



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 and 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 and 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

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Le Mépris (Contempt) Wed 1 Feb 18:10; Fri 17 Feb 20:50

Daughters of the Dust Wed 1 Feb 18:15; Thu 16 Feb 20:30

Sans Soleil Wed 1 Feb 20:40; Fri 17 Feb 18:00

M (Mörder unter uns)

Thu 2 Feb 14:30; Thu 16 Feb 20:40; Wed 22 Feb 18:00

Moonlight Thu 2 Feb 20:45; Tue 14 Feb 20:30

Blade Runner: The Final Cut

Fri 3 Feb 20:40; Sun 5 Feb 20:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:10

Battleship Potemkin (Bronenosets Potemkin)

Sat 4 Feb 12:40; Sat 18 Feb 18:30

La dolce vita Sat 4 Feb 14:15; Sat 25 Feb 19:30

Sherlock Jr. Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

City Lights Sat 4 Feb 17:20; Sat 11 Feb 11:45

Goodfellas Sat 4 Feb 20:10; Wed 15 Feb 20:10

North by Northwest Sat 4 Feb 20:20; Thu 9 Feb 18:00

L'Atalante Sun 5 Feb 12:15; Tue 14 Feb 18:30; Wed 22 Feb 14:30

Rear Window Sun 5 Feb 12:20; Fri 24 Feb 20:45

Stalker Sun 5 Feb 17:40; Tue 7 Feb 20:10; Sun 26 Feb 14:00

Casablanca Mon 6 Feb 20:30; Sun 12 Feb 13:20

Psycho Mon 6 Feb 20:45; Mon 20 Feb 14:30; Thu 23 Feb 20:40

8 1/2 (Otto e mezzo)

Tue 7 Feb 18:00; Tue 21 Feb 14:30; Sun 26 Feb 12:50

The Battle of Algiers (La battaglia di Algeri)

Tue 7 Feb 18:10; Sat 25 Feb 11:50

News from Home Tue 7 Feb 20:45; Fri 17 Feb 18:20 (+ intro)

Rashomon (Rashômon) Tue 7 Feb 21:00; Thu 23 Feb 18:20

The Piano Wed 8 Feb 20:35; Tue 21 Feb 17:50

Wanda Thu 9 Feb 20:30 (+ intro by Jason Wood, BFI Executive Director of Public Programmes & Audiences); Sat 18 Feb 18:20

Fear Eats the Soul (Angst essen Seele auf)

Thu 9 Feb 20:55; Mon 27 Feb 18:00

Ordet (The Word) Fri 10 Feb 18:15; Sat 25 Feb 14:30

The 400 Blows (Les Quatre cents coups)

Fri 10 Feb 20:50; Sun 19 Feb 18:40

Bicycle Thieves (Ladri di biciclette)

Sat 11 Feb 11:50; Mon 20 Feb 20:55; Thu 23 Feb 14:30

Barry Lyndon Sat 11 Feb 19:20; Sat 25 Feb 15:30

Some Like It Hot Sun 12 Feb 13:30; Tue 14 Feb 18:10

The Third Man Sun 12 Feb 18:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:40

Killer of Sheep Sun 12 Feb 18:40 (+intro); Sat 18 Feb 20:40

Mirror (Zerkalo) Mon 13 Feb 20:50; Tue 28 Feb 20:50

Pather Panchali Sat 18 Feb 20:30; Tue 21 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 15:45

The Apartment Wed 22 Feb 20:35; Sun 26 Feb 12:40

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