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Final Exam Essay Prompt #2: Postcolonial Cinema

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The Battle of Algiers perfectly captures the chaos of colonial conflict in a harrowing, documentary-like presentation. The use of non-professional actors, on-location shooting, and a realistic mode all echo the sentiments of realist films that precede it, including *Rome Open City* and *Pepe Le Moko*. By reflecting the characteristics of these seminal Italian neo-realist and French colonial films, *Battle* crafts a world that is partitioned into unique spaces in which the characters navigate and negotiate - including the ambiguous in-between.

The film operates in such a mode that is decidedly convinced in its own reality. As O'Leary writes, "the mimicry of documentary footage was designed to give the impression of viewing evidence, of witnessing events as they occur" (18). From an outsider's perspective, films such as *Battle* and *Rome Open City* could easily pass as dug-up, archived war footage. In addition, the use of on-location shooting serves as a twisted love letter to the Casbah, as both *Battle* and *Pepe Le Moko* expose the hardships and struggles of colonial life through death and destruction.

Battle's coda, in all of its celebratory chaos, serves as a victory lap for an unwavering colonial struggle. O'Leary writes that "[it] pictures the culmination of a process of politicization...by what feels like an entire people" (23). The sheer number of people participating in the portrayed protests overwhelms the occupied space. It is at this point in the film where the space transcends the reel and where the world merges with our own. *Battle's* coda

is essential in highlighting the alienated space beyond the screen as *banlieue* cinema, where the ongoing adversities of displacement, housing, and other pressures of post-colonial life still exist to this day.

The various structures and buildings found in the film offer some interesting commentary on power and the struggle to reclaim it. As O'leary notes, "the houses of the Casbah present a sealed aspect that can be taken as both a sign of resistance and of occupation" (21). The 200 Columns building, a towering achievement of European architecture, serves as an effective backdrop for demonstrators - reflecting the opposing European oppression that the Casbah's inhabitants face. The coda's portrayal of the Climat De France "echo the mise-en-scène and framing of the buildings and elevations seen earlier in the film" where the protestors reject the idea that they are confined within the space the colonizers drew out for them (21). In one scene, the film briefly visits the Aero-Habitat building - reflecting the unfulfilled visions of colonial French architects and their imposition on Algerians.

Perhaps the most important feature of the coda of *Battle* is how it constructs a "third-space", one that lies in between the Casbah and European infrastructure. "*Battle* pushes beyond the space of authenticity (the Casbah) and of occupation (the European city) to a third space that is hybrid and other to both" (O'Leary 24). This space is one that both spatially and temporally transcends the restraints of the film and develops itself in real-time. It is in this post-colonial area where Algerians must grapple with the remnants of oppression and tirelessly march into the future.

In *Atlantics*, director Mati Diop provides an intimate view into this postcolonial space. From the portrayal of harsh, rust-like urban areas to hypnotic shots of waves crashing on the

shore, *Atlantics*' scenery showcases duality. The protagonist, Ada, is in constant pursuit of freedom, as her involvement in an arranged marriage conflicts with her desires for agency. Ada must navigate through a space where the vestiges of colonialism still remain, while also dealing with the strict laws and rules placed upon her by society. This is conveyed subtly through the use of supernatural activity. Just as the effects of colonialism and capitalism have haunted Senegal, the underpaid workers return the favor by taking the corporeal form of everyday citizens. The supernatural elements in *Atlantics* are downplayed as to not cheapen the film's artistry through gimmicky or novel devices. Instead, the ghosts are more unnerving than horrific while still serving a poignant story about resistance, revenge, and freedom.

According to Beugnet, "the new realist cinema of the 1990s chose provincial locations often unfamiliar to the cinematic gaze...the fear of unemployment and poverty, the pressures in the working environment combined with family tensions [are] depicted through elliptical narratives (292). These films often eschewed conventional tropes and explored the "unglamorous" and "banal" (Beugnet 293). These themes of social pressures, economic struggles, and dramatic realism all manifest themselves in *Atlantics*, exemplifying a bold exercise in more evocative, politically-conscious cinema.

Works Cited

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