

Document Citation

Title	The battle of Algiers
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Source	<i>Take one</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	Vol. 1; no. 9; pp. 25-26
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	La battaglia di Algeri (The battle of Algiers), Pontecorvo, Gillo, 1966

TAKE ONE VI #9

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS-- ELVIRA MADIGAN

Is there anything new to be said about artistic truth and its bearing on reality? The documentary film has for long been a touchstone. Whatever is, in the documentary, is right. Physical reality is to be continually redeemed.

We were surely naive. There was a catch in the formula all along. The "creative dramatization of actuality" (Rotha) has as much undistributed middle as any director could wish for; and middles, as well as both ends, is what a director distributes when he is in the business of dramatic creation. Selection is all. The door is open to art, artifice, whimsy or, it should be said, to didacticism.

Gillo Pontecorvo's recreation of that other undeclared war which ended in March of 1962 with the victory of the Algerian FLN,

announces in a preface that not a single foot of newsreel has been used. This in itself requires a quick readjustment of some 30 years of documentary theory. In fact, at this point, one is cheerfully prepared to expect the worst.

What happens, however, is the best. Pontecorvo must have been doing something right: his film remains unshown in France, and at Venice 1966 the French delegation objected in a most strenuous fashion. The film got its Golden Lion all the same.

The citizens of Algiers who make up Pontecorvo's revolutionary *corps de ballet* relive the days of terror to such effect that one is free to admire the audacity of the filmmaker while forgetting the artifice. Pontecorvo does things with his crowd, a fruitful pairing of the European interest in crowd psychology with his Marxist theories of "spontaneity." For the Algerians, however, one senses almost an anniversary mood, more celebration than cerebration.

At times the screen almost bursts into flames. After a particularly horrible atrocity in which a group of off-duty police explodes a bomb among a honeycomb of sleeping families, the mangled children are carried out through the smoking rubble. And a wild cry of anguish begins, low at first, gradually taken up by all the inhabitants of the wounded ghetto until the soundtrack becomes a shrieking witness to all the humiliations of the wretched of the earth. And Marcello Gatti's camera pulls back and soars eloquently over all, searching as if for explanation in the sky above the casbah. If the task of the artist, as the old tag has it, is to translate his personal anguish into history, Pontecorvo has succeeded in just that. **The Battle of Algiers** is a film that should run for years.