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**Title:**

Terrorism and Visibility in Algeria’s ‘Black Decade’: *Des Hommes et des dieux* (2010)

*Abstract/143 words*

This article addresses the audio-visual representation of the victims of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism in Algeria in the 1990s, drawing on both historical and testimonial sources before examining Xavier Beauvois’s *Des Hommes et des dieux* (2010). Based on a true story, the abduction and murder of a group of ex-colonial French monks, it offers a useful platform on which to interrogate the interactions of the representational and the political in relation to terrorism. Critical accounts of contemporary terrorism suggest that there has been a shift in focus from governments and terrorist organisations to an apprehension of the individual victim. However, examinations of the audio-visual can inform terrorism studies, pointing towards representational and socio-political occlusions by illuminating an implicit hierarchy of visibility. Certain lives, generally Western and Christian, are visible and mourned publicly when lost, while others, in this case Algerian, remain without an image.

**Keywords:** terrorism, Algeria, film, Xavier Beauvois, Judith Butler, violence, visibility

**Word count:** 6101

**Charlie Hebdo: Victims and Visibility**

The 7th January 2015 attack on the Charlie Hebdo offices in Paris by Islamic fundamentalists resulted in the deaths of twelve people: cartoonists Charb, Cabu, Honoré, Tignous and Wolinski, editors Elsa Cayat and Mustapha Ourrad, economist Bernard Maris, guest Michel Renaud, police officers Franck Brinsolaro and Ahmed Merabet, and maintenance worker Frédéric Boisseau. Within moments of the attack, international media outlets, as well as social media, offered round–the-clock coverage of the massacre and the search for the perpetrators. In less than 24 hours, the slogan ‘Je suis Charlie’ was being adopted by private individuals, celebrities, public figures, and politicians as a marker of solidarity with the victims and as a symbol of the importance of freedom of expression in the face of violence. Yet at the same time, beginning on the 3rd of January and continuing to the 7th, the Islamic fundamentalist group Boko Haram (meaning ‘Western education is forbidden’) were engaging in a murderous campaign of terror in the town of Baga in Borno, Northern Nigeria. According to Human Rights Watch researcher Mausi Segun, ‘The exact death toll in Baga and 16 surrounding villages is unknown, with estimates ranging from “dozens” to 2000 or more’ (2015).

The lack of both national and international coverage of the massacre in Baga, occasionally contrasted with the glare of the Charlie Hebdo murders, drew criticism from both Nigerian and international commentators.[[1]](#endnote-1) Nigerian journalist Ehi Ekhator blamed the Nigerian press, suggesting that political leaders themselves did not care about ordinary Nigerians and that Nigerian citizens themselves had become immune to pity due to the frequency of violence. Others suggested that there was a problem of reporting in the area, while many suggested that the media was protecting their own interests, the high profiles of the Charlie Hebdo journalists ensuring the prominence of the deaths.[[2]](#footnote-1)

Certainly, a hierarchy of visibility was present even in the Paris attacks: as economist Frédéric Lordon writes:

Charlie, ce sont d’abord des personnes humaines, privées – par bonheur, on s’est aperçu rapidement que dire simplement “Charlie” pour les rassembler faisait bon marché de deux policiers, un agent de maintenance, un malheureux visiteur de ce jour là, et puis aussi de cinq autres personnes, dont quatre juives, tuées les deux jours d’après. […] il était perceptible à tous que ce qui venait d’être attaqué excédait évidemment les personnes privées (2015).

Indeed, the ideological implications of the slogan, as well as the virulence with which huge swathes of the population adopted it, came under increasing criticism in the days and weeks following the attack. It was hard to ignore the irony of political figures like Turkish Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu, Saudi Arabian Ambassador Mohammed Ismail Al-Sheikh, and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov marching in the name of ‘free speech’ in the demonstration on the 10th January 2015, while they represent nations where journalist expression is notoriously and often violently denied. Moreover, the surge of nationalist sentiment that the demonstration provoked resonated uncomfortably with certain FrontNational discourses; as Lordon again points out, ‘Tout porte à croire que le cortège parisien, si immense qu’il ait été, s’est montré d’une remarquable homogénéité sociologique: blanc, urbain, éduqué’ (2015).

Further confusion arose about what the ‘Je suis Charlie’ slogan actually implied. Was it asking individuals to identify with the magazine itself, which many Muslims and non-Muslims alike felt had promulgated Islamophobia? Did it propose a more general identification with the values of freedom of expression, or did it signify an opposition to violence, terrorist violence, or Islamic fundamentalist terrorist violence? This lack of clarity proved profitable for the increasing numbers of racist and xenophobic elements in French society: for Jacques Rancière, ‘Les défilés ont réuni sans distinction ceux qui défendaient les principes d’une vie en commun et ceux qui exprimaient leurs sentiments xénophobes’. (2015).[[3]](#endnote-2) The concerns I have outlined above, concerns that arose publicly following the Charlie Hebdo massacre and in subsequent debates- hierarchies of victim visibility, differential distribution of compassion, and the couching of latent xenophobia in the language of the Western universalizing tropes of secularism and Republicanism- find a startling echo in both the events leading up to and following the massacre of the Tibhirine monks and *Des Hommes et des dieux*.

**Terrorism and Algeria’s ‘Black Decade’**

In many ways, terrorism in Algeria from the 1980s onwards, and both state and international responses to it, have foreshadowed more recent occurrences in Europe, The United States, and the Middle East. The timely and moving text *Arab Spring Dreams* (Ahmari and Weddady, 2012) is a collection of short, first-hand accounts of individuals’ experiences living under dictatorships or with terrorist violence in the Arab world. Writing about Algeria, the editor notes that the term ‘Algiers syndrome’ was born out of a widespread fear that the only way to counter terrorist violence in the Middle East was through military-controlled dictatorships with Western support. Indeed, as the text points out, Algeria’s ‘Arab Spring’ might have happened as early as 1988, when groups of young men, unemployed and disenchanted with a nation and an economy that offered them no hope, took to the streets. The protests ended in military repression and violence, in the month known as ‘Black October’. The essay in *Arab Spring Dreams*, written by a young woman, has striking similarities with the attacks on foreigners represented in *Des hommes et des dieux.* The student arrives in school one day to see the following poster pinned to the wall, its stark warning an indictment against perceived neo-colonial influence, and a brutal attempt to appropriate both symbolic and physical space:

The profane French language must be removed from the curriculum. Proper Islamic garb must be made mandatory for female pupils. If this decree is not implemented within one week, we will slaughter you all - Front Islamique du Salut. (2012: 40-41)

The Muslim teachers in the school plead with the students and the Catholic headmistress to follow the decree; the headmistress refuses, and within a week she has disappeared, kidnapped from outside her home, tortured and executed.

The woman also notes that tourists were targeted, noting that ‘they were just killed randomly — as if for sport’ (2012: 42). This observation points to the dehumanization implicit in the terrorist act: human lives become mere objects of recreation, targeted without differentiation. According to contemporary analysts of terrorism, this lack of distinction is not an ancillary feature of the terrorist act, but rather an essential component. As Charles Townshend observes, a shift in focus from specifically targeted, high-profile victims to a blanket targeting of the general population is implicit in the organisation of terrorist attacks nowadays: ‘targets may not be in an objective sense innocent, but they must be in practical terms defenceless (“soft”). The essence of terrorism is the use of violence by the armed against the unarmed’ (2011: 8). Moreover, the notion of a form of terrorism that is limited to an idea of precise political objectives, what Townshend calls ‘auxiliary’ terrorism, does not take into account the fact that to a large extent terrorism in our time is focused not on specific goals, but on worldwide revolution, particularly in the ‘heady, even disorienting impact of the fusion of Islam and terrorism’ (2011: 105): what he names ‘absolute’ terror.

In this context, the notion that terrorists only target specific individuals, and that civilians are killed incidentally, is no longer valid. Nowadays it is precisely the targeting of innocent civilians that gives terrorism its shocking impact: ‘terrorism upsets people. It does so deliberately […] Insecurity can take many forms, but nothing else plays quite so sharply on our sense of vulnerability’ (Townshend: 2011, 1). It is the aleatory, unqualified nature of terrorist attacks, the fact that civilians are targeted in such a random manner that even individuals who support or are sympathetic to the terrorist cause may be victims. This total lack of predictability, and the break from the logic of means and ends, alters the discursive and physical space in which potential victims live; as Townshend notes, ‘war is in essence physical, terrorism is mental’ (2011: 14). The essence of terrorism lies not in the destruction it causes, the lives lost (for these are all correlative with war) but in the mental fear it induces: if anyone can be a target, anywhere, at any time, the delineated mental and physical space of the war-zone no longer exists.

Adriana Cavarero, drawing on Townshend, recognises the erasure of individuality at the heart of the terrorist act. However, she takes an important ontological step further, noting that ‘extreme violence [is] directed at nullifying human beings even more than at killing them’ (2010: 9), through ‘a violence whose precise aim is to erase singularity’ (2010: 19). Terrorist violence has at its heart the negation of human singularity and human vulnerability, which is why *Des Hommes et des dieux* focuses resolutely on the humanity and individuality of the monks, in an attempt to capture a singularity that the terrorist act attempts to erase. Cavarero believes this semantic shift will reconfigure the debate, focusing on the victim rather than on an impersonal, political or ideological act:

If we observe the scene of massacre from the point of view of the helpless victims rather than that of the warriors, however, the picture changes: the end melts away, and the means become the substance. More than terror, what stands out is horror. (2010: 1)

For Cavarero, shifting the terminology from one of terror to one of horror captures the particular ontological violence at the heart of the terrorist act in our time: its negation of human singularity. However, this violence can take place on both ontological *and* discursive levels if no testament to the life that has been lost is offered. According to Benjamin Stora, celebrated historian of late twentieth century Algerian history, the only picture that gained international recognition during the ‘Black Decade’ was Hocine’s *La Madone de Bentalha* or *La Pietà d’Alger*. According to Stora, this image has become the defining representation of the war, ‘une photographie, une seule image fixe devenue icône’ (2001: 7). Stora links this visual invisibility of the war in Algeria to the machinations of the military government on the one hand and the terrorists on the other: the vast majority of people found it impossible to identify with either faction.[[4]](#endnote-3) Moreover, the woman writing in *Arab Spring Dreams* highlights a similar concern frequently overlooked by political commentators and the Western media in general: amid the terror and counter terror that engulfs many states, lies a civilian population that is eager, even desperate, to move forward in ‘a society otherwise brimming with human potential’ (2012: 40).

Where exactly are this silent and for the most part, invisible majority? Not in *Des Hommes et des dieux*,it seems, for while the monks are certainly seen to be trapped between the terrorists and the army, we learn little about the position of the Algerian population (beyond their dependence on the monks). Although terrorism reduces victims to an undifferentiated mass of ‘targets’, they can come to be defined by specific characteristics, in a process that Townshend calls ‘the smothering of the victims’ individual human qualities by their collective identity (whether religion, class, race, or ethnicity)’ (2011: 17). Therefore, even though terrorist attacks on the general population are non-specific, unqualified, and random, there are other concerns that influence the choice of location and of victim, and this point is key to the second strand, the visibility of non-Western victims of terrorist violence.

In Algeria, the terrorists operated a four-point plan of attack:

In the first stage it was aimed at security forces and government employees; in the second stage it was aimed at intellectuals, journalists, lawyers, artists and foreigners; in the third stage it was aimed at the general infrastructure of the country, e.g. bridges, schools, railways, and electricity supply; and in the current stage, it is aimed at the entire population. (cited in Whittaker, 2007: 160)

This targeting reflects, in many ways, degrees of power within social and political space; the terrorists targeted victims according to a hierarchical structure, whereby the individuals wielding the most power and influence are attacked initially, then those, like foreigners, who will attract international interest, and finally, the civilian population. Victimhood is thus unevenly distributed; some individuals are targeted specifically because of the public visibility their nationality or religion confers on them, and this is the case in *Des Hommes et des dieux*. The monks are killed because they are French, Catholics, and foreigners. Of course, the extent to which a victim of terrorist violence remains undifferentiated remains a question of their capacity to be recognised, for their loss to be perceived as a loss: an individual’s ethnicity, religion, and country of origin will determine whether they are mourned publicly. As Judith Butler writes, ‘affect depends upon social supports for feeling; we come to feel only in relation to a perceivable loss, one that depends on social structures of perception’ (2010: 50). Therefore, in relation to terrorist violence, two types of singularity are at risk: the erasure of the singular individual through violence but also their further erasure, due to a lack of recognition of their death.

Thus, although terrorism functions by rendering its victims interchangeable, random, exposed, and physically vulnerable, not every victim is equally vulnerable and not every victim’s death is recognised in the same way, if it receives full or partial public recognition at all. Some discourses exclude certain individuals from the normative structures that govern what enters into the public field of the visible. As Butler notes, comparing media coverage of American and non-American victims of war and violence, ‘discourse itself effects violence through omission. If 200,000 Iraqi children were killed during the Gulf War and its aftermath, do we have an image, a frame for any of those lives, singly or collectively?’ (2004: 34). What is at stake, therefore, in placing the death of French civilians at the hands of Algerians at the centre of a film about the Algerian Civil War?

***Des Hommes et des dieux*: Priests and Terrorists**

Made with a comparatively modest budget of four million euros, *Des Hommes et des dieux* achieved unprecedented success, winning the *Grand Prix* at Cannes and attracting in France over three million viewers, the kind of audience figures reserved for Hollywood blockbusters. I suggest that part of the success of the film is due to its implicit catering to a Western conception of terrorism and terrorist violence: Islamic fundamentalist terrorists, prominent and humanized Western victims and an innocent, Western-friendly, but mostly undifferentiated indigenous population. While the film uses spatial and filmic tropes to present the monks as distinct, vulnerable, and individualised beings in the face of terrorist violence, it seems necessary to place this in conjunction with the historical contexts surrounding the monks’ deaths, and the film’s creation and reception.

The monastery at Tibhirine (which means ‘gardens’ in Kabyle) where the monks lived was originally established by Cistercian monks in 1934, in an abandoned building that had once been a 19th century English colonial farmhouse, thus linking their presence to assorted histories of occupation. For Léon Duval, Archbishop of Algiers from 1954 to 1988, ‘Tibhirine was the symbol of a multi-faith post-colonial Algeria where Christians and Muslims, along with Jews, could live together in mutual respect and dialogue’ (cited in Evans and Philips, 2007: 226). However, in the tense atmosphere of 1990s Algeria, the presence of the monks, however harmonious in relation to the local population, came to be resented by terrorist militants and army officials alike. The army ‘were patently unhappy at this outside presence witnessing the reality of the dirty war’ (2007: 226) while the terrorists viewed the presence of the French monks on Algerian soil a blatant mark of the continuing control and infiltration of a Western ex-colonial power. Moreover, the terror campaign targeting foreigners in Algeria had proved to be one of the most effective means of gaining international coverage of the war. The monks, by deliberate choice unarmed and unprotected by the army, became easy and high profile targets.

In geographical terms, Tibhirine is also located in an area of the Atlas Mountains between Algiers, Larbaa, and Blida that came to be known as the ‘triangle of death’. On the night of the 26/27 March 1996, seven of the nine monks in the monastery were kidnapped. Their heads were subsequently discovered on the 31st May, 1996, while their bodies have never been found. The outcry following the death of the monks was enormous in Algeria, France, and internationally. Evans outlines:

President Chirac called the monks the embodiment of tolerance and on television millions shed tears as they watched Cardinal Lustiger, the archbishop of Paris, snuff out the seven candles that had been brought from Tibhirine to Notre Dame Cathedral as a sign of hope. Bells were tolled in every church in France on Pentecost Sunday whilst political organizations from across the spectrum marched in memory of the dead brothers. (2007: 229)

Thus, while terrorism in Algeria and the government’s response to it did not receive extensive international media or cultural exposure, the kidnapping and subsequent murder of the Tibhirine monks elicited international outcry. This extensive and public mourning demonstrates the extent to which grief and the recognition of loss can be differentially distributed:

Certain lives will be highly protected, and the abrogation of their sanctity will be sufficient to mobilize the forces of war. Other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as “grievable”. (Butler: 2004: 32)

The public obituary then, is for Butler evidence of a recognisable humanity, ‘grievability as a presupposition for the life that matters’ (2010: 14). Furthermore, the critical reception in France and the United Kingdom also failed to remark upon any absence or deficiency in the film’s depiction of Algerian terrorism. As Stora points out ‘tout le monde a abordé le film uniquement sur le terrain esthétique ou religieux, sans jamais poser les questions d’ordre historique ou politique’ (cited in Péron, 2014). Both the Bishops' Conference of France and the French Council of Muslim Faith lauded the film for demonstrating the ways in which Christians and Muslims can work and live together. The importance of religion in the film is related to the form of contemplative spirituality practiced by the monks. Indeed, a semi-liturgical language creeps into the writing of many French commentators; *Le Parisien*, for example, perhaps unwilling to evoke religious themes that might be at odds with French secularism while also assuaging potential skeptics, asked: ‘un film réligieux? Non. Un film transcendant? Oui’ (Anon., 2010).

This emphasis on the transcendent humanity of the *frères*, on the harmony between the Muslims of the village and the Christian monks, as well as the democratic process that leads them to their final decision to stay in Algeria, is not without its detractors. Certain commentators have questioned the ‘passive morality’ implied in the monks’ decision to stay, their pacifist resistance, and the fact that their decision to stay would inevitably draw the terrorists to the village (Thorpe, 2010). Indeed, reaction to the film in Algeria highlights one of the underlying uncomfortable issues about the film, the privileging of the deaths of a small group of French men over the elimination of approximately 100,000 Algerians:

En Algérie, le film est évidemment accueilli comme le rappel d’une tragédie, mais les commentateurs ne manquent jamais de rappeler que face à ces sept victimes, il ne faudrait pas oublier les dizaines de milliers morts algériens de l’immense tragédie des années 90. (Péron, 2014)

Although to date there has been little academic criticism of *Des Hommes et des dieux*, in ‘Of Gods and Humanitarians’, David Nowell-Smith points to some of the provocative issues raised by the film. He queries the fact that although the film makes reference to clear historical events, broadly, terrorism in Algeria in the 1990s and specifically the abduction of the monks, very little screen time is allocated to a clear engagement with these events. Moreover, in contrast to journalistic appraisals of the film, Nowell-Smith interrogates the extent to which it truly contributes to an intercultural dialogue about terrorism, suggesting that the film instead evokes ‘the founding ideals of French republicanism’ (2011: 59). Indeed, the director states explicitly that the film aimed to encapsulate these ideals, rather than evoking a social or political dialogue about terrorism:

Ce film montre des hommes libres. Et puis ils décident ensemble, démocratiquement, en se réunissant en chapitres. Et ils se soucient de leurs frères, chrétiens et musulmans. Je résume cela par: liberté, égalité, fraternité! (cited in Tranchant, 2010).

These posited ideals of republicanism and humanism in the film may be further problematized by the realities of French colonialism and the monks’ colonial pasts.

Therefore, although scriptwriter Étienne Comar attempted to highlight the monks’ position as one of objectivity, stating, ‘le film adopté a 100% le point de vue des moines, qui ont toujours veillé a rester neutres, a ne pas prendre parti’ (Georges: 2010), his words belie two essential components of the film. Firstly, the viewer is led to identify with the monks’ point of view for the entirety of the film (which I will discuss in the following section) and secondly, their supposed ‘neutrality’, which obscures the fact that many of them had already taken part in the 1954–1962 Algerian War. Henry Quinson, a religious devotee and scholar based in Algeria who had been close friends with some of the monks, and who advised Beauvois on certain aspects of the film, highlights the fact that most of them had a complicated relationship to Franco-Algerian history, something that *Des Hommes et des dieux* resolutely ignores. According to Quinson, Christian had been a sub-lieutenant during the Algerian war, when his Algerian policeman friend Mohammed had intervened with the FLN and saved his life; a few days later, Mohammed had been found with his throat slit. Paul had seen, and possibly participated in, ‘horrible’ acts during the war and Luc had been kidnapped by the FLN in 1959. Amédée was a *pied-noir* and Christophe had come in 1962 as part of the ‘coopération’ (a form of Catholic-run foreign aid service) (cited in Péron, 2010).

Given the complicated relationships most of the monks had with Algeria, and the fact that this is not even obliquely referenced in *Des hommes et des dieux*, their status as representatives of French republican ideals is doubly troubling in a film that also explicitly associates self-sacrifice, bravery, and fearlessness in the face of violence to Western and Christian protagonists (whatever the directors stated intention might have been). The film offers a model of a specifically Christian spirituality that is blatantly contrasted with the aggressive fundamentalism represented by the Muslim terrorists. It could be argued that Beauvois perhaps too neatly equates Islam and terrorism, and Christianity with a quasi-secular humanistic pacifism. Thus, while we do witness discussions between the monks and the peaceable villagers who are united in their denunciation of terrorist violence, it is the monks who make the ultimate and symbolically charged sacrifice of their lives. This trope carries heavy overtones of Christian martyrdom (as opposed to the Islamic tradition of martyrdom, *shahid*), and which is explicitly referenced throughout the film through the paintings that hang on the monastery walls, which include Caravaggio’s *The Flagellation of Christ* (1601).

Indeed, although the film tries to link the actions of the monks to republicanism, rather than religious motifs of martyrdom, this appears to be undermined by Beauvois himself who cites the Pope when praising the bravery of the monks:

Il y a une phrase de Jean-Paul II qui me plaît : “n'ayez pas peur”. Les frères aussi vivent comme ça. C'est tellement le contraire d'un gouvernement qui nous dit tout le temps d'avoir peur. Oui, frère Christian ne se laisse pas intimider. (cited in Tranchant, 2010)

According to Malaise Ruthven, consultant on Middle Eastern Affairs, nationalism often functions as a compliment to religious fundamentalism, and indeed ‘the strongest parallel […] lies in the ability of nationalism and religion, alone among all forms of allegiance, to give moral sanction to martyrdom and violence’ (cited in Townshend, 2011: 88). Yet although both the monks and the terrorists can be linked to both nationalism and religion, in the film there is a firm separation of those who are martyrs, the French monks, from those who are agents of violence, the Islamic terrorists. Thus, while the film offers a vision of a vulnerable and visible humanity, it is one that is specifically linked to Christian and Western individuals. Furthermore, the extent to which the film consequently or concomitantly excludes or overshadows the Algerian victims of terrorist violence should be interrogated. As Stora comments laconically, ‘les moines sont restés et sont allés jusqu’au bout, devenant des victimes françaises de l’histoire algérienne’ (cited in Péron, 2014). Thus, throughout the film the focus remains steadfastly on the monks, and many of the technical devices and spatial tropes the director and screenwriter employ reiterate a desire for the spectator to identify almost exclusively (‘100%’, according to Comar) with the perspective of the monks.

**Visibility and Identification**

In *Des Hommes et des dieux*, sentimental audience identification with the monks reaches its climax in one of the final scenes of the film: the monks very own Last Supper which takes place to the overtures of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake*. A panning shot that captures in close up the emotions of the monks in the final scene: we are treated to intimate and lingering close ups of individual expressions of fear, hope, sadness, regret, bravery, acceptance, nostalgia, peace. As the camera sweeps across their faces, we are reminded of Cavarero’s statement that the focus of discourses of terrorism must move away from the perpetrator, to that of the victim: ‘it is the defenceless person without qualities, interchangeable and random, who takes the centre of the contemporary stage on which the specialists in violence against the defenceless perform’ (2010: 74). This attribution of individuality to the monks renders them starkly human and the literal proximity of the audience to the monks through the use of the close-up renders emotional and affective identification with them almost inevitable.

This scene is the finale of a series of spatial tropes that mark out visible distinctions between the monks and the Algerian civilians, the army and the terrorists. Most of the action takes place within the enclosed walls of the monastery, or within the bounded walls of its grounds. In one of the opening sequences, the perfectly symmetrical image of the monks chanting in the chapel in pale blue and white tones cuts abruptly to the scene of a wedding in the village, hinting at a disruption from the outside of the symmetry and regularity of the monks’ lives. The monastery scenes draw our attention to the ways in which their discipline, dress and lifestyle become ‘elements that separate and differentiate them from the rest of humanity’ (Di Ceglie and Sabbadini, 2011: 745). A similar dislocation occurs in the contrasting of another scene of prayer with a vision of the monks selling honey in the noisy marketplace of a nearby town: although they are part of the community, as viewers we are made aware through the sharp cut of the division between the space of the monastery and that of the outside world.

Moreover, the monks constantly mediate our experience as viewers of the spaces occupied by civilian Algerians, occupying paternalistic roles within the village that echo colonial ideologies a little too comfortably. One villager states the ‘les oiseaux c’est nous, la branche c’est vous, si vous partez nous ne saurons pas où se poser’. Such a statement cannot help but carry uncomfortable overtones of the *mission civilisatrice*, the belief that the French were aiding a less advanced population both socially and economically which can also be observed in a scene in Laurent Herbier’s *Mon Colonel* (2006), where a party of French *pieds-noirs* organize a politicised picnic on some Roman ruins. The colonel of the title makes a speech, noting that ‘ce pays a toujours eu besoin d’une autre civilisation pour le féconder. Il y a plus que 2000 ans c’était les Romains […] nous avons aujourd’hui la résponsabilité de cette mission civilisatrice’.

In line with this notion of the civilising mission which presupposes cultural, and usually racial, hierarchies, we also see the monks offering employment to locals, acting as doctors, providing clothes and shoes, assisting in dealing with the French administration, and even, in the case of Luc (Lambert Wilson), offering a young woman advice about the nature of true love. As Nowell-Smith writes, ‘they are portrayed as half martyr, half aid worker, inspired by ideas of Christian sacrifice’ (2011: 59). Such actions again have an uncomfortable resonance with the military tactics of the French government during the war of Independence (1954–1962), when medical assistance and clothing were distributed in villages as a means to gain support among the population for the French cause.[[5]](#endnote-4) These quasi-colonial residues are further inflected in the setting of the film; although the action ostensibly takes place in Algeria, filming actually took place in Morocco. This appears to suggest an interchangability between one North African former colony and the next; yet perhaps this choice of location is more to do with the impracticalities and possible dangers of filming in Algeria, an issue that hints at the continuation of terrorist violence, which the film again does not point towards, even obliquely; the narrative of terrorist violence in Algeria ends with the death of the French protagonists.

This single-minded focus on the monk’s experience of terrorism is also evident in a scene where two of the monks reach a roadblock that has been set up by the army, and they witness the dead body of a single terrorist, surrounded by tanks and armed militia. The scene is filmed entirely from the monks’ point of view, and it might be argued that this perspective shifts the spectator’s awareness from a consideration of the victim to that of the monks; as Nowell Smith writes, ‘the experience of victimhood is transferred from the dead terrorist to the monk witnessing the dead body’ (2011: 59). Even many of the apparently neutral landscape shots pan across to end with the point of view of a monk gazing out of the hill and valleys of the Atlas Mountains. It is also clear from the scenes where we witness Christian walking alone in nature that the weather conditions, light, and natural vistas, combined with medium shots and close ups, reflect his personal experience of the landscape, as well as reflecting his thoughts and feelings. One rather obvious example is when monastery leader Christian goes out for a walk alone, and suddenly he is surrounded by a flock of sheep. He is visually and symbolically transfigured (or indeed transubstantiated) into the beneficent Christian shepherd leading his flock, and the viewer is invited to imagine his inner dialogue, his self-visualisation in this role, as the Algerian landscape moulds itself around his mood and his thoughts.

The spatial and identificatory tropes outlined above that problematically serve to increase audience identification with the monks move through different phases: initially, it is with the group as a whole, and it is as the film progresses that the monks begin to individuate. The opening scenes do not allow us to distinguish individual personalities within the group, but after the terrorists first arrive individual personalities begin to emerge. Retaining individuality while remaining in a community could be characterised as the very definition of democracy and it is significant that the *frères* insist that Christian’s solitary decision to refuse the army’s help has endangered the democratic principles upon which the community was founded. In the chapel scene following this discussion, the camera angle shifts, and as they individually approach the altar with offerings, close-ups of their expressions create a sense of singularities within the group that had not been evident up to this point.

*Des Hommes et des dieux* suggests that the anonymity and negation implied by the ideology of terrorism is always already an illusion; beneath all forms of violence, there are individuals, whether this is recognised or not. What remains problematic about the film, then, is the extent to which this individuality and the spectator’s identificatory focus remains fixed upon the French protagonists, highlighting the ways in which ‘we react to certain forms of violence with horror and to other forms with a sense of acceptance’ (Butler 2010: 49). The spectator is conditioned to react with pathos and horror at the treatment of the monks at the end of the film, and yet the violence that may be inflicted on the villagers is obscurely registered, if at all. Morover, not only are we conditioned to identify with some victims more than others, but from the outset, the monks were targeted, unlike the civilians, because they are already specific and singular: it is precisely because their deaths will be registered that they were targeted. The varying degrees of victim visibility found in *Des Hommes et des dieux* might lead us to question how audio-visual media can, on the one hand, confound the erasure of individuality that terrorism seeks to impose, and on the other, reflect a double erasure: of a human life and of the visibility of that life.

1. The contrasting media reception of the Baga massacre and the Charlie Hebdo killing was compiled by Maeve Sherlaw for *The Guardian* (2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The contrasting media reception of the Baga massacre and the Charlie Hebdo killing was compiled by Maeve Sherlaw for *The Guardian* (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. As the controversy around the ‘Je suis Charlie’ slogan and hashtag demonstrated, we cannot always ask people to positively identify with the victims of violence; indeed, the 7/7 formular ‘Not in my Name’ in Britain had much more success, because it proposed a form of disidentification with perpetrators and with terrorist violence more broadly. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. The main fundamentalist groups who turned to terrorism in the wake of the failed ‘democratic’ elections were the FIS, the MIA (Mouvement Islamique Armé), and the GIA (Groupe Islamique Armé). Opposing these groups were the Algerian military-controlled government, who were desperate to contain and manage terrorist violence within the country’s borders and refused to solicit or accept help from outside forces, effectively placing an embargo on outside communication. For more on this issue, see: Lahouari A (1998) Algeria’s Army, Algeria’s Agony. *Foreign Affairs* Jul/Aug: 44–53; McAllister E (2013) Immunity to the Arab Spring? Fear, Fatigue and Fragmentation in Algeria. *New Middle Eastern Studies* 3: 1–20 and McDougall J (2005) Savage Wars? Codes of Violence in Algeria, 1830s-1990s. *Third World Quarterly* 26: 117–131. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. For a detailed account of the *mission civilisatrice* specifically in relation to the targeting of women, see Lazreg M (2008) *Torture and the Twilight of Empire: From Algiers to Baghdad*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

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