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Filming History from Below: Microhistory as Cinematic Practice

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Abstract

This paper foregrounds the historical film as a form of historical documentation capable of shaping and reframing our understanding of the past. It examines how Souheil Ben Barka's *The Lovers of Mogador* (2002) detours around colonial representations of Moroccan resistance that reproduce narratives of inevitable submission and European military superiority. By visually reconfiguring Hubert Lyautey's pacification campaign (1912-1925), the film reimagines southeastern Morocco not as a passive periphery but as a stronghold of sustained military resistance, thereby highlighting the agency of Moroccan guerrilla fighters. Grounded in a microhistorical approach, the paper further investigates the ambivalent position of Moroccan goumiers, indigenous colonial soldiers, who are torn between two conflicting realities: stigmatized as traitors within local memory, while relegated to subordinate roles within the French military apparatus. That said, the paper argues that, through such narrative and visual strategies, historical cinema enables a re-staging of the past that renders its ambiguities visible and destabilizes mainstream historical narratives.

Keywords

Historical Film, Microhistory, Moroccan Goumiers, Resistance, *The Lovers of Mogador*

1. Introduction

Historical film has come a long way from being seen as a street attraction and having no identity, in contrast to what is written, to becoming one of the most important film genres in contemporary times, which not only enriches our historical archives but also affects the way we look at and relate to history itself. This new understanding has shifted the focus to the filmmaker as a person who is involved in much more than just screening past events. In a sense, the filmmaker

takes up the role of the historian, and so filming becomes a way of projecting historical events as much as it is a way of doing, representing, and commenting on history. Rosenstone (2012) strongly affirms that filmmakers may have as much right to think about the past as historians. That is, the filmmaker can help us see and hear the visible as well as the non-visible parts of our history. The rich combination of screenplay, sight, and sound can, in particular cases, fill in "irritating gaps in the historical record and polish dulling ambiguities and complexities" (Carnes, 1995). More importantly, historical film, oftentimes, moves beyond the scope of merely showing the past to imbue it with certain emotions and feelings that make the audience relate to and identify with it. It is exactly here where the filmmaker, aided by the visual power of the medium he uses, gains prominence over the academic historian whose prose, and sometimes a small selection of grainy photographs, does not have the same effects as the moving image does on the audience.

However, the question of whether a filmmaker could claim the title of cinematic historian persists and still generates much controversy in both the cinematic and historiographical academic scenes. One of the contributing factors to this controversy is the rigor of historical objectivity as conceptualized and practiced by historians. The latter believe it is strictly necessary for a historian to maintain a critical distance from their subjects to produce good and bias-free historical writings. The binary opposition between fact and fiction must be made clear and respected under any circumstances. This is sometimes not the case for filmmakers who might find themselves "projecting onto the silver screen [their] highly subjective version of actual persons and events and enlivening them with colourful imagery, concocted dialogue, and imaginary people" (Rosenstone, 2012). Thus, from a historian's point of view, history in film is referred to as a travesty. By way of illustration, Ian Jarvie, a historian and a film enthusiast, levels scathing criticism at filmmakers, accusing them of fakery. He states, "From the earliest times moviemakers have faked and re-staged events for their newsreels and documentaries" (Jarvie, 1978, p. 376). Accordingly, historical films in Jarvie's view cannot be seen as a window onto the past. He acknowledges the ability of film to screen past events or embody a historical standpoint, but he finds it limiting in the sense that the filmmaker cannot properly and convincingly defend it, rebut it, or footnote it, like the historian who has all the necessary documents and tools at his disposal. In this sense, the boundaries between fact and fiction become increasingly porous when screening past events.

Respectively, the British historian Carr (1990) critiques historians for the same issues they often point out in filmmakers. For him, historians are also involved in selecting and structuring facts, while eclipsing others. Similarly, White (1988) points out that professional historians tend to overlook the fact that "written history is itself a representation of the past, a construction with its own rules of operation." This draws our attention to Rosenstone's assumption that history is "a cultural historicist discourse constituted by historians as much as it is reconstructed from the sources available about the past." Other notable historians, such as Oliver Stone, Tony Barta, Mark Carnes, and Marnie Hughes, all argue that cin-

ematographic language can be a means of information and a mode of expression, allowing for an additional dimension to be given to our knowledge of the past. Neither filmmakers nor historians write history innocently (Ferro, 1988). The latter calls upon fellow historians to harness the multifaceted powers of the visual medium, which, putting aside questions of indubitable objectivity, can help shape our understanding of history. He even praises the filmmaker's ability not only to envision history but also to reinterpret and challenge it. He declares, "Thanks to popular memory and oral traditions, the historian-filmmaker can give back to society a history it has been deprived of by the institution of History" (Ferro, 1988, p. 20). The film can, therefore, provide a counter-analysis to society by de-structuring what several generations of men of state and thinkers have built into such a beautiful harmony. Inherent in Ferro's argument is the uniqueness of the filmic language, which differs completely from that of written texts. Thus, films should not be sought as illustration nor as a means of entertainment, but rather as a historical document, whereby the filmmaker "challenges generally accepted views of particular people, events, issues, or themes" (Rosenstone, 2012).

At the core of revising historical narratives is the act of inclusive visual remembering. This implies extending historical inquiry to silent, overlooked, and marginalized spaces and people whose stories, if ever acknowledged, are only used to reinforce the prominence of those at the center of mainstream narratives. For this particular reason, a new trajectory of envisioning history started to emerge in cinema, that is, filming history from below, which is in turn pivoted on a micro-historical approach.

Grounded in a microhistorical approach, the paper argues that *The Lovers of Mogador* invites us to listen to the small voices of history by foregrounding the role of southeastern Morocco in resisting the pacification campaign led by Hubert Lyautey. It also recovers the forgotten story of Moroccan goumiers, Moroccan colonial soldiers, whose participation reveals an ambivalent and often contradictory positionality in Moroccan historical accounts. Situated within this historical juncture, the film enables a critical re-reading of established historiographies, challenging their claims and exposing their silences.

Accordingly, the paper asks the following question: How does Souheil Ben Barka mobilize a microhistorical lens to reframe dominant narratives of colonial Morocco, particularly with regard to resistance in the southeast and the role of goumiers? Addressing such a question is based on the assumption that the film provides an especially compelling case study because it centers on marginal voices and localized experiences that are frequently excluded from macro-historical accounts, thereby offering a more nuanced and critical understanding of Moroccan history vis-à-vis French colonialism.

2. Filming History from Below: Microhistory as Cinematic Practice

Among the first to theorize about microhistory was the Italian scholar Giovanni Levi, who contends that, "The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is

the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved" (qtd. in Brewer, 2010, p. 97). This approach to historical inquiry should be distinguished from the French concepts of petite histoire and fait divers, as the latter tend to single out events as case studies, while microhistory, as understood by the Italians—Primo Levi, Giovanni Levi, and Simona Cerutti—cannot be viewed merely as "biography or local (ized) history, nor can its description be relegated to that of a mere case study" (Pucci, 2019). On the contrary, microhistory has an objective far more far-reaching than that, as it looks for answers to great historical questions. Similarly, Magnússon & Szijártó (2013, p. 5) point out, "For microhistorians, people who lived in the past are not merely puppets in the hands of the great underlying forces of history, but they are regarded as active individuals, conscious actors".

These new trajectories have had an immediate impact on historical fiction and documentary filmmaking, with Italian neorealism as a case in point. In his book *Filming History from Below* (2022), Efrén Cuevas deploys the microhistorical approach to study films and shows their contribution as a microhistorical chronicle of a specific era, nation, or social group. Cuevas grounds his approach on historians' positing of the complementary relationship between written history and visual history, especially Rosenstone, who affirms:

> To accept filmmakers as historians ... is to accept a new sort of history ... In terms of informational content, intellectual density, or theoretical insight, film will always be less complex than written history. Yet its moving images and soundscapes will create experiential and emotional complexities of a sort unknown upon the printed page (Cuevas, 2022).

In light of this quote, the concept of the cinematic historian refers to filmmakers who engage with the past in ways comparable to professional historians, but through the distinctive language of film rather than written discourse. Accordingly, directors of historical films are not merely storytellers or illustrators of history; they actively interpret, construct, and argue about the past using visual, auditory, and narrative techniques.

Using Rosenstone's concept of the cinematic historian within a microhistorical methodology to read and think about Ben Barka's historical films signifies, first, the acknowledgment that these films are viable gateways onto a social history that can contribute knowledge to our understanding of this history with their own unique filmic language, and second, that they are important visual media to shed light on marginalized and forgotten narratives.

This shifts focus to the lived experiences of the laymen, or, as Lüdtke (1995) calls them, "the largely anonymous in history." Cuevas pushes the boundaries of rescuing "the casualties of history" to bear on the world of cinema. He argues that microhistory should recover marginalized characters and construct counter-hegemonic narratives in opposition to official histories (Cuevas, 2022, pp. 44-45). A similar argument can be found in Ranajit Guha's seminal work, *The Small Voice*

of History (2009), which also enjoins us to listen to the often dismissed voices of subaltern subjects. Like Cuevas, Guha, albeit in a different field of study, commits himself to the task of regaining the myriad voices of the oppressed and their suppressed histories. He notes,

> Historical scholarship has developed, through recursive practice, a tradition that tends to ignore the small drama and fine details of social existence, especially at its lower depths. A critical historiography can make up for this lacuna by bending closer to the ground in order to pick up the traces of subaltern life in its passage through time (Guha, 2009).

Inherent in Guha's call lies a discursive dualism, that is, dominant and suppressed histories; the latter is drowned in the former's hegemony.

It is for this reason, arguably, that many postcolonial filmmakers, either in Africa or elsewhere, have made films to document the history and culture of their own communities in order to give a voice to those who have been marginalized and silenced by Western and Hollywood depictions. Souheil Ben Barka is an interesting case in point. His films exemplify this narrative agency. In addition to representing Moroccan as well as African subjects as no longer ciphers and ornamental accessories, Ben Barka explores thus-far suppressed memories and hidden histories in a way that destabilizes the self/other binarism. His engagement with history differs from most postcolonial filmmakers who, I contend, fall into the category outlined above by Aijaz Ahmed. Instead of focusing exclusively on the colonial aftermath, Ben Barka goes further back in history to stage seminal historical narratives that attest to Moroccan ingenuity and agency. Through his historical films, he carves out a space where Morocco slips away from the Eurocentric panopticon, and the Moroccan subjects are no longer subordinate to Westerners.

By doing so, Ben Barka is engaging in an act of subverting conventional frames and choreographing new histories, which opens the way toward a reconceptualization of imperial/colonial histories and geographies. In *Postcolonial Cinema Studies* (2012), Sandra Ponzanesi and Marguerite Waller refer to this act as 'unframing histories,' which they like to think of as a political endeavor to visualize what has been invisible, untold, or discarded. They further explain that unframing histories "is not only about undoing established historical accounts and fixed geographies but also about rediscovering the regional, the minor histories and local spaces, made available through anachronisms and deterritorializations" (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012, p. 62). This view is also shared by Sorlin (1980), who argues that history as used in film "is a mere framework, serving as a basis or a counterpoint for a political thesis." It is fair enough to note, at this point, that one of postcolonial cinema's critical roles is the interruption of discursive top-down histories of and about third-world subjects and geographies. More importantly, postcolonial cinema, as Ponzanesi and Waller have stated above, should not stop at disruptive acts only, but it should aspire to rediscover "hidden histories," to use Stuart Hall's phrase. In light of this double-bind definition, postcolonial cinema's

role becomes twofold: subversive as well as productive.

However, this visual remembering put forward by historical film should not be mistaken for what Gilroy (2004) characterizes as "postcolonial melancholia." This is informed largely by imperial nostalgia, which is in turn driven by:

> It is a desire to return to past "glories". Of course, this demands a voluntary amnesia and a level of historical illiteracy, privileging a particular memory of empire—tea-drinking, railway-building, cricket-playing, and keeping calm and carrying on—which was partly constructed and perpetuated in films and media (Rice, 2019).

This call was made mainly by British patriots who wanted to turn the clock back so that they could relive once again what was commonly known as the empire on which the sun never set. Yet, for former colonies to return to the past designates fleshing out colonialism, and reminds the world of their ordeal and plight under what was once celebrated as la mission civilisatrice. The latter view, in effect, cuts across most postcolonial films, some of which have already been mentioned above.

Although Ben Barka's historical films fall within the purview of postcolonial cinema, his take on history, I argue, does not linger much on the notion of victimhood and how Moroccans suffered under the yoke of colonialism. Rather, he celebrates the past in a way that repositions Morocco at the center. In addition, he interrogates the past, speaking of the unspoken issues and blanks of memory in Moroccan official history. Following this route to approaching history, Ben Barka concomitantly addresses the double bind of internal as well as external domination that suffocates the small voice of history.

3. Unframing Occluded Histories in *The Lovers of Mogador*

Ben Barka's cinematic practice can be understood as a sustained effort to unframe dominant historical narratives through a microhistorical lens. Drawing on the notion of unframing histories as "not only about undoing established historical accounts and fixed geographies but also about rediscovering the regional, the minor histories and local spaces" (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012), I will examine Ben Barka's *The Lovers of* Mogador as a cinematic attempt to foreground French colonial discourse and Moroccan resistance, particularly in the Southeastern region against Lyautey's pacification campaign. Despite its crucial role in the country's independence, this part of Morocco is rarely mentioned, let alone filmed. One of the key arguments in this section is the recollection of the untold stories of African colonial soldiers: Tirailleurs and Goumiers. While the French colonial army used both troops to consolidate its grip on its colonies, they remain different at many levels: origin, organization, and function. Tirailleurs were regular infantry troops recruited from across French West Africa, and fully integrated into the formal military structure, trained, and deployed as standard soldiers in imperial and European wars. In contrast, goumiers were primarily Moroccan, locally-recruited

auxiliaries organized along tribal lines and operated as irregular forces under French command, especially during the pacification campaigns led by Hubert Lyautey. Since the film attempts to retell this period from an indigenous perspective, special focus will be placed on goumiers and their position within the Moroccan social fabric.

Rather than depicting them as traitors to their kin, the film paints a complex and ambiguous picture of these individuals. Although Ben Barka refuses to refer to *The Lovers of Mogador* as a historical film, the latter will be analyzed in this section as such since it constitutes almost all the conventions of historical filmmaking, chief among which are the reenactment of past events and the representation of real people. As outlined by Stubbs earlier, the film speaks to the present, appears in three acts featuring exposition, complication, and resolution, and offers a partisan view of the past. Furthermore, Ben Barka's rejection of the historical film label simply because it tells the story of his parents is, from a genre criticism perspective, weak and unfounded.

The Lovers of Mogador revolves around the love story between the Moroccan merchant Belkacem, played by the Moroccan actor Mahmoud Mahmoudi, and a French nurse named Hélène, played by the Italian actress and singer Maria Violante Placido. Set in the coastal city of Mogador with all its historical significance, the film follows the couple as they defy cultural traditions and social norms to be together. Amid this romance-charged narrative, the film foregrounds the French colonial expansion in the south of Morocco and how this was not an easy campaign, especially with the fierce resistance mounted by Moroccan guerrilla fighters. Thus, the dissertation contends that the film visually constructs two narratives: one about the love story between a Christian and a Muslim, which will be further developed in the last part of this dissertation, and the other about a nation's struggle against French colonialism. It is the latter narrative that is of paramount importance in this section. Again, history here will be looked at from below in an attempt to listen to some voices that have been suppressed and disregarded by dominant histories. Like *Sand and Fire* (2019) and *Drums of Fire* (1992), *The Lovers of Mogador* shifts focus from macro-histories to micro-histories. The rationale behind the change in the scale of looking at history "is not to offer particular case studies as 'examples' of general theories, but to discover, through a 'microscopic' analysis, historical realities that have gone unnoticed in macrohistorical analysis, in order to better explain a particular era" (Cuevas, 2023).

The film is set in a time when Morocco was a French protectorate. However, many scholars refuse to use the term protectorate because they argue that French policies back then were far from the mandates of the protectorate. In their book *The Ambiguous Compromise: Language, Literature, and National Identity in Algeria and Morocco* (1990), Abdelhamid Zoubir and Jacqueline Kaye assert that, "The protectorate was a myth, for all power lay with the French." To illustrate, the French administration worked according to the infamous colonial rule of "divide and conquer"; the Berber Dahir (decree) of 1914 is a case in point. Berbers were

subsequently pitted against Arabs. It must be stressed that these policies were cloaked in what Rudyard Kipling calls "the white man's burden", that is, the moral obligation of white people to manage the affairs of non-whites whom they believe to be less developed. In this regard, Zoubir & Kaye (1990, p. 11) point out, "Whatever the myths about the French civilizing mission, the policy of French colonialism was to create an unlettered people. Religion, language, and historical traditions had to be destroyed in order to create a person free enough to be civilized." In the preface to his seminal work Orientalism (1979), Edward Said argues that every empire espouses an official discourse that emphasizes its peculiarity and mission to enlighten, civilize, and bring order to the world, hence la mission civilisatrice. In this discourse, force is left as a last resort in the process of "making the world safe for democracy" and bringing natives and their territories within the purview of civilization (Said, 2003).

However, these philanthropic claims are immediately called into question in the film's opening scene, which depicts a group of French soldiers, led by a Moroccan guide, tracking down rebels in the southern region of Morocco. Cornered in a small, uninhabited fortress with no chance to escape, the French captain shoots the Moroccan guide, calling him a traitor, which instigates a spattering exchange of shots, leaving several dead and wounded on both sides. This bloodshed could have been avoided if the captain had agreed to negotiate with the Moroccan rebels, who were only seeking a deal with the French legion to release their fellow men from the French noose. The French captain refuses to talk with the natives because, for him, they are outlaws, and so the only language they understand is violence. Besides, the act of negotiating with natives would set them on an equal par with the French. Here, Ben Barka seems to reverse the discourse mentioned earlier by foregrounding violence as the primary language France speaks with its colonies. He also destabilizes what historians and critics refer to as "the Lyautey method", especially the belief that the latter prioritizes pacification, security, and negotiation over military confrontation: "One came neither as conqueror nor colonizer [...] Lyautey always valued negotiation above battle (in Le Role Colonial he notes his admiration of a soldier who kept talking rather than return fire)" (Singer, 1991). This might be true on certain occasions, but it does not encapsulate the entirety of French colonial history in Morocco.

The second scene takes us to Mogador's port to witness the offloading of a new cargo of guns and ammunition, as well as hundreds of Senegalese soldiers to reinforce the African infantry. Looking at the newly arrived military reinforcements, Salem, Belkacem's trusted servant, exclaims, "Look at all that stuff. Frightening! Hundreds of soldiers; guns, guns, and guns. They have gone mad! Do they plan to kill us all?" to which his master replied, "Plainly! To take what we Moroccans still own, and to stamp out our rebellion." Belkacem's fear is immediately corroborated in the following scene by the French colonel, who compares killing Moroccan rebels to hunting quails: "The more we shoot, the more they sprout." He said this humorously (*The Lovers of Mogador*, 00:05:00).

These opening scenes set a rather horrifying tone for the presence of the French army in Morocco, whose role is far from maintaining peace and promoting democracy, but rather brings misery and death to all those who refuse French rule. This screening challenges the claims made by some French historians and geographers who reiterate the benevolence of the French presence in Morocco. For instance, the French historian Piquet (1917) writes, "La France a acquis le droit d'établir au Maroc son hégémonie politique, qu'elle a su faire accepter avec une remarquable habileté; ses soldats poussent chaque jour plus loin les limites de la zone où règnent la paix et l'ordre." (France has acquired the right to establish its political hegemony over Morocco, which it has managed to make accepted with remarkable skill. The French soldiers push the boundaries of the zone where peace and order reign further every day.) The scene above and others to follow not only disrupt the French discourse on Morocco but also draw attention to the resistance that was in full swing in the Southeastern region. The road toward colonizing Morocco was not an easy task, as some French patriots would claim; it was rather tough and hard-fought, as well as an ongoing battle due to the resistance that was taking place all over the country.

In addition to refreshing Moroccans' collective memory of the atrocities committed in the name of la mission civilisatrice, Ben Barka brings forward one of the long-forgotten and highly problematic chapters in French colonial history, that is, the use of Senegalese soldiers, who were known by the misnomer tirailleurs sénégalais, in the expansion of the French empire. The recruitment of indigenous soldiers was a common practice in the French colonial foreign legion, and it was done in almost all the French ex-colonies, even in Morocco, as we are going to see with Belkacem, the film's protagonist. The scene above features, as well as the offloading of military gun supplies, the arrival of a huge number of Senegalese soldiers recruited by the French to strengthen the colonial army, which the native resistance in the south has weakened.

The French military's use of West African colonial infantrymen in Morocco started at the beginning of the 20th century. This was the first time these colonial soldiers were mobilized outside the sub-Saharan region. Zimmerman (2011) points out, "French military strategists envisioned the Moroccan campaigns as a laboratory for experimentation […] The Moroccan campaign served as a site of trial and error in terms of testing the physical limits of tirailleurs sénégalais." By invoking such an issue, the film brings to the surface how the French used Morocco as a laboratory and sub-Saharan Africans as experimental materials. This colonial strategy, albeit dehumanizing in nature, was described by Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Mangin as "the dawn of a new era in colonial military strategy" (Zimmerman, 2011, p. 23). Here, Ben Barka not only exposes the French colonialist machine and its diabolically unconventional war methods, but he also reveals the double-bind oppression the natives endured. The voices of these soldiers, who have been used as manpower reserves and sometimes as lab rats in the French colonial campaign in North Africa, have gone unnoticed for a considerable period of time. Only re-

cently have scholars become interested in the subjugated histories of tirailleurs sénégalais (force noire) and goums. It is worth mentioning that the situation of these soldiers among their fellow countrymen is a precarious one. The colonizer sees them as a highly adaptable and efficient tool to impose colonial measures on natives, while they are concomitantly seen as traitors by the colonized.

The film then develops this theme even further by following the protagonist in his trading ventures across the Moroccan desert to Timbuktu. Known as a great trader, Belkacem gathers his crew and sets out to Timbuktu, leaving his new French bride at home with his family. On the way back, Belkacem's caravan is raided by a group of bandits, which results in the killing of all his crew members. Surviving the ambush, Belkacem appears in a French garrison. The film does not tell us how Belkacem manages to survive the raid or the circumstances that brought him to where he is right now. A whole sequence with fundamental information is cut out. This narrative ellipsis reminds us of Martin Scorsese's famous statement: "Cinema is a matter of what's in the frame and what's out" (Mott, 2020). This means that what filmmakers choose to cut out of their story is as important as what they choose to include. Given the fact that the film tells the story of Ben-Barak's parents, omission here should be taken as a deliberate and conscious act.

The following scene opens with a legion of French soldiers, busy erecting barracks and installing arms and ammunition in what appears to be a dilapidated and forsaken Casbah in the desert. The camera focuses on the French flag, which reminds us of the French colonial campaigns in the southern regions. The framing of heavy guns speaks of the military force and oppression used to subdue the resisting tribes. The latter reading challenges what has come to be known as Lyautisme, or the pacification doctrine adopted by the French Resident General Hubert Lyautey, that is, avoiding direct rule in Morocco and the need to use military force. Besides, transforming the Casbah into a military outpost destabilizes Lyautey's controversial colonial method "of never destroying local traditions" (Singer, 1991). This constructional remodeling foreshadows Belkacem's forced naturalization and recruitment into the French army. Justifying Belkacem's naturalization, the French captain asserts, referring to the report that Belkacem was found in Timbuktu, "Timbuktu is a French property, and therefore he is now also French. I will let you rub a stamp for the necessary paperwork to proceed. As if now, he is called Francois Sudan." (*The Lovers of Mogador*, 01:27:00) This statement further highlights the coercive attitude of the French administration towards natives who are treated as objects to be named and used against their will. This brings to attention one of the colonial acts whereby European empires used to inscribe order and meaning on non-European people and geographies through the process of naming. The power of naming lies in its ability to uproot and efface already existing identities to make way for new, customized ones. Indeed, in the colonial framework, "naming or renaming a place or a person is a means of conquering or possessing" (Williamson, 2023). In the film, the act is well justified even by law. The name given to Belkacem not only introduces him to the French patrie, but it is

also a sign of ownership. Belkacem now belongs to the French colonial army. In the figure below, the officer is taken by surprise at Belkacem's reaction, who does not seem to be happy with the news of his naturalization. When the latter tries to explain his real identity and what has befallen him, the officer refuses to believe him and orders the other sergeants to take him to the infirmary and have his beard removed. Yet, when Belkacem keeps repeating that he is not French and so he cannot accept the new identity forced upon him, the officer throws him in jail.

This is not the first time Belkacem has had to deal with such an issue. At the beginning of the film, the French Colonel Albert Fojart rebukes Belkacem for turning down French nationality. The colonel insinuates that French nationality is a great honor and that refusing it would be a grave mistake. However, when Belkacem asks the French colonel whether he will renounce his nationality for another one, the latter becomes furious and deems the question irrelevant. This recurrent theme suggests more than a petty quarrel over nationality; it taps into bigger postcolonial issues, such as identity politics and the question of belonging. Refusing French nationality must be read in light of Belkacem's attitude towards colonialism.

At the very beginning, Belkacem criticizes the French presence in Morocco. He says, addressing Colonel Fojart, "You take over the land, and impose your law, which we are subject to" (*The Lovers of Mogador*, 00:06:48). The consequence of this statement is later borne by Belkacem when he finds himself enlisted in the French colonial army against his will. Yet, longing for his wife and daughter, whom he has not seen since the day of her birth, Belkacem has tried to escape the legionnaire only to find himself back in prison alongside Paolino, the French soldier who helped him escape. Inherent in the scene is the idea that the colonial discourse is marked by "heterogeneities, inconsistencies and slippages". Indeed, instead of grounding the film in a close Saidian model of criticism, which is premised on oppositional binaries, Ben Barka attempts to portray how not all French soldiers are colonizers at heart. For instance, the film closes on Belkacem and Paolino as they lie in their cells, counting how many bullets each will get.

While Belkacem is charged with deserting the army, Paolino is condemned for helping his Moroccan friend escape the legion and join his wife and daughter. Thanks to the invocation of this cross-cultural friendship, the film attempts to erode the colonial enterprise from within by enjoining us to listen to the small voices of history who have been drowned out in the French colonialist command. Here, we have a French soldier who has supposedly come to conquer Morocco and subdue Moroccan subjects, jeopardizing his own life for the sake of his friend. However, these moments of cross-cultural dialogue do remind us of the polyphonic experiences of the French foreign legionnaires. Yet, they in no way acquit the French army of the crimes it committed against Moroccans in their struggle for liberation.

Short of men, the captain of the legion refuses to punish Belkacem for deserting the army and forces him to wear the French uniform and march with them to crush a rebellion. At first, Belkacem refuses to shoot back at Moroccan militants,

shouting, "They are my brothers!" Yet, this quickly changes when a bullet penetrates Paolino's body. Only then does Belkacem take his gun and start firing hysterically at Moroccan militants. The camera swiftly cuts to a close-up shot showing Belkacem's unwitting reaction to the death of his friend. The frame is filled with bullets' smoke and Belkacem's frenetic desire for revenge. His facial expression tells us that he is unaware of what he is doing. Ben Barka successfully conveys this moving and violent reaction to the audience by zooming in on his lead character. The close-up in this scene is significant as it intimately connects the audience with the protagonist, who seems to be acting out of spite. It also displays the sad outcome of forcing natives into the colonial army as they are compelled to shoot at their own kin. Their situation is worsened by the fact that they are fighting with no cause, but rather out of instinct. This begs the question of whether Ben Barka is being apologetic to those who joined the French colonial army. The question becomes more interesting if we take the film's story into account, which is based on the life of the filmmaker's parents.

Equally important, the film, extensively imbued with Ben Barka's humanist agenda, denounces war regardless of who initiated it. This is perfectly illustrated by the wide shot below featuring the human casualties in the aftermath of the attack on the Moroccan militants. The death toll seems enormous. In fact, from the very beginning, Ben Barka introduces his humanist take on war through the character of French magistrate Louis Lenhart. When Colonel Forjat informs Lenhart of his schemes to crush the Moroccan militants in the south, the latter intimates, "I am convinced that it would have been better to negotiate with the rebels rather than blow them to pieces." (*The Lovers of Mogador*, 00:05:11) Not following Lenhart's advice, which echoes Ben Barka's standpoint, the film shows us the price that the French colonial army had to pay for opting for violence.

Yet, a close look at the shot above reveals more than the consequences of violence. At the outset, the majority of the bodies scattered around are those of French soldiers. This can be read in two ways. First, by foregrounding the human casualties in the French army, the film reiterates the same apologetic tone, suggesting that even France had lost much in the pacifying campaign. Here, the focus shifts to the loss of the French army, with a victim-playing rhetoric taking center stage. This cinematic act gives way to a diffusion of responsibility. Framing French dead bodies does, in effect, extend culpability to Moroccan militants, who, the shot might imply, are not always the ultimate victims of French brutality. Such a representation shapes the audience's reception of the visual narrative by blurring the line between invasion and resistance.

Second, the scene above can be approached as an act of relocating agency into Moroccan militants. It seeks to reverse the discursive notions that natives are vulnerable and easy to conquer. While colonial powers, France and Spain, faced fierce resistance in the North led by Abdelkerim Khattabi, a political and military leader who led the resistance against the Spanish colonization in the North, little attention has been directed to the resistance of the southeastern part of Morocco. The

film portrays how southeastern Moroccan militants sacrificed their lives to free their country, hence rewriting their history in the history of national independence. Despite being cornered and having only rifles as opposed to the French army, which uses rockets and heavy arms, the militants do not give up and choose to fight instead.

This suggests a return of the subject, to use Michel Foucault's concept, which in our context describes: "the process by which objectified others may be turned into subjects of their history and experience" (Bhabha, 1993). Moreover, instead of choosing one reading over another for the scene above, the dissertation allows both, given the filmmaker's background and cinematic vision. Neither can the latter thoroughly condemn the colonial campaign for the simple reason that the story resonates with his parents' legacy, nor can he dismiss the agency of the Moroccan militants because it is of great importance in the Moroccan collective memory. The film, then, turns into an ambivalent visual terrain evoking a contradictory emotional appeal. This is not the first time Ben Barka vacillates between two conflicting narratives, but he has done so in almost all of his films, hence the auteur trademark. Bordwell (1985) describes the auteur trademark as:

> The consistency of an authorial signature across an oeuvre constitutes an economically exploitable trademark. The signature depends [...] partly upon recognizably recurring devices from one film to another. One could distinguish filmmakers by motifs (Buñuel's cripples, Fellini's parades, Bergman's theater performances) and by camera technique (Truffaut's pan-and-zoom, Ophuls's sinuous tracks, Chabrol's high angles, Antonioni's long shots). The trademark signature can depend upon narrational qualities as well. [...] The authorial trademark requires that the spectator see [each] film as fitting into a body of work.

Sometimes, Ben Barka employs double critique to assert his trademark; other times, he resorts to universal humanism, as evident in the scene above. His anti-war sentiments engulf the entire narrative. While articulating oneself from a humanist prism guarantees wider circulation for the film and keeps transnational funds flowing in, as well as offering Ben Barka a way to avoid a reductionist view of his family's history, it nonetheless generates an array of mixed feelings and unanswered questions. This will inevitably shape the historical knowledge the film imparts to the current generation.

However, speaking of historical knowledge, the film does play an important role in helping to recover the voices of Moroccan militants in southeastern Morocco from historical amnesia. To this day, few, if any, Moroccan films have explored the theme of resistance in the southeast region of Morocco as extensively as the one under study. The under-representation of Moroccan resistance in Moroccan cinema can be largely ascribed to the scarcity of historical films due to economic and structural factors, along with the problematic issue of historical representation. Unfortunately, this gap is filled by colonial films like *Itto* (1934), directed by Jean Benoit-Lévy et Marie Epstein. Consequently, the audience's perception of

native resistance is framed within Herbert Lyautey's colonial strategy of *pénétration pacifique*. The film also came to consolidate the idea of the Berber myth as "a self-serving array of half-truths concocted to explain the origins of the Maghreb's earliest inhabitants and to justify a policy of divide and rule" (Slavin, 1998). Backed and funded by Lyautey himself, the film was used as a vehicle for the promotion of the agenda of Lyautinisme, an ideological and colonial tendency that "idealized Morocco's customs, traditions, and religion; romanticized the bled, the countryside, over the city" (Slavin, 1998, p. 125). More importantly, the film not only projects the modus vivendi of the Berber of the Middle Atlas, but it goes as far as showing the futility of resistance. It tells the story of the submission of the tribes in the Atlas led by the famous Mouha Ou Hamou and his daughter, Itto. Thus, Itto (the film) gives a perfect example of the success of Lyautey's pacifying campaign and paints a rather defeatist picture of one of the most important anti-colonial and charismatic tribal Berber leaders.

All that said, Ben Barka's *The Lovers of Mogador* makes a detour around colonial representations of Moroccan resistance that reiterate the inevitability of submission and European military superiority. The film visually redefines Lyautey's pacification campaign in the southeastern part of the country from below. In colonial films, the pacification campaign has been described as smooth and highly effective, yet *The Lovers of Mogador* shows just the opposite. By depicting the southeastern region as a stronghold for military resistance, the film sheds light on the agency of Moroccan guerrilla fighters. For instance, Lamine, Belkacem's brother, is the leader of the armed resistance. From the very beginning, Lamine is depicted as a nuisance to the French colonial army. Although gravely wounded, Lamine keeps on carrying out his militant activities. Unlike the picture drawn by colonial films focalizing on the cul-de-sac of resistance, Lamine rallies hundreds of his followers to his cause and urges them to take up arms against the French despite the latter's military advantage.

> Moroccan warriors were more often armed with breech-loaders than with flintlocks; the technological gap between them and the French was not significantly narrowed. For the Moroccans had comparatively few repeating rifles and none at all of the machine guns and portable cannons that would win every major battle for the French imperial cause (Dunn, 2018).

Despite this military gap, Lamine and his fellow fighters do not seem to give in; rather, they choose to fight, knowing that their death is just a matter of time. The fight scene at the end offers telling images of Moroccan resilience and self-sacrifice. The film redresses the balance of how Moroccan militants used to be introduced to the international audience. It also redirects attention to the contribution of these people in slowing down the French control over Morocco.

Nonetheless, the film sometimes depicts the resistance from a reductive point of view. In other words, the film seems to transform the notion of resistance into a personal vendetta between Salem and his brother Lamine and Colonel Forjat.

Little effort has been invested in anchoring the resistance in a wider national cause. Mindful of Ben Barka's auteur-trademark, the film focuses on the adage that violence breeds violence, a humanist standpoint. This is why most of the Moroccan militants' onslaughts are carried out in reaction to the brutality of the French colonial army commanded by Colonel Forjat. For instance, the first time Lamine is introduced into the narrative is when he is brought to the hospital to be operated on due to the shots that were taken at him by the French colonial army. After this incident, Lamine looks preoccupied with the idea of fighting back, thus rescuing his fellow militants from the cruelty and violence inflicted upon them by Colonel Forjat. In his discourse, there are no nationalistic tendencies. When Helèn catches him smuggling guns to his brother's house, he informs her of the crimes the French Colonel, who happens to be her friend, commits against Moroccan militants, whom he states are treated like wild dogs.

Furthermore, while staging resistance in the southeastern region, the film draws on a key issue in the history of Morocco on the eve of the French protectorate: the role of Morocco's internal crises in the colonization of the country, as is illustrated by the following quote:

> The army's conception of the Muslim response to its offensive, whether it was resistance or resignation, rested on the assumptions of paternalism and cultural and racial arrogance that dominated European thought in the decades before World War One. The colonialist literature and journalism of the period usually accepted these assumptions as well. As a result, Europeans habitually reported the conquest of southeastern Morocco as an event in their own history, disregarding the personal and collective crises of the conquered (Dunn, 2018, p. 233).

Indeed, a quick look at colonial films reveals that these internal crises are rarely mentioned. This is largely because of France's ideological use of the visual medium: "France [...] developed a colonial lobby promoting cinema to yoke national pride to colonial expansion" (Reynolds, 2018). Such films also constitute Lyautey's colonialist agenda, and they were used as a means "of stimulating popular support for the Empire" (Slavin, 1998). This explains the dismissal of anything that could upset the idea that France's invasion of Morocco was due to the former's military superiority and not the latter's internal struggles. In the film, Ben Barka zooms in on Morocco's tribal rivalries that Moroccan militants had to deal with, besides the foreign invasion of their land. For instance, when Belkacem's caravan set out on a journey to Timbuktu, it was attacked by a group of Moroccan bandits who pledged allegiance to France in return for money. As Belkacem states in the film, these Moroccans sold themselves out to the French, and they should, by no means, be confounded with Moroccans who were forced to join the colonial army. This is where Abdelkebir Khatibi's notion of double critique becomes necessary to read Ben Barka's take on the French pacifying campaign. His camera goes beyond criticizing France's imperial desires in Morocco to address the natives who helped

realize those desires. By doing so, Ben Barka engages in a double-bind criticism where both the other and the self are represented as mutually responsible for the horrifying acts of violence Moroccan militants endured during the protectorate. He is leveling a double subversion that strives to rethink the history of resistance in the southeast in particular and the whole of Morocco in general.

It is, as Amine (2015) asserts, "an archaeology of silence and a resistance of recuperation within a closed system." The film not only regains the voices of Moroccan militants in the southeastern part of Morocco, but also brings to the surface those who helped the colonial machine advance in the country. In this sense, both Moroccan national history and the notion of France as a matchless imperial power are called into question. The film encourages us to look back at our history with a critical eye that exempts no one from interrogation. Looking at Moroccan history from this vantage point allows the audience to construct their historical knowledge while taking into account the political nuances that marked the period.

That said, the southeastern part of Morocco has become a spatial leitmotif in Ben Barka's filmography. While the filmmaker's affiliations to the place need no elaboration, I believe that the focus on the Tafilalt region can be read within the power dynamics of the center/periphery. In a way, Ben Barka attempts to rewrite the history of the southeastern part of Morocco, whose contribution to national independence should not be cast as minor or secondary. On the contrary, the film depicts the region as a stronghold for resisting colonial power. Accordingly, Dunn points out, "By the fall of 1904, however, Lyautey decided that the population of Tafilalt was too large and too hostile to be brought to terms by any means other than a massive, costly, logistically hazardous campaign" (231). More importantly, in addition to repositioning the southeastern region at the center of national resistance, the film casts a transnational dimension upon the region. The latter is portrayed as a vibrant market that connects Fez, Marrakech, and even France to sub-Saharan African countries:

> The merchants of the Southeast had for centuries moved trade goods both north and south along a network of routes ultimately linking West Africa with Europe. Tafilalt was even an exporter to Europe in its own right in the nineteenth century, since part of its date crop was sent through Fez to England (Dunn, 2018).

The film then highlights the region's historical role as a crossroads of trade. The spatial identity of Tafilalt is unfolding on the screen within a well-defined translocal framework. By framing caravans, Sahraoui costumes, palm trees, oases, and Kasbahs, the film provides a material inscription of the region's historical memory while directing attention to its quintessential commercial role. Ross (2017), a cultural and urban geographer, stresses that the Moroccan southeastern hinterland operated as a main regional highway where "its dromedary caravans were as important to the trade of the Sahara as contemporary Venice and its shipping were to that of the Mediterranean." Indeed, the film offers a visual representation of Ross's statement. That said, it is safe to say that Ben Barka has succeeded in shedding light

on the region's contribution to national independence as well as its role as a commercial intermediary between North Africa, Europe, and sub-Saharan countries.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have foregrounded Souheil Ben Barka's position as a cinematic historian and his film as a historical document that revitalizes (trans)national memory by foregrounding the significant role played by southeastern Morocco during Lyautey's pacification campaign. Looking at the film as a historical document implies that it is not simply an illustration of history, but a source that represents and interprets the past, and a visual archive through which the viewer can uncover hidden, overlooked local histories and narratives. It is important to note that while this study has sought to approach history from below by unsettling established narratives, it does not claim to advance a linear or verifiable truth. Rather, in drawing on film as a historical document, it aligns with the insights of Rosenstone, who reminds us that the world represented on the screen is itself constructed and requires critical examination. As he notes, "To make the past linear is already to interpret it" (Rosenstone, 2012). Yet, he does not dismiss the visual medium as unfit for conveying historical knowledge; instead, he underscores its value as a mode of historical knowledge capable of offering meaningful insights into how the past is imagined, experienced, and rearticulated.

The film consistently illuminates subaltern voices, granting cinematic space to figures historically marginalized or silenced within dominant historiographical narratives. Rather than dismissing cinema as an unreliable source of historical knowledge, this paper has demonstrated how historical film can function as an alternative mode of knowledge production that challenges hegemonic historical accounts. Such a perspective invites viewers to actively engage in the construction of historical understanding, being attentive to the political, social, and ethical ambiguities that shaped the period, thereby reaffirming historical cinema's capacity to resist narrative closure and to reopen the past to critical reinterpretation.

Read against Eurocentric representations of colonial Morocco, the film opens a new visual and historiographical window onto the past by presenting history as a contested discursive terrain rather than a fixed colonial narrative. Through a microhistorical lens, it foregrounds localized forms of resistance led by Moroccan fighters, thereby restoring agency to actors long marginalized within imperial accounts. Simultaneously, the film engages in postcolonial memory work by addressing the ambivalent reality of Moroccan Goumiers, whose involvement in the colonial military apparatus situates them at the intersection of coercion, survival, and collaboration. By holding together resistance and complicity, the film destabilizes binary readings of colonial history and reopens the past as a site of negotiation, tension, and ethical ambiguity.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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