



MORRICONE

The Battle of Algiers

There are few classic films with as much relevance to the early 21st century as Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966 re-enactment of the Algerian liberation struggle of the preceding decade. *The Battle of Algiers* is a singular film, celebrated on the one hand as a paradigm of political cinema, and on the other studied by the military for clues about the problems of confronting urban guerrillas. Writing in the *New York Times* in 2003, when it was released on DVD in the US, Michael T. Kaufman reported a screening at the Pentagon where '40 officers and civilian experts ... were urged to consider and discuss the implicit issues at the core of the film – the problematic but alluring efficacy of brutal and repressive means in fighting clandestine terrorists in places like Algeria and Iraq. Or more specifically, the advantages and costs of resorting to torture and intimidation in seeking vital human intelligence about enemy plans.' This was not the first time the film had been paid such compliments. Other reports speak of its use as a training film for the troops in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

The paradox here is that as a piece of political cinema, *The Battle of Algiers* belongs to the left. Specifically, to the new left of the 1960s, which broke with Soviet communism after the Russian tanks went into Hungary in 1956 (though Pontecorvo was still a Party member at the time he made the film), and then, inspired by the Cuban revolution and Algeria's victory against the French, took up a third-world perspective and made solidarity with Vietnam. The film was indeed a touchstone for that most politicised of decades, and in France it was banned. But then the French authorities were notoriously sensitive about the representation of anti-colonial sentiments even before their defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954.

There is no cogent definition of what a political film consists: on the contrary, there are so many different ways of being political and so many different types of political film as to defy definition. One mistake is to suppose that political means propaganda. This is little different from saying that all films are essentially political because they express one ideology or another. It's too simple an approach because it fails to distinguish between, say, *Good Night, and Good Luck* and *300*, to take a pair of recent Hollywood examples. Both films are clearly political, but in very different ways. On an ideological level, the former is a left-liberal reconstruction of a recent historical episode of profound effect on contemporary US politics, while the latter is not just silly nonsense but a reactionary piece of distant historical invention to which Iran, which is deeply conscious of its ancient pre-Islamic cultural roots, has quite rightly taken offence. In filmic terms, however, there is a more crucial distinction: *Good Night, and Good Luck* is a film of explicit political discourse, which is quite absent in epics like *300*. What is at stake here is not simply politics, but the politics of cinema, the gulf between a film that mobilises the viewer's intelligence and the duplicitous idea that cinema is nothing but entertainment. As if entertainment and politics were mutually exclusive categories, which is clearly not the case.

The Battle of Algiers defies description as propaganda because of the way it presents both sides of the conflict, Algerian and French, locked in a dialectical

relation with each other. There is no false objectivity, and the film doesn't hide its fundamental sympathy for the insurgents, but neither does it obscure the contradictions of the liberation struggle. The parallel storytelling also answers to the film's classical narrative construction as what Peter Sainsbury back in 1971 called 'a suspenseful battle of tactics between hunters and hunted, action and counteraction' – and this is precisely what made it such a good film for the military analysts to get their teeth into. But this also sets *The Battle of Algiers* squarely within a particularly Italian predilection for the political thriller, a current that includes Elio Petri's *Investigation of a Citizen above Suspicion* (1970) and Giuliano Montaldo's *Sacco and Vanzetti* (1971), not to mention various films by Francesco Rosi.

The way you understand the renewed contemporary significance of *The Battle of Algiers* revolves around the question of the political culture of the viewer – and here the text of the flier inviting guests to the Pentagon screening is highly revealing: 'How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervour. Sound familiar?' And the film indeed suggests certain parallels. As Michael T. Kaufman puts it, the events re-enacted in Pontecorvo's film demonstrate the effective use of the tactics of a 'people's war', 'where fighters emerge from seemingly ordinary lives to mount attacks and then retreat to the cover of their everyday identities.' But go back to the passage from Kaufman with which I began, where he speaks of 'fighting clandestine terrorists in places like Algeria and Iraq'. By calling both groups terrorists, all historical distinctions are elided to leave only one essential element: that in both cases the insurgents are Muslim. The liberation struggle of the FLN is reduced to the religious sectarianism of competing strands of Islamic fundamentalism 50 years later. To avoid this trap, the trick is to see *The Battle of Algiers* as both a contemporary and a historical film at the same time, which is not about the myth of the clash of civilisations, but about the incomprehension of the imperial hegemon.

Michael Chanan, *Sight & Sound*, June 2007

Critical reception for 'The Battle of Algiers'

'The most powerful and ultimately the most persuasive thing about *The Battle of Algiers* is its extraordinary fair-mindedness, its scrupulous refusal to simplify or romanticise the moral and practical choices on either side of the barricades ... Only on the soundtrack does *The Battle of Algiers*, a model of how a propaganda film should be made, betray where its emotional loyalties lie. Not just in the stirring eloquence of its music, but above all in the collective wailing of the Algerian women, mocking the paratroopers with an eerie wall of sound that creates a strangely menacing form of passive resistance.'

– Jan Dawson, *Monthly Film Bulletin*

'In none of the political melodramas that were to follow is there any sequence that comes near to the complex overtones of the sorrowful acceptance with which each of the three bomb-planting women looks to see who will be killed by her bomb.' – Pauline Kael

'One of the great scenes is the besieging of an FLN hideout, a frantic scrambling in a wet clammy Arab house. It's a perfect scene of shock and terror constructed with a multiplicity of detail, a palpable tremor working through the inner court of the four-storey building.' – Manny Farber

‘*The Battle of Algiers* is a self-indulgent film and like most drama-sucking parasites on cataclysms, Pontecorvo allows himself the nauseating grace of retrospection – the impossible compassion for victim and rebel alike.’
– Nancy Ellen Dowd, *Film Quarterly*

‘It may be a deeper film experience than many audiences can withstand: too cynical, too true, too cruel and too heartbreaking. It is about the Algerian war, but those not interested in Algeria may substitute another war; *The Battle of Algiers* has a universal frame of reference.’ – Roger Ebert, *Chicago Sun-Times Sight & Sound*, June 2007

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS (LA BATTAGLIA DI ALGERI)
Director: Gillo Pontecorvo
Production Companies: Igor Film, Casbah Film (Algiers)
Producers: Antonio Musu, Yacef Sâadi
Unit Managers: Lakhdar-Toumi Edine, Abdenour Essed
Production Managers: Sergio Merolle, Nour-Eddine Brahimi
2nd Unit Director: Giuliano Montaldo
Collaborating Director: Fernando Morandi
Assistant Director: Moussa Haddad
Screenplay: Franco Solinas
Based on a story by: Gillo Pontecorvo, Franco Solinas *
Director of Photography: Marcello Gatti
Camera Operator: Silvano Mancini *
Camera Assistant: Ali Maroc *
Editors: Mario Serandrei, Mario Morra
Assistant Editor: Lina Caterini *
Art Director/Set Decorator: Sergio Canevari
Make-up: Maurizio Giustini
Hairstyles: Hamdi Mohamed
Music: Ennio Morricone, Gillo Pontecorvo
Music Director: Bruno Nicolai *

Cast
Brahim Haggiag (*Ali la Pointe*)
Jean Martin (*Colonel Mathieu*)
Saadi Yacef (*El-hadi Jaffar*)
Samia Kerbash (*Fathia*)
Ugo Paletti (*the commissioner*)
Fusia El Kader (*Halima*)
Mohamed Ben Kassen (*little Omar*)
Tommaso Neri (*Captain Dubois*) *
Franco Morici

Italy/Algeria 1966
121 mins

* Uncredited

MORRICONE

The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)
Sun 1 Aug 15:10; Wed 25 Aug 14:30
The Sounds of Ennio Morricone
Mon 2 Aug 18:10
A Fistful of Dollars (Per un pugno di dollari)
Mon 2 Aug 20:45; Sat 7 Aug 11:30; Tue 10 Aug 20:50; Mon 30 12:20
Two Mules for Sister Sara
Wed 4 Aug 18:00; Sat 21 Aug 20:30
Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom (Salò o Le 120 giornate di Sodoma)
Thu 5 Aug 20:45; Tue 10 Aug 17:45; Wed 25 Aug 17:50
The Untouchables
Fri 6 Aug 17:45; Tue 24 Aug 14:30
The Thing
Fri 6 Aug 20:50; Tue 24 Aug 20:50
For a Few Dollars More (Per qualche dollaro in più)
Sat 7 Aug 14:00; Sun 22 Aug 12:10; Mon 30 Aug 15:00
The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo)
Sat 7 Aug 17:10; Sun 29 Aug 18:20; Mon 30 Aug 18:15

White Dog
Sat 7 Aug 20:50; Fri 20 Aug 18:10; Fri 27 Aug 20:45
Once upon a Time in the West (C’era una volta il west)
Sun 8 Aug 12:00; Fri 27 Aug 14:00; Tue 31 Aug 14:00
The Mission
Sun 8 Aug 15:10; Thu 12 Aug 20:30; Thu 26 Aug 18:00
Days of Heaven
Mon 9 Aug 21:00; Tue 31 Aug 17:50
Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down (Atame!)
Wed 11 Aug 20:50; Thu 19 Aug 14:15; Mon 23 Aug 21:00;
Tue 31 Aug 20:45
The Hateful Eight
Sun 15 Aug 15:00; Sun 22 Aug 18:00
Once upon a Time in America
Tue 17 Aug 17:40; Sat 28 Aug 11:20
The Legend of 1900 (La leggenda del pianista sull’oceano)
Sat 21 Aug 11:50; Sun 29 Aug 15:10
Cinema Paradiso (Nuovo Cinema Paradiso)
Sat 21 Aug 14:30; Thu 26 Aug 14:30

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