

Postcolonial Geopolitics: Reading Contemporary Geopolitics in Maghrebi-French War Films

Alex Hastie

Final Published Version deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Hastie, A., 2021. Postcolonial Geopolitics: Reading Contemporary Geopolitics in Maghrebi-French War Films. *Geopolitics*

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426>

DOI [10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426](https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1882426)


ISSN 1465-0045

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Postcolonial Geopolitics: Reading Contemporary Geopolitics in Maghrebi-French War Films

Alex Hastie 

School of Energy, Construction and Environment, Coventry University, Coventry, UK

ABSTRACT

This article examines geopolitical responses to postcolonial films on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Maghrebi-French films *Days of Glory* (French: *Indigenes*) (2006), *Outside the Law* (French: *Hors la loi*) (2010) and *Free Men* (French: *Les hommes libres*) (2011) collectively re-tell Algerian histories of resistance and anti-colonialism in the Second World War and the Algerian War of Independence, using Hollywood combat and gangster genre to do so. This paper finds that the specific temporal and spatial narratives of (post)colonial France and Algeria are transformed and read geopolitically as allegories of more familiar conflict, namely the War on Terror, the Arab Spring and Israel-Palestine. Drawing on the fields of postcolonial theory and popular geopolitics, this article extends the scope of popular geopolitics to consider postcolonial film and its reception as a site of geopolitical contestation. In doing so, this article highlights how the reception of 'foreign-language' postcolonial stories in the Anglosphere is mediated by popular geopolitical frames of reference, and is dependent on the context of reception and (post)colonial power relations.

Introduction

'How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film'.¹

The above is an excerpt from a flyer for the famous Pentagon screening of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) in 2003. It is a striking example of how films travel. This Marxist-inspired, anti-colonial epic piqued the interest of the US military as an inspiring tale of tactical counterinsurgency and urban warfare (MacMaster 2004). *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) also had subsequent DVD re-releases around the world, tagged in the US advertisement: 'the most explosive film of the 1960s is now the most important film of 2004' (Harrison 2007, 337). The elasticity of the film is seen in the ways in which it has informed political goals or movements, not just the US government's guerrilla warfare in Baghdad and

CONTACT Alex Hastie  ac9156@coventry.ac.uk  Coventry University, Sir John Laing Building, Much Park Street, COVENTRY, CV1 2LT.

© 2021 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

the War on Terror, but also The Black Panther Party and the IRA. The interest in *The Battle of Algiers* for opposition groups, which was “required viewing” (Harrison 2007) for members of The Black Panthers, was to conduct rather than resist “terrorist” insurgency. In juxtaposition to the Pentagon advert, a very different US poster for the film in the 1970s read “Eldridge Cleaver has seen it – have you?” (Harrison 2007, 338). The film has therefore been used by different people, different organisations, at different times and in different places, and demonstrates that a film’s intended meaning is not fixed but reliant on the audiences’ abilities to produce and reproduce it in new locations and according to different geopolitical agendas.

These readings of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) find parallels in film reviews and discussions of contemporary Maghrebi-French films². *Days of Glory* (French: *Indigenes*) (2006), *Outside the Law* (French: *Hors la loi*) (2010) and *Free Men* (French: *Les hommes libres*) (2011) on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Set during World War Two, *Days of Glory* (2006) follows Algerian and Moroccan infantrymen from recruitment in North Africa onto the battlefields of Italy and France, centring on the war effort of North Africans fighting in de Gaulle’s Free French Army. They fight a battle on two fronts, combating not only the Nazi war machine, but colonial racism and discrimination within their own army. Bouchareb’s ‘sequel’, American gangster inspired *Outside the Law* (2010), tells the story of the Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) from the perspective of three Algerian brothers in Paris, each of whom fight and resist the French in their own way. Ismael Ferroukhi’s *Free Men* (2011), similarly to *Days of Glory* (2006), situates North African colonial identities and histories proximate to popular representations of World War Two and the French Resistance. Set in occupied Paris, primarily around the city’s Grand Mosque, the film focuses on the Mosque’s efforts towards the rescue of European and North African Jews. It positions itself and its Muslim protagonists alongside western allies by condemning Nazi Germany and tapping into the popular narrative of the French Resistance. The majority of critics discussed in this article are ‘amateur’, with reviews written individually and in messageboards, and mainly relating to *Outside the Law* (2010) with examples from *Days of Glory* (2006) and *Free Men* (2011). This article interrogates the online reception of the films amongst English-speaking Western critics on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) where filmgoers are well-accustomed with these film genres and are situated in environments where anxieties about immigration, multiculturalism and terrorism dominate social and political life. Reviews and discussions range from 2007 to 2015, by which time the number of new reviews of the films had passed their peak long after the films were released. IMDb also shut down its messageboard platform in February 2017, meaning that no further data could be collected after this date.

Taken together, the films raise important questions about the (re)appropriation of popular Hollywood cinematic genre in Maghrebi-French film,

and the ways this helps to situate Franco-Algerian colonial histories in broader cultural circuits, telling unfamiliar stories in familiar ways (Hastie, 2020). Why is this important? French cinema, including to a lesser extent *beur* and Maghrebi-French, is known for its auteur or art-house style, and has resisted American or Hollywood influences since the end of the Second World War (Buchsbaum 2017). Higbee (2013) notes this recent turn in *beur* or Maghrebi-French cinema towards the ‘mainstream’, referring to this moment as ‘post-*beur*’. These films exemplify this turn, with their genre, style and even anglicised international titles actively courting Anglophone audiences. *Days of Glory* (2006) was marketed internationally as the ‘best war film since *Saving Private Ryan*’, and closely matches Spielberg’s aesthetics. The move to change the original French title from ‘Indigenes’, which translates into English as ‘natives’, to ‘Days of Glory’ reflects this desire to reach audiences in the UK and US. The film also had a huge impact in France upon its release, attracting 2,951,669³ spectators, and its ensemble cast collected a shared award for Best Actor at Cannes Film Festival. Perhaps most famously, it forced the then President, Jacques Chirac, to overturn a freeze on colonial soldiers’ pensions, which dated back to 1959 when many French colonies were becoming independent. *Outside the Law’s* (2010) aesthetics more closely match American gangster films like *The Godfather* and *Once Upon a Time in America*, perhaps to achieve a complex sympathy for its violent and troubled anti-colonial protagonists. *Outside the Law’s* (2010) reception in France was mixed and caused lively debates about French history. It caused outrage at Cannes Film Festival where it was accused by groups representing military veterans, as well as by some French politicians, for being ‘anti-French’ and a ‘falsification of history’ (Higbee 2013, 86). In appealing to audiences in the Anglosphere, the films take on new meanings. Whilst the French reception of the film takes place in the context of a contested and traumatic colonial past, the films are received in the Anglosphere in the context of contemporary geopolitical conflict, and through the lens of a popular geopolitics that plays its part in influencing how people see and understand ‘others’.

This paper investigates critics’ encounters with stories and places that are generally outside of the Anglophone colonial imaginary, and yet are brought closer to them through popular narrative conventions. This paper finds that the specific temporal and spatial narratives of (post)colonial France and Algeria are transformed and read geopolitically as allegories of more familiar conflict, namely the War on Terror, the Arab Spring and Israel-Palestine. Some critics use the films to speak critically about colonial history and contemporary geopolitical relations, whilst others use them to confirm their suspicions about Islam and the ‘Arab World’. More often than not, the films are emptied of their particular postcolonial Francophone politics, and homogenised and incorporated into a popular geopolitical imaginary which allows

some to see, as one amateur critic put it, anti-French Algerian protests in 1945 as ‘the exact same’ as the Arab Spring.

Drawing on postcolonial theory (Benwell, Procter, and Robinson 2012; Jazeel 2019; Said 1978) and scholarship on popular geopolitics and their audiences (Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Dodds 2006; Thorogood 2020; Woon 2014), the article considers postcolonial film and its reception as a site of geopolitical contestation. The article highlights how the reception of ‘foreign-language’ postcolonial stories in the Anglosphere is mediated by popular geopolitical frames of reference, and are dependent on the context of reception and (post)colonial power relations.

Postcolonial Film and Theory

Before I go any further, it is necessary to unpack the terms ‘postcolonial film’ and ‘postcolonial theory’. Rooted in literary criticism, postcolonial theory emerged as a tool through which to challenge persistent imperial dominance over culture in the period after colonialism (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2002). The term is not simply a temporal one designating a time after colonised countries became independent. It is also used as a critical analytic to investigate colonial and imperial power in shaping postcolonial societies (Gregory 2004; Jazeel 2019; Radcliffe 1997).

Time and space are crucial to postcolonial studies. Postcolonialism challenges binaries such as those that separate time before and after colonialism, and colonised peripheries from imperial centres. Edward Said (1978) argued that the ‘struggle over geography’ is central to (post)colonial relationships, not just materially, but also in the ‘imaginative geographies’ evoked in the battle for space. As Blunt and McEwan (2002, 3) have argued, ‘postcolonialism should be understood as a geographically dispersed contestation of colonial power and knowledge’. Fundamental to postcolonialism then is a ‘politics of representation’. It is concerned with who is represented, and how, and by whom, in order to work ‘towards ways of knowing and reading the world differently’ (Jazeel 2019, 2).

The post-2000 shift in Maghrebi-French or *beur* cinema (Higbee 2013) in France offers a specific insight into the postcolonial contestation of representation and encounter. Postcolonial film scholars define postcolonial cinemas according to a variety of criteria, such as style, conventions, ethnicity, and transnationality (Ponzanesi and Waller 2012). Hamid Naficy (2001) identifies what he calls ‘accented cinema’, based primarily on modes of production that are reliant on the ethnicity and background of the filmmakers. Incorporating a wide geography of films in his analysis, including from France and North Africa, he argues that ‘although there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialised peoples and their films share certain features, which in today’s climate of lethal ethnic difference need to be considered, even

emphasised' (Naficy 2001, 1). The films in his corpus have what he refers to as a 'unique style' which represents a 'self-reflexive' and 'fragmented' narrative. Here, the postcolonial film refuses dominant cinematic conventions associated with Hollywood, thus inviting the viewer to participate in a more 'complex circuit of perception'. But what happens when postcolonial films embrace those conventions and tell stories in ways, and through genres, that are unexpected?

The development of Maghrebi-French and beur cinema demonstrates that postcolonial film is fluid and cannot be easily defined by a fixed set of characteristics. By the 1990s, beur cinema had come to reflect the lives of a new generation of North Africans born and raised in France. In doing so, it had moved on from the downbeat gritty style which characterised 1970s émigré film (Higbee 2013). Beur filmmakers began to draw on popular French genres to create 'desirable and streetwise male characters' (Tarr 2005) that would reach a more diverse 'crossover' French audience. This produced a more commercially successful body of film in France that reached beyond a minority-ethnic audience. As Higbee (2013, 11) describes it, this was a 'delicate negotiation ... in exploring the negative treatment of Maghrebi-French youth, without adopting an excessively hostile stance towards a French society in which, ultimately, they have a stake'.

This begs the question of what the aim or impact of beur cinema is. In Tarr's (1993, 342) opinion, the aim of beur cinema was not to 'empower the beur' but, by the 1990s at least, to appeal to the 'liberal-critical conscience'. For Maghrebi-French cinema then and now, adopting the genre and aesthetics of more Hollywood-influenced mainstream films, was significant. The conventions of Hollywood permeate how colonial histories are told in these films, enabling them to reach wider audiences who view, and transform, them in particular cultural and geopolitical contexts.

Postcolonialising Popular Geopolitical Audiences

The subfield of popular geopolitics examines the ways that popular culture informs how people think about international relations, geopolitical events and the world more generally. Scholars have observed all manner of popular outlets including newspapers and magazines (Sharp 2011; Woon 2014), cartoons and comics books (Holland 2012; Thorogood 2016, 2020), toys (Woodyer and Carter 2020), games (Bos, 2018), and film and TV (Crampton and Power 2005; Dittmer and Dodds 2008; Ridanpää 2014). This work examines how different media respond to, reproduce or challenge hegemonic, often American, geopolitical agendas and worldviews. A chief aim of popular and critical geopolitics has been to investigate these popular media for the ways they produce imaginative geographies and geographical knowledge.

Cinema is a central part of this scholarship. Power and Crampton (2005), for example, have emphasised the relationship between Hollywood and 9/11 as a geopolitical event and a key turning point for popular geopolitics (Dittmer and Dodds 2008). They point to the ways action films such as *The Siege* and *Die Hard* frame, produce and reflect the 'production of identity and difference' that further divided the world after 9/11 (Power and Crampton, 2005; Dittmer and Dodds 2008). Others have highlighted the relationship between diplomacy, the military, politics and the media with films such as *The Kingdom* (Carter and Dodds 2011), *Black Hawk Down* (Carter and McCormack 2006) and the *James Bond* franchise (Dodds 2005) playing vital roles in people's understandings of the world around them. Indeed, for Dodds (2008, 1621), 'the power of film lies in not only its apparent ubiquity but also the ways in which it helps to create (often dramatically) understandings of particular events, national identities and relationships to others'.

Those who have studied audiences in critical geopolitics stress the position of an 'active' audience of popular geopolitical productions and the ways these discourses become further animated in relation to audience power (Dittmer and Dodds 2013). Scholars suggested that audiences' responses are diverse and dependent on both the context and location of reception (Woon 2014) as well as in the context of 'contemporary geopolitical concerns' (Thorogood 2020). Described by Dittmer and Gray (2010) as 'geopolitics 2.0', scholars place the audience at the centre of geopolitical meaning-making. Consumers actively participate in the production of geopolitics according to different 'dispositions' (Dodds 2006). These dispositions are dependent on the venue or in relation to who they are watching with (Dittmer and Dodds 2013), or the political milieu and available frames of reference (Crampton and Power 2005). Scholars have steered away from film directors and cinematographers to the everyday practices of consumption. Films no longer have 'fixed meaning'; people bring their own meanings (Dodds 2006) to films that are considered open and therefore interpretable depending on different contexts.

Popular geopolitics retains a focus on 'western' popular culture. While scholars do include different 'sites' beyond the traditional text (Woodyer and Carter 2020), including recent and welcome inclusion of topics such as the refugee crisis (AlAwadhi and Dittmer 2020; Yatsyk 2018), postcolonial frameworks can help better understand popular culture from beyond the 'west'. Saunders' (2017) recent work does this. The 'foreign images' that he studies, specifically what he calls 'nation branding', are consumed across the world. He argues that 'popular geopolitics is certainly interested in the colonial gaze' (Saunders 2017, 77), but that the scope of the field 'goes beyond' this and is rather bound by a focus on the 'popular'. Scholars of popular geopolitics could go further, towards a wider consideration of 'other' popular culture, and towards a postcolonial methodology for interrogating colonial traces of power in popular geopolitical texts.

Sharp (2011) and Craggs (2014, 2018) have highlighted the relationship between colonialism and geopolitics. For Craggs (2014, 2018) insists on taking both a postcolonial and geopolitical approach to Commonwealth conferences in order to uncover the ways in which anti-colonialism was experienced in the mid-twentieth century. This builds on Sharp's (2011) call to approach geopolitics through the lens of the 'subaltern', which argues that whilst power and knowledge are at the centre of critical geopolitics, the sub-discipline has often overlooked postcolonial representation. In doing so, Sharp (2011) seeks to 'highlight a postcolonial emphasis bringing in the voices of those usually rendered marginal and silent in other accounts'. Similarly, Slater (2004) argues that postcolonial theory allows for a 'rethinking' of North-South relations, particularly in terms of how the world has been imagined and categorised hierarchically, and with particular attention to development, foreign policy and military interventions. Others have also responded, taking postcolonial approaches to geopolitical events in Libya (Sidaway 2012) and the Philippines (Woon 2014). Woon's (2014) work on Filipino responses to, and production of, discourses on the War on Terror is key here and is a great example of how *Geopolitics* is already being postcolonialised. Woon's work on dominant media discourses, popular narratives of the War on Terror, and the role of the audience, skilfully problematises the 'assumption of an all-influential and manipulative media outmanoeuvring a passive and unthinking audience' (Woon 2014, 658).

Postcolonial studies has a long history of examining the importance of 'reading for Empire' (see Bristow 1991; Phillips 1997), both at home and abroad, for the purposes of manufacturing consent, marketing the empire (McClintock 1995), and introducing new and unknown places to the colonial imaginary. As these authors have argued, audiences in their different forms were central to Empire, and to the organisation and negotiation of power and identity. However, there has been a lack of engagement with *empirical* audiences in the field. Benwell et al (2012, 8) suggest that for many in postcolonial studies, audiences may disrupt 'some of the more general claims that have been made in the field around the transformative, resistant or subversive capacities of isolated postcolonial texts'. In other words, postcolonial scholars largely privilege the text as the site of meaning making, neglecting the transformative role of different readers and consumers.

New and emerging circuits of global culture have fostered increased access to the lives of others. What Fraser (2008) and Procter (2011) refer to as 'reading *after* empire', continues to be central to renegotiating and making sense of contemporary issues of difference, migration and multiculturalism in contemporary Western centres. In *Postcolonial Audiences*, Benwell, Procter, and Robinson (2012) attempt to move towards a clearer, and wider, idea of who and where audiences of postcolonial texts are, to consider the publishing industry, groups of online readers in the 'West' and in the 'global south',

academic and professional readers, and towards 'ethical' reading and viewing positions. The collection ultimately attempts to conceptualise and think 'in the broadest possible way about the different theoretical and empirical consequences of reception, from ideal to real readers' (Benwell, Procter, and Robinson 2012, 1).

The collection retains the field's attention on literary texts, in spite of their introductory acknowledgement that 'until relatively recently ... postcolonial studies has spoken about readers alone, and in isolation from the other [film, TV and other media] audiences' (Benwell, Procter, and Robinson 2012, 3). Contributors that do examine visual media in the collection, which focus on animated comedy in New Zealand (Keown 2012) and the reception of Bollywood films in India (Banaji 2012), offer empirical analyses that locate the reception of postcolonial texts in relation to the social identities and positions of the audience. What is lacking is the study of the reception and consumption of 'foreign', 'world', and 'international' cinemas (or 'foreign language', i.e. not in English), in English-speaking Western centres. Addressing this specific gap in postcolonial studies can simultaneously aid popular geopolitics and engage with and help conceptualise the postcolonial audience. This paper addresses this gap by bringing postcolonialism and popular geopolitics into conversation through the thorny issue of audiences.

From the Algerian War of Independence to the War on Terror

Reviews and discussions of Rachid Bouchareb's Algerian War thriller, *Outside the Law* (2010), range from comparisons of the French Empire with the 'new' American one, to open support for the War on Terror. Responses to the film are therefore heavily shaped and influenced by contemporary geopolitical events, specifically American-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and Islamist terrorism. The film, through its audiences, can be seen as a site of geopolitical contestation, offering opportunities to both contest and reaffirm hegemonic geopolitical discourses. There is a danger of the specific French-Algerian colonial geographies being conflated with those of terrorism. Carter and Dodds (2011, 99) highlight this problem in popular geopolitical film, which often works to

'simplify the complexities of global geopolitics to a comprehensive set of binary divisions that then lead to identifiable problems that necessitate clear-cut and at times dramatic solutions'.

Unlike *The Battle of Algiers*' (1966) enduring influence to frame contemporary conflict, *Outside the Law* (2010) resonates less with current geopolitics, according to professional film critics. It is reprimanded for its 'simplified' and 'less analytical'⁴ version of the Algerian War, and its lack of 'explanation'⁵ regarding the insurmountable tactics of the Front de Libération Nationale

(FLN). Amongst amateur critics *Outside the Law* (2010) becomes a lens through which to discuss the War on Terror. For example, in an IMDb messageboard thread entitled ‘Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’,⁶ reviewers debate America’s place in the world and the morals of terrorism. This thread’s title is met with varied, and some heated, responses in the ensuing discussion. There is a general consensus on the thread however, that the American-led War on Terror is an extension of French imperial oppression, a position which *Outside the Law* (2010) has helped to foster, as one participant in the discussion answers:

‘basically, this film highlights the colonialist aspect of the conflict, whereas today the War on Terror is a highly neo-colonialist adventure. In the same patronising colonial-style rhetoric, Donald Rumsfeld has compared America bringing ‘democracy’ to Iraq as a parent teaching a child to ride a bike ...

... we hear French radio reports about the attacks that it is a threat of ‘radical Muslim terrorists’ and it just resonates that this is the same rhetoric which is being employed for the War on Terror’.⁷

The above response demonstrates that *Outside the Law* (2010) is a vector for critically observing comparisons and historical connections, in this case between the old French Empire and the ‘new’ American one. This is made clear in a further response in this thread, as one critic makes comparisons between the FLN and 21st Century ‘terrorists’ who seek ‘justifiable revenge’ on their western oppressors:

‘there wouldn’t be a revolt/hatred against the French if the French weren’t conquering Algerian. There wouldn’t be any terrorist acts around the world unless somebody been terrorised first. It’s called revenge. I’d say 90% of it justifiable.

We can stop the cycle of revenge by admitting guilt, making amends, paying back what was taking (material stuff), pledging not to repeat what had happened, etc. But adding insult to injury by saying: I did it for your own good, or to civilise you, or to teach you about democracy, etc. That only increase hatred and diminish any chance for reconciliation’.⁸

These comments reflect an overt anti-establishment standpoint that conflates explanations for both the Algerian ‘revolt’ and post-2000 Islamist terrorism. This commentary equates Muslims with violence and defines the Muslim ‘other’ in relation to his inherent opposition to the ‘West’ (Said 1978). It further suggests that Islamist terrorism is something that effects only the West as acts of ‘revenge’ for centuries of imperialism. Therefore, both reviews rely on the same orientalist assumptions as more obviously Islamophobic commentaries, claiming prior geopolitical knowledge and contributing to an imagined geography that further dichotomises Orient and Occident.

Messageboard discussion threads, however, are a unique space of conversation and debate on IMDb, in which views do not go unchallenged. In a direct

response to the comments above, one participant reminds them of the ‘real’ reason for terrorist acts against the west, as they say, ‘90%?? You’re forgetting the large percent of all terrorist acts that’s due to religion’.⁹ Others concur, strongly objecting to the ‘flawed geopolitics’ and ‘Marxist rubbish’ of sympathetic responses to the film, claiming that,

‘the War on Terror is a legitimate war on persons who stand in direct contrast to what Guevara stood. To assail Americans for attacking the Islamic version of Nazism makes me question your ethics . . .’.¹⁰

In contrast to those who relate the ‘virtuous’ plight of the FLN with that of contemporary terrorism, and America’s War on Terror with France’s imperial struggle for Algeria, the above commentary inverts this comparison, in doing so reproducing, or reflecting, a ‘series of geographical imaginations and traditions, which help to sustain particular national visions of states and territories’ (Dodds 2006, 127). Such discourses further pose questions about what audiences already know, as well as what they expect from familiar genre films (gangster and combat), and from ‘foreign’ film. For Michael Booth, writing in the American newspaper *The Denver Post* (nd), their explicitly claimed prior knowledge of ‘Islam’ at the intersection with the expectations of both World War Two and its representation on film, results in this response to Maghrebi-French World War Two combat film *Days of Glory* (2006):

‘Knowing what we know now about the abuses of occupation and fundamentalist Muslim hatred of the West, the mind reels to see turbaned men jumping on jeeps to fight passionately for the French against Nazi Germany’.

One review in particular exemplifies the dominance of hegemonic geopolitical frameworks, and anxieties about Islamist terrorism, to structure readings of the films. This is in response to combat film *Days of Glory* (2006), in which the amateur critic openly conveys their Islamophobic stance on the film in a review which has since been removed, admitting that,

‘All I could think about during this entire film was Muslim fanaticism. I have developed such a hatred towards the Muslim community that it shames me. I would not have had this feeling had I watched the film before 9/11/2001 I suppose’.¹¹

This review explicitly confirms the link between the ways in which post-9/11 Islam has been framed culturally and politically, and Westerners’ relationships with Muslims in wider society. Director Rachid Bouchareb has talked openly about his desire with these films to challenge the whitewashing of history and his use of Hollywood inspired gangster and combat aesthetics to appeal directly to broader groups of viewers. These reviews and discussions of his films suggest that popular geopolitical discourses, such as around the War on Terror, frame how people encounter and engage with ‘other’ stories.

Historicising the Arab Spring and Israel-Palestine

Critics also discuss *Outside the Law* (2010) and Ismael Ferroukhi's *Free Men* (2011) to make connections with the so-called Arab Spring¹², and Israel-Palestine. The Arab Spring was well underway across large parts of the Middle East and North Africa, including Algeria, at the time *Outside the Law* (2010) was released in the UK and US in 2011. *The Georgia Straight's* Mark Harris (15th June 2011) comments that *Outside the Law* (2010) 'is the perfect film for this year of the so-called "Arab Spring"', as his review's title reads '... a tribute to difficult times'. As some critics call for *Outside the Law* (2010) to be read as allegory for the War on Terror, Harris argues that it can simultaneously be read as part of the longer history of recent revolts in the 'Arab world'. Andrew Latimer's review for online Scottish magazine, *The Wee Review*, similarly argues that,

'as the uprisings in the Arab world continue to escalate, our ignorance of individual plights and suffering have only mystified our perceptions further ... And with the timing of this film's release coinciding with the revolutions occurring in Algeria itself, as well as neighbouring Libya, Morocco and other nations, it's perhaps the most relevant and germane film we will see for some time'.¹³

In establishing connections between the Algerian War of Independence in *Outside the Law* (2010) and the Arab Spring, this critic conflates geographies of recent civil resistance across North Africa and the Middle East, with geographies of specific anti-colonial violence against the French Empire. In doing so, a universality about the Algerian experience is assumed. This is particularly demonstrated in the continuation of a previous thread about the Algerian War of Independence and the War on Terror. Here, this is further extended to frame the Arab Spring, tying it into a criticism of American 'neo-colonialism':

'the opening scene of the demonstration of Algerians in 1945 was reminiscent of the exact same type of street insurrections that we see lately in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain AND Algeria again! Just like the national flag has been the rallying point in the 2011 'Arab Spring' demonstrations, we see in the movie the symbolic importance of the Algerian flag ... Arab people are still out mass-protesting because of neo-colonialism. One of the things that was highly publicised about Mubarak's repression of the protests in Egypt was the fact that tear gas canisters were made in Pennsylvania'.¹⁴

This amateur critic transfers the message about the ambiguities of terror to the resistance movements of the Arab Spring. Whilst it is possible to find productive connections between different spatial and temporal contexts, they ignore specific reasons for, and outcomes of, the various 'uprisings' from Algeria to Yemen in 2011. The attempt to understand both the War on Terror and Arab Spring through readings of *Outside the Law* (2010), and indeed vice versa, therefore rests on relatively simplistic and orientalist fantasies of the world,

which ultimately homogenise ‘Arab’ and ‘Muslim’ spaces and histories, and conflate geographies to understand, and produce, a ‘big picture’.

Whilst *Outside the Law* (2010) is seen by many critics as a commentary on the War on Terror and the Arab Spring, *Free Men* (2011) is read as an allegory for Israel-Palestine. Centring around the history of Jewish rescue facilitated by the Paris Mosque during World War Two, *Free Men* (2011) positions itself as an intervention into the white-washed history of the French Resistance, and in doing so presents a positive image of Muslims in the twenty-first century. The historical specificity of its Muslim-Jewish narrative, however, is Algerian. The French Cremieux Decree of 1870 (see Stein 2012) granted French citizenship to thousands of Algerian Jews, whilst withholding such rights from the majority Muslim population of Algeria. The policy was overturned by the Nazi collaborating French Vichy government during World War Two and had the effect of intensifying animosity between Muslims and Jews (Schreier 2007). It is against this specific French colonial backdrop that the relationship between the films’ protagonists, Younes and Salim (a Muslim and a Jew, both Algerian), is set.

For critics here however, this historical specificity is likely unknown, and so they largely make sense of the Muslim-Jewish relationship at the centre of the film through the lens of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Debates about the historical accuracy of *Free Men* (2011) rage amongst critics, with reviewers seriously questioning the reality of a story in which Muslims rescue Jews. *Free Men* (2011) challenges audience expectations and claimed knowledge of historical relations between Jews and Muslims, which rests on Israel-Palestine. The conversation shifts between the celebration of a peaceful past of Arab-Jewish harmony, and therefore hope for the present and future, and those who call out that vision as a ‘myth’. First of all, Chale Nafus’ review for the *Austin Film Society*, in the context of a screening by the society in March 2015, provides a somewhat romantic reading of *Free Men* (2011) that frames it as evidence of the possibility of peace between Muslims and Jews:

‘21st century news reports, especially about the Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, give the impression that Muslims and Jews have been eternal enemies, but a careful examination of history provides numerous examples to the contrary’.

The power of the film, they argue, is that it can be read against the continuous negative media about the conflict in Israel-Palestine, in favour of a more positive story of unity. Complimenting their hopeful view of the relationships in *Free Men* (2011), they further pick up on the symbolic importance of Andalusia throughout the film, as

‘the creation of the Andalusia nightclub, where Salim performs, was very important for its reference to the many centuries of Muslim rule in Andalusia, Spain where Arabic, Jewish, and Christian people lived in harmony much of the time. Together they created

a magnificent culture while much of the rest of Europe wallowed in the ignorance of the Dark Ages’.

This romantic historical imaginary of a harmonious Arab Empire that united Europe and Africa, and Muslims, Jews and Christians, extends the author’s hope of a peaceful middle east and Israel by looking to a mythicised past. This view is challenged, indirectly, by others. One American viewer, who fails to see Salim as a Jew, argues that,

‘the actor who plays Salim is an Arab, not a Jew. Trying to see the character as a Jew is practically impossible, but his Jewishness is key to the movie. If their [Younes and Salim’s] friendship is supposed to exemplify some sort of grand utopian harmony between Arabs and Jews, it fails’¹⁵

This review rejects the possibility of Israeli-Palestinian harmony based on a flawed racialised reading of the film and exemplifies the argument that geopolitical issues are constituted racially (Miles 1989) and along the lines of Orientalist stereotypes. For Americans, the very history of the racialisation of Jews and Arabs is geopolitical, as racial classifications in the USA began to change after World War Two, and the Palestinian nakba of 1948 (Little 2008). Historically, Jews in the United States have been racially positioned as both white and non-white. A key turning point, Brodtkin (1998) identifies, is the shift in government policy post-World War Two to ‘reconfigure the category of whiteness to include European immigrants’, including Jews (Brodtkin 1998, 27). In this context, it is not entirely surprising that an American viewer struggles to see Salim, played by Arab-Israeli actor Mahmud Shalaby, as Jewish as he is simultaneously ‘an Arab’, and therefore outside of the geopolitical imaginary of Israel-Palestine in which Jews are predominantly racialised as white (Little 2008).

What these reviews show is that complex colonial histories, many of which are likely to be new to these critics on IMDb, are used to help frame the Arab Spring and Israel-Palestine. In doing so, reviewers conflate the anti-colonial politics of the films with contemporary conflict in ways that simplify both, producing an orientalist imaginary that is guided by popular geopolitics. A fear of Islam after 9/11 and Israeli-Palestinian politics both cloud the ways in which reviewers can view *Free Men* (2011), whilst a desire to better understand the wide-ranging Arab Spring supersedes a full engagement with the Algerian War of Independence in *Outside the Law* (2010).

Conclusion

This paper began by discussing the multiple afterlives of Pontecorvo’s infamous *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), in order to contextualise the reception of politically motivated films about colonialism, and to demonstrate the ways in which geographically and socially situated audiences use and consume films in

a variety of ways. Whilst MacMaster (2004) and Harrison (2007) foreground the juxtaposed political mobilisation of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) in the decades since its release, this paper has, through interrogating the actual audiences of *Days of Glory* (2006), *Outside the Law* (2010) and *Free Men* (2011), come to further understand expectations of, and attitudes towards, postcolonial film. The films work as reference points, archives and sources of information through which audiences reject and accept historical and political claims of postcolonial others, and through which they understand or imagine contemporary geopolitics.

There are different responses to the films and their attempts to 'shoot back'. Critics transpose specific Francophone colonialisms onto more familiar and contemporary geopolitical terrain, generalising the unknown politics of the films and incorporating them into the more familiar geopolitical landscapes of the War on Terror, the Arab Spring and Israel-Palestine. This goes some way to extending the scope of popular geopolitics by bringing postcolonial film and theory to the scholarship on how audiences use cultural texts such as films to map out contemporary geopolitical concerns.

This forces one to reflect on the potential for the popular postcolonial, or the use of Hollywood aesthetics in postcolonial film, to effectively disrupt dominant paradigms of knowledge. Audiences can connect with things in the films that are familiar, namely the World War Two battlefield, the gangster tragedy, and the French resistance, but in doing so are more sensitive to the differences that appear in the cracks. This paper's approach to these postcolonial films has demonstrated, through critical reception, the tense possibilities for a more commercialised and accessible postcolonial cinema to both disrupt and reinforce power relations. In bringing postcolonialism to popular geopolitics this article has highlighted the work that critics do to actively constitute new geopolitical meaning from postcolonial films. Often overlooking specific colonial histories of the French Empire and Algerian resistance, critics read the films via popular geopolitical frames of reference to produce a discursive geopolitics that imagines and divides the world along racialised and colonial axes, and a manageable and knowable 'Muslim' or 'Arab' world. With more films being made available online via platforms such as Amazon Prime Video and Netflix in recent years, access to a more diverse range of films is increasing and potentially improving. Furthermore, countries such as China and India are making their presence felt in the global film market, alongside their importance in international relations. Both changes force us to consider the ways in which people engage with 'foreign language' or postcolonial cinema, as the relationship between audience and film provides insights into how people respond to and produce contemporary geopolitics in a rapidly changing world.

Notes

1. Pentagon advert for the The Battle of Algiers screening, Kaufman (2003) ‘The World: Film Studies; What Does the Pentagon See in “Battle of Algiers”?’ *The New York Times*. 7th September 2003
2. Maghrebi-French Cinema refers to films made by directors of Maghrebi origin in France, often referred to as ‘beur’ cinema.
3. Source: IMDb, Days of Glory.
4. French, P. (2011) ‘Outside the Law – Review’, *The Observer*, 8th May 2011 [<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/may/08/outside-the-law-review>]
5. Ebert, R. (2010) ‘The Algerian War seen from the other side’, *Roger Ebert*, 23rd November 2010 [<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/outside-the-law-2010>]
6. IMDb *Outside the Law* Messageboard, 28th March 2011, ‘Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’
7. IMDb *Outside the Law* Messageboard, 1st September 2011, ‘Re: Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’
8. IMDb *Outside the Law* Messageboard, 26th January 2012, ‘Re: Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’
9. IMDb *Outside the Law* Messageboard, 8th April 2015, ‘Re: Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’
10. IMDb *Outside the Law* Messageboard, 24th October 2012, ‘Re: Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’
11. IMDb *Days of Glory* User Review, 14th July 2007, ‘Days of Glory’.
12. See Willis (2014) for a detailed insight into historical trajectory of Arab Spring in the Maghreb.
13. Latimer, A. (2011) ‘Outside the Law’, *The Wee Review*, 29th April 2011 [<https://theweereview.com/review/outside-the-law/>]
14. IMDb *Outside the Law* Messageboard, 1st September 2011, ‘Re: Algerian Conflict – War on Terror – What’s the message for today?’
15. IMDb *Free Men* User Review, 20th October 2012, ‘Not much good except for Michael Lonsdale’.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Richard Phillips and Eric Olund for their guidance in the earliest stages of this article, and to my friend Joe Thorogood for his thoughts and comments towards the end. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers whose feedback on this paper challenged me to improve it.

Funding

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [ES/J500215/1].

ORCID

Alex Hastie  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1298-142X>

References

- AlAwadhi, D., and J. Dittmer. 2020. The figure of the refugee in superhero cinema. In *Geopolitics*, 1–25.
- Ashcroft, B., G. Griffiths, and H. Tiffin. 2002. *The empire writes back: Theory and practice in post-colonial literatures*. 2nd ed ed. London: Routledge.
- Banaji, S. 2012. ‘Bollywood’ adolescents: young viewers discuss class, representation and hindi films. In *Postcolonial audiences: Readers, viewers and reception*, ed. B. Benwell, J. Procter, and G. Robinson, (pp.57–72). Oxon: Routledge.
- Benwell, B., J. Procter, and G. Robinson, ed. 2012. *Postcolonial audiences: Readers, viewers and reception*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Blunt, A., and C. McEwan, ed.. 2002. *Postcolonial geographies*. London: Continuum.
- Bristow, J. 1991. *Empire boys: adventures in a man’s world*. London: Harper Collins.
- Brodkin, K. 1998. *How jews became white folks and what that says about race in America*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.
- Buchsbaum, J. 2017. *Exception taken: how france has defied hollywood’s new world order*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Carter, S., and D. P. McCormack. 2006. Film, geopolitics and the affective logics of intervention. *Political Geography* 25 (2):228–45. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2005.11.004.
- Carter, S., and K. Dodds. 2011. Hollywood and the ‘war on terror’: genre-geopolitics and ‘Jacksonianism’ in the Kingdom. *Environment and Planning, D, Society and Space* 29 (1):98–113. doi:10.1068/d7609.
- Craggs, R. 2014. Postcolonial geographies, decolonization, and the performance of geopolitics at Commonwealth conferences. *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 35 (1):39–55. doi:10.1111/sjtg.12050.
- Craggs, R. 2018. Subaltern geopolitics and the post-colonial commonwealth, 1965–1990. *Political Geography* 65:46–56. doi:10.1016/j.polgeo.2018.04.003.
- Crampton, A., and M. Power. 2005. Frames of reference on the geopolitical stage: Saving private ryan and the second world war/second gulf war intertext. *Geopolitics* 10 (2):244–65. doi:10.1080/14650040590946575.
- Dittmer, J., and K. Dodds. 2008. Popular geopolitics past and future: Fandom, identities and audiences. *Geopolitics* 13 (3):437–57. doi:10.1080/14650040802203687.
- Dittmer, J., and K. Dodds. 2013. The geopolitical audience: Watching Quantum of Solace (2008) in London. *Popular Communication* 11 (1):76–91. doi:10.1080/15405702.2013.747938.
- Dittmer, J., and N. Gray. 2010. Popular geopolitics 2.0: Towards new methodologies of the everyday. *Geography Compass* 4 (11):1664–77.
- Dodds, K. 2005. Screening geopolitics: James Bond and the early cold war films (1962–1967). *Geopolitics* 10 (2):266–89. doi:10.1080/14650040590946584.
- Dodds, K. 2006. Popular geopolitics and audience dispositions: james bond and the internet movie database (IMDb). *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 31 (2):116–30. doi:10.1111/j.1475-5661.2006.00199.x.
- Dodds, K. 2008. Hollywood and the popular geopolitics of the war on terror. *Third World Quarterly* 29 (8):1621–37. doi:10.1080/01436590802528762.
- Fraser, R. 2008. *Book history through postcolonial eyes: Rewriting the script*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Gregory, D. 2004. *The colonial present: Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Harrison. 2007. BASED ON ACTUAL EVENTS . . .’: pontecorvo’s battle of algiers, 40 years on. *Interventions* 9 (3):335–39. doi:10.1080/13698010701618554.

- Hastie, A. 2020. Popular postcolonial masculinities: gangsters and soldiers in Maghrebi-French cinema. *Gender, Place & Culture*. 27 (2), pp.153-174. doi:10.1080/0966369X.2019.1596884.
- Higbee, W. 2013. *Post-beur cinema: North African émigré and maghrebi-french filmmaking in France since 2000*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Holland, E. C. 2012. To think and imagine and see differently”: Popular geopolitics, graphic narrative, and Joe Sacco’s “chechen war, chechen women. *Geopolitics* 17 (1):105–29. doi:10.1080/14650045.2011.573512.
- Jazeel, T. 2019. *Postcolonialism*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Keown, M. 2012. *The politics of postcolonial laughter: the international reception of the new zealand animated comedy Series bro’Town*. ed. B. Benwell, J. Procter, and G. Robinson, Oxon: Routledge: Postcolonial audiences: readers, viewers and reception.
- Little, D. 2008. *American orientalism: the united states and the middle east since 1945*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press.
- MacMaster, N. 2004. Torture: from algiers to abu ghraib. *Race & Class* 46 (2):1–21.
- McClintock, A. 1995. *Imperial leather: race, gender, and sexuality in the colonial contest*. London: Routledge.
- Miles, R. 1989. *Racism*. London: Routledge.
- Naficy, H. 2001. *An accented cinema: exilic and diasporic filmmaking*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Phillips, R. 1997. *Mapping men and empire: geographies of adventure*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Ponzanesi, S., and M. Waller, ed.. 2012. *Postcolonial cinema studies*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Procter, J. 2011. Introduction: reading after empire. *New Formations* 73 (73):5–11. doi:10.3898/NEWF.73.INTRODUCTION.2011.
- Radcliffe, S. A. 1997. Different heroes: Genealogies of postcolonial geographies. *Environment and Planning A* 29 (8):1331–33. doi:10.1068/a291331.
- Ridanpää, J. 2014. ‘Humour is serious’ as a geopolitical speech act: Imdb film reviews of sacha baron cohen’s the dictator. *Geopolitics* 19 (1):140–60. doi:10.1080/14650045.2013.829819.
- Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage.
- Saunders, R. A. 2017. *Popular geopolitics and nation branding in the post-soviet realm*. Oxon and New York: Routledge.
- Schreier, J. 2007. Napoléon’s long shadow: morality, civilization, and Jews in France and Algeria, 1808-1870. *French Historical Studies* 30 (1):77–103.
- Sharp, J. 2011. Subaltern geopolitics: Introduction. *Geoforum* 42 (3):271–73. doi:10.1016/j.geoforum.2011.04.006.
- Sidaway, J. D. 2012. Subaltern geopolitics: Libya in the mirror of Europe. *The Geographical Journal* 178 (4):296–301. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4959.2012.00466.x.
- Slater, D. 2004. *Geopolitics and the post-colonial: Rethinking North-South relations*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Stein, S. 2012. Dividing south from north: french colonialism, jews, and the Algerian Sahara. *The Journal of North African Studies* 17 (5):773–92. doi:10.1080/13629387.2012.723429.
- Tarr, C. 1993. Questions of identity in Beur cinema: From tea in the harem to cheb. *Screen* 34 (4):321–42. doi:10.1093/screen/34.4.321.
- Tarr, C. 2005. *Reframing difference: Beur and banlieue filmmaking in France*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Thorogood, J. 2016. Satire and geopolitics: vulgarity, ambiguity and the body grotesque in South Park. *Geopolitics* 21 (1):215–35. doi:10.1080/14650045.2015.1089433.
- Thorogood, J. 2020. Cartoon controversies and geopolitics: archer, animators and audiences. *Social & Cultural Geography* 21 (3):357–79. doi:10.1080/14649365.2018.1497190.

- Woodyer, T., and S. Carter. 2020. Domesticating the geopolitical: Rethinking popular geopolitics through play. In *Geopolitics*, 25(5),1050–1074.
- Woon, C. Y. 2014. Popular geopolitics, audiences and identities: reading the ‘war on terror’ in the philippines. *Geopolitics* 19 (3):656–83. doi:[10.1080/14650045.2014.907277](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2014.907277).
- Yatsyk, A. 2018. A popular geopolitics of the refugee crisis in Europe: The re-actualization of identity-driven geopolitical narratives in Estonia. *Geopolitics* 23 (4):803–22. doi:[10.1080/14650045.2018.1486300](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2018.1486300).