
Miscellaneous

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Submitted

October 10th, 2024

Approved

March 14th, 2025

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Communication & Society

ISSN 0214-0039

E ISSN 2386-7876

www.communication-society.com

2025 – Vol. 38 (2)

pp. 187-198

How to cite this article:

Stubbs, J. (2025). States of Emergency, Popular Culture and the Aftermaths of Colonial Violence in *The Private Right* (1966) *Communication & Society*, 38(2), 187-198.
<https://doi.org/10.15581/003.38.2.013>

States of Emergency, Popular Culture and the Aftermaths of Colonial Violence in *The Private Right* (1966)

Abstract

This article examines the 1966 film *The Private Right*, written and directed by Michael Papas, as a case study for understanding the representation and circulation of colonial violence in British popular culture. Drawing on Arjun Appadurai's work on global cultural flows, particularly what he terms "mediascapes," the film is situated within the broader context of British cultural productions addressing the Cyprus Emergency (1955–1959) and other late-imperial conflicts. Through close analysis of the film's content, production history, and reception, the article explores how *The Private Right* engages with public knowledge of colonial violence in Britain. The study considers the film's portrayal of torture, its displacement of culpability onto Cypriot collaborators, and its depiction of London as a site of postcolonial reckoning. These elements are examined in relation to contemporary television plays, novels, and other cultural artifacts addressing colonial violence. The article argues that *The Private Right* challenges popular narratives of peaceful decolonization by depicting the return of violence from the imperial periphery to the imperial metropole itself, illustrating the failure of emergency laws to contain anticolonial resistance.

Keywords

Postcolonial cinema, colonial violence, Cyprus Emergency, mediascapes, popular culture.

1. Introduction

The 1966 film *The Private Right*, written and directed by Greek Cypriot filmmaker Michael Papas, provides a revealing case study for examining the representation of colonial violence in the aftermath of British imperial rule. Although it remains relatively obscure, *The Private Right* is notable for the way it uses violence as part of its visual language to represent and dramatize colonized spaces, and how this violence is shown to seep from the peripheries of empire back to the imperial center in Britain itself. As Achille Mbembe has suggested, violence has long been employed in imperial settings not simply as an instrument to subdue and regulate populations but also as a means to justify imperialism itself. He writes: "In the colonial context... violence constituted the substance of the right to rule. Violence was the original form of the right itself." (2001, p. 25). Much recent scholarly discussion of violence in the British Empire has focused on the repression of knowledge about atrocities and brutality, and the propagation of a myth that Britain withdrew from its colonies

in a peaceful, lawful, and orderly manner, in contrast to the violent decolonization experienced by other empires, notably France. Notably, Paul Gilroy (2004) has argued that “a hidden, shameful store of imperial horrors has been an unacknowledged presence in British political and cultural life” and that “repressed knowledge of the cruelty and injustice that recur in diverse accounts of imperial administration can only be denied at a considerable moral and psychological cost” (p. 102). A similar phenomenon has also been observed in other national contexts. Writing about France, Ann Laura Stoler has used the term “colonial aphasia”, which she describes as “a dismembering, a difficulty speaking, a difficulty generating a vocabulary that associates appropriate words and concepts with appropriate things” (2011, p. 125). The cultural failure to speak about the violence of empire may thus not simply be a case of repression or forgetting, but rather of the absence of a language suitable for its expression.

As Gilroy and Stoler indicate, knowledge of violent colonial pasts has the potential to resurface in the present, even in societies which struggle to fully acknowledge or articulate it. This idea has found striking manifestation in recent years through legal cases and historical revelations that have prompted some to reexamine Britain’s colonial legacy. A landmark moment in this process occurred in 2013 when the British government settled a case brought by survivors of torture in British detention camps in Kenya during the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950s. In 2019 the British government settled a similar case involving Cypriot victims of torture during the EOKA insurgency of the same era (Smith 2019). These legal cases led to the release of vast troves of historical records, fueling a cycle of new historical scholarship reappraising this period of British colonial history (Elkins 2005, 2022). At the same time, the extent to which knowledge of colonial atrocities truly was repressed in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s warrants closer examination. As Erik Linstrum (2023) notes, the British public was exposed to information about torture and abuse through activist campaigns, media reports, soldiers’ letters, and representations in popular culture such as novels, TV plays and films like *The Private Right*. The state was never fully in control of the circulation of this knowledge. Rather than simply examining the repression of information, Linstrum (2017) suggests that scholars should therefore pay attention to the “epistemological grey areas of imperialism,” the ways that “uncertainty, ambivalence and denial” shaped how Britons understood and responded to colonial violence (p. 21).

This article aims to explore how *The Private Right* participated in the circulation of representations of colonial violence in British popular culture in the 1960s. The film follows Minos, a former EOKA insurgent who travels to London seeking revenge against Phantis, a Greek Cypriot who tortured him during the Cyprus Emergency while working as a British collaborator. Moving between scenes of colonial violence in Cyprus and the transformed spaces of post-imperial London, the film traces how the brutal logic of emergency rule returns to haunt the metropolitan center as Minos methodically hunts down his former torturer through the city’s Greek Cypriot diaspora community. In this context, Arjun Appadurai’s theoretical work on global cultural flows provides a useful framework for understanding the circulation of colonial violence between imperial periphery and center. His concept of “mediascapes” is particularly relevant, defined as “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” that offer “complex sets of metaphors by which people live” (1996, p. 35). Mediascapes may thus be understood as global flows of media content—images, narratives, other information—across various platforms, providing resources for self-imagining as a daily social project. As a depiction of the Cyprus Emergency’s aftermath in London, *The Private Right* contributes to this media flow in its narrative bridging of colonial and metropolitan spaces. It exemplifies what Appadurai calls the “deterritorialization” of cultural phenomena, where “money, commodities, and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world” (p. 38). In this case, it is violence and trauma that chase the characters from Cyprus to London,

detritorializing the colonial conflict and bringing it into the imperial center. *The Private Right* can also be seen to participate in what Appadurai terms the “production of locality” (p. 178) within the context of global flows. While the film circulates as part of a global mediascape, it also produces a specific locality—a vision of post-colonial London populated by Greek Cypriots carrying the unresolved tensions of empire. This speaks to Appadurai’s argument that locality is “primarily relational and contextual rather than scalar or spatial” (p. 178). The London of *The Private Right* is thus not simply a geographical space but a relational one, defined by its connections to Cyprus and the broader context of decolonization. In this way, the film both reflects and shapes understanding of post-colonial identities and spaces in 1960s Britain.¹

This article begins by providing a detailed synopsis of *The Private Right*, a necessary step given the film’s relative obscurity and limited availability.² The synopsis serves to familiarize readers with the film’s narrative and themes, laying the groundwork for subsequent analysis. The article then explores two crucial contexts that inform understandings of the film. Attention is first given to the historical context of the Cyprus Emergency, elucidating the political, social, and military dimensions of this colonial conflict. Secondly, the representation of the Cyprus Emergency in British popular culture, including literature, television dramas, and cinema is examined. This cultural context allows *The Private Right* to be positioned within a wider mediascape of colonial and postcolonial narratives circulating in 1960s Britain. The final section of the article offers an analysis of *The Private Right*. It begins by tracing its production history and the controversy it generated on its release. A close reading is made of the film’s content, paying particular attention to its depiction of torture and its portrayal of London as a site of postcolonial violence. Throughout this analysis, *The Private Right* is situated within broader debates about violence in the British Empire, drawing on theoretical frameworks from postcolonial studies to explore how the film both engages with and complicates narratives of colonial violence. In so doing, the article demonstrates how this overlooked film contributes to our understanding of the cultural afterlives of empire in postcolonial Britain.

2. Synopsis of The Private Right

The Private Right begins in Cyprus during the late 1950s, amid the EOKA (National Organization of Cypriot Fighters) insurgency against British colonial rule. British soldiers from the 5th Parachute Regiment conduct a raid on an EOKA hideout, assisted by a Greek Cypriot collaborator named Phantis. As EOKA members ambush a British jeep, Phantis drives ahead in an ordinary car. In the ensuing shootout, Phantis’ car is destroyed by an EOKA grenade, but he manages to shoot one of the insurgents. British soldiers capture an EOKA member named Minos, pinning him down with rifle butts. The scene then shifts to an underground site, where Phantis interrogates Minos under the supervision of an ununiformed British officer and two police officers, who appear to be Turkish Cypriots. Phantis slaps Minos and straps him to a board, demanding his code name, crew members, and contacts. The interrogation quickly escalates to brutal torture. He waterboards Minos, forcing a wet cloth into his mouth and tipping buckets of water over him. The two police officers also participate, slapping Minos and pouring more water over his head, but Phantis barks “don’t you dare!”, apparently demanding to be the sole perpetrator of the violence. As this unfolds, the supervising British officer seems to become concerned by the fervor with which Phantis brutalizes

¹ The film bears a certain resemblance to Jean-Luc Godard’s *Le Petit Soldat* (1963), which follows a French intelligence agent in Geneva who is haunted by his experiences of torture during the Algerian War. Like *The Private Right*, it shows how colonial violence circulates beyond the space of emergency, with torture techniques learned in Algeria (including waterboarding) being deployed in mainland Europe.

² A copy of the film is available at the National Archive of the British Film Institute in London through their research viewing service. It is not currently available in digital formats.

Minos, warning him, “you’re going to find it bloody difficult to explain another accidental death”. As they leave the underground site together, the officer mentions money, implying that Phantis’ motivations are at least partially financial.

As Minos lies slumped in his cell, a montage of news bulletins announces that Cyprus has become independent. The film cuts to Minos, now dressed somewhat like a gangster in a black suit and tie with slicked back hair, arriving at a London train station. Cyprus became independent in 1960, but this arrival appears to come several years later. He is met by a compatriot who drives him to a rented room in North London. Minos has become a grimly determined and possibly traumatized figure and he immediately begins his manhunt for Phantis. As he searches for his torturer, we follow him through various locations populated largely by London’s Cypriot immigrant community. He also happens upon a swinging house party, looking out of place in his gangster attire, and has a brief encounter with a blonde woman. The depiction of London’s Greek Cypriot community—in bars, café’s, slum housing and religious gatherings—has a documentary-like quality, but the party and lovemaking scenes are influenced by the erotic imagination prevalent in contemporary “swinging London” films such as *Darling* (1965) and *The Knack... and How to Get It* (1965). Minos continues his search, attacking a man in a back alley. After receiving a tip about Phantis’ location, he bursts into a flat wielding a pistol, but the occupant is someone else. Throughout, Minos remains a silent, impassive figure, driven to violence by his obsessive quest for revenge. Their names are significant: Phantis shares the Ancient Greek root of the word “phantom”, while in Greek mythology Minos became a judge of the dead in the underworld.

Meanwhile, we also see Phantis’ troubled life in London as he gambles and abuses women. When one resists him, declaring “this isn’t Cyprus, you know,” he forces a bottle of alcohol into her mouth, replicating his earlier torture of Minos. In scenes which echo contemporary British films such as *Repulsion* (1965), Phantis experiences haunting, psychedelic flashbacks to his violent actions in Cyprus. Amid an array of symbolic imagery, a hooded figure recurs, first against a black background and then back in Cyprus, where he identifies an EOKA insurgent from a line-up of suspects. Multiple hands then reach out towards the figure, pulling the hood and revealing Phantis, leading him to fall through a dark hole of some kind. The film culminates with the two characters driving through London at night: Minos finally has Phantis in his sights. They arrive at an abandoned circular building, filmed in a railway engine shed in North London. Heavily lit from behind, Minos slowly approaches Phantis with a gun and executes him in a clinical, emotionless manner. Echoing the subjectivity of the earlier flashback scenes, the shooting is shown from Phantis’ point of view—despite his sadism, the torturer remains the more psychologically accessible of the two characters. As an impassive Minos leaves, various figures are seen waiting outside for him.

3. The Cyprus Emergency context

Beginning in 1955, the Cyprus Emergency was an ethnonationalist insurgency waged by Greek Cypriot fighters against British colonial rule. This conflict emerged from a complex historical and political context, rooted in the island’s diverse ethnic composition and its strategic importance to British imperial interests in the Eastern Mediterranean (Holland, 1998, Rappas 2014, French 2015). The Emergency differed from other anticolonial struggles in that insurgents sought annexation by a different nation—the Kingdom of Greece—rather than independence *per se*. This goal of union with Greece, known as *enosis*, was the driving force behind the Greek Cypriot nationalist movement. EOKA, the primary militant group leading the insurgency, employed guerrilla tactics against British forces and those it perceived as collaborators. In response to EOKA’s campaign, the British authorities imposed a state of emergency in Cyprus in November 1955. This measure suspended normal legal processes, granting extraordinary powers to the police and military, including the ability to detain suspects without trial and impose collective punishments on communities

suspected of supporting the insurgents (Holland, 1998; French, 2015; Stubbs, 2017). As Stephen Morton (2013) suggests, this state of emergency was a “quasi-legal technique of governmentality” intended to “discipline and punish anti-colonial resistance... and to reassert British colonial sovereignty” (p. 111). The rule of law, or at least the impression of it, was integral to British colonial governance. However, it could always be abrogated when required. As Priya Satia (2020) argues, “colonial rule was never actually about the rule of law but about the tension between the rule of law and “emergency powers” justifying exception to the law” (p. 128–29). The conflict between legality and emergency in colonial governance also aligns with Giorgio Agamben’s (2005) concept of the state of exception, a “zone of indistinction” at the heart of sovereign power, where legal norms and their suspension become indistinguishable (p. 23). The democratic principles Britain espoused at home were thus frequently at odds with its more autocratic methods of colonial administration

The Private Right situates its narrative within this state of emergency, depicting two further techniques of British colonial governmentality: the use of informers and the use of torture. Both Greek Cypriot and Turkish Cypriot informants played a vital role in providing British forces with intelligence about anticolonial activities and identifying members of EOKA (French, 2015). The hooding of the informant character Phantis in *The Private Right* references a specific counterinsurgency tactic, documented notably in Northern Ireland, in which hooded informants were used by British forces to anonymously identify insurgents. It was also common practice to relocate Cypriot collaborators and informants to London for their safety (French, 2017); we may assume this is the reason for Phantis’ presence there. While the film’s depiction of Phantis as the lead perpetrator of torture appears to be a dramatic invention, allegations of the torture of Cypriot insurgents in British custody were widespread in the late 1950s and formed a significant aspect of the public discourse surrounding the Emergency in Britain. As John Tulloch (2005) suggests, torture was made possible in colonized spaces firstly by distance from the imperial center and secondly by racialized dehumanization of colonial subjects. Complaints ranged from physical abuse such as beatings and stress positions to psychological torment including sleep deprivation (Elkins 2022). Some of the most serious allegations involved the use of waterboarding, which bears a striking resemblance to the treatment of Minos in *The Private Right*. These allegations reached the European Commission of Human Rights, where Greece lodged formal complaints against the UK in 1956 and 1957, but they were met with official denial. Within Britain, some left-wing politicians and human rights activists publicized these charges, challenging the official narrative of an orderly counterinsurgency campaign. By contrast, mainstream British media euphemistically described torture as “rough handling” or “tough behavior” (Linstrum, 2023, p. 17, 160).

4. The Cyprus Emergency in British popular culture

News of the Cyprus Emergency was widely followed in Britain during the late 1950s. According to a November 1958 opinion poll, the public regarded it as the biggest issue facing the British government at that time (Carruthers, 1995, p. 230). Representations of the Cyprus Emergency in popular culture provide a window into how the British public engaged with and made sense of these events, forming part of a broader mediascape that *The Private Right* both contributes to and challenges. These cultural products, including novels, TV plays, and films, recall Appadurai’s “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality,” a framework that proves especially useful for understanding how British popular culture processed the complex realities of colonial conflict. The concept of mediascapes helps analyze how these works not only represented violence but also mediated between colonial periphery and metropolitan center, translating distant events into narratives that British audiences could comprehend and consume. By examining this mediascape, the development of ideas about colonial violence, British identity, and the legacies of imperialism circulated in the cultural imagination of 1950s and 1960s Britain may be explored.

Cyprus served as the setting for a wave of 1950s pulp novels, whose reactionary politics recall what Ranajit Guha (1988) terms the “prose of counterinsurgency,” attributing anticolonial resistance to atavistic fanaticism rather than political consciousness. These novels include *Not Yours the Island* (Nash, 1956), set on an unnamed island which was clearly marked as Cyprus, and *Violence in Paradise* (Buttenshaw, 1957), in which Cyprus was fictionalized as “Sophos” and the enosis movement mockingly renamed “Halitos”. However, a cycle of television plays took the Cyprus Emergency more seriously as a political and ethical crisis. In all these dramas, violence is made central to the representation of the Cyprus Emergency and colonized space more broadly. *Arrow in the Air* (Brinton, 1957) features a scene of a British soldier torturing a Cypriot suspect with a lit cigarette, bluntly identified as “torture” by a reviewer in the *Times* (1957, p. 3). *Incident at Echo Six* (1958), the TV debut of screenwriter Troy Kennedy Martin, himself a veteran of the Cyprus conflict, depicts a debate between soldiers about the necessity of violent counterinsurgency in the wake of an EOKA attack. *The Interrogator* (1961), also by Kennedy Martin, features a rogue British detective in Cyprus who interrogates EOKA suspects and later allows one of them to be killed by villagers for revealing information. Kennedy Martin’s production notes frame this as a cautionary message about counterinsurgency: “the harder you fight terrorism the more likely you are to catch the disease... the interrogator commits an act of terrorism and therefore catches the disease he is fighting” (Cooke, p. 29). Violence is represented as a contagion, but in this interpretation it is passed from the colonized to the colonizer, not the other way round.

These TV plays also explore the theme of colonial violence coming home to Britain. In *Airmail from Cyprus* (Hall, 1958) the death of a British soldier is mourned by his family as a heroic sacrifice, but the soldier was in fact killed after murdering his Cypriot lover. The family uncover this deception but decide not to reveal it, mourning him as a hero. In *The Night of the Apes* (Wheatley, 1961) a British soldier is dishonorably discharged for failing to shoot an EOKA prisoner. Returning to his hometown, he is treated as a disgrace and assaulted by drunks. The topic of prisoner mistreatment in Cyprus was given much more explicit and sensational treatment in Peter Barnes’ experimental stage drama *Sclerosis*, which was performed in Edinburgh and London in 1965. The play opens and closes with the comic, verbatim dramatization of House of Commons debates on the Cyprus Emergency. In between, members of the British military are shown sadistically torturing EOKA suspects, most vividly by electrocuting a detainee who is strapped to an iron bedframe. The *Times* theatre reviewer described these scenes offhandedly as “electric persuasion on the nipples... interspersed with jolly soldierly jokes” (1965, p. 6). These plays, and the critical response to them, underline the relative prominence of the Cyprus Emergency in Britain during the period and indicate that the subject of torture was far from off-limits in British popular culture. Indeed, violence was central to the representation of the Cyprus Emergency and colonized space more broadly. However, the use of torture as a sensational dramatic device, as well as the narrative focus on British perpetrators rather than their foreign victims, can also be interpreted an attempt to displace the violent abuse of prisoners from a political, legal or moral context. As Linstrum (2017) observes, the political impact of the violence depicted risks being “blunted by the vagaries of fictionalization” and an “aesthetic which prizes moral ambiguity” over a clear accounting for colonial abuses (p. 4). Thus, while these dramatic works could address topics that were difficult to explore in non-fiction forms, this often came at the expense of a more robust reckoning with the violence of imperial rule.

In cinema, the depiction of the Cyprus Emergency follows the wider tendency of 1950s British films to move away from earlier mythologizing tropes of empire, which associated Britishness with civilization, heroism and enlightened rule, while attributing anticolonial resistance to external manipulation rather than local political consciousness. Films like *Simba* (Hurst, 1955) and *The Planter’s Wife* (Annakin, 1952), set amid the then-ongoing Mau Mau Uprising in Kenya and the

Malayan Emergency respectively, took on a “ripped from the headlines” topicality. Both climax in scenes in which colonial domestic spaces are besieged by insurgents, requiring British civilians to take up arms in defense of sovereignty and home. In Wendy Webster’s (2003) description, these films turned imperial spaces into a “hybrid adventure landscape, where domestic interiors and gardens were transformed into a main theatre of war” (p. 92). Here, colonial violence comes home metaphorically, revealing the inability of emergency laws to fully contain it. Films set in Cyprus during this era also tended to avoid the political realities of the conflict. *Private Potter* (Wrede, 1963) stars Tom Courtney as a soldier who spoils a British raid on an EOKA base by crying out, later claiming that he saw a vision of God. The Emergency itself is barely depicted; instead, colonized space acts as a backdrop for an internal psychological or spiritual drama. *The High Bright Sun* (Thomas, 1965) does depict the Cyprus Emergency more extensively, but it places the conflict beyond ideology—the insurrection is motivated by irrational hatred of the British rather than by politically coherent aspirations. *Private Potter* and *The High Bright Sun* both emphasize the psychological toll of counterinsurgency on British forces, highlighting the corrosive effects of colonial rule on the colonizer’s psyche (Stubbs, 2015). But in their focus on the personal struggles of British soldiers, they fail to consider the trauma also inflicted on ordinary Cypriot people by years of emergency rule.

5. The Private Right: Reception and analysis

The Private Right enters this mediascape as both a product of these existing narratives and a challenge to them, offering a unique perspective that complicates simplistic portrayals of the Emergency and its aftermath. Written, directed and produced by Michael Papas, a Greek Cypriot who came to Britain in 1959, the film drew much of its crew from Papas’ fellow graduates of the London School of Film Technique. The film’s financing history itself illustrates complex flows of capital and culture in the postcolonial context. Initially, Papas secured funding from small investments by business owners within London’s growing Cypriot community. However, when many of these investments fell through due to disputes over the casting, the film was completed with money from the National Film Finance Corporation (NFFC), a state-funded agency which made loans to support a wide range of British film production (Arkadin, 1967, p. 49). In a sense, this shift from diasporic to state funding thus mirrors the film’s narrative movement from Cyprus to London, embodying the deterritorialization of both capital and cultural production in the post-imperial context.

The first major public screening of *The Private Right* came at the 1966 London Film Festival. Its inclusion alongside politically radical films like *The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo, 1966) and *Made in the USA* (Godard, 1966) positioned it within a transnational dialogue about political cinema, decolonization, and representations of violence. This context is significant, framing *The Private Right* not just as a British film about a specific colonial conflict but as part of a global wave of cinema grappling with the legacies of empire and the nature of political violence. To promote the film, Papas provided the press in Britain with a still depicting the film’s waterboarding scene, presumably alighting on the marketability of this image. It was published by *The Observer* alongside a brief text referring to “water torture” (*The Observer*, 1966). However, a report in *The Times* three days later framed the film as a “government-aided production” which “depicted the torture of a rebel in the presence of a British officer” (1966a, p. 12). The implication that state funding (via the NFFC) had been used to implicate the British army in torture caused a media furor, and sensationalized stories referring *The Private Right* as a “torture film” appeared in several newspapers (Marshall, 1966, p. 17). Days later, these complaints reached Parliament when two Conservative MPs asked the Board of Trade to explain why public money had been granted to a film that “denigrates the United Kingdom and smears members of the Armed Forces” by showing “a British soldier presiding over the infliction of degrading tortures on a prisoner” (Hansard, 1966). The House of Commons returned to

the film three months later, having now had the opportunity to watch it. The Labour minister for the Board of Trade dismissed claims that the film slandered the British army, asserting that the officer present during torture was “obviously a civilian”: “he is not a soldier, he is not in uniform, and he has not had a haircut for about 10 weeks”. Moreover, he added, the “young director and producer of the film shows exceptional talent and is exactly the sort of man who should be encouraged by the National Film Finance Corporation” (Hansard, 1967). *The Private Right* was thus embroiled in the production of post-imperial British identity. Although it was valued as a cultural product, the film was also seen as a threat to Britain’s self-image and its ability to control narratives about its colonial past.

Ironically, condemnation of film from the right fed into a wave of more positive reaction from British critics at the London Film Festival. The *Times*, whose reporting had fanned much of the initial controversy, now praised *The Private Right*’s waterboarding scene as “beautifully managed” and “aesthetically justified,” also praising the director’s “striking skill and control” and his presentation of a “weirdly unfamiliar nightmare London” (1966b, p. 17). In *The Observer*, Penelope Gilliatt found the torture scenes “repellently decorative” (1966), but Michael Kustow in *Sight and Sound* praised their “almost ceremonial” quality (1966, p. 13). However, the acclaim and notoriety which surrounded the film proved short-lived. *The Private Right*’s commercial release stalled for over a year, by which time its scandalous aura had dissipated. The film was eventually distributed by the small London Independent Producers company and was given a limited theatrical run. Matters were not helped by the X Certificate issued by the British Board of Film Censors, which placed restrictions on how the film could be advertised and exhibited. This rating might have been avoided, but Papas retained control over the film and declined the censor’s request to shorten the torture sequence (Day-Lewis, 1966).

The brief scandal caused by *The Private Right* warrants attention for two reasons. Firstly, as previously discussed, knowledge of British torture in Cyprus was not a new revelation in 1966, with earlier television and stage dramas having depicted such abuses without provoking outcry in the media or in parliament. But whereas these works were produced by British writers, some of whom had served in the British military in Cyprus, *The Private Right* was the work of a Greek Cypriot and former colonial subject. This may have given the torture scenes an air of authenticity and moral weight that British audiences found more difficult to dismiss. Secondly and more pertinently, the film does not in fact portray British personnel engaging in torture directly. The perpetrator is Phantis, a Greek Cypriot collaborator with his own, sadistic agenda, assisted by colonial police officers who appear to be Turkish Cypriot. A British officer oversees the interrogation, but he seems to be disconcerted by Phantis’ violent zeal. This narrative choice absolves British forces of direct responsibility, displacing culpability for torture onto the conflicted psychology of an individual Greek Cypriot collaborator and (to a lesser extent) Turkish Cypriot enforcers rather than framing it as a structural effect of colonialism. This approach might be interpreted as an attempt to highlight the moral ambiguities and compromises forced by the colonial system, drawing attention to the complex web of power relations and conflicting loyalties that characterized life under British rule. However, by shifting focus away from systemic British colonial violence, it also dilutes the film’s anti-colonial critique. It should also be noted that this was not an intentional strategy to secure funding from the NFFC as production was largely finished before Papas applied for the loan (Arkadin, 1966, p. 50).

At the same time, *The Private Right* does provide a unique and compelling vision of post-colonial London, producing a specific “locality” within the context of global flows. The emergency laws and counterinsurgency tactics deployed in Cyprus, Kenya, Malaya and elsewhere were designed to contain anticolonial resistance, but they failed to prevent the contagion of violence from

reaching Britain itself. While *The Planter's Wife* and *Simba* brought colonial conflicts into the settler home metaphorically, *The Private Right* makes the streets of London itself a battleground for reenacting unresolved traumas. In the process, the London of *The Private Right* becomes a microcosm of the global flows that characterize the post-colonial world. Greek Cypriot characters move through British spaces, their personal traumas and conflicts spilling over into the streets and cafés of the imperial center. This depiction of colonial violence returning to the metropole resonates with what Hannah Arendt has called the “boomerang effect”, in which European colonial practices rebounded on Europe itself, influencing the development of domestic authoritarian politics (1973, 155).³ Jean-Paul Sartre made a similar point a few years later in his preface to Franz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, warning European readers that “the same violence is thrown back upon us as when our reflection comes forward to meet us when we go towards a mirror” (2001, p. 15).

The characters of Phantis and Minos embody deterritorialized violence in ways that also align with Fanon's theories of colonial psychology. Fanon argues that colonial violence is not merely physical, but also psychological, shaping the very identities of the colonized. His observation that “the colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people” (Fanon, 2001, p. 40) is particularly pertinent to understanding the complex dynamics at play in the film. The actions of Phantis can be interpreted as a manifestation of internalized colonial violence, exemplifying how colonial power operates not just through direct aggression but also by co-opting and possibly corrupting members of the colonized population. Similarly, Minos' quest for revenge can be seen as another expression of this internalized aggression, illustrating how the psychological scars of colonialism persist even after formal colonial rule has ended.

The film centers on extrajudicial violence, first in Cyprus, then Britain, examining the individual's power to enact revenge. As the film's trailer asks: “Has anyone the private right to justice—above, beyond, outside the law? Can one man's conscience turn murder into execution?” This notion of a “private right” to violence evokes Agamben's notion of the “state of exception”—a suspension of normal legal and ethical constraints that underpins sovereign power (2005). In the context of colonial rule, this state of exception was often institutionalized through emergency laws and extraordinary powers granted to colonial authorities. *The Private Right* suggests that it is not only colonial violence that comes home to roost, but what Caroline Elkins calls the “legalized lawlessness” which facilitated Britain's deployment of lethal violence in colonized spaces (2018, p. 81). The film portrays a world where the ability to wield exceptional violence, once reserved for colonial authorities, has now been appropriated by individuals carrying the psychological scars of empire. This appropriation of violence speaks to Achille Mbembe's concept of “necropolitics,” in which he argues that the ultimate expression of sovereignty lies in the power to dictate who may live and who must die. As Mbembe writes, “to exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and manifestation of power” (2003, p. 12). The “private right” to violence, as portrayed through characters like Minos and Phantis, may thus be understood as an appropriation of sovereign power. Moreover, the film's depiction of how this power circulates between the colonial state and individuals reveals the pervasive nature of necropolitical logic in colonial and postcolonial contexts. By bringing this violence to the streets of London, *The Private Right* suggests that the colonial state of exception cannot be neatly contained within the spatial or temporal boundaries of empire.

³ Arendt wrote *The Origins of Totalitarianism* in 1951. Ironically, she noted that British colonial leaders had drawn “a sharp line between colonial methods and normal domestic policies”, thus preventing the kind of “boomerang effect” from colony to metropole she observed in Nazi Germany in the 1930s (1973, 155).

This portrayal reflects a fundamental duality in Britain during its imperial period: a nation that simultaneously maintained democratic institutions within its home borders while often employing authoritarian and extra-legal practices across much of its empire. Over time, this contradiction increasingly challenged Britain's self-image as a beacon of democracy, as colonial practices of surveillance, emergency powers, and extrajudicial violence began to seep back into domestic governance. *The Private Right* dramatizes this collapse of the boundary between metropole and colony, democratic principles and authoritarian practices, by showing how the violence meant to be contained by emergency laws inevitably returns to transform London's spaces and citizens. Within Arjun Appadurai's framework of global cultural flows, *The Private Right* contributes to the mediascape surrounding Britain's colonial legacy. It both reveals and obscures aspects of Britain's imperial past, contesting simplistic narratives of a peaceful decolonization while simultaneously displacing some of the responsibility for colonial violence onto colonized subjects themselves. The film thus participates in what Appadurai calls the "production of locality" within a globalized context, creating a vision of postcolonial London as a space where the unresolved tensions of empire play out in violent and unpredictable ways.

6. Conclusion

The Private Right offers a complex and revealing case study in the cultural afterlives of colonial violence. Emerging at a time when the British public's knowledge of such atrocities was growing but still contested, the film's production and reception illuminate the difficulties inherent in confronting the nation's colonial past. Appadurai's writing sheds light on how the film portrays colonial violence as transcending geographical boundaries, challenging the spatial and temporal quarantining of Britain's imperial history. The film contributed to British public discourse around colonial violence, offering a narrative that both reveals and obscures aspects of Britain's imperial past. The controversy the film generated, however brief, points to the enduring sensitivity and denialism around Britain's use of torture and repressive violence at the end of empire. At the same time, *The Private Right's* displacement of responsibility for colonial brutality onto Cypriot collaborators, rather than British forces themselves, limits its anti-colonial critique, acknowledging imperial brutality without fundamentally challenging the myth of Britain's peaceful decolonization. As such, the film reflects Linstrum's "epistemological grey areas" through which many Britons understood and remembered the Empire's abuses—with knowledge often partial, ambiguous, and morally equivocal.

Nevertheless, *The Private Right* successfully challenges narratives of Britain's peaceful withdrawal from Empire by depicting colonial violence's return to the metropole. The film suggests that the tactics of colonial counterinsurgency, notably torture and extrajudicial killings, were not contained by states of emergency, but bled across national and psychic borders, making the streets of London a site of postcolonial reckoning. The film's central provocation, encapsulated in its title, is that the lawless violence of the colonial "private right" cannot be neatly relegated to the past or the periphery. Instead, it tears at the fabric of the post-imperial nation, demanding a moral and political accounting. While the film's individualized revenge story falls short of providing this accounting, its unsettling portrayal of a Britain haunted by the violence of empire remains powerful. In its production history, its narrative choices, and its popular reception, *The Private Right* embodies the tensions that have long attended Britain's relationship to its colonial past. It points to the urgent necessity of confronting that imperial history in all its complexity and moral ambiguity—not through comforting myths of enlightened benevolence but through a sustained and unflinching engagement with the Empire's continuing presence in the post-colonial nation's imaginative and material life.

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