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MEMORY AND MELODRAMA IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL FRENCH FILM

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ABSTRACT

Critical analysis of colonial and postcolonial cinema is a growing field of academic research. The editor of the *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, Kamal Salhi, explains that many American and English university French programs now offer degrees in this area of study (2). One line of research in this field centers on colonial and postcolonial memory in French cinema. This is because colonial memory has a problematic relationship to French national ideology. This thesis explores the causal connection between French colonial and postcolonial memory and melodramatic structures. Two French films, *Indochine* and *Chocolat* were the subjects of this study. These films were chosen because they both use a central character to recount colonial memories. They were compared to each other in order to ascertain the causal relationship between memory and melodrama. It was concluded that using personal memory to recount history does engender the use of melodramatic structures. It was also found, however, that the directors of the films react to the French nation ideology in different ways. Their reaction will influence the way that the spectator understands the French colonial experience.

A country's cinema is a sort of prism: it intercepts and refracts interpretations of past and present social phenomena. In order to do this, some films, especially those that treat historical subjects, use autobiography. They use a "focus" character to recount history. This character relays a historical event or time period by retelling or remembering a life story or personal experience. The personal memory or life-story relates to the audience in a way that a documentary cannot. This is especially true when the character is a "member" of the same nation as are the members of the audience. As Panivong Norindr argues in his article "Filmic Memorial and Colonial Blues," the personal memory of the character may become a collective memory because it includes the members of the audience (122). The collective memory then provides a sort of national identity and sense of continuity for the audience, both of which are strongly connected to the emotions associated with nationalism (124).

Films that use autobiography to reflect on a period in national history do not only use personal memory, but also frequently use melodramatic structures. This is because emotion marks and changes the personal memory of the character and the collective memory of the nation. Since exaggerated emotion, or sentimentalism, is also one of the central characteristics of melodrama (Hayward 105), films that exist in the realm of memory have a tendency to use melodramatic structures. To examine the cinematic connection between memory and melodrama, it is necessary to look at films that use personal memory to reflect on an historical period. This use of memory can be seen in Régis Wargnier's *Indochine*. As Norindr relates, "In *Indochine*, French colonial history becomes visible as Eliane's [the protagonist's] memories of events in her colonial past and of individuals she has loved" (124). Another film that uses memory to reflect on the colonial experience is Claire Denis's *Chocolat* (Mayne 34). It should be emphasized that both memories deal specifically with the French colonial and

postcolonial period. Because of the trauma surrounding the French decolonization period, these memories will be especially problematic to those who consciously or unconsciously accept the ideology of the French nation and will lead to the use of melodramatic structures. This thesis, then, will look at the causal relationship between the cinematic use of personal memory to relate French colonial history and melodramatic structures in the films *Indochine* and *Chocolat*.

Before looking at the particulars of memory and melodrama in *Chocolat* and *Indochine*, it is important to know the basic plots of the two movies. The plot of *Indochine* moves on two levels: 1) the present, in which Eliane Devries, a wealthy French plantation owner, narrates a story to her grandson; and 2) the story that Eliane narrates. Camille, Eliane's adopted daughter, was originally the daughter of two Indochinese rubber plantation owners, who died in a plane crash during Camille's childhood. After her parents' deaths, Camille lives with Eliane on the rubber plantation. They enjoy a happy mother-daughter relationship until Eliane is seduced by a young French officer named Jean-Baptiste. Their affair ends badly. Jean-Baptiste, however, reappears in Eliane's life when Camille falls in love with him. Upon discovering Camille's feelings for Jean-Baptiste, Eliane uses her influence to have him sent off to a secluded outpost in Indochina. Camille, in turn, runs away to find him. On her way, she joins a family of workers who are fleeing from the mining industry toward Jean-Baptiste's outpost.

When they arrive at the outpost, the family is divided by plantation owners. They struggle against the guards to remain united and are killed. Camille, horrified by the gruesome sight of the bodies of her friends, shoots a French officer. Jean-Baptiste sees her and recognizes her as Eliane's daughter. They escape into a boat. By the end of the boat trip, Jean-Baptiste has fallen in love with Camille. They survive a maze of islands, to end up in a sort of legendary land.

There they are hidden by a group of communists who agree to smuggle them with

a group of traveling actors to China. At this point, Camille tells Jean-Baptiste that she is pregnant with his child. Their story together ends, however, when Jean-Baptiste and the child are captured. Camille stays with the communist actors until they are all captured and are imprisoned for communist activity. Jean-Baptiste, in the meantime, is to be tried by the French navy in France. In his last twenty-four hours of freedom, he is murdered. Five years later, upon her release from prison, Camille rejects Eliane, telling her mother to go back to France, for her Indochina is "dead." Eliane then returns to France with her grandson, Etienne.

The film *Chocolat* centers on a young woman named France Dalens. She is visiting Cameroon, where she spent her youth as the daughter of the French District Officer of Mindif. This film also operates on two levels. The "outer" story is the interaction between France as a young woman and an American black man and his half African son. The "inner" story is adult France remembering her childhood through a flashback that interrupts and divides the outer story.

In the outer story, France, the American named Mungo Park, and his son are on their way to a town in Africa. Mungo offers France a ride, mistaking her for a tourist. In the car, France begins to remember her life as a child. She remembers her family and the family's Cameroonian servant, Protée. Her father, Marc Dalens, was a French colonial administrator in a sparsely populated part of Cameroon. Aimée Dalens is his beautiful wife, who spends her days alone at the house while her husband goes into remote areas of his district to sketch the countryside or visit the elders of various indigenous tribes.

Other than the daily interactions between a small set of main characters, there is not a forward moving storyline in *Chocolat*, as there is in *Indochine*. *Chocolat* shows the relationships between France, Marc, Aimée, and Protée. The only major event in France's memory is an airplane crash, which brings new factors into the equation. The passengers and pilots survive. Upon meeting them, Marc offers them a place to stay in his home.

Among the guests are the pilot and co-pilot, another French district officer and his new wife, and a coffee-grower and his black housekeeper and mistress, Thérèse. The other character of importance is Luc, an ex-seminarian who is crossing Africa on foot and living among the African tribes.

As stated above, memory is the venue by which the past is present in both of these films. On the surface, there are similarities in the way the films use memory. In both films the focus character is a French woman, rather than an indigenous person. Eliane is the only one who remembers and recounts in *Indochine*. Camille and her fellow Indochinese are presented to the audience only as Eliane remembers them. In *Chocolat*, France Dalens remembers her childhood, a memory to which the audience is privy. The indigenous people in the film are almost completely silent. They are the objects of the gaze, but they are rarely penetrated by it. Another similarity between the two films is that the memories of the focus characters center on their families. *Indochine* starts with the relationships of Eliane, Camille, and Jean-Baptiste and expands to relate the entire history of the independence of Indochina. France's memory in *Chocolat* remains within the relationships in the Dalen family, but the deep significance of these relationships is never completely absent from the film. It exists as negative space. In sum, the memories are essentially Eurocentric and begin with the immediate environment of the French colonial family and life.

On the other hand, however, there are significant differences in the two films' uses of memory. The first difference is the presence of the voice-over in *Indochine* and the lack of the voice-over in *Chocolat*. Eliane is presented as a reliable narrator, especially since she openly admits to her bad decisions in relation to Camille and Jean-Baptiste. She does not question the reality of her memory of French Indochina, which she remembers as a sort of exotic paradise, and nor does the film (Norindr 121). She presents Indochina before the communist revolution as a sort of Eden before the Fall (Norindr 124).

The director of *Indochine* presents no other memory with which to contrast Eliane's memory (Norindr 123). As Norindr opines, "As both the protagonist and the narrator, she [Eliane] exerts complete control over the narration, its development, its resolution" (123). Her memory and narration is the only possible interpretation of the past, and it is not a critical reflection. Eliane does not pause to dwell on her mistakes (Norindr 124). She admits and accepts them. In fact, at one point, Camille's former Indochinese fiancé, who was educated in Paris, makes a telling remark. The philosophy behind this remark is that the French mission civilatrice did not wholly fail and this in some way validates the French colonial presence. His mother accuses him of disobedience in freeing Camille from her obligation to be his wife. He replies that obedience has made the Indochinese people slaves to the French. But, he adds, at the university in Paris, he has learned about freedom and equality. He says that he will fight the French with these weapons. The underlying message in this is that despite the errors of the French administration, Indochina will still be better because of French colonization (Norindr 125). This message runs through the whole film, and allows Eliane to accept and move past her errors, rather than to puzzle over an answer that cannot be found. The end result is a punctuated and linear memory that ignores the complexity of the uprising of the Indochinese and instead uses this uprising to propel the storyline.

Besides the acceptance of mistakes in judgment, Eliane's memory is stream lined because she does not admit any obscure motives or unknown undercurrents in herself or the other characters. Elaine's memory is not unlike the sort of memory that Erich Auerbach identifies in certain types of literature. He explains that some authors represent memories in "a fully externalized form, visible and palpable in all their parts [...]"(6). Eliane is a completely omniscient and honest narrator. She is not deceived and does not deceive. This presentation of the narrator and the other characters maintains the

momentum of her narrative, but sacrifices the complexity of the characters and their relationships. There can be no doubt about Eliane's feelings for Jean-Baptiste. The love affair is stormy, but not complex. Not only does Wargnier move quickly through complex historical events, but he also simplifies his characters in order to keep up with the pace of his plot. In other words, the characters become archetypes, and history becomes myth.

In contrast with *Indochine*, France does not narrate her memory in *Chocolat*. The adult France has an experience that causes her to remember her childhood in Cameroon. The memory, however, is not simply a child's first-hand interpretation of events. It is an adult recalling a child's memory. Actions and words that would have been meaningless to France during her childhood take on a sudden gravity in the adult France and add to her understanding. But these actions are not always clear because they are obscured by the passage of time. For example, the tension that is present between Aimée and Protée seems intense because France finally has come to understand that a sexual attraction existed between her mother and the Cameroonian house servant. The calling up of this memory has implications not only for France's past, but also for her emotions in the present. The attraction to the Other is replayed between the adult France and Mungo, whom France invites to go out for a drink. In sum, France's memory has a more porous exchange between the past and the present. While it appears that nothing in particular happens during France's childhood, the memory is called from the depths of France's mind because it relates in some way to her unexplained feelings in the present.

Unlike the memory of Eliane, therefore, France's memory creates a film that is rich in symbolism and that engages the spectator. The spectator must struggle to interpret the memory with the focus character. France and the spectator must move between the past and the present to find the meaning of the actions, gazes, and words of the characters. For instance, in the opening

sequence, France wipes the dark sand off her feet, in contrast to Mungo and his son who let the sand wash over their entire bodies. This is also in contrast to Protée, who used dirt to clean his hands. The implication of these scenes is the lack of identity that France has as the child of French colonists. She spent her childhood in Cameroon, but could not and cannot accept to have the dirt of the country on her skin, as did Protée and as does Mungo. The fact that France is named after the colonizing nation and is taken for a tourist by Mungo is another somewhat ironic demonstration of the distance between the character and the country in which she spent her childhood. The spectator cannot be sure that the director of the film, Claire Denis, planned every link between the actions of France as an adult and France's memory of her actions as a child. Denis, however, creates a situation rich in symbolism: parts of France's memory are prefigurements and parts of the present are repetitions or fulfillments of the past (Mayne 42). To summarize, the main difference between the memories of Eliane and France is that Denis accepts the idea of restricting herself to representing an elliptical and personal memory. It is a memory that is unsure because of its elliptical structure. It is also personal because it necessitates individual interpretation. Wargnier does not restrict Eliane's memory to that of a colonist remembering her colonial experience. By trying to encompass the history of French colonialism in Indochina, he does not invite an individual interpretation, but rather a national interpretation.

A national interpretation implies the presence of a sort of preexistent code, a code that Susan Hayward would call "nation ideology." To look at the connection between memory and melodramatic structures in films that deal with colonial and postcolonial structure, it is useful to understand the process that formed the French national ideology and specifically, the concept of the French nation. This is because the link between memory and melodramatic structures is emotion, and the catalyzing force behind nation building is also emotion. Hayward, in her study about French

national cinema, identifies three stages in nation building and links a historical event to each stage. For the first stage of nation building, she associates the French Revolution with "arrogance" or "optimism." She claims that it was the French Revolution that caused the French people to believe that their form of government was a universally good form of government (2). The second characteristic of the formation of a national identity is, according to Hayward, "malaise" or "morosity." She associates this stage with the French Enlightenment, which facilitated the common loss of religious belief and the loss of belief in the divine right of the monarchy (3). To fill this void it was necessary to create the French nation (3). The last characteristic, then, that led to the formation of the French nation was a need for "security" (1). Since the unifying ideology of a nation is linked to the need for individuals to feel secure, any threat to the legitimacy and the infallibility of the nation will often be met with hostility from the members of that nation.

Colonial history threatens the French nation because it forces the nation's members to reexamine their national ideology, one that allowed them to act unjustly towards a large number of indigenous peoples. It also threatens the French nation because in some cases, the nation acted unjustly in its treatment of some of its own members. It follows that French films that use memory to relate colonial history or the colonial experience will be subject to pressure from conflicting emotions. The need for security, which is linked to the need for identity, the need for connection to the past, and the need for avoiding guilt, will cause certain members of the French nation to pressure directors to silence or mitigate the wrongs done by the French in French colonial history. The need for connection to past, in the case of those members of the French nation who were colonists or the children of colonists, will pressure directors to express a sense of nostalgia and loss in reference to colonial times.

The cinematic use of memory to retell the history of the colonies or relate a colonial experience will, as explained above, be subject to emotions such as guilt and nostalgia. The result of using memory in films that treat colonial matters, then, will never be an accurate representation of colonial history. As Naomi Greene relates, "...this [colonial] past with all its weight of guilt and unease has been transformed by memory. That is, while the precise historical context that gave rise to the melancholy that is felt here is not hidden, its exact outlines remained blurred...Drawn into the undertow of memory, we enter a world dominated by a melancholy nostalgia..." (106). Directors that use memory will often turn to melodramatic structures because melodrama is the genre that enables them to include the exaggerated and often conflicting emotions that are melded to colonial memories.

As explained above, melodramatic structures are connected to memory because melodrama is the genre of conflicting emotions. Eric Bentley identifies these emotions as self-pity and fear (200). He argues, "What is the least that anyone can expect from a melodrama? As apt an answer as is any: a good cry...Besides referring to superficial emotion, the phrase 'having a good cry' implies feeling sorry for one's self. The pity is self-pity" (196). Pity and fear are also at work in colonial memory. Greene, in the above citation, explains the strong nostalgia that is at work in colonial memory. Nostalgia is the combination of self-pity for the loss that the person remembering feels for the past, and the fear that he or she feels for the future and the ultimate future, death.

In *Indochine*, Eliane fears a loss of identity, which can be seen as a sort of living death. With the "death" of French Indochina, Eliane's identity as "une Asiate" must disappear as well. She is forced to flee Indochina and live as an exile. This fear of the future forces her to look back and remember a time when all seemed right. In looking back, she allows herself to engage in fantasy, and the feeling of self-pity becomes stronger than her fear. She pities herself for the loss of her

daughter, her lover, and Indochina. This sense of self-pity, however, overpowers her ability to analyze the past. Her memory becomes a melodramatic replaying of her history-mixed with a mythical version of world history.

If the emotion of self-pity dominates the memory of *Indochine*, the emotion of fear dominates the memory of France in *Chocolat*. This fear is not a clear focused sense of terror, but rather a fear of the unknown and the obscure in persons, relationships, and in the Otherness of Cameroon itself. The relationship between the child France and the Cameroonian Protée exemplifies some of this fear. In many ways, Protée is more of a mother to France than is Aimée, who spends her time reading or smoking. Yet there is always a sense of apprehension on the part of France towards the servant. For example, in one scene, France and Protée are looking at the carcasses of a neighbor's stock that was killed by a hyena. During this scene, Protée takes some blood of one of the animals and smears it onto France's arm. In another scene, France tells him that he "disgusts" her. The culmination of this fear is the final scene between France and Protée. He leads her to believe that she can touch part of the house's generator by placing his hand on it when she asks him if it is hot. She does the same, and recoils in pain. She looks at him in confusion and horror, and backs up toward the wall.

Aimée also feels an undefined fear of Protée. As in the case of France, this fear is connected to a kind of fascination (Mayne 35). She is torn between her fear and her fascination for him. For instance, one night when Marc is away, she frantically calls Protée because she has heard a hyena. He appears in her room silently, startling her. She looks at him and gives him a gun. He sits smiling, shaking his head at the thought of her terror. He is perfectly comfortable with idea of the animal's presence while she is filled with fear. Like the hyena, he becomes the Otherness of Africa that frightens her. The fear of the Otherness in Cameroon resurfaces in the cemetery scene at the former house of a German colonist. Aimée tells France that the man who lived in that house was killed by his

"boy." The camera then pans to Protée, as if to signify Aimée's underlying fear of the Other, incarnated by Protée. France then asks Aimée if they will be buried there in the cemetery when they die. Aimée freezes at the thought. The culmination of Aimée's fear occurs the night that she tries to seduce him. She is sitting hidden from his sight and suddenly lays her hand on his calf. He pauses, then violently pulls her up from the floor, intensely looks at her, and sharply turns around to walk into the night.

Unlike *Indochine*, any self-pity in France's memory is subtle or nonexistent. Cameroon is not portrayed as a sort of paradise in the present or in the past, but rather as a hot and dry climate with sparse landscape. France's self-pity could only be in the lack of understanding and loss in Protée's final rejection of her (Mayne 36). It is, however, far from the amount of self-pity that colors Eliane's memory.

Besides the relationship between pity and fear, the use of memory forces the directors to use the melodramatic structures of types and archetypes. Before exploring why the use of memory engenders the use of types and archetypes, however, it is necessary to define them. Types are characters that play out a predetermined role. Bentley calls them "fixed quantities." He distinguishes between types and archetypes by the amount of representation of which each is capable. The type represents "groups and their foibles and eccentricities" (49). The archetype goes beyond representation of small groups. It also survives time, often crossing generations. The archetype becomes a myth, such as that of Don Juan (51). On this Bentley writes, "That the archetypes plunge us deep into myth is obvious: they *are* myth, and their creators are among the great myth-makers" (53). An archetype, then, theoretically has the capacity to represent large groups of people.

In fact, the use of archetypes in *Indochine* and *Chocolat* can be seen in the way that the characters personify nations. This is obvious in *Indochine*. As Norindr writes, "Eliane becomes the embodiment of the French colony in symbol and image, the

'colonial Marianne'; simply put, she personifies Indochina" (124). Camille, in turn, personifies free Indochina, France's "adopted daughter." Eliane calls her "irresistible." This is to say that Camille is endowed with all of the exoticism that the French colonists and even continental France, Jean-Baptiste, cannot resist.

In *Chocolat*, the characters also become personifications of France and its colony, although this is to a lesser extent than in *Indochine*. Aimée and Marc personify France in their attraction to Cameroon. Marc is attracted to the land of Cameroon, as symbolized by his trips to sketch landscapes. Aimée is attracted to Protée, but her attraction is based on his physical beauty and his "Otherness," rather than any deep knowledge of his personality (Mayne 36). Protée, in his silence and opaqueness as a character, is the personification of Cameroon (Mayne 30). The child France, with her strongly symbolic name, is the personification of postcolonial France.

Melodramatic structures can be identified not only in the use of archetypical characters, but also in the love-triangles among the characters. In *Indochine*, the mother-daughter relationship symbolizes the relationship between Indochina and France. The rising tension in their relationship, because of their common love interest, becomes the budding conflict of the Indochinese people against the French colonists. The result of the archetypical personification is the portrayal of the communist movement as an extension of the rebellion of Camille. In fact, Camille's rebellion is not only a symbol of the communist revolution; it is an actual catalyzing factor in the film. The family romance becomes myth. Etienne, Camille's child, is nursed by various Indochinese women as the French lead Jean-Baptiste to where he will be judged. Etienne's story becomes a rallying point for the Indochinese independence movement. Camille becomes the "red princess" who is heavily involved in the independence movement and eventually

becomes part of the Vietnamese delegation in the 1954 Geneva Peace Conference.

Not only archetypes, but also colonial types make an appearance as minor or secondary characters in *Chocolat*. The survivors of the crash are all colonial types (Mayne 38). There is the new colonial officer, who is horrified at the idea of an African doctor treating his seriously ill wife. His behavior in the situation shows that he is more "backwards" than any of the African people in the film. The coffee-grower shouts racial slurs at a tribal chieftain who is a friend of Marc's, yet keeps an African mistress. Finally, there is Luc. He does criticize the French treatment of the native peoples, but he does it in a way that is completely artificial and disrespectful to Protée and the rest of the servants at the Dalens' home. Luc can choose to cross the invisible line between the colonists and the colonized, but Protée cannot. Luc invades the only personal space that the servants have, and then is shocked by the violent reaction of Protée to his jeering.

It is here that the viewer can start to recognize the true difference between the films. The types described above are recognized as small-minded, hypocritical, insensitive, and arrogant by the viewer. Denis, however, never openly condemns them as such. She lets them condemn themselves by the disparity between their words and their actions. This points to Denis's capacity in using memory. She partly uses the perception of the child France, who is still somewhat untainted by the social codes of the blind adults, to unmask the hypocrisy of those surrounding her. But Denis also uses the mind of France as an adult. France returns to Cameroon after its decolonization. With this new perspective, certain parts of her memory stand out more clearly, such as the faults of the colonial types. This is not the case in Wargnier's film. While his film does show the mistreatment of Indochinese workers, the use of national memory forces the injustices to be ignored or brushed aside by the interplay between the archetypes of France and Indochina.

Because France's memory in *Chocolat* questions and therefore undercuts the reliability of certain characters' words and actions, it does not simplify the colonial relationships. The memory leaves the audience with the impression that there is much more to the story than can be seen. For example, the audience catches glimpses of the emotions in Protée that are not fully expressed, but nevertheless are always threatening to break through his opaqueness. Two scenes in particular exemplify this. In one scene, Protée is taking an outside bucket shower, after having to pour water into the water heater for Aimée bath. As Aimée and France walk by, he crouches down to hide himself. After they leave, he pounds his fist against the wall in frustration and cries. He is forced to take a shower in front of everyone, with no more respect for his personal privacy than for an animal's. This obviously affects him, but Denis leaves the audience only with the expression of his emotions and without his words. The other scene is the last scene in which he interacts with France. France, holding her burnt hand, looks at him. He, also burned, looks at her with tears streaming down his face. France and the audience know that there is much beyond what Protée shows. They catch a glimpse of it and then meet a wall of opaqueness once again. The audience shares this inability to fully understand with France, which is perhaps the point of the film.

Indochine ends with closure, the reconciliation and acceptance of Eliane as the "mother" of Etienne, the child of Camille, the former colony of France. *Chocolat* ends almost where it began, with France silently watching. She looks one last time on Cameroon before getting on an airplane. She did not see her childhood house, nor did she find closure to the complexities that her memory contained. The division between France and Protée, the colonizer and the colonized cannot be bridged. In one of her most profound metaphors, Denis expresses the incomprehensibility between the colonizer and the colonized. As Marc tells France, the more quickly that one tries to run towards the horizon, the more quickly it escapes.

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