THE ILLEGITIMATE LEGITIMACY OF THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS IN FRENCH FILM CULTURE

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This article explores the three main phases of the reception of The Battle of Algiers in France – in 1966 when the film was awarded the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival, on its first national release in the early 1970s, and in the wake of its screening at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004 – in order to understand reactions to, and appropriations of, the film by the critics and by the public. This reception history, it is argued, is deeply shaped by the intersection of the values promoted by a strong film culture and the larger preoccupations of a national culture that has difficulties coming to terms with its postcolonial status. An examination of the critical reception and of the box office figures highlights a very regular pattern: the evaluation of the film in each historical phase owes more to national or international concerns than to the analysis of the film itself. Paradoxically, it also shows the ways in which the categories imposed by French film culture in the late 1950s and early 1960s have survived and continue to inhibit the development of new questions about the relationship between film and national culture in France today. The relative invisibility of The Battle of Algiers in French film culture is not so much the outcome of political censorship as that of the film’s inability to fit
In a country that still regards its film industry as a national landmark and its capacity to maintain its own film production and distribution networks as well as its own film culture as evidence of its unaltering commitment to culture, the tortuous path of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* demands an interrogation of the relationship between film and national culture. Contemporary French film culture is still deeply influenced by a symbolic revolution that took place in the critical discourse, imposing film as an art form only a few years before the release of *The Battle of Algiers*. This symbolic revolution, the auteur policy, and the rise of the New Wave coincided with various struggles for independence and with a sharp rise in the number of films censored (Eades 2006: 12; Stora 1997: 120). While the relationship between decolonization and film has been tackled by historians (Ory 1990; Stora 1997), it has remained underexplored by French film scholars, who, until recently, have remained impervious to the influence of cultural studies and postcolonial studies. Consequently, this symbolic revolution has had a lasting impact on the questions that have been raised about cinema. Even though generalizations are always reductive, it is quite clear that until very recently issues of national cinema, modes of production, film as art and ‘auteurism’ have made issues of reception marginal at best.

What makes *The Battle of Algiers* a particularly striking case study is the disjunction between the media event and the life cycle of the film, as well as the black-or-white nature of each phase of its critical reception and, overall, the limited interest the film itself has generated since coming out. The relative invisibility of the film has generally been constructed — retrospectively in the promotion and marketing of the film, and in scholarly discourse — as the outcome of various kinds of political censorship. In scholarly accounts the neglect of the film is seen as part of the long-standing reluctance of the French to revisit the painful experience of their colonial past and, in particular, the ‘Guerre d’Algérie’, as it is commonly known in France. But it is necessary here to keep in mind that the reception of a film is the outcome of a complex alchemy that meshes together the status, in a film culture, of the film as film, and the discussion of the sort of ‘representation’ offered by the film as it participates in the debates of a national culture at the moment of its reception.

The purpose of this article is precisely to examine the processes by which Pontecorvo’s film was appropriated, evaluated and eventually marginalized
at the intersection of discourses on its status as a film in French film culture and discourses on the representation of the Algerian War of Independence. There are three distinct moments in the critical reception of the film. First, in 1966, the screening and the award at the Venice Film Festival created a stir in the French national press and film journals. The film was not released at the time. Then in 1970, the film became associated with the struggle against censorship even though it was granted a certificate for its release in France without any difficulty.\(^4\) Attention was focused on demonstrations, attacks, and lobbying for and against its release. It went on to receive a more ‘normal’ commercial release in Paris starting in October 1971.\(^5\) Finally, in 2004, the press covered the screening of the film at the Cannes Film Festival, its re-release in September and its first broadcast on French public television in November. The first wave of reviews from 1966 was overwhelmingly negative, while the second wave in the 1970s was generally positive. In 2004, *Cahiers du cinéma* staunchly opposed the film while the national press largely supported it. This most recent phase reveals an inconclusive debate about what constitutes film culture in France today.

An examination of the different phases of the reception highlights the ways in which the publicity around the release of *The Battle of Algiers* always exceeded the actual encounter between audiences and the film. *The Battle of Algiers* has been a political and a media event beyond the film itself, and one striking aspect of its reception has been the wide national consensus in each phase – as one cannot but note how few reviews express an independent judgement on the film.\(^6\) I will consider *The Battle of Algiers* in French culture as a ‘social fact’ (‘fait social’) and examine its construction based on what the box office receipts and the critical reception tell us about its filmic value within the specific context of its French reception (Esquenazi 2000: 15–47). I will borrow Roger Odin’s theoretical framework, his ‘semio-pragmatique’, although diverted from its initial purpose (Odin 1983, 2000). In the debate in film and media studies about the balance between, on the one hand, the power of the film to limit the interpretation of the text and, on the other, the freedom of the spectator to produce meaning and affect, Odin is very aware of the ‘external constraints in the process of communication’ that may shape the production of meaning and affect but still proposes a heuristic model to understand ‘the modalities of the production of meaning and affect’ based on the film text (Odin 2000: 54, 57). I will turn his model inside out to start from the critical discourse – what the critics claim the film does and how – to recover the ‘processes of structuration’ of the film in order to examine critics’ understanding of these ‘modalities of production of meaning and affect’ (ibid.: 57).
The Battle 1966: an illegitimate award, an illegitimate film, an illegitimate filmmaker

The presence of The Battle of Algiers at the Venice Film Festival took French culture by surprise, imposing awareness of a nation and a new national cinema at a major international event. Numerous contemporary articles about ‘the diplomatic incident’ that could have been avoided and the unnecessarily ‘awkward position of the French’ blamed the jury for a lack of sensitivity in the selection of such a film (i.e., Aurore, 6 September 1966). In reporting the film, journalists and critics alike implicitly considered themselves primarily as Frenchmen, with the foremost question being whether or not the film was ‘anti-French’. Thus, Henry Chapier in Combat contested the French delegation’s decision to walk out of the awards on the grounds that ‘there is nothing hurtful toward us in the film’ (2 September 1966). Such concerns about the effects of the film on the image of the French neatly sidestepped any detailed descriptions and discussions of the film itself.

Once the film was awarded the Golden Lion, the articles turned to outrage. Whatever the political or cultural status of the publication, the reviews were united in criticizing the low standards of a dysfunctional international film festival, even proclaiming the influence of a ‘social-democrat mafia’ (Combat, 12 September 1966). Many critics in the national press deplored the inability or unwillingness of the jury to consider the films from a purely cinematographic standpoint, as no one, it was claimed, could contest the superior quality of Robert Bresson’s Au Hasard Balthazar or François Truffaut’s Fahrenheit 451. Thus, French critics rallied in a defence of ‘cinema’, a reaction which coincided with the struggle to impose French films as representing the authentic values of any film culture worthy of the name. The struggle for the autonomy of art from politics was promoted as the only true sign of a commitment to cinema as art and dispensed the critics from having to account for The Battle of Algiers in terms of colonial history.

Except for one mixed reaction in Télérama (25 September 1966) and two positive responses in Arts (14 September 1966) and Cinéma (November 1966), the reviews in the national press were negative. While the impression of unanimity is striking, there were two complementary grounds for the dismissal of the film. The first was the illegitimacy of the festival as institution, whose vocation should have been the assessment of the films and whose competence was contested by many French reviewers; the second was based on the fact that the film did not fit into any of the categories valued in the new French film culture: its mode of production, the conditions of its screening at the festival and its formal choices were discredited, and its director was disqualified as an auteur. On all of these grounds, it was impossible to regard this particular representation of the ‘Battle of Algiers’ as...
a legitimate ‘building block’ in the larger representation of the War of Independence. More insidiously, one senses an inability on the part of the critics to watch and ‘adhere’ to images of the War of Independence and of Algerians through an Italo-Algerian film.

*The Battle of Algiers* was not only regarded as inferior to other films in the festival. It was also defined by its limitations and positioned in film culture in relation to a list of international films it purportedly could not match. It was most often compared with *Salvatore Giuliano* (Francesco Rosi, 1962), another Italian action film about a mobster, a film considered to have more rigour and efficacy. Reviewers made references to classics like Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and *Strike*, and Godard’s *Les Carabiniers* in order to condemn the absence of real political analysis. The critics demanded either a documentary representation of the liberation struggle (and found only caricature and commonplace) or a montage film, which was considered the legitimate form for political analysis. One reviewer noted the objectivity, sobriety and political honesty of Pontecorvo’s film, but turned these values against the film and its director:

> Neither objectivity, nor historical honesty, nor the courage to take on political passions that are still burning constitute cinematographic qualities. These are conditions without which it would have been impossible to make the film... These are ‘negative’ qualities, but cinema needs artists and creators. (*Télérama*, 25 September 1966)

Clearly, Pontecorvo did not qualify. The balanced account of the war was likewise turned against the filmmaker:

> never inspired, hesitating between a plain report and exaltation, objectivity and sentimentalism, the individual and collective dimensions... sparing everyone’s sensitive feelings through a meticulous balance of responsibilities, cautious to the extreme, Pontecorvo abandons his film to an ill-defined position. (*Cahiers du cinéma*, October 1966)

The film was condemned for its refusal to provide the spectator with a clear message, for the undecidability of its meaning.

As I have already implied, Pontecorvo’s lack of renown in the new film culture in France and his being Italian were factors in the dismissal of the film. *The Battle of Algiers* was very seldom read as being part of a larger corpus – Pontecorvo’s previous film *Kapo* (nominated for an Oscar for Best International Film in 1961) was hardly ever mentioned except to remark on the relative superiority of *The Battle of Algiers*. Indeed, Pontecorvo was primarily characterized, implicitly at least, as a former communist journalist turned filmmaker – i.e., someone who used film as a vehicle to get ideas across.8 His reputation as a director of large-scale co-productions on

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8 By 1966 Pontecorvo had directed *La grande strada azzurra* (1957), a Franco-Italian-West German production starring Yves Montand and Francisco Rabal, and *Kapo* (1959) a Franco-Italian production starring Laurent Terzieff and Emmanuelle Riva. See Forgacs’s article above for more information on Pontecorvo’s career.
political subjects was completely at odds with the image of the auteur interested in exploring the potential of film form through low-budget personal films. In contrast to other films by Pontecorvo, there are no stars in *The Battle of Algiers*, but his reliance on non-professional actors was regarded as undermining character development. Pontecorvo’s image also suffered from the involvement of Saadi Yacef (Djafar in the film), which was regarded as evidence of Pontecorvo’s pro-Algerian commitment and the film’s bias.

Overall, the representatives of the French film industry and apparently most of the newspapers and magazines shared the same disdain for the film. There is even a sense among those who did review the film (*Cahiers du cinéma*, *Télérama*) that the numerous articles decrying the presence of the film at the festival had artificially inflated its actual interest. Critics claimed that they were unable to ‘connect’ with the representation because the film was shown in Italian, which was implicitly regarded as evidence of low production standards. They attacked its large budget, treating it as ‘a resistance film made in Hollywood’ (*Nouvelles Littéraires*, 8 September 1966). It is difficult to assess retrospectively the critics’ reactions without relying on dubious psychology. Still, we can surmise that the critics could not recognize themselves in the target audience on two grounds. *The Battle of Algiers* was obviously a production aimed at large audiences. First, as film critics in a new French film culture, while they may have been ready to commend the formal choices of a film aimed at large audiences, they could not endorse what they saw as Pontecorvo’s slick didacticism. Second, as Frenchmen, the critics assumed that they had nothing to learn about the ‘Guerre d’Algérie’ from Algerians or Italians, a hypothesis supported by the French audiences’ subsequent preference for French films on the subject. They were dismissive of a film in which everything ‘rings false’, with its string of ‘commonplaces’, its ‘close-ups of children’ that ‘leave the spectator unmoved’ (*Nouvelles Littéraires*, 8 September 1966), the ‘tear-jerking melodrama and self-righteous scenes’ (*Combat*, 2 September 1966). According to one reviewer, the tense faces captured in close-ups all looked the same and made it impossible to identify with the heroism of the Algerian fighters (*Le Monde*, 2 September 1966).

Only in *Arts* was *The Battle of Algiers* regarded as providing as yet unseen images of a conflict, images of ‘the immense potential battlefield’ that had so far remained ‘apparently … empty of direct confrontations [corps-à-corps]’ (Stora 1997: 187). *Arts* claimed that for ‘us here in France, to look at ourselves through the eyes of others has become an urgent matter of public health’ (14 September 1966). This constituted a very dissonant acknowledgement that French identity had been affected by decolonization and that the French had from now on to draw on the cultural productions of former colonies to learn about their own history, a step that most reviewers could

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9 For more detail on Yacef’s role see Forgacs’ article above.
not even imagine and did not need to imagine in view of the hierarchies that prevailed in film culture. Significantly, the review in *La Croix* (2 September 1966), one of the more positive, engaged with the film only to support the implicit parallel *The Battle of Algiers* imposed between the ‘blind terrorism’ of the Algerian bombers who killed innocent victims and the ‘strong repressive measures’ carried out by the French air force. Four years after the end of the conflict, the reviewer questioned the French government’s rhetoric about the illegitimacy of the Algerian struggle but without contesting the legitimacy of French military reprisals.

These categories used in assessing the film – regarding the illegitimacy of the film festival, of the auteur, of the mode of production and of the representation – all guaranteed the legitimacy of the negative judgement. Critics could overlook the film’s documentary style, its vivid rendering of the conflict, and its recreation of the atmosphere of the casbah during the war, on the grounds that the film did not meet any of the requirements expected from a film in French film culture at the time. Thus the film was criticized both for its excesses and for its indecisiveness, sometimes within a single review. It was not only constructed as a failed ‘process of discursive structuration’ (Odin 2000: 57), but also and maybe more importantly as a failed process of production in that the operations involved in the production of the film were not recognized as guaranteeing a legitimate political discourse about the struggle for liberation and about the birth of a nation. Consequently, any account of the ‘adjustment’ of the spectator to the film had become superfluous because the diegesis, the narrative and this particular representation of a historical moment did not require any such engagement (ibid.).

In France, *The Battle of Algiers* started its life drifting on the edges of a film culture in which it had no place. The criteria imposed by the Auteur Policy and the New Wave – among them the necessity of the autonomy of cinema as art – coincided neatly with the dismissal of an Italo-Algerian production. There was a consensus in the press as well as in the industry that *The Battle of Algiers* should not be released in France at the time and no distributor ever requested a certificate for its release even after it had received the Golden Lion.

1970: a legitimate film for a mature nation

*The Battle of Algiers* was not the first film about the Algerian War of Independence nor was it the first Algerian film to be released in France after Algerian independence. French audiences had had the opportunity to see several films about the war in the first half of the 1960s (Eades 2006; Guibbert 1992), but the attitude of the French toward the Algerian War of Independence was very narcissistic and most films dealt with France, the
French and French and European culture during the war (Le Petit soldat by Jean-Luc Godard, released in 1963; Muriel, le temps d’un retour by Alain Resnais, released in 1964; La Belle Vie by Robert Enrico, released in 1964; and other rarely seen films that had no certificate). Other films dealt with the war in Algeria, including Les Oliviers de la justice by James Blue, a French production about a pied noir12 living in France who returns to Algeria during the war to bury his father and decides to settle there. The film was released in 1962 and well received by the national press. Les Centurions, a Columbia production directed by Mark Robson about a French parachute regiment in Indochina and Algeria which presented different male points of view on the Algerian War of Independence, was released in 1966, shortly after Pontecorvo’s triumph in Venice. Les Centurions featured big box office draws – Anthony Quinn, Maurice Ronet and Alain Delon – and did well commercially. Also, Le Vent des Aurès by Mohamed Lakhdar-Hamina – an Algerian film, made in 1966, about a woman following her son who is taken prisoner and sent to a camp – got a small-scale release in Paris and in the provinces and was reviewed positively in the French national press.13

In 1970, Universal Films requested a certificate for the distribution of The Battle of Algiers and obtained it without any difficulty. Nevertheless, the commercial release of the film due to start in June was suspended owing to disruptions and threats from extreme right groups as well as political lobbying from war veterans or associations of pieds noirs. Once more the film became the object of two debates that are related but distinct and that clearly went beyond the issue of the representation, as most people discussing the film had not yet seen it. The first debate was about the values associated with national culture, the second about censorship. In the press, opposition took the form of articles in extreme right newspapers seething with hatred for the ‘Italo-Fellagha’14 film, press releases issued by war veteran organizations, coverage of the disruptions in the cinemas which resulted in exhibitors cancelling some shows and local authorities banning others. Even though the ban by local authorities of a few screenings of Lakhdar Hamina’s Le Vent des Aurès in southern France in 1969 and January 1970 had also been reported in the press, it is clear that the international recognition of Pontecorvo’s film made it the object of much more attention.

The Battle of Algiers became a pawn in a much more politicized national culture allowing various communities to position themselves in relation to the Algerian War of Independence. By now most critics no longer saw the film as an insignificant film production or as a blow to the honour of the French, but as a means to mark the divide between an enlightened humanist French community and retrograde pieds noirs and war veterans. (Some critics questioned the representation of Colonel Mathieu, the fictionalized

12 See p. 366, n. 2.

13 In Paris and its suburbs Les Centurions sold 389,983 tickets over ten weeks; Le Vent des Aurès 22,572 tickets over seven weeks; and Les Oliviers de la justice 29,323 tickets.

14 See p. 341, n. 2.
French leader of the ‘paras’, regarding it as too positive with respect to the real-life officers who may have inspired the character.)

Understandably, articles about the need to resist the intimidatory tactics of various lobbies and to release the film established lines of discussion that the reviews followed; the protest against all forms of censorship was more prominent than was actual analysis of the film. Writers were clearly competing in the overdue recognition of the legitimacy of the Algerian struggle for liberation. Thus, expressing support for the film became a means to prove that ‘a nation must take responsibility for its own history’ and that the national community was a ‘mature people’ (‘un peuple adulte’) able to rise above the divisions and prejudices caused by this now-resolved conflict, an effort that the pieds noirs and war veterans were apparently deemed incapable of making (France-Soir, 5 June 1970).

Thus, in the 1970s, The Battle of Algiers became part of a much wider protest and was lumped into the category of censored films, even though it was never actually censored by the national Commission de la Censure Cinématographique. The debate about censorship in the national press went beyond the issue of decolonization – it also focused, for instance, on the representation of sexuality – and was part of the larger expression of a growing malaise in French culture about what was perceived as the outdated and stifling paternalism of the French public audio-visual media. The ban of a five-minute excerpt from The Battle of Algiers in a political programme, Panorama, in June 1970, generated a slew of articles, the resignation of the prominent journalist Olivier Todd who hosted the programme, and much hostility towards the government, toward the national committee in charge of censorship and toward other forms of censorship including political lobbies, distributors who were only interested in making money, exhibitors who lacked any kind of commitment and the audio-visual media’s servility in relation to the government in general. The Battle of Algiers was evoked in the press primarily alongside films like Elise ou la vraie vie (1970), the adaptation of a novel by Claire Etcherelli in which a French girl working in a car factory falls in love with an Algerian colleague who is an FLN activist; its director Michel Drach had to borrow money in order to manage the distribution himself because he could not find a distributor for the film. Among other films mentioned were Lakhdar Hamina’s Le Vent des Aurès and Comité Audin/Jacques Panijel’s Octobre à Paris (1963), a documentary about the Paris demonstrations of 1961.15 Shot without authorization, the film obtained a certificate after René Vautier, a prominent filmmaker in the struggle against French colonial power, went on hunger strike in 1973, but it still has not been shown because Panijel’s condition that a preface be added to the film has never been met by the distributors (Panijel 1997).

The ‘national’ release of The Battle of Algiers started in the summer of 1970 in the provinces and in October 1971 in Paris where it was screened...
less widely than initially planned, in one, then up to four cinemas. Screenings were sporadically disrupted but the film went to the end of its run with a very steady stream of spectators. It did reasonably well at the box office, like other French films about the war at the beginning of the 1970s. It was seen by 126,623 spectators over sixteen weeks in Paris (147,032 over twenty-two weeks). *Elise ou la vraie vie* sold 146,242 tickets; *Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès*, a fictionalized account of the reluctant involvement of a group of soldiers from Brittany in the war and of the desertion of one of them with the Algerian prisoner he was guarding, received the Grand Prix de la Critique at the Cannes Film Festival in 1972 and drew 110,216 spectators; *La Guerre d'Algérie*, a documentary film by Yves Courrière (the author of a four-volume history, *La Guerre d'Algérie* (1970–1973)) and Philippe Monnier, based on archival material that came out in March 1972, drew 169,885. None of them did as well as *RAS* by Yves Boisset (1973), another popular fiction about the participation yet again of a group of French soldiers who had been recalled and were regarded as strong-headed and dangerous, which drew 324,617 spectators. By contrast, *December*, the second film by Lakhdar-Hamina that was released in Paris a few months before *RAS*, drew only 18,025 spectators. Overall, these audience figures attest to a growing interest in the war. While they appear high if one remains attached to the belief that it was a taboo subject in the national imaginary, they are nevertheless low if one takes into account the publicity that the struggle against censorship generated. The gap in the box office figures between Algerian films and French films also highlights that the French were /C1 and perhaps are /C1 interested primarily in French representations of the French during the Algerian War of Independence. This may explain why *The Battle of Algiers* was less popular than ‘smaller’ French auteur films even though it did much better than Lakhdar Hamina’s films. Vautier’s film, though it had won a major prize, was probably hindered by Vautier’s reputation, his vocal anti-colonial stance and the perception that he had fought on the Algerian side.

The articles and reviews about *The Battle of Algiers* published in 1970 and 1971 were almost unanimously laudatory, with only *Aspects de la France*, a very vocal extreme right paper, arguing that the film should be banned, and the *Tribune Socialiste* and the film journal *Cinéma* still criticizing the film’s lack of political analysis. The negative reviews were in publications from the extreme right and from the left, with small readerships. Once again, in this second phase the film’s reception in France was characterized by a broad consensus. What is most striking, however, is that even though the critics saw *The Battle of Algiers* this time round as endowed with great ‘cinematographic qualities’, they used exactly the same terms to describe the film. It was regarded as a ‘work whose artistic qualities should have lifted it above reactions tied to its context’ (*France-Soir*, 4 June 1973).
1970). This reversal of attitude could be attributed to the passing of time and to the perceived necessity to make amends. Still, emphatic praise could not disguise an ambivalent attitude. First, *The Battle of Algiers* remained at the same level in the hierarchy of films mentioned in the reviews. In a few instances, it was compared negatively with *La Voie* by Slim Riad (1968) which can be regarded as having replaced Rosi’s *Salvatore Giuliano* as the benchmark for this film, and once with *Les Oliviers de la justice*. Overall, *The Battle of Algiers* was still rarely integrated in a larger corpus of Algerian films or films about the war.19 Even though the representation of the War of Independence had become an issue in the assessment of the film, in critical discourse, film form prevailed and *The Battle of Algiers* was deemed to lag far behind *Battleship Potemkin* or *Z* (Costa-Gavras, 1969). Second, the film was examined at the intersection of two concerns that cannot be easily reconciled. On one level, the critics were emphatic about the visual beauty of the diegetic world and its vivid rendering of the struggle in the casbah. It did not really matter whether these were the outcome of the tempo of the film, of the chemical processing of the film, or of the performances of the actors, which were highly praised: ‘Nothing... looks acted or reconstituted. It not only takes the form of a document but has a document’s impalpable materiality’ (*Figaro*, 1 June 1970); ‘The naturalness of the characters captured on the spot’ (*Canard Enchaîné*, 3 June 1970); ‘Everything rings true’ (*La Croix*, 2 June 1970). This time the film was discussed as providing the visual raw material of a conflict of which images had been lacking. On another level, the critics dealt with the film’s capacity to produce a political and historical analysis. They often described the ways in which the film could have fallen into, but avoided, the traps of nationalistic propaganda or a Manichean world view. As a result, the film was highly praised for its objectivity, its impartiality, its political honesty and its sobriety. The question of how the spectator was positioned, however, was not clearly addressed.

Pontecorvo’s image as director was likewise renewed in this second phase, although this transformation was not the outcome of a shift in his trajectory as a filmmaker. Indeed, shortly before the commercial release of *The Battle of Algiers* Pontecorvo had released another feature film about decolonization in the West Indies, *Queimada*, starring Marlon Brando.20 Despite its relative success in France (over 89,500 spectators saw it in Paris), *Queimada* did not significantly affect Pontecorvo’s status in French film culture. While *Queimada* was at times evoked as confirming his continued interest in struggles for independence in the colonies, he was not constructed as an auteur in relation to a corpus of films but as the heir of a legitimate national Italian film history. Pontecorvo was seen to belong to the second generation of neo-realists who successfully combined ‘aestheticism’ with the ‘rigour of a Marxist approach’ (*L’Express*, 1 June 1970) – a capacity that was contested,
significantly, by one of the few negative reviews in Cinéma. Such an interpretation of Pontecorvo’s style may be surprising: the plot-driven rhythm of The Battle of Algiers is very remote from what André Bazin, for instance, regarded as the specific features of neo-realism (Bazin 1975). The notion that the conception of the film was ‘bicephalous’ remained, although credit was given this time to Franco Solinas, the screenwriter who participated in the writing of Salvatore Giuliano, rather than to Saadi Yacef. Pontecorvo was described as a ‘witness of his time’, able to steer between the Scylla of caricature and the Charybdis of complacency, drawing praise for his impartial, yet engaged, representation of the war. Thus, the main effect of the transformation of Pontecorvo’s status as a respected filmmaker (he wasn’t considered a real auteur) was the new legitimacy of his own comments, now considered to offer a trustworthy point of entry into the interpretation of the film.

Some perceptions of the film’s limitations did survive: Tribune Socialiste and Cinéma criticized Pontecorvo, Yacef and Solinas for a questionable ideological slant, for their stylistic choices and for the lack of Marxist dialectical analysis. For Cinéma, the film remained ‘like the Algerian revolution, a nationalist ode and nothing more’ (Cinéma, December 1971). Pontecorvo, Cinéma claimed, had succumbed to the mysticism of action and produced a ‘western’. The critics highlighted the absence of the pieds noirs, the excess of ‘description’ and the lack of character development. In this second phase, assessments based primarily on a political reading of the film, however, appeared as solitary protests amidst the overwhelming applause.

As I have indicated, the reception of The Battle of Algiers cannot be detached from the context of the struggle against censorship of which it was a part and of the re-ordering of French culture taking place in the national press at the time, a process to which the film contributed. Consequently, even though the point of view on the film adopted by most critics shifted by 180 degrees, French reviewers still positioned themselves primarily as Frenchmen in their response to what had become a legitimate representation of the Algerian War of Independence. Doing so, they did not condemn or even revise the categories that had been the foundation of the new French film culture of the 1960s, nor did they have in mind the promotion of any alternative and more political film culture. As Frenchmen they endorsed the position of politically aware individuals, a position they had staunchly opposed a few years earlier, and it is from this position that they affirmed what they liked about the film. French national culture at large was much more politicized in the early 1970s and the necessity to take a clear stance on decolonization and censorship overrode any real engagement with the political analysis offered by the film. In other words, The Battle of Algiers was once again considered as a ‘process of discursive structuring'; but this
time, it was considered to have achieved its goal even though the film was not integrated into a corpus, be it that of Algerian cinema, of representations of the Algerian War of Independence, or of resistance films.

It is clear too that the thorough reconsideration of the relationship between film and politics that shook French film culture in the early 1970s, and made room for the recognition of The Battle of Algiers, could not embrace the film. Caroline Eades shows that a fair number of postcolonial films were produced and released in the 1970s and argues very convincingly that postcolonial films – a corpus of fiction films about the French colonial empire produced after its demise from the former colonizer’s point of view – have enabled the shift from memory to history. As a response to the coherence of colonial discourse, the filmmakers in question have favoured fiction as a means to construct a different temporality anchored in the present that enables them to account for the past. The films tend to privilege a fragmentation of time, individual points of view and memories that questions the limits of rigid ethnic, national and gender categories, rather than any recounting of events (Eades 2006: 63–101). Despite its real attempt at humanizing both sides of the conflict, it is easy to see how The Battle of Algiers does not quite fit into such a vision of postcolonial cinema. Even though the film was clearly made with ‘Western’ audiences in mind, its story is not told from the colonizer’s point of view, and, more to the point, even though the story is to a degree fictionalized, the film constitutes a meticulous reconstruction of a precise historical moment. Mainstream film criticism awkwardly meshed together a recognition of the film’s formal beauty and the humanity of its narrative with a recognition of the birth of a nation, failing to consider the extent to which its specific film aesthetics and the country and mode of production may have hindered the ‘adjustment’ of the spectators. Critics’ main aim was to endorse the representation rather than to reflect on the film’s effect on audiences. Within this context, the rejection of the film by Cinéma and Tribune Socialiste made sense. Paradoxically in the 1970s The Battle of Algiers had come to be seen in mainstream French culture and in mainstream film culture as a remarkable universal film against decolonization, but the compunction to express clearly one’s ‘adherence’ to the representation overrode any desire to establish the film’s status as a work of cinema or even to consider it as part of French film heritage.

2004: a classic outside the confines of French film culture

The Battle of Algiers was shown as part of the selection of classics at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, before being re-released in French cinemas in September, and receiving its first French television broadcast on the Franco-German public channel ARTE in November. The renewal of interest in the
film was attributed by critics to the 2003 screening of the film at the Pentagon as part of the search by the American military for strategies to fight terrorism in Iraq. Here again, it was the news that brought *The Battle of Algiers* back into the limelight.

A very approximate and inaccurate history of the censorship of the film was used as a teaser in marketing the film and once again the publicity surrounding its release tended to emphasize the events that brought the film to attention rather than the quality of the film itself. The distributor’s promotional flyers and booklet sold the film as never having been available, ‘forbidden in France’ in 1965, ‘released at last but quickly withdrawn from the screens’ in 1971, ‘screened at the Pentagon’ in 2003. In the event, the interest of the French public remained very limited, with only 13,266 tickets sold in 2004, i.e., one tenth of those sold at its 1971 release in Paris. (These figures cannot be interpreted as attesting to a particularly marked lack of interest in the film, however, whatever the reasons for it may be, because the box office figures for re-releases are commonly much lower than those of first releases.)

The critical response was certainly much more limited in scale than in the earlier phases and critics expressed surprise at the belated resonance that the film was finding in French culture as well as doubts about the Pentagon’s real motivation for screening such a film. Even though the film was highly praised in the national press, critics could not but regard the screening at the Pentagon as raising suspicions about the film’s capacity to transcend dubious appropriation. The Pentagon connection, however, strongly affected reviewers’ perception of the film, which was no longer seen as providing an opportunity to re-examine the representation of the Algerian War of Independence, French national identity in a postcolonial context or Algerian identity. Rather, critics now regarded *The Battle of Algiers* primarily in terms of its apparent pertinence to the ‘global war on terrorism’ and the perceived conflict between Islam and the ‘Western world’.

*Cahiers du cinéma* devoted a special feature to the film consisting of five articles by critics philosophers, and film scholars, wherein the negative assessment of the film was cast in such strong terms that it undermined, on moral grounds, the legitimacy of any critic or analyst who did not condemn the film, let alone anyone who dared consider it worthy of filmic attention.21 Each article addressed the specific context of the 2004 release of the film and regarded its appropriation in the current debate on international terrorism as evidence of its lack of legitimacy. Jacques Rivette’s seminal 1961 article ‘De l’abjection’ about Pontecorvo’s *Kapo*, a scathing critique of the film which equated the value of a film with the morality of its director’s formal choices, was evoked to exclude Pontecorvo from the category of auteurs (Giavarini 2004: 72). The critique offered by *Cahiers* in 2004 was articulated first around the representation of a heroic terrorism. Thus, Abdelwahab Meddeb claimed that *The Battle of Algiers* extolled the virtues of terrorist

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engagement and an ‘ideology of sacrifice’, saw the women in the film as suicide bombers, and therefore regarded the film as contributing to the glorification of terrorism in Algeria – a position which is highly questionable, not least because, although there is one suicide attack in the film, the women are not suicide bombers (Meddeb 2004: 68). Jean-Louis Comolli claimed that the spectator’s body was ‘projected into’ the body of the torture victim: according to him, spectators are put in the position of always expecting new blows, with each blow increasing their ‘jouissance’ (2004: 70, 71). Comolli strongly objected to the film’s ‘control’ of the spectator’s affect as well as to the implied message that political awareness and engagement do not stand a chance against violence. Neither Meddeb nor Comolli considered The Battle of Algiers as a film about decolonization – that might vaguely correspond to the vision that the filmmaker sought to construct – but they did raise the question of the spectator’s position as it is constructed in film form and as it can be analysed in historical terms. In doing so, both critics implicitly moved the debate away from a discussion of the representation of the Algerian War of Independence to a discussion of the impact, on easily manipulated masses, of a film aimed at large audiences. They described the film as lending itself to dubious appropriations by various audiences (especially in the light of international terrorism) and dismissed the film through their invocation of vague categories of spectators – and it is not clear whether these categories are national, political, military or religious – over whom the film putatively cast a dangerous spell. In doing so, they signalled that the question of the reception of the film was no longer a French problem but a much larger one.

Even though the reviewers in the national press were aware of the screening at the Pentagon and also placed the film in the context of a global ‘war on terrorism’, they did not draw the same conclusions: the spectrum of evaluations of the film varied from excellent to mildly interesting. Libération, for instance, noted the ‘painful resonance of the film at a time of radicalization of a type of Islam’, but still considered the film the ‘best film ever made about the Algerian war. Because it was the most credible and the fairest’ (4 November 2004).

In 2004, the filmic value of The Battle of Algiers was treated as taken for granted, and the film was praised as much for its powerful representation of the war as for its formal choices, its ‘sumptuous black and white [photography] and quasi-documentary realism’ (Télérama, 26 May 2004). Comparisons, always rare, with other films about the War of Independence or with other films about struggles for liberation had all but disappeared. The Battle of Algiers was accepted as a landmark to the extent that no justification for this status now seemed necessary. Some reviews implicitly endorsed the marketing claims that interpreted the new release as a belated means to right a wrong. Other reviews remained purely descriptive, noting the power and beauty of the film without engaging in a debate about the
spectator’s position or the impact of the film, as construction and representation, on audiences today.

To summarize: the central explicit issue for Cahiers du cinéma was the spectator’s position and this was dealt with in two ways: first, as the outcome of film form that not only deprived him/her of any freedom but also allowed him/her to take pleasure in a questionable representation that promoted violence; and, second, in relation to history where contemporary appropriations of the film constituted a diversion from the film’s initial intent and attested to its weakness. It was in the name of these easily manipulated spectators that the experts adopted a strong moral stance in order to condemn the film. This moral stance did not apparently ‘filter down’ to affect the reception in the national press. There it was impossible to distinguish any pattern of response that might be attributed to divisions in the press between right and left, highbrow and lowbrow, or any dissension concerning the film’s positive attributes, which were perceived as a mixture of stylistic, contextual, formal and narrative traits. Previously the evaluation of the film had been implicitly considered a France-centred issue; today the question of different communities of spectators means the film is taken to belong to a much larger struggle, one that goes beyond French national preoccupations. In raising the possibility of an Algerian spectator galvanized by the film, recent critics of the film have made the question of the positioning of the specifically French spectator and of the relationship between film and decolonization in France appear completely irrelevant. In this context, in France, The Battle of Algiers remains, in many ways, unwatched and under-analysed.

**Conclusion**

The different phases of the reception of The Battle of Algiers illustrate both the vigour of the principles that established the new French film culture in the late 1950s to early 1960s and the constricting inability of this culture to redefine over time the questions it ought to raise about cinema. The Battle of Algiers constitutes an interesting case study because it highlights the extent to which the relative ‘invisibility’ of the film, commonly attributed to political censorship, is actually the outcome of its cultural marginalization. The film was never considered primarily in relation to other films within a defined category, such as representations of the Algerian War of Independence, Algerian cinema or resistance films, or in relation to the audience’s perception of the film as a film. Instead the film has always been apprehended, and in a sense submerged, within larger concerns – about France’s international image in the wake of the loss of the empire in the mid1960s; about censorship and
postcolonial national identity in the early 1970s; and about the global ‘war on terrorism’ that made the film look suspicious in 2004.

Crucial here is the relationship between film culture and national culture. The ‘processes of structuration’, be they diegetic or discursive, at work in the film were certainly evoked by the critics – only to be discredited the first time and highly praised the second time on the same grounds – but they were never convincingly examined. The spectator’s ‘adjustment’ to the film and the operations required for this adjustment remained underexplored, because the appropriation of the film in national culture operated at other levels and because this enquiry into the spectator’s response to the film did not bear on the evaluation of a film that does not really fit into the categories valorized by French film culture. The strong narrative of The Battle of Algiers, its visual fluency, its documentary quality, its clear characterization, and, as well as his formal choices, the director’s trajectory, together made it impossible for the film to become part of that film culture. If at times it appeared to have gained critical legitimacy nonetheless, this was only because the debate about the release of the film and its subsequent release contributed to a larger debate about the reconstruction of national culture.

In the 2004 context of international terrorism that dominated the last phase in the reception of the film, there was, as we have seen, a sharp divergence between the rejection of the film by ‘legitimate’ critics and its taken-for-granted status as a classic by the rest of the press. In this way, The Battle of Algiers exposed the fading hegemony of the discourse associated with an elite film journal like Cahiers du cinéma, with its very restrictive conception of film. The strong moral condemnation of The Battle of Algiers in Cahiers highlighted the latter’s apparent need to reaffirm film hierarchies and with it a real distrust of the ‘masses’ and mass culture. Such a distrust cannot be interpreted as a rejection of mass audience films in general that can be valorized in French film culture as big spectacles, but rather as a distrust in the capacity of its audiences to draw on the experience of such a film to reflect on representations of themselves. The limitations of Cahiers’ position deserve further critique, but it is quite clear that it is no longer tenable. It cannot resist indefinitely the necessity to revise the categories at work in film criticism and to account for audiences’ experience of film, hence the need to take into account more systematically a much broader spectrum of films, including those outside the hierarchy imposed by film criticism. The reception history of The Battle of Algiers helps demonstrate, among other things, the limits of the hegemonic position of French film criticism in national culture and its unwillingness or inability to direct its attention to films aimed at large audiences. In the end, French culture is left with a film that offers a powerful evocation of the Algerian War of Independence yet is banished to the fringes of a film culture incapable of offering an appropriate framework for its analysis.
References


