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LA BATTAGLIA DI ALGERI

(The Battle of Algiers)

Italy-Algiers, 1966

Director: Gillo Pontecorvo

Production: Igor Films (Rome) and Casbah Film Company (Algiers); black and white, 35mm; running time: 123 minutes. Released 1966. Filmed 1965 in Algiers; cost: \$800,000.

FILMS

INT'L Dict of FS & FILMMAKERS - 3RD ED

BATTAGLIA DI ALGERI

Producer: Antonio Musu and Yacef Saadi; **screenplay:** Franco Solinas and Gillo Pontecorvo; **photography:** Marcello Gatti; **editors:** Mario Serandrei and Mario Morra; **art direction:** Sergio Canevari; **music:** Gillo Pontecorvo and Ennio Morricone; **special effects:** Tarcisio Diamanti and Aldo Gasparri; **Algerian assistants:** Ali Yahia, Moussa Haddad, Azzedine Ferhi, Mohamet Zinet; **Algerian "opérateurs":** Youssef Bouchouchi, Ali Maroc, Belkacem Bazi, Ali Bouksani.

Cast: Yacef Saadi (*Djafar*); Brahim Haggiag (*Ali La Pointe*); Jean Martin (*Colonel Mathieu*); Tommaso Neri (*Captain Dubois*); Mohamed Ben Kassen (*Le Petit Omar*); Fawzia El Kader (*Hassiba*); Michele Kerbash (*Fathia*).

Awards: Venice Film Festival, Lion of St. Mark, 1966.

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In 1966 the revolutionary filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo released his stunning chronicle of one of the major clashes of the Algerian struggle for independence: *The Battle of Algiers*. The film's fictionalized account of this crucial three-year period in Algeria's history draws on actual people and events as the basis for its story, and adopts an impressively convincing documentary style in its presentation.

The film's opening credits contain a message stating that "not one foot" of actual newsreel footage was used in the making of the picture, yet Pontecorvo achieves a naturalistic, cinema-verité quality through his direction, conveying the events with the immediacy of a television news broadcast. Marcello Gatti's grainy, black and white photography captures the look and texture of a newsreel, as does the jarring realism of the hand-held camerawork in many of the film's explosive crowd scenes. The use of non-professional actors (with the exception of Jean Martin as the French Colonel Mathieu) also contributes to the film's overall impression of events being recorded as they occur.

This documentary-like effect has evoked both praise and condemnation for Pontecorvo, with some critics expressing admiration for the film's achievement and others questioning the ethics of filming a partly fictional scenario in such strikingly realistic terms. For Pontecorvo and his screenwriting partner, Franco Solinas, however, the question of the "truth" of *The Battle of Algiers* is answered by the film's political impact as an anti-imperialist statement. If isolated moments in the film, such as its central character's harassment by a group of arrogant young Frenchmen, are the products of the authors' imaginations, they are nevertheless representative of events which occurred countless times during France's 130-year occupation of Algeria. Indeed, the film's most harrowing scenes—those of captured rebels undergoing torture at the hands of the military—demand to be shown, to demonstrate the full measure of the inhuman brutality they represent.

Yet Pontecorvo's political stance regarding the Algerian struggle does not lead him to resort to the caricatures of heroism and villainy which so often mar the impact of otherwise fine political films. Even as he reviles the policies of the French government, he forces us to confront the painful fact that these are human lives that are being lost and not mere pawns in a revolutionary uprising. His camera lingers on the faces of those who will die moments later from a planted rebel bomb, bringing home with wrenching clarity the bitter price of violent conflict. This rare approach, in a genre which frequently averts its eyes from these hard truths, places *The Battle of Algiers* at the forefront of political filmmaking by allowing each viewer to re-examine his or her own position on political violence in the harsh light of the images on the screen.

In the years since its release, *The Battle of Algiers* has become a staple of film classes and revival house theatres. Its political merits have been widely discussed and debated, with the individual outlook of each critic coming very much into play in any evaluation of the film. The film's cinematic achievements, however, remain as powerful as they first appeared in 1966, and subsequent armed revolts in other Third World countries have only served to reinforce the universality of Pontecorvo's remarkable work.

—Janet E. Lorenz

THE BATTLE OF CHILE. See LA BATALLA DE CHILE.

BATTLE OF THE RAILS. See LA BATAILLE DU RAIL.

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