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# Terrorism, Media, Liberation



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## The Battle of Algiers: Colonial Struggle and Collective Allegiance

Algeria has become a second Haiti.

Can we still be moved by the sufferings of one young girl?

—Simone de Beauvoir and Gisele Halimi<sup>1</sup>

Even during the shooting of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (*La battaglia di Algeria*, Algeria-Italy, 1966), sectors of the French public were campaigning for the banning of the film, on account of its offensively "biased" version of the colonial struggle in Algeria, a struggle which, in constitutional terms, had ended only four years previously in 1962. This reaction proves that it is possible to produce a narrative that undermines the myths and topoi of "colonialist discourse," if by that we mean a system of representation that upholds and justifies the colonizing culture's actions, and this is possible not only for the colonized. The fact that the film was shot in Algiers on the very ground that the battle was fought, however, using a cast largely composed of ordinary Algerians (i.e., nonactors), including a member of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) reenacting his role in the revolution, guarantees no absolute truth, no irreducible kernel beneath all mediations. As Mallek Alloula's analysis of colonial postcards from Algeria demonstrates, it is possible in a colonial situation to induct members of the indigenous population into a system of representation that has little to do with their social reality.<sup>2</sup> We might add that a similar process of "appropriation" is possible in the neocolonial context in which *The Battle of Algiers* was produced: the leading actor in the film, Brahim Haggiag, was a farmer who worked on the film in part to raise money for farming equipment.

Of course, Haggiag's motives may well have been more multiple and complex, as complex as the provenance of the film. Conceived by former FLN member Saadi Yacef, the script was developed by Pontecorvo and fellow Italian Franco Olinas, while the film was co-produced by Italian and Algerian film companies, was supported by the Algerian government, and was among the first feature films

made in independent Algeria. The mixed inheritance—or cultural hybridity—of the film is evident in many of its features: the rhythm of the final sequence, for example, was conceived by Pontecorvo in terms of ballet (a European art form), but was ultimately set to the pulse of the *baba-salem* (an African percussion instrument). This complex of factors suggests that while the film certainly draws extensively on various Western traditions of representation, and relied in many respects on European resources and institutions (e.g., festivals), it would be a mistake to reduce the film to the articulation of a single "discourse." As I will argue in a little more detail later in this essay, the supposed purity of any cultural tradition or "discourse" is breached by both cross-cultural and hypercultural factors. On the one hand, distinct cultures arise out of and are constrained by the presence of certain human constants. On the other hand, globalization gives rise to ever greater cultural interpenetration and hybridization (though of course exchange between cultures rarely happens on an equal footing).

Given, then, that the film is an attempt to rewrite the colonial, Orientalist narrative—in which the native, colonized culture is represented as deprived and violent, in need of the civilizing hand of the colonizer—to what other forms does it appeal, in order to reshape itself?<sup>3</sup> How does the film address itself in part to a colonial audience without restating the self-justifications of colonial discourse? The film's institutional context is that of the European art film, a tradition associated with the development of modernist narrative strategies. Pontecorvo's earlier work had clearly been influenced by the neorealism of Rossellini. The legacy of neorealism, evident in the detailed mise-en-scène of the film and especially in its virtuoso mimicking of newsreel cinematography, probably strikes most viewers first.<sup>4</sup>

But like other early Algerian features, such as *Assifat al-Aouraz* (*Wind of the Aurès*) (Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina, Algeria, 1965), *The Battle of Algiers* is a narrative of revolution for which equally significant antecedents lie in the "countertradition" of the Soviet revolutionary films of the 1920s, such as *October* (Sergei Eisenstein, USSR, 1928), *The General Line* (Sergei Eisenstein, USSR, 1929), *The End of St. Petersburg* (V. I. Pudovkin, USSR, 1927), and *Arsenal* (Alexander Dovzhenko, USSR, 1929). Like these films, *The Battle of Algiers* was supported by a postrevolutionary government as a celebration and commemoration of revolution and the attainment of nationhood. Moreover, in the Soviet films, as in *The Battle of Algiers*, we find a fundamental revision of what we can loosely call the Western narrative of revolution, at the heart of which lies the problem of the individual character. Our legends and fairy tales are filled with stories of "revolution" in which charismatic individuals are responsible for the outcome. The problem for the Soviet filmmakers was to produce narratives of revolution in which causality was seen as collective rather than individual, in accordance with Bolshevik doctrine. Similarly, Pontecorvo's avowed intention in *The Battle of Algiers* was to produce a narrative that could bring us to feel an allegiance with an entire

<sup>1</sup>Originally appeared in *Iris: A Journal of Theory on Image and Sound*, no. 24 (1997), 105–124. Reprinted by permission of the author and the Institute for Cinema and Culture at the University of Iowa.

people, not just with a charismatic leader. Pontecorvo's methods in this regard will be the main concern of this essay.<sup>5</sup>

The quotation from Simone de Beauvoir and Giséle Halimi at the head of this essay, taken from another text concerned with the Algerian revolution, impinges directly on the problem of the individual character and emotional response. De Beauvoir and Halimi's comment is perhaps a little disingenuous, for it is the very strategy of their book on the torture of an Algerian woman to move the audience through a personalized, individual narrative. Eschewing such a strategy, Pontecorvo's problem was to produce a narrative that did not elevate any single figure into the role of supreme causal agent or victim in this manner, while still allowing an emotional avenue into the narrative through an individual or individuals. The filmmaker's solution belies the argument that the "sole novelty" of *The Battle of Algiers*, relative to mainstream narrative movies, is its political subject matter.

The Soviet films of revolution from the 1920s depend upon two basic structural variations: *the structure of confrontation* and *the structure of apprenticeship*.<sup>7</sup> In the former, a steadfast character already convinced of the correctness of the revolutionary movement struggles to persuade others of his conviction. In the latter, an uncommitted character undergoes an experience that brings the character to such a commitment. Soviet literary theorists of the 1920s argued for three types of protagonist, who fit with these two structures in different ways.<sup>8</sup> The most familiar to a Western European audience is the *positive hero*, a figure defined entirely by his commitment to the revolutionary struggle and who has no existence outside it.<sup>9</sup> Socialist realist narratives revolve around such characters; hence positive heroes are usually found within the confrontational structure. The second type is the *living man*, a figure who is essentially committed to the struggle, but whose devotion is complicated by psychological factors (like sexual desire) for which Bolshevik doctrine does not account. For obvious reasons, such a character tends to be connected with the apprenticeship structure. The third type is the *mass hero*, as described by Sergei Eisenstein in the following manner:

We brought collective and mass action to the screen, in contrast to individualism and the "triangle" drama of bourgeois cinema. Discarding the individualist conception of the bourgeois hero, OIU films of this period made an abrupt deviation—insisting on an understanding of the mass as hero.<sup>10</sup>

The narrative of *The Battle of Algiers* does not fit neatly into any of these categories, in part because these theoretical elaborations are drawn from the particular context of Soviet revolutionary culture. Nevertheless, they will be useful in considering the ways in which Pontecorvo's film constructs its own narrative of revolution. After discussing a more general framework for approaching questions of character and emotional response in the next section, I will turn to a detailed analysis of Pontecorvo's heroic dramaturgy.

### Character Engagement

The focus of my interest will be the way in which the narration of the film elicits particular attitudes and emotional responses toward its characters. Rather than relying upon the notion of "identification"—an at best ambiguous, at worst confused, concept—I suggest we think of our responses to characters in terms of three *levels of engagement*. The first of these, *recognition*, concerns the way in which we individuate and reidentify characters—that is, perceive them as unique and distinct from other characters, and as continuous across the narrative. In most narrative films, this is a rapid, preconscious, and unproblematic process and, as such, of little critical interest (although as we will see this is not true of *The Battle of Algiers*). *Alignment* is the second level of engagement and describes the way in which our access to the thoughts, feelings, and actions of characters is controlled and organized by the film (not only through optical point-of-view shots, but also through reaction shots, voice-overs, and many other devices). By contrast the third level of engagement, *allegiance*, describes an emotional reaction that arises out of the moral structuring of the film, that is, the way the film invites us to respond with regard to characters morally, through the devices of music, iconography, performance, and so forth. While alignment denotes our knowledge of a character's actions, feelings, and states of mind, allegiance refers to our evaluation of and emotional response to such actions, feelings, and states of mind. On this level of allegiance, our responses range from the wholly sympathetic (love, admiration) to the intensely antipathetic (hated, revulsion), although they will often fall in between these extremes. All three levels of engagement operate in this graduated fashion. In addition, our responses are often differentiated by character; we usually do "recognize" more than one character at a time, although not necessarily to the same degree. Similarly, many films align us, simultaneously or successively, with several characters, and we usually react with a whole variety of positive and negative emotions over the course of a narrative involving several characters.<sup>11</sup>

Lest it appear that I am stubbornly—in the face of the current attachment to reception theory—granting the film text far too much power over the spectator, let me explicitly state that I do not think that a film can bludgeon viewers into sympathizing with one set of characters and not another. The social background and experience of spectators is obviously important if our interest is in particular, empirical audiences, especially in relation to the moral structure of a film. *The Battle of Algiers* is a film which, as I hope to show, goes to some lengths to forge an allegiance between the spectator and the Algerian revolutionaries. But this did not stop one American critic from writing: "The French people—including teen-agers and babies—who are blown up by Arab terrorists are considerably more attractive to our eyes than the natives."<sup>12</sup> So although a study of the reception of the film—especially by Algerian audiences—would be very interesting, and although I will occasionally make reference to such matters, these issues lie

beyond the scope of this essay, I will merely note here that while actual viewer response is undoubtedly varied, the responses of viewers are responses to something; and if we want to understand reception fully, we will need to understand that something—the film text—which is being watched or “received.” Studies of reception usefully supplement, but (logically) cannot supplant, the study of films themselves. My aim here is thus to examine the textual terrain on which social determinations, in specific audiences, will come into play.<sup>13</sup>

### Alignment, Allegiance, and Ali

*The Battle of Algiers* can be divided into five large segments or movements (each of which are comprised of a number of smaller scenes and sequences):

1. the betrayal and discovery of Ali la Pointe
2. Ali's induction into the FLN (1954)
3. the rise of the FLN, the eight-day strike
4. the destruction of the FLN, Ali's death
5. the popular demonstrations two years later (1960)

In chronological order, the segments run: 2, 3, 1, 4, 5. The first segment of the film, which initiates the flashback structure, is designed to forge an emotional allegiance between the spectator and the Algerian people, represented by Ali (Brahim Haggiag), an allegiance that frames the entire film. The initial steps in this process are the creation of structures of recognition and alignment that highlight the experiences of the Algerian characters within the film. In the first scene of the film an Algerian who has been tortured reveals a vital piece of information (the location of Ali's hideaway). In medium shot, a group of soldiers stand around the victim, tending to him with coffee and reassuring words even as they set aside the instruments of torture (one soldier sets down an iron bar, another wrings out a soaked rag). The prisoner has confessed. His resistance now crushed, the French soldiers can now treat the Algerian prisoner jokingly as if he is one of them. Colonel Mathieu (Jean Martin), the leader of the French paratroops assigned to defeat the FLN in Algiers, enters. On discovering that the prisoner has spoken, Mathieu hands him a French army uniform. A soldier presses the hat onto the prisoner's head, quipping “integration.” Mathieu cuts such levity short: the prisoner is “integrated,” but he is *inferior*. In a gesture mixing intimacy and condescension, Mathieu addresses the prisoner as *tous*—rather than *vous*—as children are addressed by their parents in France. Then the film cuts to a close-up of the prisoner, and at the same moment, minor-key music rises on the sound track (prior to this the sound has been entirely diegetic). Looking at the uniform, the prisoner turns and cries “N-o-o-o-o-n.” A soldier grasps him, slaps him, and tells him to have some guts.

The cut to the prisoner in close-up, together with the minor-key music, emphasizes the emotions of the Algerian, and provides the viewer with access to his feelings. We are thus *aligned* with him, whereas we merely *recognize* the French soldiers. The close-up and the anguished cry of the prisoner may also trigger *affective mimicry* in the spectator—a kind of involuntary, empathic response whereby we “mimic” the facial and vocal expressions of a person (or character) and, in so doing, come to experience the emotion of that person, albeit in an attenuated form. Moreover, the torture and coercion of the Algerian prisoner immediately establishes a moral structure in which we are sympathetically *allied* with the Algerian cause (notwithstanding the relative “decency” of Mathieu—a point to which we will return).

What of the status of the music, the anguished cry, and the close-up? Are they the unique products of Western cultural and cinematic history, and thus only available to members of that culture? In rejecting the stereotypes of Orientalism, does the film draw on a set of conventions that are equally alien to the culture it wishes to represent? Or can these devices be ascribed a more cross-cultural effectiveness? This is a question of some importance in any context, but in relation to a film dealing with French colonialism, co-produced by Italian and Algerian interests, it is doubly pertinent. The answer is not straightforward and cannot be captured with the facile formulas of either traditional humanism or poststructuralism.

It seems likely that while these devices are drawn largely from European traditions of representation, they are not entirely arbitrary, in the sense that they build on certain human constants. The techniques being used to invite particular responses—the close-up, the cry, the music—are chosen, and are effective, in part because they use conventions of bourgeois, or at least European, culture. We find the music mournful because certain modes and melodies have long been used in Western culture to evoke tragedy, defeat, despair. But there is evidence that the emotional tenor of the minor mode is rooted in cross-cultural features of perception.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, on the one hand, the face is considered a key to emotion and a source of individual identity in Western culture. On the other hand, there is a great deal of evidence that certain basic emotional expressions are universally recognized.<sup>15</sup> So the tactic of using close-ups to individuate characters, and to foster emotional access and affective mimicry with them, is likely to be effective on both cultural and cross-cultural grounds. Once again, this is not to say that we are engaging with a “real” Algerian simply because a photographic image of one stands before us. Our connection with him is achieved by means of representational conventions, many of which are European in origin. But we should not be too hasty in assuming that this neatly seals the film off from non-Westernized spectators, because all cultural traditions are shaped by cross-cultural factors.

In the next sequence, over which the titles are superimposed, French soldiers storm the Casbah while the regiment led rhythm of a march plays on the sound track. No soldier is seen in close-up. The French soldiers are depicted here as a more or less anonymous mass, as they are throughout the film: rarely are we given the

opportunity to recognize—to individuate and reidentify—particular French soldiers. In the third sequence, the prisoner indicates that Ali's hiding place is behind a false wall. Again we see a close-up of the prisoner, followed by a close-up tracking shot that begins on Ali and slowly moves across the faces of his three accomplices—a woman, a man, and a boy. Ali is asked to surrender by the French forces, but along with his companions he remains steadfastly silent. Insofar as the emotions of the Algerian characters are once again emphasized through close-ups, the scene echoes the structuring of alignment in the first scene in the film.<sup>16</sup>

The narrative then flashes back to 1954, to the beginning of the struggles that led to the events we have seen in the first segment. In this second segment, we witness the organization of the FLN, with Ali functioning as an emblem of the process. In this sense, the film is based on a Soviet-style structure of apprenticeship: Ali is presented from the beginning as virulently opposed to the French presence in Algeria, but his behavior is impetuous and rooted in individual heroics. When the FLN tests him by instructing him to kill a policeman at an appointed place and time, for example, rather than simply shooting the policeman in the back, he runs in front of the policeman, wanting to see the fear on the face of the Frenchman before he dies. In fact, the gun with which he has been provided is empty. On several occasions he is lectured on the need for patience and strategy, rather than for immediate, vengeful attack. Ali never really learns this lesson. (This negative characteristic, however, finally takes on a different and positive symbolic value, as we will see.) As a character, he is essentially a positive hero: there are not many dimensions to Ali beyond his commitment to the revolution. There are a few moments when he relates to characters outside of his revolutionary duties: in one scene he exchanges a sorrowful glance with an old woman as a helicopter flies above them, reminding them of the way even the domestic space of their existence is subject to invasion at any moment. Just before the final raid in which Ali is trapped, he and his companions enjoy a few peaceful moments over breakfast. But such moments are the exceptions rather than the rule in *The Battle of Algiers*.

### Collective Allegiance

Throughout the second movement of the film, the narration moves freely across the various aspects of the struggle with which it deals, always, however, drawing us back to Ali. That is to say, the narrative does *not* align us exclusively with Ali, but he does constitute an exemplary case. At the beginning of the segment, we see general, everyday images of the Casbah, while on the sound track we hear the FLN's first communique in the style of a radio broadcast. The narration brings us to Ali, who is running a kind of cheap street gambling shop, apparently too near the French quarter. He is chased by a gendarme, provoked by a group of arrogant

young French people, and goaded into a fight. Thus, the first specific instance of oppression that we witness in the flashback centers on Ali, one effect of which is to consolidate the moral structure of the film, reinforcing our sympathetic allegiance with the Algerians and antipathy toward the French. In the prison scene that follows, a prisoner is taken to the gallows, and as he is taken there, he cries, "Tahia el Djaz-air!" ("Long live Algeria!"). Other prisoners react with shouts of support. Ali is among one group of prisoners, but he is neither prominent nor vociferous in his support. As the prisoner is taken to the guillotine, however, Ali's perspective—visually and mentally—gradually becomes the focus of the narration, at this point we become aligned with him. The prisoner about to be beheaded is initially shown in long shot, motivated by the distant view the other prisoners have from their cells. As the guillotine falls, the camera zooms into a close-up of Ali. Insofar as this moment represents a transformation in Ali's commitment to the revolutionary cause, here again we can see the kinship of *The Battle of Algiers* with the Soviet structure of apprenticeship. It also demonstrates the narrational pattern by which an event, involving or perceived by many figures, is presented first as a general phenomenon and then in terms of Ali's position within it, thus maintaining the affective link between Ali and the spectator instituted at the beginning of the film.

In this respect, the second segment of the film prefigures certain narrational strategies that are fully exploited in the third and fourth segments of the film, tracing the rise and the fall respectively of the FLN. In these segments, Ali disappears for long stretches of the narrative. His emblematic function as the positive hero embodying the force of the FLN is now *distributed* or spread across many other characters. Indeed, many of the figures who perform various tasks for the organization can hardly be called characters, since they appear once and are never seen again (they are individuated but not reidentified). It is at this point that the construction of an Eisensteinian mass hero—or what Pontecorvo has called a "choral protagonist"—becomes salient.<sup>17</sup> The film now attempts to distribute the emotional energy we have been encouraged to invest in Ali across the entire people of Algiers, all those figures we see in the documentary-style shots that form the visual fabric of the film. We are coaxed into an alliance with an entire movement via a powerful strategy of allegiance set up at the beginning, focusing on an individual.<sup>18</sup>

The narrative strategy of the collective protagonist has a particular significance for a colonized people, a significance that surely accounts in part for the success of *The Battle of Algiers* with Algerian audiences when it was first released.<sup>19</sup> Barbara Harlow has discussed the denial of expressions of collective identity among political prisoners, even the use of the pronoun *we*.<sup>20</sup> In *The Battle of Algiers*, the Algerians are effectively imprisoned in the Casbah, restrained by barbed wire and checkpoints, their privacy continually violated by helicopters and army searches. They are subjected not so much to the coercive individualism Harlow describes, as the French imposition of an alternative collective identity

through the policy of "integration" (embodied in the promotion of French, and suppression of Arabic, culture and language, for example). The collision between these alternative collective identities is vividly realized in the sequence in which the French broadcast nationalist propaganda over a loudspeaker while a distraught Algerian woman cries out for her missing son.

The question may be asked, though, how does the narrative sustain this allegiance with the Algerian population when at the same time it depicts a series of violent actions against the French? This is especially important since these actions are likely to be interpreted by our good bourgeois spectator as "terrorism," and therefore morally repugnant, in spite of what the film unequivocally views as the justice of the Algerians' cause. The answer is that for some spectators the film singularly fails to do this, as we have seen from the review quoted earlier in this essay. Nevertheless, the film does try, through a number of narrational and stylistic strategies, to maintain a sympathetic allegiance with the Algerians even as their tactics become more violent. The sequence of killings that begins the FLN's first major assault is preceded by a marriage performed under the auspices of the FLN. Thus, the FLN is shown overseeing binding social rituals, such as marriage, as well as pursuing revolutionary violence. The film carefully selects an Algerian ritual that resonates with similar European rituals. During the actual killings, we rarely see the face of the victim, and we never see the French victims in close-up, thus denying the viewer the kind of emotional intimacy that the film has fostered (through the use of close-ups) with the Algerian characters from the very beginning. Finally, in the midst of the FLN shootings, a micro-narrative is inserted that almost melodramatically allies us with the Algerians. The French police have unleashed a host of repressive state apparatuses—police and army vehicles—in response to the shootings. An old Algerian street cleaner in the French quarter watches as motorbikes and other military vehicles fly past him. Suddenly, the paranoid *pièdes noirs* start to jeer at the old man from their balconies and shout to the police that he is responsible for one of the killings. The old man flees the neighborhood, we see his fearful look in close-up, while the French are just a blur in a fast lateral tracking shot, representing the vision of the old man as he runs. Music reinforces our emotional alignment with the old man. Once again, the Algerian character is individuated and his emotions made salient, whereas the French remain an ill-defined, overexposed, anonymous mass.

The rest of the fourth segment narrates a bomb attack led by an assistant police commissioner on the Casbah, and the revenge bombings of the FLN on a cafeteria, a milk bar, and the offices of Air France. Several critics have argued that in this part of the film a moral ambiguity undermines the allegiance previously built between the Algerians and the spectator. After the bombing of the Casbah and its aftermath, a group of Algerian women cut their hair and modernize their dress. The women are hesitant, but finally determined. The militancy of their behavior is underlined by the dynamic shift to the *baba-salem* at the beginning of the scene, a musical choice that highlights the strategic nature of the women's

adoption of Western garb (as we see them Westernize themselves, the sound track emphasizes their non-European identity)—a strategy that nevertheless had complex cultural ramifications, as analyzed by Frantz Fanon in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*.<sup>21</sup> In the next scene, they are provided with bombs that they are able to smuggle through the checkpoints around the Casbah because of their new Westernized appearances. Having had the timers set, the three women then make their way to the targets, the three micro-narratives now being intercut. More attention is paid to the two women who take bombs to the milk bar and the cafeteria. As they plant the bombs, they apprehensively examine the customers of the cafeteria and the milk bar respectively. The woman in the cafeteria is addressed politely (though flirtatiously) by a man in the bar. The film cuts back and forth between various customers of the cafeteria and the milk bar; for the first time, we see French characters in close-up, and several faces are repeated. The sequence is exceptional in that it individuates the French, allowing the viewer to form a sympathetic, subordinate allegiance with them, knowing that they are about to be killed.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly the sequence is an aberration from the rest of the film, in the way that it so explicitly solicits a sympathetic response for the French, and it can be legitimately interpreted as suggesting that the battle has initiated a cycle of violence in which *both* sides suffer. This is reinforced by the fact that the same elegiac music—reminiscent of Bach's *Mass in B minor*—is used over the aftermaths of both the Casbah bombing and the bombing of the French properties. However, the images of the French victims are initially motivated as the optical points-of-view of the women as they look around the bars. The resulting alignment of the spectator with the Algerian women prepares "the spectator to feel 'at home' within the bomber's perspective, to sense the reasons for such a mission."<sup>23</sup> The discomfort of the Algerian women seems to arise not only from anxiety over the pragmatics of placing the bomb, but also from their knowledge of what they are doing. Ironically, their adoption of Western dress enables them to make some kind of contact—limited as it is—with the world of the French. Nothing captures the ambivalence of this moment better than the feigned dancing of the woman who plants the bomb in the milk bar. The sense of activism mingled with hesitation is redolent of the scene in which the women modernize their appearances. So, while the scene does generate a certain sympathy for the French, it by no means severs the sympathetic emotional allegiance formed with the Algerians. If the scene suggests a moral ambiguity, it is a moral ambiguity that the bombers themselves are presented as experiencing.

#### Mathieu and Ali

The fourth segment of the film also introduces Colonel Mathieu, the head of the paratrooper reinforcements brought in to put down the revolt. The sequence in



which he is shown leading the arrival parade of his soldiers through Algiers is interesting for the great degree to which it foregrounds him. Following the norm established by the film, no French soldier is shown in close-up, except Mathieu. Indeed, his introduction directly parallels Ali's in the second segment. Like Ali, Mathieu is introduced by an anonymous voice-over describing his background as we see him in close-up. The film thus structurally pits the two against one another, as the representatives of the warring parties. This apparent opposition nonetheless is skewed because our allegiance with Ali has already been distributed across the Algerian population. This strategy is never more apparent than immediately after Mathieu's arrival, when the FLN declares the eight-day strike. The decision is depicted through a sequence of shots in which notes are passed among individuals in the Casbah, while on the sound track the radio-voice of an FLN communique provides the details of the strike (the most prominent of which is the timing of the strike to coincide with the United Nations debate on Algeria). The Algerians are represented as happy, relieved, even jubilant. A little boy selling newspapers confidently asserts that the strike will succeed. In the following scene, however, Ben M'Hidi, one of the intellectual leaders of the revolution, lectures Ali on the need for the strike and on the limited value of isolated "terrorist" attacks. Ali, in other words, is out of tune with the population at this point. Precisely at the moment when *The Battle of Algiers* could have degenerated into a confrontational structure in which two emblematic, masculine, positive heroes battle it out with each other, the film insists upon the Algerian people—an individuated mass, so to speak—as the real, "choral" protagonist.<sup>24</sup>

At least one critic has suggested that Mathieu is an attractive figure who invites a sympathetic response because of his reasonable manner, and that this adds to the sense of moral ambiguity in the film over the justifiability of the Algerian struggle and its means. (This differs from the view advanced in this essay that the film is wholly sympathetic to the revolutionary cause, but acknowledges the inevitable costs of such action to both colonizer and colonized.) Mathieu is a superrational creature who believes in the power of speech. He speaks lucidly and at length, he prefers the use of persuasive speech over physical force in obtaining the surrender of FLN members. He is not interested in heroics and is anything but brutal on a one-to-one basis with Algerians. Contemplating these factors, Joan Mellen argues that

the characterization of the French leadership is reduced to the engaging figure of Mathieu whose qualities are too positive to offer a realistic picture of what the French leaders were like. Pontecorvo does have his Mathieu admit that he plans to use systematic torture to break down his FLN prisoners. Yet this aspect of Mathieu's character is not accounted for in the rational and self-possessed man we see.<sup>25</sup>

Mellen overlooks, however, the way in which subsequent events undermine any sympathy that has been built up for Mathieu, by directly connecting Mathieu's

rationality and "self-possession" with his belief in the necessity of torture. At one of a number of press conferences, Mathieu is questioned about torture as a method employed by the French forces. When pressed, he produces a vehement defense of the method, ending with the words: "Is France to remain in Algeria? If your answer is still 'yes' you must accept all the consequences." Immediately following this statement, a sequence graphically depicts different methods of torture. Mathieu's hypernational, detached language hangs in stark contrast over the scene.

Mathieu argues for torture—"interrogation"—because what the French need is *knowledge*, and that is what the structure of the FLN denies them. Without such knowledge, the massive technological power of the French army is useless. Mathieu's strategy as a polemicist, in relation to the press and the enemy, is to abstract and equate the ideals and motives of the warring parties, to evacuate the war of specific ideals, and thus to treat it as a game in which he and the enemy are simply players, united by this common status.<sup>26</sup> Thus he cites his service in the resistance as parallel to his work in Algeria, disregarding the moral contrasts between the two roles, he can argue that there is no difference. Similarly, at the press conference after Ben M'Hidi's "suicide," Mathieu morally equates himself with M'Hidi in his commitment to a set of ideals. Again Mathieu overlooks the contrast between the ideals in question. Later, in the car after the arrest of Djafar (another FLN leader), Mathieu tells Djafar that he would have been disappointed if he had allowed himself to be blown up. Mathieu says that he feels that he knows him and that he had not judged him to be "inclined to performing useless actions." Finally, Mathieu proclaims, "the game is over. The FLN has been defeated." Mathieu's attitude toward his enemy is, then, quite consonant with one of the purposes of torture, as analyzed by Michel de Certeau: "What the torturer in the end wants to extort from the victim he tortures is to reduce him to being no more than that, rottenness, which is what the torturer himself is and knows that he is, but without avowing it."<sup>27</sup> Seen in another light, Mathieu treats the FLN leaders as *évolués*—the French term for "integrated," French-educated, and allied Algerians—and is blind to the demeaning and disabling force of what he thinks of as a mark of respect. By equating—and thus, in effect, denying—the ideals and the history behind the war, he strips the Algerians of their status as socially differentiated (and more specifically, oppressed) beings.

All of them, that is, except for Ali. Ali's reticence throughout the film, culminating in his silent "suicide," can be understood as a piece of senseless heroism, the kind that Djafar rejects; certainly, as a victory over the French, it is pyrrhic. But such an interpretation is deaf to the full resonance of Ali's actions. Ali refuses to be reduced to "the same," to play the game of war: "I do not bargain with them." The opening scene of the film encapsulates Mathieu's basic method: make the enemy speak, then put him in a French uniform. Ali refuses the offer of such "integration." Through these gestures of implacable resistance, Ali comes to embody Fanon's idea that violence is a necessary act on the part of the colonized in the recovery from the state of alienation and "*depersonalisation absolue*."<sup>28</sup>

The climax of the fourth segment brings us back to the point at which the film began, the cornering of Ali, the only FLN leader not either captured or dead. Unlike the other leaders, neither Ali nor his companions will surrender to Mahieu. Charges are laid on the wall behind which they are concealed. The narration concentrates on the Algerians, cutting between close-ups of Ali and his companions, similar to the shots in the opening segment of the film, and shots of the hundreds of Algerians outside, watching and praying on the walls of the Casbah. These shots are a mark of the way that the film has worked to draw us into an allegiance with a people, starting from an individual. The close-ups of Ali recall the affective connection made with him at the beginning while the shots of the other Algerians continue the strategy of "distributed" engagement and collective allegiance with a mass protagonist.

### History, Allegory, and Representation

The film's fifth and final movement is a coda that lies two years beyond the carefully framed flashback structure of the first four segments. The segment is vital in finally displacing any sense that a single heroic figure, like Ali la Pointe, is historically indispensable. Over shots of rioting crowds, journalists proclaim that "out of nowhere" a new revolt has arisen and that the exiled leaders of the FLN have no idea what has sparked it. Chanting and protesting crowds dominate the segment until the last moments of the film, when a woman defiantly waves a flag and chants at the French military even though they repeatedly knock her down. The implication is clear: the impulse to revolt is not held within individuals or even organizations, but simply within the people. Crushing organizations like the FLN is at best a temporary measure. For their determination not to foreground an individual figure or organization, however, Pontecorvo and his collaborators pay a certain price.

As a consequence of the film's desire to identify historical agency simply with "the people," it inadvertently mystifies and obscures the practical necessities of social revolution. The film either marginalizes or omits altogether many highly significant factors in the 1960 uprisings and in the ultimate attainment of political independence in 1962. The demonstrations were a response to the struggle in rural Algeria, a struggle that receives one passing (although highly ironic) reference after Ali has been blown up: Mathieu and his superiors appear in long shot, complacently exchanging opinions about the comparative ease of dealing with rural dissent. Likewise, there is only a single reference to the bombing of the Algerian countryside (when Ben M'Hidi is interviewed at a press conference after his capture). Jean-Paul Sartre's criticism of French policy is briefly discussed, but no mention is made of other French radicals who supported Algerian independence, like the newspaper editor Henri Alleg (Alleg's revelation of the practice

and extent of torture helped to shift liberal French opinion.<sup>1</sup>) The role of funds supporting the FLN provided by Algerian workers in Europe is also completely elided, as is the support of Tunisia, Morocco, and Egypt, and the place of other Algerian revolutionary movements, like the *Mouvement National Algérien*. The huge economic cost of the war to France figures nowhere in the film.<sup>29</sup>

All narratives, however, omit and exclude—as well as connect—events. The omissions of *The Battle of Algiers* would perhaps be less problematic were it not for the pseudo-direct cinema style of the film. This style, embodied in such techniques as black-and-white photography, handheld camera work, rapid zooming, and rack focusing, functions as a powerful rhetoric of authenticity and objectivity. The style achieves its apotheosis in the coda, where a "live" journalistic narration gives the impression that we are watching events as they occur. The highly specific dates and times that locate the events in the film emphasize the sense of precise historical reference (the dates were based on police records consulted by Solinas). So powerful were these techniques that Pontecorvo was persuaded—whether as a boast or as a clarification is not clear—by his American distributors to place an emphatic disclaimer at the beginning of the American release print, indicating that every inch of the film was produced through the reconstruction of events. But the original stylistic strategy stands, and it is this combination of an emphatic rhetoric of historical verisimilitude with such a highly selective narrative that has troubled some critics.<sup>30</sup> With its Romantic-Marxist ending, ascribing so much power to the spontaneous will of the people and the inevitability of popular revolution, the film is in effect an allegory clothed in the garb of documentary.

Another brand of criticism, however, attacks the film on more tenuous grounds. Writing from the perspective of semiotic Marxism, Peter Sainsbury casts doubt on the film's radical credentials by arguing that the film is nothing more than "a conscience stricken thriller."<sup>31</sup> Noting some of the omissions described above, Sainsbury goes on to criticize the filmmakers' decision to "embody the moral aspect of the war of liberation within a particular character who thereby becomes a hero"<sup>32</sup>—a criticism that entirely overlooks the balanced interplay between individual protagonist and collective hero achieved by the film. Citing Jean-Luc Godard, Sainsbury argues that only the most drastic rejection of conventional representational strategies would allow for an appropriately radical representation of colonial revolt. While a great deal of worthwhile filmmaking has come out of the reflexive tradition that Sainsbury advocates, in its strident self-justification it often simplifies the significant revisions possible within more conventional narrative form, as exemplified by *The Battle of Algiers*. For their part, Pontecorvo and Solinas have retorted that such criticism is a form of "political infantilism," which overestimates the significance of the cinema (and by implication, representation in general) in the revolutionary transformation of society: "It is naive to believe that you can start a revolution with a movie and even more naive to theorize about doing so."<sup>33</sup>



How, then, should we assess the film? De Certeau comments:

The historian's goal, and the ethnologist's, is to outline the functioning of a cultural aggregate, to make its laws visible, to hear its silences, to structure a landscape that is nothing if it is not more than a simple reflection. But it would be wrong to think that these tools are neutral, or their gaze inert: nothing gives itself up, everything has to be seized, and the same interpretive violence can either create or destroy.<sup>34</sup>

The absences in the film's rendering of the Algerian revolution, and the disingenuousness of the film's style, are mitigated when we consider what the film does do—what it creates; when we remind ourselves of the film's date, and when we remember that the film was addressed to a European as well as an Algerian audience. The film fosters an allegiance with the Algerian people in part through European music and the selection of Algerian rituals that we may recognize as similar to our own. But it does not only use European traditions and conventions. The film draws on a narrative and character types familiar from our own tales of revolution, while it also resists the topoi of Orientalist discourse, of the Orient as a place of "lascivious sensuality" and "inherent violence."<sup>35</sup> The film presents the violence of the Algerians as justified by the struggle, and, in at least one key scene, as committed with hesitancy (the bombings of the French properties). Responsibility for the cycle of violence resides with the colonialists, and the film shows torture as the lynchpin of the French army's official technique, not as an unfortunate practice indulged in by individuals, as the French government claimed for years. Algerian women use the sensuality ascribed to them by Orientalism only to dupe the French soldiers subject to the myth. Even the revolutionary Romanicism of the film is moderate when compared with that of its Soviet precursors, qualified as it is by Ben M'Hidi's prediction that the postrevolutionary period will be the most difficult period of all for Algeria, as well as by the film's refusal to caricature the French. Finally, while the film does not explore the residues of pre-colonial cultures, the past of the land and the peoples that became the colonial and then the independent state of Algeria, it condemns those who would deny their existence.

#### NOTES

I would like to thank Margrit Tröhler, and especially Malcolm Turvey, for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.

1. Simone de Beauvoir and Gisèle Halimi, *Djinnia Boupacba: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, trans. Peter Green (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 9.

2. Mallek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, trans. Myrna and Wlad Godzich (Mimneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

3. The notion of Orientalism, as discussed by Edward Said, is an ideological notion the boundaries of which do not match those of the commonplace geographical notion of the Orient (the East, relative to Europe). In Said's sense, the Orient is broad enough to encompass a country like Algeria, because of its Islamic and once-colonized status; indeed, Said writes specifically

of Islamic Orientalism in connection with Algeria and other North African countries. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979), 301. See also Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), and Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*.

4. For the techniques used by Pontecorvo and his cinematographer to achieve this style, see Gillo Pontecorvo, "The Battle of Algiers: An Adventure in Filmmaking," *American Cinematographer* 48, no. 4 (April 1967): 266–269.

5. "An Interview with Gillo Pontecorvo," in Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, ed. PierNico Solinas (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 165, 166–167.

6. Roy Armes, *The Ambiguous Image: Narrative Style in Modern European Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), 217.

7. These narrative patterns are drawn from Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Authoritarian Fictions: The Ideological Novel as a Literary Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), chs. 2 and 3.

8. See Rufus Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), and E. J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953).

9. Throughout this discussion of Soviet literary and dramaturgical theory, I will use the masculine pronoun as the generic pronoun in order to reflect the gender politics of these debates. 10. Sergei Eisenstein, "Through Theater to Cinema," *Film Form*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1949), 12.

11. This is a very brief summary of the theoretical framework developed at length in Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995). In addition to many details, one major theoretical distinction discussed in the book is set aside here—that between *acental* and *central* imagining (roughly, sympathy and empathy). The three main levels of engagement—recognition, alignment, and allegiance—are all conceived of as "acental" or sympathetic responses, in which we respond to a character but without adopting his or her mental perspective. The theory in *Engaging Characters* supplements such responses with "central" or empathic responses, in which we do imagine events "from the inside" of a particular character. One aspect of this is discussed below in connection with the notion of affective mimicry. For further discussion of this distinction, see my "Imagining from the Inside," in *Film Theory and Philosophy*, ed. Richard Allen and Murray Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997).

12. Stanley Kauffmann, "Recent Wars," *The New Republic*, vol. 157, December 16, 1967, 19.

13. Further discussion of the relationship between reception studies and character engagement can be found in Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 63–65.

14. See Royal S. Brown, *Overtones and Undertones: Reading Film Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6–7.

15. See Paul Ekman, *Emotion in the Human Face* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

16. An additional factor may be relevant here. Mallek Alloula has commented on the way colonial postcards create images of the European family that have little to do with Algerian society (Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 38–39). *The Battle of Algiers* does nothing so explicit, though there may be traces of a similar process in the film. The four figures behind the wall constitute a kind of nuclear family: a mature woman, a young man, a small boy, with Ali functioning as a kind of father figure. As it turns out, they are not a family, but the film does not block the inference at this point, thus evoking all the emotive associations connected with the traditional family in bourgeois Western society. The content of the scene may have a referential value, that is, it may be historically accurate—but the nuclear family is still a central unit of Western dramatic representation. As such, the scene may be a further example of the film seeking our allegiance with the Algerians through an "imposed" bourgeois social structure.

17. "An Interview with Gillo Pontecorvo," 166.

18. For more on the concept of distribution, and on the similarities between *The Battle of Algiers* and Dovzhenko's *Ascend* in this respect, see Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 132–138.

19. Joan Melien, *Filming to The Battle of Algiers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1973), 22.

20. Barbara Harlow, *Resistance Literature* (London: Methuen, 1987), 151. See also Harlow's

introduction to Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, xvi–xviii, for more detail on the attempts by the French to discourage and repress an independent, Arab culture in colonial Algeria.

21. Fanon commented on both the use of the veil and its strategic abandonment in the cause of revolution in *Studies in a Dying Colonialism*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (London: Earthscan, 1989), especially 63. Here, as elsewhere in the film—in the closing moments of the film, a woman acts as the emblematic figure—the role of women in the struggle is recognized. However, in casting the female Algerian roles in the film, Pontecorvo faced considerable difficulties because of patriarchal misgivings over the propriety of women performing in a film. The liberation of women from traditional patriarchal structures did not, then, simply follow liberation from colonization. See also Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London: Routledge, 1994), 255, and David C. Gordon, *The Passing of French Algeria* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 124, note 36.

22. It may be worth stressing here that there is no reason to suppose that a sympathetic allegiance with one character will necessarily annul a sympathetic allegiance with another character, even where these characters are at odds with one another as they are here. Talk of wholesale “identification” with a character, and especially of singular “identification figures,” however, may lead us to this spurious conclusion. For further discussion, see my “The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism,” in *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*, ed. David Bordwell and Noël Carroll (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), especially 144.

23. Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, 253.

24. In a sense this echoes the lateral structure of the ELN as described by Mathieu, while each unit has a triangular power structure, with a leader and two subordinates, overall hierarchy is minimized by the fact that each member of the organization—with the exception of the general staff—only knows three other members: his superior and two subordinates.

25. Mellen, *Filminguide to The Battle of Algiers*, 62.

26. Mathieu attempts to transform a genuinely antagonistic struggle, in which moral values and goals are at stake (liberation, dignity), into an “agonistic” conflict, in which nothing other than skill and power are at stake. See Smith, *Engaging Characters*, 198.

27. Michel de Certeau, “The Institution of Rot,” in *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 41.

28. The phrase comes from a letter written in 1956 contained in Frantz Fanon, *Pour la révolution africaine: Écrits politiques* (Paris: Francois Maspero, 1979), 51. The fullest expression of the idea can be found in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1968).

29. Mellen, *Filminguide to The Battle of Algiers*, 58–68; “An Interview with Franco Solinas,” 198.

30. Guy Hennebelle, *Les cinémas africains en 1972* (Dakar: Societe Africaine d’Edition, 1972), 125.

31. Peter Sainsbury, “Review of *The Battle of Algiers*,” *Afterimage* 3 (Summer 1971): 7. See also Nancy Ben Dowd’s commentary on the film, which castigates it as one of a number of “drama-sucking parasites on catclaysms,” reliant on various “romanesque clichés” and melodramatic devices, and compares it unfavorably with Andy Warhol’s *Haircut* (USA, 1963) and Frederick Wiseman’s *Titicut Follies* (USA, 1967); “Popular Conventions,” *Film Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1969): 26–31. On these issues, the present essay is a companion piece to Smith, “The Logic and Legacy of Brechtianism,” which questions the logic of the semio-Brechtian critique of Hollywood filmmaking.

32. Sainsbury, “Review of *The Battle of Algiers*,” 6.

33. “An Interview with Gillo Pontecorvo,” 189, and “An Interview with Franco Solinas,” 199.

34. De Certeau, “The Beauty of the Dead,” 135.

35. Kabban, *Europe’s Myths of Orient*, 6; Alloula, *The Colonial Harem*, 3.

## Discourses of Terrorism, Feminism, and the Family in von Trotta’s *Marianne and Juliane*

E. Ann Kaplan

Made in 1980, Margarethe von Trotta’s *Die bleierne Zeit* (*Marianne and Juliane*, 1981) has become the focus of intense debate among feminists, at least in Germany and America. In dealing with terrorism, feminism, and the family, the film touched upon issues already of deep concern to women. The controversy that the film has aroused has important ramifications, which a close examination of its discourses, in the contexts of its production, may help to illuminate.

Part of the reaction to the film in Germany had to do with von Trotta’s position in the German film scene. Somewhat older than the current generation of explicitly feminist German women filmmakers, von Trotta (like many first-generation female feature-filmmakers) cannot avoid being marked as a woman who has made it because of her relations with an established, successful male director—her husband Volker Schlöndorff. As one of the first German male directors to break into the American art-cinema market, Schlöndorff set the trend for those to follow, helping to create what has been called an *American phenomenon*, namely, “The New German Cinema.”<sup>1</sup> Von Trotta (who worked with Schlöndorff as actress and scriptwriter) thus learned her cinematic practice in that context, which set her apart from the women coming up alone later on, under quite different personal and political conditions. Taking far more risks with their cinematic enunciation, these women have been unable to penetrate the American market.<sup>2</sup>

Von Trotta’s professional break with Schlöndorff in 1977, when she made her first feature, *Das zweite Erwachen der Christa Klages* (*The Second Awakening of Christa Klages*), did not end her positioning as complicit with what had now become a successful male cinematic establishment that shaped its styles for the American market. *Klages* and its successor, *Schwesteren oder Die Balance des Glücks* (*Sisters or the Balance of Happiness*, 1979), got attention over here, but neither was exactly a blockbuster. It was with *Marianne and Juliane* that von Trotta finally evoked interest and was generally viewed, in the critics’ discourse, as “an exciting new director.”