

Untying the Knot?
France and Algeria in contemporary visual culture
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‘Entre l’Algérie et la France, le psychodrame est permanent.’¹ Such was *Le Monde*’s assessment in its editorial of 20 May 2010, commenting on the controversy aroused by the première of Rachid Bouchareb’s film *Hors-la-loi* at the Cannes film festival that month. Bouchareb’s account of the final years of French Algeria provoked the ire of a number of *pied-noir* associations and political figures in France, chief among whom was Lionnel Luca, UMP deputy for the Alpes-Maritimes in the National Assembly. Luca was angered in particular by the film’s portrayal of the violent repression by French forces of the protests in Sétif against colonial rule in May 1945, a foundational event in the post-war struggle for Algerian independence. Despite not actually having seen the film, Luca condemned it as ‘anti-French’. In his view, its uncompromising depiction of colonial conflict risked inflaming tensions between communities of North African origin and the rest of the population (Berretta 2010) and its partial view of history denied others of their rightful claims to victimhood, including ‘les victimes européennes et les algériens fidèles à la France’.² For all its claims to tell the truth, he concluded, the film was in fact ‘un gros mensonge fait pour aviver les plaies et non les cicatriser’.³

Meanwhile, another film evoking Franco-Algerian relations – this time set during the Algerian civil war of the 1990s – won the Grand Prix at the same festival, before going on to attract over three million viewers at the French box office. Xavier Beauvois’ *Des Hommes et des dieux* was lauded by reviewers for its poignant and sensitive portrayal of the final months of a group of French

Cistercian monks kidnapped in 1996 from their monastery in Tibhirine in northern Algeria and later found dead (Kaganski 2010, Regnier 2010). The release of two films engaging with different aspects of the Franco-Algerian relationship, and the differing reactions they provoked, are testament both to an on-going fascination with that relationship in contemporary France, and to the political and emotional sensibilities which continue to surround it.⁴ Moreover, that fascination is only likely to increase as we head towards the fiftieth anniversary in 2012 of key landmarks in the history of both nations – the cease-fire marking the end of the Algerian War in March 1962, and the recognition of Algerian independence by France in July 1962.

Indeed, it often seems that the relationship between the two countries is growing more rather than less complex as time passes, not least because France's Algerian past and the Franco-Algerian relationship remain caught between history, memory and lived experience. On the one hand, the Algerian War and its consequences have acquired increasing legitimacy over the past two decades as a subject for academic historians in France, who have found it easier to access archival material and bring to light difficult questions. We can point most obviously to the groundbreaking work of Benjamin Stora (1991), but also to the activity of a new generation of French historians, including Sylvie Thénault (2001, 2005) and Raphaëlle Branche (2001, 2005). The past few years have also seen the dissemination via translation within France of the work of international historians such as Todd Shepard (2006, trans. 2008), on the legal, political and administrative disentanglement of France from Algeria; and Jim House and Neil MacMaster (2006, trans. 2008), on the events of 17 October 1961 in Paris.

On the other, of course, the inevitably critical and difficult questions which continue to be posed about France's colonial activities and their legacy, both in Algeria and elsewhere, have led to counter-moves such as the ultimately ill-fated law of 2006 calling for the benefits of colonialism to be taught in French schools, or in a more indirect way perhaps, to the somewhat consensual presentation of France as a *terre d'immigration* in initiatives such as the Cité nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration in Paris. At the same time, the past twenty or thirty years have been marked by the increasing visibility in the French cultural sphere of a range of writers, filmmakers, and visual artists of Algerian origin, for whom a hyphenated identity – their positioning across national, cultural and social frontiers – is central to their work. Such work has often explored problematic issues of identity and belonging deriving from their status and position as immigrants or descendants of immigrants.

In other words, what recent history and cultural production continue to tell us is that, perhaps now more than ever, we need to think through France and Algeria together. Doing so involves a constant shuttling back and forth across the frontiers dividing the two, as well as a mapping of those frontiers, whether they be geographical and administrative (in their most obvious manifestation) or cultural, social and generational; but it also means revisiting the extent to which France and Algeria can be separated out at all, and exploring the networks and flows which cut across those frontiers almost to the point of disruption. That the past and present of France and Algeria need to be thought through together – that what counts is the relationship between them – is not in itself a new idea. It was raised by Étienne Balibar in 1997 when he asked the question, 'Algérie, France: une ou deux nations?' (Balibar 1998: 73); but in pursuing Balibar's

question, we need arguably to consider two further issues in particular: firstly, the different forms that relationship might take, and the ways in which it might find expression; and secondly, how those forms and expressions might change over time.

As the differing impacts of *Hors-la-loi* and *Des Hommes et des dieux* alone would suggest, the visual sphere and visual culture especially seem to have a privileged role to play in reflection on and mediation of the Franco-Algerian relationship. This is the hypothesis motivating our three-year, AHRC-funded project, 'Post-Colonial Negotiations: Visualising the Franco-Algerian Relationship in the Post-War Period', of which the current special issue is one output.⁵ The project was elaborated in response to a proliferation of interest and activity around France and Algeria in the contemporary cultural sphere. Investigating a range of material across the spectrum of visual culture, from the video art of Zineb Sedira to the pages of *Paris-Match*, the project examines the role played by the visual image in constructing and contesting dominant modes of understanding about France's Algerian past and the on-going complexities of the Franco-Algerian relationship.

On the approach to the significant anniversary year of 2012, the special issue draws together a range of contributors to consider how the Franco-Algerian relationship has been made manifest in the visual sphere. Whereas much scholarship up to now has focused on cinematic production especially – from the phenomenon of *beur* cinema since the 1980s, to films such as Michael Haneke's *Caché* (2005), exploring how the repressed memories of France's Algerian past can stage disruptive returns into the world of the dominant order – the aim of this volume is to investigate visual culture in its broadest sense.⁶ The

essays reveal how the theme of the Franco-Algerian relationship transects and draws together a diversity of material and topics, from the contemporary visual art of Kader Attia to the 'home movie' footage of *pied-noir* returns to present-day Algeria; and from the appropriation of colonial histories in the text-image work of Leïla Sebbar to the role played by the Algerian War in the grand narratives of post-war geopolitics, as evinced by the activities of the so-called 'Terror's Advocate', Jacques Vergès.

Moreover, what also emerges from these essays is the way in which the golden thread of the Franco-Algerian relationship not only runs through national and international histories, but also through the biographies and trajectories of individuals for whom its dysfunctions and disjunctions are bound up in and inflect their lived experience, their identity and memory. Such are the complexities articulated in the work of Leïla Sebbar and Zineb Sedira, for example. In a number of cases, we can see how individual micro-histories are inflected by, and occasionally (as in the case of Vergès) can themselves inflect, the macro-histories of nation states and geopolitics. Indeed, each contribution in its own way maps the constellation of micro- and macro-narratives which constitute the Franco-Algerian relationship, and the dialectical relationship between the two.

In the first article, Helen Vassallo examines Leïla Sebbar's series of photo-texts evoking what she terms her 'Algéries en France'. Sebbar's texts explore the imbrications of her private story and public history, and the consequences of emerging out of the collision between, and disjunction of, France and Algeria. Her uncertain quest for a sense of community based on shared Algerian reference points also reveals the extent to which traces of

Algeria are to be found permeating the environment and culture of metropolitan France. The role of Algeria – or rather, multiple and shifting Algerias – as a constitutive element of contemporary French identity, history and memory comes to be seen as unavoidable, even as that role is occluded, marginalised or ignored within the space of metropolitan France.

Amy Hubbell's article takes us on a journey in the other direction. Where Sebbar sets out to establish a sense of community and identity by mapping the ways in which Algeria manifests itself in France, Hubbell explores how a French Algerian past is revisited and visualised by *pieds-noirs*, from the 'pilgrimages' back to Algeria staged and filmed by *pied-noir* associations, to Marie Cardinal's 'family album'-style photo-book and Jacques Derrida's return-by-proxy in *D'ailleurs*, Derrida (1999). She captures a fragile dynamic of nostalgia whereby a ghostly or 'trembling' memory of the past is assembled or projected on to a present which is perceived in terms of ruins, and which is constantly at risk of disrupting the remembered or imagined landscapes created by the *pieds-noirs*.

While Hubbell explores the contemporary re-visioning of French Algeria by *pied-noir* emigrants, Amanda Crawley-Jackson considers how the work of visual artist Kader Attia interrogates the discourses and ideology of the French colonial project as manifested in modernist architectural interventions in Algerian space, and the complex relationship between colonialism and modernism. Attia's work reminds us how colonial Algeria became a laboratory for modernist-inspired urban planning, and how the planning techniques trialled in colonial Algeria informed the *aménagement* of post-colonial France in the Gaullist era. Urban spaces in France and Algeria come uncannily to mirror themselves as colonial inequalities are replayed spatially in post-colonial French

cities, and immigrant communities find themselves relegated to the *grands ensembles* of the suburbs.

Nadira Laggoune investigates the trends shaping Algerian visual art since the colonial period. She argues that Algerian art during the colonial period was defined by a dynamic of resistance through appropriation, set in motion when European pictorial traditions and modes were imported via institutions such as the École nationale des Beaux Arts d'Alger (established in 1881). She goes on to establish the central role given to visual culture in asserting and constructing an Algerian national identity in the post-colonial period, while also highlighting that an engagement with the country's colonial past proved to be a concern not so much of local artists, but of those of the Algerian diaspora, such as Kader Attia and Zineb Sedira. Their interrogation and re-appropriation of colonial history and memory offers a means of getting to grips with the legacies of the colonial relationship and the ways in which it permeates and resonates in the present.

The role of visual culture in the nation-building of post-independence Algeria is also discussed by Guy Austin. He argues that the role and treatment of space in Algerian cinema is central both to the assertion of a national Algerian identity through film in the initial years of independence, and increasingly – particularly in the years following the uprising of October 1988 – as a way of negotiating and challenging that identity and the dominant myths of national unity. Cinema offers a voice to minority and disenfranchised members of Algerian society, including Berber populations, women or the younger generations of the post-revolutionary era. Unlike the cinema of the Algerian diaspora in France, it is perhaps less concerned immediately to explore the

relationship between France and Algeria; but it is nevertheless important for the insights it offers into the nature and emergence of a 'national' cinema, as well as the tensions which begin to shape it.

In the closing article, Libby Saxton underscores the intricate ways in which the Algerian War and its aftermath are bound up in the broader geopolitics of the post-war era. Building on recent work by Michael Rothberg (2009) on the 'multidirectional' nature of cultural memory, she highlights how two rather different films from 2007 – Barbet Schroeder's documentary on the lawyer Jacques Vergès, and *Dans la vie* by Philippe Faucon – draw to the surface and make connections between the Franco-Algerian conflict, the struggle for the liberation of Palestine, and anti-semitism and the Holocaust. At the same time, Faucon's film reminds us not just how the Algerian fight for independence had an influence on other liberation struggles of the post-colonial era, but also how those struggles in turn have come to inform perceptions of inter-cultural and inter-ethnic tension in contemporary France, which are framed increasingly with reference to the on-going conflict between Israel and Palestine.

To return to the question posed by Étienne Balibar, his own attempts to answer it emphasise the difficulty – not to say the futility – of unpicking and disentangling the ties binding France and Algeria, for all their separate legal existence as sovereign states. Rather, he suggests, 'l'ensemble franco-algérien' constitutes a vast and complex 'borderland' or 'frontière-monde' (Balibar 1998: 81). It is a world which is constituted like a frontier in that it is a space of constant contact and conflict; but it is also a frontier where the world as a whole – the global North and South of the neo-liberal era – meets and is delineated.

The contributions to this special issue would confirm not only the particularities and intricacies of the Franco-Algerian relationship, but also its importance for understanding the colonial and post-colonial world as a whole. They underline too the centrality of visual culture as a means by which such understanding can take shape.

Notes

1. 'Algérie-France: le choc des mémoires – encore', *Le Monde*, 20 May 2010 [accessed 19/1/11].
2. Lionnel Luca, 'Profil bas', communiqué, 16 September 2010, published on <http://www.lionnel-luca.fr> [accessed 19/1/11]. See also other statements about the film published on this site.
3. Luca, 'Profil bas'.
4. Though the more direct and polemical engagement with the history of that relationship in *Hors-la-loi* might account for its comparative lack of success at the box office (404,000 entries by the end of 2010). The audience figures for *Des Hommes et des dieux* placed it comfortably inside the top fifteen most popular films of the year. Meanwhile, a third film evoking French Algeria and the *pied-noir* exodus, Nicole Garcia's *Un Balcon sur la mer*, released in mid-December 2010, also proved to be a rapid commercial success, chalking up nearly 840,000 entries in its first four weeks on general release. Source: <http://www.cinefeed.com/index.php/box-office-2010> [accessed 19/1/11].
5. Further details of the project can be found at <http://www.france-algeria.net>. Other outputs are a co-authored book and an exhibition of contemporary photography and visual art by French, Algerian and UK-based artists on the

theme of the Franco-Algerian relationship, staged at Cornerhouse, Manchester, April-June 2011.

6. Examples of work focusing on such areas of cinema include Tarr (2005), Ezra and Sillars (2007), and Higbee (2007).

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Filmography

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