

CLOSE-UP ON THE COLONY: INSIDE HISTORY, THROUGH THE CAMERA LENS

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Abstract: This paper is a close study of Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* and *Queimada* (Burn!) and Tomas Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment* -- in particular, the ways in which these films explore the colonial and post-colonial experience. By focussing on the engagement with spatial and gender politics, constructions of the hero/villain dichotomy and debates on the political efficacy of violence that emerge from these films, the paper explores the language of Pontecorvo's and Alea's cinema, its thematic priorities and visual methodologies. Even while elucidating the differences in their cinematic aesthetics, it is argued that both the filmmakers share a certain kind of politics and radical/revolutionary sensibility that aligns them to and places them within the continuing traditions of the cinema of resistance.

The colonial and post-colonial 'condition' is one that encompasses in its discourse all continents of the world. The three films under consideration in this paper, Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* and *Queimada* (Burn!) and Tomas Alea's *Memories of Underdevelopment*, negotiate what can without hesitation be called the universal phenomenon of imperialism, including its latter day variant, neo-imperialism. Going beyond mere externals, a cinematic aesthetic such as that of Alea or Pontecorvo, provoked by the realities of imperialism/neo-imperialism, excavates the inner archaeology of the latter's consequential outcomes for whole nations and peoples: the impact not only on their overtly political but also their psycho-social and 'spiritual' existence in a world rife with jarring inequalities and brutal repression. At the same time, what distinguishes the 'politics' of these films and allows them to be thought of under one rubric, is not so much their shared formal stylistics but the *revolutionary intent* of the filmmakers. These are filmmakers fired by their deliberate and unequivocal understanding of the interventionist role that cinema ought to play in the creation of an egalitarian world (and world order), where the terms of 'development' are not dictated by agendas of the First World.

Alea's own words explain simultaneously both the need and the limits of working with cinema as an artistic medium because "cinema continues to be the most natural incarnation of the petty bourgeois spirit", it voluntarily adheres to the demands and interests of capitalism better than those of socialism.¹ Evidently, it is precisely because the propagators of a class society control the dissemination of ideology through cinema, it becomes imperative that those challenging capitalist ideology appropriate its tools and weapons and make them function on the side of and in alignment with socialist principles. Alea extends Brecht's vision for theatre to the medium of film and reiterates "cinema's social function" as one that elevates "the viewer's revolutionary consciousness", arming the people for "the ideological struggle, which they have to wage against all kinds of reactionary tendencies."²

The manifestos written by Latin American filmmakers have intensely telling titles – "Aesthetics of Hunger", "Imperfect Cinema", "Cinema and Underdevelopment" and "Third Cinema". The implicated theoretical positioning can in fact be stretched to accommodate not just the Latin American critique of Hollywood films and America's imperialist tendencies, but the full compound of

anxieties and struggles of the entire Third World. Moreover, this is an ideological issue, and can transcend accidents of birth and geography: those ranged on this side of the ideological battleground can include members of the First World like Gillo Pontecorvo and their resistance of the colonial project in its maximal meanings. Like Alea, other Third World Film theorists such as Espinosa would refute absolute demarcating lines between aesthetics and ethics, for in the end the goal of an anti-imperialist cinema must always be the socio-political and cultural transformation of society. Fernando Birri, an Argentinean filmmaker, states matters in the form of a quasi-slogan: “resist emulating the dominant social system, which results in ‘a bourgeois superstructure.’”³

The agenda of ‘Third World Cinema’⁴ includes a deconstructive exposé of the myths of Development and Modernisation, which are revealed to be little more than euphemistic rationales for the colonial powers to make inroads into “backward” countries and make the latter dependent on colonising nations. The memorable scene between William Walker and Jose Dolores, in *Burn!* wherein the former warns Dolores –

Civilisation is not a simple matter Jose. You cannot learn its secrets overnight.
Today civilisation belongs to the white man and you must learn to use it.
Without it you cannot go forward

- encapsulates the great fear of ‘underdevelopment’ instilled by the Western world among its colonised subjects, a fear that helped squash any ‘anti-colonial’ desires or insurrectionist attempts to strike out independently. Jose’s profound rebuttals:

Civilisation belongs to the whites but what civilisation and till when?;

and:

If what we have in our country is civilisation, civilisation of white men, then we are better uncivilised because it is better to know where to go and not know how than it is to know how to go and not know where;

might well be read as echoing not just the words of a rebel colonial subject, but indeed the guiding principles of post-colonial filmmakers themselves. This paper will undertake a close analysis of Pontecorvo’s and Alea’s films, the language of their cinema, its thematic priorities and visual methodologies. Even while elucidating the difference in their cinematic aesthetics the essay will argue that both the filmmakers share a certain kind of politics and radical/revolutionary sensibility that aligns them to and places them within the continuing traditions of the cinema of resistance.

The Spatial Thematic

Colonisation always entails a spatial demarcation between the colonised and the coloniser(s). For the colonisers, the spaces of the colonised are spaces of danger – danger from the unseen, the unknown and the diseased. The space of the coloniser, on the other hand, is laid out, characteristically, as symmetrical wide avenues and clearly demarcated structures. Thus are emphasised the dual sources of control: property and the scopic drive. We have thus the over-populated and impoverished *Casbah* entirely separated from the uncontaminated and impregnable French part of Algiers in *The Battle of Algiers*. The former, shot brilliantly in its alternately vertiginous and claustrophobic essence by Pontecorvo, is the space into which one may venture at one’s own peril. It is also a space that hides much from the colonisers – a seemingly ordinary wall in a house can be peeled away to reveal the enemy – a space whose secrets are only yielded at the end of the most brutal tortures. On the other hand, the menace of the French quarter for the Algerians is also brilliantly encapsulated in the terror of the road-worker with nowhere to flee from the horrifying crescendo of French gazes – the gazes of those safe in their balconies. In *Burn!*, a sharp dividing

line exists between the villages, plantations and mountains on the one hand, and the presidential office and army headquarters on the other. The metaphor of the jungle (urban slum as in *The Battle*, or rural as in *Burn!*) is a crucial visual-spatial supplement to the metaphor of the savage and dangerous native.

The struggle against colonialism, however, necessitates a breaching of absolute borders: the 'undoing' of not just political but also economic and racial segregation. The transgression of sanctioned (and 'sanctified') boundaries by the rebels becomes a strategic means of rupturing the comfortably enclosed spaces of the coloniser. The trespassing of the check post by Algerian women to plant bombs in French coffee homes and the airport in *The Battle of Algiers* is an obvious example of the crossing of spatial boundaries in the anti-colonial resistance. (Contrarily, the coloniser too infiltrates 'rebel spaces' to reinstate order and deprive the insurgents of even limited autonomy of space and movement, for those spaces have come to represent a dire threat: they have turned into 'breeding grounds' where rebels and revolutionaries proliferate uncontrollably.) In *Burn!*, the rebels are excluded from the city and shunted out and relegated to the margins, the mountains. Eventually, even the mountains – the margins, the wilds and open natural spaces – are burnt down and deforested in the hunt for these rebels. Colonialism places its indelible stamp on nature and wilderness. In the end, there is nothing 'outside the colony'.

The tussle for spatial domination may be understood through Henri Lefebvre's thesis: each society must "produce" its own spaces. Jose Dolores's grand gesture of 'assuming' the Presidential throne to carry out negotiations with the colonial authorities is a spatially symbolic act; an attempt on his part to seek post-colonial legitimacy as the 'true' and rightful leader of the island of Queimada by reclaiming the space that such a leader would occupy: the presidential seat. But of course, the gesture is just that. That he will have to relinquish this highest space of authority is a given. The colonising forces cannot allow a Black 'lord of misrule' to occupy the state building for long, for that would signal that he also controls the rest of the state and country. Hence, one's spatial outreach also determines the extent of one's power.

The imperialist powers too carve out and 'promulgate' colonised spaces by order-imposing violence. The burning down of Queimada, first by the Portuguese and later under William Walker's instructions, enables the production of a tractable and governable island. As Walker himself confesses, burning the island enabled the Portuguese to rule it peacefully for three hundred years. Today he repeats that orgy of destruction to allow the British to repeat a 'triumph of peace'. The dialectic here, behind the rhetoric of peace and order, is that *violent destruction of enemy spaces* offers a mode of creating a *space of power for oneself*. Walker's frank disclosure of the capitalist-colonial programme recalls the classical Marxist assessment of the workings of capitalism: One builds to make money. But to go on making money it becomes inevitable to destroy.

The scarring of the landscape of Queimada by burning down the forests and plantations to smoke out rebels 'infesting' these lovely natural locales is yet again a reminder that colonial violence is carried out not just upon human bodies but on the body of the colonised nation as well. Once no longer fit to be ground in the mill of slavery, black nations, like black bodies, are as easily and dispensably reducible to. The scene, where the smoke of the burning plantations envelops the guerrilla rebels signifies the consumption and destruction of both the colonised land and its people by colonial fires.

In *Memories of Underdevelopment* the dynamics of 'colonised spaces' operate somewhat differently: for one, unlike in *Burn!* and *The Battle of Algiers*, the issue here is not so much the discontent of the colonised against colonialism, but rather survival in a country (Cuba) that has carried out a successful revolution against a

dictatorial regime. Sergio, the protagonist of the film, though is neither a revolutionary nor a counter-revolutionary. He inhabits instead the no-man's land space of one who favours the idea of the revolution – he is after all an avant-garde free thinker and therefore refuses to leave Cuba, unlike his wife, friends and parents, without becoming in any way an involved active *participant* in the unfolding churning of a revolutionary society. In the end then, he remains an alienated spectator, cut off from the revolution's ground level implementation: marked off inside the moral-spatial position of the 'class-enemy within' by his 'stranger's gaze' as it strays passively across newspaper headlines and scenes of revolutionary transformation. He ends up as the dilettantish intellectual and member of a leisured elite for whom, as spectator and 'audience', the revolution, as the film-within-the-film metaphor suggests, is itself no more than a long and randomly stretching cinematic/television 'production'. The disconnection is strikingly revealed in the scene where Sergio crosses paths with a group of political demonstrators as he walks in the opposite direction from them, and the pattern of his encounters with the world is established for good: "Sergio is always heading in the other direction from everyone else."⁵

Unable to immerse himself in the post-revolutionary fervour, the film's 'hero', like Camus' Outsider, thus seems condemned to life 'on the outside'. The location of the balcony – a location which can neither be designated as wholly indoors or outdoors and from where he observes, without quite understanding, the changing social map of Cuba – emblematises the locus of liminal estrangement which he must be resigned to occupy (a mood of exhaustion, ennui and resignation in fact hangs over all of Sergio's adventures and escapades throughout the film). The elevated ('elite') positioning of the balcony of course makes it the literal ivory tower: a location appropriate to the ultimately ineradicable superiority that he has started out with:

Now everything is 'the people'. Before I would have been the respectable one and they the damned guilty ones.

This unbridgeable self-distancing of the hero's eye from the 'them', the hordes and masses, is mediated by a symbol of simultaneous distance and closeness: the telescope. The telescope develops into a signifier of Sergio's alienation from and inability to interact with his environment – except as techno-assisted (and technology separated) onlooker. It is a radical separation of the refined 'self' from the turbulent and messy surrounding 'world' of a revolutionary Latino society underscored by the constant references to Europe – the land of the civilised. That unforgettable utopia across the seas is posited against the "underdeveloped" of the Latin American continent: "I always try to live like a European", he says, "and Elena forces me to feel the underdevelopment at every step." Even when he does attempt, dutifully, to 'get into' the spirit of things in the post-revolution scenario (though admittedly as an intellectual rather than as a political activist), his efforts prove lame and futile: the round-table conference that he attends is little more than a non-starter gathering of pedants and pseudo-intellectuals, arguing redundant, if pretentious trivialities. As the American journalist points out, the format of the round-table conference, in a revolutionary context, is itself a contradiction in terms. He asks: "Why is it that, if the Cuban revolution is a total revolution, they have to resort to an archaic form of discussion such as the round-table and treat us to an impotent discussion of issues that I'm well informed about...when they could be a more revolutionary way to reach an audience like this?"

Sergio's condescension towards "the people" forces him to find refuge in bookstores and art galleries. However, even these traditional havens of the typical bourgeois intellectual seem to have turned against Sergio – no longer markers of Europe's sophisticated culture, they are now flooded with books on communism and the writings of revolutionaries like Castro, Che Guevara and Mao. The roads too seem

like 'alien texts', with their neon signs and billboards unfamiliarly flashing the inspirational words of socialist leaders. The only spatial refuge left for him is an 'interior': the indoors confines of his luxuriant apartment with its sprawling bed and bricolage of expensive artefacts and paintings; this is where he escapes to when he wishes to dodge his working-class girlfriend Elena. It is from here that he can view comforting images through his telescope, of sunbathing women, to assure himself that "everything remains the same". Sergio, in relation to the revolution, has become the eternal and incurable voyeur.

As the film progresses however, his apartment too starts to 'turn enemy', betraying his sense of complacent security. The elite interior in the end proves to be too narrow and claustrophobic a space: the end of the film finds him pacing up and down in his house, a trapped creature inside his own zoo. One might suggest then, that the revolution's inescapable ferment and fervour has finally got to Alea's self-exiled hero, and has finally infected him to the extent of breaking down the 'natural' fit between him and his bourgeois setting, represented here by his apartment. This is a setting that now turns into a cage or chain, curtailing his freedom and negating any remaining possibility of his joining the frenzied political activity erupting on the streets below/outside. But if his comfort inside the cage of his class origins has been broken – if this gilded cage is what he longs to free himself from – then it is also clear that a breakthrough to the free air outside seems altogether beyond Sergio's resources. To that extent, Sergio's journey from a disinterested member of the bourgeoisie to a man who breaks the glass replica of the "imperial eagle" in his living room is not to be confused with a self-initiated awakening. It must be understood that he is in fact provoked and indeed thrust into reassessing his political loyalties and commitments by the programmes of the new Cuban government, which too is determined to "produce its own space" independent of and in opposition to big-brother America, waiting anxiously in the wings to leap at the first opportunity of staging a counter-revolutionary coup. As a citizen of a socialistic order committed to an egalitarian redistribution of property, Sergio is forced to give up his state-of-the-art apartment. He is not a willing or active participant or even an agent in this new moral economy, and significantly, the cinematographic economy reflects this sad reality. In this redistributive exercise, those assets and properties are no longer truly and rightfully 'his'. The camera, in the episode where the state officials come to his house with a detailed questionnaire about his property and assets, remains focused on the faces of the two state personnel. Correspondingly, Sergio's face, and in fact his whole being, has dissolved into an insignificant and irrelevant 'absent presence'. In the new society, men like Sergio, who depend entirely on their property and class positioning for their identities, become non-beings, redundant 'hollow men', and therefore the camera can afford to not look their way at all.

His downward slide to nihilism, or what he self-dramatising and apocalyptically terms his "final destruction", does not end with being reduced to a (sleep)walker of the streets [recall the episode where he is asked to vacate the cab and walk to his house] – this respectable citizen and 'gentleman' also faces the abominable possibility of being branded a criminal. Yet this very situation is his one chance at redemption: it is in this crisis that he first considers giving up his self-imposed splendid isolation – sitting in the police station, with its grubby atmosphere and peeling walls, amidst a horde of down-market petty criminals and potential convicts, he learns to share his cigarettes. It is a transformatory moment: in this deceptively minor act, when he shares his last remaining worldly goods with the common man, he is able at last to recognise the spirit and ethics of the revolutionary morality which so far has eluded him. The destruction to which he refers is not, then, a negative event. Countering the usual anti-communist propaganda where the individual must be sacrificed and 'destroyed' for the sake of the collective is another

‘revolutionary’ understanding: what is destroyed and transcended in fact is the false sense of an exclusionary self, one predicated on the self-congratulatory schism and unbridgeable chasm that separates the ‘I’ from the ‘We’. Here then lies the answer to Sergio’s poignant question: “Have I changed, or has the city changed?” The truth is that both have changed: the space of the city that houses the collective community, but also, in the end and under pressure of that larger surrounding change, the interior landscape and ‘moral map’ of Sergio’s heart and mind. It is a dialectical transformation from which emerge a New Nation, as well as a New Man.

Ambiguous Heroes and Fascinating Villains

Alea argues relentlessly against the creation of “Tarzan like” heroes in political films, for the audience must be prevented at all costs from unquestioningly identifying with the hero. A mindless empathy with the hero “puts the spectator in a position in which the only thing he can distinguish are the ‘bad guys’ and the ‘good guys,’”⁶ and it is precisely such simplistic and universal essentialisms that one needs to steer clear of.

In Alea’s own film, *Memories of Underdevelopment*, the protagonist is far from an easily explicable figure. He is not susceptible to easy judgments and pronouncements either. As discussed earlier, even though Sergio is a conventional bourgeoisie who, in the midst of world-shaking changes, misses his imported “Colgate toothpaste”, Alea nevertheless grants him a critical, even perhaps a ‘radical’ voice. His is the necessary function of an “offscreen narrator”⁷ whose eye and voice lend perspective and ‘meaning’ to the ongoing historical process. Not only does Sergio convey crucial social and political information, he also complements the ‘facts’ with his own ‘meta-revolutionary’ commentary:

In Latin America four children die every minute due to illnesses caused by malnutrition. After ten years there will be twenty million children dead. The same number of deaths caused by the Second World War.

On another occasion, his acerbic characterisation of the members of the counter-revolutionary force sent by the U.S. to Cuba in the Bay of Pigs invasion – “the priest, the free enterprise man, the dilettante official, the torturer, the philosopher, the politician and the innumerable sons of good families” – works as a scathing exposé of the cynical realities behind the First World’s ‘freedom’-saving missions and pretences. Not only does Alea critique pre-revolutionary Cuba and the disastrous role of the U.S., he uses Sergio to implicitly critique revolutionary Cuba as well. It is true that Sergio’s alienation from the revolution is primarily related to his bourgeois class affiliations. Yet the unsettling question remains embedded in Alea’s presentation: is it not the responsibility of a revolutionary movement to gather along the way as many supporters as possible? Is not the revolution in Cuba somehow guilty of having alienated Sergio? After all, he is not like his other bourgeois compatriots, like Pablo for instance, who flee from Cuba at the first opportunity. Why then does the revolution not recognise and harness Sergio as a potential ally? It was Gramsci who had declared that for a revolution to be truly successful, it must learn to accommodate all potentially radical voices, even if they have not been fully won over to the cause. In time that mission would be accomplished, but in the meanwhile it was necessary to enhance the revolution’s support base, making it an inclusive rather than an exclusive movement. Is Alea suggesting perhaps that the Cuban revolution is not entirely tolerant and incorporating?

In comparably ‘dialogical’ representations, both Colonel Mathieu in *The Battle of Algiers* and William Walker in *Burn!* cannot simply be dismissed as purely barbaric fascists. Edward Said has noted Pontecorvo’s “fascinated [fascinating?] portrayal of imperialist villains”.⁸ Pontecorvo himself observed that he did not wish to caricature the figures of Colonel Mathieu and William Walker and needed to treat

them seriously. The lavish entry of Mathieu's army into Algiers and Walker's super-intellectualised persona may be approached along the lines invoked in some critical readings of Milton's glorific depiction of Satan. The argument goes: in order to make God's victory and triumph over Evil truly meaningful, it was necessary for Milton to create God's enemy as a worthy and formidable adversary. If Satan were an insipid, bumbling idiot who would value or indeed praise God for destroying him? Hence, in order to construct the Algerian struggle against the French and Dolores's rebellion against the British as truly subversive and threatening, their colonising enemies needed to be shown as equally, if not more, dedicated to and serious about their colonial mission.

The portrayal of the coloniser figures in these two films is further problematised and layered – not only are these figures grand, they are also human, and in certain moments, even humane. Two instances from *Burn!* should suffice to demonstrate as much. When Dolores has been captured and is being taken to the city, Walker keeps turning his head to catch Dolores's eye and communicate something to him. We are not sure what Walker is itching to say, until he gallops up to Dolores and in state of frenzied racial anger declares:

Now listen to me you black ape, listen to me [the second time he says "listen to me", his tone and facial expression are less aggressive and venomous]. It wasn't I that invented this war and furthermore, in this case, I didn't even start it. I arrived here and you were already butchering one another.

What one realises in this speech, which begins with the crassest kind of racism, is that the hatred and contempt Walker is showing towards Dolores is in fact a veneer to hide and sublimate his feelings of guilt for having betrayed Dolores, his one time friend. More generally, such anger and contempt surplus is the inverted expression of a repressed and still deeper colonial guilt, the coloniser's moral burden for having devastated the island. The shot of the child fleeing from the soldier provokes this fit of confession. Thus if a child has internalised the fear of the State, then the army has indeed succeeded in intimidating and terrorising the most innocent of civilians under the instructions of Walker. Hence, the army's success is Walker's triumph: he has managed to defeat the rebels. What Walker sees before him now – in the image of the orphaned and naked child helplessly running for his life – is neither a measure of his moral triumph nor one of colonialism's civilising missions – but a brutal reminder of his complicity in spreading misery and destruction. It is to rid himself, by means of the old mythic device of the scapegoat, of his guilt for perpetrating the radical horrors of his colonial rule (recalling Kurtz's "The horror, the horror" in Conrad, or Coppola's take-off thereon in *Apocalypse Now*) that Walker tries to justify his act to Dolores in the tones of aggression. What Walker fears is not so much the unforgiving glare that Dolores gives him, but the pangs of his own guilty conscience. He pleads with Dolores to escape from the impending assassination for similar reasons. Pontecorvo himself explains this scene best: "He wants to free Jose Dolores, not only because he is his friend, but because if Jose Dolores escapes, he will not feel so dirty. He feels desperate when Dolores refuses. He sees his own emptiness before his eyes...Walker encounters, in contrast to his emptiness, someone who is full of purpose. And this is his great defeat."⁹

Colonel Mathieu in *Battle* too reveals an unnerving trace of ethics. I say unnerving because it would be so much easier to hate an out-and-out, unmitigatedly unscrupulous rascal. Yet, no easy and black and white categories are resorted to by Pontecorvo. In the opening sequence where the rebel prisoner has just confessed important information regarding the whereabouts of Ali la Pointe, and is being dressed up in a French uniform to be taken to the Casbah, the soldiers begin to make fun of him. At this moment, Mathieu reprimands the soldiers with a strict instruction to "stop that". The message is clear: Mathieu is someone who will do everything it

takes to make the prisoner talk, but once he has accomplished his task he will not indulge in gratuitous humiliation and torture of the prisoner. We are made to see that Mathieu is doing his job, one for which he is paid and hence must perform to the best of his ability. We are not expected to sympathise with him, but are meant to understand the world from which he comes; to understand him in terms of the values of the world he has inherited and internalised.

Interestingly, the camp fighting against colonial rule is not rendered above blame either. In *The Battle of Algiers*, the FLN's (Front de Libération Nationale) mission to clean up the Casbah of 'immoral' elements – alcoholics, prostitutes and other unsavoury citizens – is scrutinised with a critical eye. The imposition of socio-cultural morality entails victimising one's own people, and any movement that becomes a cultural cleanser cannot be truly revolutionary in the most progressive sense. The theatre of cruelty enacted by children upon an impoverished drunken man is a gesture, not of the popularity of the cleansing-the-Casbah mission, but of the regressive deviations that the most positive movements can sink into.

The Raging Debate: The Question of Violence

The second realm of ambiguity that *The Battle of Algiers* and *Burn!* throw up is the continuing moral debate regarding the use of violence as a legitimate means of resistance to colonialism. On one end of the debate are the arguments put forth by figures like Malcolm X and Sartre who argue in favour of the right to fight for one's freedom by "any means necessary". At the other end of the spectrum is the Gandhian principle of fighting for independence through passive, non-violent means. Both positions, obviously, are inherently problematic. Here, I will not venture into the complexities of the Gandhian motto of ahimsa, for those have already been discussed to death, and are not particularly relevant to the films at hand.

The Malcolm X viewpoint is based on a calculus of suffering, whereby, the victims of a colonial regime declare that the suffering caused by the colonisers is so much more, that the use of violent means by the colonised is easily excusable. Besides, since the colonisers will not hesitate to use repressive and relentless violence, one cannot but use similar means to combat them. This argument is located outside the jurisdiction of ethics and is posited on the grounds of the functional efficacy of violence instead. It is this ideological stand that the FLN, the rebel party in Algeria adopts. When Ben M'Hidi says: "Give us your napalms and we'll give you our women's baskets", he is essentially rebuffing the French protests against the bombs planted in baskets by Algerian women. The French have killed hundreds and thousands more than the FLN, not just in Algeria, but in other parts of the world too. The reference to the Napalm bomb is an overt reminder of Vietnam where these bombs were indiscriminately used. Hence, Ben M'Hidi seems to suggest that the Algerians are adequately justified in targeting the French civilian population. This is where the defence of violent means enters dangerous terrain. Violence, arguably, can be a credible and at any rate unavoidable mode of resisting oppression by an incomparably more powerful enemy: we need only to consider the Palestinian freedom struggle. Yet, violence must be directed against legitimate targets. On the other hand, the torture or killing of innocent civilians, especially children, must be rejected on all grounds. Modern warfare and modernisation in general has jeopardised the call for absolutes. Yet some absolute, universal ethical principles must be abided by. Even if the repressive regime of the coloniser does not do so, the resistance movement cannot afford to be value neutral, for in a value-empty world, why is oppression wrong? If the protestors and insurgents against colonialism begin to indistinguishably echo and replay the worst draconian tactics of the coloniser, they must stand guilty of having compromised their revolutionary claims in terms of

occupying a clearly superior moral ground, and in terms of practical politics they risk losing the world's moral and humanitarian support for their cause.

In *Battle of Algiers*, to begin with, the FLN is shown as assassinating only officers of the State. However, once the French police plants bombs in the Casbah, the FLN decides to take revenge. Nonetheless, the most crucial leader of the FLN, Ben M'Hidi, sees a future for the Algerian movement, beyond the violent attacks and counter-attacks, beyond the cult of the gun and the bomb:

You can't fight a war with bombs alone...terrorism is only useful in the beginning. After that the people must rise up...Its hard to start a revolution, its even harder to keep it going...There is much left to be done.

It is this vision of his that finds culmination at the end of the film, when "the people" take to the streets and go "wild" and tear through the calm of the last two years with their "terrifying cries". It is the strength of a whole people, resisting their oppressors with a fanatical zeal, which finally wins Algeria its independence in 1962.

Pontecorvo however suggests another means of understanding the violent upsurge by Algerians. Instead of focusing on the repression committed by the French and the retaliation by the Algerians, what is significant is "that the birth of a nation happens with pain on both sides, although one side has cause and the other not." The making of this film, thus, is not an exercise at pointing fingers, and diagnosing who killed whom and in what numbers, but a tribute, a "homage" paid unto those who fight for independence, who have given birth to a nation "in sorrow".¹⁰ The motive of the film is not to ruminate over the violence committed against the Algerians and the violence they inflicted back on the French. Instead, it is a celebration not just of a people who have won back their independence, but more importantly of the fact that they began a struggle against imperialism in the first place.

Feminising the Political and Politicising the Feminine

The most memorable scene of women joining the ranks of resistance against imperialism is the one where the Algerian women transform or morph themselves into their French counterparts. There are several nuances that surface through this episode: firstly, it entails putting aside of the veil or *burqua*. Several feminists and post-colonial theorists have argued that the veil interrupts the colonial male gaze, making the colonised woman inaccessible to men's roving and penetrating eyes. In the colonial context of Algeria, the *burqua* may protect women from a patriarchal regime, where all women function as readily available sex objects, yet it makes them easily distinguishable as the racial 'other'. Hence, when these women wish to dodge the panopticon vigilance of their colonisers they will have to give up their veils and reinstate themselves into the regime of visibility – this time not only of the male as coloniser but as sexual aggressor. Yet, the real vitality of this episode originates from the success with which these women are able to infiltrate the French spaces and sabotage the French guard. This becomes possible, ironically enough, not because as the post-colonial argument suggests the veil blocks the colonisers gaze, but precisely because the absence of the veil grants them a certain anonymity and protection, i.e. a new mobility and level of freedom to cross borders without arousing suspicion.

In *Memories of Underdevelopment*, we witness another manifestation of the association between the feminine being and the political scenario. The woman's body has time and time again been allegorised as the body of the nation. Hence, in India, at the time of Partition, the rape of a woman symbolised the ravishment of the motherland and vice versa. Sergio in Alea performs a similar conflation: "Elena proved to be totally inconsistent...this is one of the signs of underdevelopment...it is difficult to produce here a woman shaped by sentiments and culture." For Sergio, the socio-economic and political underdevelopment of Cuba is manifested best in

women's infantile behaviour and their general air of disinterestedness. However, in the course of the film, it is really Sergio who gets critiqued for his skewed and capitalist understanding of the categories of development and underdevelopment. For him, foreign commodities, "good clothes, good food, make-up and massages" create a complete woman and these alone can rescue her from becoming one of the "slovenly Cuban girls". His conception of a liberated woman is in fact a corollary of his bourgeois commodity fetishism, which can calculate degrees of "development", and manage human relationships in terms of commodities alone. Material things always mediate Sergio's relationships with women: tape recordings, photographs and clothes.¹¹ Instead of affirming the underdeveloped state of the women of Cuba, Alea gives us a case study of the emotional and sexual retardation of a bourgeois male. Not surprisingly, then, it is a woman, Elena, who gives us the most scathing critique of Sergio:

You're neither a revolutionary nor a counter-revolutionary. You're nothing.

This is not to suggest that there isn't anything wrong with women like Elena or Laura: they are indeed beings who willingly construct their identities in tandem with male desire and capitalist commodities. Yet, their emancipation cannot lie in following the path of liberation that Sergio suggests: by adopting the markers of western capitalism.

We need to ask ourselves a pertinent question: what future do these films posit for the women of colonised nations? We see the creation of a New Man in Sergio – a potentially socialist being. Is any such vision put forth for the women? The opening and the closing sequences of *The Battle of Algiers*, may offer some answers. The camera pans the faces of the revolutionaries hiding behind the wall – the group includes two men, a woman and a child – seemingly, a complete family, but more importantly a complete revolutionary family. Ironically however not one person in this grouping is related to the other through blood or marriage. Yet, their loyalty to each other remains unshaken. The presence of persons from different generations and genders suggests perhaps the basis for the creation of a new society where human beings will now be related to one another as revolutionary comrades, not as husband and wife or parent and child. Similarly, the last few scenes of the film, of an Algerian woman relentlessly waving her flag in the face of the French army, offers another role to women: one of a fearless and tireless resister against subjugation. This woman does her dance of protest against colonial forces. But when the occasion arises a similar protest can be launched against other oppressive forces too. In both these cases, one finds that the necessity of the agency of women, in different ways, opens up the possibility of that agency being used for their own emancipation.

Stylistics

In conclusion, it might be worthwhile to recapitulate some of the key aesthetic strategies that Alea and Pontecorvo deploy to create a maximum revolutionary effect. Hollywood cinema creates a reverie of the "given" by adopting continuity editing. It is this that Alea rejects through his use of a non-temporal narrative, jump cuts, and Bunuel-esque dream sequences. This use of a 'Brechtian' 'alienation', distancing the audience from the action on screen, is something that we confront repeatedly. Sergio is characterised in the beginning of film by his yawns. To be able to yawn when the whole world around you is changing is the ultimate marker of his distance from the revolution that has just taken place. The one event – the Cuban revolution – to which generations of people have responded with unbounded fervour, is cause for a yawn for Sergio. Yet, it is the protagonist's pallid response to this gigantic event that forces even the audience to view the event from a somewhat objective stance. Not only do we gain an alternative perspective about the revolution, we simultaneously study the

transformatory process that Sergio undergoes, thereby giving us a lesson in how socialists are not born but created.

The documentary footage used in Alea's film further accentuates this distancing effect. We are never allowed to follow the trajectory of Sergio's life without it being interrupted by actual newsreels. Alea believes that at the time of revolution, cinema must act "as one more facet of reality".¹² In this context the elements of the documentary film become central even in fictional films. The documentary style can get accommodated into fictional films in two ways: first, as has been mentioned, in Alea, where actual, historical speeches and news clippings find space in the film narrative. An example should suffice to illustrate the way in which the intrusion of the 'real' can work to create different effects. Fidel Castro's speech during the Cuban Missile Crisis comes right before Sergio breaks the imperial eagle in his living room. The speech thus gives Sergio the impetus to make a final break from his residual bourgeois-American allegiance. Similarly, we are conscious of Sergio as a kind of split personality because of the documentary footage to which he gives a voice over. If there is one part of Sergio that yawns, the other part informs the world about the children that die in Cuba because of sanctions imposed by America. However, as in *The Battle of Algiers*, the effect of a documentary film can be created even without using any real historical footage. When it was released, the distributors had to constantly assure audiences and authorities that no real footage from the Algerian struggle had been used in the film. Pontecorvo explains that he achieved the newsreel effect of the film by using lenses that gave a granular effect. The last scene of the thousands of protestors on the streets of Algiers is a classic example of constructing the newsreel effect.

Thus, genre elements that are used in Hollywood melodramas to romanticise or sentimentalise, can also be used 'deconstructively'. Pontecorvo's use of sound and music is the most outstanding such feature of his films. The grinding of the pestle juxtaposed against the sandpapery voice of Brando when the latter is talking to Santiago's wife, or the shrill war cry of the Algerians signify, in the first case, a complete sense of desolation and heighten the silence of the colonised; in the second, the euphoria of breaking free and inviting others to do the same. The drumbeats when the women transform their appearance, similarly heightens the urgency and fear of the moment. The producer's choice of the music pieces in *Burn!* – the credit piece and the one that plays when Dolores meets his people – creates an atmosphere of joy and gloom at the same moment. It is an ambiguity of sound that replicates and evokes a doubled response: the rapture of the revolution and simultaneously a sense of foreboding for the violence and upheavals that are to ensue.

One may end where *The Battle of Algiers* ends, with the scene of the masses. The classic Hollywood film, even when it talks about a community or a group of people say for instance, *Titanic*, takes the story forward through the trials and tribulations of a pair of lovers. It is through their tragedy that we come to relate to the catastrophe of the group. Revolutionary cinema however rejects the cult of the individual, or the couple or the family. It may launch its narrative on the shoulder of the individual, but the culmination of the film downplays the role of the 'hero'. Where Hollywood films valorise the talents and tenacity of the individual and attenuate the significance of the masses as secondary, revolutionary cinema is geared towards merging the trajectory of the individual with that of his/her community. Hence, the tragedy of the individual in the films by Pontecorvo – the death of Ali la Pointe or Dolores – is rarely meant to signify the defeat of their community. On the contrary, the revolutionary spirit of the individual lives on and proves efficacious only through "the people". It is the vanquishing of the FLN and Ali la Pointe in particular that gives the people of Algeria the drive to restart their struggle against the French. It is in the death of Dolores that another revolutionary is born. It is thus in the symphonic quality

of the crowd scenes in *Battle* that the dynamic role of the masses is envisioned by the director. Alea's film is the exception that proves the rule. It is a film that concentrates on the individual and is primarily lacking in crowd scenes. Yet, far from glorifying the protagonist, he is depicted as an incomplete, decadent being, precisely because of his incapability of becoming one with the crowd.

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NOTES

¹ Tomas Alea, "Rapture and Rupture: Rediscovering Eisenstein and Brecht, in *The New Latin American Cinema: Readings From Within*, ed. Indranil Chakravarty, S. V. Raman and Samik Bandypadhyay, 1998, Jamshedpur: Celluloid Chapter, p. 191, 195

² *ibid.* p. 190

³ Scott L. Baugh quoting Fernando Birri, "Manifesting la Historia: Systems of 'Development' and the New Latin American Cinema Manifesto", *Film and History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies* 34.1 (2004) 55-56

⁴ One is of course wary of using the nomenclature "Third World Cinema" simplistically and unproblematically. Nevertheless, one may argue that there is in fact a need to assert the existence and necessity of a post-colonial cinema that examines the traumas of socio-political and economic disenfranchisement.

⁵ Samik Bandypadhyay, *The New Latin American Cinema: Readings From Within*, ed. Indranil Chakravarty, S. V. Raman and Samik Bandypadhyay, 1998, Jamshedpur: Celluloid Chapter, p. 167

⁶ Tomas Alea, "Rapture and Rupture: Rediscovering Eisenstein and Brecht, in *The New Latin American Cinema: Readings From Within*, ed. Indranil Chakravarty, S. V. Raman and Samik Bandypadhyay, 1998, Jamshedpur: Celluloid Chapter, p. 211

⁷ Margot Kernan, "Cuban Cinema: Tomas Guterrez Alea", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2. (Winter, 1975-1976), pp. 45-52

⁸ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Literary and Cultural Essays*, 2001, New Delhi: Penguin

⁹ Joan Mellen and Gillo Pontecorvo, "An Interview With Gillo Pontecorvo", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Autumn, 1972), pp. 2-10

¹⁰ Joan Mellen and Gillo Pontecorvo, "An Interview With Gillo Pontecorvo", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 1. (Autumn, 1972), pp. 2-10

¹¹ Margot Kernan, "Cuban Cinema: Tomas Guterrez Alea", *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 2. (Winter, 1975-1976), pp. 45-52

¹² Tomas Alea, "Rapture and Rupture: Rediscovering Eisenstein and Brecht, in *The New Latin American Cinema: Readings From Within*, ed. Indranil Chakravarty, S. V. Raman and Samik Bandypadhyay, 1998, Jamshedpur: Celluloid Chapter, p. 188

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