

School of Arts Submission Coversheet (All Programmes)

Student Identification

Student Name or Number <i>(in case of anonymous submission please write student number only)</i>		Isabell Long (12945093)	
Programme Title		BA French Studies	
Module Title		Imagining France	
Module Code <i>(listed on student timetables)</i>			
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Coursework Title		Assignment Three	
Word Count	1815	Date Submitted	26/04/2015

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“There is something morally cowardly about a film that seems to whisper about an atrocity rather than shouting about it.” Discuss with reference to one or both of the films studied on this module.

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April 26, 2015

Cowardly is an interesting way for a film to be thought of. Films are, by their nature, meant to be informative or funny, and have a central plot line which is echoed very strongly, in order for people to want to go and see them.

The film *Muriel, or the Time of Return* (hereafter abbreviated to *Muriel*), released in 1963 and directed by Alain Resnais, is one such apparently cowardly film. One of its overarching themes is that of dishonesty, and another is guilt. The second film, *Hidden*, is similar although produced much later in 2005 by the director Haneke who was previously famous for his portrayal of issues that are “provocative via polemical argument” (from ‘Haneke, Film as Catharsis’ via Price and Rhodes (2010, p. 155)). Both of them never really get to the point of discussing their softly referenced theme of the Algerian War apart from in a very roundabout way, or indeed the reasons or conclusions for their main plotlines, although said soft references increase in their intensity upon having viewed the film multiple times and later with background knowledge of the atrocities. That said, many of the viewers’ questions raised by the characters’ actions in the film related to their main plotlines never get answered either. The two films are definitely ones that generate more questions than they answer, even with the help of cinematic and literary devices like changing of viewing angles, flashbacks, different viewing devices such as the kaleidoscope used by Bernard when conversing with Françoise in *Muriel*, voiceovers such as the one at the very start of *Hidden* which is said to bring a sense of reality to the potentially surreal beginning of just a static shot of a house which stays static for an eerily long time (Jaspe, 2014).

Muriel is a film that starts off slowly, with many supposedly intertwined plot lines. A family of which the mother — Hélène — meets an old flame and invites them for dinner,

which kickstarts the web of lies. To give an example, the old flame, Alphonse, brings along his “niece” Françoise to this encounter, who talks in depth to Bernard — the war-torn stepson of Hélène who has recently returned from fighting in Algeria, and as dramatic irony would have it it transpires that the young woman is not a niece but a lover. Alphonse lies prolifically, telling Bernard that he has been in Algeria too and that he was “surprised they never met”. This is an example of a quaint social interaction around a dinner table — something so common in France — and people trying to please each other without seeming overly superior.

Hidden is itself full of dinner table scenes, but they are not given any attention — the camera briskly moves to the next scene which is often completely unrelated to the last. Nothing is explicitly violent at first, but confusing — again reinforcing the “cowardly” viewpoints. The pinnacle of the film is widely regarded (Wheatley, 2012, p. 22) to be when Georges, the lead character, has a nightmarish flashback to his childhood during which he incited his friend Majid to kill a chicken. The viewer is shown this memory in full colour and gore, which is most definitely not shying away from the event. It could be said that it is intensified by the final shot of the nightmare before he wakes up drenched in sweat being Majid wielding the same axe covered in chicken blood over his head, threateningly. It is almost as if Georges anticipates what is coming next with the videotapes as they get more scary and more frequent, accompanied by crayon drawings, and the police do not want to help him identify their source or reason. This has parallels with the police not wanting to help during the massacre in Paris in 1961, because they did not see evidence that anything bad would have happened at the time it was required that they decide whether to intervene.

Like war in real life, the scenes in both of these films are very jerky and keep the viewer guessing as to what the next revelation or the next hurt will be. *Muriel* provides different explanations every way you turn — in fact almost in every shot — and this is reminiscent of war itself being more often than not a web of lies and propaganda for the richer, more powerful, better armed country of the group. Indeed, the beheading of the chicken scene in *Hidden* also can be said to reinforce the thoughts of bloody acts of war and war’s brutality, as well as the innocence of some children. In that, it is obvious to the viewer that it is not just adults that are subjected to atrocities, or even commit them, but children too, and it children remember more than we think they do, hence Georges still being haunted in nightmares in adulthood by gruesome things that took place in his relative infancy.

On the subject of morals, as per the title, it is important to think about what exactly morality is. As per the Oxford English Dictionary in 2015, “morality” is defined as “[p]rinciples concerning the distinction between right and wrong or good and bad behaviour”. Moral cowardice is the principle of, for example, a person not wanting to face up to their wrongdoings in life and society, doesn’t want to take responsibility for their actions, or to do what is right when it is the hard thing (potentially lacking in social norms) to do. When analysing these films, the critic or even the director could consider whether it is better to leave the viewers to think for themselves and draw their own conclusions, or spell everything out to them and emphasise the exact points they are making. If they did that, however, viewers would not be very happy as it has been shown by studies on viewing habits and researchers such as Plantinga and Smith (1999) that viewers do not like to be kept guessing — they watch TV to relax or have fun.

The point of view of the films being morally cowardly could be said to be unjust, in stark contrast to earlier evidence and ensuing thoughts. As expressed in Matthew Croombs’ essay *Algeria Deferred: The Logic of Trauma in Muriel and Caché* (2014), according to the famous psychoanalyst and psychologist Sigmund Freud, trauma is not immediately obvious at the time of the event, but at the time that a later discovered traumatic event occurs. An event requires a second stimulus — a memory or another, similar event — to be recognised as traumatic and can then be hellish for the person experiencing the psychological or physical effects. Therefore, it would have been hard for either Resnais or Haneke to have made the films directly about the Algerian War. For one, many French people did not realise the atrocities were happening because of the propaganda via broadcasting news mechanisms, and events recalled in film would have been too shocking for many viewers to have ever gone to see the films in the first place, even forty years after when it had gone from (or not reached) the psyche of most French people. Indeed, at that time there were still bans on books discussing the French massacres in Algeria. These included Henri Alleg’s book *La Question*, or the philosopher Satre’s book *Les Temps Modernes* which was banned from sale by the French government straight after its publication, presumably because it directly touched on these issues of the massacre that were still required (or wished) to be covered up. This explains why neither of the films directly touch on the issues: neither Haneke or Resnais would have wanted their films banned, as the idea of a film is to diffuse into the

minds of the most people possible, and the Algerian War was a very important topic that they believed should not have been subject to censorship. Therefore, they could be said to not be morally cowardly, but simply careful: they wanted to appeal to the general public and have their films allowed to be shown for years to come.

These films supposedly “whispering” are doing so very cleverly. As the violence mounts in *Muriel*, this is akin to the violence mounting in Algeria, like the French government refusing to let citizens know that there was anything to worry about and instead insisting that it was “under control”. The name of the second film *Hidden* (*Caché*), is quite poignant in light of the censorship and “hiding” of the atrocities in Algeria by the French government and media. What the film is trying to hide, the viewer never knows — as with the Algerian War, since secrets were rife. This is also emphasized in *Muriel* with the vague mentions and never a full revealing of the eponymous girl Muriel — Bernard just talks about her hauntingly, leaving the viewer to ponder what happened to her. This draws another parallel with the War: the families of those killed in the Algerian War (or indeed the Paris massacre when refugees were pushed into the river) never got closure or even an explanation because the French never admitted to wrongdoing.

Wrongdoing is an interesting word here. In the aforementioned scene of *Hidden* — children beheading a chicken — and when Georges’ mother pretends that she does not know Majid, because she does not want to remember the realities of that friendship, what happened to his parents (they were killed in the Paris massacre of Algerians in 1961), and the broken promise of adoption by Georges’ mother that was due to her precious son having lied to save himself a scolding for having incited the act of violence. In this case, denial is the response, but it comes back to bite Georges with the videotapes and the disturbing images, flashbacks and nightmares — who is watching his house, and why are they — why are they trying to terrorise him and his family? We can also ask whether lying should have terrifying consequences such as these hauntings and invasions of privacy. *Muriel*’s portrayal of wrongdoing, betrayal, misplaced loyalty (Hélène with Alphonse) and secrets, such as Hélène not realising Alphonse was married until he was asked to return home (Chappell, 2005), and hence her dreams being shattered by these overarching themes of dishonesty and disloyalty.

It can be concluded from a study of these two films and their events that indeed, they do whisper about “an atrocity” and that atrocity is indirectly the Algerian War. In both films, the main plotline is not that of the War, but the viewer gets sucked in to watching growing chaos as both main characters in each of the respective films try to piece together what has happened. The main thesis of both films in this respect is that we can never really know what happened before if we did not directly experience it — there may always be some machine spinning its own version of the truth, and deciphering what is actually the truth is taxing on the brain.

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