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Across five decades and many different cultures, audience reactions to Gillo Pontecorvo's masterpiece *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) have been extraordinarily varied, divided, and fraught. In France, screenings of the film continued to provoke violent attacks on cinemas until the early 1980s. Elsewhere it has reputedly been required viewing for diverse insurrectionary groups including the Black Panthers, the IRA, and the PLO.<sup>1</sup> It can be regarded as the most successful Algerian film ever made: it was an Italian-Algerian coproduction that did well internationally at the box office and won critical acclaim, including three Oscar nominations, and has been shown regularly on Algerian television; but not all Algerian nationalists have approved of it, or for that matter considered it Algerian. And for many audiences around the world – notably, for my present purposes, in postcolonial studies, where the film is widely admired and frequently taught – it has served as a prominent source of images and understandings of the Algerian war of independence.

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NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For references and a fuller discussion of some of these issues around the making of the film and its reception, see Harrison, ed.. I am grateful to Taylor & Francis for permission to quote at length from the interview with Saadi Yacef published in that collection: see Harrison "An Interview."

When the film was re-released in several countries in the mid-2000s, it quickly became apparent that it could still divide opinion. In France in May 2004 the journal *Cahiers du cinéma* marked the occasion of the re-release with a collection of essays which, unlike most other responses to the film this time around, were predominantly hostile.<sup>2</sup> Several of the *Cahiers* critics seemed discomfited that, in the first decade of the new century, *The Battle of Algiers* appeared grimly topical, and they seemed unsure how far to hold the film itself responsible for the violent history it represented, or for its impact on diverse audiences – audiences that reportedly included both sides in the “war on terror.” The introduction to the *Cahiers* dossier alluded to the screening of the film at the Pentagon in September 2003, advertised with a flyer that read: “How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. ... Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to [...] this film.”<sup>3</sup> After this the *Cahiers* dossier noted: “the film also attracts affectionate attention from supporters of radical Islam, who find in it, or believe they find in it, if not a set of instructions then at least some justification” (Editorial 64). Salient among the *Cahiers* critics’ objections to the film, it turned out, was the inspiration it was thought to offer to Islamists.

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<sup>2</sup> The *Cahiers* had a history of hostility to Pontecorvo, especially associated with Jacques Rivette’s response to *Kapo* in 1961. I will not discuss that history here.

<sup>3</sup> The flyer is quoted by Kaufman. The flyer was also quoted in the *Cahiers* 64. In the 2004 documentary “*The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study*” a US counterterrorism chief alludes to the Pentagon screening and bemoans the fact (as he sees it) that the battlefield of ideas “is all al-Qaida’s in the Muslim world.”

One passage, in a transcribed conversation between Marie-José Mondzain, Abdelwahab Meddeb and Jean-Michel Frodon,<sup>4</sup> gives a particularly clear view of the critics' unease. The passage goes (slightly edited) as follows:

Mondzain: Things in Pontecorvo's film that seem ambiguous to us today were invisible at the time. Who at the time could see that *The Battle of Algiers* not only tells the story of a subjugated people's fight against the power dominating them, but also represents the ideology of sacrifice, an ambiguous panegyric to puritanism, and a questionable relationship to morality? The scene where the drunkard is lynched is appalling, but it can be viewed as a scene of purification and today we are familiar with the consequences of that. It establishes a link between political action and moral order, a link that is very strong and that may be dangerous.

Meddeb: Without realizing it, the film foretells the postcolonial state's drift into totalitarianism [...] It represents unwittingly [*inconsciemment*] the double genealogy of Algerian resistance, which had two sources and frames of reference, Islamic and modern; and those turned out to be irreconcilable because no-one did the work needed to bring them together and unify them. The independence movement stemmed at once from traditional roots permeated with religion, and from European roots, in the name of human rights and peoples' right to self-governance. Both reference points were present, but people acted as if they could leave it at that. And the result was

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<sup>4</sup> Mondzain is a specialist in philosophical questions around the image; Frodon was chief editor of the *Cahiers* from 2003 to 2009; Meddeb, who was born in Tunisia, is a writer who has become well known in France as a commentator on Islam.

the civil war of the 1990s. [*Cette double référence est là, mais on fait comme si cela allait de soi. Il en résultera la guerre civile des années 90.*]<sup>5</sup>

Mondzain: The pressing significance [*prégnance*] of Islamism in today's world prompts us to see that distinction more clearly now, and, when in the film we hear the decrees condemning alcohol and sex, to see the mark of Muslim fundamentalism [...]

Meddeb: [...] Which goes to show how much you're influenced by current events when you watch a film. Everything we've just been discussing was literally invisible to me when I saw *The Battle of Algiers* in 1966 in Tunis. (Meddeb et al 68)

Several ideas that are interlinked in these remarks will be explored in this essay. First, it is suggested that Pontecorvo somehow, perhaps despite himself, captured something important about the way Islam was enmeshed in the Algerian nationalists' fight against French colonialism. On this point the *Cahiers* commentators were not alone: Alan A. Stone, for example, film critic for the *Boston Review*, wrote: "If Pontecorvo could now revisit his own film, he might recognize – as we can with the hindsight of 9/11 – the essential place of Islam in the film's setting and how that background context has now become its central message" (157-58).<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, as I have already noted, it is suggested that *The Battle of Algiers* may thus have offered and continues to offer a source of inspiration to Islamist terrorists. Again, other critics reached the same conclusion: B. Ruby Rich, for instance, made the arresting remark that "in today's context *The Battle of Algiers* has begun to look like a recruiting film for Al-Qaeda"

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<sup>5</sup> Meddeb's use of "on" is hard to translate: it is not clear who he has in mind, and whether his "on" may include the film. Other remarks suggest it may: he speaks (66) of "an [historical] imaginary fed to a great extent by the film" and states that "we live in an environment, in a frame of mind that Pontecorvo's film helped to create."

<sup>6</sup> For a wider discussion of responses of this sort, see O'Riley.

(111). The feeling of the *Cahiers* critics was clearly that the film's historico-political role in this respect is, or had become, a culpable one; and they linked that culpability to the film's "ambiguity," a notion evoked twice by Mondzain in the first of the remarks just quoted. Previous critics who were hostile to the film tended to maintain it was not ambiguous enough: Peter Sainsbury, for example, wrote in 1971: "It achieves the characteristic of a complete statement... confirming itself as a concluded representation of history about which no further questions are to be asked" (cited by Moore 56).<sup>7</sup> The *Cahiers* critics' objection was different: Pontecorvo's ambiguity was not the good ambiguity that film criticism would tend to find in much canonical film; rather it was a form of "schizophrenia" (Meddeb's term), to be contrasted unfavorably with the positive equivocality of a Murnau ("free, inexhaustible, without danger" [Meddeb 69]). One further issue deserves emphasis in all this: as the *Cahiers* critics note, Islamic aspects of the action have been, at one time or another, for some audiences, more or less "invisible."

If I use the *Cahiers* critics' responses as a starting point for this essay it is for two reasons: they encapsulate, but fail to pursue seriously, some significant concerns for anyone today who is interested in Pontecorvo's film and the war of independence; and at the same time they raise general questions about critical methods and responsibilities. My first aim, then, is simply to offer a detailed assessment of the film's Islamic elements. The film, although very accurate historically in most respects, is selective in focus and partly fictionalized, and I will "read" it in conjunction with numerous other historical sources, including an interview with Saadi Yacef, about whom I shall say more shortly.<sup>8</sup> Having tried in this way to cast light on the place of Islam in the film, and also in the war, I will return later in the essay to the other issues

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<sup>7</sup> Moore deems this a "fair assessment of the politico-epistemological limits of Pontecorvo's film" (56). Sainsbury's article appeared in *Afterimage* 3 (1971), 5-7.

<sup>8</sup> For analysis of the film's relation to history, including criticism of certain omissions, see Mellen 61-68; and Harries. All the main characters apart from Mathieu are based directly on real individuals, but he is a fictionalized character, based on several senior army figures, including Jacques Massu.

raised by the *Cahiers* critics: on the one hand, questions about the legacy of the film and of the war; on the other hand, concerns over the film's "ambiguity," and the fluctuating visibility of whatever Islamic material it contains.

I should signal now that I cannot treat the vast question of the war's legacy, or even the question of the film's legacy, in any detail, and will not be attempting to assess concretely the *Cahiers*' claims and intimations about the influence of the film on Islamists. Indeed, part of my argument will be that substantiating or disproving those claims and intimations would entail a sort of empirical research that was not the project of the *Cahiers* critics any more than it is mine. Rather, I will focus on the question of whether the film's treatment of Islam appears irresponsibly "ambiguous;" and the question of how a dimension of the film that had once passed unnoticed could have become so striking and provocative to the *Cahiers* critics, as to various other audiences. On the face of it, after all, there is a tension between the idea that the film has served historically as dangerous propaganda, and the idea that its dangerously propagandistic elements were long imperceptible.

Part of what I will be exploring, to put it another way, beyond some specific questions around Islam, the film, and the war, is how a film such as this can mean such different things to different people, and in what sense that variability may be instructive for critical practice. It seems appropriate, then, before turning to the detail of the film, to say a little more about the context of my own response. As the *Cahiers* critics indicated, interpreting the film in terms of Islam would have been unthinkable to many audiences, including them, until quite recently; and from several perspectives, it is counter-intuitive. There is no reason to think that the film's director or its producer had any desire to emphasize the role of Islam, let alone to give expression to any ideological tendencies that some audiences forty years later could view as proto-Islamist.

Pontecorvo, who as well as directing the film co-wrote the screenplay with Franco Solinas, was an Italian Jew who was drawn to the subject of the Algerian war as a Communist, an internationalist, an anti-colonialist, and a former leader of the Italian resistance in the second world war. The producer, Saadi Yacef, had been an FLN leader in the casbah during the war, and took a lead in the actual “Battle of Algiers,” getting arrested just before its end; and he played himself in the film, as “Jaffar.” Although the Algerian side of the coproduction was led by his own company rather than by the State, the FLN government lent substantial logistical support to the shoot. The finished film initially did not please some senior FLN leaders, by his account; nonetheless, the FLN duly allowed its release and its screening on Algerian national television, where it now appears regularly. Yacef was made a Senator in 2001. In several senses if not all, then, Yacef may be considered a representative of the FLN. And as we will see – in contextualizing the film I will draw quite extensively, and quite critically, on an interview I conducted with him in 2007 – he too has been inclined to offer a secular account of the war.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, a secular or secularizing line on the war may be considered the general tendency of the FLN leadership: when in a recent book the Algerian historian Kamel Chachoua observed that for the FLN, “religion was an ideal basis on which to arouse combatants’ zeal” (an idea to which I will return shortly), he added that this analysis was “contrary to general opinion” of the war and in particular, contrary to the secularizing image that the FLN sought to project abroad (Chachoua 252).<sup>10</sup>

One reason for today’s FLN and for Yacef in particular to steer clear of the question of Islam in the war is, of course, the background of widespread anxiety and hostility in the non-

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<sup>9</sup> Yacef (whose name often appears in print as Yacef Saadi) published a memoir, *Souvenirs de la Bataille d’Alger, décembre 1956-septembre 1957* in 1962, before producing the film.

<sup>10</sup> There have of course been some fluctuations in the FLN line, and I should add that I have written this article in a period when the Arab Spring has raised the possibility – but, as I write, only the possibility – of significant political change in Algeria, which may alter the relation of the FLN to power and to Islam.



Muslim “West” with regard to Islam – of which the sometimes crude responses of the *Cahiers* critics seem symptomatic, at least in some respects. (It is clear, for example, that Meddeb’s explanation of the rise of Islamism, an international phenomenon with multiple origins, is startlingly cursory.) In that context many commentators, including me, are wary of lending, or appearing to lend, indirect support to those, notably on the Right in France, who may wish to overstate the religious dimension of the Algerian war of independence and/or to question the fundamental legitimacy of its goals.<sup>11</sup> If I have chosen to focus on this topic nonetheless, it is not just because certain critics have recently reacted – and perhaps over-reacted – to the film’s Islamic dimensions; above all, it is because I imagine I am primarily addressing readers in the sphere of postcolonial studies, where understandings of the war have tended, in my experience, to be over-secular.

Those understandings are powerfully and perhaps disproportionately shaped by the work of Frantz Fanon, who had reasons to downplay the significance of Islam in Algerian politics. Fanon’s background may have been a factor here, and certainly his role as an Algerian nationalist is all the more remarkable given that he was neither Algerian nor Muslim. But in any case, the link between anti-Islamic feeling and anti-anti-colonialism was already well-established at the time Fanon was writing; and much of his work must be apprehended as wartime propaganda whose aim was to alter opinion and behavior, rather than to provide a reliable account of Fanon’s own views. His famous essay “L’Algérie se dévoile” (“Algeria Unveiled”) is an obvious example, and is pertinent here. In writing that essay Fanon had tactical and political reasons to simplify and even misrepresent women’s relationship to the “veil,” tradition and Islam, which he depicted as basically secular, rational, tactical, and teleological – the *telos* being Algerian independence. In this way he all but avoided references to religious belief and religious

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<sup>11</sup> For a rabid example, see Pérez.

practices as such; he used “tradition” and its cognates repeatedly, but largely avoided words such as “Islam” and “religious,” except in summaries of erroneous colonial attitudes. In other words, Fanon’s essay offers no acknowledgement that Islam was an enduring part of the worldview of many Algerians, with a spiritual value irreducible to the contingencies of their political or historical circumstances.

It has sometimes been assumed that “Algeria Unveiled” shaped Pontecorvo’s representation of Algerian women in some of the best-known sequences of his film, but he denied having read it. In an interview with Pontecorvo for the postcolonial journal *Interventions*, Neelam Srivastava, thinking of the evidence in the film that Algerian women used both veiling and unveiling as forms of disguise during the war, appeared to find this hard to believe, a response that itself may attest to the prestige of Fanon in postcolonial studies. I do not mean that her reaction was unreasonable, and clearly it is possible that Pontecorvo, who was familiar with some of Fanon’s work, had forgotten exactly what he had read. But he insisted, quite plausibly: “We understood [...] not through the [=Fanon’s] book, but by talking with the local women and men. It was a rather ‘amusing’ sign, quote unquote, of their position; it was a curious thing.” Srivastava then asked: “The fact they used the veil instrumentally?”, to which Pontecorvo replied: “*Also* instrumentally” (110). This suggests that Pontecorvo recognized, in a way that Fanon’s essay did not, that the motivations for veiling could be religious as well as practical or political. It is another question, of course, how far any such sensitivity to religious belief and to Islam’s socio-political function found its way into Pontecorvo’s film; and it is to that question I now turn.

Most of the allusions to Islam in *The Battle of Algiers* come relatively near the beginning, in terms of both historical chronology and filmic timescape. After the opening titles, we see a man who has been tortured into giving away the final hiding place of Ali la Pointe, the FLN combatant who is at the centre of the film. Next we see soldiers rushing into the casbah to hunt down Ali and his group, whose death will mark the end of the “Battle of Algiers” as such.<sup>12</sup> An image of Ali’s face dissolves into the flashback that will form the bulk of the film, with an establishing shot panning from the European city to the casbah.

The first words we hear in the main part of the film, in voiceover, are these:  
 Front de Libération Nationale, Communiqué Number 1: Fellow Algerians  
 [*Peuple algérien*], our actions are directed against colonialism. Our goal is national independence with the re-establishment of the Algerian state, *in the framework of Islamic principles* [*dans le cadre des principes islamiques*] and with respect for all fundamental freedoms, irrespective of race or religion. To limit loss of life, we are offering the French authorities honorable discussions on our people’s right to self-rule. Algerians! Each of you has the duty to save your country and to win back its freedom. Algeria’s victory will be your victory. Forward, brothers, as one! The FLN calls on you to join the struggle.

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<sup>12</sup> The Algerian war of independence lasted from November 1954 to July 1962. The so-called Battle of Algiers was a period of confrontation sparked by a week-long general strike called by the FLN from 28 January 1957. Although the phrase was in use from around the time of the events themselves, it was always disputed. In response to Pontecorvo’s film (and Yacef’s book), Jacques Massu in 1971 published *La Vraie Bataille d’Alger*, where he claimed that Yacef was the first to use the phrase (11); whereas Yacef maintained Massu was first. Arguably the phrase reflected glory on both. Historians now use it with cautionary inverted commas, or avoid it altogether.

<sup>13</sup> My emphasis. This is the entirety of the communiqué as heard in the film. The original document, the “Proclamation” of 1 November 1954, is much longer. Its discursive preamble offers a justification of the choice of the name “Front de libération nationale” and among other things takes a sideswipe at the Algerian communist party.

To those audiences who, perhaps influenced by Fanon, may think of the discourse of the FLN as fundamentally secular, this early allusion to “Islamic principles” may be surprising. Questioned on this point, Yacef responded:

The first proclamation by the FLN was addressed to the French of Algeria and the French authorities and said that we would do everything in our power for our fatherland, that we were ready to die to free our country; but that we were ready to talk peacefully about the issues, and if we gained independence, it would be a secular state [*état laïc*]: different religions would be respected. Don’t forget that the first proclamation by the FLN was written in French; if it had been religious, it would have been in Arabic. Most of the leaders were not practicing, we didn’t pray and so on, but we’re Muslims. (Harrison “An Interview” 410)

In some respects that response is misleading. The fact remains that both in the film and in reality, the first declaration made an explicit, if brief, commitment to Islamic principles.<sup>14</sup> The communiqué’s commitment to the future state’s religious tolerance is important too, of course, but as the phrasing of the communiqué suggests, and contrary to Yacef’s claim in the interview, an *état laïc*, which would mean the separation of the state from religion, is not exactly what the

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Islam is a very small part of the document, yet is prominent in that it appears, as in the film, in the first programmatic statement of the movement’s goals. This appears halfway through the document and reads: “Goal: national independence, with:

i. the re-establishment of the sovereign, democratic, social [*sic*] Algerian state in the framework of Islamic principles [*La restauration de l’Etat Algérien souverain, démocratique et social dans le cadre des principes islamiques*];

ii. respect for all fundamental freedoms irrespective of race or confession.”

Other objectives included “The realization of North African unity in its natural Arabo-Muslim framework” – the only other reference to Islam. Reprinted in Harbi 101–103.

<sup>14</sup> Yacef’s response is also slightly misleading with regard to the use of French. Although it is true the FLN wanted its communiqué to reach French ears, the educational background of key FLN leaders was a significant factor in their choice of language.

FLN appeared to be promising during the war.<sup>15</sup> Nor is it exactly what it has offered since independence; one Algerian historian, Mohamed-Chérif Ferjani, remarks that: “from the start of the 1970s in Algeria, there was a recuperation of traditional (and retrograde) Islam. We went from the notion of ‘citizens’ to the notion of ‘believers’, the pretext being that ‘nationalism on its own is incapable of proving a cultural matrix’ and that ‘before being the citizen of a state, the Muslim is first and above all a servant of God’ (Algerian minister of religious affairs, *El Moudjahid* 2 September 1980)” (322-23).<sup>16</sup>

The second sequence in the film’s central flashback also contains an Islamic dimension that appears fleetingly and yet may have a certain prominence, at least to some eyes. We have seen Ali hustling on the street, and we see how he ends up in prison after his self-defeating decision, when he is running away from the police, to punch a European bystander who chose to trip him. In prison (the notorious Barberousse, used as location as well as setting for the shoot), Ali witnesses the execution of a militant. As the man is led to the guillotine, before repeatedly shouting “*tahia el-Djazair*” (long live Algeria) he twice shouts “*Allahu akbar*” (God/Allah is great). Should this be taken as a sign that for some participants the anti-colonial war was, at least in part, a religious war? When I put this question to Saadi Yacef he responded:

No. Absolutely not. More than 90% of Algerians were Muslims. It was thanks to Islam that we were never converted into Frenchmen, into Christians. All through the French occupation, from the beginning, Islam had persisted, through the observation of Ramadhan, prayer and so on. And that is what prevented integration. [...] But it wasn’t because of Islam that the war began;

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<sup>15</sup> Meynier notes (220) that during the war, “reference to Islam was a constant of the FLN’s discourse.” In the copious wartime documents assembled by Harbi and Meynier, references to *laïcité* are rare (e.g. 586), whereas there are more frequent references to Islam: see especially the section “L’idéologie en habits musulmans.”

<sup>16</sup> Gadant (33) cites as post-war examples of religiously-inspired legislation the 1963 Code la nationalité and the Code de la famille of 1984. See also Ralston, and MacMaster.

most Muslims were not in favor of the war, and they hid; they didn't play any role and things were left up to us, people who were from a Muslim background but not practicing Muslims. But if you're going to be executed, and you're from that background, you hope to go to paradise and you shout "God is great." It's the same for terrorists in Iraq; that's how people use "Allahu akbar"... You think of yourself as dying for the fatherland and for the glory of Islam. ... Islam played a very important role in encouraging individuals to accept death as their fate. (Harrison "An Interview" 410)

Many of these observations are valid, and are corroborated by other commentators on the war. Yacef is doubtless right about the courage that Islam could give combatants (I shall return to this shortly), and right to suggest that in the culture at large the cry of "Allahu akbar" may hover between religious conviction and cultural reflex. Between the two there may be no clear boundary in the mind of the individual, let alone the external observer. Yacef himself seems to waver: on the one hand, he distances himself from practicing Muslims, and implies one might shout the phrase "Allahu akbar" simply because of one's background; on the other hand he keeps the idea of paradise in play, attributes considerable power to Islam as a barrier to integration (on which point one should mention French prejudices as well as Muslim beliefs), and implies that any fighter from that background would believe they were dying for the glory of Islam.

Overall, it seems to me that Yacef's response again underplays Islam's role; and in some ways the film shares this tendency. Three points deserve emphasis in relation to the wider history of the war, beyond the film and beyond the moment of the "Battle." First, some FLN leaders were practising Muslims, contrary to Yacef's statement. According to Meynier in his *Histoire intérieure du FLN* (220), leaders of the FLN swore an oath on the Quran the night before

launching their struggle on 1 November 1954. Among them were Tawfiq al-Madani and Taalbi Tayeb, who arrived in the FLN via the AUMA (the Association of Algerian Ulama). The AUMA ceased to exist in 1957, but its slogan, “Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, and Algeria is my country,” was eventually adopted as the slogan of independent Algeria.<sup>17</sup> None of this finds expression in the film, unless you count the allusion to Islam in the first communiqué.

Secondly, despite Yacef’s rejection of the idea, there is little doubt that for a significant number of combatants outside the leadership, the war was inextricably religious. Monique Gadant writes: “in terms of their lived experience, for a good proportion of combatants of peasant origin, the jihad was against ‘the infidel’ more than against French imperialism” (23).<sup>18</sup> John Ruedy makes a similar point, emphasizing that there was an ideological split (as Gadant too implies) between urban leaders, who were predominantly secular / “cultural” Muslims, and their followers. “With the *mujahidin*, the peasant foot soldiers of the revolution, Islamic values and observances were focal,” he writes (“Continuities” 78). With its strictly urban focus, *The Battle of Algiers* has limited opportunity to explore this ideological and socio-geographical diversity. The difference between urban and rural circumstances is touched on only in passing, when in a

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<sup>17</sup> An extended discussion of the AUMA and of al-Madani in particular is offered by James McDougall in his thoughtful book *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*. Al-Madani seems a good example of a leading figure who experienced the war through an Islamic lens (in terms of jihad, sacrifice, and “universal Islamic renaissance,” (226)), but McDougall points out too (232) that he sent his children to French schools, and was reputed to enjoy a whisky.

<sup>18</sup> Gadant adds that “Popular consciousness conflated nationality, religious affiliation and use of Arabic, and to the present day the authorities have echoed that spontaneous ideology” (33; see also n16 above). Slimane Chikh (a former FLN activist) notes in his 1981 book *L’Algérie en armes* (326-27): “invoking Allah [/God] and turning to religious practices steeled the will and allowed combatants to come through the harshest ordeals. Above all, their attitude to death changed. It was no longer a purely individual matter, but became a matter of collective responsibility. It became less terrifying to the extent that it became linked with hope, from two points of view: as an activist, one hoped for independence; as a believer (and who isn’t a believer in the face of death?), one hoped for the paradise promised to all ‘mujahiddin’: those who sacrifice themselves to the greater glory of God. The Koran’s *Surah Al Imrân* (*Think not those of who have been slain in the cause of Allah as dead. Nay, they are living, in the presence of their Lord, and are granted gifts from him*) was repeated every time a combatant was buried, and every time his memory was invoked.” See also “Remembering History” on *The Battle of Algiers* disk 3, where Mohammed Harbi (another former FLN activist) discusses the issue. Chikh among others also makes the obvious but important point that the way the French used “Muslim” as a category in colonial Algeria, together with their policies toward “Muslims” and Islam as such, helped politicize Islam and associate it with Algerian nationalism (323-24; see also McDougall 92-94).

brief conversation at the end of the “Battle” an army officer draws a distinction between Algiers and the rest of Algeria.<sup>19</sup> The class aspect of the division is slightly more apparent, for example in the gap between the high standard of French among the senior leaders, and the illiteracy in both French and Arabic of a character such as Ali; but this division is not discussed, there is no mention of its possible religious dimension, and we have no real insight into the relation to Islam of Ali, a putative representative of ordinary Algerians.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly from a political and historical point of view, the FLN leadership *chose* to associate the movement with Islam more actively and more widely than could be surmised from Yacef’s remarks in the interview, or indeed from that sober reference in the first communiqué, in the film and in reality, to “Islamic principles.” A notable example was the FLN’s decision to name its mouthpiece publication *El Moudjahid*. The journal, like the first communiqué, was published first in French and was intended to influence international public opinion as well as the Algerian people. In this period the term *mujahid* (in its various spellings) was unfamiliar in the non-Muslim “West,” and its religious associations were less powerful than they are today. It appeared in a French dictionary for the first time only in 1968, becoming current, in French as in English, only after the Iranian revolution of 1979. Nevertheless the decision over the title was reached with some difficulty, in the context of colonial propaganda that tended, as I indicated earlier, to accuse FLN members of being religious fanatics; and the leaders of the FLN initially considered alternatives such as *El Moukafih* (“the combatant”) and *L’Algérien*.<sup>20</sup> After these hesitations, the first issue appeared bearing on its cover the title EL-MOUDJAHID in large capitals in the Roman alphabet, then smaller in Arabic; then still smaller,

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<sup>19</sup> Further distinctions internal to the FLN could be made, and linked to factors including irregularities in the spread of reformist Islam. Some *wilayas* (divisions) were more secular than others; but Meynier states that all had a markedly Muslim atmosphere, and that in some cases, the mujahiddin tried to impress their leaders with their religious zeal and were punished if they failed to observe ramadhan (221).

<sup>20</sup> On these debates see Gadant, especially chapter 2.



in French, LE COMBATTANT. Inside, it carried a pre-emptively defensive Editorial which, explaining that Islam was the last refuge of national values, said:

Some will be surprised, no doubt, at the title we have chosen, which they may believe to have been inspired by some form of political sectarianism or religious rigorism, whereas our goal is to free ourselves from the denationalizing yoke of colonialism, to achieve democracy and equality for all Algerians, irrespective of race or religion (*El Moudjahid* 1 (June 1956) 8-9).

According to Gadant, in the longer term the journal also tended to downplay the Islamic dimension of the fight; only once – she refers to the issue of 8 June 1959 – did *El Moudjahid* record combatants’ practice of shouting “Allahu akbar,” although that practice was commonplace (199n29). In such respects, as I have already noted, the FLN tended (and has tended) to emphasize its attachment to secularism. But against that tendency, the FLN leaders also, of course, through actions such as their decision to call their journal *El Moudjahid*, endeavored quite deliberately to tap into the religious sentiments and values of their compatriots.

In *The Battle of Algiers* this decision to stir up and channel religious energies finds expression in the sequences singled out in the *Cahiers* round table, those treating the FLN’s “purges” in the early stages of the war. When Ali is released from prison after five months, radicalized by his experiences there, he is sent on a mission to kill a policeman. He is handed a revolver by a woman accomplice, but it turns out that it won’t fire. The woman then takes him to meet Jaffar (Saadi Yacef), who explains how the FLN used the dud gun to test his commitment. (If he had been an infiltrator controlled by the colonial security forces, he would not have tried to shoot the policeman.) In an avuncular talk, Jaffar goes on to explain that the “organization” is gaining in strength but needs to eliminate drunks, junkies, whores, and pimps – “people who talk

too much, people ready to sell us out” – putting its house in order before confronting its real enemy. In the subsequent sequence another “FLN communiqué” in voiceover, dated 24 April 1956, explains that the colonial authorities are responsible not only for the impoverishment and enslavement of many Algerians but also for corrupting them into “degrading vices;” and that henceforth the FLN “assumes responsibility for the physical and moral health of the Algerian people.” Prostitution, pimping, alcohol, and drugs are now banned, announces the communiqué, and after a first punishment, “récidivistes” will be given the death penalty. This announcement is made over a shot of a drunkard whose lurching progress along the street is interrupted by a veiled woman who pushes and scolds him (see Figure 1).

[\*\*figure 1 here\*\*]

Next we see him being accosted by a large group of children, who are called over by Omar (Jaffar/Yacef’s young nephew, who worked closely with Ali, and who died with Ali in his hiding place, as we see in the repeated sequence that frames the central action). The children push the drunkard down a flight of steps (see Figure 2). The next brief sequence shows Ali accosting a slightly raddled but unthreatening-looking man in a café who is smoking a joint; then a longer sequence shows Ali seeking out Hassan el-Blidi, a casbah pimp. Ali’s familiarity with Hassan el-Blidi and with the madams and prostitutes is a reminder of Ali’s recent past somewhere in or around this underworld. (For this reason, according to an Algerian journalist with whom I discussed the film, the part of the sequence where Ali goes into brothels is censored when the film is shown on Algerian TV; Ali la Pointe is a national hero, whose memory is not to be tarnished in this way.) After a hostile confrontation, in the course of which Ali declares that he is afraid only of God (an everyday expression – I shall come back to this in the final section of the essay), and with the call to prayer ringing out in the background, he guns el-Blidi down.

These sequences offer a glimpse of the merciless treatment meted out to many Algerians, especially in the early years of the war, as the FLN sought to establish its legitimacy and authority. As Yacef indicated in the interview when he alluded to the political distance between the FLN leadership and the bulk of practising Muslims, the FLN started out as a small group with little active support. According to Mohammed Harbi and Gilbert Meynier, the number of mujahiddin peaked at around 20,000 in 1957-8 (49n30; they add that there was about the same number of “auxiliary combatants (*musabbilûn*)); and in building towards that peak, the FLN inflicted considerable violence on other Algerians. According to Ruedy, “During the first two and one-half years of the war, the FLN killed only one European for every six Muslims it liquidated” (*Modern Algeria* 164). When the newly self-disciplined Ali kills el-Blidi, it is a sign both of his ruthless dedication to the cause, and of his organization’s ruthlessness.

On one level, then, the purges had strongly political dimensions. The film, in opposing Ali to an unsympathetic figure like el-Blidi, avoids important historical aspects of those politics, notably the relation of the FLN to another nationalist grouping, the MNA (Mouvement national algérien). The purges also had practical aspects; and Jaffer’s emphasis on these in the film (dealing with “people who talk too much, people ready to sell us out”) is congruous with an FLN tract of 15 June 1955 that read:

The FLN calls upon the Algerian people to stop smoking and to boycott outlets for alcohol.

This measure will not only be an *act of faith – faith in the liberation of the fatherland* from the yoke of colonialism – but will also allow us to land a telling blow on the imperialist economy. (My italics. In Harbi 105. Cited also in Chikh, with minor differences, 327n3)

Certainly, the practical justifications given for the policy are not implausible, and in its context the ban on alcohol may be seen as a counterpart to the paratroopers' decision to call their assault on the casbah "Opération Champagne."<sup>21</sup> For this reason among others, to describe the ban in terms of "puritanism" and of "fundamentalism," as did Mondzain in the remarks I quoted at the start, is tendentious;<sup>22</sup> and the fact that she confused the FLN's line on prostitution with a condemnation of "sex" is another sign that her argument was ill-considered and overblown. But having said that, one must also recognize that the FLN's prohibitions had not been chosen purely for practical reasons, if "practical reasons" means economic factors or the fact that drunks are prone to indiscretion. In relation to the contentious decision to mobilize religious convictions politically, the way that, in the original tract, the phrase "an act of faith" slides into "faith in the liberation of the fatherland" looks like rhetorical sleight of hand.

In practice, the FLN leaders' decision to draw on religious rhetoric, and to adopt policies consonant with Islamic religious views, undoubtedly served a crucial role in winning them legitimacy and support. The film touches on this, but only very lightly, when we catch passing signs of a general piety in the urban Muslim population. Other sources provide evidence on this score, however. In his journal, Mouloud Feraoun recalls a conversation of 2 February 1956 when he received news from his home village of Tizi-Hibel, brought by a man named Amar, who had started paying subs to the FLN. What is instructive is Amar's insistence that the FLN men had been accepted, despite being "étrangers" (foreigners/strangers), because they were "good Kabyls and good Muslims." Amar goes on:

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<sup>21</sup> Within the film the choice of "Opération champagne" as a name may seem uncharacteristically provocative and glib on the part of (the fictional) Mathieu, but it is historically accurate, and throws into relief the contrasts and disparities between the French/Europeans and the predominantly Muslim colonized peoples.

<sup>22</sup> In *The Battlefield Algeria* Roberts argues: "The Bible is above all a collection of histories. Christian fundamentalism characteristically asserts the literal truth of the Book of Genesis as the history of the creation of the world and of Man. [...] To apply the term 'fundamentalist' to radical Islamism is to stigmatise it by means of the connotations of anti-scientific eccentricity appropriate to fundamentalist Christianity [...] Radical Islam is wholly orthodox and this is one of its strengths" (4).

Brothers, I tell you. Good Muslims. When they called us all together by the olive press, the village patriarchs were quaking, but the leader behaved admirably. He began by reciting the Koran. A *fatiha* in Arabic [the *fatiha* is the first chapter of the Quran, recited in prayer]. You should have seen him: the way he spoke, the tone of his voice, his passion. You didn't need to understand what he was saying, it was really impressive. You can respect those people, you really can. And then they put a stop to everything: no snuff, no smoking, no gambling. Besides, all those things are forbidden by Islam. And that's what that lot are all about: Islam and nothing else. (72-73).

Among other things, this passage conveys something of the authority to be gained from a display of piety. That piety may well have been sincere, but Feraoun presents Amar as slightly naive, and his text certainly allows room for a critical perspective on the FLN – for example in offering a reminder, if one is needed, that the term “arabo-musulman,” used in the FLN’s first declaration and in many other contexts, disguises the fact that not all Algerian Muslims were, or are, Arabs, or even Arabic speakers. Feraoun’s description is also tellingly equivocal about the relation of Islam to politics in this instance: the sentence starting “Besides” (*D’ailleurs*) suggests that the FLN leaders were returning the villagers to an Islamic path from which they had strayed, but the word “Besides” may also imply that Amar recognized, despite his final remark, that on some level the disciplinary dimension of the proscription may have preceded its religious dimension.

In a discreet way, *The Battle of Algiers* too may allow for, and perhaps even encourage, a critical perspective on the purges. True, Jaffar/Yacef’s secularizing perspective is given voice, and at the level of dialogue left unchallenged. But the sequence where the drunk is attacked by children, some of whom can be seen grinning as they assault him (see Figure 2), is surely

unsettling to most people, as it was to the *Cahiers* critics. [\*\* insert **Figure 2** here, but no paragraph break\*\*] As one watches the swarm of children, there is little reason to think their motivations pious or, for that matter, nationalistic (except in the case of Omar, who is precociously political and who orchestrates the attack); rather, a punitive urge seems to take on its own momentum and to offer its own warped pleasures. The children's behavior, apparently authorized and encouraged by the FLN's religiously inflected decrees, is unlikely to appear a convincing demonstration of "moral health" to most audiences. At least, that is what I would assume; though the danger of making such assumptions is an issue to which I shall return in the final section.

The next sequence, the last I shall discuss, shows a clandestine wedding. It begins with a prayer calling for victory for the "mujahiddin" (the only time the term is used in the film); the officiant, who is not an imam, makes a brief political speech (in Arabic: "Remember, we are at war against colonialism [...] This is why the FLN has to make decisions concerning the civil life of the Algerian people. With this marriage we fulfill our duty, a duty of resistance [/an act of war]"), and congratulates the couple on behalf of the FLN; and the ceremony ends with a surah from the Quran. Like earlier sequences, this one emphasizes that the FLN was developing a parallel clandestine state apparatus. In the film it is explicit that the politicized form of the wedding stems from the demands of the moment; but it cannot be clear how secular or religious an "FLN" wedding might otherwise have been, or would be in the future; and it cannot be clear whether the FLN had longer-term ambitions to modify or take over certain social roles traditionally played by Islam, or to what extent it would allow itself to be shaped by Islam. In reality, in the area of marriage as in other areas, elements within the war-time FLN were willing to express religious-identitarian and even anti-secular feeling: reacting angrily to a French

ordinance of 1959 “pertaining to marriages between persons of local civil status” in Algeria (i.e. the colonized, or “Muslims”), whose politics and context are a complex matter but which was designed among other things to stop unilateral repudiation by the husband, to raise the standards of consent, and to discourage under-age marriages, an article in *El Moudjahid* commented “In this way the French, who moreover are Christians or of the Jewish faith, dare quite purposely to undermine the Quran, in its immutable essence, and to impose on the Muslims of Algeria, by the sword, the secular laws of France” (cited by Borrmans 494).<sup>23</sup>

By my assessment, the wedding sequence is the last in which Islam plays a notable role.<sup>24</sup> What, then, does Pontecorvo’s film have to say in the end about the importance of Islam to the war of independence? It has to be acknowledged that Islam is a small part of the film’s world, and fades from view once the fighting against the French really gains momentum (around 25 minutes into the film). This is one simple reason why to some audiences, Islamic dimensions of the film have been invisible. Nonetheless, according to my analysis, Islam features significantly in all the key sequences covering the early stages of the war prior to the “Battle:” in the FLN’s first communiqué; in Ali’s radicalization, particularly in the prison sequence, where for some audiences the condemned man’s cry of “Allahu akbar” may threaten to reverse, at least for a moment, the communiqué’s prioritization of the political over the religious; in the Islamic dimensions of the FLN’s purges; and then in the wedding sequence, which shows an innovative

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<sup>23</sup> Borrmans is quoting from *El Moudjahid* 45 (6 July 1959). He offers detailed analysis of the ordinance, its context, and its effects. See also Chikh 325-26, and 327; and MacMaster. As MacMaster argues, a conservative current of “Islam-Arabic” ideology within the FLN was strengthened when the cause of Muslim women’s emancipation was adopted for tactical reasons by the French Right (16 and passim).

<sup>24</sup> In one of the central sequences we catch sight of a Quranic school, and for a brief moment the boys’ chanting of the Quran has a certain prominence, as it precedes the visual cut and so may appear to be part of the extradiegetic soundtrack. Yet all this happens very quickly, and its main function is to show the spreading of the FLN’s network. Later passing/possible allusions to Islam include the fact that Ali escapes at one point through a mosque (cf Chikh on mosques as a place of refuge, 324), or the visual echo between the post-wedding panning shot and a shot near the end of the film, when we see and hear bystanders praying on rooftops as they watch the paratroopers cornering Ali. The theme of sacrifice or martyrdom raised by Mondzain could also be discussed here, above all in relation to the Christian iconography of the torture montage.

and partly secular ceremony whose religious dimension is nonetheless undeniable. That religious dimension is emphasized, to my eyes, by the camera's movement as the sequence closes: it pans up through the building to show numerous anonymous participants joining in the prayers, and then pans across the rooftops and down towards the European city. This helps suggest that a succession of sequences is drawing to a close, as it reverses the camera movement from European city to casbah with which the main part of the film began, and effectively becomes an establishing shot for the film's next major phase, in which we witness spiraling violence.

In this way, *The Battle of Algiers* could be said to show, or at least to hint at, the importance of Islam to many Algerians at the end of the colonial era and the beginning of the war. While focusing primarily on urban FLN combatants in 1956–57 (largely to the exclusion of other groups and other phases of the conflict), the film suggests subtly that Islam provided inspiration and strength to many mujahiddin. And, more subtly still, in its treatment of the purges it may point towards possible ethical or ideological concerns about the ways in which the FLN drew on religious energies to invigorate and sustain its fight for Algerian independence.

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This analysis leaves us with a series of questions – about the history that is the film's subject matter; about Pontecorvo's treatment of that history; and, to return to my starting point, about the ways in which critics and other audiences react to the film, or should react to it. The broadest questions concern the basis and legacy of political decisions made by the FLN. If the FLN leadership mobilized and capitalized on religious feeling, to what extent was it a matter of cultural reflex, to what extent, for some leaders, a matter of religious conviction, and to what



extent a more self-conscious, even cynical, tactic? And what, in the longer term, were the ramifications of that decision?

As the *Cahiers* dossier suggested, those questions have come to seem more pressing in recent years, not least in the context of bloody conflicts between the FLN government and their Islamist opponents. It has become more striking that Algeria's "National Daily Newspaper," now available online, is still called *El Moudjahid* (see <http://www.elmoudjahid.com/>). Many supporters of the FLN – including Saadi Yacef – reject out of hand any suggestion that Islamists in Algeria have taken some of their inspiration from the wartime FLN. When I asked Yacef: "do you see any connections between the war of independence and the war of the 1990s?," he answered,

No, no, in the 90s it was yobs, assassins who wanted to create another sort of Islam, their own version, one that went back to origins. They saw that there was a vast number of Muslims in the world and that therein lay a potential source of support, if they created schools and so on, that would allow them to create a movement. (Harrison "An Interview" 410)

These broad historical and political issues fall far outside the scope of the film, of course, chronologically as well as conceptually, and largely beyond the bounds of this essay.

Nonetheless, I have tried to show that through close attention to the film not only is it possible to raise questions about the ideological grounding and legacy of the war, but to begin to argue that there is some justification for turning back on the FLN Yacef's last claim, with its overtones of disapproval of certain political manipulations of religious belief: "They saw that there was a vast number of Muslims in the world and that therein lay a potential source of support [...] that would allow them to create a movement." And while Yacef may be right to resist any simple account of

what today's Islamists have drawn from the war-time FLN, there can be no doubt that Algerian Islamists have sought, and to a significant degree managed, to position themselves in the eyes of their supporters as the true successors of the earlier "mujahiddin."<sup>25</sup>

This returns us to other questions with which this essay began, including possible "ambiguities" in the film's representation of Islam, the inspiration or provocation it may thus offer to some critics and other audiences, and the intermittent visibility of its Islamic elements. The *Cahiers* critics may have been predominantly hostile to the film, but their own responses could be taken as evidence of the film's success in broaching some of the historical and political issues I have touched on. Mondzain's reaction to the purge sequence as "appalling" (*atroce*), for example, could be seen as testament to the sequence's unsettling effects; in which case, the film could be commended for raising difficult questions about the purges' fundamental legitimacy, and/or their relation to Islam (how "truly" Islamic were they?), and/or the extent of the violence with which they were pursued.

This is not to say, of course, that the film condemns the purges. Mondzain, the one to use the term "ambiguous" in the discussion I quoted at the start, might agree; but as I suggested then, one of the peculiarities of the *Cahiers* response was the critics' apparent discomfort with certain types of ambiguity, a discomfort linked to their anxieties about other audiences' reactions.

Meddeb remarked: "Today, the film brings out the unresolved issues created by the problem [sic] of Islam in the casbah in 1957, whose legacy includes the Islamist temptations in the French

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<sup>25</sup> See Stora, especially Chapter 2, for parallels between the war of independence and the war of the 1990s (including hesitations over whether to use the word "war"). See also Roberts "Doctrinaire Economics" which notes (139) that the name "FIS" (Front Islamique du Salut) is a nod to the FLN: the term "front" is associated primarily with nationalism, while the acronym FIS is widely understood to be a play on "fils," "son" (of the FLN). Discussing the long-term legacy of the AUMA in *The Battlefield Algeria*, Roberts remarks (6): "It would appear that the critique of the Algerian state put forward by the radical Islamists is unanswerable on the grounds of Islam. The dilemma of Algerian nationalism arises from the difficulty which the state has in answering this critique on any other ground, including that of physical force. This is partly because the Islam which is the official religion of the state and the Islam of its critics have a common source" – i.e. reformist Islam.

*banlieues* in 2004.” This may initially seem to be meant as praise: critics usually valorize a work’s continuing ability to bring out unresolved issues. But he went on: “As such – that is to say, without critical attention – it can serve as a major argument for the Islamists” (68). To me this sort of argument seems uncomfortably censorial. Like Mondzain in her discussion of the sequence with the alcoholic, Meddeb appears perversely reluctant to give the film any credit for provoking his own complicated reactions to it, and too quick to assume that it would have a corrupting effect on other, less sophisticated readers or viewers.

Against this approach, I would argue that the film’s take on historical reality is in many respects scrupulously and thought-provokingly, rather than culpably, hesitant or ambivalent – even if in some respects, as we have seen, it could be considered to toe the FLN line. It is worth emphasizing how sketchily and disjointedly the film deals with the crucial period between the end of the “battle” and the end of the war, which falls outside the film’s main narrative arc; it offers almost no account of how the FLN moved from what seemed a definitive defeat in 1957 to eventual victory several years later. As I have argued in a previous essay, when the film’s coda skips through those years it presents the successful resurgence of the urban anti-colonial movement as a kind of non sequitur to what has come before, and as nearly incomprehensible, especially to non-Algerians.<sup>26</sup> But none of this need be seen as a flaw in the film; perhaps the film’s closing sequence, which resembles newsreel with its wide shots, repeated loss of focus, and vast, anonymous cast of demonstrators, could be taken to suggest the belated, decisive

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<sup>26</sup> See Harrison, “Pontecorvo’s ‘Documentary’ Aesthetics.” After Ali and his group have been killed the action leaps to the vast demonstrations of December 1960. A voiceover, which turns out to belong to a journalist, presents these demonstrations as having arisen *spontaneously* and *unexpectedly*, and as having had, due to their “surprising unanimity,” a significant influence on French public opinion. The “Muslim districts” are described by another journalist as echoing with “*unintelligible*, [...] terrifying chants.” After this we see a member of the French security forces shouting (rather implausibly) to demonstrators through the mist, “What do you want?,” to which the reply is “Independence!,” “Our pride!,” “We want our freedom!” Finally, over more shots of the massed demonstrators, the last voice-over — the first that is retrospective and historical — announces: “Two more years of struggle lay ahead. And on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of July 1962, with the advent of independence, the Algerian nation was born.”

irruption not just of the Algerian masses but of a wider historical reality that was lost from view while our attention was focused on the heroics of the film's central narrative. Such an interpretation would cast a dubious light over the film's main players and their actions, and indeed over the leadership's decision to launch the "Battle." That decision is made to appear ill-advised, and to have carried a heavy cost for many anonymous Algerians. Where to place Islam in this scheme is far from clear: in various senses it does not seem central, either to the main story or to the coda; but on this analysis, the film allows the possibility that what is central to the film, and most visible in it, was peripheral to the outcome of the war.

To draw out such possible "ambiguities" is to counter the idea that the film is crudely propagandistic, but it is not to deny that many audiences will see the momentum towards independence as unstoppable. I am tempted to argue this has less to do with chains of causality than a sense of destiny – a sense that may have a religious aspect for some audiences, and may be all but inevitable when a foregone conclusion is re-played as cinematic narrative. But the more general methodological issue that emerges at this point is the gulf between two modes of critical response to the film. On the one hand is the sort of analysis I offered briefly in the last paragraph, based on the "close reading" of what I consider an aesthetically distinguished work. That practice is second nature to many critic-teachers, including many in postcolonial studies, who thus find and sustain a complex space of interpretation in the objects of their attention (and whose own "readings" may bear little relation to their own initial reactions to a film or text). On the other hand, this sort of close reading may both tend towards, and be undercut by, an historical account of how the film has actually been viewed and used – into which territory those critics move, if only conjecturally and tacitly, when their claims about the subversive qualities or

propagandistic dangers of a film or text imply a detailed understanding of other audiences' reactions.<sup>27</sup>

If you really do want to understand, or to speculate on, audiences' reactions, then precise distinctions between different audiences are no doubt vital, as are the variations within those audiences, from person to person and across time. It is primarily because of such distinctions and variations that the Islamic elements that I have described may remain invisible to one spectator or one audience, then leap out – perhaps disconcertingly, perhaps inspiringly – at another audience, or at another moment. To take a specific example, there is likely to be a sharp discrepancy between the reactions of Algerian/Muslim audiences and of other audiences as they watch the wedding sequence. The former will be keenly aware that this particular ceremony, with its hurried mixture of the secular and the religious, is no traditional wedding; whereas non-Muslim/Algerian audiences – especially at a moment when the non-Muslim world is marked by anxiety about Islam – may be struck primarily by unfamiliar Islamic elements, which they may perceive as exotic or even threatening.

Similar issues arise around dialogue in Arabic, which is comprehensible to non-Arabophone audiences only through translations. Translators face an impossible task with a phrase such as “Allahu akbar” (God/Allah is great), in the sense that one alternative may sound too “alien” to non-Muslims, the other perhaps incongruously familiar; and in that instance, as I indicated earlier, the phrase may now deliver to non-Muslim, non-Arabophone audiences with excessively strong religious connotations shaped by the phrase's association with contemporary Islamism. The same sort of point could be made about various everyday expressions that crop up

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<sup>27</sup> My point here is that “close reading” provides little insight into reception; one might add that it provides little insight into authorial intention. I have not had space to speculate on how the Islamic material I have discussed found its way into the film, a line of analysis that might also cast light on the specificity and value of film and aesthetic form.

in the film: Ali's comment that he is "afraid only of God;" Jaffar's remark to one of the women bombers, "God be with you;" and in the wedding scene, "inch'allah" (God willing) and "barakallaoufik." The latter appears in the English subtitles as "May God grant you good fortune," and that is a perfectly reasonable translation; but it could just as well be translated – with a different effect on the non-Arabophone/non-Muslim viewer – as "thank you." These expressions will seem conspicuously religious to some people, or in some contexts, and may indeed be religiously felt by some who use them, but in other instances (comparable to English speakers' habit of answering a sneeze with "Bless you!") may emerge from and blend into a general cultural fabric where religiously colored strands have faded towards the secular.

So if, to summarize, the film can be considered "ambiguous" on pivotal issues, that is partly in the sense that it succeeded in capturing important "ambiguities" in the historical reality that is its subject, and partly in the sense that through its skillful manipulation of elements of cinematic form and narrative, it allows room for interpretation and re-interpretation, and has the capacity to generate powerful conflicting emotions. This is not to say, however, that the particular reactions of any given audience, or audience member, will necessarily be notably ambiguous, subtle or flexible. In the *Cahiers* round-table Mondzain remarks, "If we ask why *The Battle of Algiers* is still visible, still interpretable, should we think it's because it is a 'masterpiece' which, come what may, is open to interpretation and manipulation, or, on the contrary, because at every moment it risks being seized upon by public opinion, by ideology, by instrumentalization" (Meddeb 67). The arguments I have been making suggest that the two alternatives she offers are not alternatives at all. Empirically speaking, I do not doubt that some of the film's ambiguities will be missed by most, perhaps all, of its audiences, including members of the CIA, Islamists, and me. The ambiguities are there nonetheless, in a sense that

critics cannot do without. On that basis the *Cahiers* critics should have given the film more credit for provoking their own knotty reactions to it, and their different reactions across time. And they should have known better than to use their hasty readings of the film in support of generalized speculations about its political impact – not least because they acknowledged that what they now saw in the film had once been invisible to them. Evidently this argument goes beyond this film and beyond the *Cahiers* critics and their anxieties and impatience. The multifariously politicized afterlife of *The Battle of Algiers* in particular makes the general point clear: even more careful critical readings of this or some other masterpiece, more respectful of the film's richness and complexity, would not really tell you how other people had reacted or would react. The dual urges to "read" closely and to conjecture on the political work done by books and films run deeply enough, though, that the point is difficult to absorb for critics across a broad spectrum, from the *Cahiers du cinéma* to postcolonial studies.

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Illustrations:

Figure 1: A woman remonstrates with a drunkard

Figure 2: The drunkard assaulted by children

Both taken from *The Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. 1966. Criterion Collection, 2004. DVD.