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## “AGENT OSS 117: FRANCE, COLONIAL MEMORY, AND THE POLITICS OF PARODY”

*Dorian Bell*

In the spring of 2006 a slight but well-executed spy movie spoof called *OSS 117: Le Caire, nid d’espions* became a hit with the French public. A parodic romp through the conventions of sixties-era Bond films and their French analogues, *OSS 117* sold over two million tickets in France, enough to secure a place among the top French-made domestic box office draws that year and to warrant a sequel, *OSS 117: Rio ne répond plus*, released in April 2009. France, it seems, now has its own *Austin Powers* franchise. And why not?

Somewhat harder to explain is the excitement with which the French press and cinematic establishment received the 2006 film. *Les Cahiers du cinéma*, usually disinclined to review such fare, deemed *OSS 117* “un miracle.” “Depuis quand une super-production comique française n’avait-elle pas fait montre d’une telle maestria?” enthused the *Cahiers*, invoking no less than Hitchcock to argue for the film’s relevance: “*OSS 117* ranime ainsi une catégorie sinistrée ici, celle du divertissement haut de gamme, ainsi qu’Hitchcock qualifiait lui-même certaines de ses merveilles réputées mineures” (52). French critics concurred almost unanimously with the *Cahiers*’ favorable assessment. *OSS 117* capped its triumph with four nominations and one win — for best production design at the 2007 César awards — and nominations for best actor and best screenplay. Jean Dujardin’s portrayal of the film’s titular secret agent also earned him a prestigious Etoile d’or for best actor, which vaulted him into the company of the more serious-minded French cinema luminaries usually recognized by the film critics who vote on the Etoiles d’or awards.

How did such critical acclaim come to surround a film that, despite the affable Dujardin's charismatic performance, hardly rises to the standard set decades ago by spoof forebears like *The Pink Panther*? A glowing review of the film in *Le Monde* hints at a possible answer. The review celebrated the film for showing the deft comic touch typical of all "grandes comédies." But *Le Monde* claimed for *OSS 117* another important merit as well: cultural opportuneness. Lamprooning as it did the colonial arrogance typical of the original French OSS 117 films of the 60s (*vide infra*), the new *OSS 117* provided, "en ces temps de controverse sur la colonisation," what *Le Monde* esteemed a timely reminder of past sins. The controversy in question had raged over the previous year in response to the passage of the now-infamous law of 23 February 2005 stipulating that French school curricula acknowledge "le rôle positif de la présence française outre-mer, notamment en Afrique du Nord." The resulting polemic, including an angry denunciation by Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, attracted international attention. Though an embarrassed President Jacques Chirac ultimately managed to abrogate the law's most objectionable clause in January 2006, newly reopened colonial wounds were still fresh when *OSS 117* arrived in theaters a few months later.<sup>1</sup>

*Le Monde* evidently considered *OSS 117*'s self-deprecating take on French colonial attitudes a welcome addition to what had become an acrimonious debate. Such hopefulness likely accounts for at least part of the film's critical success: the country needed catharsis, and the easygoing *OSS 117* seemed to provide it. Yet a close examination of the film reveals conflicting tendencies. For all its well-intentioned tweaking of France's imperial past, *OSS 117* mobilizes discourses and imagery that in fact perpetuate certain strategies of absolution, strategies that, after developing in the colonial era to rationalize colonial crimes, have survived into the present as a means to divert responsibility for France's postcolonial predicament. It is that subtly exculpatory agenda, and not just the film's easy anti-colonial critique, that I would propose helped *OSS 117* resonate with a French audience unconsciously receptive to the redirection of colonial and postcolonial blame.

*OSS 117*'s comedic nature probably explains why it has attracted no attention from the flourishing body of critical commentary on French colonial memory.<sup>2</sup> As I will be arguing in the rest of this essay, however, it is precisely this comedic nature — or more specifically, the film's parodic project — that usefully brings into focus how old colonial tropes are being repackaged to contemporary ends. By offering itself as a send-up of French colonial arrogance, but decentering that critique via a triangulated relation to the targets of its satire, *OSS 117* performs and refines the kind of ideological feint that has long blinded France to colonial and postcolonial realities. In so doing, the film sheds light on the complicated interdependence between French republicanism and colonialism. It also reveals the extent to which France's current relation to Islam remains conditioned by French exceptionalist anxieties about Anglo-American encroachment. In all these respects, the film indexes the confused climate in which an increasing French willingness to recognize past colonial mistakes has, paradoxically enough, reinforced the country's propensity for compounding them. I begin, therefore, with some preliminary observations on the broader sociopolitical context in which *OSS 117* delivered its pratfall-driven brand of historical reflection.

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Lately the question of colonial memory has dominated French debates about the country's past. After the difficult revelations of the 1980s surrounding French participation in the Final Solution, France's colonial transgressions were next to be examined under the sign of a “devoir de mémoire.”<sup>3</sup> The spate of important historiographic work to this effect in the 1990s and early 2000s produced a backlash that culminated most visibly in the 2005 law affirming the positive contributions of colonialism.<sup>4</sup> In a reminder that more than symbolism was at stake in the ensuing national polemic, the nationwide rioting in October and November of the same year — concentrated in communities shaped by immigration from former French colonies — served notice that France's colonial past still ensnares its present.<sup>5</sup>

French state officials have entered the fray over colonial memory wielding what historians Nicolas Bancel and Pascal Blanchard recently termed a “double discours” (“La colonisation” 152). President Nicolas Sarkozy, while acknowledging France’s participation in certain colonial crimes, has nevertheless continued to insist on a colonial “œuvre de civilisation sans précédent dans notre histoire” (qtd. in Bancel and Blanchard, “La colonisation” 153). Bancel and Blanchard are likely right to consider this divided official rhetoric a political expedient for pandering alternately to left- and right-leaning constituencies. One also shares their obvious disbelief at the rhetorical continuity between Sarkozy’s colonial apologia and the so-called *mission civilisatrice* invoked generations ago by imperialist France (“La colonisation” 149; 153). Yet perhaps the more telling continuity with the past lingers in the duality itself of the double discourse. Already in the late nineteenth century, when the civilizing mission became state ideology, the French attitude toward empire was bound up in a dialectics of admission and absolution. Theorists of expansion often did not deny that colonial France had blood on its hands. But given what many considered the inevitability of colonization in a Darwinian struggle for supremacy among developed nations, that culpability was mooted by French exceptionalism. If France needed to colonize to stave off its European competitors, the cradle of the Revolution at least seemed most apt to do so toward civilized ends.<sup>6</sup>

A key point here — and a central theme I shall explore in this essay — is the mediation such a dialectics requires. The logic of exceptionalism is fundamentally relational: for there to be exceptionality, there must exist a norm against which the exceptional distinguishes itself. In the imperial context, that norm was usually provided by the British, whose historical superiority in matters colonial incited the French to invent in the nineteenth century what Edward Said has laconically called a “political second-best” (169). The British Empire might be larger and richer, but at least the French could take comfort in their more humane, civilizing genius, or so the narrative went. French guilt vis-à-vis the colonies could thereby be triangulated across, and largely displaced onto, a third term. Sarkozy recycles this kind of triangular, exculpatory logic when he credits

the French colonial state for at least not having “inventé la Solution finale” (qtd. in Bancel and Blanchard, “La colonisation” 153-54), even if he grants that it committed crimes along the way (Bancel and Blanchard, “La colonisation” 151-52).

Whether or not France should laud itself for better-than-Nazi behavior, Sarkozy’s twenty-first century take on triangular absolution remains notable for what its mediated nature reveals about France’s mediated relation to the postcolonial. For if French colonialism once required the excesses of others against which to mark France’s exceptionality, French republicanism today similarly requires a foil in its engagement with ethnic, cultural, and religious heterogeneities born of the colonial encounter. One such foil is Anglo-American multiculturalism, against whose “particularist” countenancing of difference the French republican model constructs its universalizing assimilationism. Islam, too, has come to play the convenient role of a third term across which to disperse blame for France’s failure to integrate postcolonial minorities. To the extent, then, that the official double discourse regarding colonial memory invokes a mediated, triangular paradigm through which to affirm French republicanist exceptionality, this discourse about the past performs subtle ideological work in the present.

There is of course nothing secret about French republicans’ critique of multiculturalism. Nor is it any less obvious that the battle over colonial memory has substantial present-day stakes, given the vexed status of Muslim colonial immigrants and their French descendants. What merits greater recognition, however, is that in the resurgence of the triangular mode of apprehending France’s colonial past, the triangular mode of fashioning France’s contemporary polity emerges reinforced. One expects as much from Sarkozy, whose political calculations manifestly trump real colonial repentance. More surprising is the extent to which the triangular paradigm structures even better-intentioned French reflections on the colonial past.

*OSS 117* represents an especially revelatory case in point, skewering as it does the casual colonial-era racism on display in

the old French series of OSS 117 movies from the 1960s. Based on the hugely popular OSS 117 spy character created by French pulp writer Jean Bruce in 1949, the original OSS 117 movies were as blithely dismissive of non-Europeans as they were baldly imitative of the early films in the popular James Bond film franchise (itself hardly evolved when it came to non-European characters). The first film in the updated *OSS 117* series makes that colonial callousness its central conceit.

The year is 1955, and Agent OSS 117, aka Hubert Bonisseur de la Bath, is sent to Nasser's Egypt to keep an eye on things in the tumultuous days before the 1956 Suez crisis. He is greeted by Larmina, his lovely and poised Egyptian contact, who shows him around Cairo. OSS 117's interactions with Egyptians soon occasion repeated opportunities for him to register smugly his total, caricatural ignorance about all things Arab, Muslim, and Egyptian. Informed by Larmina that millions of people speak Arabic, OSS 117 bursts into laughter. "Vous voyez ce que ça fait déjà, un million?," he asks her with condescending disbelief. In what becomes a running gag, OSS 117 offers his Egyptian employee Slimane a small portrait of then French President René Coty, declaring with grinning paternalism that "C'est notre Raïs à nous" (using the Arabic word for "president" with which Egyptians designated Nasser) and that Coty "aime les Cochinchinois, les Malgaches, les Marocains et les Sénégalais. C'est donc ton ami." Other faux pas — including OSS 117's forcible silencing of a *muezzin* whose call to prayer awakens him, and a lecture about Egyptian backwardness directed by OSS 117 at a high-ranking government official — go over even less well with the Gallic spy's incredulous hosts.

OSS 117 manages nevertheless to save the day. After getting the best of German and Belgian agents in preliminary run-ins, OSS 117 foils the plans of the film's true villains: the Aigles de Khéops, an underground Islamic group intent on ridding Egypt of European influence. OSS 117 provides the film's requisite climactic explosion when he destroys a shipment of arms destined for his Islamist enemies. The conventions of the genre lampooned dictate, after all,



that the hero remain a hero, even if unintentionally. The exigencies of *OSS 117*'s comedic take on the material also make it crucial that the hero remain likeable. Jean Dujardin does his part by bringing an infectious *bonhomie* to the title role. *OSS 117*'s unwitting flashes of competence do the rest, making it hard not to root for this “con brilliant,” as Dujardin dubs him in the film's press notes, despite the character's unrelenting boorishness.

The film's director, Michel Hazanavicius, has acknowledged the delicacy of asking the audience to cheer on such a chauvinistic character. In the press notes, Hazanavicius explains how the film-makers took pains to ensure that the audience laugh at — rather than with — *OSS 117* in his racial and cultural transgressions:

Je suis très pointilleux quant au racisme politique, nous devons y réfléchir. Il ne fallait pas non plus nier ce qu'était la France à cette époque. Faire *OSS 117* aujourd'hui et occulter complètement cet aspect aurait été refuser l'obstacle. Pas une des horreurs qu'il peut proférer ne reste impunie — soit par un regard qui le juge, soit par une phrase, un acte... et c'est assez réjouissant!

The Egyptian victims of *OSS 117*'s affronts indeed react with prescriptive shock and dismay. Yet *OSS 117*'s cultural points of reference serve subtly to undercut the film's censure of French colonial-era attitudes. Intervening at all times in the film's parodic relationship to the older *OSS 117* films is another key target of satire: the British Bond films from the 1960s that influenced their *OSS 117* counterparts in France. Dujardin's resemblance to a young Sean Connery and spot-on imitation of Connery's Bond mannerisms play to an audience better-acquainted with Bond than with the original *OSS 117*. So, too, does the film's memorable pun of a tagline: “Un peu de Sean, beaucoup de conneries.” Even though much about *OSS 117* remains indubitably French — it should be noted that Jean Bruce invented the character four years before Ian Fleming invented Bond<sup>7</sup> —, the secret agent's shenanigans are intended to evoke 007 as much as 117.

The triangulated result rehearses a familiar dynamic. The film's self-reflexivity about French colonial arrogance authorizes its own displacement at every turn, diverting to British account at least partial responsibility for the boorishness critiqued. This perhaps helps explain the enthusiastic French reception of what the *Cahiers du cinéma* approvingly calls the film's "effet délicat de troisième degré par rapport à sa référence" (53). In what the *Cahiers* labels an "imitation d'imitation" (52), i.e., a parodic imitation of a French film franchise itself derivative, *OSS 117* spoofs its French object in the "third degree," continuously mediating its relation to French colonial history via a shadow British presence that provides built-in ideological cover for the antics of the film's provincial French hero. Triangular absolutism is here in full effect.

Little wonder, in this context, that the film should be set in Egypt on the eve of the Suez crisis. After 1882, when the British seized de facto control of Egypt and the French-built Suez Canal, the Canal entered the collective French consciousness as a totem for the ostensible distinction between France's civilizing genius and Britain's naked imperial aggressions. Never mind France's own disappointed colonial ambitions in Egypt dating to Napoleon's ill-fated Egyptian campaign; what mattered, ideologically speaking, was the supposed barbarism with which the British claimed their Egyptian colonial prize. France could henceforth cite British Egypt in its efforts to whitewash, by comparison, its own colonial efforts.<sup>8</sup>

*OSS 117* updates that posture for the contemporary era. Britain aside, Egypt furnishes a third term across which to decenter the real axis of Franco-Arab enmity in 1955: namely, the brutal war of Algerian independence that had just begun the previous year. One certainly appreciates that a French comedy such as this could not have been set in wartime Algeria, and that the filmmakers may have seen in Egypt a less affectively charged backdrop against which to stage their lighthearted critique of past French behavior toward the Muslim world. Yet it becomes evident as the film wears on that the filmmakers engage not only in a putatively tactful omission of Algeria, but also, more broadly and less innocently, in a systematic

elision of French colonial responsibility across the entire region. Despite the filmmakers' self-conscious censure of French colonial arrogance, nowhere does the film acknowledge France's vested colonial interest in the Suez crisis the French helped precipitate. France, it will be remembered, joined Britain and Israel in attacking Nasser's Egypt in 1956, largely out of concern that Nasser was providing assistance to the FLN resistance in Algeria.<sup>9</sup> In the film's alternate version of events, however, the Suez crisis is represented as an accident of history — or even, as we shall see, the consequence of Islamic fundamentalism — and not as the concerted front it was in France's globalized, imperialist defense of French Algeria.

To be sure, OSS 117's own intervention on behalf of France brings about the crisis. In the film's last scene, OSS 117 is seen reading a newspaper whose headlines suggest that the explosion he caused has accidentally set in motion Nasser's 1956 showdown with the West. But whatever this final joke about OSS 117's gaffe-prone ways superficially concedes about French responsibility for the crisis, it also works, at a deeper level, to offset. Deferring blame for the Suez aggression from French imperialist maneuvering onto the trivial ineptitude of its bungling hero, the film obscures behind a veneer of self-deprecation the colonial stakes for France of the crisis. *OSS 117's* Egyptian setting facilitates that elision by offering a Muslim locale not as easily associated by the casual spectator with French colonial interests.

Integral to the film's humor, of course, is that those interests were rapidly waning, and with them France's geopolitical influence. The recurring René Coty joke, in which OSS 117 patronizingly distributes portraits of the French president to the Egyptians he meets, exploits the ironic dissonance between OSS 117's confident colonialism and the overmatched Coty's troubled real-life stewardship of the Algerian war. Recall that Coty's inability to resolve the Algerian question sealed the fate of the Fourth Republic, ushering de Gaulle back into power in 1958 and ensuring that Coty would be associated, as he is in the film, with the twilight of France's colonial empire. The problem is that here, too, the filmmakers' self-deprecating joke

about French ineptitude simultaneously obscures France's erstwhile colonialist investment in Egypt. Coty, for all his perceived quaintness now, must not have seemed quite so benign to Egyptians facing French bombers and paratroopers in 1956.

*OSS 117* exhibits in this regard the sort of nonchalance it purports to ridicule. If the original *OSS 117* films never questioned the colonial context of their hero's cultural snobbery, their present-day successor no less suppresses the actual, material circumstances of the French colonial project it critiques. Despite its parodic nature, then, or perhaps because of it, *OSS 117* reproduces a blind spot in its models. While the colonial arrogance of the old films can be remembered and skewered because it was present on screen, the exercise of colonialist *Machtpolitik* itself — an absent presence in the original films — remains similarly elided in the comedic send-up. To remember a thing is to forget something else, as Paul Ricoeur and Tzvetan Todorov have reminded us, and the compunction to repent for colonial arrogance here comes at the expense of a more honest recollection of the past.<sup>10</sup>

Yet *OSS 117*'s historical myopia does not stem only from the limitations of its parodic project. It also works along ideological lines to refract the present. The film reflects this in an approach to culture as myopic as the film's approach to history. Glaringly, every one of *OSS 117*'s Egyptian characters speaks Moroccan Arabic, rather than the vastly different Egyptian Arabic the plot would seem to require, a situation akin to having Portuguese characters speak Spanish. Though undoubtedly encouraged by the fact that the film was shot in Morocco and features several Moroccan and Franco-Moroccan actors, this linguistic decision by the filmmakers monolithizes the very culture for which the film otherwise preaches respect.

Such monolithism might be a lesser matter were it not symptomatic of *OSS 117*'s uneasy depiction of Arabs, or more specifically of Arab Muslims. That depiction, I want to argue, emerges as much from France's current, postcolonial fixation with Islam as from any attempted atonement for past colonial offenses. *OSS 117*'s Bond con-

notations and Egyptian setting mediate the film’s representation of French colonialist behavior. Such mediation is evident in the film’s alternate explanation for the Suez crisis, which absolves the French state altogether of colonial motivations in the lead-up to the crisis. But alongside this historical deviation comes one of complementary, and more obviously contemporary, significance: the introduction of the Aigles de Khéops as the French hero’s chief Egyptian foe. A fictionalized version of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic political movement repressed by Nasser, the Aigles de Khéops certainly remain grounded in some historical reality. By pitting them against OSS 117, however, the film misleadingly implies that political Islam posed the greatest Egyptian risk to French interests in the 1950s. In reality, France was far more concerned with the secular Nasser’s anti-colonial politics and their potentially disruptive influence on French North Africa. It is notable, given this, that the film’s intrigue should feature a shipment of arms to the Aigles de Khéops. French officials were indeed worried in the mid-1950s about Egyptian arms shipments, but from Nasser to the FLN resistance fighting the French in Algeria.<sup>11</sup> The Muslim Brotherhood hardly entered into France’s colonial calculations.

*OSS 117*’s revision of the arms-shipment narrative at the Aigles de Khéops’ expense casts anti-colonial resistance as the specific province of a threatening Islam. This transposition of events suggests the return of an Algerian repressed on the part of the filmmakers, considering the historical French propensity for conflating anti-colonial resistance in French North Africa with Islamic fundamentalism.<sup>12</sup> The transposition also rewrites Egyptian history. The anti-colonialism that Nasser articulated in secular, political, and economic terms is entirely imputed by *OSS 117* to the religious zealotry of a shadowy fringe group. Meanwhile, Nasser himself goes almost completely missing, an absence curious in a film about the build-up to the Suez crisis, though presumably one that makes it easier to focus on OSS 117’s Islamic antagonists.

Islam, in short, looms conspicuously large in the film’s explanation for geopolitical discord. Hazanavicius and his screenwriter

Jean-François Halin have explained how they backed off their earlier intention to make OSS 117's murder of a *muezzin* lead directly to the Suez crisis.<sup>13</sup> Traces of that causality linger on nonetheless. OSS 117's scuffle with a *muezzin* atop a minaret outrages the Aigles de Khéops and furnishes them a rallying cry. The fictional newspaper headlines shown in the film announce that the explosion of the Aigles de Khéops' arms shipment has in turn been construed by Egypt as an assassination attempt on Nasser, destabilizing relations with the West in a way clearly meant to foreshadow the Suez confrontation. This displaces responsibility for the Suez crisis onto the Aigles de Khéops, and thus, by extension, onto the Muslim Brotherhood, whose alleged 1954 assassination attempt on Nasser the film appears to reference. Unlike in *OSS 117*'s transposed version of events, that real-life assassination attempt did not help precipitate the Suez crisis, though it certainly precipitated a crackdown by Nasser on the Muslim Brotherhood. Little does this matter, apparently, to the filmmakers: just as the revised arms shipment narrative dresses anti-colonial resistance in the threatening garb of political Islam, the film's revised assassination narrative proposes a Suez crisis triggered not by imperialism, but by the isolated machinations of an Islamist group.

The double-agent betrayals of OSS 117's Egyptian handler Larmina underscore the point. Like any self-respecting love interest in the genre spoofed, Larmina has been working for the enemy all along, conspiring with the Aigles de Khéops to rid Egypt of foreign influence and avenge her father's drowning in the British-controlled Suez Canal. Once the Aigles de Khéops have been revealed as her father's true murderers, however, Larmina takes her requisite place alongside OSS 117. The dictates of the genre here intersect with preoccupations of a more ideological nature, as the emergence of the real villain — Islam — proves Larmina's initial grievance with the colonial powers unfounded.

On the face of it, the contemporary implications of all this seem clear enough. The Aigles de Khéops' scowling, firebrand imam obviously owes less to the prototypically debonair Bond villain than to France's recent and well-documented anxieties about Islam. Yet

why should these anxieties extend, through the imam’s fulminations, to the anti-colonial discourse he is made to voice so unpleasantly, especially given the film’s otherwise critical perspective on the colonial era? The explanation I would advance has little to do with the latent, nostalgic investment in colonialism associated with what Phil Powrie has called “colonial heritage films” like *L’Amant* (1991) and *Indochine* (1992) (6). The film’s elision of France’s colonial agenda during the Suez crisis aims not to sanitize the colonial past, but rather to remove a justificatory, political explanation for the Muslim resistance depicted. Constructed in this fashion into an irrational inciter of conflict, Islam slots conveniently into an account of the colonial past targeted at the postcolonial present. The filmmakers surely do not really believe in the image they offer of a past colonial era in which Islam, and not colonialism, thrust a disruptive wedge into what otherwise might have been a promising Franco-Arab encounter. That scenario serves instead to legitimate its present-day analog: the attribution to Islam of responsibility for ongoing French difficulties in integrating postcolonial minorities, difficulties that would otherwise require addressing the structural iniquities bequeathed by France’s North African colonial saga.<sup>14</sup> Unwilling, or unable, to take into account this iniquitous legacy, and yet evincing in their eager political correctness a well-intentioned desire to see France integrate its Muslim minority, the filmmakers struggle to reconcile their own good will with an abiding Maghrebi anger in the Hexagon. The scapegoating of Islam solves this classic French liberal conundrum nicely.

*OSS 117* accordingly imagines a prelapsarian Franco-Arab harmony that, absent a meddling Islam, might have been and might still be. One scene proves particularly instructive in this respect. Working undercover as an Egyptian musician in a Cairo restaurant, OSS 117 suddenly finds the spotlight trained on him. He hesitates in uncomfortable silence as his audience and fellow musicians await a solo. Then, against all odds, he breaks into song, and in fluent Arabic. The cloddish agent who just moments before could only count to five in the local tongue soon has his Egyptian audience cheering in approval. If the numerous YouTube clips dedicated to the scene are any indication, OSS 117’s unexpected musical and

linguistic prowess has proven just as much of a hit with the film's French audience. The reason lies in the kind of humor deployed. Up until this point, much of the film's humor revolves around OSS 117's unrelenting knack for being woefully out of kilter with his environment. This invites what Henri Bergson described as the normative laughter elicited by a collective need to proscribe any such instances of social disjunction (395-96). OSS 117's musical performance, however, appeals to a different comic register. In an illustration of what Freud described as humor's capacity to release tension, OSS 117's sudden cultural competence occasions a pleasurable release on the viewer's part — laughter — that marks relief from an anxiety-producing tension.<sup>15</sup> The tension derives, of course, from OSS 117 having been publicly put on the spot. But it also derives from another, broader tension that has been building all along: the tension produced by the European protagonist's uncomfortable, movie-long encounter with Arab anger and alterity. That tension manifests on-screen the real-life anxiety of a France still uncertain how to embrace its Arab self.

The choice of song speaks to the kind of relief sought. OSS 117's ability to sing in Arabic spontaneously bridges the cultural divide he has previously done his inadvertent best to deepen. Yet even more important is that OSS 117's proffer of linguistic intelligibility to his Egyptian audience doubles in the other direction as a gesture of cultural intelligibility destined for the film's French audience. That is because the song he performs is an Arabic translation and arrangement of "Bambino," the famous 1956 French hit by the singer Dalida. A healthy dose of the familiar, in other words, inhabits an otherwise potentially estranging shift to Arabic by OSS 117, an imbrication further reinforced by the fact that Dalida herself was Egyptian-born. The hopeful message of a mutual Franco-Arab compatibility is clear.

Note here how, once again, Egypt mediates France's fraught relation to its colonized North African subjects and their postcolonial, immigrant descendants. In an Arab country where France did not become the colonial master, the filmmakers are free to imagine (if briefly) an alternate Franco-Arab history unburdened by the bloody



memory of French North Africa. But there is an obstacle. Predictably, OSS 117's performance goes over poorly with the Aigles de Khéops' leader, who is meeting with Larmina in the same restaurant. Even as every other Egyptian patron sways and claps to the music, the imam snarls to Larmina that “cette musique est assourdissante” and storms out in disgust. Next to the joyousness of the scene, the dour imam's objection cannot but imply an Islamic sticking point between peoples who might otherwise get along. What if, the film seems to ask, Egyptians had just taken their cue in 1956 from their Francophile countrywoman Dalida, or if, fifty years on, France's own North African community could just embrace Franco-Maghrebi cultural commonality over religious difference? Working forward from triangulating accounts of the colonial era that claim first the British, then an obstreperous Islam as alibis for past failures in the Franco-Arab encounter, *OSS 117* quietly submits an alibi for the shortcomings this now-internal encounter uncovers in the postcolonial state.

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There is a larger lesson here. Just as British imperialism once helped rationalize French colonial expansion, the specter of Islam — itself often portrayed as a colonizing force — now helps conjure away French responsibility for that expansion's difficult socioeconomic legacy in France. The sheer heterogeneity of the foils chosen illustrates the extent to which they have been made to play similar functional roles, independently of any quality immanent to them. This structural continuity explains why, in *OSS 117*, the European colonial rivalry evoked by the film segues so naturally into an indictment of Islam. Absolving France of colonial guilt in comparison with a Britain subtly but insistently referenced by the film's Bond subtext and Egyptian setting, *OSS 117* is free to lay the responsibility for colonial and postcolonial Franco-Arab antagonisms at the feet of Islam. Such continuity also explains why current French fears of Anglo-Saxon multiculturalism dovetail so profoundly with fears of the Islamism to which that multiculturalism would allegedly deliver France. Consider the formula advanced by French political philosopher Pierre-André Taguieff, whose denunciation of multiculturalism

as the “nouveau terrorisme politico-intellectuel” leaves little doubt, after 9/11, of the parallel he intends (17).

All of this demonstrates that the discursive reinforcement formerly at work between French republicanism and colonialism has never ceased to operate. Historians have recently suggested that the particularist treatment by France of the colonized represents no mere aberration in the universalist republican project, given how constitutively the particularist/universalist contradiction inheres in republicanism itself.<sup>16</sup> But what has gone less remarked is how the paradigmatic locus of this paradox — a French exceptionalism that stakes a particularist claim to universalist values — has so thoroughly determined France’s colonial *and* postcolonial sagas. The old mediation through Britain of France’s relation to its colonial periphery served as much to buttress republican France’s exceptionalist claim of difference from its European neighbor as to justify France’s colonial ambitions. The triangle, in other words, worked in two directions: France’s mediated case, via Britain, for colonial expansion functioned conversely as a mediated expression, via the colonial, of French republican exceptionality vis-à-vis its colonial rival. And I would suggest that little about this primordial dynamic has changed. The terms have evolved — American (multi)cultural imperialism has replaced British colonial imperialism, and Islam has superseded the colonies, — but French republicanism still constructs itself relative to a Western foil.

At least within that schema, Islam constitutes less a figure of radical alterity than the latest avatar of an Anglo-Saxon threat to French exceptionalist ambitions of global leadership. If republicans fear the Islamization of France, then, it is not just because of the incommensurability they imagine between republicanism and Islam. It is also because, as a privileged stand-in for multiculturalism, Islam is dimly perceived to auger the erosion of French exceptionality in a world that appears increasingly homogenized by capital and American hegemony (though I hasten to reiterate that Islam itself, on its own, unmediated terms, obviously exerts a special fascination for the French as well).

We might benefit, in this context, from reconsidering the binary heuristics so pervasive in analyses of European encounters with Islam. On the left, a generation or two of critics weaned on Said’s *Orientalism* reflexively understands those encounters in terms of East and West, other and same. On the right, the binary thinking takes the form of ominous warnings about a “clash of civilizations” (Huntington). Such reductions make it easy to overlook how inter-cine occidental rivalries — the special tenacity of which might be ascribed to what Freud called the “narcissism of minor differences” (“The Taboo of Virginity” 199) — shaped the phenomenological parameters for apprehending non-Western cultures. Late nineteenth-century French republicanism seized in colonialism an opportunity to distinguish itself from a Britain that, as David A. Bell observes, had a century earlier furnished radical Jacobin republicans a special antithesis precisely because of its political resemblance to France (100). Today, France may fear Islam not only for its difference, but also for what it signals about the diminution of difference between France and her fellow Western powers.

Herein, perhaps, lies a final key to the politics of *OSS 117*’s cinematic parody. *OSS 117* spoofs a series of 1960s French films easily ridiculed for their awkward imitation of the Bond phenomenon. Yet the film’s resolute Frenchness subtly recalls that before Ian Fleming created Agent 007, Jean Bruce created Agent OSS 117. Thus does *OSS 117* occupy a strange, liminal space where difference and imitation converge: the “third degree” so appreciated by the *Cahiers du cinéma* because, it should now be clear, it perfectly captures the paradox of French identity. What better way to stage that paradox than in an Egyptian setting where, even as Islam helps shore up French exceptionalism, old French memories of the Suez and Napoleonic Egypt (like Jean Bruce, Napoleon got there first) recall missed colonial opportunities for France to walk in the shoes of its cross-Channel sibling?

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a detailed account of the law's genesis and aftermath, see Bertrand.

<sup>2</sup> Recent examples of this commentary include Bancel, Blanchard, and Lemaire, Hargreaves, and McCormack, to cite just a few.

<sup>3</sup> On the origin, around 1980, of the "devoir de mémoire," see the introduction to Kattan.

<sup>4</sup> A landmark work in this French historiographic turn toward the question of colonial memory is Benjamin Stora's *La Gangrène et l'oubli* (1991), which examines French collective memory of the Algerian War.

<sup>5</sup> This much again became clear during the economic riots that shook the French overseas departments of Guadeloupe and Martinique in February 2009.

<sup>6</sup> On pseudo-scientific French rationales for the inevitability of colonization, see Betts 90-105.

<sup>7</sup> Note as well that the original French cinematic adaptation of the OSS 117 character actually predates the Bond films, though the OSS 117 films did not achieve any real success until they were able to piggyback on the Bond phenomenon launched by *Dr. No* in 1962.

<sup>8</sup> Writing in 1883 — the year after Britain occupied Egypt — the French Orientalist James Darmesteter drew a comparison typical for the era, negatively contrasting British "exploitation" in Egypt with France's ostensibly higher-minded claim to a country cherished by French philological greats: "Prenne qui voudra le monopole d'exploiter l'Égypte du jour et de dépouiller les fellahs; l'Égypte, dans ses quarante siècles, est à la France, de par le génie de Champollion et de Mariette" (69).

<sup>9</sup> Nasser's open support for the rebels in Algeria severely rankled the French, who were intent on retaining what became France's last North African outpost after the losses of Morocco and Tunisia to independence in 1956. See Childers 171-75, Connelly 102-09, and Love 129-64.

<sup>10</sup> "Voir une chose," writes Ricoeur, "c'est ne pas en voir une autre. Raconter un drame, c'est en oublier un autre" (584). Todorov echoes the

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sentiment: “la mémoire, elle, est forcément une sélection: certains traits de l’évènement seront conservés, d’autres sont immédiatement ou progressivement écartés, et donc oubliés” (14).

<sup>11</sup> On Nasser’s material support for the FLN, as well as French worries about Nasser’s destabilization of North Africa, see Connelly 78-79, 102-09.

<sup>12</sup> On the French government’s efforts to equate the FLN resistance in Algeria with Muslim “fanaticism,” see Le Sueur 199-200.

<sup>13</sup> In an interview published in *Libération*, Halin describes the envisioned plot as follows: “Dans une des versions, OSS 117, très affûté, tuait le muezzin qui avait eu la mauvaise idée de le réveiller en pleine nuit, et déclenchait quasiment l’affaire du canal de Suez en 1956, ça me faisait beaucoup rire.” Hazanavicius explains that he deemed several such early iterations of the story too “politiquement incorrectes.”

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of the deferral onto Islam of French anxieties about postcolonial integration, see Fernando and Terray.

<sup>15</sup> For Freud’s first formulation of what has come to be known as the tension-release theory of humor, see his “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious.”

<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Bancel and Blanchard, “Les origines républicaines de la fracture coloniale” and Wilder.

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