Wolves in the City – The Algerian War and Colonialism in Comics

Geo Sipp, winter 2021

Studying the history of the French-Algerian War for a graphic novel I am creating entitled *Wolves in the City*, I have become aware of the topical relevance of this conflict, particularly as it relates to insurgency and counter-insurgency military tactics. I was struck by the parallels between what happened at Abu Ghraib during the United States’ war with Iraq and what happened in Algeria a half century ago, when the French used techniques such as waterboarding to elicit information from members of the Algerian resistance, including French citizens themselves. Additionally, the plight of the human condition becomes a central theme and can be visually explored with an intimacy unique to the discipline of comics. It takes the work beyond the narrative of graphic fiction and draws parallels to conflicts and issues that we face militarily today and brings to the forefront the moral ambiguity of how people react to the emotional and physical displacement of citizens in crisis.

Through meticulously researched comic strips such as Hergé’s *Tintin*, Milton Caniff’s *Terry and the Pirates* and the war comics of the 1950’s and 1960’s, particularly Harvey Kurtzman’s *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*, audiences have been compelled by the adventures of the lead characters in exotic foreign locations, while gleaning historical insights as foundations for the story content. These early strips were products of their time, often reflecting the perception of superiority of the protagonists over the simplistic or pernicious characters from other lands.

When Hergé’s character first appeared in *Tintin in the Land of the Soviets* at the end of the 1920s, he stood for conservative, Catholic values, showing up the godless credo of communism. It is no accident that in his second adventure in 1931, *Tintin in the Congo*, a bearded Catholic missionary dressed in white saves the intrepid reporter from the snapping jaws of angry crocodiles. In Milton Caniff’s *Terry and the Pirates*, Americans save the day through muscle and know-how, fighting barbarians in faraway primitive lands; the action is good and the overt caricatures of the foreigners suggest that this was the first American adventure comic strip. Americans are portrayed as smart, tough, and able to act forcefully in their battle of good versus evil, with civilization trumping tyranny and barbarism. Despite all its antiquated racism, *Terry and the Pirates* remains the basic template for other American action comics. And although it is constrained by the prejudices of the 1930’s with often racist dialogue and exaggerated portrayals of foreigners, it sets the American hero story in motion. More recently, with Art Speigelman’s *Maus*, Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*, *Footnotes in Gaza* and Jacques Tardi’s *It Was the War in the Trenches*, the expanded format of the graphic novel has...
enabled artists to examine from a journalistic perspective the complexities of human cruelty and desperation. Jacques Ferrandez, particularly as it pertains to France’s dominion over Algeria, explores the examination of Colonialism in comics in depth with his series *Carnets d’Orient*. It is his attempt to tell the whole story of French Algeria from colonization in 1830 right up to the eve of the war of independence. The author, Jacques Ferrandez – himself a *pied noir* from Algiers – spent nine years working on it, and the five volumes collected in this edition dart happily between adventure, romance, political commentary, and family drama, all the time with a careful eye on historical detail. In 2012, Alain and Désirée Frappier published *Dans l’ombre de Charonne*, which recounts a young schoolgirl and her friends’ experiencing the terror of a riot at the Charonne Metro station in Paris. During the French-Algerian War, most French politicians came to accept the need to grant Algeria its independence. Only the OAS, which was the Secret Armed Organization, continued to resist independence. The Left called for a demonstration on February 8, 1962 to denounce the OAS and the Algerian War. The Paris Police, led by Maurice Papon, clamped down on this demonstration, as it had done on October 17th, 1961 (when between 32 and 200, mainly Algerian people, are estimated to have been killed). Police blocked nearby streets at both ends before charging the crowd. Demonstrators tried to take refuge in the entry of the Charonne metro station, but police pursued the crowd into the station and hurled heavy iron plates, which were used around the bases of trees and on metro vents, down onto demonstrators in the stairwells. Nine people were crushed to death or died from skull fractures.

The research for the *Wolves in the City* project primarily developed from viewing two films that particularly resonated with my curiosity of colonialism as a metaphor for the human condition. Both *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Battle of Algiers* were great influences;
Lawrence of Arabia for its epic depiction of the Middle East and the pathos of moral equivalency, and The Battle of Algiers for its gritty cinema verité. Because the French-Algerian War had ended just three years prior to its release, we are aware that the wounds and the raw emotions that exist at the surface are still very fresh. There was only one professional actor in that film. Every other participant in that film was an Algerian or French citizen, and the person who played the head of the FLN was Saadi Yacef, who was the FLN’s military chief of the Autonomous Zone of Algiers, making him one of the leaders on the Algerian side in the Battle of Algiers.

The intent of Wolves in the City is to provide an historical context of the French-Algerian War from 1954-1962. This war might be considered the first modern conflict, an insurgency where the guerilla wins if he does not lose, and the conventional army loses if it does not win. It was a war that relied on the marriage of terror and torture; over 1,000,000 Muslim Algerians died and as many European settlers were driven into exile. There were suicide bombers, women fighters, street-to-street and house-to-house combat. With multiple simultaneous bombings in an urban environment, employing asymmetrical battle techniques that focused on urban terrorism for national liberation, the goal was to activate the population, to understand that these acts would result in the overwhelmingly heavy-handed response by the French. Algeria has become a code word for the type of amorphous struggles that we’ve seen repeated in the Balkans and the Middle East. Questions of religion, nationalism, terrorism, and retribution killings have taken on a new and lethal intensity. An army can be strategically effective at counterinsurgency and be able to systematically eliminate people at various levels of a command structure; the French were good at this.

The primary method for obtaining information from citizens was through the use of torture, a theme I will introduce to Wolves in the City, particularly as it relates to the moral and ethical ambiguities of The Question, French journalist Henri Alleg’s autobiography of the torture he endured at the hands of the French military. The principle arguments about torture revolve around its effectiveness and whether it works. Does the act of torture on a detainee forestall the possibilities of an imminent attack, or is it ultimately self-defeating through the loss of moral standing and popular support? Jean-Paul Sartre wrote that “The purpose of torture is not only to make a person talk, but to make him betray others. The victim must turn himself by his screams and by his submission into a lower animal in the eyes of all and in his own eyes. His betrayal must destroy him and take away from his human dignity. He who gives way under questioning is not only constrained from talking again, but is given a new status, that of a sub-human.”
Against the backdrop of beautiful and exotic Algiers, home of the Barbary Pirates and its history as part of the Ottoman Empire and ultimately French Colonial occupation, a mythology about the human condition can be told. Algeria was in a long and bloody struggle to free itself from French Colonial Rule. The FLN (the National Liberation Front), spearheaded the fight for independence through a series of bombing campaigns and clashes with the military. The political and social climate was such that no Algerian could afford not to have firm allegiances with one side; those caught in the middle were dealt with harshly by the FLN. In developing *Wolves in the City*, I wanted to weave the story of a war that still resonates with the fantasy of American popular mythology and refers to the romance of older adventure comic strips. And I found that in the dark, romantic myth of the French Foreign Legion. Haunted men from everywhere, fighting anywhere, for causes not their own. There was a time in America when one could join the Legion, to escape from a troubled past and begin a new life or to aspire to a greater sense of adventure. This notion was popularized in films such as *Beau Geste*, *March or Die* and even in comedies starring Laurel and Hardy and Abbott and Costello. And indeed, upon joining the French Foreign legion, one assumed a new identity. What person in America hasn’t thought about getting in the car and just driving south? It’s the same shared cultural myth of being a cowboy, riding into a new town and walking into a saloon filled with a variety of characters and subsumed with the risks of danger. It fulfills the sense of fantasy of male strength and virility.
Wolves in the City tells the story of Buster Higby, an American who serves in the French Foreign Legion during the French-Algerian War. Fleeing a murder rap in a small Missouri town, he travels to New York and enlists in the French military; in return for the anonymity and sanctuary that the Foreign Legion provides, he agrees to serve for ten years and do whatever it is they want him to do. And, following basic training in Provence, he is sent to Algeria. There, Buster, who has taken the name Bertrand, becomes part of a special squad charged with interrogating Algerian insurgents. Bertrand becomes a highly effective torturer who exhibits remarkable sangfroid under the circumstances. He also falls in love, and his professional and personal involvements entwine in a dramatic denouement.

The French-Algerian War was a conflict that is, to this day, difficult to document, as the French government didn’t want images of the war widely available to the press, and subsequently to an audience that may have been critical of the conflict. Therefore, archived material that could be used as subject matter is obscure and hard to find. Through my research, I have discovered French newsreels from the war and have created many of my prints and paintings from those original sources. Making images from these archives has proven to be very challenging.

Most of the images for Wolves in the City are drawings on glass that have been grained with carborundum grit; this gives the glass a cloudy, opalescence with just a bit of tooth, which allows the pencil marks to hold and build values. The glass has enough transparency that light can pass through, giving the drawings a richly luminescent quality. Additionally, I can expose the drawings to photosensitized polymer etching plates and create editioned prints of the images.
For chapter breaks, the images are woodcuts. As in my drawings, they reflect my interest and admiration for German Expressionist artists such as Otto Dix, George Grosz and Max Beckmann, who abstracted their figurative compositions to convey anxiety and emotion.

To make an image from newsreel footage, I run the footage through my computer and pause at points that suggest the peak of tension, just prior to physical action occurring. This allows the viewer to anticipate the drama and complete the circuit of visual information, rather than by my providing all details. At this point, I print a copy of the image and assess it for its narrative and compositional value. When appropriating imagery, I want to change it and alter it to make it my own. I lay a piece of drafting film over the image and trace essential
elements and develop an appropriate hierarchy of visual relationships. Once the formal elements of the image are laid down, I then use pastel pencils to block in most of the color and dark/light relationships. Then through repeated layering of oil paint, clear packing tape and resin, I build the structure of the paintings. Repeating this process heightens the images’ luminosity and transparency. The packing tape serves as a textural component, antiquing the look of the work. Part of my intent with the work is to replicate the look and the primitive quality of mass-reproduced imagery that might appear in newspaper reproductions. There are nine daily newspapers printed in Algiers. For a city that embraces the perception of an active Fourth Estate, structuring Wolves in the City like a visual essay creates curiosity in Algeria.

Comics and graphic novels, through their unique perspective of observing and controlling the illusion of time, allow an audience to participate in the narrative in any manner. Depending on its construct, a comic can simultaneously permit an audience to view past, present and future. If the work has no dialogue, the audience’s personal set of experiences and biases can inform the editorial content and complete the circuit of the viewing experience. Wolves in the City is a wordless story. It evokes the wordless novel with origin in the German Expressionist movement of the early 20th century. The work draws inspiration from medieval woodcuts, using the exaggerated look of that medium to express angst and frustration at social inequality.

Comics can create narratives that explore complex political, moral and social themes while also treating an audience to stories of shared cultural mythology. French Colonialism suppressed the citizens of Africa while attempting to establish a moral imperative to lift them up to French standards by espousing Christianity and French culture. Algeria has an interesting mix of French and Arab influences. Colonialism has largely disappeared in Africa, yet the influence of France and its passion for Bandes Dessinée has fostered thriving and enterprising comics communities in Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Mali and Gabon.
Authors and artists have availed themselves the opportunities to address their lives, fears and aspirations through the medium of comics. Festivals and conferences such as the Festival International de la Bandes Dessinée in Algiers attract thousands of students and fans from all over North Africa and the Middle East; artists, writers and educators from all over the world participate in these conferences and help expand readership, interest and publicity. The French influence has left them with a healthy interest in Bandes Dessinée, so their long-form comics tend to be influenced by the European tradition. The Arab world's love of political and editorial cartoons is also in evidence: there are over 80 daily papers just in Algiers, and each one has an in-house political cartoonist. And the prestigious Ecole Superieure des Beaux Arts in Algiers educates students in the traditions of comics and political cartooning. In Algeria and in North Africa, out of a bitter and painful past, amazing stories are being told and the future of this remarkable medium is very exciting.