

Politics and the Police: Documenting the 17th October 1961 Massacre

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Abstract (194 words):

The 17th October 1961 police massacre of hundreds of protesting Algerians in the center of Paris has become one of the most recognized events of the Algerian War. Amid a wealth of historical and fictional works that treat the event, Jacques Panijel's *Octobre à Paris* has received comparatively little attention, perhaps due to the fact that it was immediately censored in 1962, denied a *visa d'exploitation* in 1973, and finally released in cinemas in October 2011, when it was frequently screened as a double bill with Yasmina Adi's *Ici on noie les algériens* (2011). Panijel's film is quite distinct from Adi's work; unsurprisingly, perhaps, given the altered conditions of their creation and potential public reception. Adi's film rests on the assumption that the audience will trust in the veracity of the information she presents; Panijel's text, by contrast, cannot rely on any previous knowledge on the part of the spectator, and anticipates incredulity and resistance. This article examines both works, and asks whether a form of Rancierian politics, as a rupture in dominant modes of perception that offers voice and visibility to the marginalized, might be made manifest in Panijel's choice of aesthetic techniques.

On the night of the 17th October 1961, 30,000 Algerians (technically considered French citizens at the time) gathered for a demonstration that took them from Nanterre and Gennevilliers on the outskirts of Paris towards the centre, in protest against a recently state-imposed curfew. About 11,500 people were arrested on that evening alone, and by the end of the week that figure had reached more than 14,000. This was an event whose very visibility in the centre of Paris sparked the extreme brutality of the police, and Roger Chaix, former

director of national intelligence services, underlines this: 'We couldn't allow the spectacle of a Paris under the control of the FLN... we just couldn't accept that' (quoted in Kupferstein, 2001). It also brought to light the fundamental hypocrisy of the French colonial system: for what could be more democratic, more expressive of the French *epistème* of *liberté, égalité, fraternité* than an entirely peaceful protest at a perceived social injustice? Rancière writes the 17th October 1961 marked a turning point, when the very visibility of Algerians in public space sparked violence, repression and the blanketing of knowledge about the massacre through state-organized censorship: 'Algerians in struggle had emerged within the French public space as political participants and as French subjects [...] the police cleared the public space and, thanks to a new blackout, made its own operations invisible' (1998, 28).

The march can be read in Rancière's schema as the essence of politics, a breaking in the order of what can be seen and not seen in public space, when those without a share in political life, what he calls the *sans-parts*, emerge onto the public stage. The double movement of this event vacillated between excesses of visibility and invisibility: thousands of Algerians in the centre of Paris, and the following police cover-up. That night on television there were a few reassuring images, but by the 24th of October, the French media no longer reported on the event and it effectively disappeared from public consciousness. This regulation of the perceptual domain is characteristic of the system of sensory control Rancière calls the police. While it was the work of the literal police that ensured the massacre remained unrecognized for many decades, in Rancière's lexicon the police is that which presides over what he terms a 'distribution of the sensible':

The essence of the police lies neither in repression nor even in control over the living. Its essence lies in a certain way of dividing up the sensible. I call distribution of the sensible a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed' (2010, 36).

He further describes a politics, which upsets the order of the police, giving voice and visibility to those 'who have no part' (2010, 33), breaking the regime of the sensible and instigating a form of dissent. Politics arises from a claim to equality and visibility from those "without part" yet it also entails the destruction and invention of aesthetic forms. While politics is a disruption, an introduction of forms of dissent or strangeness into the sensory regime, the police attempts to regulate the perceptual field by excluding void, supplement and difference, imposing a consensus whereby what can be perceived and recognized in the public domain is conceived as unanimous and univocal.

Consensus can be enforced quite literally through forms of censorship, and as Panijel remarks in 1992, 'naturally the police seized it. They wanted to bury the event, and so they buried the film. They acted as if it didn't exist' (quoted in Brooks and Hayling, 1992). The 17th October 1961 massacre was subject to a double annihilation, what Rancière calls a '*vernichtung*': a 'reduction to nothing, annihilation, but also annihilation of that annihilation, the disappearance of its traces, the disappearance of its very name' (2014, 45). Questions of representation, of *histoire* as both fictional story and registered history, are therefore central to a conception the event. To cite the most compelling example: the number of dead is still unknown; various competing *histoires* surround this issue, and no definitive count has emerged. Police chief Maurice Papon cited 3 fatalities on the 18th October 1961; right-wing historian Jean-Paul Brunet cites 31, following police archives (1999); left-wing historian and journalist Jean-Luc Einaudi cites 200 or more, relying on witness testimony (1991); and finally, FLN records from the *bidonvilles* (shantytowns) record more than 550 missing persons (House and Macmaster, 2006).

While Rancière is clear that a film (or any artwork) in and of itself does not constitute politics, aesthetic techniques, as modes of shaping the perceptible and the sensible, can disrupt the logic of the police. He does not draw a clear distinction between aesthetics and

politics, because the practices that shape modes of perception are common to both spheres: ‘if there is a politics of aesthetics, it lies in the practices and modes of visibility of art that re-configure the fabric of sensory experience’ (2010, 140). To this end, *Octobre à Paris* combines photographs, video, oral testimonies and abstract New Wave-style sequences that use sound-image disjunctions, close-ups, disembodied voiceovers and abrupt cutting that I argue strive to confer a form of political visibility upon those victims whose stories were otherwise obscured. By the time the film was finally distributed and screened widely in 2011, the facts surrounding the massacre were publicly acknowledged, debated and accepted; although certain details remain impossible to confirm, such as the precise number of deaths, there is no longer any question of denying its gravity, scale, and reality. However, at the time when Panijel made *Octobre à Paris*, the very occurrence of the massacre was open to question, and in this sense, Panijel’s film marks a decisive intervention into a heavily regulated perceptual space.

In contrast, *Ici on noie les Algériens* is exactly what it was designed to be: a memorial act, a collation and a summation of the main events and instances that occurred before, during, and after the massacre, designed to appeal to a wide audience for the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the event. The title of the film refers to the by now well-known photograph by Jean Texier of a bank of the Seine, on which these words were inscribed in graffiti in the weeks following the massacre. Adi consistently draws on the imagery of the river, counterpointing shots of victim testimonies with images of the dark, churning, but empty waters of the Seine. The film constructs a linear narrative of the events of the night, presented in chronological order: the start of the protests, their bloody climax and the days following the massacre, while drawing on a mixture of interviews, archive footage, and photographs. Initially the interviews are primarily with women whose husbands were killed or deported during the massacre or in the subsequent days, and are primarily conducted in

Arabic. In this sense, Adi offers a new perspective on the massacre: as an Algerian and a woman, she has greater linguistic and cultural access to witnesses who might not otherwise testify. Two new strands of emphasis appear in the film that do not gain significant attention in many other representations: the deportation of hundreds of Algerian men, who were transported back to Algeria in the days following the massacre, and the women's protest, which took place on the 19th of October, and resulted in multiple incarcerations, some in psychiatric institutions. Although *Ici on noie les Algériens* contains some new footage, abstraction is limited, and overall the aesthetic techniques facilitate the spectator's comprehension of the material presented in testimonial and photographic form.

Therefore, while Adi's text can be described as a document, which in Rancière's terms denotes the 'text [...] intentionally written to make a memory official', while *Octobre à Paris* shuttles between the document and the monument, as 'that which preserves memory through its very being, that which speaks directly, through the fact that it was not intended to speak [...] the monument is the thing that talks without words [...] that bears a memory through the fact of having cared only for the present' (2014, 22). While the document is significant, intentional and visible, the monument can be insignificant, aleatory, and invisible. For Rancière, documentary film in general is the medium that allows for a play on these two forms of historical inscription: the camera can record the significant or the insignificant, but through its very recording, it creates historical importance. The banal universalization of significance brought about by the mechanical eye of the camera can be counteracted by aesthetic techniques that privilege the solitude of the individual voice. The loneliness of the voice emerges through a confrontation, conflation, superimposition, interplay, of words and images; 'if there is a visible hidden beneath the invisible, [...] it's the mise en scène of words, the moment of dialogue between the voice [...] and the silence of images that show the absence of what the words say, that will reveal it' (2014, 44).

Indeed, the confrontations and interactions between images and verbal testimonies form the locus of Boudjedra's criticisms of *Octobre à Paris*, and he draws a distinction between the film's aesthetic and political aims:

'Octobre à Paris is irrefutably a political act, even if we might have a few reservations about it as a work of art...The makers of the film [...] were concerned about the monotony of static shots, and so they fragmented the testimonies that make the whole film worthwhile. Therefore, the depiction of dialogue is not always satisfactory, because of the gap between some images of little significance, and the violence of the militants' discussions' (my translation, 1971, 39).

Yet while the importance of the testimonies is indisputable, I would argue that their juxtaposition with these 'images of little significance' rather increases their value. The film opens to a black screen and a solitary voice, and we hear a spoken testimony by an Algerian, Khader, that assures the audience that what they will see and hear is true, an declaration of authenticity that is doubly important, given the lack of visibility surrounding both the fact of the massacre and the socio-political marginalization of the Algerian victims in a broader cultural context. Such claims to authenticity and truth would be entirely out of place in *Ici on noie les Algériens*: an audience in 2011 is more than prepared to believe the victims testimonies. The rest of the opening sequence further draws out the unreliable links between visibility and knowledge, words and images: we see an anonymous woman standing on a pavement framed by a wall. She emits a scream, and the shot cuts to another woman screaming; - all we can see is a single shoe on the ground; no explanation is offered. He also creates montages, with wordless, rapid cuts and static images of either victims faces or scars

they carry as a result of the violence they experienced, accompanied by lone violins or drums. When a narrative is not sufficient, because the speaker cannot voice or the listener cannot hear, the corporeal marks left by violence can offer an alternative testimony, and they also lend the film a temporal and political urgency that other representations, made decades later, cannot.

Throughout the film, verbal testimonies are rendered in long takes with medium shots, a discreet yet relatively personal distance that denies the invasiveness of the close-up. Indeed, the medium shot captures perfectly the perspective on these subjects of both filmmaker and viewer. Both familiar and unfamiliar, close yet distant, the medium shot draws us into this world, and without attempting to create full emotional identification with the victims, where, by contrast, Adi frequently employs the close up in her rendering of victim's testimonies. Indeed, as Rancière writes, it was not that French people identified with the victims of the massacre, but rather that they *dis*-identified with the police who had committed it in their name: 'we could not identify with the Algerians who appeared as demonstrators within the French public space [...] we could, on the other hand, reject our identification with the State that had killed and removed them from all the statistics' (1998, 29). Testimonies in *Octobre à Paris* are frequently infiltrated by a non-diegetic sound track, which creeps in quietly before erupting in a cacophony of jarring violin chords, lone guitar strings and aggressive percussion. Often, these sounds lead to a transition of image: we move from testimonies to archive footage or images of the *bidonvilles*. The fictionality of the non-diegetic sound supplements the images of brutality on the screen, a technique that can be traced to Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard* (1955). Indeed, the slow tracking shots that capture the *bidonvilles*, devoid of human presence, and the panning shots and rapid zooms that accompany the montage of photographs from the night in question, further recall Resnais' treatment of the empty spaces of Auschwitz and the mobile camera that captures and

intensifies the horrific images from the camps. By moving from what are now some of the most recognizable photographs of the event, to grainy close-ups, Panijel picks out particular faces, to emphasize the individuals behind the anonymous and loaded signifier 'Algerian'.

Octobre à Paris not only dwells on physical scars, exterior traces and direct testimonies: it also captures prevailing mood in France at the time. This sense of the explicit dehumanization of the Algerian population is echoed in the images showing the *bidonvilles*, which contrast the luxury of central Parisian promenades with the shantytowns on the outskirts of the city. There are shots of children filling water from street pumps, wading through mud, constructed dwellings where nine people live in one room without cooking facilities; in another sequence, a baby is wheeled in a pram made out of a cardboard box. Panijel's focus on the poverty and social exclusion of the residents of the *bidonvilles* enacts the sense of confinement, containment, and estrangement from the outside world experienced by their inhabitants, a practical and physical exclusion that reiterates and perhaps enacts the historiographical and socio-political obfuscation of the massacre.

Thus, although most of the filmed testimonies take place in the form of a face-to-face interview, another sequence points to the limits of both visual and verbal representation. A disembodied voice tells us how a policeman beat him with a baton, and then threw him into the river where he remained underwater from midnight until 6am. As the man's voice describes how he climbed out of the water, the camera tracks slowly across an empty riverbank. The camera moves haltingly, at the pace of a freezing, uncertain human, before swinging abruptly to a sign hanging on a tree, which reads, 'Défense à déposer des ordures'. The implication is self-evident: one is forbidden from throwing garbage into the river, but not certain human beings. This sequence employs the fictional technique of the flashback: the spectator is shown proximate visions of a past event that the words describe. Yet the blank anonymity of the image points to the uncertainty surrounding the events of that night, the

impossibility of verifying precise times, locations, and victims: this could be any riverbank, any farmhouse, and beyond this, the film later suggests, any person.

Rancière references this technique, the disjunction between the words of a victim of violence and images of the place where it occurred, in describing the testimony of Simon Srebnik in Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985). The image in both cases can only partially reflect the narrative, supplementing it without fully explaining it. What is presented here, then, in the juxtaposition of empty space and verbal testimony, is not only the fact that the massacre occurred, but also its occlusion: 'the impossibility of adequate correspondence between the place and the speech and the very body of the witness goes to the heart of the elimination that is to be represented' (2009, 128). This space of uncertainty contrasts with representations of the police order that seek to draw clear distinctions between the real and the fictional, constructing a clear dividing line between the world of representations and that of facts. One of the characteristics of 'police approved art' is that it takes the real for granted; it pretends to draw a clear distinction between what is actual and self-evident, and what belongs to the world of fiction, opinions and ideas. For Rancière, the real, whether in art or politics, is a matter of construction: 'there is no 'real world' that functions as the outside of art. Instead, there is a multiplicity of folds in the sensory fabric of the common [...] the real is always a matter of construction' (2010, 148).

Therefore, it is not only a question of representing an event as real, or of using fictional techniques to emphasize the brutality or inhumanity of certain actions. It is rather necessary to create a sensible space in which this real counts as real, in which inhumanity can be perceived as such, of demonstrating 'the world in which [an] argument counts as an argument [...] for those who do not have the frame of reference enabling them to see it as one' (2010, 39). To this end, the film ends by drawing links between the 17th October 1961 massacre and the murder of 10 communist protesters by police at Charonne metro station on

February 8th 1962. Reaching beyond the specificity of the 17th October events, Panijel asks his audience to make connections between different instances of violence, and instigates a disruption in the police order that seeks to categorize, discount and segregate. Concluding circuitously with another black screen, the voice of Khader asks the spectator, ‘what more has to happen before we finally understand that everyone is a *youpin*, everyone is a *bicot* - everyone, absolutely everyone’. By citing racially derogatory terms for North African and Jewish people, Panijel reaches backwards to the memory of the Holocaust, thus presenting a humanistic appeal for a kind of common responsibility in the face of a violence which can potentially target anyone. Using sound-image disjunctions, non-linear editing and flashbacks, the film accords speech and visibility to the Algerian victims of the massacre, as well as gesturing towards the sensible frameworks in which this violence occurred.

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