INTRODUCTION:

Art during War and the Potentialities of Decolonial Representation

DÉCHIREMENT/LACERATION (cruel, painful).—This term helps accredit the notion of History’s irresponsibility. The state of war is masked under the noble garment of tragedy, as if the conflict were essentially Evil, and not a (remediable) evil. Colonization evaporates, engulfed in the halo of an impotent lament, which recognizes the misfortune in order to establish it only the more successfully.

GUERRE/WAR.—The goal is to deny the thing. For this, two means are available: either to name it as little as possible (most frequent procedure); or else to give it the meaning of its contrary (more cunning procedure, which is at the basis of almost all the mystifications of bourgeois discourse).


This is a book about war, although it will make no reference to specific battles, or really anything of much military concern. Instead, it is a book that proposes to consider the ways in which the experience of war motivates the production and justification of culture, as well as why we have been unable to see this effect. It focuses on the development and deployment of aesthetic practices and theories in France from the late 1940s throughout the 1960s, a place and a period about which we already assume we know a great deal. This assumption notwithstanding, the impetus to write about the specific intersections of spatial and visual culture during this period arises from a simple fact: whereas the field of modern European art history circumscribes these decades as being “post-war,” their reality was anything but, especially in France. Indeed, it was during these decades that France fought the longest wars of the twentieth century, wars that were, not coincidentally for the arguments I make in these
pages, intended to preserve a dwindling colonial empire. It follows that the art of this period is not “post-war” as we have come to understand it. Instead, it is an art that was created within, shaped by, and fully legible only in the historical context of an ongoing war—or wars, as the case may be. It is, therefore, art we need to understand as “art during-war.” In focusing on this distinction, this book aims to understand the specific and historical ways in which the art and visual culture of this time were situated as essential and elaborate components of a feedback loop that taught people to see not only the art made during their time but to understand the spaces—material and discursive—in which it circulated, or from whence it drew.¹ My object of study therefore includes not only art objects proper (and improper, as suggested below), but also the ways in which and the places where art itself was positioned to engage, if not also construct, the audience with or for whom it would attempt to generate meaning.

More than a question of simple semantics, this transition from “post” to “during” is significant not only for the comprehensiveness of how we understand the mid-twentieth century and the kinds of claims that were made by and for art at that time, but also for the ways in which we understand and see the construction of history more generally. Over the course of this book’s exposition, I suggest that the periodization of the twentieth century into two tidy segments divided by the “post” that precedes references to the Second World War as a generic “war” in the term “post-war” has had the unintended effect of naturalizing our historical remove from this moment to the point of calcification and of fixing the geographic certainty that places the former Western Europe at the center of the period’s cultural production. The consequences of such reification are far more significant than a matter of dating or charting aesthetic developments and transactions across the disruptive event that we have always understood war to be, and for good reasons.

As Roland Barthes reminds us in the passages cited above, the linguistic strategy that motivates—or motivated in 1957—the representation of war works either to deny it categorically or to obfuscate it by asserting it as its own opposite. In this way, war becomes “pacification,” and “déchirement,” the tearing apart of a people that it produces, is marked as a lamentable but unavoidable fact of history. When Barthes indicts this phenomenon as the operational logic behind most bourgeois mystifications, he offers us the tool to similarly undermine the equally “cunning” chronological inversion that has replaced the ongoing temporality of war, the “during,” and indeed the interminable present that Maurice Blanchot names in his own account of “writing the disaster,” with the retrospective finality of “post.”² Despite his caution, however, the historical categorization of “post-war” has managed to absorb and so naturalize once again the rhetoric—Barthes’s allusion is specifically to the state’s rhetoric—that meant to perform the ideological work of transforming a time of being “at” war into a time marked by being “after” war.

For art historians of the “post-war” period, interpreting art practices and works in exclusive reference to the major axis of the Second World War has meant, first and foremost, distancing ourselves and the objects of our study from other contemporane-
ous histories. Among these, this book is principally concerned with the crucial points of ideological intersection and overlap between the moment of French reconstruction after the Second World War, the consolidation of an emergent Europe, and, most significantly, decolonization and the wars fought to achieve it in much of Africa and Asia from the mid-1940s through the mid-1960s, or what I will hereafter refer to as the decades of decolonization. Having distanced ourselves and our objects from the complications of this history beyond its relationship to a state of war we presume to be “post” means that we have not fully seen the complete picture, either as it pertains to the interconnectedness of the episodes of state violence that marked this period or as it pertains to the debates about aesthetic practice and representation that forcibly accompanied them. While it is true that twentieth-century art history as a discipline has done little to acknowledge the claims of the colonized that emerged with urgent immediacy and with heightened visibility during these decades, it is also true that the field has been impaired in doing so because we have not seen the carefully constructed articulations of visuality that were developed to alternately frame and obscure these claims.³ In the long term, this situation has also meant that we have not always registered the impact that these articulations have had on charting visual practice, both in the geopolitical centers of empire and the cultures that developed there. But that point is beyond the parameters of this Introduction.

In 1957, when Barthes was writing his weekly columns for the magazine Les lettres nouvelles—essays that would later form his Mythologies—France was embroiled in a significant war, even if, at that time, the official parlance to which Barthes alludes did not name it as such.⁴ For the purpose of refocusing the lens through which we view the French mid-century from one preoccupied with the condition of being “after” to one attentive to the conditions of existence “during,” it is helpful to recall a few historical facts that similarly reframe the decades in question. In particular, it is instructive to remember that the uprisings that would eventually culminate in the 1954–1962 Algerian War of Independence actually began in 1945, precisely on 8 May, a date much better celebrated in Western histories as “Victory in Europe Day” (VE Day), as the surrender of Nazi Germany to the Allied Powers came to be called at the time. So, just as one moment of violence and genocide was ending and precisely as it was being celebrated with pageantry and parade, another episode in what the historian Abdelmajid Hannoum has recently coined a “violent modernity” was beginning. Rather than discontinuous and contained, the history of war in France during the decades of decolonization would prove ongoing and perpetual.⁵

The centrality of this continuity to Algerian representations of the Algerian War of Independence is underscored by the dramatic re-enactment of the Sétif uprisings in Rachid Bouchareb’s Hors la loi (Outside the Law, 2010). As Bouchareb’s film shows with the painstaking realism celebrated in so many docudramas and the artistic productions that mimic them, on 8 May 1945 several thousand Algerians, many of whom had fought alongside Allied troops and whom Bouchareb thus shows costumed in uniform, amassed in Sétif to join the VE Day celebrations that were taking place on
the streets of cities and towns across Algeria in much the same fashion as across metropolitan France. In Algeria, however, local colonial authorities only allowed Algerian participation in these celebrations on the condition that those assembled refrain from articulating any overt political platforms. When, instead, several people among the thousands assembled began chanting demands that the anti-colonialist leader, Messali Hadj, be freed from arrest in France, and calling for what Ferhat Abbas’s Manifeste du peuple algérien (1943) insisted be an “Algérie libre et indépendante,” the colonial police became nervous and eventually shot at a 26-year-old man carrying a green banner with a red star and a crescent moon, symbols of Algerian nationalism that would eventually constitute the Algerian flag.

Violence broke out between the protestors and the police, and spread quickly to produce a generalized clash between native Algerians and European settlers that left approximately one hundred European settlers dead. In response, General Charles de Gaulle, then provisional leader of the French government and its future president, authorized the army—including militias stationed in nearby Guelma, foreign legion troops, and reserves of Senegalese and Moroccans summoned from nearby Oran—to intervene and restore peace. The military assault subsequently launched against the people of Sétif and the surrounding towns was so complete and so overwhelming that, in February 2005, the French ambassador to Algeria, Hubert Colin de Verdière, was forced to acknowledge it as a “massacre” in which, according to historians’ estimates, approximately 8,000 Algerians died (although this number, according to some accounts, represents fewer than one quarter of the actual number of dead). The stakes surrounding what this history means in France today are suggested by the fact that when Bouchareb’s film premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010, riot police had to be called in to quell the protests against what some French audiences understood as the film’s biased and prejudicial account of the events in Sétif.

For the purposes at hand, then, what happened in Sétif underscores the fact that, at the same time Europe was celebrating its liberation from Fascism and the end of six years of devasting war, French forces were already being redeployed, this time against—and not in defense of—a population that was also ostensibly governed under France’s authority and flag, even if it was not ascribed the full benefits of the rights otherwise ascribed its citizenry. Shortly after the Sétif massacre, French forces would also find themselves fighting a war to maintain the far eastern reaches of their empire in the First Indochinese War, or what is sometimes called the French-Vietnamese War (1946–1954). The brutal defeat of the French by the Viet Minh at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954—significantly, for France and its militaries, the same year the Algerian War of Independence officially began—marked not the end of a single war so much as the consolidation of a pattern of intervention that the French would come to repeat again and again in the series of wars, conflicts, and skirmishes in which they engaged, in order to maintain an empire that, before the Second World War, had been second in size only to that of Great Britain.

The official declaration of the Algerians’ militarized demands for independence
would not come until 1 November 1954, even though these demands had been long in
the making. The Algerian War of Independence was eventually fought from 1954 un-
til 1962, not only between the French army and the Algerian Armée de libération na-
tionale (ALN) and Front de libération nationale (FLN), but also among factions of rival
Algerian nationalists in both France and Algeria, and eventually between the French
government and the organized paramilitary of right-wing opponents to Algerian in-
dependence led by French far-right Army generals who called themselves the Organisa-
tion de l’armée secrète (OAS). The scope of such a war can only be properly grasped
in terms of the many kinds of conflicts, armed and otherwise, that comprised it. Cul-
ture, as this book argues, figured chief among these conflicts. Along with its political
and historical significance, however, such a culture tends to wither in the histories
based on, if not actually constructed by the term “post-war.” Thus, this book turns to
the possibilities of how this culture might have been seen otherwise in order to inves-
tigate how we might better re-see it now.

In this introductory chapter, I focus on the immediate origins of the Algerian
War of Independence, not because I want to suggest that they were the most impor-
tant events of the thirty-year period under analysis in this book (although for some
this is certainly the case). Rather, the Algerian War of Independence is of signal im-
portance for this study of decades previously thought to be “post-war” because it es-
tablishes the contest between the French state as a false guarantor of rights and the
significance of the claims made by those anxious to achieve their rights as sovereign
political subjects, in excess of the statist provisions that have been so central to analy-
ses of subalternity within colonial modernity. The Algerian War of Independence is
also pivotal as a litmus test for the state’s imposition of the law as a means to deny—
rather than ensure—such claims, and therefore also a key moment in the essential
turn to extra-juridical means to implement and develop political invisibility. For the
story that transpires during the decades of decolonization analyzed here, the art they
occasioned, and how this art was deeply if inversely tied to debates about political
representation, it is critical that these extra-juridical means often focused on the in-
stitutions that comprised the public sphere and the sites that comprised urban pub-
lic space.

Indeed, it was on 3 April 1955, almost a year after the declaration of Algerian in-
dependence by the FLN, that the French National Assembly voted to approve a law
that would allow for the declaration of a “state of emergency.” This law allowed the
government to censor or otherwise limit and control all the institutions of the public
sphere, including the press, and also curtail or restrict public assembly. Such measures
were further augmented by the decree of “Special Powers” in 1956, which not only
enabled greater restriction of expression, but also prepared for the violation of hu-
man rights, such that internment camps and torture centers became logical and legal
tools of the French wars to maintain the empire, just as they had been such impor-
tant components of the National Revolution in Nazi Germany. Ultimately and rather
famously, factions of the French military attempted a coup in Algiers on 13 May
1958, in response to what many in the Army (and the settler populations with whom they were increasingly aligned) perceived as the metropole’s vacillation regarding the maintenance of the Algerian territories as an integral component of France’s geopolitical territory. This failed coup led to the collapse of the metropolitan government and, with it, the Fourth Republic. For France, such a collapse triggered an important shift in the configuration of governmental responsibilities of republicanism vis-à-vis the populations that the state was meant to “represent” and whose interests it was meant to serve. Along with this transformation, which was most immediately visible in the enhanced authority assigned to the president as elected sovereign, the problem of representing the past and the present as a means to envision and enact a future became central components of reestablishing French hegemony. Culture, in turn, would become a primary locus of this effort, as well.

This book focuses on the site where these two mobilizations of culture as contestatory device and culture as normalizing control meet—literally, in the physical space of Paris. It does so in order to recontextualize and thus better understand a range of French visual practices during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s in light of the challenges that decolonization wrought on theories of representation, both political and pictorial, and the tacit implications that decolonization would have for official as well as unsanctioned French remembrances of the recent past, public. While decolonization and colonial remembrance are significantly opposite in their intent, it might nonetheless be said that they share a significant structural similarity at their core; indeed, each is organized around the ambition to shape and determine (at least in the short run) a national public. In this instance, the decolonizing processes that were set in motion by the events in Sétif and culminated in the Algerian War of Independence necessitated novel regimes of visuality to negotiate and influence the new modalities of public belonging that the war introduced. This was especially true in the way these modalities would be articulated in regard to the consolidation of memories surrounding the recent experience of the Second World War. By asserting the centrality that the Algerian War of Independence had on visual culture and the public experiences that it would enable within the boundaries of metropolitan France, my analysis here intends to highlight the significance of subaltern political agendas on establishing modern French visual and spatial culture. It does so with an eye to looking both forward and backward, so that we see the importance of these agendas in the early moments of decolonization as well as in the decades after independence had been achieved in Algeria (and in many other former colonies). This expanded history also means keeping the experiences of the 1940s—war, genocide, and occupation chief among them—in view as they explicitly impacted how historical experience would come to be represented in later decades. These experiences also reflected how definitions of national belonging would be forcefully articulated in relation to a long history of French universalist republicanism, understood at the time as having been sullied first (or worse, only) by the ideological interruption of the Vichy regime, when the French government colluded with the German occupation of their own country.

In the context of the arguments that follow, and in light of this expanded histori-
cal view of what we might call the “long 1950s,” I should clarify that in the above allusion to “subaltern political agendas,” I mean to invoke both those of the colonized populations of French empire—in this case mostly Algerians—as well as those among the French populace who were equally interpellated and shaped by a dominant French cultural project that attempted to represent their experience on their behalf. My use of the term “subaltern” therefore adheres to its use by Ranajit Guha in his essay, “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.” Guha uses the term to designate the broadest category of people who are defined in distinction to, but not dependent upon, the official governmental, economic, and juridical authority ascribed to the “elite.” For Guha, one of the most important aspects of this term is that it establishes a category that is relational and always constructed in negotiation with shifting platforms of power. Within the narrative that this book charts, therefore, the Ashkenazi Jews living in Paris were certainly subaltern in their relationship to the state’s articulation of public memory in the mid-1940s, even though they also maintained the colonial authority of elites in relation to other populations, and even as their experiences have now come to occupy an emphatically central place in dominant historical (and art-historical) narratives. Because, however, the principal concern of this book is with representation—both political and pictorial, so to speak—it also bears emphasizing that my investments in the political agendas of the subaltern classes is not that of a historian or even of a sociologist, although I draw on work in both areas of expertise. My aim, nonetheless, is not to expose or identify the production of specific identitarian agencies heretofore unseen.

Rather, following important advances made by Dipesh Chakrabarty and more recently by Achille Mbembe, I hope to lay the groundwork necessary to explain how such elisions of subaltern agendas themselves have been naturalized within histories of modernity and the disciplinary strictures upon which they depend. “Provincializing France,” as Mbembe and Chakrabarty would have it, means seeing it again: seeing it as it was and as it labored to picture itself during a history we have otherwise allowed to become myth—according to the logic of Barthes’s analysis—as well as seeing it with or alongside the history of its colonial past and in concert with the place of its colonial interventions. As Chakrabarty inveighs, such a project means writing a “history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity.”

While popular and scholarly narratives of modern art, modern aesthetics, modern literature, and even modern urbanism have long taken France and its capital as their central example—with good reason, given the ideological articulation of French state-craft around the universalist ideals about representability so valorized by perceptions of modern subjectivity—my interests in returning to Paris during this period diverge significantly from those around which these narratives have largely been structured over the past fifty years. Following Chakrabarty’s challenge to “make visible” the collusions of the cultural theories we invent and in deference to the material at hand,
I should emphasize that this study has no interest in dislodging French cultural production from the central position it enjoys in the historiography of modernity. Rather, it intends, as Mbembe instructs, reimagining this history as transnational, as equally rooted in the experiences of the colonies as it is in those of the metropole. Doing so means redefining what France means in order to expand the purviews of how we understand the modern that issues from it without compromising the complex realities of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism that sometimes render recent models of “alternative” modernities somewhat utopian. Indeed, the integrity of the French nation as equivalent to the “hexagon” that is defined by its physical borders has already been persistently challenged by the interests and claims articulated by those excluded from the categories of belonging that France, like other nation-states, has developed in accordance with the self-interest of modern democracy and its adherence to the contradictory principles of collective consensus and liberal individualism. Some of those challenges make my point: that the history of French art and visual culture has also always been the history of Algerian art and visual culture.

Here, too, a second clarification is helpful and important, because I do not propose to rewrite French art as Algerian art. While this might be an interesting project, it actually runs counter to the methodological stakes of the arguments I am making here, which focus instead on the complex relationship between national productions and thus on the forces that come to negotiate, represent, and constitute such cultural nationalisms. These, in part, are what Mbembe suggests are always in flux when he insists we now recognize that “every nation is now transnational and diasporic. The crucible in which the nation is being forged is as much outside its territorial borders as inside. The distant, the elsewhere, and the here-at-home meet.”¹³ While the project of creating a more inclusive canon of modernism by incorporating art made by Algerians alongside their European counterparts exceeds my study, it is certainly work that other scholars can and should undertake. This is also true of recuperating the women who, as artists and activists, labored alongside the men described here. What this book intends to do, in place of such recuperative or corrective projects, is to understand France through the fundamental tears and contradictions at the heart of empire, just as it proposes to understand culture, regardless of whether it is attributed to an “Algerian” maker or a “French” one, as also always subject to the transnational conditions of the subjects who produce it and those who are produced by it. As much as France is the target of this book’s analysis, then, so too is the model of culture that has been used to buttress the very model of the nation-state’s representation of itself that has allowed us to imagine something like a hexagonal France in the first place.

In the chapters that follow, I contend that the visibility and invisibility of various populations, subaltern or otherwise—French, Algerian, pied-noir, Jewish—within the geopolitical entities formed and re-formed by the shifting borders and allegiances forged after the end of the Second World War, indeed “after Sétif,” were the result of actions and agents that, until now, we have not been able to see within the purview
of art and visual cultural analyses of the period. These actions cannot be dislodged from their ideological embeddedness in the Europeanization that began in earnest with the establishment of the European Common Market, and in response to the assertion of American military and moral hegemony against the threat of global communism. But it was also during this time that Western nations began to increase the stakes of their engagement in the conflicts regarding those territories that had been divvied up after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, thereby establishing the new parameters of an emergent global politics concentrated on the particularity of a given place. Of particular interest to this study is how these historical elements influenced the articulation of the very same aesthetic and urban models that we have since come to naturalize and rationalize as self-evidently modern. The impact that such simultaneously temporal and spatial contests for self-representation had on the production of cultural meaning cannot be underestimated. And, in order to understand them more fully, we need to historicize what has long motivated the very impulse not to acknowledge them as significant. For art historians, taking up this double perspective allows us to focus on global histories that rehistoricize and recontextualize—that is, fundamentally reinterpret—the assumptions about abstraction and figuration, spectacle and reality, speech and text, politics and ethics that pervade the disciplinary preoccupation with this period.

To begin with the most basic question: what were the mechanics by which those unacknowledged within ascendant discursive enterprises effected images of themselves or otherwise attempted to represent their own experience? In accessing what the political theorist Hannah Arendt would generalize as the “public space of appearance”—and which she, like the other figures in this book’s analysis, abandons to the world of men—such subjects challenged contemporaneous theorizations of the public sphere as an enlightened space of rational, language-based exchange, and thereby also resisted the imperial logics generated through that same sphere.¹⁴ But, how did they do so, and in what forms? Another question might be: who could constitute a public or a publicly recognized subject within the short-lived Fourth Republic, or the Fifth, which followed it? For whom did they do so? In what kind of space and in what kind of temporality? To answer these questions, the chapters of this book trace an arc from the administrative control of urban (and ostensibly public) space to its reoccupation by those subjects positioned by the statist apparatus as “invisible.” In so doing, this book demarcates how both official and invisible modes of occupation drew upon the past even as they formulated alternative projections of the future.

To some degree, this means challenging the kinds of visual production that have entered the canonical understanding of the period with those that have not, in order to understand the processes that the former privilege. Thus, while this is a book about art, it deliberately understands that term broadly, considering work made in a variety of media, and by a host of differently schooled players. In order to avoid reinforcing the hierarchical division between advanced artistic practice and popular experiences and practices throughout the mid-twentieth century, the phrase “decolonizing art,”
which I use throughout this book, deliberately plays on the double valence of the word “decolonizing.” Here it is intended in both its adjectival form, wherein the art is part and parcel of the historical contest fought over decolonization, and as a verb, wherein the action being named shifts to our own attempts to “decolonize” the field of art and its history in accordance with efforts to differently imagine alternative representational possibilities. In what follows, therefore, I endeavor to shift the ascription of agency away from individual artists and intellectuals and instead toward communities and crowds, as is consistent with my claim that decolonization was the motivating and animating factor of these practices. This means exploring and using two archives, the one official, the other popular and ephemeral, and doing so in ways that mine the contradictions between the two as sources of productive re-imaginings.

This book’s expanded disciplinary reach is thus not without its own tactical ambition. To place a politics of cultural memory outside the dominant institutions of the archive or the museum (and beyond the artifacts and art objects that fill them) suggests new genealogies for the visual practices of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The goal here lies not simply in indicating that the history and the voices of the subaltern have been occluded in the visual histories of a particular period, but rather that such silencing actually constitutes our historically received concept of the visual. To attempt to reawaken those voices or to prepare for that reawakening is to revise and renew the visual as a sensorial process, one that is linked to the processes of speech and sound and their duration in space, and so a constituent component of experience and its realization. Of necessity, then, this book investigates the points at which theories of political representation crossed paths with theories and models of aesthetic representation. Thus, visual—and to a lesser degree, aural—production is treated here within the context of contemporaneous art criticism, but also in concrete relationship to the broader debates about citizenship and representational democracy that decolonization occasioned. In these contexts, it should be emphasized that neither my skills nor my interests are those of a historian per se. In the pages that follow I am less interested in correcting the historical record or indeed replacing one written around French names with another written around those of Algerians or other subalterns. Rather, I am interested in analyzing the processes by which these debates about belonging and the nation have been—and continue to be—represented, especially insofar as these representations turn on non-representation or invisibility.

From a Nation Torn is written in three parts, which roughly follow a chronology from the mid-1940s through the end of the Algerian War of Independence in 1962, with a brief, concluding consideration of the legacy left by these events and a nod to how we might model a practice of decolonial looking in the present.¹⁵ In addition to their chronological order, the three parts of this book correspond to three different representational modalities—space, language, and image—and to the ways in which each modality is both contingent upon and constitutive of experience. At the same time, each part of the book negotiates the impossibility of locating a precise or exact correspondence between representation and experience in a world predicated
exclusively on visual engagement. That is to say, each chapter’s analysis turns on understanding the shifting historical reasons why the visual cannot be understood without recourse to other cultural and political realms that interact with it. With that in mind, the first part of the book considers how urban space is generated according to the logic of pictorial aestheticization; the second considers avant-garde techniques squarely in dialogue with the semiotic and acoustic properties of language, in its filmic, literary, and spoken iterations; and the third considers the photographic image that haunts both of these first two categories.

Part I, “Fragments and Facades: André Malraux and the Image of the Past as the Future of the Present,” grounds the book’s assessment of public experience in an analysis of the changing physical spaces of Paris throughout the decades under consideration. This I understand as quite literally setting the stage for the possibilities of imagining or picturing public participation on both the national and the individual level that animate the next two parts of the book. In this section of the book, I theorize what it would mean to consider the actual parameters of such participation as having been determined in advance by urban models developed in Paris during the Vichy period (1940 to 1944) as well as in the North African capitals that had been built or rebuilt according to the standards of French imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The first chapter, “Fragments; or, The Ends of Photography,” examines the mid-century ambitions to “restore” central Paris that were articulated by André Malraux, France’s first minister of culture (1959–1969). I understand these ambitions through the lens of the decontextualized, photography-based aesthetic models that Malraux cultivated in the obsessive revisions to which he put his seminal treatise Les voix du silence, from 1937–1951.

Refuting standard readings of Malraux’s written work as simply an exemplum of high-modernist method or as an exclusive discourse about the institutions of the museum and/or photography, this chapter defines instead what I call Malraux’s “amnesiac aesthetics.” Underlying this aesthetic and the urbanisms it would eventually enable when Malraux would become France’s first minister of culture (1959–1969) is a model of historical experience that simultaneously refutes both the possibility of knowledge about the past and cognizance of the conditions of the present. I argue that such a model is deeply implicated in the crises of the nation that were occasioned by the end of the Second World War and beginning of the Algerian War of Independence. While Malraux was presented as a preservationist, his urban visions actually extended his radically decontextualized aesthetics to the real space of the city as it was used and experienced by inhabitants of all backgrounds, but particularly those who could be identified as foreign. This created what I call a “space of silence,” which was profoundly rooted in Malraux’s understanding of both the semiotic spacing of the museum and the fictional capacities of the photographic apparatus, the device upon which his entire aesthetic model depends. In this attention to fiction and the semiotics that sustain it, the first chapter also frames how the succeeding chapters treat language—in both its sonic and its visual properties—within the space of the city.
Finally, it frames the ways in which the photographic image and the near-incessant re-theorizations of its function complement and sometimes complicate the way language is discussed in the rest of the book.

By redefining large swaths of urban space as subject to the conservation principles previously ascribed to monumental architectural patrimony, Malraux’s urban vision placed the city of Paris at the core of debates regarding the French national imaginary and its relationship to the long durée of the past. In fact, Malraux’s model did so at precisely the same moment that the French nation was being transformed by the Algerian War of Independence. These considerations constitute the material focus of chapter 2, “Façades; or, The Space of Silence.” Here, I suggest that Malraux’s “amnesiac aesthetics” inscribed onto the restoration of central parts of Paris the same effort to render invisible that would characterize the state’s response to the recent history of anti-imperial opposition and did so in order that the city might symbolically elide the visible evidence of a failed colonial project, both materially and in terms of the various populations that inhabited the restored areas. In so doing, the silence that Malraux hoped to engender through an aesthetic model would come to speak volumes.

Part II of this book, “Between Resistance and Refusal: The Language of Art and Its Publics,” continues to assess the relationships between the 1940s and the early 1960s—that is to say, between the end of the Second World War (and the Holocaust, which so often stands as a synecdoche for the longer war) and the official end of the Algerian War of Independence in 1962. In this case, however, rather than focus on the official discourse of governmental and bureaucratic interventions (even as mediated by aesthetic theories), the discussion here focuses on the specific optic of the so-called advanced art practices that explicitly engaged with a legacy of avant-garde production even as they attempted—and often failed—to subvert the institutional and geographic parameters upon which this history had been founded. In particular, chapter 3, “Sonic Youth, Sonic Space: Isidore Isou and the Lettrist Acoustics of De-territorialization,” establishes the roots of the representational crises regarding vision, language, and the city in the processes of decolonization that had begun in the late 1940s, but which were often occluded by discourse meant to universalize the experience of the Shoah as the defining catastrophe of modern history and as the grounds of eventual European consolidation. In this chapter, I analyze the multimedia work—including poetry, film, and performance—produced by a group of artists affiliated with the Paris-based movement known as Lettrism. The work of Isidore Isou, a Jewish exile from Romania (where he had survived the extermination camps to the East) and other Lettrists in Paris attempted to create a “spatialized” language that they hoped would circumvent traditional language’s embeddedness in routine, everyday perception and its calcification as the result of the consolidation of national boundaries throughout the first half of the twentieth century. I argue that it was the Lettrists’ hope that this reconceptualization would engender new tools of discourse and, in so doing, enable communication and representation beyond the limitations of spaces demarcated by national language. In this, they aimed to foment a deterritorialized
language based on the shared experience of sonic immersion and immediacy. Similar efforts are addressed in relationship to Isou’s film, *Traité de bave et d’éternité* (Treatise on Drool and Eternity, 1952), which aspired to inscribe representations of war into a site of presumptive peace.

By 1961, Paris would become the literal site of violence that Isou’s representational gambits had tried to remind viewers it was, either metaphorically or by association. Chapter 4 thus further examines urban articulation and expression within this context, taking a more acute focus on the Algerian War of Independence as it came to be represented in the metropolitan capital. While it maintains the focus on both the subject and the object conjured by the same broadly conceived aesthetic registers of Isou’s Lettrism, the fourth chapter, “La France déchirée: The Politics of Representation and the Spaces In-Between,” turns to a more strictly conventional art practice. It looks at décollage, a process by which an artwork is created by tearing pieces away, rather than adding them on. This pictorial innovation was created in 1949 by Raymond Hains and Jacques Villeglé when they mounted an accumulation of vandalized street posters onto canvas. This chapter takes particular focus on *La France déchirée* (Torn Apart France), a 1961 exhibition of Hains’s and Villeglé’s décollage that meant to make reference to the political divisions then tearing at the nation as a result of the wars of independence in Indochina and Algeria. Here, I explicitly examine the particular problems of representing, experiencing, and ultimately contesting what contemporary political speech and popular discourse tried to dismiss as a non-war. This leads me to investigate the possibility of a viable public sphere and representational politics as they were constructed in two basic arenas: 1) the art objects produced by the décollagistes; and 2) the challenge that décollage presented to the semi-private space of the gallery. I argue that Hains’s and Villeglé’s 1961 installation of décollages—culled from political posters torn by Parisian passersby during the accelerated history of decolonization with which this book is concerned—engages in a critique of both institutional space and universalist, participatory democracy, pointedly helping us to see the limitations of both as they were experienced during the period under discussion. Moreover, the model of aesthetic practice generated by their art leads to a consideration of how French leftists could and did use aesthetic practices to generate spaces of appearance in which the claims of citizens upon the nation-state and its vessels might be better heard or seen. Such an analysis forces an explicit comparison with the techniques and tactics understood as viable means of articulating an “engaged” art during the historical period of the French Resistance, which I do in order to demonstrate how these tactics are not as historically stable as we have come to understand them in the overarching periodization of a mythic “post-war” production. It also provides an opportunity to further trace the impact that photography would continue to have on aesthetic thinking throughout the period, a leitmotif that runs through the book.

The third and final part of the book, “Reidentifications: Seeing Citizens Being Seen,” turns to the models of seeing and listening generated by those subjects that
implicitly, and at times explicitly, give rise to and inform the practices studied in the first four chapters, emphasizing how it is incumbent upon viewers themselves to learn to see these practices as such. To this end, chapter 5, “The Eye of History: Photojournalism, Protest, and the Manifestation of 17 October 1961,” returns the reader to the public space of the street and to the stakes of Malraux’s “aesthetics of amnesia.” This chapter considers a manifestation (a peaceful demonstration) in 1961 by tens of thousands of Algerians in the city of Paris against a curfew imposed by the prefect of police, Maurice Papon.¹⁶ The photographic capture of the brutal suppression that marked the French response to this Algerian demonstration allows me to position it as a visual cultural event on the same order as any other mode of representation, and in specific dialogue with the image of the city—authored, so to speak, by such efforts to “silence” and to scotomize as suggested by Malraux’s revisionist urbanism. Rather than dwell on the question of whether these images do or do not objectify or appropriate the experience of the subjects they depict, and rather than celebrate them as photographs “taken” by authorial agents, I read them as an effort to make room for an Algerian subjectivity within something other than the silent space otherwise allotted to them. The model of photographic possibility that I develop here encourages a reconsideration of the politics of picturing in a period largely understood to be coincident with the spectacularization of everyday life and which, as such, is associated with a presumed need to denigrate the claims of certain genres of photographic practice. In brief, this tendency marks the transition between so-called modern and post-modern aesthetics, both of which, I want to underscore in this book, result in the same visual aporias, precisely because they repeat the same incapacity to see the colonial conditions at their core.

The book’s final chapter presents a retrospective glance at these aesthetic dynamics as mapped across the first five chapters and as newly parsed in more recent visual practices. This chapter focuses on the film Caché (Hidden, 2005), directed by Michael Haneke, analyzing it as a series of tableaux generated by an image-maker, rather than as a narrative made by a filmmaker. This last chapter also examines a twelve-minute digital video, Europa 2005–27 octobre (2006), directed by Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub, who drew on the tradition of the cinétracts circulated as models of leftist agitation in the 1960s. The importance of the dialogue staged by these two works, each of which tells us how to look at contemporary experience as history, is triangulated with an analysis of The Algerian Annex, by Dennis Adams, as it was installed at the Musée d’art moderne de la Ville de Paris in 1989. This analysis is underscored from the point of view of 2005, which I argue was a momentous year in the history of the “postcolony” as Mbembe has defined it, which is to say not at all as a place “after” or free from the effects of colonization.¹⁷ It was in 2005, after all, that the French government responded to urban insurrections that began just outside of Paris by issuing a state of emergency in accordance with laws first developed to contain colonial dissent. In this retrospective view, “Looking Past the State of Emergency” serves as a coda to the questions posed throughout the book about representation and visibility by pro-
posing a model of reception based on a different articulation of the ethics of seeing, looking, and watching. It also brings the book’s arguments about the period of de-
colonization to bear on France’s contemporary problems of integrating, symbolically
and literally, ethnic and racial others within the national public today. Such integra-
tions, I suggest, are in accord with what we have learned to see as the claims made on
behalf of a decolonized visibility.

REMEMBERING THE PRESENT
In telling this story, and indeed in telling the many stories from which it is formed,
this book aims to respond to the galvanizing challenge presented by the art histo-
rian David Joselit: that we reimagine our ambition in writing art history as one orga-
nized toward the imperative of writing something like a work of political science.¹⁸
As I understand it, this means reading art objects and the visualities they engender
as primary sites of theorization and analysis, rather than as secondary or tertiary
epiphenomena. It also means understanding them as essential sites of conflict and
evaluation. More than just a question of rhetoric, to “decolonize art,” as this project
proposes, is to generate new platforms from which to understand, critique, and theo-
rize the very same image culture(s) that we presume we know so well. It also demands
that we reimagine the roles that diverse visual vocabularies play in enacting public
participation, a core component of political theory and practice.

As opportunities to figure and refigure public modalities of belonging and partici-
pation, the aesthetic practices I examine were not merely secondary effects. Rather,
they were a primary ground upon which the conditions of coloniality and postcolo-
niality were imagined and contested. Indeed, through the various regimes of the spa-
tial, the linguistic, the sonic, and the visual—and through the resulting politics of
publicness they all engendered or refused—colonizer and colonized fought a pitched
battle. The stakes of this battle, I argue, were nothing less than the continuing ascen-
dancy of colonialism or the incipient decolonization of a subaltern multitude. By
repositioning the stakes of achieving visibility—or what we might think of as percep-
tibility—in this way, this book disengages the phenomenon of being seen from the
myopic stronghold that Guy Debord’s construction of “the spectacle” as monocural
and unidirectional has long had over the period’s analysis. Instead, this book spatial-
izes and temporalizes the phenomenon of being seen, insisting upon its multiple and
material vantage points as sites of engaged political practice.

Most of this book’s writing has been nearly coincident with the situation that
some have referred to as “the war on terror,” and which others have decried as a “per-
manent” or “perpetual” war.¹⁹ The imperative to understand my work as a reader of
aesthetic objects in relationship to this war—as informed by the fact that I have lived
through and during it—has motivated the work and the analysis I present here. Over
the course of the past many years that I have studied materials from the 1950s and
1960s, I have seen there signs of the present that struck me simultaneously as all too
familiar and yet all too unthinkable, even as I continued to hear their echo in news
from Iraq or Afghanistan on my radio or see their doubles in the photographs, for example, issuing from Abu Ghraib that arrived with such frequency into my inbox. In light of the urgencies of our own moment, it has become increasingly impossible, not to mention perhaps unethical, not to acknowledge what it was that I, trained as a proper modernist, had learned not to see, or worse, learned to deliberately ignore in this earlier period. In this book, therefore, I attempt to reverse the effects of that blindness; to imagine that making, receiving, arguing, presenting, and postulating during history means maintaining more than simply a sense of being contemporary to, but instead, of being contemporary with, and engaging in. As the philosopher and literary theorist Maurice Blanchot, who figures so prominently in this book, wrote in a retrospective glance toward his own position in the period of history analyzed here:

We are on the edge of disaster without being able to situate it in the future: it is rather always already past, and yet we are on the edge or under the threat, all formulations which would imply the future—that which is yet to come—if the disaster were not that which does not come, that which has put a stop to every arrival. To think the disaster (if this is possible, and it is not possible inasmuch as we suspect that the disaster is thought) is to have no longer any future in which to think it.

It is time to see beyond the disaster. Let us instead look at what the disaster, such as it has been thought, did not see.