

# Trauma, Cinema and the Algerian War

Guy Austin (University of Sheffield)

## Abstract

This article analyses the depiction of the Algerian War in French and Algerian cinema, making use of trauma theory. In particular, Cathy Caruth's assertions that trauma involves an "inherent latency" and that the most powerful filmic representations of trauma display "a seeing and a listening from the site of trauma" will be used to explore the ways in which Algerian cinema has engaged with the impact of the conflict on the indigenous people. Among the films addressed are *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1965), *Youcef* (Chouikh, 1993), and *La Maison jaune* (Hakkar, 2007). Conclusions are also drawn about the role of cinema in providing images of the recent civil war in Algeria.

## The Algerian War in French Cinema: Another Time, Another Place?

The Algerian War lasted nearly eight years (1954–62), cost between one million and one and a half million lives, and saw widespread atrocities, above all the use of torture by the French army—as reported by several sources, including for example Henri Alleg's *La Question*, published in 1958. But the war remained absent from French cinema screens during the course of the conflict. Those few films that showed the conflict directly, such as the work of René Vautier, or the 1961 short *J'ai 8 ans* (see below), were not distributed in France; in the words of the cultural historian Benjamin Stora (1991), "[a]ucun film n'évoquera donc directement la guerre d'Algérie pendant qu'elle se déroule" (41) ["not a single film directly evoked the Algerian War during its course"]. Matters changed after the Evian accords. The war was addressed in a number of French films, as well as of course by numerous journalistic investigations, memoirs, and novels. Stora estimates that between 1962 and 1982, a total of 31 French films concerning the war were released, alongside 14 from Algeria (Stora 1991: 248). And yet the impression persists that "la guerre n'est jamais entrée dans la mémoire collective française" (Frodon 2004: 76) ["the war never entered French collective memory"]. Why?

Reasons might include censorship (strengthened under Charles de Gaulle's presidency) as well as organised forgetting, a tendency formalised in a series of amnesty laws passed at regular intervals in the years after the war, from 1962 to 1983. When films on the topic were made in the sixties, they often raised questions in a tangential, even timid manner, as for example in Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7* (1961), Resnais's *Muriel* (1963), or Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* (1964).

Moreover, such New Wave versions of the national defeat in the Algerian affair (never formally termed a 'war') were often obscured by more consensual, mythologizing representations of the Resistance and the Second World War. Occupation and Resistance were repeatedly, even obsessively, treated by French cinema in the post-war years, especially after *la mode rétro* of the early seventies. Popular genres such as the thriller and the comedy (including the record-breaking *La Grande Vadrouille* in 1966) ensured that, for all its associated traumas, the Second World War was a perennial and successful topic within French cinema. The case of the Algerian conflict was very different.

The feeling of absence that surrounds French filmic representation of the Algerian War can be approached in terms of trauma theory. This suggests that traumatic events are never fully assimilated in the present but take time to manifest themselves, often migrating to a different place and a later time to make their impact felt. Cathy Caruth (1995) has termed the temporal dislocation that she identifies within trauma "inherent latency", writing that "since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time" (8). This might explain why the Algerian conflict has been addressed, forty years after it ended, in a spate of recent French films such as *Caché* (Haneke, 2005), *La Trahison* (Faucon, 2006) and *Mon colonel* (Herbiet, 2006). But it also reveals a notable tendency in nearly all French films on the war: the trauma has shifted spatially from Algeria to France. Hence the recurrent figure of the traumatised war veteran who is always represented on home soil, from the fictional protagonists of *Muriel*, *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg*, *Le Boucher* (Chabrol, 1969) and *Le Crabe-tambour* (Schoendoerffer, 1977) to the numerous real-life interviewees in *La Guerre sans nom*. When Caruth declares that the most powerful and successful filmic representations of trauma display "a seeing and a listening from the site of trauma" (Saltzman and Rosenberg 2006: 214), the question immediately arises: where is that site? For French cinema, it often appears to be France after the end of the war. There are exceptions, primarily in the politically-motivated cinema of the seventies: *Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès* (Vautier, 1972), *RAS* (Boisset, 1973), and *La Question* (Heynemann, 1977) are all set predominantly in Algeria. But in each case it is the experience of French personnel which is explored. Even in *La Question*, which adapts Henri Alleg's memoir of being tortured by the paras in Algiers, it is again a French protagonist whose suffering is depicted; the Algerians remain once more invisible, off screen. As Stora has asked of the French, "[p]ourquoi n'ont-ils pas cherché à voir et à comprendre ce que disaient les Algériens? A saisir leur souffrance?" (Cerf and Tesson 2003: 12) ["why didn't they try to see, to understand what the Algerians were saying? To grasp their suffering?"]. The representation of Algeria as the site of trauma has largely been left to Algerian cinema.

### **Algerian Cinema of the Sixties: the Trauma of Suffering, the Light of Martyrdom**

The ‘site of trauma’ for the Algerian population is unambiguously Algeria itself. Not just the city of Algiers, so iconic as a site of struggle from the opening moments of Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* (see below), but also the mountains, forests, fields and deserts of the vast country, particularly in the east where the fighting began. The landscape that is so empty of Algerians in so many French films (including even the most well-meaning, such as Tavernier and Rotman’s *La Guerre sans nom*) is inhabited, personalised, and defended by the protagonists of the numerous Algerian films to celebrate the liberation struggle. In the years immediately following independence in 1962, Algerian cinema was rapidly nationalised and radicalised, to become dominated by *cinéma moudjahid*, which sought to celebrate the triumph of the FLN. Initially however, before becoming ossified into a schematic and triumphalist official version, the representation of the war centred on trauma.

It is a commonly accepted idea within trauma theory that cinema tends to “figure the traumatic past as meaningful yet fragmentary, virtually unspeakable” (Walker 2005: 43). But in the early sixties certain films relayed narratives that spoke the unspeakable. Exemplary among these is Yann Le Masson and Olga Poliakoff’s documentary short *J’ai 8 ans* (1961). Filmed secretly in a Tunisian refugee camp, the film collates the testimony of half a dozen children (all boys) who have escaped from the fighting in Algeria.<sup>1</sup> Some have lost their families; others are reunited with relatives in Tunisia. All tell their stories in simple direct phrases, and via paintings and drawings of the scenes they have witnessed, from the shooting of Algerian villagers to FLN gun battles with the French. The central role of both visual and spoken testimony in *J’ai 8 ans*, aided by the narrative structure that sees the child witnesses escape from Algeria to Tunisia, clearly enacts what Caruth (2006) calls “a seeing and a listening from the site of trauma” (214). It also presents a narrativizing of traumatic experience, holding together fragments of memory in a clear chronological and teleological frame, which appears to suggest in its optimistic final image that the trauma, now told, may be left behind.

Caruth (1995) has written that trauma is “not so much a symptom of the unconscious, as it is a symptom of history” (5). She adds that “the event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it. To be traumatised is precisely to be possessed by an image or event” (4–5). Born out of the war for independence, Algerian cinema is possessed by history. The ‘repeated possession’ of the new national cinema by the national trauma begins in earnest with its most celebrated manifestation, Pontecorvo’s *Battle of Algiers* (1965). This iconic Italian-Algerian co-production, based on the memoirs of Yacef Saadi of the FLN, was the first Algerian film to reach a global audience, although it was not screened in France until 1971.

The opening credits of *The Battle of Algiers* show French paratroopers clambering over the roofs of the casbah, to start hunting down the FLN networks in the

---

<sup>1</sup>*J’ai 8 ans* is currently available as a bonus on the French DVD release of *La Question*.

city. It is a thrilling and threatening moment, in which the film situates itself very clearly at the site of trauma (the 1957 struggle for control of Algiers). But prior to the credits comes a much more devastating, if understated, introductory sequence, depicting the aftermath of torture. Unlike the later torture scenes in the film—which create a sacred, almost baroque, sense of suffering—this one is simple and matter of fact. The images are unmediated by Ennio Morricone’s emotive Bach-inspired score, and they represent the aftermath of torture, after the victim has been ‘broken’ and has ‘confessed’.<sup>2</sup> The scene is all about power, which can be defined as the ability to inflict pain. The power differential between the French paratroopers and their victim is immediately apparent from the composition: several soldiers, all dressed in combat uniform, surround a seated and half-naked Algerian. His vulnerability is manifest not just in the fact that he has been stripped, but in the hollow and sunken face and the skinny body: he seems to incarnate weakness where his torturers incarnate strength. This simple iconography of power is also found in photographs of torture, whether in the Algerian War or in notorious recent examples from Iraq. In this regard, the opening of *The Battle of Algiers* recalls the photos presented in *Le Monde*’s 2004 dossier on ‘La torture dans la guerre’, particularly an image from 1959 depicting a French army interrogation centre near Constantine, Algeria. As in the infamous photos from Abou Ghraib, the victims are stripped while their captors, in uniform, laugh and point at their nakedness (Beaugé 2004).

Elaine Scarry (1985) has written about the political significance of representing pain, notably in contexts where this is not normally permissible:

the failure to express pain [ . . . ] will always work to allow its appropriation and conflation with debased forms of power; conversely, the successful expression of pain will always work to expose and make impossible that appropriation and conflation. (14)

One of the key achievements of *The Battle of Algiers* is precisely to express the pain of torture, bombing, and so on—atrocities which were absent from French cinema of the time because of censorship or self-censorship.

Also crucial to the representation of trauma in *The Battle of Algiers* is Pontecorvo’s use of setting. As it happens, the restaging of the battle on the very site where it took place eight years previously operated as a kind of unwitting screen for the 1965 coup by Boumédiène: three days before filming started, Boumédiène’s seizing of power was apparently interpreted by the local population as the start of the shoot. As for the film’s climactic moment, as Joan Mellen has noted: “The only place in the crowded Casbah where there was enough space to construct and blow up the house of Ali La Pointe was the site of the actual house destroyed at the end of the real battle of Algiers” (cited in Tomlinson 2004: 363). Tomlinson (2004)

---

<sup>2</sup>This is a problematic concept. For an excellent critique of torture as a supposed ‘information-gathering’ tool (rather than simply an expression of the power to inflict pain on the victim) see Scarry (1985).

reads this scene, and the film, as follows: “One can begin to lay the ghosts of certain crimes to rest; one cannot entirely avoid the inclination to repeat” (369). This repetition compulsion (what some might term an acting out, rather than a working through, of trauma) marks Algerian cinema from the mid sixties to the end of the decade and beyond.

Cinematographically speaking, the legacy of *The Battle of Algiers* is encapsulated by the moment when Ali La Pointe’s hiding place is blown up. As dust hovers in the air along with Morricone’s grieving music, the archway of the house seems to emit a white glow. It is this sacred aura that informs the *cinéma moudjahid* projects that followed *The Battle of Algiers*. In Mohammed Lakhdar Hamina’s *Le Vent des Aurès* (1966), for example, a mother walks from the Aurès mountains across the country in search of her son, who has been taken prisoner by the French. Repeated scenes show her framed against the light, silhouetted by sunsets, walking in the perpetual glow of martyrdom.

Mohamed Chouikh (who plays the son in *Le Vent des Aurès*, and is now one of Algeria’s best known film directors) has described this trend in late sixties Algerian cinema:

ce n’était plus le peuple que l’on filmait, mais les usines et les slogans, les programmes et les chartes. [ . . . ] Cette démarche a rendu le spectateur imperméable [ . . . ] car il ne s’identifiait plus à l’image positive et constructive qu’on lui imposait. (Chouikh cited in Taboulay 1997: 24)

[They were no longer filming the people, just factories and slogans, plans and charters. This made spectators impossible to reach, because they no longer identified with the positive, constructive image they were given of themselves.]

Originally conceived as telling the people about their own struggle against colonial rule, Algerian national cinema rapidly began to repeat and to parody itself. If in trauma theory “the impact of past crimes in a nation-state may evidence itself in the form of ‘cultural symptoms’ analogous to those in individuals” (Kaplan 2005: 68), then Algeria appeared to be suffering from the compulsion to repeat the enactment of French colonial crimes, and the mythologizing of the liberation struggle that ended them.

### **Representing Trauma Since the Nineties: a ‘Second Algerian War’?**

By the 1980s, it seemed that Algerian cinema could be divided into three key stages: during the sixties the films of armed struggle (*cinéma moudjahid*); from 1971–76 the representation of the agrarian revolution and experimentation with new forms (*cinéma djidid*); and from the late seventies onwards, films of daily life (see Mimoun 2006). But now the violence of the last fifteen years, which has left an estimated 200,000 dead in Algeria (without ever being officially recognised as a war, recalling France’s reaction to the earlier conflict) necessitates the addition

of a fourth stage: a new cinema of trauma. The result of the recent civil war, as Stora (2001) suggests, may be the impression that Algeria is perpetually mired in conflict, that “[t]out se passe comme si l’histoire algérienne s’était arrêtée en 1962, après de nombreuses années de violence, et reprenait son cours en 1992, à nouveau marquée par la violence” (2) [“everything happens as if Algerian history stopped in 1962, after years of violence, only to start again in 1992, again marked by violence”]. For Stora (2001), the resurgent French interest in the Algerian War over the last few years has been at least partly due to the sad stimulus of what some have termed “la seconde guerre d’Algérie” (1). This might explain the glut of recent French films on the ‘first’ war, such as *La Trahison*, *Mon colonel* and *Caché*, alongside Rachid Bouchareb’s representation of an earlier, forgotten Algerian presence in the Second World War, *Indigènes (Days of Glory)*, 2006). One might add to Stora’s persuasive thesis the impact of another colonial war, fought by the USA and the UK in recent years. Hence, Algeria can function as a screen, a stimulus, or an allegory for thinking about Iraq. An explicit link was made between these two conflicts when the Pentagon famously screened *The Battle of Algiers* in 2004, apparently in an attempt to learn from history, but the connection is also evident in *Le Monde*’s torture dossier of the same year, and in numerous press articles on that topic. In a perhaps not unrelated move, *The Battle of Algiers* was re-released in France, the US and the UK, while 2003 was declared *l’année de l’Algérie* in French cultural circles, with special events at the Cannes Film Festival and the *Institut du Monde Arabe* in Paris.

Meanwhile, recent Algerian cinema (and literature, for example Rachid Boudjedra’s *Les Funérailles*, 2003), has begun to directly represent the terrorism and counter-terrorism of the nineties. One thinks of the young teacher in *Rachida* (Yamina Bachir-Chouikh, 2002), who ends the film tearfully facing the remnants of her class in a bombed-out school-room, or the three protagonists of the epic *Al-Manara* (Belkacem Hadjaj, 2004), each of whom traces a different trajectory through the years of violence and trauma. If this is the fourth age of Algerian national cinema, perhaps it begins with Mohamed Chouikh’s *Youcef ou le septième dormeur* (1993). This pessimistic, remarkably prescient film appears to predict Stora’s assertion that from a current viewpoint, Algerian history seems to have leapt from 1962 to 1992, from one conflict to another, with nothing in between. The film’s protagonist, Youcef, escapes from an asylum after thirty years’ incarceration, and believes that the war of liberation against the French is still being fought.

If Youcef stands as an embodiment of the ‘inherent latency’ of trauma theory (he is still experiencing the Algerian War decades after its end), he also personifies a call to remember why that war was fought, and functions as a reminder that the ideals of the liberation struggle, along with issues such as women’s rights, seem to have been lost in modern Algeria. He could be said to represent cinema’s ability to remind its public of forgotten truths. This is all the more important in a nation where home-produced images are scarce. According to Stora, “[I]’absence d’images [ . . . ] participe de la déréalisation de l’Algérie, pays qui s’est évaporé

depuis une dizaine d'années" (cited in Cerf and Tesson 2003: 8) ["the absence of images has helped to dismantle Algeria. In the last ten years, the country has evaporated"]. In this context, recent films such as *Rachida* and *Al-Manara*, that undertake the representation of the atrocities of the nineties, are crucial. All the more so since between 1997 and 2002 not a single feature film was made in Algeria. The country risked cinematic amnesia. Perhaps the most telling example of the *travail de mémoire* that cinema is now called upon to achieve in Algeria comes from Amor Hakkar's *La Maison jaune* (2007). Like an updated version of *Le Vent des Aurès*, the film presents a very simple quest narrative in which a parent from the remote mountains goes in search of their lost son. Now the parent is a father, and the son is on military service (a hint at the internal conflicts of recent years) rather than imprisoned by the French. Learning of his son Belkacem's death in an accident, the father drives his tractor across the mountainous landscape to recover the body and take it home for burial. This journey, like that in the earlier film, embeds the narrative directly in the landscape, although the hills and roads in *La Maison jaune* are represented more naturalistically, without the glow of martyrdom that silhouettes the mother's quest throughout *Le Vent des Aurès*.

Among the son's possessions is a video-cassette, a mysterious 'white box' which, the father tells his grieving wife, contains "pictures of Belkacem". The second half of the film concerns the father's attempts to access the images within, and culminates in a moving scene of the family (reflected in the screen of their new television set) watching Belkacem's brief, matter of fact message. Beyond the emotional intensity of the domestic drama, *La Maison jaune* operates as a simple but brilliant metaphor for the importance of the film image as a vector of memory. The peasant family's ignorance of video technology only enhances the magical aspect of the images of Belkacem, who seems to speak to them from beyond the grave. These images are traumatic, since they are given meaning by death, but they are also welcome as a means of preserving a memory of the traumatic past. *La Maison jaune* crystallises the hope that Algerian cinema will continue to provide a seeing and a listening from the site of trauma.

## References

- Beaugé, Florence (2004): 'L'Irak, au miroir des exactions commises pendant la guerre d'Algérie'. *Le Monde* (Dossier: La torture dans la guerre) 6–10 May 2004, p. 7.
- Caruth, Cathy (ed.) (1995): *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP.
- Caruth, Cathy (2006): 'Literature and the Enactment of Memory'. In: Saltzman, Lisa and Rosenberg, Eric (eds.): *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press/University of New England Press, pp.189–221.
- Cerf, Juliette and Tesson, Charles (2003): 'Benjamin Stora: l'absence des images déréalise l'Algérie. Elle construit un pays fantasmé que n'existe pas'. *Cahiers du cinéma: Spécial Algérie*.

- Frodon, Jean-Michel (2004): 'Le Film de guerre n'existe pas'. *Cahiers du cinéma* 593, pp. 74–76.
- Kaplan, E. Ann (2005): *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP.
- Mimoun, Mouloud (2006): 'Quand l'Algérie misait sur son jeune cinéma'. *Manières de voir* 88 (Cinéma engagé), pp. 57–61.
- Saltzman, Lisa and Rosenberg, Eric (eds.) (2006): *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*. Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press/University of New England Press.
- Scarry, Elaine (1985): *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford UP.
- Stora, Benjamin (1991): *La Gangrène et l'oubli: la mémoire de la guerre d'Algérie*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Stora, Benjamin (2001): 'L'Algérie d'une guerre à l'autre'. *Apprendre et enseigner la guerre d'Algérie et le Maghreb contemporain*. Versailles: CRDP de l'Académie de Versailles.
- Taboulay, Camille (1997): *Le Cinéma métaphorique de Mohamed Chouikh*. Paris: K-Films.
- Tomlinson, Emily (2004): 'Rebirth in Sorrow: La Bataille d'Alger'. *French Studies* 58(3), pp. 357–370.