

Remembrance of things past:
New Perspectives on Films and French Domination
in Algeria.

The significance of François Luciani's *L'Algérie des Chimères*
(2003)

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At a time when *Indigènes/Days of Glory* (Rachid Bouchareb, 2006) – a film highlighting the bravery of North African soldiers on the side of the Free French during the Second World War – is still basking in a swath of media attention,¹ it is relevant and timely to focus on France's recent filmic representation of its colonial history and its aftermath. Apart from this emblematic film, two more mainstream films on this topic were released to some acclaim in the same year: *La Trahison* (Philippe Faucon, 2006) and *Mon colonel* (Laurent Herbiet, 2006). Both works share the same backdrop: the Algerian War and the trauma it created – on the one hand in French soldiers who gradually

¹ The five-strong male cast (Bernard Blancan, Sami Bouajila, Jamel Debbouze, Sami Naceri, Roschdy Zem) shared the Best Actor award at the 2006 Cannes Film Festival and the film received an Oscar nomination in the Best Foreign Film category in 2007. Released in France in September 2006, it was viewed by nearly 3 million people by December 2006 (Source: Allocine.com). The most illustrious of viewers were the French presidential couple. President Jacques Chirac, ostensibly moved by the film storyline, made an on-the-spot declaration according to which soldiers of the French armies originating from former colonies would now finally be eligible for an increase in their pension which had so far been essentially frozen.

came to see the absurdity of the conflict, and on the other in the local population too often subjected to torture by the French authorities.

Although François Luciani's *L'Algérie des Chimères* did not enjoy such international exposure, the 3-part saga shown in prime-time on a French mainstream television channel in 2003 is nevertheless a groundbreaking representation of French colonial domination in Algeria right from the beginning of the Algerian conquest – an important, if little-known, episode of Franco-Algerian relations. As such, it is particularly valuable, and also, because in the words of Olivier Barlet about French colonial cinema in general, it explores “through the depiction of various personal relationships the emotional bonds between France and its colonies. It furthermore represents a lucid insight into the deep ambivalence of the French colonial domination.”²

Such films bear witness to the groundswell of change which has been gathering pace in France in the recent past. Indeed, in the last few years, countless cultural events have chosen to centre on France's colonial inheritance. For instance, in 2007, the Comédie Française added to its repertory Bernard-Marie Koltès' play *Le Retour au désert/Return to the Desert* (1988) whose background is also the Algerian War. The momentum is even more obvious in the plethora of recent cinema and television productions. In 2005, the *Forum des images* in Paris was able to show a spectacular season of events which aimed at problematizing the representation of colonial history in world cinema, under the general title of ‘Cycle Colonies: Les cicatrices de l'histoire’.

As for French terrestrial television channels, in the last decade, they have shown a number of programmes (films and documentaries) on prime-time television which depict carefully chosen, lesser-known episodes of French colonial history and their echo in contemporary French society. *Les Années déchirées* (Rachid Bouchareb, 1993) dramatized the growing chasm between the French settlers in Algeria and the Muslim population from the Sétif rebellion in 1945 to the start of the war of Independence in 1954. *La Dette* (Fabrice Cazeneuve, 2000) concentrated on a dramatic episode of the First World War usually occulted from official history, that of the fundamental, but yet little acknowledged role played by the Black auxiliary soldiers within

² Barlet, Olivier, ‘*L'Algérie des Chimères* - Série en trois épisodes de François Luciani’, *Africultures*, http://www.africultures.com/index.asp?menu=revue_affiche_article&no=2432&rech=1 ; accessed 13 July 2007.

the French army, known as the Tirailleurs sénégalais, who were sacrificed in great numbers in the name of France during several bloody battles in 1916; this film has been the subject of an in-depth study by the present authors.³

Negro (Karim Akadiri Soumaila, 2000), a social drama, followed the steps of two Malian brothers and their French Caribbean friend on their road to delinquency as they roamed aimlessly in the suburbs of Bordeaux. *Fatou la Malienne* (Fabrice Cazeneuve, 2001) focused on issues of identity in 'La Goutte d'Or' in Paris, an area known for its successive waves of immigrants; again, a film that has been studied and discussed previously.⁴ Even the little-known fate of the Harkis (pro-France Algerians during the War of Independence) has generated a well-received fiction film which was shown in prime time on France 2: *Harkis* (Alain Tasma, 2006). In different ways, these films have purposefully attempted, with lesser or greater success, to get away from the clichéd, exotic representations of the colonial Other, to which the French public has been accustomed since the beginning of its colonial endeavours. While there are films made by anthropologists which go against this exotic trend (see for example the works of Marcel Griaule or Jean Rouch), and also anti-colonial films, especially after the Second World War (see for example the works of René Vautier or Chris Marker), the vast majority of films and documentaries on the colonies impart a clichéd view of the Other.⁵

This is all very different from the more common reference to Algeria in popular culture which prevailed straight after 1962. At the time, the most noticeable representation of the colonial Other was the Pied-Noir (a European settler in North Africa) who was conveniently used as a way to refer to a traumatic part of history – the French presence in Algeria – without running the risk of questioning the actual facts about the French colonial involvement which culminated with the War of Independence (1954-1962) and all its excesses. This displacement was facilitated by the presence of around one million

³ Maryse Bray and Agnès Calatayud, 'La Dette: les Tirailleurs sénégalais pendant la Première Guerre mondiale ou le destin de ceux qui viennent d'ailleurs', *Web Journal of French Media Studies*, Volume 6, Number 1, December 2003, <<http://wjfms.ncl.ac.uk/enframes.htm>>.

⁴ Maryse Bray and Agnès Calatayud, 'Diversité ethnique à la télévision française', *Africultures*.
www.africultures.com/index.asp?menu=revue_affiche_article&no=3448.

⁵ For further details, see the Dossier 'Exotismes', *Positif*, n° 528 (February 2005), pp.86-111.

Pieds-Noirs on French territory, who could not and did not want to be silenced. The stereotype of the Pied-Noir fed to the general public in French popular culture was born: a one-dimensional, loud-mouthed, vulgar and irascible individual, with a thick ludicrous accent.

A farcical representation of a happy, French Algeria, where all was well in the best of worlds, allowed for tensions to be superficially diffused. A particularly telling example of this can be seen in the triptych of films by Alexandre Arcady, a Pied-Noir himself, who directed: *Le Coup de Sirocco* (1979), *Le Grand Pardon/The Day of Atonement* (1981), and *Le Grand Carnaval* (1983).⁶ The negative, risible image of the Pied Noir has endured not least because several actors, such as Roger Hanin, Robert Castel or Marthe Villalonga, themselves of Pied-Noir origin, have skillfully exploited the vein with resulting commercial success. The heavy burden – linked for some to the loss of Algeria, for others to the political humiliation following the defeat of the French armed forces, or for others still, to the actual wounds they or their dearest may have sustained during the fighting on Algerian territory – seemed thus easier to carry.

1. Films and documentaries on the Algerian War

More than forty years have now elapsed since the end of the Algerian War. Times have moved on, and so have collective mindsets, spurred on by the growing number of testimonies from the various parties involved in the war, who, up to then, had remained essentially silent. The last decade of the twentieth century saw former conscripts, French army officials, but also Algerian civilians and Harkis, now reaching old age, overwhelmed by the imperative need to share their traumatic experiences. While the fall of so many long-held barriers was welcomed by most (both from a personal and from a historical standpoint), it must be noted that many diverging, not to say antagonistic memories were now running the risk of being compartmentalized or even reified: such an exposition of irreconcilable memories could perpetuate the original social, racial and political divides. As Paul Ricoeur noted: 'It is difficult to exercise equity towards the competing demands of damaged memories which

⁶ Alexandre Arcady in particular continues to draw inspiration from his personal experience: he is also the director of the musical *Les Enfants du Soleil* (2004) which depicts the hasty departure of the Pieds-Noirs from Algeria in the Summer 1962.

are sometimes blind to each other.’⁷ Hence the official attempt in 2003 to try and reconcile conflicting memories and heal old foes’ wounds born of the contentious relationship between France and Algeria, in the guise of ‘Djazair, Une Année de l’Algérie’, a year-long celebration of Algerian culture, jointly supported by the French and the Algerian governments, which was successfully organized in France.

This is not to say that mainstream French cinema has shied away from the representation of the Algerian War. Indeed, contrary to received wisdom, many filmmakers have not infrequently tackled this controversial subject. A commentator evaluates that 280 films have been shot in France on the Algerian War since 1956.⁸ The journalist Mouloud Mimoun⁹ and the historian and sociologist Benjamin Stora¹⁰ afford a comprehensive overview of the subject. However, according to Jean-Michel Frodon, ‘the story [these films] tell mostly takes place in France, and reverberates with the perception by the French of the “war without a name”: in other words not as a war but as a myriad of disturbing events, threatening the lives of people, threatening economic interests, a way of life, challenging their position in face of the conflict and the illusions they held since the end of the Second World War.’¹¹

Moreover documentaries on the Algerian War had already been shown on French television: amongst them, in the 1970s, *La Guerre d’Algérie* (Yves Courrière, 1972) and another bearing the same title by Peter Baty in the following decade. In the same vein, Benjamin Stora produced a key, four-hour long documentary TV series on the French presence in Algeria called *Les Années algériennes* (1991). Amongst the most publicized works on the topic is Bertrand Tavernier’s *La Guerre sans nom* (1992) which presents the war through the hitherto unspoken memories of the French conscripts in a

⁷ Quoted in Bernard Droz, ‘La guerre d’Algérie: Mémoire singulière, mémoire plurielle’, *Marianne* n° 401-402, p. 115.

⁸ www.ambalgott.com/html/cinema_franc_lib_nation.htm ; accessed 3 February 2005.

⁹ *France-Algérie: images d’une guerre* ed. by Mouloud Mimoun, *Cahiers de Cinéma-Ima*, 1 (Paris: Institut du Monde Arabe, 1992).

¹⁰ Benjamin Stora, *Imaginaires de guerre: les images des guerres d’Algérie et du Vietnam* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

¹¹ Jean-Michel Frodon, ‘Le cinéma et la guerre’, *Le Monde*, 31 October 2004, www.france-mail-forum.de/fmf36/art/36frodon.htm ; accessed 3 February 2005.

mise en scène reminiscent of Max Ophüls' *Le Chagrin et la pitié/The Sorrow and the Pity* (1969) (in its time itself a ground-breaking film which allowed a kind of cathartic collective psychoanalysis of the dark years of collaboration and resistance).

According to Tavernier, '[*La Guerre sans nom*] attempted to fill the silence [surrounding the Algerian War]'. And he continued: 'In no way was I going to keep any aspect of the war hidden. (...) I wanted to react against the prevailing camouflage.'¹² His comment on the silence surrounding the war, although apparently typical of the amnesia which surrounds the Algerian War, could appear surprising since he himself co-produced his former assistant Laurent Heynemann's film *La Question* (1977), based on the journalist Henri Alleg's account of his horrendous experience of torture in Algeria at the hands of the French Paratroopers towards the beginning of the war¹³ – a paradox which highlights what Benjamin Stora epitomizes as: 'the impossibility [in France] of moving beyond the traumatizing individual experience and to reach a collective visualization [of the war] through cinema'.¹⁴

Tavernier could not have forgotten that many directors before him had tried to deal with this difficult issue, even as the war was going on – although, to be fair, such films did not receive much media attention, in part because of ongoing State censorship especially in the decades immediately following Algeria's independence. For instance Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat /The Little Soldier* (1960), the story of a deserter from the French army in Algeria and a hired hand in the pay of the OAS who has qualms about the murder he has been commissioned to commit, was banned from French cinemas until 1963. According to the New Wave filmmaker: 'In the Malraux days [Minister of Culture under de Gaulle's presidency from 1958 to 1969], it wasn't easy to broach the topic of the Algerian War. As I had

¹² Jean-Paul Monferran, 'Bertrand Tavernier: *Tuer le silence*', *L'Humanité*, 3 January 2001, www.humanite.presse.fr/journal/2001-01-03/2001-01-03-237366; accessed 14 January 2005.

¹³ Alleg's book *La Question* had been published on 12 February 1958, and was banned five weeks later on the grounds that it could demoralize the army and that it was an attempt at jeopardizing the defence of the country. Interestingly Heynemann's film *La Question* was re-released in 2001, as more personal testimonies from both victims and perpetrators filled the front pages of the media.

¹⁴ Benjamin Stora, 'Mon colonel' in *Cinéma – Leur ticket, Le Nouvel Observateur*, 4-10 January 2007, p. 98.

received death threats in my letterbox, it suited me that the film was banned! Le Pen went as far as demanding that I should be expelled from France...'¹⁵

In fact, in this period, escaping censorship took considerable effort on the part of filmmakers who wanted to feature the Algerian War. As an example, let us take Agnès Varda's *Cléo de 5 à 7/Cleo from 5 to 7* (1961): in the streets of Paris, a young woman, Cléo, possibly suffering from cancer, meets a French soldier on leave from Algeria. For different reasons, the natural course of their lives is likely to be perverted and the war is clearly identified with a fatal disease. Although central to the film, the Algerian War is only actually mentioned by the by, in apparently innocuous conversations – clearly so as not to fall foul of the censors! Similarly, Alain Resnais proved a masterpiece of censorship evasion with *Muriel ou le temps d'un retour /Muriel or The Time of Return* (1963): in spite of the Algerian War and its atrocities being essential to its theme, the film was allowed to run uncensored.

In the scenario, written by the late Jean Cayrol (a writer who had survived the Mauthausen concentration camp during the Second World War and who also wrote the script of Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard/Night and Fog* (1955), a film on the Nazi concentration camps), a young man is haunted by the memory of Muriel, a woman he tortured to death in Algeria as a conscript during the war. Playing on his reputation as a literary filmmaker following *Hiroshima mon amour/Hiroshima, My Love* (1959) and *L'Année dernière à Marienbad/Last Year in Marienbad* (1961), Resnais managed to present *Muriel* as a study on the strong impact the war has on a given generation and the traces it leaves in their memory. And yet, as Frodon says in the article previously quoted, 'it is clearly *Muriel* [...] which highlights the place the conflict holds in the collective imagination: a secret which everyone prefers – or at least accepts – to keep buried away from the limelight'.

In our view, it is therefore impossible to argue, as some commentators have, that the war in Algeria was kept under wraps and that it was absent from public forums. The evidence to the contrary is, as we have seen, overwhelming. And yet, in spite of this, it is true to say that the 'wall of silence' mentioned by Bertrand Tavernier was not completely broken down. At the official level, it took years for the

¹⁵ Review of *Le Petit Soldat*, http://pserve.club.fr/Le_Petit_Soldat.html ; accessed 3 February 2005.

State to acknowledge the reality of the Algerian War of Independence. For a long time it remained 'a war without a name' since the State kept on referring to it as 'the events in Algeria' (*les événements*), presumably in a bid to hide the true, war-like nature of the conflict. In fact, it took until 18 October 1999 (i.e. an incredible thirty-seven years after the signature of the Evian Agreements) for the French Parliament to recognize officially that it was indeed a war.¹⁶ A kind of *omertà* was clearly implemented by the State, which is very gradually being lifted. The word 'gradual' should be taken literally.¹⁷ How could this situation last for so long, when so many in the country had either first-hand experience of the conflict or were made aware of it through various media especially after the 1980s?

If censorship was of course used during and after the war, self-censorship must also have played a part, not least because it probably chimed in with people's desire for peace, born of a wish to forget personal or national trauma. Enough time has now passed since the end of the war, and we are currently confronted in France with a deluge of books, newspaper articles, and various other cultural productions on the subject of the Algerian war, together with a changed position on the part of the French State.¹⁸ As Henry Rousso writes, drawing a parallel between the Algerian war and the Vichy period: 'In the last ten years, (...) the obsessional presence of these two events which we witness nowadays in our society seems to

¹⁶ The Act number 99-882 dated 18 October 1999 states: 'From now on the expression "La guerre d'Algérie" replaces in all official documentation the previously used acronym T.O.E or "Théâtre des opérations extérieures".' It must be noted also that the law recognizes that all French citizens who took part in the Algerian War in an official capacity, as well as all the Algerians who fought alongside the French, are entitled to a State pension, in the same way as are all veterans of previous wars. However, France has not conceded this at the United Nations. Therefore those taken prisoners during the conflict are still not considered to have been prisoners of war.

¹⁷ As Maurice Maschino wrote in 'L'histoire expurgée de la guerre d'Algérie', *Le Monde diplomatique*, February 2001, pp. 8-9: 'Contrary to Lionel Jospin's promise on 27 July 1997, the most sensitive archives are still not open to the public except for very specific reasons which are difficult to argue.'

¹⁸ It is worth noting the normalization of the relations between France and Algeria symbolized by much publicized, reciprocal State visits by Abdellatif Bouteflika and Jacques Chirac, presidents of Algeria and France respectively.

partake of a similar trend: that of *hypermnesia*.¹⁹ For cinemagoers and TV viewers who may not have known much about such historical events, the many stories which particularly focus on the human dimension of the conflict, where they can easily identify with fictional characters, actually facilitate the understanding of the issues at stake. This way, through the films, the dilemmas faced by individuals at the time of colonization and the various memories constructed since the conflict are given a discursive and visual space, thereby opening the lid on a hitherto suppressed historical episode.

In 2003, besides feature films, a plethora of TV documentaries and cultural programmes were programmed: on France 2, the well-regarded current affairs programme 'Envoyé Spécial' devoted a subject on the rapes and tortures perpetrated by the French Army in Algeria from 1954 to 1962. On the same channel, the weekly 'Mots croisés' devoted time to Georges-Marc Benamou's book *Un Mensonge français/A French Lie* (Robert Laffont, 2003) which highlights the French government's sponsored lies about the 'events' in Algeria; Arte broadcast a programme entitled *Les Visages du terrorisme* (John Blair, 2003), a section of which focused on the rationale of the FLN and refers to the celebrated *La Bataille d'Alger/The Battle of Algiers* (Gilles Pontecorvo, 1965), once banned by the French government. Another of its star programmes, 'Les mercredis de l'Histoire', showed a two-part series entitled *La Pacification en Algérie* (André Gazut, 2002). For the Swiss director of this series, the challenge was 'to give a memory to the young generation, to help them understand the conflict democratically, to give back to the general public a number of facts that only historians knew.'²⁰ Last but not least, France 5, the channel with an educational purpose, broadcast *OAS, une histoire interdite* (François Margolin and Georges-Marc Benamou, 2003). For the programmers, 'the aim was to go beyond official history, to depict a more complex history than is usually the case, a history which has had a more negative impact on

¹⁹ Henry Rousso, 'La guerre d'Algérie et la culture de la mémoire', *Le Monde*, 5 April 2002, www.lemonde.fr/web/article/0,1-0@2-3328,36-267206,0.html ; accessed 3 February 2005.

²⁰ André Gazut, 'J'ai voulu donner une mémoire aux jeunes pour les aider à comprendre la Guerre d'Algérie', *Le Courrier*, www.lecourrier.ch/print.php?sid=2127 ; accessed 3 February 2005.

people's mind than is commonly acknowledged – whatever their background may be.²¹

No surprise then, that in this context, all French terrestrial channels recently programmed a number of TV films dealing with various aspects linked to the Algerian War of Independence including the repressed memories of the various protagonists. Taken in their entirety, the films shown reveal a new willingness to contemplate the multi-faceted reality of the war. For instance, in *Le Porteur de cartable* (Caroline Huppert, 2002) shown on France 2 (the main state-financed TV channel aimed at the general public), the complexity of the war is embodied in the unexpected relationship between two children living in Paris in 1962: Omar, an Algerian youngster born and brought up in France, and his newly found friend Raphaël, a Pied-Noir who has had to leave Algeria because of the war. In July 2003 France 3, the other publicly financed TV channel, showed *Le Bois du Pardoux* (Stéphane Kurc, 1999) which emphasizes the tragic impact the Algerian War had on ordinary people's lives: Catherine and Bernard's plans for their future life are shattered by the death of Bernard's brother in an ambush in Algeria.

In *L'Adieu* (François Luciani, 2003), shown on France 2, the war is seen through the eyes of the conscripts and the Harkis. Set during the last two years of the conflict, the film shows the heavy-handedness of the French police 'maintaining order' in the Kabylie region in Algeria (with scenes of torture and summary executions), as well as the struggle between the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète), an extreme Right-wing militant organization in favour of French Algeria, and the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), fighting for Algeria's independence. Contrary to what might have been expected, such programmes have been shown in prime time and have met with the viewers' approval or, at the very least, interest. As an example, *Le Bois du Pardoux* turned out to be very successful in viewing terms, since it attracted 4.3 million viewers or 25.5% of the national audience. Maybe this achievement was due to the twenty years or so that people have had to wait before such films were made largely available to them: opinion polls published in *L'Express* in 1979 and in *Paris-Match* in 1990 revealed that the Algerian War was seen as 'an important historical event', although difficult to define. In both

²¹ www.france5.fr/histoire_decouverte/articles/W00371/94/119188.cfm (François Margolin) ; accessed 3 February 2005.

surveys, a majority indicated that they wanted to know more about the subject.²²

One of the most recent attempts to fill this knowledge gap on television was a thought-provoking three-part mini series shown on France 2 in 2005: *L'Algérie des chimères* (François Luciani, 2003), which this paper will now analyze. Interestingly, *L'Algérie des chimères* is one of the few recent films on Algeria which do not take the Algerian War of Liberation, or immigration issues, as its backdrop. Set in the early years of French colonization of Algeria in the nineteenth century, it depicts the conquest of Algeria from the arrival of the French troops in 1830 to the start of the Third Republic in 1871, a part of the French colonial adventure which tends to be confined to the margins of history.

2. The Conquest of Algeria from 1830

Indeed, how many people know that the fateful expedition to conquer Algiers under Charles X in 1830 was the result of a ludicrous diplomatic incident involving the Dey of Algiers and the French Consul? The anecdote is beyond belief: in 1827 the Dey hit the Consul with his fly swat handle over the Frenchman's lack of honesty when he refused to provide security for the reimbursement of a loan contracted decades earlier with some Jewish families in Algiers for the supply of wheat to Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign. Reeling from this supposed affront, and anxious to add lustre to his poor image in France, Charles X decided to send troops: 453 battleships, 27,000 seamen and 37,000 soldiers,²³ who landed at Sidi Ferruch, west of Algiers. The Dey capitulated on 5 July 1830, but not without having strongly resisted the French assaults. The French army then proceeded to loot the Dey's treasure and to ransack Algiers.

The original plan had been to act swiftly in order to enjoy the supposed pleasures of the Orient, a seductive, almost mythical image, dating back to the Romans, which had endured in the collective psyche thanks to Latin scholars. In fact, Pliny the Elder, Tacitus, and Saint Augustine spread the same embellished message: Algeria as a land of plenty where life is agreeable, with fruit orchards, wheat, barley, vineyards, cattle, ivory, works of art galore, criss-crossed by

²² Droz, p. 114.

²³ '14 juin 1830: Les Français débarquent en Algérie', www.herodote.net/histoire06140.htm; accessed 7 February 2005.

roads, aqueducts or bridges. Since the Middle Ages, this idyllic representation had been somewhat tarnished by, amongst others, the accounts of Cervantes (who had been imprisoned by ‘Barbary pirates’ in Algiers in 1575-1580),²⁴ the writings of the geographer Leo Africanus, or those of Ibn Khaldoun: ‘[These pirates] arrive unexpectedly and ransack everything they come across; they attack the infidels’ ships, often take them over and go back home with their loot and prisoners. In this way, Bougie and the other western ports of the Ifriqiya are full of captives; the streets echo with the rattle of their chains.’²⁵ Hence one of the commonly held positions in France with regard to Algeria in the early nineteenth century: the desire to recover the true and pure Algeria of yore and therefore the need to defeat the ‘Barbarians’ who had ruined it.²⁶

However, a great many of the French manifested little interest for the conquest of Algeria. The general public were indifferent, and amongst the intellectuals, Alexis de Tocqueville was one of the rare supporters of the colonization of Algeria in spite of the practical difficulties: the conquest of Algeria was not so easy to achieve. Very quickly, the French army found themselves caught up in a spiral of brutal violence to repress the numerous bouts of insurrection, in particular those led by Abd El-Khader – a violence which, from the beginning, was constitutive of the contentious relations between France and Algeria. Abd El-Khader surrendered in 1847 but it took another ten years before the whole of the North African Territories

²⁴ María Antonia Garcés, *Cervantes in Algiers: A Captive’s Tale*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 2002.

²⁵ Quoted in Elisabeth Fechner, *La Gloire de l’Algérie: Ecrivains et photographes de Flaubert à Camus*, Calmann-Lévy, Paris, 2000, p. 16.

²⁶ The press, opposed to Charles X, warned of the difficulties which the French army would encounter. See for example this account of Algiers in 1830 published in *Le Journal des Débats*, one of the most influential Parisian daily newspapers at the time: ‘Algiers is a town full of sadness, with a harsh land; with Barbarians, soldiers and citadels. Circled by deserts resounding with the roar of lions, jackals, and hyenas, where boa constrictors wriggle along, where scorpions, whose sting is lethal, fill even the richest of houses. When summer comes, locusts, the true scourge of Egypt, descend in clouds like the armies of Genghis Khan and devour everything including the barks of trees. Aside such blights (I have even forgotten to mention the desert sands and the *simoon*, a kind of hurricane in this land of corruption, as the Bible says), there are only two good sides to this country: opium, the drug of brutes, and the perfume of roses’ in Fechner, p. 16.

(which had been given the name of Algeria in 1839 by the French Ministry of War), bled dry by the fighting, were totally occupied.²⁷

Focusing on this lesser-known episode of the colonial conquest in a television film for the general public, *L'Algérie des chimères* could be interpreted as a device to avoid the problems associated with the representation of the War of Independence a century later. In our view however, even though *L'Algérie des chimères* cannot in any way be considered as the ultimate achievement – the film's discourse at times comes dangerously close to conveying a pro-colonialism message – its very existence reveals that another phenomenon may be at work. We may indeed be witnessing the very early beginnings of what Benjamin Stora highlights: the fact that 'the traumatism and the hurt must leave room for the scientific and less passionate work of history',²⁸ as if the collective subconscious is now, finally, able to venture beyond stultified characterization. In our opinion, François Luciani's film is a good illustration of this newly emerging cultural climate.

3. The utopian marriage of Orient and Occident

In *L'Algérie des chimères* the relationship between the French and the Arabs at the time of the conquest is illustrated by the divergent itineraries of two *Polytechniciens*, Odilon Hubert, a doctor, and Hélié Toussaint, an interpreter – two young, idealistic officers of the French Army. The film is constructed on a to-ing and fro-ing between the historical events filmed on a grand scale, and the more intimate and romantic developments of the two main characters' personal relationships. Interestingly, Odilon and Hélié are both ardent followers of the doctrine of the French philosopher Saint-Simon (1760-1825), whose aim was to devise a synthesis between science and philosophy

²⁷ Elisabeth Fechner highlights that 'the entry to most of the towns was forbidden to civilians as much as a measure of security as for the prevention of speculation and probably also to hide the horrors committed by the French army: locals smoked out, stoned and tortured (...) in a country which is still called *la Barbarie* in order to justify the atrocities perpetrated,' or, in the words of General Saint-Arnaud about the taking of Constantine: 'Everything was ransacked, nothing was respected. What a scene (...) what carnage... (...) We were up to our knees in dead bodies' in Fechner, pp. 38-39.

²⁸ Benjamin Stora, interview with Eugénie Barbezat 'Décloisonner les mémoires autour de la guerre d'Algérie', http://web.ina.fr/voir_revoir/algerie/itv_stora.en.html; accessed 20/06/2003.

in order to change for the better a society based on exploitation.²⁹ During its short-lived history, Saint-Simon's doctrine left its mark on the political, social and economic thought of French elites, notably the *Polytechniciens* who agreed with its technocratic and somewhat authoritarian orientation combined with a love of humanity which, in their eyes, would improve the life of the poorer majority of people, and herald the end of uncertainty and violence in the world.

Like so many other upper-class converts to Saint-Simonism, Odilon Hubert and Hélié Toussaint go on a 'crusade' to Algeria to realize the utopian, mystical marriage between the materialist Occident and the spiritual Orient with the Mediterranean at the centre of the union, a theory advocated by Prosper Enfantin (1796-1864) one of the main theorists of the Saint-Simonian movement. While in Algeria, the two French officers are in contact with Thomas Urbain Appoline (1812-1884) nicknamed 'The Arabs' Friend', and later known as Ismaïl Urbain after his conversion to Islam. He is another Saint-Simonian, responsible for Napoleon III's doomed policy of the 'Arab Kingdom' for Algeria, which planned the complete naturalization of all Algerian Muslims.³⁰

Luciani's film is skilful inasmuch as the character of Hélié is in fact a replica of Urbain. Like him, Hélié is a half-cast, the son of a plantation owner in the Caribbean and a Black slave. Hélié marries the daughter of an Algerian chief ruined by the French conquest. Tellingly, the wives of both heroes bear similar names: Beïa for Urbain and Bahia in the case of Hélié. Beyond the anodyne appearance, this narrative device is a perhaps not so subtle attempt at giving equal status to the French and Arab cultures in the film. As an artifice, this is one of the examples of the at times didactic nature of *L'Algérie des chimères* which shows, if needs be, what a powerful

²⁹ See 'Le Siècle des saint-simoniens: du Nouveau Christianisme au Canal de Suez', an exhibition held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France (28 November 2006 – 25 February 2007), highlighting the tenet of Saint-Simonism: 'The improvement of the moral, physical, and intellectual fate of the poorest and largest social class'. <http://www.bnf.fr/pages/zNavigat/frame/cultpubl.htm?ancre=cultpubl.htm> ; accessed 27 February 2007.

³⁰ On 19 September 1860 Napoleon III, on a visit to Algiers, spoke of his 'desire to look after the happiness of three million Arabs whom war had brought under his domination'. Philippe-Jean Catinchi, 'L'Ami des Arabes', *Le Monde des Livres*, 28 June 2002, www.sissco.it/rassegne/rassegna247.html ; accessed 10 January 2005.

tool cinema and television can be for the representation of ideological standpoints.

The structure of the narrative highlights another tenet of Saint-Simonian theory: the great importance of women, who represent sensibility, whereas men are repositories of knowledge. Just as they advocate cooperation between those who govern and those who are governed, the Saint-Simonians favour equality between the sexes, but without wishing to abolish their differences. According to Evelyn L. Forget: 'Women were to take active roles in the social and political functions of the new society that would emerge from these policies because their unique nature particularly fitted them to bring sympathy and morality to complement the reason of the male. Together a man and a woman would constitute a social unit made up of an appropriate mix of attributes required to usher in the new age.'³¹

Clearly *L'Algérie des Chimères* is imbued with this philosophy, but it also draws on a long history of colonial films which invariably associate the conquest of the land and the seduction of the local women, a feature noted in particular by the historian Marc Ferro who, commenting on Jacques Feyder's *L'Atlantide* (1921), Jean Renoir's *Le Bled* (1929) and Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le Moko* (1936), states that, in films on colonial history, the female character is the embodiment of the relationship between the Occident and the Orient.³² Although shot forty years after Algeria's independence, Luciani's film is still constructed on this paradigm. In fact, Robert Soulé, one of the scriptwriters, himself born in Algiers, enthuses about his love for his native country which he compares to that of a woman.³³ Not surprisingly then, the female characters created for the film are significant and therefore especially worthy of study. Three of them perform substantial roles on which we will concentrate: Leila, Bahia and Naouel who are all used as vehicles for the various political ideologies which have framed the Franco-Algerian relationship from the start of colonization.

³¹ Evelyn L. Forget, 'Saint-Simonian Feminism', *Feminist Economics* 7 (1), 2001, p. 85.

³² Marc Ferro, *Cinéma, une vision de l'histoire*, Paris, Editions du Chêne, 2003, p. 114: 'La femme est le personnage frontière entre l'Occident et l'Orient, comme elle a pu l'être, au Maghreb, entre colonisateurs et colonisés.'

³³ Robert Soulé, *TéléLoisirs* n° 819, 10 November 2001: 'Comme tous les pieds-noirs, j'ai aimé follement ce pays. Comme on aime une femme.'

Leila is the archetype of the European settler in Algeria. She is a young nurse of Spanish, Kabyle and Arabic descent, whose origins constitute a summary of the history of the population in Algeria from the Turkish to the Spanish invasions in Berber land. She meets Odilon Hubert, the army doctor, when he first arrives in the military hospital in Oran in 1837. She falls in love with him. Through Odilon, she is in awe of the French army and will react aggressively towards him once he has been expelled from it for his militant political support of the Republic at the time of the Empire. Odilon and Leila eventually marry – at her instigation, because Odilon still has very strong feelings for Naouel, a young slave whose character we will discuss later – and their dispassionate relationship leads to the birth to two children, Jeanne and Emile. One day, the children come home from school and ask their parents if they are Arabs. Leila, the mother, is outraged at the suggestion. Her rejection of the Arab part of her history is due to her desire to become French, like her husband. She also cherishes French clothes, French furniture and *art de vivre* even when she lives in the Mitidja, in the heart of rural Algeria. She is very much the incarnation of the French ideology of ‘civilizing mission’. She is keen to help the local population through her role as a nurse, or later on as a teacher, but there are limitations: there must not be any close integration between the French and the indigenous populations. Her ideal is a life in Algiers where the two populations live side-by-side and yet totally separate from one another. ‘In Algiers people don’t mix!’ she gleefully shouts at her husband. In the course of her life with Odilon, she has to accept the arrival in her family unit of Aïssa, a young Arab, since her husband has agreed to look after him while the supposed father, one of Abd-El-Khader’s lieutenants, is forced into exile. Again she looks after him although she feels no love for him, and she tries to ensure that her own children are kept at a distance from him. In a telling scene, Aïssa and the other two children are seen praying to their respective gods, their backs turned on one another. They may be in the same room but religion is presented as clearly setting them apart.

Another important female character in the film is Bahia, the daughter of one of the Arab leaders in Algeria. As she had no brother, she received an education both in French and Arabic. She comes across Hélié Toussaint, a soldier in the French army, a friend of Odilon and interpreter. They marry after his conversion to Islam which had been a condition imposed by Bahia’s family. Hélié is the flag-bearer for the philosophy of the ‘Royaume Arabe/Arabic

Kingdom' which was prevalent in France amongst the Emperor Napoleon III's advisors.

Napoleon had visited Algeria twice in the 1860s and he was particularly impressed by the dignity and the worthiness of Algeria's traditional leaders, especially as compared to what he saw as the self-centeredness of the colonizers. In fact, he saw the latter as corrupting the indigenous population. His philosophy of an Arabic Kingdom was intended to preserve most of Algeria for the Muslims, with himself becoming the King of the Arabs. This utopia quickly unraveled when the policy demanded that full French citizenship could only be granted if the Algerians renounced their religion.

The demise of Napoleon III and the advent of the Third Republic was the final nail in the coffin of this philosophy. It is through Bahia's characterization that the viewer is presented with the ill-fated Arabic Kingdom. Hélié had fallen in love with Bahia at first sight as so many Frenchmen succumbed, in their own words, to the ensnaring beauty of Algeria's landscapes. His marriage to Bahia is passionate and they are both very respectful of each other's culture. Bahia's culture never gets assimilated into her husband's. She follows him wherever his postings take him. But even when she is in France, she keeps her Algerian clothes; she furnishes her house in an Oriental style, and the family live according to the precepts of Islam.

As for Hélié, he is a member of the French army and as such would have been, in Napoleon's blueprint, the protector of the Arab country against the colons. The fact that he is also an interpreter is particularly fitting: he is the mediator between the Arab leaders and the French hierarchy. The first disagreement in this idyllic couple comes when their son Ahmed, who has chosen to remain in France after his Law degree, decides to change his first name to Amédée. Bahia, who sees this as a betrayal, is a symbol of the Arabs' refusal to submit to the full jurisdiction of the French legal code, which was a tenet of the Napoleon III's proposals. At the end of the film we are in 1871 and the Algerians are taking arms against the French. Bahia sides with her father and Hélié has to flee Algeria, his plans for the future lying in tatters. By then, the two couples who had been on friendly terms because of the husbands' friendship were no longer on speaking terms. The relationship between France and Algeria is clearly doomed.

The film's narrative structure is completed by the third important female character: Naouel, a young French-speaking slave from the Abd-el-Kader's Smala, who is placed by the Arab leaders with Odilon

in order to spy on him. They fall in love and enjoy a two-year-long relationship. As hostilities between the French and the Arabs resume, they are forced to split and following a misunderstanding, they both think the other has betrayed them. As we know, Odilon goes on to marry Leila and Naouel becomes one of the wives of a high-ranking soldier in Abd-el-Kader's army. A few years later, Odilon finds out that a son, Aïssa, was born of his relationship with Naouel. And he will be asked to educate him alongside his children with Leila, after Abd-el-Kader's surrender to the French in 1847. In spite of their love for one another, the relationship between Odilon and Naouel is not allowed to flourish. They are portrayed as the representatives of two cultures which are shown to be incompatible. And this incompatibility is further embodied in the fate of Aïssa who becomes very successful in the French Army and who, having fallen in love with Jeanne, Odilon's and Leila's daughter, has his life cut short on a battlefield at a very young age. Not even in the second generation of characters in the film, can there be a common future. As symbolized in the incestuous relationship of the youngsters, love between the two communities is definitely a forbidden fruit.

Conclusion

L'Algérie des chimères is a fictional account of a historical period. Whether, or to what extent, the history of the conquest of Algeria is accurately depicted is, in parts, debatable. On the one hand a filmmaker is not a historian, s/he is an artist whose aim is to foster emotions and provide entertainment for the viewers. François Luciani's intentions in this film were to highlight the beauty of Algeria and also to tell the human stories which remain unheard in history books and yet explain some fundamental contemporary questions regarding colonialism and decolonization. In his own words: 'My films on Algeria show what is never mentioned in history books: the personal, human stories. (...) They explain the close emotional ties that French people felt towards the land they had adopted as their own and the heartbreak they suffered when they had to leave it.'³⁴

In this sense, this film is very important because, in addition to moving the debate away from the Algerian War, it shows to the general public, in a very accessible way, that colonization in Algeria

³⁴ François Luciani, www.france2.fr/semiStatic/61-NIL-NIL-213489.html ;. accessed 16 June 2003.

should be seen as a continuum and not solely through the prism of the War of Independence. This has particular resonance in relation to the reciprocal cycle of violence which, in this film, is shown for what it was: a constituent part of the colonial system imposed on Algeria, and not merely certain one-off ‘accidents’ which took place during the “exceptional circumstances” during the War of Independence.

There remain, however, serious reservations about this film. In our view they are not to do with the capacity of a fiction film to analyse history. For example, Eisenstein’s *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925) as a dramatized account of a great Russian mutiny with imaginary scenes, reaches an exceptional form of historical analysis. Although clearly not in the same category – not least because of its emphasis on didacticism, which tends to create one-dimensional characters with a relatively limited range of emotions – *L’Algérie des chimères*, with its emphasis on memory and history, is nonetheless the first step on a road which has now been opened and which may lead to better works of art combined with a deeper historical understanding of a complex and painful episode of French history. In the words of the French Ambassador in Algeria at the screening of *Indigènes* in Algiers: ‘Sometimes those who have no pretension to be historians but who have strong views, a real sensitivity and the talent to express all of this succeed in making things happen, in awakening memories and in the end in giving meaning to events.’³⁵

³⁵ Hubert Colin de Verdière, speaking on 7 October 2006 at the screening of *Indigènes* in Algiers, www.ambafrance-dz.org/article.php3?id_article=955; accessed 27 February 2007.

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