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The Return of the *Battle of Algiers* in Mediterranean Shadows:
Race, Resistance, and Victimization

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In late Summer of 2003, when resistance to the American occupation in Iraq acquired the profile of a war of guerilla insurgency through increased bombings and acts of sabotage, the office of Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict at the Pentagon designed and distributed e-mail flyers for those involved in "wot," or the war on terror. The email with the cautionary heading, "How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas," was an invitation to a special screening of the 1966 masterpiece film, *The Battle of Algiers*, by the Italian Marxist director, Gillo Pontecorvo.[1] Based on the book, *Souvenirs de la bataille d'Algers*, by Saadi Yacef, former leading figure of the FLN (National Liberation Front) up until his arrest in 1957, Pontecorvo's film opens on 7 October 1957 as an Algerian nationalist is tortured at the hands of the French Colonel Matthieu. Of course, Yacef, who not only served as producer of the film but also starred in it as El-hadi Jaffar, leader of the FLN, acts out events of the battle that led to his own arrest. After the opening scenes of torture, the film returns us to the beginning of the battle of Algiers on 1 November 1954 to follow the three-year war. A political epic that employs no real documentary footage, the film depicts the conflict between Algerian nationalist insurgents and French colonial forces in the late 1950s.

The U.S. government was not the only party interested in Pontecorvo's classic, although it undoubtedly contributed in great measure to popular interest. The film has recently benefited from release in an enhanced DVD format from the Criterion Collection replete with documentary and interviews, and ongoing runs at the New York Film Forum, as well as movie houses in Washington, Chicago, L.A. and San Francisco. In addition, the film has been subject to a slew of reviews and reports in major newspapers and magazines in the U.S. and Europe. The understandable paradox of such identifications remains that the film is largely known as a leftist film, particularly as a new-leftist film of the 1960's and that decade of anti-colonial struggle. Although the film is a co-production of Italy and Algeria, it also participates in the 1960s and 1970s Italian revision of fascism and national identity. Like films such as Bernardo Bertolucci's *Il Conformista*, *The Conformist*, and Liliana Cavani's *Il Portiere di notte*, *The Night Porter*, Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* also participates in the 1960s and 1970s Italian cinematic tradition of revising fascist oppression and depicting criminality as an ambiguous category. Associated with Algeria's Independence, the Cuban revolution, Vietnam, the Black Panthers' resistance movement, and, more recently, with the training of troops in Northern Ireland in their struggle with the British, Pontecorvo's film has become the emblem of anti-colonial struggle and leftist leaning politics. Viewed as a pedagogical tool for understanding analogous conflicts in Iraq after September 11th, the film broadened its earlier spectator base to include those political groups not readily identified with either leftist or anti-colonial sentiment.

In reportage surrounding the new release of the film, the turn to discourses of racial identification as a tactic of recognizance and surveillance was popular. Many of the critical

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[1] According to Michael Kaufman in a *New York Times* article on September 7, 2003, the idea to show the film came from the Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict. The official responsible for this group stated, "Showing the film offers historical insight into the conduct of French operations in Algeria, and was intended to prompt informative discussion of the challenges faced by the French." Kaufman reported that the official "added that the discussion was lively and that more showings would probably be held."

commentaries published after September 11th in the wake of the film's newfound popularity, even when critical of the Pentagon's use of the film in its war on Iraq, evoked discourses rooted in an Orientalist tradition, referencing notions of a history of pan-Arab terrorism in opposition to the West and conjuring "Arabness" as a quasi racial category. The racial coding found in such reportage in the West aligned largely with the anti-Arab climate related to terrorism in the wake of September 11[th.]. Ultimately this way of viewing the film and "Arabs" in it, resonated not only with the larger political climate but also with a larger strategy of Western neo-imperialist surveillance and territorial expansion. This strategy participated in a long historical trajectory whereby the Mediterranean is constructed as a space of imperialist objectification.

This type of Western surveillance, rooted in an Orientalist tradition of identifying and designating an Eastern "Other," was part of a mapping process intended to enable the U.S. to approach more easily a territory as seemingly alien and forbidding to the U.S. government's mission as it was inviting. This process revealed the ongoing relevance of colonial-era practices in the targeting of foreign and, more precisely, Arab populations and territories for Western occupation. Most importantly, highlighting the centrality of resistance cinema to the age of terrorism in the way it did, this process suggested the ways that oppositional, or *third cinema*, were dealt debilitating blows.

In order to explore this phenomenon, I will examine how reception of the film and commentary on cinematic identification by the film's important critics play in stark contrast to the U.S. understanding and appropriation of victimization in the film. Whether it be the ambiguous grey treatment of victim and victimizer underscored by many critics of the film, or a more overtly oppositional quality identified by other critics to characterize its style, cinematic identification clearly focused on Muslim terrorism and not on the perceived messages by some critics of the way that victim and victimizer are melded in war. The Western process of designating and appropriating victimization evident in the recent screening of *The Battle of Algiers* remains at the center of the dilemma for resistance cinema in the age of terror. Moreover, it suggests how the shadows of European colonialism in the Mediterranean continue to cast a pall over the way the region is viewed today in the Western attempt to re-assert its hegemony.

A great deal of the recent mass interest in *The Battle of Algiers* by American spectators as well as by a U.S. government wary of a long-term cohabitation with an "Arab" population was based on the perceived reality of the revolutionary nature of Arab terrorism informed by historically received images of Arabs and pan-Arab stereotypes. Despite important contextual differences between the occupation of Algeria and the occupation of Iraq, much reportage linking the two wars draws strict parallels between *The Battle of Algiers* and the War on Iraq primarily through recourse to race and racially coded images of terrorism and revolution. Strictly speaking, the category of Arab does not constitute a racial designation in conventional terms. However, in reportage either seeking to draw or denounce parallels between *The Battle of Algiers* and the war in Iraq, notions of race and racially coded images of terrorism were evoked, often in surreptitious ways.[2] Frequently these emerged in the notion of pan-Arab terrorism and in the reliance upon pre-existing racial stereotypes played out in reference to both the film and the context of the war in Iraq.

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[2] In this respect, Etienne Balibar's assertion that the new racism is a "racism without races" is applicable here. There now exists a "racism without races," writes Etienne Balibar, "a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity but the insurmountability of cultural differences." Etienne Balibar, "Is There a 'Neo-Racism'?" in Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Chris Turner, trans. (London: Verso, 1991). The designation of the Arab as a codified enemy insurgent in opposition to the Western subject, established a racialized category where codes of the veiled and "indigenous" Algerians as victimizers were relied upon to view the Arab as a cultural Other.

Before turning to some specific examples of these manifestations, I would like to point very briefly to the structural framework that underpins the types of racial and racially coded identifications made in many discussions of parallels between the film and the war on Iraq. Such identification problems can be best viewed, perhaps, in Robert Stam's report on the film in a recent article on the politics of cinematic identification. Stam argues that the film constitutes a revolutionary breakthrough in that it creates conscious political sympathy with the Algerian people. He argues, for instance, that through scale and point of view editing, the spectator comes to identify with the struggle of Algerian women planting bombs in cafés, to the point where, "the film makes us want the women to complete their task" of bombing.[3] While Stam does acknowledge the many close-up shots of innocent victims, he argues that "spectatorial positioning is so complete" as to derail any ambiguity concerning the film's message: "Pontecorvo thus hijacks the apparatus of objectivity and the formulaic techniques of mass media reportage…to express political views usually anathema to the dominant media. For the First World mass media, terrorism means only freelance or infrastate violence…But *Battle of Algiers* presents anticolonialist terror as a response to colonialist violence."[4] While it is easy to agree with Stam that cinematic identification does take place through spectatorial positioning, such identifications as seen in reportage about the film (particularly from the Pentagon) seem to take place as identifications with Algerians as enemies. Such a positioning propagates the "clash of civilizations," establishing an identification directly related to the conflict in Iraq as Western world versus Arab, or Orient. It is ultimately this specular relationship between West and East that structures the racialized identifications one finds in many commentaries on the film.

One of the first things to note in the Pentagon's viewing of the film as documentary is the biased, indeed exclusive, focus on Arab terrorism and the way it builds. In those discourses there is a complete and utter spectatorial identification with Algerians as an enemy under surveillance. There is no mention whatsoever of Western occupation as terrorism—a point made in the *Battle of Algiers* most explicitly by a captured official of the FLN who, when asked about the tactics of planting bombs, responds, "Doesn't it seem even dirtier to you to drop napalm bombs on defenseless villages with thousands of innocent victims? It would be a lot easier for us if we had planes. Give us your bombers." Identifications with Algerians, indeed with "Arabs," as terrorists within the context of colonial struggle is perhaps most evident in the documentary case study, included with the newly released version of the film. The conversation between Richard Clarke, former national counter terrorism coordinator, and Michael Sheehan, former State Department coordinator for counterterrorism proceeds through tension between the constant disavowal or pushing away of Western (American and French) terrorist tactics and occupation, and evocation

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[3] Stam and Shohat, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* (Rutgers University Press, 2003): 29.

[4] Robert Stam and Louis Spence suggest that traditional representations of the racialized Other in cinema are predicated upon a spectatorial position where cinematic identification with the Other can only take place through his or her surveillance ("Colonialism, Racism, and Representation," *Screen* 24:2 (March–April 1983): 30). Of Pontecorvo's film they write, "One of the crucial innovations of *Battle of Algiers* was to invert this imagery of encirclement and exploit the identificatory mechanisms of cinema on behalf of the colonized rather than the colonizer. Algerians, traditionally represented in cinema as shadowy figures, picturesquely backward at best and hostile and menacing at worst, are here treated with respect, dignified by close-ups, shown as speaking subjects rather than as simple manipulable objects. While never caricaturing the French, the film exposes the oppressive logic of colonialism and consistently fosters our complicity with Algerians" (Stam and Spence 1983, 20). My point in referring to this essay written long before the Pentagon screening, albeit reprinted very recently, is not to unfairly criticize Stam and Spence through a strawman argument, but rather, to demonstrate how the resistant quality of *third cinema* often hinges upon the point through which spectatorial identification takes place. Moreover, the U.S. screening of the film, as I argue below, demonstrates the policing or reinforcement of the Western strategy of surveillance of the Arab.

of the terrorism of the Arab world rooted in a long history. Speaking of "Arab extremism," Sheehan argues that, "there is nothing new going on in Iraq that hasn't gone on for over 3000 years." In this respect, it is important to note that this conversation is framed by alternating clips from Pontecorvo's film of veiled and armed Algerians performing acts of what Sheehan and Clarke term "urban terrorism," whereas no images of French colonial activity are featured.

Such notions of pan-Arab terrorism are also evident in reports by journalists who find little historically comparable between Algeria and Iraq. In his article in *The New Yorker* On December 22, 2003 entitled "Winning and Losing," Philip Gourevitch points out the French defeat in the film and states that what does unite the two situations is "the ugly truth" that "terrorism works." Of course, the ongoing situation of civil war and unrest in Algeria demonstrates that the Algerians did not necessarily win, a point which seems to illustrate more clearly that terrorism, no matter how defined, does not work.[5] Like Charles Paul Freund, senior editor of *Reason* magazine, Gourevitch suggests a common revolutionary Arab terrorism in both Algeria and Iraq. In his article titled, "The Pentagon's Film Festival: A Primer for *The Battle of Algiers*," Freund concludes that although the two situations are radically different, the "Mideast learned the efficacy of insurgent terror from Algeria. The PLO, Hamas, and other (Arab) groups are indebted to the Algerian strategy. Its lessons are now apparent in Iraq too.[6]" Identifications such as these of a pan-Arab terrorism originating in Algeria suggest a disavowal of Western terrorism in the form of colonial invasion and occupation, not to mention the practices of French torture clearly depicted in Pontecorvo's film. To characterize common Algerian and Iraqi resistance to Western occupation in their own countries as terrorism is to posit a Western proprietary right to colonial territory, as if Algerian and Iraqi citizens were never there before Western arrival. As Achille Mbembe reminds us in his work *On the Postcolony*, this is a common trope of colonial discourse that abrogates ownership and cancels or completely disavows "native" settler identity.[7]

Moreover, the nature of such pan-Arab terrorism is coded in Orientalist terms as a specific stereotypical address and Western approach to the "East." Although Edward Said associates Orientalism more specifically with the era of active European colonialism, in his more recent work, *Culture and Imperialism*, he notes that American ascendancy into a new imperialist relationship with the world continues the Orientalist lineage in ways that are often mediated by mass media and the culture of the image. For Said, then, contemporary Western media representations of the Arab world frequently exhibit an Orientalist approach "effective in representing strange and threatening foreign cultures for the home audience."[8] Moreover, as Iain Chambers recalls, the colonial tropes of "framing, objectifying, and alienating the "'native'" common in the Mediterranean, have become the tenets of a "universal modernity" now maintained by a certain Western approach that continues to define itself against an Other and thereby maintain "planetary order."[9] The interviews included with the new release of Pontecorvo's film display just such an Orientalist representation of the Mediterranean. The

[5] The French use of force in Algeria did, however, cause a great deal of political scandal that has traumatized political life in France. At the heart of these scandals lies the question of the French use of torture and the way it caused the Algerian nationalist cause to be viewed throughout the world. As recently as 2001 General Massu, the model for the film's Colonel Mathieu, noted in an interview with *Le Monde* that he felt the French should now apologize officially for their use of torture during the Algerian War. The U.S. use of torture in Iraq and with other presumed terrorists presents an analogous case that raises the question of the merits of embroiling the U.S. in political scandal on the geo-political scene.

[6] Freund, "The Pentagon's Film Festival: A Primer for *The Battle of Algiers*," *Reason*, 28.

[7] See Achille Mbembe, *On The Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001): 183.

[8] Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1993): 292.

[9] Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008): 7.

conversation between Clarke and Sheehan focuses, as does the Pentagon's statement about the film, on the "mad fervor" of "Arabs." Nonetheless, for Sheehan and Clarke, the Algerians in Pontecorvo's film are "lackadaisical and passive" yet have an arcane "longer view of where they wanted to go." In other words, Algerians and Algeria contain a hidden historical revolutionary essence that winds itself through a 3000 year old fervor. Such an essence is, as Edward Said has pointed out, one of the principal tropes through which the Western world defines itself through and consequently against the Arab, or Eastern World. [10]

This concealed, smoldering revolutionary essence is also suggested in a *New York* magazine article by Peter Rainer who, although he finds little historically comparable between the film and the war in Iraq, points out that Pontecorvo's Algerian protagonist, Ali La Pointe, leader of the FLN, "is not a character exactly, he's the embodiment of downtrodden Muslims clamoring for Liberation. Pontecorvo has a great eye for faces that carry within themselves a depth charge, and in Ali he gives us an unforgettable mask of suffering and rage. There is destiny in that acetyline glower of his, it tells us time is on his side." Rainer remarks that, "not much in the current Iraq situation is historically comparable to the late-fifties Algerian struggle for independence dramatized in *The Battle of Algiers*, but its anatomy of terror remains unsurpassed--and, woefully, ever fresh."[11] The dramatic images of an Arab epic of revolutionary stealth and terror steeped in *longue durée* — whether in comparison or through refusal of the comparison of Algeria and Iraq — constitute racialized codes. The images of a common terrorist character or type, whether within the context of anti-colonial struggle or Iraqi insurgency, unite the understanding of the two geographical and political contexts and elide important historical distinctions. Ultimately, statements such as those found in Michael Kaufman's report of the Pentagon's invitation to view "clandestine terrorists in places like Algeria and Iraq," suggest not only the concealed, ebullient nature of Arab terrorism, but also the Muslim nature of larger Arab insurgency.[12] The anti-colonial struggle for independence by the Algerian FLN becomes translated into the insurgency of Islamic fundamentalism. As Michael Chanan puts it in his brief review article of the film, "the trick is to see the *The Battle of Algiers* as both a contemporary and historical film at the same time, which is not about the clash of civilizations" (Chanan 2007, 40).[13] The comparisons made above, however, even when mindful of historical differences, ultimately elide the specificity of colonial history and, instead, substitute the meaning of its rebellion and victimization with Orientalist tropes.

Placed within the context of post 9/11 these tropes suggest a characterization of American hegemony as a neo-imperialist practice. More importantly, much like the tactics of earlier colonial settlers, the Western practice of mapping out a space that seemed alien yet visually enticing or appealing to the imperialist gaze can be seen in the Pentagon screening of the film. However, the specificity of this practice as a uniquely neo-imperialist tactic is evidenced in the way commentary surrounding the film appropriated colonial history and, more specifically, victimization at the hands of anti-colonial liberationists. The Pentagon's screening of *The Battle*

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[10] Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* 290-96.

[11] See Rainer, "Prescient Tense," *New York Magazine*, 5 January 2004

[12] In a 2003 *New York Times* article, Michael Kaufman wrote of a Pentagon screening where, "40 officers and civilian experts were urged to consider and discuss the important issues at the core of the film…the problematic but alluring efficacy of brutal and repressive means in fighting clandestine terrorists in places like Algeria and Iraq. Or more specifically, the advantages and costs of resorting to torture and intimidation in seeking vital human intelligence about enemy plans" (Kaufman, "What Does the Pentagon See in Battle of Algiers?" *New York Times*, 7 September 2003).

[13] It is important to note that in many ways the "clash of civilizations" evident in *The Battle of Algiers* is structured by many of the same ideologies that contribute to the contemporary clash of civilizations. The problem is that the responsibility of the West and its vision of these ideologies is completely occluded in the Pentagon screening.

of Algiers represented a unique moment in the history of the present where, we might say, the apparatus of Western hegemony was laid bare. Certainly the Pentagon's screening displayed the way that the representation of colonial history and of "third world" liberation might be positioned so as to inform a neo-imperialist practice of mapping out territory to be occupied. It also revealed, however, the use of media from the colonial era in this process, and its exportation to the present for the purposes of identification, surveillance, and coding that prefigure, or at the very least, contemporaneously inform, physical occupation of territory. This use of media parallels a larger Western neo-imperialist use of media and technology in the codification and management of "Arab" others. The act of viewing the film as an analogous narrative of struggle demonstrated America's ability to abrogate the narrative of colonial history and its meanings for its own purposes and, moreover, exhibited its ability to use its paradigmatic images as a tactics of racialized codification of space and territory for its own narrative of hegemony.[14] While, as we will see below, the trope of victimization is central to Pontecorvo's treatment of the struggle for Algerian Independence, the U.S. identified solely with its Arab enemy as victimizer, placing itself in the position of victim. The desire to occupy the victim's position so as to retaliate with victimization is central to the contemporary age of terror; it structures the "clash of civilizations" and is exemplified by the dynamics of spectatorship that the Pentagon viewing of Pontecorvo's film exemplified.

What is perhaps most interesting about the Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers* is the way that colonial-era media was used in the wake of September 11th to re-imagine the nation as a hegemonic power through the surveillance and control of victimization. If, as Benedict Anderson has argued, nations are imagined communities that establish themselves through a certain imagined image, then the process of reparation to the nation that took place in the wake of September 11th and in the Pentagon's viewing of *The Battle of Algiers* proved telling. Anderson defines a nation as "an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."[15] What is key to Anderson's definition of sovereignty is his identification of its limited nature. Although Anderson does not address what occurs to a nation when the balance of its sovereignty and limitation is disrupted, as in the case of the U.S. in the wake of September 11th when the terrorist attacks created a sense of the limitations of its sovereignty, we might posit that a re-imagination of sovereignty and its limitations would be in order. The screening of Pontecorvo's film and the discourses related to its release after September 11th suggested that the process of re-imagining the nation in the wake of a disruption, or perceived disruption, of that nation's sovereignty is an integral component of the ongoing process of the imagined community. More importantly, perhaps, the screening in question suggested that the imagined control of victimization through visual mediation is central to the ways the imagined sovereign nation addresses the limitations of its sovereignty so as to reinforce it. By viewing and imagining victimization in Pontecorvo's film and in the terror of September 11th as a product of Arab terror only, not only did the U.S. ignore the limitations of Western

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[14] In Dipesh Chakrabarty's theorization of the status of historicity as serial time, one finds a suggestion about the invisibility of disjunctures in the writing of history by the West: "Thus the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself" (*Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007): 109). "Making visible this disjuncture," according to Chakrabarty, is the first step in revealing the Western elision of its own vision and control of the historical narrative. The Pentagon appropriation of victimization and elision of the full narrative of colonial history in its positioning of *The Battle of Algiers* as a historical narrative analogous to the Iraqi situation aligns with Chakrabarty's conception of the Western appropriation of the historical narrative in its disavowal of temporal disjuncture.

[15] Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 2006): 6.

sovereignty in its imperialist history, it simultaneously appropriated the position of victim in the process of designating potential Arab victims. It is safe to say that this process reflects a larger Western process whereby the new neo-imperialism of the West establishes itself through the active re-imagination of colonial history and the contemporary limits of Western sovereignty.[16] Central to these dynamics was the positioned control or imagined re-appropriation of Western surveillance and codification of its enemy. The pentagon screening of Pontecorvo's film exemplified how the continued re-appropriation of visual surveillance of the Other is an integral component not only of the appropriation of the victim's position and its ultimate transformation into that of victimizer, but also of the process of re-imagining the purview of geo-political relations through the prism of the U.S. and the scope of its sovereignty.

Pontecorvo's film made explicit these spectatorial dynamics of the appropriation of terrorist victimization. After perhaps the film's most famous scenes where three consecutive bombs planted in the European quarter of Algiers by female terrorists have detonated, we witness the arrival of the French paratroopers led by the cool and impenetrable Colonel Mathieu, the image of whom bears an uncanny resemblance to Arnold Schwarzeneger's Terminator. Mathieu then holds a briefing of his troops where the recent terrorist attacks are discussed. He begins by enumerating the escalating number of daily attacks faced by the French population of Algiers in recent days. He then issues a statement that not all of the Arab population is known or considered to be an enemy to the French presence, a speech that recalls official U.S. government discourses concerning Arab populations after September 11th. After, he calls his men's attention to surveillance footage of the Arab populations, pointing out that continuous video is taken in select locations of the Casbah, the old labyrinthine neighborhood of Algiers populated largely by Arab citizens. As the soldiers watch, we view the projected black and white footage, akin to the film we are watching, and witness close-ups of passing veiled Muslim women and local men. The footage we watch appears, aesthetically, much like the film itself, in newsreel-style black and white.[17] We then see searches in select entry points of the Casbah by French police. It is unclear in Mathieu's speech what the exact outcome of searches has been, but the implication of the scene is that visual scrutiny of the Arab population might ultimately aid in the identification of the hidden enemy. More importantly, perhaps, this scene reveals how the projection of Western measures of surveillance and policing are central to their own existence. This auto surveillance of Western practices of visual control reflects and reinforces, in a larger sense, the very spectatorial dynamics involved in the Pentagon screening of Pontecorvo's film.[18] Not only does this particular scene reflect clearly the types of racialized coding and observation of Arab populations put in place after September 11th by the U.S. government, it also mirrors the very

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[16] Important postcolonial accounts of the Western national imaginary focus on the "disruptive" dynamics that the representation of colonial history provides in its challenge to the West. Homi Bhabha's conception of the way the "homogeneity" of national time is splintered by the time of colonialism, or by the representation of minority or resistance narratives, is emblematic of the larger postcolonial revisionist perspective. The Pentagon screening of Pontecorvo's film proved to be an event that demonstrated how the representation of the time of colonialism within the confines of the Western imaginary might also serve to simply reinforce the conception of the temporal and spatial boundaries of sovereignty in the West.

[17] The newsreel style footage of presumed terrorists in the film could be said to resonate with much of the newsreel images one finds in U.S. reporting on Iraq. This similarity can be seen to establish another point of cinematic identification for U.S. spectators.

[18] In *The Age of the World Target: Self-Referentiality in War, Theory, and Comparative Work* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), Rey Chow argues that self-referentiality is central to the U.S. targeting of populations that are deemed Other, and ultimately to the establishment of U.S. hegemony on the world scene (2006). Chow points out that the self-referentiality found in American political praxis is accompanied by its reflection in the production of knowledge. Although she does not discuss the self-referentiality of surveillance in her work, the scene of Pontecorvo's work suggests similar dynamics in the production of knowledge and of Western hegemonic practices.

dynamics of the Pentagon screening of the film itself. In a larger sense, viewed within the film being watched as surveillance footage, this scene suggests how the pre-existing visual codes summoned to interpret the context of terrorism ultimately reflect those already in place *a priori*.

The question remains as to what this type of process suggests for the condition of "third cinema," or resistance cinema today. As a classic film of nationalist struggle, *The Battle of Algiers* was widely received by critics as a "resistance" film. Whether characterized for its underscoring of the ambiguous nature of terrorism or for its direct message of anti-colonial resistance, the film was widely applauded as an example of *third cinema* and as a resounding denouncement of terrorism. Jan Dawson, for instance, writes that, "the most powerful — and ultimately the most persuasive — thing about *The Battle of Algiers* is its extraordinary fairmindedness, its scrupulous refusal to simplify or romanticize the moral and practical choices on either side of the barricades."[19] Likewise, in *Film Quarterly*, Nancy Ellen Dowd writes that Pontecorvo, "allows himself the nauseating grace of retrospection — the impossible compassion for victim and rebel alike." Indeed, *The Battle of Algiers* does depict the brutalities of warfare on both sides. The film highlights the brutality of terrorist acts by the FLN just as it underscores the equally brutal French use of torture and repression. In one particular scene, the French plant a bomb in the Casbah near the home of an Algerian accused of murdering a policeman. The bomb explodes killing and injuring many innocent people. In reprisal, Algerian women disguised as Europeans enter into the French quarter and detonate bombs in cafés and at the Air France terminal, killing and injuring many innocent victims in return.[20] When captive FLN leader, Larbi Ben M'Hidi is questioned during a press conference whether he feels that it is "cowardly to use women's baskets and handbags to carry explosive devices that kill so many innocent people," he responds:

> And doesn't it seem to you even more cowardly to drop napalm bombs on defenseless villages, so that there are a thousand times more innocent victims? Of course, if we had your airplanes it would be a lot easier for us. Give us your bombers, and you can have our baskets.

In many ways, this specular violence underscored by the film seems to align more closely with contemporary conditions of terrorism and reprisal despite the specific historical and contextual differences designating the different periods. Yet, ironically, the film's depiction of the ways that victim and victimizer ultimately both become terrorists is lost in recent analogies made between the Algerian and Iraqi contexts.

Roger Ebert writes of, "the universal frame of reference" that the film establishes in its treatment of terror where, "those not interested in Algeria may substitute another war."[21]Writing in a similar vein of the pedagogical lessons the film provides, Pauline Kael states that, "in none of the political melodramas that were to follow is there any sequence that comes near to the complex overtones of the sorrowful acceptance with which each of the three bomb-planting women looks to see who will be killed by her bomb."[22] In all of these critical reviews, the film's message as to the vicissitudes of terror as an imperialist tactic or as anti-colonial struggle is

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[19] See Dawson, *Monthly Film Bulletin* (Jan. 1971).
[20] One of the real life women bombers was Zohra Drif, who became a parliamentarian in Algeria after Independence from the French. She was a law student at Algiers University and the daughter of an Islamic judge. During World War II her parents told her that the occupation of France by Nazi Germany was God's revenge on the French for their treatment of Muslims. On this topic see Louis Proyect's article, "Looking Back at *The Battle of Algiers*."
[21] Ebert, "The Battle of Algiers," *The Chicago Sun-Times,* 30 May 1968.
[22] Kael, "The Current Cinema, "Poetry and Politics," *The New Yorker* (20 January 1973): 80.

highlighted. Yet, clearly the film's complexities and indication of the grey areas of struggle between French forces and Algerian liberationists were lost during the Pentagon screening and, we might say, in the widespread commentary on the film that constructed a racialized perspective of pan-Arab terrorism.

Cinema of resistance, or *third cinema*, finds its roots in the subversive agenda of the 1968 social and artistic movement launched by Argentinean filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Gettino. Solanas and Gettino conceived of a "guerilla cinema" that would serve in opposition to an overwhelmingly dominant Hollywood cinema:

> What determines Third Cinema is the conception of the world, and not the genre or an explicit political approach. Any story, any subject can be taken up by Third Cinema. Third Cinema is a cinema of decolonization, which expresses the will to national liberation, anti-mythic, anti-racist, anti-bourgeois, and popular.[23]

Distinguishing between "first cinema" in the commercial mode epitomized by Hollywood, and "second cinema" characterized by European *auteur* films, Solanas and Gettino posited that third cinema distinguished itself in opposition to these other two forms of cinema as a revolutionary aesthetic and highly charged political form.[24] Their conception of third cinema derived in great part from the experience of making the radical Argentinian documentary *La Hora de los Hornos*, or *The Hour of the Furnaces*, in 1968. Since then, the leading theorist of *third cinema*, Teshome Gabriel, has proposed that the schema introduced by Solanas and Gettino tends to ignore certain imbrications of cinematic forms that lead to the creation of an interesting and challenging aesthetic. For Gabriel, often the most interesting examples of *third cinema* are to be found in those films that occupy the grey zone in between. As such*, third cinema* is "moved by the requirements of its social action and contexted and marked by that strategy of action."[25] Style becomes meaningful only in relation to the context of its use and in its ability to illuminate the ideology at work within a particular cultural context.

Third Cinema is thus not a demolition of Hollywood or *auteur* cinema but rather, a dialectically inflected genre that provides, "a rational interpretation of a historically defined reality so that a line of causation can be established."[26] The conception of ideological positioning is important here since *third cinema* is characterized, according to Gabriel, as more than just a reality effect, or the projected impression of reality, but rather, as the active and positioned interpretation of it. The praxis of *third cinema*, then, is one of confrontation with existing social realities: "The aesthetic of Third Cinema also moves between two poles; one, the demand that the works engage the actual pressing social realities of the day, and the other that the film achieve its impression of reality, not by simply mirroring, but by transforming the given."[27] Key to Gabriel's formulation of *the third cinema* aesthetic is a certain engaged perspective. The *third cinema* filmmaker works from a postcolonial perspective, in the strictest sense, of liberation and

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[23] Michael Chanan, "Outsiders: *The Battle of Algiers* and Political Cinema." *Sight and Sound* 9 (June 2007): 37.

[24] Michael Chanan points out that "the Argentinians suggest a position in which, to fulfill the criteria of *third cinema*, there can be nothing in political terms which is tentative or hypothetical about the content or signification of the images concerned; whereas the avant-garde or underground notion of experimentalism defends the notion of a space which is untouched by these considerations (without thereby becoming reactionary)." Chanan, "The Changing Geography of Third Cinema," *Screen* 38:4 (Winter 1997): 373.

[25] Gabriel, "Third Cinema as Guardian of Popular Memory: Towards a Third Aesthetics," in *Questions of Third Cinema,* edited by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen (London: BFI publishers, 1994): 40.

[26] Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Dynamics of Style and Liberation* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1979): 97.

[27] Ibid., 8.

politically representative engagement. The act of re-imagining reality from the perspective of the filmmaker is germane to the production of *third cinema*; it hinges upon the interpretation of reality and constitutes a conscious surrender to the manipulative dynamics of the hermeneutic act.

Robert Stam and Louis Spence identify this quality of Pontecorvo's film best in pointing out its aberration from earlier portrayals of Algerians and its active partisan portrayal of the colonized liberation forces. Writing of the conventional suturing of the spectator to the colonialist perspective found in many films treating the destiny of the colonized, Stam and Spence point out that *The Battle of Algiers* exploited,

> the identificatory mechanisms of cinema on behalf of the colonized rather than the colonizer. Algerians, traditionally represented in cinema as shadowy figures, picturesquely backward at best and hostile and menacing at worst, are here treated with respect, dignified by close-ups, shown as speaking subjects rather than as manipulable objects. While never characterizing the French, the film exposes the oppressive logic of colonialism and consistently fosters our complicity with the Algerians. It is through Algerian eyes, for instance, that we witness a condemned Algerian's walk to his execution. It is from within the casbah that we see and hear the French troops and helicopters. This time it is the colonized who are encircled and menaced and with whom we identify.[28]

Of course, Stam and Spence interpret the film from a positioned perspective that shares the same political consciousness of decolonization they identify in Pontecorvo's film. Indeed, the crux of the question of engagement and realism derives from the cultural capital and political perspective that is a part of the apparatus of realism. In great part, we might trace the type of political appropriation we see with *The Battle of Algiers* to the history of neo-realist Italian aesthetics to which Pontecorvo's work is indebted.

In his classic study, *What is Cinema*, André Bazin pointed out the underpinnings of this very question of political affiliation, arguing that the *mise-en-scène* of the classic neo-realist style, for instance, revealed its own construction as a form politically engaged with its context. Writing of De Sica's films, Bazin stated that, "Though this *mise-en-scène* aims at negating itself, at being transparent to the reality it reveals, it would be naïve to conclude that it does not exist…There is not one image that is not charged with meaning, that does not drive home into the mind the sharp end of an unforgettable moral truth, and not one that to this end is false to the ontological ambiguity of reality" (205). It is important to note that the comparison to the political slant found in the ambiguities of neo-realism is not without basis since Pontecorvo's style was greatly informed by Italian neo-realist aesthetics and principles by predecessors such as De Sica, Visconti, and Rossellini. His early filmmaking embraced the documentary style and the raw camera movement of neo-realism in popular works such as *The Wide Blue Road* (1957) and *Pane e zolfo* (1959). Although neo-realist intent might differ from the overtly liberationist character of *The Battle of Algiers*, which has become an emblem of *third cinema*, or from Pontecorvo's other highly politicized films from the 1960s and 1970s such as *Burn!*, an anti-colonial film set in the Antilles, and *Ogro*, depicting terrorism at the end of Franco's regime in Spain, Bazin's formulation of the way the ambiguities of neo-realist representation remain politically charged and open to appropriation by diverse ideologies is applicable to Pontecorvo's work. Writing of the political appropriation of Vittorio De Sica's films in the post-fascist climate

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[28] Stam and Spence, "Colonialism, Racism, and Representation," *Screen* 24:2 (March–April 1983): 244.

of Italy, Bazin points out the extreme polarity of interpretations found in ambiguous representations: "The ambiguities of *Miracolo a Milano* and *Ladri di Biciclette* have been used by the Christian Democrats and by the Communists."[29] In a similar manner, we can say that the ambiguities underscored by Pontecorvo's film, the grey interstitial areas that unite torturer and tortured, victim and victimizer, ultimately folding them into a specular and singular equation, lend the film to appropriation by left and right wing ideologies alike.

Although Pontecorvo's ambiguous treatment of victimization contained the liberationist ideology associated with *third cinema*, it also lends its message, some forty years later, to appropriation by a Western power concerned with re-imagining the limits of its hegemony and its status as victim of terrorist attacks. It is here that Bazin's notion of cultural capital in the apparatus of realism comes into play. For Bazin, the spectator of the neo-realist film brings to the screen's poetic and ambiguous representation of reality his or her own political imagination of it. We might go further to recall that the neo-realist film also portrayed, in the largest sense, victimization as a means of inciting spectatorial response. Perhaps the most emblematic scene of victimization in the neo-realist film can be found in Rossellini's *Roma Città Aperta*, *Rome, Open City*. In the context of fascist Italy, immediately following the Nazi occupation, the scene of torture in Rossellini's film featuring the Marxist Manfredi who is tortured by the Nazis to reveal information about the partisan movement in Rome reflects the way that victimization in the neo-realist film played upon the cultural capital and political imagination of the nation as a victimized entity. Manfredi's torture by the Nazis, along with the Catholic Don Pietro's death as a martyr of the resistance, played upon the pre-existing cultural image of Italy as a nation victimized by the Nazis yet resistant in Marxist and Catholic values. In many ways, the scene of torture in *Rome, Open City*, capitalized upon the prevailing sentiment of victimization to galvanize and codify Italian cultural values. Although victimization in Pontecorvo's film is portrayed differently, what the two examples share is the way that pre-existing expressions of cultural values become affixed to the depiction of victimization when those values are perceived to be threatened.

The *Alger 1954* segment early in *The Battle of Algiers* is a salient example of a scene that lends itself to the identificatory mechanisms of pre-existing Western conceptions of victimization in the wake of September 11th. The neo-realist documentary-style approach of Pontecorvo's camera focuses in on Ali La Pointe and his victimization at the hands of both French settlers and police. As the camera closes in on La Pointe's face while he is being dragged away by the police, the voice over narration provides biographical details of his criminal history. While La Pointe's history is clearly embedded in the larger context of colonial oppression, the close up shots of his face and the narrative of his criminality combine to play upon the idea of Western victimization at the hands of "Arab" terrorists. While this segment of the film, pointing as it does to the incipient nature of Algerian revolution in 1954, could clearly be read as an indictment of French colonialism that led to the police suppression and containment of Algerian independence, it can also be seen to align clearly with the perceived threat of victimization felt by the West in the aftermath of September 11th. Moreover, the scene is preceded by the film's opening scene of torture where La Pointe's whereabouts are extracted. Even clear scenes of French victimization of Algerians in the film, such as the opening scene of torture and the subsequent round up of Algerians in the search for La Pointe, can be read as necessary responses in a Manichean structure pitting perceived victim against victimizer. The still of La Pointe's face at the close of the opening segment of the film ends in a dissolve to a segment about his criminality, symbolically pointing to the necessity of torture and "necessary means" as a

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[29] Bazin, *What is Cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967): 207.

response to Western victimization by a history of criminality. Moreover, the still of La Pointe's face and the emphasis on his criminality mirror the practices of ethnic profiling that have become commonplace in the post 9/11 climate. Scenes such as these demonstrate how the cultural capital of the West, intent on appropriating the position of victim, could easily produce a viewing of the victim as victimizer and vice versa.

The ambiguities of Pontecorvo's treatment of terrorism amounted to more than just an occasion for the U.S. to codify Arabs according to age-old stereotypes and to interpret terrorism as an infliction affecting only the West. The Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers* also offered the opportunity for the U.S. to work through the ambiguities of its own status as both torturer and victim. The ambiguities of Pontecorvo's film that signaled the barbarism of both colonizer and colonized locked in a terrorist embrace proved the perfect imagery for the political praxis of the hegemonic nation faced with addressing the ambiguities of being at once victim and torturer. The working through of that ambiguous position corresponded perfectly to the exigencies of the moment that called for an immediate valorization not only of sovereignty and the attending occupation of Iraq, but of all means required to achieve it. The screening of the film enabled a projection of the victim's position to occur and supersede the simultaneous position of torturer occupied by the U.S. at the time of the screening. Following Anderson's conception of the nation as an imagined community predicated on the ongoing imagination and activation of the limits of hegemony, we might say that the screening of Pontecorvo's film enacted the very process of re-imagining the nation after September 11th as a victim.

Such conceptions of hegemony resonate with a larger history of European imperialist approaches to the Mediterranean. European colonialism in the Mediterranean attempted to impose the Western perspective as central in its occlusion of colonial history. And, as Chambers points out, the centrality of the control exercised by the Western perspective within the history of colonialism in the Mediterranean resurfaces today in post 9/11 geopolitics: "This is why the destruction of the Twin Towers is the symbol of the epoch of global terror, rather than the eight thousand Muslims slaughtered by 'Christian' soldiers in Srebrenica or the hundreds of thousands exterminated in the genocide of Rwanda."[30] One might add that the establishment of this worldview is based upon the idea of the victimization of the West by its Muslim "Other," rather than on a long history of Western imperialism. What becomes central, then, to the Western establishment of the centrality of 9/11 as the defining event of the age of terror, is the establishment of Western victimization as a focal point.

Of course, the victim's position is the specular shadow of the torturer's position, the reverse side of the hegemonic equation. In this case, the dominance of Western perspective and point of view are presumed and identified in *The Battle of Algiers* despite the ambiguities underscored by critics. That perspective, along with the cultural capital that informs it, is rooted in the ongoing imagination of the American nation that must transpose its positions as torturer and victim in order to galvanize its position as a hegemonic nation. The U.S. screening of Pontecorvo's film ultimately reveals how the resistance film can become the political screen onto which is projected the spectator's imagined image of hegemonic nationhood replete with a history of victimization and imagined reprisal.

The imagination of the hegemonic nation, as Anderson suggests, must constantly confront the limits and the strength of its sovereignty. The scenes of torture in *The Battle of Algiers* enabled just such a confrontation, particularly because of the way that torture in relation to American sovereignty had come to the forefront of political and public debate at the time with the Guantanamo Bay affair. The opening scene of Pontecorvo's film takes place in a torture

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[30] Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, 20.

chamber where a captive member of the FLN is coerced to reveal the whereabouts of his leader Ali La Pointe after receiving repeated doses of electric shock. In a subsequent scene, following the arrival of French paratroopers in Algiers led by the Colonel Mathieu, torture becomes an official practice established without regard for French democratic measures. In a scene depicting a press conference, Colonel Mathieu remarks that,

> the word torture doesn't appear in our orders. We've always spoken of interrogation as the only valid method in a police operation directed against unknown enemies. As for the FLN, they request that their members, in the event of capture, should maintain silence for twenty-four hours, and then they may talk. So, the organization has already had the time it needs to render any information useless. What type of interrogation should we choose, the one the courts use for a murder case that drags on for months?

In many ways, the U.S. government response to the torture of suspected members of al-Qaeda in 2002, before the screening of Pontecorvo's film, came to reflect the French response represented by Colonel Mathieu. The opening scene of the film corresponded to an image of the U.S. as torturer, a reality perceived as a necessary response to al-Qaeda threats after September 11th when U.S. sovereignty was interpreted as vulnerable and therefore limited.

While we might say that the Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers* enabled the domestication of victimization, its appropriation as something intrinsically inflicted on the West and, more importantly, America, we might also say that the implication of torture as a necessary tactic in the face of Muslim insurgents also bore witness to a domestication of the suggestion of the barbarism of torture that emerged in Guantanamo Bay. The screening of *The Battle of Algiers* enabled a recuperation of the terrorist tactics of the Arab enemy--viewed as vile and victimizing-- and their subsequent translation into something intrinsically American and civilizing. Of course, those same tactics would come into play in Abu Ghraib just months later and it is easy to see how the Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers*, placed as it was between two torture scandals, participated in the general climate that transformed or re-imagined terrorism and torture as necessary tactics of the victimized.

The return of Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* to what, just years ago, might have seemed like a most unlikely audience, speaks volumes about the nature of post 9/11 politics and the condition of postcolonial resistance. The Pentagon screening of the film functioned as a cartographic process that mapped out the uncertain contours of the war in Iraq. The visible identification of al-Qaeda operatives proved difficult for the U.S. after the World Trade Center attacks. The faces of the victimizer were not readily available and the profile was to be reconstructed, pieced together. The cinematic identifications that took place in the screening of *The Battle of Algiers* and in reportage about it suggest that such identifications with Arabs as enemy combatants were facilitated by the liberationist narrative from forty years prior as well as by pre-existing conceptions of Arabs that aligned more with racialized modes of perception.

Pontecorvo's film demonstrated that *third cinema* is as likely to be promoted by leftist ideology as it is to be appropriated as an example of right wing persecution in the age of terror. What it revealed most, though, was the way that the trope of colonial victimization common to *third cinema* can be identified, controlled, and worked through for the purposes of victimization by a hegemonic power. Victimization was certainly at the heart of the colonial control of territory, but it did not always drive it. In the aftermath of September 11th, victimization reveals itself to be a central tenet of the neo-imperialist drive for territory. It serves as a primary mode of identification and perception of the enemy and it functions to justify that enemy's surveillance

and control. Moreover, the screening of Pontecorvo's film proved to be an exercise in the way the limits of the hegemonic nation's own sovereignty and principles might be screened through colonial history and re-imagined as victimized by cultural principles that appeared foreign and threatening. The end result of such a screening was a reinforcement of the imagined image of the nation that occluded the ambiguities of colonial history in the Mediterranean and ultimately used them to new imperialist ends. Such a consequence ultimately revealed the continuing shadow of imperialist perspective under which the Mediterranean is cast.

Although Pontecorvo's film ends on a positive note of liberation, it did not imagine how the Algerians would ultimately come to replicate the very patterns of victimization and oppression that the colonial administration had instated. Indeed, the bureaucratic machinery of the colonial administration persisted long after formal independence with many Algerian state personnel owing their positions to the colonial administration. The FLN continued to allow France to maintain naval and air force bases in Algeria for a number of years after the Evian agreements in 1962. More importantly, perhaps, the Algerian state began a politics of extremism aimed at enforcing the rejection of Western cultural mores and values. The Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers*, intended as it was to re-imagine American hegemony in the wake of September 11th, did not consider the limits of the historical scope of Pontecorvo's classic and, more importantly, the way the limits of the political imagination function in both art and reality.

What the return of *The Battle of Algiers* perhaps most saliently underscores, is the way the political imagination mediated through the cinematic might fail in imagining its uses and historical trajectory. For instance, it is unlikely that Pontecorvo ever imagined that his work would be appropriated some forty years later by a Western power for the purpose of better targeting Arab populations and ultimately facilitating what has amounted to a long standing neo-imperialist occupation. It is equally unlikely, however, that U.S. officials, in identifying in the way they did with the surveillance, torture, and victimization depicted in Pontecorvo's film, would have ever imagined the limits of the reaches of Western democracy that the existence of Pontecorvo's liberationist narrative ultimately underscore some forty years later. Those limits have now been made clear by the prolonged U.S. occupation of Iraq. While it would be easy to state that the return of *The Battle of Algiers* within the age of terror ultimately suggests the demise of *third cinema*, that conclusion too would fail to imagine the insistence of the limits of postcolonial narratives whose celebration of liberationist ideology has acquired a tainted and desultory tone.[31] The Pentagon screening of Pontecorvo's work demonstrates that given the new imperialist appropriation of postcolonial texts, it may very well prove to be more effective to see anti-colonial works of resistance as indicative of the ways that the victimization highlighted in them creates a struggle to assume the victim's position rather than as works of imperialist resistance with direct currency today. In the current age of terror, a problematization of victimization found in *third cinema* seems more effective than the postcolonial celebration of the representation of victimization as resistance. The return of *The Battle of Algiers* depicts with alacrity the limits of *realpolitik* aesthetics and the occlusion of colonial history and its legacy, but

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[31] For Ranjanna Khanna, the melancholic yet persistent tones of postcolonial texts and theories point towards a continuing and hopeful exchange within the present. Where some find failure, Khanna identifies a persistent demand for justice: "Rather, I would propose, the case of Algeria, and more specifically Algiers, becomes exemplary because a certain form of sovereignty was played out which systematically engendered a melancholic remainder. It is within the affect initiated by this remainder that one could, perhaps, find a specter calling for justice. These melancholic specters, available to us only by listening to the often unspoken demands of a text, point the way toward a different future, and are profoundly material" Khanna, "Post-Palliative," *Postcolonial Text* 2:1 (2006). While it is difficult to see how the specific melancholic and victimized positions identified by Khanna might truly serve as the basis for postcolonial political praxis, her sense of the insistence of the postcolonial narrative, even in failure, is suggestive for the return of Pontecorvo's masterpiece.

as an insistent indicator of the very limits of the postcolonial (and, indeed, neo-colonial) imaginary to picture its own demise, it serves as a persistent and ever-important lesson for the history of the present.

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