot, a sculptor who fancies himself the equal of Rodin, to

build a war memorial on the battlefield of Grezincourt, which leads him to remark:

Nothing like it since the Greeks, since the Cathedrals. Even shitty artists have their hands full. One monument per village. 300 sculptors for 35,000 towns. Everybody wants his *poilu*, his widow, his pyramid, his marble. Bas-relief, inscriptions. It's a factory. Better than the Renaissance. It's the resurrection. Thanks to our dead. Thanks to them.

The memorialization and remembering of the war dead are indeed mediated by commerce. Do all of these monuments act as a memorial to commemorate all the war dead? Or as Tavernier suggests *en filigrane*, do these memorials fail to include the memory of the dead *tirailleurs indigènes*? We must ask ourselves if the institution of the *soldat inconnu* induces forgetting and leads many to forget the million and a half lives lost in the war, among them, 205,000 *tirailleurs*. Does the Unknown Soldier also represent the *tirailleurs indigènes* who died for France? It is doubtful.

One of the last sequences of the film reenacts the official selection of the Unknown Soldier. In a well-staged ceremony, and in the decorative presence of widows, mothers, and sisters of dead soldiers, André Maginot, the Minister of War and Pensions, instructs a simple soldier, from the "Class of 19. A Volunteer. Son of a missing soldier [who] fought in Champagne, Verdun. A rare survivor of the *234e d'infanterie*, transferred to the 132nd regiment," to select the coffin that will be interred under the Arc de Triomphe and known as the Unknown Soldier:

Soldier! Take this bouquet picked on the battlefield of Verdun amid the graves of heroes who have died for the nation. Lay it on one of these eight coffins. This coffin will be that of the Unknown Soldier which the people of France will accompany tomorrow to the Pantheon and the Arc de Triomphe. Supreme homage! The finest that France ever paid to one of its children. Yet none too great when he must symbolize and immortalize the valiant soldiers whose anonymous sacrifice and superhuman heroism, safeguarded our homeland, justice and liberty.

Maginot's speech constructs an official myth of the Unknown Soldier by first presenting the dead soldiers as children, thus reestab-

lishing the force of the Law of the father, that is, the Law of the nation. It then transmutes the dead body into an abstract (if empty) repository for heroic and moral virtues. This "strange figureless figure" is resurrected, elevating at the same time, an "exquisite corpse" (Derrida 73) above the human condition, and turning it into an abstract sign, which becomes the site for an imaginary and ecstatic identification. Paradoxically, the Unknown Soldier is transfigured into the ultimate *corps étranger*. Dellaplane, scandalized by such a discourse, is one of the few capable of deciphering the myth: "They had 1,500,000 killed. But now, they'll think only of this one. This sham is a scandal." What is expressed here explicitly is that the institution of the Unknown Soldier, as an abstract trace, is indeed a scandalous *front*, which induces forgetting.¹⁹

Achille Mbembe, a Senegalese historian who reads the deployment of the *tirailleurs* as a supplement in filmic archives, recognizes the mythic and symbolic function of the institution of the Unknown Soldier, and laments the duplicity of the trace:

Here they are, these Senegalese *tirailleurs* whose names do not appear on any funeral monuments erected at the gates of our cities, and I am sure, no one remembers, when, each year, we lay a wreath on the tomb of the "unknown soldier." This is what I mean: the Senegalese *tirailleur* is the "unknown soldier" par excellence. (135)

Mbembe may have been unaware that, on November 11, 1992, during the ceremony commemorating the Armistice, "President Mitterrand laid a wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier," with indigenous *tirailleurs* in attendance, and in fact, very much a part of the ceremony. Conscripts of Indochinese, Maghrebian, and African descent were once again mobilized. Under the very same banner/poster of the *Journée de l'Armée d'Afrique et des troupes coloniales*, they donned the original uniform of the *troupes coloniales* to commemorate and honor the memory of their forebears who fought during the Great War and in all wars. This type of official recognition and the use made of natives troops in full military garb of a bygone era bear an uncanny resemblance to the use made of *tirailleurs* as *figurants*, extras in cinematic productions. Jean-François Lyotard wrote that "the narrative film engenders an excess of presence. What the event makes absent is forgotten" (248).²⁰ This inclusion of the "alien bodies" as *figurants* in the cin-

ematic scenography as well as in this official ceremony merely re-figures the *tirailleurs indigènes*, not as Mbembe claims, as the Unknown Soldier par excellence, but re-deploys them as the emblematic *drôle de zouave*.²¹

Notes

1. For the film critic Marcel Oms, Alain Resnais and Chris Marker were among the first film directors (with Jean Rouch) to acknowledge the historical connectedness that binds Africa and France:

But it is Alain Resnais and Chris Marker who were the first to have made the only observation that matters with *Les Statues meurent aussi*, censured as early as 1953: "There is no rupture between the African civilization and our own. The faces of art were shed from the same human face, as the snake's skin. Beyond their dead shapes, we recognize the undertaking, common to all great civilizations, of the man who triumphs from the world. And, Whites and Blacks, our future lies in this undertaking". (107)

2. I am indebted here to James Young's lucid analysis of Holocaust memorials. He writes: "Once we assign monumental form to memory, we have to some degree divested ourselves of the obligation to remember" (5).

3. The following citation is paradigmatic: "*Tirailleur* Coulibaly, of the 44th battalion, citation: 'During the offensive of July 20, 1918, has shown admirable courage and calm. Firing as in target practice, shot down several enemy soldiers; having run out of ammunitions, scoured the battlefield, gathering the ammunitions of the dead and wounded and distributing them to his comrades despite the intense machine-gun fire'" (Marseille 254-55).

4. Gallieni, having received "the mandate to defend Paris against the invader," "made a Moroccan division march from the Porte d'Orléans to the Gare de l'Est, to exalt the morale of the Parisians who lined up the sidewalks and shouted their support [*enthousiasme*] all night long" (Ducasse et al. 43).

5. The French historian, Gilles Meynier, describes this tendency thus:

From photographs and films made by the military, the war appears to have been a series of parades, martial postures, community and festive deeds. Just as in representations of French soldiers in *L'Illustration*, "indigenous" soldiers in photographs and films do not die. They are subjects in complete agreement with the official discourse: military filmmakers gather a large harvest of images of *tirailleurs* residing in

their camp: the rushes [*bandes brutes*] thus produced are used to make documentary films from carefully selected images: anything in the original strips (*bandes*) that suggests a gap between the colonized and France, or a critique of its power and institutions, is elided from the final edited films [*les montages terminaux*]. (Meynier, "Volonté." 43)

6. Meynier also remarks that this type of production of images during the war seems to be contrary to a new consciousness among the colonized, whose very experience of coming to the aid of France has a liberating effect:

Images produced during the war are contrary to the new situation in which the colonized find themselves and which official reports designate with dread, "l'esprit *tirailleur libéré*" 'the attitude of the liberated *tirailleur*': for having crossed the Mediterranean and having found themselves manipulated by an incorporating paternalistic discourse, the men have changed. Resistances to authority increase, insubordination spreads and subversive reflexes arise.

For one does not flatter and appeal to men without respite for four years without leaving something in their mind. The military order presents itself as being more egalitarian than the colonial order. The experience of the repatriated colonized has valorized them and they behave as if the present war discourse had actually become the reality for the colonial government and its subjects.

Thus, a glimpse of an anticipated liberation may be seen briefly in the days following the war. (Meynier, "Volonté" 43)

What is carefully screened out from the "official reports" that describe *l'esprit tirailleur libéré* is the daily carnage of war on these dislocated people.

7. In Lacan's theory, the concept of mimicry implies a reproduction of an image, "a passive duplication of a preexisting image" (Silverman 149). This concept can help us "expose [debunk colonial] masculinity as a masquerade" (Silverman 47). Homi Bhabha describes "colonial mimicry" as "the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate . . . (*The Location of Culture* 86).

8. The *Littré* (1958) claims that only Frenchmen are recruited in this army corps.

9. For the French women of Orange, the character played by Jean Gabin is seductive only because he wears the *spahi* uniform, the colonial attribute of virility; without it, he goes completely unnoticed. No longer in "camouflage," he is touched by melancholia and mourns his former virile self. Judith Butler, who examines the structure of production of gender in an heterosexual frame, writes: "Freud isolates the mechanism of melancholia as essential to 'ego formation' and 'character,' but only alludes to the centrality of melancholia to gender. In *The Ego and the Id* (1923), he elaborates on the structure of mourning as the incipient structure of ego formation, a thesis whose traces can be found in the 1917 essay 'Mourning and Melancholia.' In the experience of losing another human being whom one has loved, Freud argues, the ego is said to incorporate that other into the very structure of the ego, taking on attributes of the other and 'sustaining' the other through magical acts of imitation. The loss of the other whom one desires and loves is overcome through a specific act of identification that seeks to harbor that other within the very structure of the self: 'So by taking flight into the ego, love escapes annihilation' (178). This identification is not simply momentary or occasional, but becomes a new structure of identity; in effect, the other becomes part of the ego through the permanent internalization of the other's attributes" (57-58).

10. *Le Grand Robert de la langue Française*. Vol. 9, p. 880.

11. The Bibliothèque Forney examined the commodification of the African body in an exhibition entitled *Négripub: L'image des Noirs dans la publicité depuis un siècle*, and subsequently published a catalogue entitled *Négripub*.

12. Antoine Prost, in his book *In the Wake of War*, examines the French veterans' movement, their attitude towards their country, the army, peace and politics. He analyses veterans' societies, the associations the veterans created after the war, which in their heyday numbered three million in the 1930s.

13. General Mangin popularized the notion of *La Force noire* in his propagandist analysis. He still believed that "infantry" was "la reine des batailles" 'the queen of battles' and that "numerical superiority" was the most important factor for victory. He suggested that Africa be tapped as an endless source of "workers and soldiers." In his "homage to our African army," honored in the first victory march, several battalions of *tirailleurs* received, from the hands of the War minister, a French flag, "the glorious emblem for which they have fought with such an admirable courage." This is how Mangin put it:

The decision taken by the War Minister to give flags and banners to our beautiful black troops has come at the right time. A grateful France is only doing justice to her overseas sons who have shed their blood so generously to ensure her victory.

Our indigenous men have keen feelings for the nation, embodied by the flag, which they surround with a respectful and enthusiastic veneration.

In all the French colonies, the flag is raised and lowered each morning and evening in our posts. The salute to the flag is mandatory, and religiously observed by our *tirailleurs* who know that the homage paid to the flag is the homage paid to this generous France that brought them civilization and freedom by liberating them from the dual yoke of ignorance and slavery.

The affection for the flag displayed by our black troops is touching. It expresses itself with such emotion and pride that denote the purest notion of loyalty and honor. (Mangin, July 16, 1920)

A paternalistic Mangin projects onto his *force noire* the same feelings of patriotism that he himself feels for the French flag.

14. The Senegalese Deputy, Blaise Diagne, headed an official mission whose aim was to intensify the recruiting campaign by convincing the Africans that "in this immense war, nothing less than civilization itself was at stake, and that their lot [*sort*] was linked to our fate [*destinée*]" (Michel 226; quoted by Bouche 289). The Jonnart law of February 4, 1919 did increase the number of Muslim electors eligible to vote in municipal elections, but more liberal political reforms like the Violette-Blum bill which would grant citizenship to a larger number of Algerians never passed. The following statistics should give us an inkling as to the failed commitment of the political establishment. Up until 1940, Algeria was represented in Paris by six (then nine, ten) députés and by three senators elected exclusively by French citizens (*Français d'Algérie*) and the naturalized, who numbered only 7818, in 1936. It was estimated that the total number of naturalized citizens from Indochina in 1930 numbered 600 (Bouche 303). One of the requirements for becoming a French citizen, the *Algérien-évolué* had to renounce the Coranic statute, a sacrilegious gesture for Muslims (Bouche 301-02).

15. Derrida discusses the concept of "dangerous supplement" in his *Of Grammatology* 141-64. He writes: "It [the supplement] adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates itself *in-the-place-of*; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void. If it represents and makes an image, it is by the anterior default of a presence. Compensatory [*suppléant*] and vicarious, the supplement is an adjunct, a subaltern instance which *takes-(the) place* [*tient-lieu*]. As substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness" (145).

16. The controversy surrounding Maya Lin's design for the Vietnam War Memorial on Washington's Mall is indeed symptomatic of the virulence of the debate surrounding the "ideology" of monumental design (see Hess).

17. The French government has recently acknowledged the role played by Laotian, Cambodian, and Vietnamese soldiers who fought in the French army during the Indochinese War. Pierre Pasquini, the Minister for Veterans and War Victims, has pushed back the deadline that allows eligible Indochinese veterans to apply for a French military pension. They have until December 31, 1997 to submit a proof of their "incorporation."

18. Mangin was the first to promote this idea of colonial subjects as powerful reserves from which to draw endless number of combatants: "Our colonies have given our homeland [*mère-patrie*] 545,000 native combatants." He acknowledges the fact that "More than 115,000 of these valiant soldiers have been killed under our flags, and this ratio was only exceeded by that of our officers and non-commissioned officers in the statistics of losses in the Great War" (Mangin 1920). It is interesting to note that in 1920, Mangin underestimates the number of "native" casualties by 90,000. He goes on to add that

Colonial assistance numbered 600,000 men, counting workers who freed numerous combatants from the metropole to work in special services at the front.

This magnificent effort could have been easily tripled or quadrupled if the organization of native conscripts had been prepared long in advance as I had emphasized the urgent necessity since 1910. He then lists "the heroic feats of arms of black troops" at different key battles sites such as the Chemin-des-Dames in 1917. Mangin provides one more interesting piece of information: "At the armistice, indigenous troops from all the French fronts listed 83 battalions from West or Equatorial Africa, 10 battalions from Madagascar, 17 Annamite battalions, one battalion from Somalia et one Pacific Battalion."

19. In the "Postscript" to his love letter to Irène, Dellaplanes writes: "These are my final, dreadful statistics. In comparison to the duration of the Allied Victory March down the Champs-Élysées, about 3 hours, I think, I calculated that given the same speed, step, and military formations, the march of those who died in this inexpiable madness would have lasted 11 days and 11 nights. Forgive me for this crushing accuracy."

20. In "Memorial Immemorial," a screenplay for a film on the Battle of Normandy, Lyotard examines the "modes of remembering" and "forgetting" in a film he describes as belonging to a genre he calls "critical montage film" which is "neither fiction (pleasure), nor documentary (information) nor 'historical film' (educational)."

21. Tavernier succeeds in confronting the issues of memory and memorializing in an extremely provocative fashion. He unearthed images that were on the brink of disappearing from the French political unconscious and popular collective memory. The presence of native military auxiliaries,

albeit in the role of *figurants*, succeeds not only in subverting the official mythology of the war but also in reestablishing and reasserting their very labor and contribution in colonial wars of conquest and in the defense of the French nation. We must also not forget that Senegalese *tirailleurs* were used in Madagascar and Indochina as enforcers of French colonial rule. Frantz Fanon describes the myths surrounding Senegalese *tirailleurs* to which he had been introduced as a young boy: "I was perhaps thirteen when for the first time I saw Senegalese soldiers. All I knew about them was what I had heard from veterans of the First World War: 'They attack with the bayonet, and, when that doesn't work, they just punch their way through the machine-gun fire with their first. . . . They cut off heads and collect human ears'" (162). But Fanon also reports the violence exerted by the same soldiers on other colonized subjects: "'From the African point of view,' a colored student said at the 25th Congress of Catholic Students during its discussion of Madagascar, 'I wish to protest against the dispatch of Senegalese troops there and the misuse that is being made of them.' We know from other sources that one of the torturers in the Tananarive police headquarters was a Senegalese" (103-04).

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