Revue plurilingue : Études des langues, littératures et cultures / *ÉLLiC* 8.1 (2024)

Politics of Trauma

Visual Representation in *La Bataille d'Alger*

Dominique Lounés LALEG
University of Zürich
Institute of Art History

Abstract

Focusing on the movie *La Bataille d'Alger* (1966) the paper explores how postcolonial cinema addresses and processes traumatic events from the Algerian liberation war. By examining its filmic form as well as its production, the paper demonstrates how the cinematographic apparatus partakes in the complex construction of traumatized memory. In order to do so, the paper refers to trauma theory, which underlines the visual and resistant character of the traumatic. While the realism of traumatic memory and recurring flashback images remain an unresolved question in psychiatric research, the article argues that the movies aim for realism determines the entire production process, from screenplay, to staging, to editing. This production then causes an ontological confusion between filmic picture and perceptual image. It is further argued that the visual representation produced by this confusion is used as means of soft power and consolidation of the sole power of domestic political actors in the postcolonial context.

Keywords: Postcolonial Cinema, Algeria, Trauma Theory, Apparatus Theory

Résumé

En se concentrant sur le film *La Bataille d'Alger* (1966), l'article étudie la manière dont le cinéma postcolonial adresse et traite les événements traumatiques de la guerre d'Algerie. En analysant sa forme filmique ainsi que sa production, l'article montre comment l'appareil cinématographique participe à la construction complexe d'une mémoire traumatisée. Pour cela, l'article se réfère à la théorie du traumatisme, qui souligne le caractère visuel et résistant du traumatisme. Alors que le réalisme de la mémoire traumatique et des images de flash-back reste une question non résolue dans la recherche psychiatrique, je soutiens que l'objectif du réalisme du film détermine l'ensemble de sa production, son scénario, sa mise en scène et son montage. Cette production provoque une confusion ontologique entre l'image filmique (picture) et l'image perceptuelle. J'argumente également que la représentation visuelle produite par cette confusion est utilisée comme moyen de soft power et de consolidation de l'autocratie nationale des acteurs politiques dans le contexte postcolonial.

Mots-Clés : Cinéma Postcolonial, Algérie, Trauma, Théorie du Dispositif

Introduction

Arguably, the most unusual screening of Gillo Pontecorvo's movie *La Bataille d'Alger* (1966) took place during a New York City trial in 1970, where it was submitted as evidence by the district attorney (Breslin, 1972). The accused were members of Panther 21, a group of Black Panthers who had been charged with planning bombing and rifle attacks against police stations in New York City. An undercover detective who had infiltrated the group argued, accurately, that the film had been an important model for the assault (Whitfield, 2012). The popularity of *La Bataille d'Alger* was immediate and widespread among film enthusiasts as well as anti-establishment groups like Panther 21, who were influenced by its political message and approach to guerrilla warfare. Both these aspects have been well-researched in scholarship. Another less-considered consequence of the film, one which is the subject of this paper, is how it represents "trauma", notably individual and collective war trauma.

The term "post-traumatic" has long been associated with war. While it was first entered into the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* in 1980, meaning that it came into official medical use after the release of *La Bataille d'Alger*, it has a long prehistory, including in film (Jarzombek, 2006). The following reading of the *La Bataille d'Alger* does not claim its creators intentionally used the concept "traumatic" but rather notes an affinity with such cinema and its modes of production, specifically the visual and resistant characteristics of trauma. By examining the making of *La Bataille d'Alger*, which is widely based on a re-enactment of what can be called the experience of "traumatic events" by colonial victims, this affinity for trauma and cinema emerges.

La Bataille d'Alger depicts the Algerian War of 1954–1962, which left a profound psychological impact on the local and French colonial populations of Algeria, one which remained virulent even after the country's formal liberation. While in postcolonial Algeria, the concepts of trauma as well as psychology were generally widely rejected discourses for cultural and political reasons (Lazali, 2018), it is still possible that a movie like *La Bataille d'Alger*, consciously or unconsciously, produced some effect on its makers and viewers by addressing what can undoubtedly be called "traumatic events". My aim is to trace these effects by analysing and interpreting a series of scenes from the movie and their particular filmic qualities, not merely as therapeutic but as inseparable from postcolonial politics and ideologies.

Figure 1: La Bataille d'Alger (1966)

Eyewitnessing

Ali La Pointe, one of the protagonists of *La Bataille d'Alger*, played by Brahim Hadjadj, is introduced in a street scene early in the movie. Ali, an unemployed, petty crook, is reported to the police by a French passer-by while gambling on the street. After a short chase through Algiers' French district, he is caught by the French police and finds himself in a jail cell with other inmates in the notorious Barbarousse prison (today's Serkadji prison). In its tenth minute,

this location is where one of the key scenes of the movie takes place. A fellow prisoner and Mujahid, played by Mohamed El Badji, is taken from death row by two guards (Fig 1). As the condemned man is brought through the empty corridors of the prison by two uniformed French officers, he repeatedly shouts, "taḥyā l-ǧazāʾir!" ("Long live Algeria!") whereupon the prisoners in their cells join in the call. As he is led into a yard, the shouts fall silent (Fig 4). There, his head is brutally guillotined in full view of his fellow prisoners (Fig 5). They watch the execution from the barred windows of their cells, Ali La Pointe among them (Figs 3 and 4). This scene is a key moment for the movie at the moral, narrative, and aesthetic levels.

At a moral level, it demonstrates how France has, by this point, exhausted all means to combat the Algerian people's struggle for independence. While persecution, imprisonment, and torture had long been a common practice of the French authorities, even before the start of the war in November 1954 (Branche, 2005), the official execution of political prisoners in the 1950s was a new measure taken in the increasingly brutal conflict against the rebellious local population. The first of these executions in Barbarousse prison took place in June 1956, followed by a further 58 guillotinings[1].


Figure 2 and 3: La Bataille d'Alger (1966)


Figure 4 and 5: La Bataille d'Alger (1966)

The execution scene also marks a turning point in the protagonist's story, as it shows the moment that Ali La Pointe was politicised. Before witnessing this event, he is portrayed as an aimless, petty criminal whose actions are neither serious nor politically charged. As a result of his eyewitnessing the murder of another Algerian inmate, Ali undergoes a transformation that

[1] According to a document from the Archives des Parti du peuple algérien, the last execution at Barbarousse took place in 1958 [http://www.fondationmessali.org/Liste%20de%20condamnes%20a%20mort.html].

turns him into a determined and reliable freedom fighter and, ultimately, the hero and martyr of the film.

These moral narratological moments find their equivalent in the filmic form itself. This equivalence, I argue, is neither merely rhetorical nor structural but ultimately concerns the film's claim to "truth". In other words, it is an ontological claim by, as well as for, the movie's visual representation. The term "visual representation" has a double meaning here because it refers, on the one hand, to what the protagonist perceives of the represented event and, on the other hand, to the cinematic representation, i.e. to the photographic picture captured by the film camera. The double meaning in the very same visual representation (seen in Fig 4 and 5) is firstly the protagonist's perceptual image, which appears as a counter-shot to Ali's gaze from the barred window (Fig 2 and 3). This shot portrays the guillotining in the prison yard. Secondly, it is the filmic – hence photographic – picture, or better yet, a series of black-and-white pictures whose continuously sequenced projection establishes the film's visibility. The fact that these two – the perceptual image and the filmic picture of the killing – temporarily coincide at the moment of the counter-shot creates a "suture" – a seam between the viewer and the cinematic signification, as Jean-Pierre Oudart (1969) would put it a few years later – is not yet a special feature of Pontecorvo's film. What is special, though, is the exact function of this coincidence of image and picture not merely in terms of media theory but politically.

Let us take a closer look at the scene itself. At the moment in which the act of execution takes place – that is, when the guillotine knife falls – an abrupt crash zoom is focused on Ali's eyes in the reverse shot (Figs 3 and 4). His forceful gaze toward the backyard of the prison is connected to the visible event. His perceptual image, which is shown to the viewer as a film picture (Figs 4 and 5), becomes imprinted in the protagonist's memory like a stamp. This imprinting process is underlined by the synchronisation of the crash zoom with the loud bang of the falling guillotine blade. The use of the traditional reverse angle shot in this scene is also remarkable, as Pontecorvo generally tends to avoid such conformist editing throughout the film in order to tone down the classical movie look. Indeed, he rejected the editing of the first reels of the film, which was done by Mario Serandrei in Rome, as he felt they resembled Hollywood-style cinema too closely (Bignardi, 2000). The traditional use here is therefore aimed at a specific target: by relaying the witnessed event, the perceptual image of the eyewitness, and the filmic picture seen by the viewer, the movie blurs the boundaries between the perceptual image and the photographic picture, both referring to the actual event. As all three possess their own veracity, the blurring eventually causes an ontological confusion that is part of the movie's politics.

"dittatura della verità"

In order to interpret this ontological confusion, one has to keep in mind that this kind of cinematographic editing aims to identify a particular subject, as Jean Baudry (1970, p. 1) has famously argued. The above-described scene unmistakably identifies the imprisoned Ali with the viewer of the movie. The collapse of the eyewitness's perceptual image with the filmic picture is an integral part of Pontecorvo's political cinema. It is part of the movie's overall aims, which are designed to suggest the authenticity of the visual representation (Riegler, 2009). This suggestive approach emerges through a set of qualities of the filmic picture: the use of black-and-white, for example, is a deliberate deviation from the colour film standard established in the cinema industry since the 1950s. In contrast, Pontecorvo opts out of modern cinematographic technology and relies on a grainy monochrome picture reminiscent of newsreel footage (Pontecorvo, 1967). This reportage-like quality is accompanied by camera

work that was unusual in filmmaking at the time. For example, when the unsteady camera turns toward the protesting street crowd, the viewer's eye is literally shaken by the revolutionary events on Algiers' streets (Figs 6 and 7). In doing so, Pontecorvo establishes a particular relationship between the depicted events, the filmic pictures, and their reception by the viewer.

This relationship, I argue, is not fully described by the term "rhetorical", as the film scholar Alan O'Leary contends (O'Leary, 2019). Pontecorvo himself used a stronger term when he spoke of the "dittatura della verità" (Bignardi, 1999, p. 122). The term "dittatura" is to be understood here literally as the "dictate of truth". The original meaning of "dittatura", certainly familiar to the Roman filmmaker, derives from a political office in ancient Rome that allowed its holder to temporarily exercise almost unlimited authority under certain circumstances, most importantly warfare. Therefore, "dittatura" refers to a political necessity, a necessity that temporarily centres authority for the sake of battle. In this sense, Pontecorvo's political cinema seeks the authority of the filmic picture, which stems from the above-mentioned means and has led some to describe the film as "between a neorealist political film and a docudrama" (Bedjaoui, 2020, p. 147).


Figure 6 and 7: La Bataille d'Alger (1966)

The visual character of trauma

Pontecorvo's emphasis on the authority of pictures descends from a well-known place in the history of cinema. His work is usually discussed in the context of Italian neo-realist cinema, namely in the tradition of Vittorio De Sica, Luchino Visconti, and Roberto Rosselini's films, whose work began in the 1940s and was directed against fascism (Forgacs, 2007). Films like *Citta Aperta* (1945), a story of resistance fighters, and their filmic style – for example, through the use of largely natural light sources, coarse-grained film, and the resulting gloominess of the image – echoes in *La Bataille d'Alger*.

In addition to this influence from neo-realist cinema, there is another, more subtle inspiration that found its way into Pontecorvo's commitment to postcolonial cinema. It is the model of psychoanalysis, specifically trauma theory, which had influenced cinema for some time prior –for instance, in Alfred Hitchcock's movies such as *Spellbound* (1945), *The Wrong Man* (1956), *Psycho* (1960), and *Marnie* (1964). Hitchcock's approach to cinematic storytelling might be fundamentally different from the contemporaneous neo-realist cinema in Italy, but it seems that trauma theory, which explicitly influenced Hitchcock's work at the time, might have had an impact on *La Bataille d'Alger*. This more subtle effect has, above all, to do with the

medial condition of cinema, which has a peculiar affinity with the psychopathology of trauma and its symptoms[2].

In psychiatric and psychoanalytical research, the visual character of trauma is an ongoing subject. It mainly refers to the fact that victims who witness traumatic events regularly report intrusive memory images, that is, uncontrollably recurring flashbacks (Frankel, 1994). It is not difficult to find such an example in the context of colonial Algeria, where decades of colonialist violence, as psychiatrist Frantz Fanon (2004, p. 11) has pointed out, were inscribed on the bodies and psyches of the colonised (Fanon & Azoulay, 2018; Stam, 2003).

Bachir Boumaza, an activist in the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and later minister in independent Algeria, reports in the 1959 publication *La Gangrène* the intrusive images that have haunted him since he witnessed a brutal massacre of Algerians by the French in his village in 1945, known as the massacre of Sefif, Kherrata, and Guelma (Rey-Goldzeiguer, 2020): "Je revois défiler devant moi, pour la millième fois, les images d'un film dont les acteurs et les victimes furent mes amis les plus chers. C'était le 10 mai 1945, à Kerrata, mon village natal" [followed by a description of the witnessed massacre] (Boumaza, 1959). Boumaza's description might be classified clinically as what we know today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This diagnosis includes, firstly, the development of characteristic symptoms after "witnessing an event that involves death, injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of another person" and the "persistent reexperiencing of the traumatic event" ("pour la millième fois") (American Psychiatric Association, 1995). Secondly, and more importantly, the reexperiencing of the event comes in images that unfold in Boumaza's inner eye in a cinematic manner ("les images d'un film").

The Resistant Character of Trauma

Psychiatrists have developed a whole range of explanations for this phenomenon of intrusively recurring flashback images. One of the most influential is certainly the concept of compulsion of repetition (Wiederholungszwang), rooted in Sigmund Freud's economic model of the psyche. Briefly put, what was first called "traumatic neurosis" results from an overstimulation of the psychic apparatus (Freud, 1954, p. 288). The experienced event is overwhelming for the individual and hence leads to mental arousal that cannot be overcome. The compulsion of repetition is subsequently explained as a psychic response that recalls the traumatising experience, with the aim of reducing the emotional arousal and coming to terms with the event (Freud, 1954, p. 284).

This early concept of trauma references its resistant character. What makes the trauma possible in the first place is the resistance to the traumatic event being processed by the human mind. In other words, trauma is a result of obstructing any meaning and therefore making it impossible to grasp the event and embed it in conscious memory or integrate it into the autobiographical narrative. Semiologic-inspired theory has passionately elaborated on this resistance. Jacques Lacan (1978, p. 55) established the now widely received idea that trauma is a "missed encounter" (rencontre manquée) with reality, and therefore remains unrepresentable.

[2] Sigmund Freud famously used the metaphor of the "Wunderblock" to identify the affinity of mechanical devices behind the pictorial and psychological concepts processed by the mind. The theoretical connection between trauma and cinema goes back at least to Freud's student Abram Kardiner (see Kardiner, 1941). The Algerian war as a traumatic event also appears in French cinema, where it has surfaced as the inevitable return of a ghost, as in Michael Hanekes's *Caché* (2005).

This failing encounter is understood as the tearing apart of any significance, or as Roland Barthes (1997, p. 30) puts it, "Trauma is the suspension of language, a blocking of meaning".

Characteristically, French trauma theory, roughly contemporaneous with the *La Bataille d'Alger*, situates the trauma right at the seemingly sharp-edged border of language and imagery, a border that is crucial for the medium of cinema. It is no surprise that cinema became a field of interest for the earliest sociologically inspired trauma theories. As a result, the way in which such cinema is experienced by audiences is sometimes seen as the location and origin of trauma. In his essay "Les Unités traumatiques au cinéma" (1960), Barthes (2002, p. 5) points out: "Et c'est précisément dans le contact à la fois fragile et sensible de ces systèmes, le visuel et le verbal, que naît le traumatisme."

Traumatic Realism

If traumatic events cannot be processed psychologically and thus remain separate – that is, dissociated from normal memory – how can their recollection be understood? In other words, what is the nature of the trauma? If the suspension of language or any other semiotic translation is characteristic of trauma, it seems to derive from sheer physiological effects – sensory experiences that remain non-integrated in the individual's mental life. As non-processed, meaning "raw material", these sensory fragments must, however, be stored in a particular kind of memory, one that remains non-semiotic, hence *pictorial*. Other forms of unprocessed memory might be rhythmic, melodic, or structured in other non-semiotic ways (see van der Kolk, 1996). Flashbacks can then be understood as recurring sensory fragments that remain visual because they cannot be processed semantically. This feature gives rise to another crucial question: Can these images be trusted? Must their ostensible non-integration into any discursive or semiotic schemes of the mind lead to the conclusion that they are realistic, thus testimonies of the traumatic event?

As Ruth Leys (2000) demonstrates, there is a long tradition in trauma theory that describes the flashback image as a literal imprint in the mind – a visual trace of the perceived event. This tradition dates back as far as 1910, when Morton Prince referred to these inner visions as "facsimiles" (Leys, 2000, p. 77). Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi even used the analogy of "photochemical" moulding to describe the supposed pictorial realism of those images (Leys, 2000, p. 126). This realist theory can still be found in contemporary trauma theory. Most famously, Bessel Van der Kolk (1996, p. 279–302) argues that traumatic experience leaves an imprint that remains engraved in a person's nonverbal memory. For Van der Kolk and his predecessors in trauma research, the visual and sensory nature and their immutability by repetition prove the realistic character of flashbacks (Person & Klar, 1997). The recurring image is identified with the retinal picture, hence the pattern created by rays of light on the surface of the retina, similar to the exposure of a photosensitive film in a camera. Whether this theory of pictorial realism is convincing or not (Leys, 2000; Snyder, 1980), its idea obviously comes with a persistently persuasive force.

Looking at the *La Bataille d'Alger*, we can see a similar claim for pictorial realism. However, unlike individually experienced trauma, the movie's connection to pictorial realism remains not intrapersonal but rather crosses the border between the individual witnessing the trauma and the viewer. The above-described gaze of Ali on the image of the execution of his compatriot and the simultaneous suture of this perceptual image with the filmic picture is a way of asserting the film's testimonial quality. *Bataille*'s rhetoric of realism is nothing but the consequence of this very assertion.

The Disclosure of Torture

The film's testimonial quality comes, of course, with political weight. Its claims of quasi-authenticity are particularly important in regard to one of the most discussed topics around the Algerian War: the torture of Algerians by the French army. Today, this aspect of the war is undisputed (Stora, 2020); however, questions remain as to whether and to what extent torture was a common practice and if it was encouraged by France or carried out unauthorised, a topic of ongoing public debate in the press (Le Monde, 2018, 2024a, 2024b).

During and shortly after the war, when Pontecorvo's movie was produced, there was still a strong objective in France to keep the torture secret, as it had been a legally prohibited practice. As a result, the French military and police systematically avoided leaving any material or written evidence of what was referred to with the euphemism "interrogation" ("Interrogatoire"; Thenault & Raphaele, 2000), though their cover-up strategies were resisted by prominent left-wing intellectuals and activists in France, including Henri Alleg, Henri Georges Girard, Jacques Vergès, Jean Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. The film was released in 1966, and its controversial nature was reflected in the banning of *La Bataille d'Alger* in French cinemas until 1971 and on French television until 2004 (Daulatzai, 2016, p. 54–55). The film's unsparing depiction of torture, which begins with its opening scene and led the French delegation to walk out of the film's premiere at the 1966 Venice Film Festival, ought to be understood within this political framework (Daulatzai, 2016, p. 39).


Figure 8 and 9: La Bataille d'Alger (1966)


Figure 10 and 11: La Bataille d'Alger (1966)

We can gain some indication that the above-mentioned assertion of the film's testimonial quality is linked to torture by examining the torture scenes themselves. If we return once again to the Barbarousse prison scene, we observe another formal element, one related to sound. The moment of the execution is followed by several camera shots showing the courtyard of the prison (Figs 8 and 9). These otherwise silent and motionless pictures are accompanied by Ennio Morricone's film score, a flute melody in minor keys that is introduced right after the

execution. This type of non-diegetic music appears whenever the scenes are particularly brutal, particularly in the later torture scenes where the screams and painful noises are completely muted in favour of the visual depiction of the event accompanied by music (Figs 10 and 11). Consequently, the music functions as a signifier, one that recalls the identification of the gaze of the inner filmic eyewitness, namely Ali la Pointe, with the viewer's gaze.

The reduction of the visual also corresponds to the well-researched psychic phenomenon of muted recursive images. More specifically, real-life victims of torture and other traumatising events regularly report that intrusive images are muted. Much like in the torture scenes of the movie, the sound of the reexperienced event is missing (Leys, 2000, pp. 227–265). In other words, the filmic silence of the depicted event echoes the psychogenic silence of the flashback.

Re-enactment

In *La Bataille d'Alger*, the mix between the filmic picture and traumatic image – and their confused ontological nature – goes further. While the medial condition of film and its means of production by photography, sound production, and editing seems particularly suitable to deal with visual representations of trauma, a final crucial aspect of its production is its staging. The making of *La Bataille d'Alger* involved an enactment, or more precisely, a re-enactment, of historical, often brutal, events. The term "re-enactment" gains its meaning from the fact that the majority of the film's actors were not professionals. Most experienced the Algerian War themselves, and some, like the military leader Yacef Saadi, play a fictionalised version of themselves.

The charismatic Saadi, who was deeply involved with Pontecorvo behind the camera and whose memoir, *Souvenirs de la Bataille d'Alger*, served as a template for Pontecorvo's screenplay, was not the only one re-enacting his own experience for the movie. Some of the most violent scenes were re-enacted by individuals who experienced the events they portrayed – in the very same locations. One of the most notable actors to do this was Mohamed El Badji, who played the guillotined prisoner in the above-described execution scene. During the war, El Badji was sentenced to death for his role in the anti-colonial occupation movement. For this, he was imprisoned on Barbarousse's death row (Massias, 2020, p. 1). The connection between the actor and the portrayed character, as well as the film set and the actual location of the events, makes this scene a true re-enactment – a deferred action not only for the actors but for all Algerians involved, including members of the film crew. For example, Youcef Bouchouchi, a cameraman, had himself been in active resistance against colonial France and was arrested in 1957. After having been tortured in several prisons in Algiers, he was also held at Barbarousse. In an interview shortly before his death, Bouchouchi said of the shooting of the film: "J'ai retrouvé pas mal de sequences que j'ai vecu. […] Ce n'était pas du cinema, c'était revivre la bataille d'Alger, la revivre avec tous les éléments" (Bensmaïl, 2017).

Further, Pontecorvo (1992) revealed on several occasions how the staging of the scene at Barbarousse had had an emotional effect on the crew: "perché a questo posto [Barbarousse] sono legato ricordo emozionante. Avevamo appena finita a girare la scena di un condannato algerino che venino ghigliottinato, quando ci siamo voltati abbiamo visto tutti gli algerini della truppo chi piangevano." Ali Marock, another cameraman, substantiates Pontecorvo's memory of events: "Il y avait des gens qui pleurer. Moi j'ai pas pleuré mais j'étais très ému" (Bensmaïl, 2017).

This particular staging complicates the film's blurring of a photographic depiction and traumatic imagination. The subject of the photographic picture, as a re-enactment, echoes the claim of testimonial truth. Even before the technical process of shooting, editing, and screening, the film's cinematic production was dedicated to realism.

Conclusion

The above analysis suggests that what Baudry calls the cinematographic apparatus could be considered a therapeutic apparatus. Nevertheless, even though the terms "re-enactment" and "suture" come with a medical subtext, it would be too bold to speak of *La Bataille d'Alger* as a therapeutic project, at least in its entirety. It seems plausible, however, that the movie and how it was produced deal with traumatic events, and therefore, whether knowingly or not, play a role in their processing by actors, crew, and audiences. Such filmic reprocessing could, from a psychiatric point of view, contribute to the integration of the traumatic event into the psychic economy and the symbolic order of the traumatised person's mind.

The psychiatric literature on trauma suggests that recovery happens not only by reconstructing the trauma but also by assembling the recursively appearing sensory fragments. Judith Lewis Herman (1992, p. 177), a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School, describes recovery as follows: "Out of the fragmented components of frozen imagery and sensation, patient and therapist slowly reassemble an organised, detailed, verbal account, oriented in time and historical context. […] The completed narrative must include a full and vivid description of the traumatic mental imagery." The emphasis that Herman and many of her colleagues in the field of psychiatry place on imagery indicates that a movie like *La Bataille d'Alger*, which deals first and foremost with visual representations, might contribute to trauma recovery. In other words, the resistance of the traumatic event to narrative representation could theoretically be opposed by means of cinematic production and reception, including its staging as re-enactment, its montage as a reassembling and narrating, and finally its projection in the theatre as the continuous screening of the series of representations.

La Bataille d'Alger's production further includes a confusion that seems essential for its political impact: the blurring between image and picture, leading to the ontological confusion of the visual representation. The linkage between the inner stream of images and the filmic sequence of pictures puts the viewer of the film in both the position of witness to the events and the viewer of the film. As a result of this mutual transformation, cinema transforms into a place of collective testimony.

While this reprocessing of the traumatic events seems to meet the requirements of recovery, it is essential to underline that *La Bataille d'Alger* was, at its core, a political project. It aimed, firstly, to disclose France's atrocities and, in particular, the practice of torture to a worldwide public, garnering awareness of the Algerian War and giving the new country a type of soft power on the international stage. However, the movie has also helped to consolidate the sole power of certain political actors in domestic policy. The new state was governed by a single party, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), whose monopoly was widely based on its foundational myth within the liberation struggle (Harbi & Meynier, 2004). In that sense, the political agenda of the movie and its depiction of a battle might be comparable to the genre of nineteenth-century French battle paintings. For example, *La Bataille d'Alger* can be understood as a postcolonial response to Horace Vernet's *The Battle of the Smala*, finished in 1844 for the royal palace in Versailles (Fig 12). The work famously shows the conquest of Algeria by French soldiers, raiding the camp of the resistance leader Emir Abdelkader.

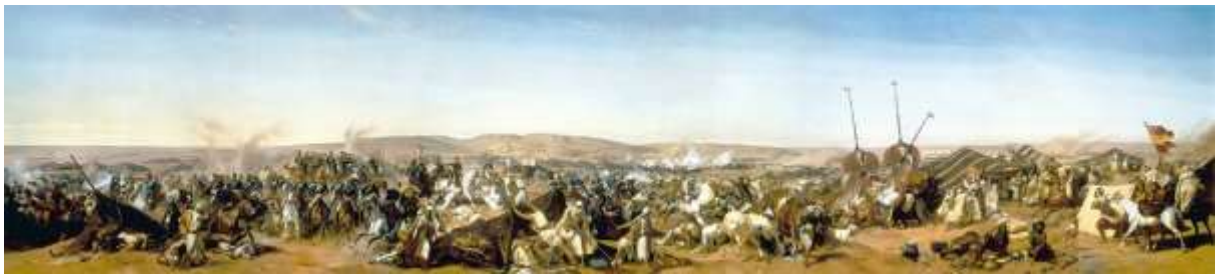

Figure 12: Horace Vernet, Capture of the Smalah of Abd-el-Kader by the duc d'Aumale at Taguin, 16 May 1943, 1845, Musée National du Château de Versailles

The ideological use of cinema and its medial condition, which allows the linking of witness and viewer, must be framed within this political context. The political legitimacy of Algeria's postcolonial government was and is still achieved by the sole managing and addressing of people's trauma, which now includes traumas caused by the civil war between 1991 and 2002. Instead of establishing conditions that would have facilitated the recovery of the young nation's people, such politics of trauma meant that Algerians became "mesmerized, swayed by emotion and confused", as Fanon (2004, p. 140) had warned. Fanon further argues that the healing of the colonised mind is impossible as long as the individual remains embedded in a hostile socio-political environment. Here, the dialectics of colonial liberation appear – liberation that has fortunately led to independence from a colonial power but, unfortunately, not to people's freedom in a democratic sense.

Trauma's essential quality of deferred action (Nachträglichkeit) can help explain how a postcolonial society like Algeria is caught up in the reverberation of colonialism and how these reverberations are managed politically. Karima Lazali, a clinical psychologist working in France and Algeria, has written one of the rare books to address this topic unsparingly. Lazali (2018, p. 237) points out: "L'effacement de la cause coloniale est un instrument de réécriture d'un texte en gras qui se veut inédit alors qu'il s'insère dans le blanc laissé par un texte disparu." *La Bataille d'Alger* is undoubtedly a part of this bold rewriting, one in which Pontecorvo's term "dittatura" continues to have a bitter reverberation.

Bibliography

BARTHES, Roland. "Les Unités traumatiques au cinéma", in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. I. Paris: Editions de Seuil, 2002, p. 1047-1056.

BARTHES, Roland. "The Photographic Message", in: *Image–Music–Text*, Stephen Heath (trans./ed.). New York: Hill and Wang, 1997.

BAUDRY, Jean-Louis. "Cinéma: effets idéologiques produits par l'appareil de base", *Cinéthique* 78 (1970), pp. 1-8.

BEDJAOUI, Ahmed. *Cinema and the Algerian War of Independence*. Springer International Publishing, 2020.

BIGNARDI, Irene. "The Making of 'La Bataille d'Alger'", *Cinéaste* 25, no. 2, 2000, p. 14-22.

BIGNARDI, Irene. *Memorie estorte a uno smemorato. Vita di Gillo Pontecorvo*. Milan, 1999.

BOUCHOUCHI, Youcef. interviewed in: Malek Bensmaïl, *La Bataille d'Alger. A Film within History*, 2017.

BOUMAZA, Bachir. *La Gangrène.* Paris, Editions de Minuit 1959.

BRANCHE, Raphaëlle. “La torture pendant la guerre d’Algérie”, in Mohammed Harbi et Benjamin Stora (eds.), *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie.* Alger: Chihab Édition, 2005, pp. 43-63.

BRESLIN, Catherine. “One Year Later: The Radicalization of the Panther 13 Jury”, *The New Yorker*, 29 May 1972, pp. 53-63.

DAULATZAI, Sohail. *Fifty Years of “La Bataille d’Alger”: Past as Prologue.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders: Primary Care Version (DSM-IV-PC). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 1995.

FANON, Frantz. “On Violence”, The Wretched of the Earth (New York, 2004), pp. 1-51.

FANON, Frantz. “The Trials and Tribulations of National Consciousness”, in *The Wretched of the Earth.* New York, 2004, pp. 97-144.

FANON, Frantz. and Jacques Azoulay. *Social Therapy in a Ward of Muslim Men: Methodological Difficulties, in Frantz Fanon, Alienation and Freedom*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018.

FORGACS, David. “Italians in Algiers”, *Interventions* 9, no. 3 (2007), pp. 350-364.

FRANKEL, Fred H. “The Concept of Flashbacks in Historical Perspective”, *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis* 42 (1994).

FREUD, Sigmund. “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”, in *Complete Psychological Works*, vol. 3, J. Strachey (trans./ed.). London: Hogarth Press, 1954.

FREUD, Sigmund. *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse, 1915–1917*, Gesammelte Werke XI.

HARBI, Mohammed and Gilbert Meynier. *Le FLN: documents et histoire, 1954–1962*. Paris: Fayard, 2004.

HERMAN, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

JARZOMBEK, Mark. “The Post-traumatic Turn and the Art of Walid Raad and Krzysztof Wodiczko: From Theory to Trope and Beyond”, in Lisa Saltzman and Eric M. Rosenberg (eds.), *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*. Lebanon, NH: University Press of New England, 2006, pp. 249-271.

KARDINER, Abram. *The Traumatic Neuroses of War*. Washington DC, 1941.

LACAN, Jacques. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1978.

LAZALI, Karima. *Le Trauma colonial: une enquête sur les effets psychiques et politiques contemporains de l’oppression coloniale en Algérie*. Paris: La Découverte, 2018.

MASSIAS, Souad. “Foreword ‘Le chant de la liberté’”, in Seham Boutata (ed.), *La mélancolie du maknine*. Média Diffusion, 2020.

O’LEARY, Alan. *La Bataille d’Alger.* Milan: Mimesis International, 2019.

OUDART, Jean-Pierre. “La suture”, *Cahiers du Cinéma* 211 and 212, April and May 1969, pp. 36-39.

PERSON, E. S. and Howard Klar, “Establishing Trauma: The Difficulty Distinguishing Between Memories and Fantasies”, *Psychotherpie Psychosomatik Medizinische Psychologie* 47.3-4 (1997), pp. 97-107.

PONTECORVO, Gillo. "La Bataille d'Alger: An Adventure in Filming", *American Cinematographer* 48, no. 4 (1967), p. 266-269.

PONTECORVO, Gillo. *Ritorno ad Algeri*, 1992.

REY-GOLDZEIGUER, Annie. *Aux origines de la guerre d'Algérie, 1940–1945: de Mers-el-Kébir aux massacres du Nord-Constantinois*. La Découverte, 2020.

RIEGLER, Thomas. "Gillo Pontecorvo's 'Dictatorship of the Truth'—A Legacy", *Studies in European Cinema* 6, no. 1 (2009), pp. 47-62.

Ruth Leys, Trauma: A Genealogy (University of Chicago Press, 2000).

SNYDER, Joel. "Picturing Vision", *Critical Inquiry 6*, no. 3 (Spring, 1980), pp. 499-526.

STAM, Robert. "Fanon, Algeria, and the Cinema: The Politics of Identification", in *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, E. Shohat and R. Stam (eds.). New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2003, pp. 18-43.

STORA, Benjamin. "La torture, ou l'inavouable secret", in *La gangrène et l'oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*. 2020.

THENAULT, Sylvie and Branche Raphaele. "Le secret sur la torture pendant la guerre d'Algérie", *Matériaux pour l'histoire de notre temps* 58 (2000), pp. 57-63.

VAN DER KOLK, Bessel. "Trauma and Memory", in Bessel A. Van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, and Lars Weisæth (eds.) *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society*. New York: Guilford Press, 1996, pp. 279-302.

WHITFIELD, Stephen J. "Cine Qua Non: The Political Import and Impact of La Bataille d'Alger", *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal* X, no. 1, pp. 249-270.

List of Figures

Figures 1-11: Gillo Pontecorvo*, La Bataille d'Alger* (Casbah Films) 1966.

Figure 12: Daniel Harkett/Katie Hornstein (eds.), *Horace Vernet and the Thresholds of Nineteenth-Century Visual Culture*, Hanover/New Hampshire (Dartmouth College Press) 2017, Plate 12.