

Chapter Four

Colonial Spacing – Control and Conflict in the Colonial and Neocolonial City

In the mountains our work is always easier
(unidentified French general – from *The Battle of Algiers*)

The Battle of Algiers

The Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers* was filmed in the Algerian city of Algiers (al-Jaza'ir) in the years immediately following Algerian independence – 5 July 1962. An Algerian-Italian co-production (the Casbah film company in Algiers and Igor Films in Rome), the film centres on an intense period of fighting in Algiers, a time when the Algerian National Liberation Front (the FLN – *Front de Libération Nationale*) were involved in a bloody war with the French paratroopers who had been sent into Algeria to supplement the occupying army and gendarmerie (Plate 4.1). The film is structured around the torture of an FLN member in 1957, who, brutalized into submission by the paras, gives up the FLN leaders hiding in the Casbah. Djafar, alias Saari Kader (played by Saadi Yacef, who actually was the FLN leader represented by Djafar/Kader), and others are arrested; Ali la Pointe, an FLN lieutenant and subsequent hero of the liberation war, is killed by the paras. The FLN is effectively silenced in Algiers, and the general strike that they organized has been crushed. Thus the film centres on a moment of defeat, a liberation guerrilla organization overcome by the superior strength of a national army. As one of the arrested FLN leaders puts it when questioned about the 'cowardliness' of using guerrilla tactics: 'of course, if we had your airplanes it would be a lot easier for us' (Solinas 1973: 122). Larbi Ben M'Hidi, the FLN leader being questioned, was later found dead in prison – 'suicided'. The film's epilogue, though, is of the almost spontaneous overflow of Algerians, out

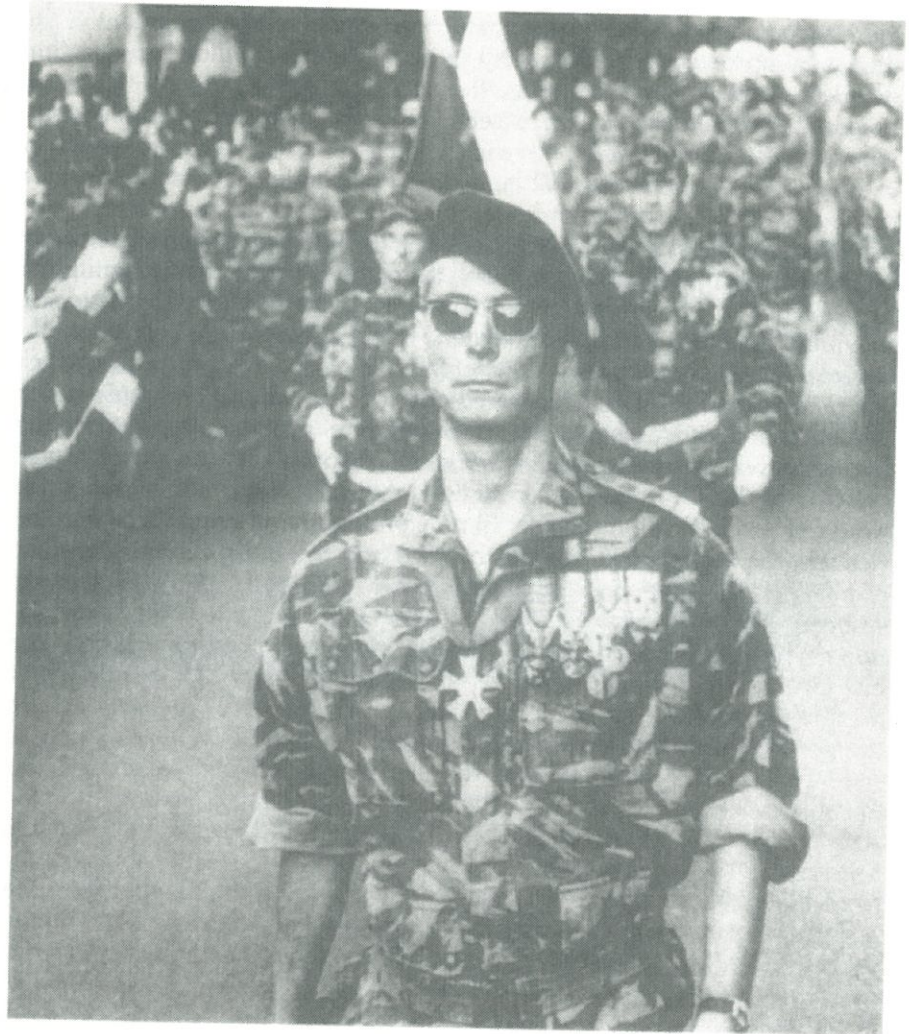


Plate 4.1 French colonial paratroopers arrive in Algiers led by Colonel Mathieu: scene from *The Battle of Algiers*

of the Casbah and into the European quarters in 1960, and the eventual liberation in 1962.

Filmed with only one professional actor (Jean Martin playing the para Colonel Mathieu), it included members of the FLN, farmers, tourists and others amongst the cast. The film was the result of a collective and political act of remembering by the newly liberated Algerians involved in the film. Pontecorvo was invited to direct the film as a left-wing film maker who would be sympathetic to the FLN's fight, and he and the writer Franco

Solinas spent a year interviewing people involved in the struggle. Yet the film is by no means a hagiography of FLN leaders; it follows in exacting detail the actual events of the battle (see, for instance, Horne 1977) and details the bombing by FLN members of civilian Europeans as they congregate in cafés and milk bars.

Pontecorvo has claimed that he 'wanted the audience to identify with a choral protagonist – with the hope, the pain, the joy of an entire people' (Pontecorvo interviewed in Solinas 1973: 166–7). The point of concentrating on the defeat of the 'Battle of Algiers', from a production that is committed to the cause of decolonization, is paradoxically to reinforce the historical inevitability of the liberation movement: 'the movement will keep on, nothing will be able to stop it, no matter what blows the organization which originally propelled it may receive' (Pontecorvo in Solinas 1973: 165–6). But while the Algerian people are the collective protagonists of the film (figured most insistently in the various crowd scenes), it is the physical *mise en scène* of the film, the city of Algiers, that articulates and supplies the rhythmic orchestration of the film. Continually moving between the Casbah (the Algerian enclave of the city) and the European quarters, the film highlights a colonial city that is a physical, social and architectural embodiment of French-Algerian colonialism. Indeed, the spatial articulation of the film is one of its most significant features and foregrounds the historical and geographical inevitability of the liberation struggle. Many of the shots are filmed on the steps of the Casbah, near or at the point where the Casbah feeds into the European quarters of the city. Many of these shots are of angry and desolated Algerian crowds amassing ready to burst through the spatial apartheid of the city.

To move from the nineteenth-century European focus of the previous chapters to the Algerian liberation in the mid-twentieth century may seem like a jarring jump-cut. Yet this leap into North Africa (to the Maghreb, the land of the sunset) and the turbulent period of decolonization that marks the period after the Second World War neither leaves the nineteenth century behind nor manages to escape Europe. Algiers is a city shaped and divided by a colonial urbanism that impacted on the city throughout most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Algiers, in the period of the film (mainly 1954–57), and from 1871 to 1962, was a North African city that was administratively a *département* of France (this colonial policy was designated as 'attachment'). This chapter is about the historical density of some of the scenes from the film, and will require us to spill out, historically, from the events of 1956/7 into the past and the future. We need history, the history of colonial urbanism, to begin to register the spatiality of the film and figure the continual neocolonial articulation of urban space.

There are two scenes that I want to pay particular attention to in this chapter. One of them (chronologically first in the film) is a scene where three Muslim women, members of the FLN, are seen removing their veils, dyeing and cutting their hair and dressing themselves in European cloth-

ing. The scenes immediately prior to this 'unveiling' depicted the bombing of the Casbah by French Algerians (*pied noirs*), and the removal of the dead from the rubble of the ruined houses (Plate 4.2). The women are going to avenge the dead by placing bombs in the European city. They need to pass as European so that they can pass the heavily policed checkpoints that are scrutinizing all Muslims. Their disguise as European is what allows them mobility in an embattled city. As they are preparing their costumes, the music that is heard on the soundtrack is a *baba saleem*, an Arabic music form with an insistent percussive beat that sounds like a synchronized, collective, racing heartbeat.

The second scene is almost an inversion of the first: instead of a tiny number of Algerian women 'passing' as European, leaving the Casbah to move into the European quarters, the scene is of a vast undisguised army of paratroopers collecting on the borders of the Casbah, ready to invade it. The script sets the scene as one of uncanny stillness that then explodes in a systematic and total invasion:



Plate 4.2 The bombed Casbah: scene from *The Battle of Algiers*

To the south, the mountains and the Casbah, situated halfway along the coast. The Casbah, still, inert, expectant, on this first day of the strike [the general strike organized by the FLN] . . .

The paratroopers are already at their places, one after another, at equal distances like links of a very long chain, strung through every alley, spreading to every sidestreet, twisting through the squares, climbing up the stairways, dividing, rejoining, and lengthening again. The silence is perfect; the camouflaged immobile forms seem to be part of the landscape.

Then a brief and sharp hiss, a hundred whistles together.

A signal releases the still forms: the attack begins.

(Solinas 1973: 101–2)

As soon as the whistle has been sounded, the music begins. In contrast to the breathless urgency of the *baba saleem*, there is a staccato military beat of snare drums. Against the ad hoc tactics of the determined but melancholic Algerian women, there is the orchestrated efficiency of the paras.

These scenes together, and others throughout the film, concentrate our attention on the border zones. These zones, because they are contact and conflict zones, suggest how different elements of the city are rhythmized by the force of colonial urbanism. The improvised and guerrilla methods of the FLN women as they negotiate the military checkpoints at the entrances and exits of the Casbah are set against the paras' collective and highly regimented invasion of the Casbah. The restless urgency of the *baba saleem* contrasts with the military efficiency of the marching music. The collectivity of the Casbah is revealed as a social network rhythmized by the mutual needs and support of its inhabitants: the mass of paras is rhythmized by the machinic regimentation of the occupying force. The dissonance produced by these conflicting rhythms, as we move across the border zones at the perimeter of the Casbah, is the dissonance of an urban colonialism that is nearing the point of collapse.

Spatial Politics and Colonial Urbanism

Reading Franco Solinas's screenplay for *The Battle of Algiers*, it is clear that one of the key elements to the film was juxtaposing the expressive differences between the Casbah and the European quarters of the city. An early scene that elliptically returns us to the start of the liberation war, the moment when the FLN asks Algerians to unite in the struggle for national independence (1954), is made up of a montage of 'Views of the Casbah' and 'Views of the European City'. The screenplay itemizes the Casbah as 'compressed humanity, swarming in the alleyways, on the steps, in the cafes, in the Arab baths, in the mosques, and in the markets; a tangle of voices, gestures, faces, veiled women, eyes' (Solinas 1973: 9). 'The European city', on the other hand, was 'reinforced concrete, asphalt, steel,

lights, shop windows, buildings, automobiles. A steady rhythm of efficiency, music, cordiality, an *apéritif*' (9). It is this juxtaposition of difference that is not simply key to the film but key to figuring the complexity of colonial spatial politics as it impacted on the urban fabric and practices of Algiers. We need to pay attention to the visual and aural register of the film to get some sense of the differences that might be involved, but we also need to work historically to see what happened in the colonial period that produced this unbridgeable and stark contrast in the urban form.

As the screenplay suggests, rhythms are going to be important here. The 'steady rhythm of efficiency' of the European city, contrasted with the 'swarming' and 'tangle' of the Casbah, does, in many ways, echo the language of colonial urbanism. This isn't to claim that the film makers were caught in a web of colonial ideology, rather, it is to recognize how colonial tropes – steadiness and efficiency versus disordered tangles and 'swarming' and 'compressed humanity' – had become concretized in the city itself. To take just the simple fact of housing density: in the mid-1950s European housing in Algiers consisted of a density of 1.2 people per room, whereas for Algerians it was almost triple the density at 3.4 people per room (Çelik 1997: 111). We would also need to include the 'unofficial' housing in the shantytowns (*bidonvilles*) that had been accumulating on the outskirts of Algiers since the 1920s and on the edges of the Casbah in the 1950s, which resulted in a situation where over 40 per cent 'of the native population lived in squatter settlements' (Çelik 1997: 110). 'Swarming' and 'compression' had an actuality.

The orchestration of these varied urban conditions, their conflicting rhythms and the dissonances they generate, is articulated by a politics of rhythm that seems to establish certain spaces of the city as crucial zones, where rhythmic dissonances are at their most intense. Robert Stam, writing about the film, describes the historical inevitability of the Casbah's revolutionary role in the following terms:

The choreographed surging movements of the demonstrators, for example, are edited almost musically to give the impression of growing strength. The subliminal metaphor of convergent streams organizes the editing. At one point a tributary effect is created, as we are shown the point of intersection of two Casbah streets. The demonstrators arrive first on the right. Then the camera pans left to show the demonstrators arriving on the left. Then the two groups join arms and rush toward the camera, giving the spectator a feeling of swelling relentless force. . . . Throughout *The Battle of Algiers* one feels this revolutionary pressure. Even the checkpoints become a kind of microcosm of the colonial situation. The people approach the checkpoints, the number of people builds up, they get impatient, and one has the sense that colonial repression cannot hold them back forever.

(Stam 1975: 20–1)

Whether the river metaphor is actually present in the film to the degree that Stam seems to suggest is perhaps beside the point, although it has certainly become the way that Pontecorvo has understood his reason for concentrating on a moment of defeat (see Pontecorvo's interview in Solinas 1973: 165). Stam, however, does usefully alert us to the importance of two borderland spaces that are hugely significant in the film: the French military checkpoints and the steps and streets leading out of (and, of course, into) the Casbah. These borderlands between the Casbah and the European city require historicizing so that the revolutionary transformation of Algiers (the 'explosion' of Algiers) isn't seen simply as the result of a few insurgents, but as a consequence of how groups of colonized people respond to the whole social and urban process of a particular brand of colonialism.

This urban process begins with the initial colonial occupation by France in 1830 (the eventual conquest of the Algerian interior didn't occur until 1845). The fact that Algeria has a history of colonization prior to French occupation shouldn't distract us from the specificity of this European occupation. To begin with, French occupation asserted itself within Algiers as a military force, and the urban planners responsible were military engineers. The most significant moment of this initial colonial urbanism was the constitution of the Place d'Armes in the 1830s, which was soon renamed the Place du Gouvernement. The establishment of this vast square, designed specifically for the massing of troops, involved the demolition of the al-Sayyida Mosque, as well as a number of houses and shops (Çelik 1997: 26–8). It also signals the beginning of an urban practice that refashioned the areas around the Casbah into wide, straight, French-style boulevards. Thus, much of Algiers was savagely reconfigured by the imposition of broad and easily policed streets. As Zeynep Çelik puts it: 'the boulevards encircled the casbah and signified the surrender of the original residents of Algiers to the French – literally and metaphorically' (Çelik 1997: 37). Such urbanism is at once militaristic and technological, monumental and economically driven – the boulevards were, as in Paris, a showcase for the more expensive shops, the buildings were a monument to (colonial) state authority and the streets were an efficient corridor for the movement of goods, workers and troops. As well as imposing an urban form on Algiers, colonial urbanism also deposes and destroys the urban forms that signal the culture of the colonized, which in this case was the demolition of the mosque, the destruction of Algerian shops and the general sense of re-making Algerian space as French space.

Alongside this practice of demolition and construction is a practice of isolation that is simultaneously cultural and physical. What distinguishes colonial urbanism from the sort of technological modernizing impulse that was practised in Paris at the same time was the separation of the European city from the 'Arab' or 'Islamic' one. The isolation of the Casbah operated as a sign of controlled exoticism and a reminder of imperial achievement.

The spectacular juxtaposition of 'two cities' performed an aesthetic and social comparison that was evidently meant to work in favour of the culture of the colonizers: on one side was imperial order, on the other side 'native' disorder. (British colonialism effected an analogous spatial 'apartheid' in Delhi in the 1920s, where it established a separate but adjoining 'administrative city' designated as New Delhi – see King 1976; Evenson 1989: 145–56.) A crucial tool in establishing these differences, and thereby supplying an alibi for colonial rule, was the newly emerging tourist industry. Consider this, for instance, from a tourist guidebook of 1908: 'the Casbah whose houses are jammed one on top of another guides one's gaze toward the European city with its marvellous gardens, open, vast boulevards, full of animation, and its stylish apartments' (cited in DeRoo 1998: 156). The presumed chaos of the Casbah ends up supplying nothing more (and nothing less) than a vivid contrast to the 'marvel' that is the French city.

Rebecca DeRoo suggests that the production of Algiers as two cities was a structuring principal of the postcard industry, which was a significant component in remaking Algiers as a destination for European tourists. The postcards, along with tourist guidebooks, portray the boulevards of the French quarter as an achievement of a civilizing mission and the Casbah as merely the expression of indigenous charm (Plates 4.3 and 4.4). For example, in the view of the French quarter in Plate 4.3, emphasis

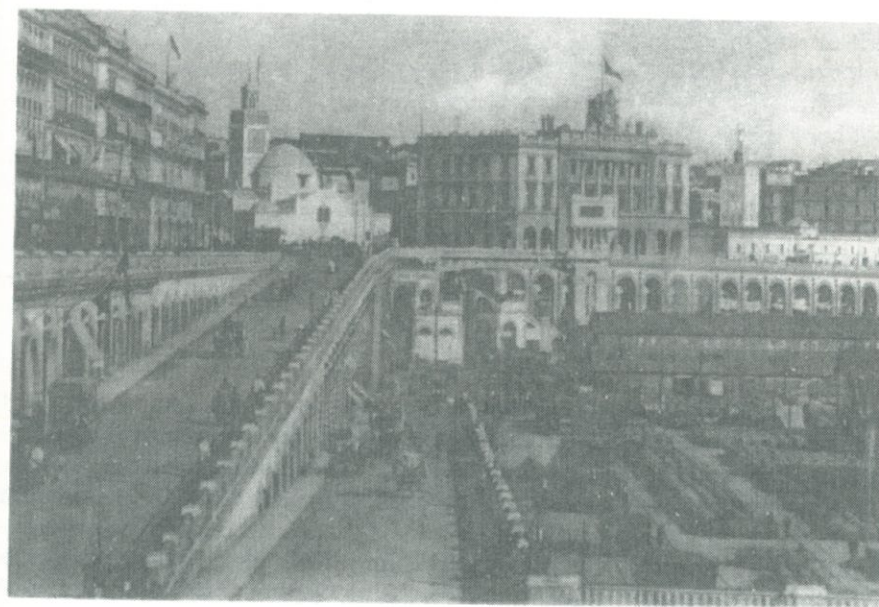


Plate 4.3 Postcard: Algiers, Le Rampes et les Quais (author's collection)



Plate 4.4 Postcard: Alger, Rue de Tombouctou (author's collection)

is placed on the engineering feat of the boulevards and ramps: the view is positioned so that we not only see the scale and stretch of the boulevard, but also the layers of colonnades that seem to hold the road in place. On the other hand, the scene of the Casbah in Plate 4.4 concentrates on the 'exotic' inhabitants, refusing us a view that could take in the architectural achievement of the site. Of the hundreds of different postcards produced for tourist consumption in Algiers, the vast majority are of urban views: 'city views of French administration, commercial centres, and leisure activities [that] reinforce a comfortable separation between

the civilized metropole and the indigenous population' (DeRoo 1998: 147). These postcard views include both images of the Casbah and the European sections of the city, the difference being that while the images of the European quarters include the occasional Muslim, the images of the Casbah are totally free of Europeans. A sizeable proportion of the postcards produced in the early twentieth century were of 'types' – a spurious ethnological imagery of different Algerian practices and occupations. Needless to say, these were entirely made up of indigenous Arabs and Berbers.

Postcards of Algiers and Algerians were produced in France and sold in Algiers; their postal destination was invariably to be sent back to France. Malek Alloula, in *The Colonial Harem*, his study of the postcards depicting the phantasm of the harem, notes the restless movement involved in the colonial tourist postcard:

[The postcard] straddles two spaces: the one it represents and the one it will reach. It marks out the peregrinations of the tourist, the successive postings of the soldier, the territorial spread of the colonist. It sublimates the spirit of the stopover and the sense of place; it is an act of unrelenting aggression against sedentariness.

(Alloula 1986: 4)

As far as this goes, the colonial mission of dehistoricizing colonized people, making them seem timeless and outside the processes of modernization, also works to absent them from the *urban* process. In comparison to the presumed global mobility and modernizing mission of the European colonizer, the Algerians and the Casbah are represented as static and timeless.

To recognize that this image of the Casbah was ideological and used for supplying an inverse image of Europe is merely to recognize how colonialism works via material practices that were both physical and imaginary at one and the same time. What needs stressing, however, is the ambiguity that was the result of this process of urbanism. If colonial urbanism worked to render the Casbah as an isolated, exotic site that was outside modernity, then in the end it was the very isolation of the Casbah that made it such an effective centre for resistance during the war of liberation, even to the point where the FLN referred to it as the 'autonomous zone'. Çelik, for instance, notes how the lack of any state care of the Casbah meant that impromptu community action became the only source for the maintenance of the buildings. Thus the 'private' world of the Casbah turned into a space where: 'the residents of the Casbah, the heights of al-Jaza'ir left untouched by the colonizers, spoke back by turning in upon themselves, consolidating their unity, tightening and redefining their own mechanisms of maintenance and control over the public and private spaces of their neighborhoods' (Çelik 2000: 164).

The moment in *The Battle of Algiers* when the French paras invade the

Casbah has to be seen in relation to these urban processes. It is precisely because the Casbah has become a force of sustained and substantial resistance that it takes such a massive force to try to suppress it. Yet this substantiation of the Casbah as resistance is precisely an effect of colonial urbanism and its process of isolation. The architectural properties of the Casbah (which we detail in the next section) became properties that could accommodate: 'a whole series of secret passages leading from one house to another, bomb factories, caches and virtually undiscoverable hiding-places concealed behind false walls' (Horne 1977: 184). Thus the initial properties of the Casbah could be adapted to ends unimagined by the original builders. Colonial urbanism produced the Casbah as a 'private sphere', a process fully in keeping with the exclusion of the vast majority of Algerians from the public sphere. The Algerians responded by turning the Casbah into a 'counter public sphere' or an 'oppositional public sphere' (see Kluge 1981 for the use of these terms) – a place for the emergence of an Algerian public. The film ends as that public emerges to claim Algiers.

Passing

This ending to *The Battle of Algiers* is the 'spontaneous' (that is, not directed by the FLN) resurgence of Algerian resistance to colonial occupation in 1960. After a day of demonstrations parading makeshift Algerian flags and battling with the tanks and militia of the occupying force, the demonstrators return to the Casbah. This is the moment when, for Pontecorvo and others, the historical mission of the people of Algeria is recognized: they can no longer do anything except take their independence. As night falls and the streets are cleared, we hear the voice of a journalist claiming: 'now calm has returned, although from the Casbah continue to be heard those cries . . . incoherent, rhythmic, nightmarish cries' (Solinas 1973: 158). The journalist is referring to the trilling calls (*ju-ju*) of Algerian women that have been a tenacious presence throughout the film.

Colonial representation has consistently perceived the Casbah as female, or more precisely as a veiled Moorish woman. Writing in a tourist guide in 1906, one Pierre Batail could describe the entirety of the Casbah as if it were a veiled woman: 'the Casbah . . . still has the same mysterious atmosphere. It still resembles the Moorish women whose veils only allow their eyes to be seen. There are still the same low doors that never open' (cited in DeRoo 1998: 147). One can only wonder what the reference to low doors refers to in this context. The colonial imagination perceived and depicted the Casbah as full of mystery, and that mystery was fundamentally female and sexualized.

It is worth pausing for a moment to take a note of how the Casbah was indigenously gendered before pursuing the colonial imagination in these matters. Our guide is, again, Zeynep Çelik:

Regardless of the family's income or size of the building, the houses of the Casbah closed themselves to the street and turned onto a courtyard surrounded by elaborate arcades. The geographic and topographic conditions of Algiers added another element to the houses of the Casbah: rooftop terraces. In contrast to the interiorized courtyards and relatively contrived rooms of the houses, the terraces opened up to neighbors, to the city, to the sea – to the world. The concern for privacy, so dominant in defining the street facades, disintegrated at roof level. It was this alternative realm that the women of Algiers claimed for themselves – as a place of work, socialization, and recreation; indeed, a much more pleasant place than the restricted streets below. The Casbah thus became divided into two realms: on top, occupying the expanse of the entire city, were the women; at the bottom were the narrow streets belonging to the men.

(Çelik 1996: 130)

Indeed the 'dense configuration of the casbah made it possible to pass from one terrace to the other and visit other homes without having to use the street' (Çelik 1997: 19). The spatiality of the Casbah is an articulation of Muslim culture and designates specific spaces (the most internal rooms of the house, the courtyard and rooftops) as female. This, as we will see, is not inscribed as immutable law but as an expression of cultural practice: it reflects a gendered division, a division which can simultaneously be interpreted and practised as providing a relatively autonomous arena for Muslim women, or as a practice of isolation and control. Neither Muslim culture nor the practices of Muslim women are static entities, rather, it is how they change, and what they change in relation to, that is crucial here.

The colonial imagination assumed two approaches towards Algerian women: on the one hand it rendered them as a uniform, undifferentiated mass; on the other it exercised an obsessive desire to unveil them. The first of these is well described in Assia Djebar's words as the 'anonymity of exoticism' (Djebar [1980] 1999: 135), an anonymity produced because the exclusive interest for the colonial subject is in Algerian women's visible differences from European (non-Muslim) women. In this all that is seen is the uniformity of the *haïk* (the white cloth that veils Muslim women's bodies) rather than the modifications and variations of design that constitute the wearing of the *haïk*, which would have been evident to other residents of the Casbah (both female and male) (see Macey 2000: 403–9). The 'unveiling' of Algerian women by colonial tourism is well documented in Malek Alloula's study of postcards, *The Colonial Harem*, where he analyses the 'erotic-ethnographic' picturing of 'Moorish women' in various states of undress. For Alloula the endless picturing of unveiled Muslim women (and Islam is a culture that prohibits the figural depiction of the human body) 'is an immense compensatory undertaking, an imaginary revenge upon what had been inaccessible until then: the world of Algerian women'

(Alloula 1986: 122). We should read this in two ways. Firstly as a reminder of the aggression of colonialism as it is exercised on colonized women ('offered up, body and soul, these *algériennes* are the metaphorical equivalent of trophies, of war booty'); secondly, though, it points to an understanding of women's veiling in Algiers (and this was not a practice that was customary outside Algerian urban centres) as a purposeful refusal of the culture of the colonizer, a deliberate opposition to the regime of colonialism.

It is the deliberate and dialogic use of the veil that is described in one of the most important documents of the Algerian war. Frantz Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism* was written and published during the war and when it was published in France in 1959 it was called *L'An cinq de la révolution algérienne* (The fifth year of the Algerian revolution). The French title declares the author's commitment to the cause of the FLN. The first chapter was titled 'Algeria Unveiled', or, as David Macey suggests, offering a more literal translation – 'Algeria Unveils Herself' (Macey 2000: 402), and describes how Algerian women had become part of the revolutionary struggle and, in the process, how ideas about women and femininity were being revolutionized. The theme of how an anti-colonial, socialist revolution has and will challenge and reconfigure family relationships, traditional practices and the private sphere more generally were the themes of his book. In relation to Algerian women and the veil, it raises some problematic issues. Fanon seems at times, for instance, to suggest that the outcome of anti-colonial liberation will be the adoption of European-style ideas about dress and the visibility of women's bodies.

Yet Fanon describes a tactical process that relates the veil to notions of urban mobility within colonial and decolonizing culture. Fanon, for instance, recognizes how both the adoption of European clothing and the wearing of the *haïk* could be used for tactical purposes to aid movement through a heavily controlled city and thereby aid the struggle:

There is thus a historic dynamism of the veil that is very concretely perceptible in the development of colonization in Algeria. In the beginning, the veil was a mechanism of resistance, but its value for the social group remained very strong. The veil was worn because tradition demanded the rigid separation of the sexes, but also because the occupier was bent on unveiling Algeria. In the second phase, the mutation occurred in connection with the Revolution and under special circumstances. The veil was abandoned in the course of revolutionary action. What had been used to block the psychological or political offensives of the occupier became a means, an instrument. . . . After the 13th May [1957, when veiled women were dragged into public squares to have their veils forcibly removed], the veil was resumed, but stripped once and for all of its exclusively traditional dimension.

(Fanon [1959] 1980: 41)

Algerian women resist colonialism by asserting a traditional form of dress that makes them unavailable for assimilation and colonialist sexual solicitations. Next, they let go of these traditions as their revolutionary consciousness is awakened. But then, when the colonizers enact a policy of forced unveiling, they reveal themselves. No doubt this is all too neat, and Fanon seems blind to the way that Algerian women's refusal of the veil, both before, during and after the revolutionary war, may have been an explicit critique aimed not simply at colonialism, but also at masculinist interpretations of the Koran. Nonetheless, it usefully begins to highlight the pragmatic and tactical nature of clothing and movement in this struggle.

Like many politically engaged intellectuals at the time, Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas read Fanon, and explicitly cited Fanon's work as a crucial reference for the making of *The Battle of Algiers* (see for instance Said 2000). Nowhere is the reference to Fanon clearer than in the scene in *The Battle of Algiers* where the three Muslim women refashion themselves so that they can pass as European. This scene is a filmic illustration of Fanon's reading of the historic significance of the veil in relation to the Algerian revolution. Yet the scene can be read on at least two levels. As symbolic material it might be read as a revolutionary unveiling, as Muslim women join the struggle and leave behind certain forms of traditional life. Yet there is a more pragmatic reading of the scene: veils are removed, hair is dyed and cut, simply in order to aid the mobility of the women through a heavily policed checkpoint – a checkpoint that was focused on anyone looking Islamic. In this way the wearing or not of the *haïk* is endlessly tactical. It might aid mobility when it was not being worn, but it could also aid the movement of weapons and bombs when it was being worn (the folds of the *haïk* allow for a loose draping, useful for concealing objects). But even this pragmatic register resonates with symbolism: the sacrifice of cutting hair and adorning themselves with lipstick is seen as costly. This is particularly shown by the use of mirrors, as we watch the women watching themselves cutting their long hair and looking regretfully at themselves in the mirror. The shrugging off of tradition, whether it is symbolic, pragmatic or even the result of an awakening revolutionary consciousness, is not performed lightly. At stake, along with lives and freedom, seems to be the very possibility of maintaining continuity with the past. The future, the revolution, will perhaps always be a step into the unknown.

The scene is close to the actual events of 30 September 1956 when Zohra Drif, Djamila Bouhired and Samia Lakhdari planted bombs in the European quarters of the city. In many ways the film follows the overly neat theorizing of Fanon in this account. What we see are three women who seem to be leaving the narrow enclaves of the Casbah to realize their part in the historical mission of a free Algeria. The FLN leader, played by Saadi Yacef, is seen as all-powerful, bringing the women to consciousness in the face of the previous day's bombing of the Casbah. In reality, Drif and

Lakhdari were part of the Algerian educated elite, both were educated within the French system (which only allowed a small number of Algerians to attend French schools), both had their baccalaureates and were studying law at university in Algiers. The idea of the male FLN leaders bringing these women to political consciousness hardly squares with the actuality of these women's lives. Yet even if the reality of the situation was more complex than the film or Fanon allow for, this scene does offer a condensed image of elements that are at stake in the colonial city. In passing through the checkpoints, the three women reveal the fragile nature of colonial racism – indeed the scene reveals the ontological impossibility of the very category of 'race' as a support for such an ideology. What is it precisely that would allow armies of colonizers to discriminate so systematically against a group of people who were supposedly so different from Europeans, the film seems to ask, when the colonizers can't tell them apart from Europeans and when the Algerian women seem so adept at passing as European (Plate 4.5)?



Plate 4.5 FLN operative passing the checkpoint and passing as European: scene from *The Battle of Algiers*

This scene, and the film more generally, reveals the plasticity and unevenness of colonial urban culture. It shows the agility of Algerians in performing various roles in the city, while the paras are shown as not needing such tactical skills. It also reveals the plasticity of the social architecture of the city, especially the Casbah. Rooms and routes in the Casbah that had been reserved for women were renegotiated as practices and roles changed:

The war of decolonization brought the Casbah to the forefront as a major locus of resistance. In this context, Algerians did not consider the privacy of the family and of women as a sacrosanct issue: resistance fighters were allowed into the houses and onto the rooftops (accessible only through the hearts of houses), facilitating their movements, while other outsiders, including the French forces, were not allowed access. Subsequently, the French forces would blockade the Casbah and occupy not only the streets but also the homes and roof terraces.

(Çelik 1996: 138)

The Casbah, then, is designed for particular uses, which include the separation of male and female space. With its interior courtyards and various navigational possibilities, the Casbah wasn't designed to facilitate a guerilla campaign, and yet proved to offer a number of tactical possibilities for the FLN. Social architecture, both domestic and public urban space, needs to be seen in relation to social practices that are continually changing and transforming space. For colonial urbanism the isolation of the Casbah was *intended* to provide an alibi for colonialism but ended up producing one of the conditions for colonialism's destruction. Intentionality and design don't lead in any straightforward way to specific effects. Yet the tenacious symbolism of these spaces is not easily obliterated: the gendering of space and its violation continues to be experienced, most extremely when *European male* soldiers violate it.

Michel Foucault provides a useful explanation of how spatiality must be thought about in conjunction with an understanding of social and cultural practices. Using as an example the cooperative factory building designed by the utopian industrialist Jean-Baptiste Godin, Foucault writes:

The architecture of Godin was clearly intended for the freedom of people. Here was something that manifested the power of ordinary workers to participate in the exercise of their trade. It was a rather important sign and instrument of autonomy for a group of workers. Yet no one could enter or leave the place without being seen by everyone – an aspect of the architecture that could be totally oppressive. But it could only be oppressive if people were prepared to use their own presence in order to watch over others. Let's imagine a community of unlimited sexual practices that might be established there. It would once again

become a place of freedom. I think it is somewhat arbitrary to try to dissociate the effective practice of freedom by people, the practice of social relations, and the spatial distributions in which they find themselves. If they are separated, they become impossible to understand. Each can only be understood through the other.

(Foucault 1984: 246)

Foucault's example takes us to a world distinct from both the colonially planned quarters of Algiers and the Casbah. Yet, his insistence that a description of space that ignores the practices of social relations will be unable to grasp the complex actualization of space at a specific historical moment is important for both these spaces. It shows how urban space is always relatively open to being used in a variety of ways and how its meanings are always, potentially at least, available for contestation. For instance, the isolation of the Casbah could be seen as a policy of colonial aloofness, providing respect for the colonized and so on – this, at any rate, was the way that colonial administrators wanted it to be perceived. To reveal such a practice as part and parcel of a fundamental refusal to grant Algerians civic and civil rights was the outcome of another practice, the practice of decolonization. In analogous ways the gendered spaces and the gendered practices of the Casbah could be remade in ways that allowed for a variety of actualizations.

Neocolonial Urban Experiences

Colonial and anti-colonial urban experience highlight a problem that has been at the centre of this book from the start; namely, the inextricable convergence of the imagination and hard facticity of urban life. If French occupiers in Algiers lived a life whereby the Casbah was simultaneously disorderly, authentic, mysterious, unsettling, unhygienic and exotic, this imaginary realm cannot be disentangled from *their* physical experience of the Casbah or the colonial urbanism that was practised on the Casbah and in relation to the Casbah. The inhabitants of the Casbah operated in ways that were constantly and simultaneously both symbolic and practical. Such operations are always a convergence – symbolic activities always constitute a physical presence just as physical activities offer symbolic (or potentially symbolic) resonances. The use of varying dress codes by female FLN activists, for instance, is simultaneously practical (an aid to mobility, a way of concealing weapons) and symbolic (depicting Europe or Islam and the connotations that accompany them).

Henri Lefebvre usefully describes the simultaneity of this double register when he talks about the lived aspect of space as 'representational space'. For Lefebvre the separation of 'experience' and 'representation' are clearly not sensible distinctions. Yet he will claim that 'representations of

space', for example those representations instantiated by urban planners, architects and the like, rarely correspond with the experience of space. Lefebvre understands social practice (living) as a representational activity, but refuses to treat representation as a 'second-order activity' (they are rarely the representation of something *else*). Representation is the name he gives to an activity that we have been describing as the simultaneity of symbolic and practical activity – it is perhaps another word to describe the thickness of culture that is always practical and symbolic. For Lefebvre one of the crucial distinctions to be made is between the activities of those who have the social power to generate space ('representations of space') and those, with more limited resources, who are faced with living in already constructed spaces ('representational space' or 'spaces of representation'). Representation is a social practice that is dynamic and contested and constitutes a struggle over and within space.

We can get a sense of how Lefebvre understands this when he designates 'representational spaces' as: 'space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols, and hence the space of "inhabitants" and "users"' (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 39). At first this may seem to be a contradictory statement – surely to live directly is at odds with living through images and symbols? For Lefebvre, however, there is no such contradiction because experience in any meaningful sense is the experience of life as it is interlaced with symbols and images. What Lefebvre is pointing to, though, is our ability to appropriate space culturally when we are not in the position to control or generate actual physical space. Thus he goes on to describe representational space: 'this is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects', it is spatial experience that is 'linked to the clandestine or underground side of life' (Lefebvre [1974] 1991: 39 and 33). Here, in the context of the history of the Casbah, we may want to suggest that such use of space doesn't remain in the realm of the imagination and that symbolic use is always and at the same time practical, physical use. We might also want to note that the 'passivity' of this experience (and by passivity Lefebvre seems to mean simply not being able to generate space actively) can, and often does, lead to an active engagement with the physical conditions of space.

The significance of Lefebvre's understanding of space, which according to Edward Soja is characterized by an insistence 'that each mode of thinking about space, each "field" of human spatiality – the physical, the mental, the social – be seen as simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, material and metaphorical' (Soja 1996: 64–5), is crucial for our understanding of colonial urbanism. But it is also significant for our understanding of the experience of space *after* decolonization. More pertinently, perhaps, we might want to say that decolonization is an incomplete project. Not only do we need to be wary of assuming that the overthrow of one colonial rule will simply bring about liberatory urban space (and the

history of Algeria since 1962 should emphatically encourage such wariness), we also need to register the wider spatial implications of colonialism that we are still living through. The experience of Algerians living in France might give us an insight into something of the 'representational spaces' of neocolonialism.

This is the 'Algerian' writer Zimba Kerdjou describing her childhood in Alès, in the south of France:

The town where I live, Alès, is a nice, quiet place. I've always lived there. My earliest childhood years were spent amidst enormous tower blocks which, at the time, children living in other apartment blocks called Chicago, as if this was a more suitable name than 'Les Cévennes'. Although the district was less poor than Le Chaâba [an Arabic name designating an Algerian shanty town on the outskirts of Lyons], as described by Azouz Begag, during the 1970s it, too, was a little piece of Algeria in the heart of France . . . For this reason, outsiders have never been able to describe the reality of everyday life in my district.

(Kerdjou cited in Hargreaves 1995: 90)

Kerdjou is describing an urban district in southern France where poor housing complexes, inhabited by families who have migrated (sometimes several generations previously), are described in relation to a variety of spaces (various places in France, Chicago, Algeria). One important thing to note though is that this place is not 'like' Algeria; more complexly and more experientially, it was 'a little piece of Algeria', existing in France. In physical terms it is clear that we are not dealing with a space that was in Algeria, nor are we dealing with a space that was somehow analogous to Algeria. It *was* Algeria, in the sense that cultural practices could constitute it as such.

Neocolonial space operates in surprisingly similar ways to colonial space, in that it is animated by juxtapositions of unevenly valued cultures that are 'spatially contiguous but culturally disparate' (Hargreaves 1995: 91). To move between the Casbah and the French quarters of Algiers in the years prior to decolonization was to move across cultural worlds even though the physical space traversed might only be a few metres. In a more general culture of neocolonialism, people who are perceived as 'immigrants' experience such dissonances continually. Zimba Kerdjou, for instance, describes her school life within the French education system:

Even at primary school, most of us were of Algerian origin, and our absence when Muslim festivals took place was a way of asserting our Arab culture. The distinction between Algerian and Arab meant nothing to us. Algeria was basically a piece of countryside to which each family returned during the summer holidays, but it was also a kind of ideal land.

(Kerdjou cited in Hargreaves 1995: 90)

Migration within neocolonial spatiality is not a singular act; it is performed daily (and yearly) as children 'migrate' from home to school and back again. As Alec Hargreaves suggests, 'though school and home were only a few hundred metres apart, in journeying between them each child migrated daily between profoundly different cultural universes' (Hargreaves 1995: 91).

There are a number of points to be made here about neocolonial urban space. Firstly, that the symbolic, imaginary appropriation of space needs to be thought of as a cultural practice that is simultaneously physical and imaginary. Kerdjou, for instance, is writing about the physical practice of upholding the Muslim calendar within a culture (and in this France is not dissimilar to Britain) that seems unable to recognize either the value of 'other' cultures or the continuity of its colonial inheritance. Recently a law was passed in France banning the wearing of Islamic headscarves, the *hijab*, as well as other 'ostentatious' religious dress in schools. At present, though, it seems that only Muslim girls are being excluded from French schools. We need to think of these spaces as neocolonial rather than simply multicultural because of the conditions within which these cultural contacts occur. It is not that one child is experiencing more cultural diversity than another, but that the experience is of cultural diversity that is unequally valued in both symbolic and physical ways. Alongside the racism that might accompany the cultural practices of following the Islam religion, we need to think about the cultural and economic discriminations that impact on cultural space. Algerians migrating to what, before 1962, was meant to be just another part of France, ended up living in the worst housing conditions in France. Indeed, one common experience of migration was the feeling of having swapped poverty in Algeria for poverty in France, while simultaneously suffering a deep nostalgia for home. One of the largest *bidonvilles* in either France or Algeria was an Algerian 'squatter' camp in the Nanterre suburb of Paris (Plate 4.6). This is where the writer Brahim Benaïcha grew up, having left Algeria at the age of eight in 1960. Benaïcha describes how he used to pretend that he lived in a block of flats and how his attempts at close friendships with his classmates always floundered when it came to visits to friends' homes:

They were nice to me, and some of them invited me home. I always found a pretext for refusing the invitation. It wasn't that I didn't want to go home with them, but because sooner or later I would have to return the hospitality – and there could be no question of my taking them back to the shanty-town. I knew what they thought about places like that.

(Benaïcha cited in Hargreaves 1995: 96)

Representational space is necessarily limited because it can't overcome the larger spatial practices of neocolonial urbanism (without, that is, a successful revolutionary campaign). Nonetheless, Benaïcha remembers



Plate 4.6 *Bidonville* in Nanterre, near Paris, in 1973, Marc Garanger, SAIF, 2004

another side to his French *bidonville* childhood: 'what has it given us during the last ten years? It has enabled us to preserve our language, our religion, our identity. It has enabled us to remain ourselves amid all the tempestuous clashes of civilisations through which we have been' (Benaïcha cited in Hargreaves 1995: 95). The *bidonvilles* in Algiers during the years of the war for independence were the most visible sign of the inequality of housing practices. They can and should be seen as an exercise of colonial spatial exclusion, but at the same time they became a space for crucial information exchange, fortifying and unifying the opposition movement:

in the summer of 1956, refugees from the burned and bombed villages of Mitija (at the foot of the Atlas mountains) and Kabylia flocked to the Mahieddine settlement, the most extensive *bidonvilles* of Algiers. Their stories mixed with those of the urban resistance, complementing each other and unifying the struggle.

(Çelik 1997: 211)

In the next chapter I want to explore the cultural unevenness of the city within North American detective novels. It might seem to be a long way away from the world of *The Battle of Algiers* and the real-world struggles of colonialism, decolonization and neocolonialism. In other ways, however, the kind of emphatic yet surreptitious cultural divisions that are articulated by spatial practices of isolation and the production of community will continue to be the focus. In particular the theme of movement and mobility and, perhaps more crucially, the limits that are placed on movement will allow us to access the very different neocolonial urban space of North America.