The Colonial Casbah on the Silver Screen:  
Using *Pépé le Moko* and *The Battle of Algiers* to Teach Colonialism, Race, and Globalization in French History

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Teaching history at the University of California, Santa Cruz, I encounter many students who are aware of (and often very well informed about) issues of social justice, racism, and globalization. However, most of my students do not expect to consider such subjects in a survey of twentieth-century French history. In a class of some thirty students—equally divided between a third history majors, a third French literature or language majors, and a third representing everything from politics to computer sciences majors—my syllabus often comes as a shock to them. I present them with a series of texts that foreground intense social conflicts in the narrative of French history. These conflicts include labor activism, gender disputes, and the development and bitter legacy of fascism. My course calls special attention to the histories of colonialism and race, allowing my students to gain insight into French, European, and global issues of race and social justice by studying subjects traditionally ignored or marginalized in French history. To teach these subjects, I utilize two films, *Pépé Le Moko* and the *Battle of Algiers*, as well as a selection of short readings including a political and theoretical essay by Frantz Fanon, a contemporary detective novel by Didier Daeninckx, and Panivong Norindr’s postcolonial film criticism.¹

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When teaching my “History of Twentieth-Century France,” I take to heart Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler’s call to tear down the artificial divide between the colonial and the metropolitan world.\(^2\) While their essay considers a new research agenda in empire studies, their message has clear and direct implications for the teaching of colonial and racial history. If we, as historians, recognize the world-historical importance of European colonial conquest in the late nineteenth century, the brutal and exploitative nature of colonial rule in the twentieth century, and the intensely bitter and violent character of the wars of decolonization, we must integrate the history of the colonial empires into our European history curriculum. With historians having become increasingly aware of the globalization of capital, the essential role of colonialism as a historic phase in the development of capitalism further justifies attention spent on the colonial world.\(^3\) But colonial history does not stand alone. Indeed, colonialism is inseparable from racism. It is impossible to disconnect European imperialism from either the development of race as an ideological construct or from the practice of racism as a system of legal exclusion and material exploitation. By erasing the imaginary divide between France’s national past and France’s colonial past, I teach a course that weaves the threads of colonialism and race into the established fabric of French history. Importantly, such an approach does not pigeonhole discussion of the colonies into a “colonial week,” but places French imperialism on equal footing with more traditional political, social, and economic subjects.

The first film I use is *Pépé le Moko*, an entertaining example of both early film noir and colonial exoticism. Directed by Julien DuVivier, the film was shot in 1936. It stars Jean Gabin, one of the most recognizable faces from interwar French cinema.\(^4\) Set in the Algerian Casbah, the plot follows the fate of a doomed antihero, the master criminal Pépé le Moko. Because of a caper gone wrong, Pépé goes into hiding and, to elude the French authorities, he seeks refuge in the Casbah. Located in the heart of French colonial Algiers, this *quartier indigène* or native quarter remains outside of the control of the French police. More than a place to hide, the Casbah becomes a true home for Pépé: He finds allies and accomplices in the dark and mysterious alleys; with secret gestures or whistles he commands his minions. When the police try to find him, he suddenly slips down the winding steps, vanishes behind a hidden door, and disappears into the shadows. His mastery of the exotic, confusing, and dangerous terrain bewilders the metropolitan French police officers. Realizing that he is outside of their reach, the French police have to rely on the cunning of an Arab collaborator to lure Pépé out of the chaos of the Casbah and into the order of the French quarter.

The film tries to convince the audience that as an outsider—an antihero criminal existing on the edges of French society—Pépé can make a seemingly deep and profound connection with the Casbah, taken here to represent the people of
color making up this impoverished, overcrowded, and dangerous neighborhood on the edge of the *quartier français*. This identification is so complete that Pépé and the Casbah become one. However, it does not constitute a union of equals. In keeping with the colonial order of things and its racist logic, the white male colonizer maintains all agency. The Casbah (the colonized people of color) follows Pépé’s lead and reacts to his moods. When Pépé is tense, the Casbah is uneasy; when Pépé is angry, the Casbah seethes with danger; and when Pépé falls in love, the Casbah rejoices. On the surface the film seems to represent the solidarity of the marginalized. Yet on closer examination it clearly reaffirms the colonial power structure. Here, the white man is in charge. Indeed, we may read the film as a fantasy of French racial and patriarchal power. Like Joseph Conrad’s Kurtz, Pépé flees the civilized society that he never quite fit into and creates his own world structured around his desires. Importantly, he creates this world out of the raw material of the colonial encounter. It is only in the chaos and disorder of the colonies that the white man can exercise his will to power. Obviously, this assumes that the *indigène*, the “native,” is simply a raw material that the colonizer shapes into something. The colonized land, here symbolized by the disorder of the Casbah, is a passive receptacle that the energy of the colonizer must fill.

The second film I screen is Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* (1966). Shot on location in the newly independent Algerian capital, the film’s exceptionally realistic style and political passion have made it a classic. Receiving nearly a dozen international awards, including Best Picture at the Venice Film Festival, the film garnered impressive critical acclaim. In stark contrast to *Pépé le Moko*’s exoticism and affirmation of French colonial power, Pontecorvo’s film uses an intense and gritty realism to depict the tragic history of a central phase in the struggle for decolonization and national liberation. The film switches back and forth between dramatic scenes and recreations of historically accurate events such as massive demonstrations, conspiratorial meetings, and acts of public violence. Sparing no punches, it reveals the brutality of the French military, *pied-noir* militants and that of the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) alike. Caught in a cycle of violence, the film depicts police torture, political assassinations, and terrorist bombings of both French and Algerian civilians. While the audience is clearly encouraged to identify with the FLN, the use of violence on both sides of the war appalls many viewers.

The shocking nature of the film reminds the viewer of this war’s (1954–62) world-historical importance. We see the irrational extent to which the French military would go to hold onto Algeria as a colony. In a crucial scene, a colonel places the war in the context of France’s recent military disasters against the Germans in 1940 and against the Vietnamese in 1954. Claiming to be part of an anti-Communist crusade both inside and outside of France (he names Jean-Paul Sartre as a domestic enemy), the colonel’s bearing, tactics, and ideology make the officer corps’ fascist
inclinations apparent. His speech proves essential in showcasing the way in which the war fanned the flames of the ongoing guerre franco-française (an ideological civil war over the unreconciled disputes stemming from both the revolution of 1789 and the traumatic crises of modernity), a conflict that manifested itself in the mutiny of the paratroopers in Algiers and their threat to invade France. The figure of the colonel also depicts the anxiety and insecurity of France in the postwar period as it desperately tries to hold on to the last vestiges of great power status. By calling attention to the bloody tactics used by the FLN, the film prophetically questions the long-term legacy of this violence on Algerian society. Obviously, Pontecorvo had no idea of the violence to come, but many of my students suspect that the trauma of the war must have contributed to the violence of the 1980s and 1990s in Algeria. Students also comment on the connection between the state terror during the French war in Algeria and the terrorist campaign of bombings by Islamic fundamentalists in France in the mid-1990s. By exploring this historical development of violence as a political tool, many American students gain a much firmer understanding of colonialism’s role in shaping contemporary conflicts.

Despite the sharp contrasts between the two films I show, they share an essential similarity. In both films the Casbah becomes a character in and of itself. In Pépé le Moko, the Casbah serves as an extension of Pépé, symbolizing the colonizer’s power and agency. However, the Casbah also represents a problem for the French forces of order; the metropolitan and colonial police cannot crack it. The overwhelming confusion and mystery of the Casbah limit their power. In The Battle of Algiers, the Casbah plays a starring role once again. In many ways this new role is a reprise of its performance in Pépé le Moko. The French authorities face the same problems when trying to chase FLN cadres in the labyrinth of the Casbah. Now, instead of a French thief, an Algerian assassin, bomber, or courier makes use of the twisting alleys, surprisingly steep stairs, and endless series of doors opening onto secret hiding places. Regardless of whom they are chasing, the French colonial authorities are impotent once they leave the order and regularity of the French quarter and enter the domain of the other. There is even a scene in The Battle of Algiers that directly mirrors one in Pépé le Moko. Both films show a large map of Algiers on the walls of the police headquarters while the colonial authorities look at the Casbah with apprehensive curiosity. Seething with frustration, the French authorities realize the limits of their power. Furthermore, the Casbah teaches us about what it meant to be white in the colonies. The squalor and poverty of the Casbah stands in sharp contrast to the comfort and wealth of the French quarter of Algiers. The image of these two cities presents the students with a visual representation of the intense disparities of wealth and living standards in the colonial context. The clear nexus of
race and class illustrates how, in the colonies, whiteness combined material privilege, racial inequality, and only a tenuous control of the other.

I show *Pépé le Moko* in the third week of the ten-week quarter; *The Battle of Algiers* comes in the seventh week. Both films are screened in class. I provide a running commentary, stopping the films on several occasions to speak at length on certain subjects, to call attention to important details, or to explain historical context not immediately apparent to the students. On the final exam, I include an essay question that requires the students to compare the representations of Algeria in the two films.

While the class views these films several weeks apart, the interceding time does not impede a valuable comparative discussion. Many history students size up the two ways in which the films present Algeria (and by extension the French colonial empire). The depictions of colonialism’s fusion of material exploitation and racial ideology provoke many students to consider colonialism as an economic and cultural phase in world-historical development. Students in French literature or French studies often comment on the symbolic ways that the films express or criticize French power. The paradox of the French authorities’ frustrated desire to control colonial society and Pépé’s ability to become one with the Casbah can lead to fruitful discussions of the ways in which French power was imagined.

Some of the best discussion and student essays have emerged on the question of gender representations in the films. In both films, Algerian women play pivotal roles. Pépé is betrayed to the police by his scorned native lover, and, in two unforgettable scenes, female FLN cadres first hide bombs underneath their traditional dress and then don western miniskirts and makeup to transport time bombs past a French checkpoint.

In conjunction with the film, my students read Frantz Fanon’s “Algeria Unveiled” from *A Dying Colonialism* (1965). This essay explores the ways in which Algerian women were brought into the FLN campaign against the French. Starting with a discussion of the lustful gaze of the white colonial who wants to see what lies hidden behind the veil, Fanon moves on to describe the complicated decision-making process that led to using Algerian women as messengers and arms porters in the urban struggle. Fanon’s description of Algerian women utilizing their gender difference to circumvent colonial power obviously mirrors the above mentioned scenes in *The Battle of Algiers*. However, Fanon also echoes one of the final scenes in *Pépé le Moko*. Pépé’s jilted Algerian lover, after betraying him to the French authorities, is overcome with guilt and tries to stop him from entering into the French authorities’ trap, a trap set in the only place that Pépé is vulnerable—outside of the Casbah in the European section of the city. To save him, she flees the protective safety of the native quarter and enters the French section that exposes her and makes her vulnerable. Fanon describes a similar process when female FLN cadres
make the same journey: “The protective mantle of the Kasbah, the almost organic
curtain of safety that the Arab town weaves round the native, withdrew, and the
Algerian woman, exposed, was sent forth into the conqueror’s city.”

His essay captures both the complex position of Algerian women caught in this traumatic historical
moment and the nature of daily life in the colonial city. He succeeds especially in
describing the dual nature of colonial society, where whiteness meant wealth and
power and being native meant poverty and vulnerability. Yet Fanon does not stand
above criticism. While his essay points to many of the contradictory pressures placed
on the Algerian woman in both the colonial context and the struggle for decoloniza-
tion, he treats Algerian women as a subject without agency. Preyed on by licentious
white colonials or used by the male leadership of the FLN, these individuals do not
make decisions of their own. While I generally do not provide a feminist critique of
Fanon, many of my students comment on his assumptions regarding gender and
patriarchy in Muslim culture.

I encourage my students not to see French colonialism as an isolated historical
phenomenon or as a case study with relevance only to the history of France.
Rather, I urge them to consider the ways in which French colonial history mirrors or
is intertwined with American history. For example, while most students know that
the United States picked up the anticommunist crusade in Vietnam when the French
left in 1954, they learn from my lectures that the United States funded the French
war effort in Indochina after 1951. Many students have been able to draw important
parallels between the French military’s use of torture to keep Algeria “French” and
the brutal tactics of American foreign policy. From the intelligence operatives who
propped up the Diem regime in South Vietnam to the American counterinsurgency
advisors working in Latin America in the 1970s and 1980s, and from the disastrous
impact of America’s war on the Vietnamese people to the excessive collateral dam-
age of the Gulf War, there are many ways in which Americans are complicit in simi-
lar acts of violence committed for comparable geopolitical and economic gain. This,
of course, presents the students with the troubling question of whether or not they
should consider the United States an imperialist nation.

Thanks to their rich images and complicated themes, the two films under dis-
cussion here have become a strong asset in my course on twentieth-century France.
Students have regularly commented on the value of these films for understanding
French colonialism. They have also noted that the ways in which we used the films
provoked them to consider film as a text or a historical document open to reading
and interpretation. Finally, the students feel they have gained insight into the his-
torical development of colonial and postcolonial violence and its role in the creation
of the contemporary world order.
Notes


3. For an extremely useful case study of this process, I suggest Walter LaFeber’s *Michaël Jordan and the New Global Capitalism* (New York: Norton, 1999). I have used this text in UCSC’s Stevenson College Core Course to teach the patterns of economic and cultural globalization at the end of the twentieth century. LaFeber does a wonderful job of presenting complex and controversial issues in clear, enjoyable, and accessible style.

4. While not immediately recognized by the vast majority of my students, Gabin’s face and the image of the smooth talking Frenchman who inhabits an exotic Arab city seems strangely familiar to almost all of them. Yet in the class discussion, few can identify the origin of this stereotype. As soon as I remind them of the cartoon character “Pépé le Pew” (an overly amorous Gallic skunk who lurks around the Casbah, chasing a cat he mistakes for another skunk), there is a collective nod of recognition. Evidently this Looney Tunes spoof of an esoteric French film has been burned into the subconscious of a generation of Saturday morning television viewers. While I initially took some pleasure in spotting this odd reference, the role of the cartoon in furthering anti-French sentiment amongst American children has caused me some concern, and a certain degree of sadness. The cartoon also indicates the ways in which American culture recycles and recirculates European colonial visions of the exotic.

5. See Henry Rousso’s *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991) for a discussion of the guerre franco-française and the violent divisions in France over Vichy and Algeria. While I have not used this text in my classes, I draw many of my lectures from Rousso’s influential argument.

6. If I had more time or were to teach a course on decolonization and postcolonialism, I would like to show *Bab-el-Oued City* in conjunction with *The Battle of Algiers*. Set in the late 1980s, this film depicts the rising tension between the authoritarian Algerian government and the militant Islamist movements from the viewpoint of an ordinary Algerian caught in the middle of these forces. In this 1994 production, directed by Merzak Allouache, the violence stems from many of the unresolved issues of the war for national liberation and the Algerian revolution.

7. Here again *Bab-el-Oued City* makes for a wonderful and ironic postscript. In the 1980s and 1990s, it was the Islamist opposition that used the Casbah against the Algerian government’s security force.
