

2003

The Veil of Nationalism: Frantz Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled' and Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers

Lindsey Moore

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moore, Lindsey, The Veil of Nationalism: Frantz Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled' and Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers, *Kunapipi*, 25(2), 2003.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss2/7>

The Veil of Nationalism: Frantz Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled' and Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers

Abstract

Women's relationship to anti-colonial nationalism has been a problematic one, in that nationalist movements have tended to employ both women and feminist discourses strategically.¹ This phenomenon is far from limited to the Muslim or Arab worlds.² Nor is nationalism the only ideology to intersect uneasily with women's interests in the region. However, work produced by feminist scholars grounded experientially in the region suggests that contestation between nationalisms and feminisms in North Africa and the Middle East has been extreme (see Hatem, Kandiyoti, Lasreg 1994 ch7, Moghadam and Moallem).

LINDSEY MOORE

The Veil of Nationalism: Frantz Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled' and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*

Women's relationship to anti-colonial nationalism has been a problematic one, in that nationalist movements have tended to employ both women and feminist discourses strategically.¹ This phenomenon is far from limited to the Muslim or Arab worlds.² Nor is nationalism the only ideology to intersect uneasily with women's interests in the region. However, work produced by feminist scholars grounded experientially in the region suggests that contestation between nationalisms and feminisms in North Africa and the Middle East has been extreme (see Hatem, Kandiyoti, Lasreg 1994 ch7, Moghadam and Moallem).

Here I revisit Fanon's oft-discussed essay 'L'Algérie se dévoile', first published in his 1959 text *L'An V de la révolution algérienne* and translated as 'Algeria Unveiled' in *A Dying Colonialism* (Fanon 1959, 1980).³ My objective here is twofold. I first reassess the emancipatory import of Fanon's essay and then use it to contextualise an analysis of Gillo Pontecorvo's acclaimed film *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). I take up a point made by a rare dissenting voice about the film's

strong sense of inevitability culminating in 'completeness'. It achieves the characteristic of a complete statement ... confirming itself as a concluded representation of history about which no further questions are to be asked, and presenting an episodic view of history quite alien to the possibility of understanding it [history] as an open horizon of possibilities and alternative realities. (Sainsbury 7)

This is a fair assessment of the politico-epistemological limits of Pontecorvo's film. So if, as critics assume, *The Battle of Algiers* functions uncritically as Fanonian gloss (Shohat and Stam 251–52), does Fanon's essay present a similarly overdetermined picture of the decolonising Algerian nation? My contention is that the film deflects the most useful complexities and ambiguities of Fanon's discourse, particularly in relation to the subject of Algerian women. I support analyses which read Fanon's text as attempting to locate revolutionary women's participation within a double temporal frame, in which postcolonial implication exceeds anti-colonial effect. The dissemination of the signs of veiling and unveiling, in particular, has consequences beyond the field of the colonising other's comprehension.⁴

Postcolonial scholarship returns, again and again, to Fanon's 'Algeria Unveiled'. This is partly a result of the ease with which the essay lends itself to

reading methods proposed by poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theories, particularly since Homi Bhabha's re-reading of Fanon (1986). Feminist attention is held, however, by the glaring incommensurability between women's anti-colonial militancy and their disenfranchisement in independent Algeria. In attempts to rationalise this disjunction, the essay has been challenged in terms of its factitiousness and lack of socio-historical contextualisation (Amrane 226–27, 247; Helie-Lucas; Lasreg 1994 125–29).⁵ Alternatively, both Fanon and the Algerian revolutionary authorities are viewed as silencing women (Fuss 36), and/or of endowing women with an agency which is merely designated, structural and auxiliary (McClintock 98; Minces 162).⁶

I maintain that, although 'Algeria Unveiled' is fissured by ambivalences and elisions which are undoubtedly problematic, it exceeds the 'discursive constellations' and combats the 'ritualised silences' which characterise women's representation in the Algerian historical archive generally (Maougal 18; Hadj-Moussa 258–59) and in Pontecorvo's film specifically. Fanon's text can be located on a continuum with recent work by North African feminist intellectuals on women's participation in early Islamic and anti-colonial movements (Ahmed; Djebbar 1980, 1985, 1991; Lasreg 1994; Mernissi). This point is also made by critic Denise Sharpley-Whiting. I diverge from Sharpley-Whiting's perspective, however, in applying a reading method to 'Algeria Unveiled' which foregrounds the play of signification and difference (cf. Sharpley-Whiting 'Epilogue'; also Lasreg 1990 338–42). As Bhabha has portrayed him, Fanon is a 'purveyor of the transgressive and *transitional* truth', a commentator who realises that 'the state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*' (1986 ix, xi, first emphasis mine). Given the dramatic erosion of women's rights in independent Algeria, it is necessary to reassess the Fanonian relationship between national emergence and socio-cultural emergency.

French control of Algeria lasted from 1830 to 1962. The Algerian historical experience is particularised by the relentlessness and hypocrisy of assimilation under the banner of the French *mission civilisatrice*, the murderous and protracted war over independence, and the profound implications of both colonialism and independence for a contemporary Algeria in cultural and political crisis. Whereas postcolonial theorists since Fanon have seen Algeria as the exemplary site of colonial devastation and anti-colonial struggle, '*les événements*' of 1954–62 have been 'imperfectly repressed' in French cultural memory (Rachid Boudjedra qtd in Dine 223). Pontecorvo's film was not granted certification in France until five years after its release, despite its huge success at the 1966 Venice Film Festival (the French delegation exited in protest). Unsurprisingly, the most virulent condemnation of the film in France has come from *les anciens combattants* and *pieds noirs* (Dine 227).⁷

Algerian nationalism was politically articulated prior to World War One and culminated in the encompassing and/or elimination of rival factions, notably Messali's MNA (*Mouvement Nationaliste Algérien*), by the *Front de Libération*

Nationale (FLN) and its *Armée de Libération Nationale* (ALN). The release of the FLN's political charter on 1 November 1954 formally inaugurated a war of independence based on principles which the FLN had proclaimed since 1946: anti-colonialism and the reassertion of non-doctrinal Muslim culture (see Horne 95). After France's official refusal, on 12 November, to compromise its stance on 'L'Algérie française', the FLN confirmed its ideological commitment to violence as counter-colonial tool. While these premises provided an ideological — and emotive — base for solidarity in a society which was culturally ravaged and linguistically and ethnically heterogeneous, the evasion of a coherent political and social agenda was to have serious implications for independent Algeria (Young 2001 278).

Fanon's essay was written at the height of revolutionary fervour, when the author worked for the FLN, largely as ideologue and international spokesperson for the secular left of the party, a key vehicle being the revolutionary organ *El Moudjahid* which he edited in Tunis. Pontecorvo's film was made in the euphoria of recent independence, five years after Fanon's death. As products of their time and exemplars of a leftist politico-theoretical context which they helped to shape, both media dramatise the Algerian war of independence as a spontaneous, unanimous and irrevocable upheaval across all social and political lines.

Pontecorvo's film elides many contextual factors, including: the violent rise to dominance of the FLN; the triangular conflict between *pièdes noirs*, Algerian nationalists and metropolitan France; evidence of sympathetic French collaboration with the Algerian cause; and class-related factors of the struggle, including the uprising of the rural population and the role of poor whites and the small Europeanised Algerian bourgeoisie (by contrast, see Fanon 1959, 1961, 1964). In *The Battle of Algiers*, the individual is consistently 'massified' and the resonances of the colonial system and anti-colonial uprising for specific groups are lost. Scriptwriter, Franco Solinas, and director, Pontecorvo, describe the film as 'an analysis of two conflicting forces', underpinned by a Marxist vision of 'the ability of the mass, in special moments, to express certain qualities ... which you generally don't find in the individual' (F. Solinas in P. Solinas 198; Pontecorvo in P. Solinas 165).

Fanon's essay operates conversely, in that a primarily existentialist ideology is personified by the *fidaïa* (female weapon-carrier) at the center of the text.⁸ His proposed agenda for a broader and more detailed study of Algerian women's participation in the War is evidence that his yoking of women to the nationalist project in 'Algeria Unveiled' was a temporary textual strategy ('AU' 38 15n). Fanon had the lived experience and the textual scope to discuss the Algerian case more comprehensively, although political necessity meant that his views at times merely echoed the FLN position.⁹ Nevertheless, Fanon's 'forked tongue' (Sekyi-Otu 218), which resonates most clearly in *A Dying Colonialism* and *The Wretched of the Earth*, testifies to Fanon's somewhat ambivalent vision of FLN policy and post-independence promise, particularly as these relate to Algerian women.

FRANTZ FANON'S 'ALGERIA UNVEILED' (1959)

Fanon's works were written from a liminal position, from which he sought to reconcile loyalty to the insurgent Algerian population with the production of a more universally applicable revolutionary theory. As such, the colonial dialecticism of the Fanonian corpus is the product of a politics of production and reception split, or doubled, between Algeria and France.¹⁰ The desire to influence the apathetic French left, in particular, was one factor which contributed to Fanon's fetishisation of 'Algeria', or his subordination of gendered, ethnic, class, regional and political differences to anti-colonial unity (Mowitt 173). This said, both FLN leaders and *ex-fidayate* have testified to an extraordinary level of solidarity amongst male and female revolutionaries (Yacef 35; Amrane; Amrane-Minne).¹¹ Ultimately, it seems that both women's role in the resistance and the 'vexed question' of Fanon's cultural position (Mowitt 176) became more problematic after the event and in the context of new socio-political and economic variables.¹²

Turning to the essay, then, the English title 'Algeria Unveiled' appears uncritically to repeat the epistemological violence of the French colonial regime upon the nation and women in particular, whereas the original French title 'L'Algérie se dévoile' insists upon subjective agency. Given criticisms that the female agency illustrated in Fanon's work is at best conferred from above, this translative slippage seems relevant.¹³ Of course, whichever way one reads it, the title appears to unabashedly collapse women's experience with that of the nation. Diana Fuss argues that Fanon's essay does not surmount the dialectic wherein

in the discourse of colonial imperialism and in the discourse of national resistance, the veiled Algerian woman stands in metonymically for the nation ... the woman's body is the contested ideological battleground, overburdened and saturated with meaning. It is the woman who circulates as a fetish. (Fuss 27–28)

According to Fuss, Fanon's women, as they masquerade in a manner which is suggested as a natural function of femaleness, represent the 'inscrutable face of a nation' (29). While I agree in part, I refute her suggestion that both women and the veils that they wear/remove have only metonymical and fetishistic functionality within the text and so fail to mobilise a specifically female political valency (Fuss 36). Fuss identifies but dismisses the empowering feature of women's self-presentation in 'Algeria Unveiled'; the fact that their gendered performances *exceed* identification with all available cultural role models, and so represent political intentionality and a gendered emancipation within and potentially beyond the nationalist agenda. I suggest, by contrast, an ironic reading of both French and English titles of Fanon's essay, so that the implied movement towards transparency is undercut by a text in which 'woman' and 'veil' become increasingly complex or opaque terms controlled by women.¹⁴

In a book dedicated to initiations of cultural catachresis and cognitive subversion by the colonised Algerians, Fanon's essay foregrounds the *haïk*, the

white veil characteristic of the northern cities of Algeria, as a hybrid site which negotiates and transcends antagonistic discourses.¹⁵ In the course of the essay, the *haïk* is depicted in terms of: a refusal to tailor cultural practice to the demands of the colonists and a defense against colonial penetration ('AU' 24–25); the concealment of revolutionary weapons ('AU' 29); and the ability to transform oneself from Algerian to French woman ('AU' 31–38), or from man to woman and back again ('AU' 39–41). Fanon first posits veiling practice as reactive — 'to the colonialist offensive against the veil, the colonised opposes the cult of the veil [*le culte du voile*]' ('AU' 25; 'ASD' 34) — but this is revealed to be merely a stage in the veil's strategic relevance. By the time of writing, the veil has been '[r]emoved and reassumed again and again, ... manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, into a means of struggle' ('AU' 39).

Because Fanon's veil is multivalent, it is not only related to women's reconstruction as urban guerillas. The religio-cultural associations of the *haïk* are overlaid by a performative politics of self-fashioning, a shift neatly encapsulated by the dual signification of the term *cult/le culte*. That which Fanon terms 'the historic dynamism of the veil' ('AU' 41) can therefore be extrapolated to an increase in the female body's performative register. This is despite those moments when the text slips into an eurocentricism which too easily equates unveiling with ontological freedom (most notably, in the passage: 'Her legs are bare, not confined by the veil, given back to themselves, and her hips are free' ['AU' 36]). One detects a sexual gaze here and a eurocentric notion of ontological authenticity). In fact, during the course of Fanon's text, the *fidaïa* 're-learns her body, re-establishes it in a totally revolutionary fashion' with *and* without the veil ('AU' 37). As such, women unmoor their bodies from dichotomous constraints such as local tradition versus Western practice, private versus public and tradition versus militancy. New, instrumental meanings are generated for the veil which will later resonate in contexts such as the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, another complex site of female participation (see Moallem; Tohid).

Judith Butler has suggested that, in the process of reiterating gendered and 'sexed' norms,

gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions [as gender or 'sex'], as that which escapes or exceeds the norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm. This instability is the *deconstituting* possibility in the very process of repetition, the power that undoes the very effects by which [gender] is stabilised, the possibility to put the consolidation of the norms of [gendered practice] into a potentially productive crisis.

(Butler 10, emphasis in original)

The interplay between cultural production, subversion and recuperation upon which Butler's work insists can be demonstrated in concrete historical and cultural locations. That which is often reductively referred to as 'the Muslim veil' provides a prime case study.¹⁶ In the second half of the twentieth century, a culturally

variable (and always individually manipulated) form of social practice has become a transnational ideological signifier (Islamist *hijab*) which interacts, in complex ways, with history and (post)modernity, as well as with local practices and meanings (Ahmed and Donnan 14–15). Veiling practices represent an active engagement with the contexts in which women locate themselves (Kaya; Lasreg 1990). This polyvalency or multicitationality is posited by 'Algeria Unveiled', particularly as the essay favours veiling, rather than unveiling, as the reiterative principle.

As Yegenoglu remarks, 'the veil had now become the *embodiment of [Algerian women's] will to act, their agency*' (64, emphasis in original). Yegenoglu applies Irigaray's notion of feminine mimicry in order to suggest that women, by assuming diverse personae, 'managed to stay elsewhere, indeed to create an "elsewhere", an "outside" that displaced the colonial power' (64). Algerian women become the agents of cultural mutation for which they were formerly the targets and, by doing so, they signify the promise of postcolonial culture. The essay ends with the hope of 'new attitudes ... new modes of action ... new ways' ('AU' 42) which will define gendered relations within the nation. 'Woman' and 'nation' are unveiled, then, as *new* terms in a postcolonial self-inscription. Despite various contradictions in the text regarding women's involvement in the FLN and the militant use of the face veil,¹⁷ the text goes to some lengths to assert that Algerian women are responsible for disseminating the significance of the veil. FLN hesitations are described in the past tense, in disjunction with the irruption of the revolutionary woman into the agonistic scene in the present tense. 'What we have here', Fanon proclaims about the unveiled militant, 'is an authentic birth in a pure state, without preliminary instruction' ('AU' 28). In a characteristically Fanonian gesture, the Algerian woman emerges — as does postcolonial Algerian culture — from the crucible of political commitment and struggle.

In response to criticisms of the dubiousness of some of Fanon's factual claims, then, I emphasise his empowering subtext. The *fidayate* increasingly 'penetrate' not only the colonial cities but also the constitutive 'flesh of the Revolution', or Algerian public and discursive space ('AU' 32). Simultaneously, the system is transformed in which Algerian women have been sexual objects of conflict and exchange across the colonial divide. Fanon's metaphorical use of the terms of sexual agency tentatively opens on to a symbolic in which the relationship between gender, sexuality and citizenship could be reworked. Such a reading inserts a productive margin between woman and nation, terms which are superficially conflated in the title of the essay.

Fanon's repression of historical contradiction is significant, nevertheless. Speaking of the issue of women's entry into militant action, he states defensively that 'when Algeria has gained her independence, such questions will not be raised, for in the practice of the Revolution the people have understood that problems are resolved in the very movement that raises them' ('AU' 25–26). The problem, given our advantage of historical perspective, is that women's

political activity was redesignated by the post-independence regime as a strategic and temporary aberration from their traditional role and dismissed from the discursive realm. As *ex-fidaïa* Baya Hocine testifies,

[From 1962] Algeria was constructed without us ... without anyone thinking of us.... For us, it was worse than before [the Revolution] because ... we had broken down all the barricades [but] in 1962, the barricades were put back in place again ... in a manner which excluded us. (cited in Amrane-Minne 146, my translation)

In a similarly reactionary manner, veiling has been recast as a cultural obligation, at least for urban women, which permits little signifying play.¹⁸

The mistaken optimism of Fanon's vision is due to his reluctance (or inability) to engage with the complexities of Algerian culture, despite his helpful depiction of this culture as dynamic and contested. Scant attention is paid to the gendered organisation of Algerian cultural space which was not only the result of French intervention even if, as Fanon points out, colonialism led to its overdetermination ('AU' 16–17, 41). Despite his awareness that Islam contributes to the 'cultural, hence national, originality' of the country, he fails to contextualise the unveiled woman's 'subjectively organised fears' as more than a reaction to the colonial gaze ('AU' 20, 30). The bias of the entire essay is latent in his claim that the 'veil was worn because tradition demanded a rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier *was bent on unveiling Algeria*' ('AU' 41, emphasis in original). Fanon underestimates the influence of religio-cultural determinants and tenacious, local forms of patriarchy, despite his sociological incursion into 'The Algerian Family' in the same volume. By contrast, in works produced in the post-independence era, Algerian author Rachid Boudjedra and, in the broader context of the Maghreb, Driss Chraïbi emphasise divisive social structures which intertwine with a profound psycho-cultural complex towards women. By comparison, Fanon's warning about the 'regressive' tendencies of 'authenticity' and tradition ('AU' 41) lacks deconstructive impetus and appears only as a 'slip' positing a eurocentric, linear relation between tradition and modernity.¹⁹

Problematic gendered norms, as well as the insistence since the anti-colonial uprising upon defining Algeria in non-Western terms, have contributed to a contemporary situation in which the legitimate options for female self-presentation are limited once again. Historical revisionism and the reinvigoration of tradition have been exacerbated by the rise of Islamist movements such as FIS (*Front Islamique de Salut*) and its more extreme successors which are, in fact, structurally similar to the FLN upon which they declared a *fatwa* in 1992 (Gafaïti 72–73; Lasreg 2000). In contemporary Islamism, however, we see 'the return in the form of a political claim of the "cultural" element repressed by modern political struggles for liberation', in Algeria as in the broader Muslim world (Berger 1998 103).

One of the major stakes in the discursive manipulation which has characterised the whole post-war era has been 'the symbolic valence of [women's] participation

and the epistemological tear that legitimising their political agency would cause to the fabric of this particular society' (Simra 827). As Djamilia Amrane comments,

Although the *fidayate* were the militants featured most often in the press of the [revolutionary] era, their participation is completely effaced in writings on the Algerian war.... [But] an episode as decisive as the 'Battle of Algiers' cannot be recounted without remembering those women who participated on all levels, including that of leadership. (Amrane 114, my translation)

In the face of state-sanctioned historiography, and despite the recent public atmosphere of terror in Algeria, militant women's histories circulate as memories, contributing greatly to women's continued willingness to protest (Amrane-Minne 12–13).²⁰ Despite his disavowal of culturally specific values and practices, it is to this legacy that Fanon made a vital contribution.

GILLO PONTECORVO'S *THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS*

Although on many levels the film reflects the Marxist affiliations of Pontecorvo and Solinas, again the relation between author(s) and text is not entirely unmediated. The film was made on the initiative of and in collaboration with the Algerian studio Casbah films, whose managing director Yacef Saadi plays himself as the leader of the FLN in Algiers. It has been suggested that Yacef extensively revised the script (Mellen), although Franco Solinas refutes the fact that the Algerians had any political input (F. Solinas in P. Solinas 194). Pontecorvo, by contrast, claims that Yacef wished to substitute the camera for the machine gun (Pontecorvo 269). Presented in the film credits as 'la première grande production algérienne', the Algeria presented in *The Battle of Algiers* could be described as overdetermined from *within*.²¹ Recontextualised as such, it seems that the obvious influence of Fanon's writings is subordinated to the self-legitimation project of the post-independent FLN government (Young 2002). Sartre, rather than Fanon, is mentioned in the film, perhaps because of his less ambivalent cultural position.

Although *The Battle of Algiers* shows women in various roles as supporters and providers of refuge for militant men, the film focuses (as did the Algerian and French media) upon the *fidayate*, 'fire carriers' or sacred martyrs, who placed bombs. Women placed two-thirds of the bombs, but this was a mode of revolutionary activity which involved around 2.1% of militant women only (Benallègue 707).²² The filmic emphasis is easily accounted for in terms of spectacular effect, maximum existential impact and the elicitation of sympathy for a 'humanised' (because feminised) revolutionary violence. It is also facilitated by an historically limited and circular diegesis which dramatises the Algerian uprising by presenting it *in medias res*.²³ This leads, however, to the erasure of historical factors such as prior female activism (cf. Benallègue 703) and of the resonances of the colonial system for Algerian women, a subject central to Fanon's essay. It is particularly problematic that women are never shown as victims of torture, suggesting an inviolability which denies that arrested *fidayate* were



Figure 1. Scene from *The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo, Casbah Films, Algeria and Igor Films, Italy, 1966.

systematically tortured (Amrane 92) and that rape was employed as a colonial weapon (cf. 'AU' 23 and Fanon 1961 'Series A'; de Beauvoir and Halimi).

Moreover, in contrast to Fanon's emphasis on the increasingly polysemic nature of (un)veiling, in the film women's behaviour tends to be recuperated into a dominant pairing of traditional unveiling/strategic unveiling. Prostitutes and women indoors — those who hide revolutionaries fleeing the police, and relatives of FLN men — are unveiled; women walking, protesting or mourning in the streets are generally veiled. The narrative logic of the film suggests that, at least until the popular uprising of the final scenes, the public circulation of unveiled women is a strategy of the FLN, conceptualised within the demands and restrictions of a particular historical moment. Unveiling is temporarily politically useful, with the accompanying implication that women resume the veil in a traditional fashion once its performative power — both on and off the body — is exhausted. In only one instance in the film are veils deliberately *put on* as a revolutionary disguise and so represented in a way which controverts customary gendered practice — and in that case, it is men who wear them as disguise.²⁴

In a scene which has become iconic, Algerian women remove their face veils, change into Western dress, cut off their hair and apply makeup (Figure 1). The syntagmatic positioning of the scene is important, as it follows an emotive montage in which Algerian bodies, bombed in the Casbah, are borne out of the debris in crucifixion poses.²⁵ The bridge to the unveiling scene not only presents anti-colonial violence as a response to colonialist terrorism (Shohat and Stam



Figure 2. Scene from *The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo, Casbah Films, Algeria and Igor Films, Italy, 1966.

254) but screens the causal link of an FLN decision. Although Yacef controls a furious crowd by promising to avenge the Algerian people, there is no evidence of planning or discussion by the FLN. Thus, the spectator is led to see an act of spontaneous patriotic reaction by the women. Underlining this link is an urgent drum-beat which affirms a connection between the women's activity and the revolutionary cause and replaces the original dialogue with the dramatic effect of 'a heartbeat, like a liturgy of war' (Pontecorvo 267–68).

The spectator's access to the subjective experience of the women, as they reconstruct their images, is limited. Most of our visual interaction is with their mirror images, a crossing of spectator/subject gazes which would normally encourage empathy. Yet here the mirror is merely, as Shohat and Stam note, a revolutionary tool of transformation. I disagree with their contradictory claim, however, that 'we become close to [these women], paradoxically, as they perform as Europeans' (254). Rather, the viewer is placed in a paradoxical situation; we witness the women in a nominally intimate space but can only see the *disguise* of their bare faces. The overall impassivity of the faces and the lack of verbal exchange imply that the women are acting under orders to which they collectively subscribe. The upraised eyes of the woman at the end of the scene position a Western spectator, who confronts this woman's unquestioning loyalty to the revolutionary cause (Figure 2). The spectator here engages with a social rather than a private consciousness. The masquerade of the Algerian as European is thus paralleled by a masking of the subjective by the communal revolutionary identity.

As in Fanon's essay, however, the ability of Algerian women to become interpretatively opaque stalls the cognitive machinery of colonialism. In an early scene, a veiled gun-bearer crosses the French barricades and one soldier is reprimanded by another for attempting to raise the woman's face-veil. 'You should never touch their women' is the received colonial wisdom. The subsequent passing of the blonde woman (modelled on the legendary guerilla Sohra Drif)²⁶ at the checkpoints of the Casbah epitomises this manipulation of scopic and sexual regimes by the colonised. The moment of colonial mimicry is re-emphasised on camera at paratrooper headquarters where, again, the young soldiers are seduced/duped. The didactic commentary of Colonel Mathieu (a composite character based on, among others, General Massu) underpins the crossing of veiled and unveiled women in the coloniser's line of vision, or the semantic moment of excess and incomprehension (Figure 3):

The FLN use proven revolutionary methods and their own original tactics. They are anonymous, unrecognisable among hundreds. They are everywhere ... Cameras [which] were hidden at the Casbah exits ... show the futility of certain methods.... The terrorists are somewhere in this crowd of Algerian men and women. Which ones are they? How can they be recognised? (translated film subtitles).

As the camera focuses upon the crossing of the unveiled blonde with a group of veiled women, 'Algerian woman' becomes the privileged exemplar of cultural and political impenetrability. The European masquerade causes a structurally similar anxiety to that provoked by veiled women: both are impenetrable and conceal something.

This subversion of the epistemological and scopic underpinnings of colonialism ensures the system's downfall. Yet there are some ambiguities inherent in Pontecorvo's presentation. Does the *fidaïa* really 'pass' as French, or does the sexual desire of the male spectators lead them to deliberately misperceive in order to deracialise her? The circulation of Algerian women is always marked, in the film, by sexual politics. When veiled they 'belong' to Algerian men, but when unveiled they are available across the culture barrier. The film reflects a transcultural masculine blindness here, in which women must play 'feminine' to be (mis)recognised and thus empowered.

As Mary Anne Doane suggests, excessive femininity potentially foregrounds the fact that gender is a masquerade. 'Hollow in itself, without substance, femininity can only be sustained by its accoutrements, decorative veils, and inessential gestures' (34). When a woman actively transforms femininity into play, it is revealed as a mask which can be either worn or removed. I have suggested that, in both texts under discussion, Algerian women mobilise multiple forms of self-presentation. The proliferation of performative possibilities suggests an increase in the number of forms of female embodiment that are potentially viable in the public sphere. In the film, however, the idea lacks contextualisation and the blonde woman signifies only the blinding of the masculine gaze by its



Figure 3. Scene from *The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo, Casbah Films, Algeria and Igor Films, Italy, 1966.

own erotic content. She is not identified definitively as a temporarily aberrative female nor as a culturally specific postcolonial subject.

I noted that Fanon's essay slips momentarily to reveal a voyeuristic gaze focused upon the unveiled Algerian woman. *The Battle of Algiers* similarly resorts to a sexually inflected viewing position. This is ironic, given the fact that the film parodies the specular vulnerability of the French male authorities to Algerian women. When the women transform themselves into Europeans, the use of bird's eye view and close-ups clearly indicates the ability of film to orchestrate, in Doane's words, 'a gaze, a limit, and its pleasurable transgression' (20). As such, the film forces the spectator to breach the privacy of the changing room and to be complicit in a voyeuristic relation to these women.

However, the scene in which French soldiers watch footage of the scene at the barricades has more complex connotations. Here we have the introduction of a supplementary screen, which replays the moment of masquerade and visual duping. Upon seeing the scene again, the extra-diegetic spectator must self-consciously assess his/her specular relationship to the woman at the centre of the image. In recognising the sexually motivated nature of the gaze, we understand the strategic success of the masquerade, and, by making the spectator complicit with the ploys of the Algerian revolutionaries, the scene reinforces emotional identification with the Algerians.

Pontecorvo, in promoting a popular aesthetic over individual experiences and relationships, attempts — with partial success — to neutralise scopic relations of desire. This goes some way toward explaining why, despite the voyeurism encouraged in the unveiling scene, the women's facial impassivity and economy

of movement have the effect of *desexualising* them. Certainly, the film does not present unveiled women as being in a more 'authentic' state, as does 'Algeria Unveiled'. Rather, the captivation of the women by their mirrored images, as well as the stilted walks and the arch flirtation of the women at the barricades, all highlight the unveiled body as being in another state of masquerade. As Shohat argues, here we have 'the Third World which masquerades as the West, not as an act of self-effacing mimicry but as a way of sabotaging the colonial regime of assimilation' (74).

However, we have little access to women's experience of their own bodily transformations or of their experiences as gendered subjects negotiating a complex bicultural field (cf. 'AU' 36–37). Where the film deploys identificatory mechanisms on behalf of the women, for example eyeline matches in the bomb-planting scenes, these insist primarily upon the humanity of the 'terrorists' (Shohat and Stam 251–53) and so, once again, privilege identification with the Algerians as a national group. The emancipatory aspect of dissimulation is mediated by this lack of access to female testimony, suggesting that the play of surfaces conceals a *lack* of depth. What is missing in the film is content which would exceed the binary of 'the Algerian woman'/'masquerading European'. If present, such a third term would correspond to Bhabha's depiction of 'a resistant trace, a stain of the subject, a sign of resistance' which exceeds the doubling between an individual and his/her cultural persona (1994 49).

In sum, the film fails to problematise women's revolutionary roles or to explore, in a particularly complex manner, ways in which gender is both sedimented by and transects the colonial context. The emphasis on women's participation achieves little other than to underline the unanimity and integrity of insurgent Algeria. The closing scene, of a woman carrying an Algerian flag, renders the bond between 'woman' and 'nation' indissoluble and symbolically buries the chance of a specifically female emancipation within national liberation. Boudjedra's *The Repudiation* (1969) and Moufida Tlatli's film *The Silences of the Palace* (1994), by contrast, symbolise the postcolonial nation as an aborted foetus, thus suggesting that the independent Maghreb has been founded upon the silencing, abjection and death of Pontecorvo's 'mother of the nation' and her daughters.

All communities establish themselves discursively via projection and exclusion — in other words, through a process of psycho-political boundary construction. The postcolonial nation is particularised by the need to dismantle already existing narratives of itself and its people. The two texts which I have addressed here constitute a counter-telling which involves both historical redress and the construction of a national identity. Partly under state pressure, Algerian cinema continued to be concerned with the construction of a unified 'Nation-Image' throughout the 1970s and '80s (Hadj-Moussa), in marked contrast to much of its literature. Signs of cultural unification are useful in order both to mobilise a

populace to urgent political action and to elicit external sympathy through a claim of moral integrity. However, as Britain's entry into the war on Iraq demonstrates, national coherence rests on the repudiation and/or concealment of difference and opposition within the *polis*.

Nevertheless, the fetishistic myth of imagined community marks, even as it disavows, the places where absence, multiplicity and ambiguity may be retrieved. History is always a contested site, where official narratives clash with individual memories. While postcolonial Algeria illustrates a powerful and often deadly drive towards discursive monolithism, this context continues to generate resistance, most stridently articulated by intellectual voices in exile but also from within demotic interstices. In a more pessimistic light, the ideally communalised Algerian subject is revealed to be riven by linguistic, ethnic, religious and political violence. If Fanon 'unveiled' Algeria as a yet-to-be-inscribed state, then Assia Djebar has recently mourned it in terms of *le blanc* (whiteness or blankness): a funeral shroud, a page from which the life has been relentlessly bled (Djebar 1995). Despite the promise of Fanon's and Pontecorvo's decolonising visions, Algeria is again a nation which only tolerates one race, one religion, one language and one meaning of woman.

NOTES

- ¹ For an almost comprehensive critical survey of material pertaining to the intersection of women's movements with anti-colonial nationalisms, see Young 2001 ch. 25.
- ² Nira Yuval-Davis is particularly attentive to the global nuances of this problem. See Yuval-Davis and Lutz, and Phoenix and Yuval-Davis.
- ³ The 1980 English translation here is referenced parenthetically as 'AU' and the French text as 'ASD'.
- ⁴ My reading thus extends Yegenoglu's interpretation of the effects of un/veiling within the colonial sphere.
- ⁵ Amrane's work is usually the authority cited for accusations of factual error although she presents a balanced view of Fanon's work.
- ⁶ With regard to this latter criticism, it is remarkable how Western commentators remain blind to the fact that sexism is ubiquitous. The *Independent* of March 30th 2002 juxtaposes, without irony, the suicide bombing in Jerusalem by 16-year-old Palestinian schoolgirl Ayat Akhras, representing the al-Aqsa militia, and the announcement by Secretary of State for Defence Geoff Hoon that British women are banned from frontline military duties on the grounds of physical inferiority (Sengupta 1; Silver 4).
- ⁷ The film's screening in St. Séverin, Paris, as late as 1981, prompted a firebombing of the theatre, thought to be initiated by ex-OAS members. The OAS (*Organisation Secrète Armée*) was a rightist military faction which wanted to retain total control of Algeria. Dine suggests, however, that France has undertaken a much deeper evaluation of its colonial past in the last two decades (228).
- ⁸ For example, Fanon represents the MNA as merely a collaborationist colonial tool (Fanon 1964 70). Macey warns that reissued *El Moudjahid* articles may have been ideologically 'retouched' and that the articles collected in *Toward the African Revolution* would have been subject to collective editing. Macey provides a more

balanced picture of the relationship between the FLN and the MNA (Macey 327, 334, 255–58).

- ^a For example, Fanon represents the MNA as merely a collaborationist colonial tool (Fanon 1964 70). Macey warns that reissued *El Moudjahid* articles may have been ideologically ‘retouched’, and that the articles collected in *Toward the African Revolution* would have been subject to collective editing. Macey provides a more balanced picture of the relationship between the FLN and the MNA (Macey 327, 334, 255–58).
- ¹⁰ See Macey 397–400 on Fanon’s decision to publish in Paris and the problems which this incurred.
- ¹¹ Amrane comments, however, that in a work published twenty years later, Yacef played down this solidarity (113).
- ¹² Gates Jr. discusses Fanon’s characterisation as a ‘European interloper’ in post-independence Algerian commentary (468–69).
- ¹³ Macey, by contrast, emphasises the temporal shift from the ongoing sense of ‘Algérie se dévoile’ to the past achievement of ‘Algeria Unveiled’. Macey also points out usefully that the title, *A Dying Colonialism*, occludes Fanon’s titular paralleling of the Algerian with the French Revolution, his point being that 1954 was the dawn of a new historical era (Macey 402–403, 398).
- ¹⁴ Most critics disregard the times when Fanon speaks ironically from the perspective of the coloniser. Sekyi-Otu is the primary exponent of this polyphonic version of Fanon.
- ¹⁵ Fanon thus foregrounds that which Bhabha sees as crucial to postcolonial study: ‘the negotiation of contradictory and antagonistic instances that open up hybrid sites and objectives of struggle’ (Bhabha 1994 25, emphasis in original). The term *haïk* should refer only to the large, white square of cloth which covers the hair and envelopes the body. The French distinction between ‘le voile’ (head and body cover) and ‘la voilette’ (face veil) better captures the binary notion of the form of dress than does the English ‘veil’, which also elides local and historical variation.
- ¹⁶ I am not suggesting that subjectivity is entirely a product of embodiment, but that bodily experience — overlaid with socio-economic factors such as class, wealth, education, access to technology and information and mobility — is one constitutive factor of subjectivity. In relation to this, I am disturbed by Yečenočlu’s argument that the veil can be understood as a kind of ‘second skin’ (119). Writers such as Mernissi and Djebbar insist upon the fact that while veiling is often a choice, it can also be imposed and violently so.
- ¹⁷ This contradiction is particularly evident in the passage which states that women were ‘sent forth’ by the FLN, but ‘adopted an absolutely unbelievable offensive tactic’ (unveiling) (‘AU’ 29).
- ¹⁸ Veiling is not a legal obligation in Algiers but has been violently enforced by Islamist vigilantes, particularly since 1990.
- ¹⁹ A more extensive critique of cultural authenticity is found in ch. 4 of *Les damnés de la terre*, where Fanon argues against the discourses of Africanism, Arabism and pan-Islam, and for a specifically nationalist agenda.
- ²⁰ See Amrane and Amrane-Minne for interviews with and testimonies of ex-moudjahidat and fidayate.
- ²¹ I am adapting Fanon’s claim (which reversed a Sartrean statement) that the colonial subject is always ‘overdetermined from without’ (Fanon 1986 116).
- ²² All figures pertaining to women’s participation are approximate, as many women did not register as militants.
- ²³ The film commences in 1957, and then flashes back to the FLN political platform

announced in 1954. Most of the action takes place in 1956. Towards the end, it returns to the events introduced at the start of the film (the capture of the last FLN leader, Ali La-Pointe), and concludes with the popular uprising of 1960, which finally led to the defeat of the colonial regime.

- ²⁴ It is ironic, given the often misplaced stereotype of Muslim women as 'cloistered', that the FLN leaders dress as women because this enables them to move around the Casbah.
- ²⁵ This incident, which left Algerians no recourse to legal structures of justice, was indeed the impetus for an upgrading of FLN terrorist activity in July 1956.
- ²⁶ This character's name is uncertain, at least in Piernico Solinas' published filmscript, in which he refers to both the blonde and the brunette as Hassiba (cf. Solinas 1973c 67 and 153). To add to the confusion, he does not list a character named Hassiba in the credits.

WORKS CITED

- Ahmed, Akbar and Donnan, Hastings (eds.) 1994, *Islam, Globalisation and Postmodernity*, Routledge, London.
- Ahmed, Leïla 1992, *Women and Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale UP, New Haven.
- Amrane, Djamila 1991, *Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre*, Plon Paris.
- Amrane-Minne, Danièle Djamila 1994, *Des femmes dans la guerre d'Algérie*, Karthala, Paris.
- Beauvoir, Simone de and Halimi, Gisèle 1962, *Djamila Boupacha*, trans. Peter Green, Deutsch *et al*, Great Britain.
- Benallègue, Nora 1983, 'Algerian Women in the Struggle for Independence and Reconstruction', *International Social Science Journal*, 35. 4, pp. 703 – 17.
- Bhabha, Homi 1986, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche and the Colonial Condition', Foreword to Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, Frantz Fanon, Pluto, London, pp. vii – xxvi.
- 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London.
- Boudjedra, Rachid 1969, *La Répudiation*, Denoël, Paris.
- Butler, Judith 1993, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, Routledge, New York.
- Dine, Philip 1994, *Images of the Algerian War: French Fiction and Film, 1954 – 1992*. Clarendon P., Oxford.
- Djebar, Assia 1980, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, des femmes Paris.
- 1985, *L'amour, la fantasia*, Jean-Claude Lattès, Paris.
- 1991, *Loin de Médine*, Albin Michel, Paris.
- 1995, *Le blanc de l'Algérie*, Albin Michel, Paris.
- Doane, Mary Ann 1991, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, New York.
- Fanon, Frantz 1961, *Les damnés de la terre*, F. Maspéro, Paris.
- 1967, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier [*Pour la révolution africaine*, 1964], Monthly Review Press, Great Britain.

- 1980, *A Dying Colonialism* [*L'An cinq de la révolution algérienne*, F. Maspéro, Paris 1959], trans. Haakon Chevalier, Writers & Readers Cooperative, London.
- 1986, *Black Skin White Masks* [*Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*, 1952], Pluto, London.
- Fuss, Diana 1994, 'Interior Colonies: Frantz Fanon and the Politics of Identification', *Diacritics*, 24, 2 – 3, pp. 20 – 42.
- Gates Jr., Henry Louis 1991, 'Critical Fanonism', *Critical Inquiry*, 17.3, pp. 457 – 70.
- Hadj-Moussa 1999, 'The Locus of Tension: Gender in Algerian Cinema', *African Cinema: Post-Colonial and Feminist Readings*, ed. Kenneth Harrow, Africa World P. Trenton, New Jersey and Asmara, Eritrea, pp. 255 – 57.
- Hatem, Mervat 1993, 'Toward the Development of Post-Islamist and Post-Nationalist Feminist Discourses in the Middle East', *Arab Women: Old Boundaries. New Frontiers*, ed. Judith Tucker, Indiana UP, Bloomington, pp. 29 – 48.
- Hélie-Lucas, Marie-Aimée 1987, 'Women, Nationalism and Religion in the Algerian Liberation Struggle', *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, eds. Margot Badran and Miriam Cook, Virago, London, pp. 105 – 114.
- Horne, Alistair 1996, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954 – 1962*, rev. ed. Papermac, London.
- Kandiyoti, Denis 1991, 'Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation', *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*, 20.3, pp. 429 – 43.
- Kaya, Ibrahim 2000, 'Modernity and Veiled Women', *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3.2, pp. 195 – 214.
- Lasreg, Marnia 1990, 'Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria', *Conflicts in Feminism*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller, Routledge, New York, pp. 326 – 48.
- 1994, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question*, Routledge, New York.
- 2000, 'Islamism and the Recolonisation of Algeria', *Beyond Colonialism and Nationalism in the Maghrib: History, Culture and Politics*, ed. Ali Abdullatif Ahmida, Palgrave, New York.
- Luts, Helma, Phoenix, Ann and Yuval-Davis, Nira 1995, *Crossfires: Nationalism, Racism and Gender in Europe*, Pluto, London.
- Macey, David 2000, *Frantz Fanon: A Life*, Granta, London.
- McClintock, Anne 1997, '"No Longer in a Future Heaven": Gender, Race and Nationalism', *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, eds. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat, U of Minnesota P, Minneapolis, pp. 89 – 112.
- Maougat, Mohamed Lakhdar 1997, 'Recognition — the Cardinal Stake of Violence: An Essay on the Neurotic Structure of the Algerian Cultural Elite', *Journal of Algerian Studies*, 2, pp. 1 – 26.
- Mellen, Joan 1973, *Filmguide to The Battle of Algiers*, Indiana UP, Bloomington.

- Mernissi, Fatima 1993, *The Forgotten Queens of Islam* [Sultanes oubliées], Polity P, Cambridge.
- Minces, Juliette 1978, 'Women in Algeria', *Women in the Muslim World*, eds. Lois Beck and Nikkie Keddie, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Massachusetts, pp. 159 – 71.
- Moallem, Minoo 1999, 'Transnationalism, Feminism, and Fundamentalism', *Between Woman and Nation: Nationalisms, Transnational Feminisms, and the State*, eds. Caren Kaplan, Norma Alarcón and Minoo Moallem, Duke UP, Durham, pp. 320 – 48.
- Mowitt, John 1992, 'Algerian Nation: Fanon's Fetish', *Cultural Critique*, 22, pp. 165 – 86.
- Pontecorvo, Gillo 1967, 'The Battle of Algiers: An Adventure in Filming', *American Cinematographer*, 48.4, pp. 266 – 69.
- Sainsbury, Peter 1971, untitled, *Afterimage*, 3, pp. 5 – 7.
- Sekyi-Otu, Ato 1996, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass.
- Sengupta, Kim 2002, 'Women Will Not Be Allowed to Serve on Frontline, says Hoon', *Independent*, Sat. March 30th, p. 1.
- Shohat, Ella, and Robert Stam 1994, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, 4th ed [1994], Routledge, London.
- Sharpley-Whiting, Denean 1998, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms*, Rowman & Littlefield Lanham, Maryland.
- Silver, Eric 2002, 'Schoolgirl Suicide Bomber Kills Two in Supermarket', *Independent*, Sat. March 30th, p. 4.
- Simra, Clarisse 1996, 'Not So Far From Medina: Assia Djébar Charts Islam's "Insupportable Feminist Revolution"', *World Literature Today*, 70.4, pp. 823 – 34.
- Solinas, Piernico (ed.) 1973, *Gillo Pontecorvo's The Battle of Algiers*, filmscript and interviews with Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York.
- Tohidi, Nayerreh 1994, 'Modernity, Islamisation, and Women in Iran', *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*, ed. Valentine Moghadam, Sed, London.
- Yacef, Saadi 1962, *Souvenirs de la bataille d'Algier*, Julliard, Paris.
- Yegenoglu, Meyda 1998, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.
- Young, Robert 2001, *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, Blackwell, London.
- 2002, 'Fanon and Revolutionary Africa', Unpublished conference paper, University of Stirling, Scotland, 16 March 2002.
- Yuval-Davis 1997, *Woman and Nation*, Sage, London.
- Zimra, Clarisse 1996, 'Not So Far From Medina: Assia Djébar Charts Islam's "Insupportable Feminist Revolution"', *World Literature Today* 70.4, pp. 823–34.

FILMOGRAPHY

- Pontecorvo, Gillo 1996, *The Battle of Algiers*, Casbah Films, Algeria and Igor Films, Italy, 1966, videocassette, UK, Tartan, 1993. Arabic and French with English subtitles.