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Author(s)	Al Richmond
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the universal revolution

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS. A Gillo Pontecorvo film produced by Antonio Musu. Directed by Pontecorvo. Screenplay by Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas. (In S.F. at the Richelieu.)

"THE BATTLE of Algiers" is as contemporary as tomorrow's ghetto outbreak, as historical as the Great French Revolution.

True, it recreates, in the form of a dramatic documentary, revolution in a particular time (1954-57) and a particular place (Algeria), but as a great work of art it projects universal qualities and problems of revolution, that most implacable, relentless and often the most cruel of conflicts, which is at the same time the most heroic, inspiring and liberating moment in the human experience.

Revolution is the time of decision in a struggle between irreconcilable forces, contending for mutually exclusive aims. It is an either-or time when there is no middle ground any longer.

In the particular circumstances of the film the issue is stated most precisely by a French

colonel, commander of the paratroops charged with crushing the Algerian insurrection. He is a sophisticated, professional soldier (beautifully played by Jean Martin), who had served in the anti-Nazi resistance — and the battle of Dienbienphu.

The revolutionaries, he says, want the French to leave Algeria, and the French intend to stay.

He says this at a press conference when questioned about the French use of torture. He adds that the French press is agreed the French must remain in Algeria and it must, therefore, accept all the implications of its position. One of these is torture.

Dispassionately, logically, he explains. To remain the French must destroy the revolutionary underground. To destroy the underground they must ferret out the secrets of its structure and personnel. To ferret out these secrets they must torture those who know them.

THERE ARE scenes of torture. There are also scenes of terrorist reprisals by the FLN

(Front de Liberation Nationale), against this and other atrocities — especially a dramatic sequence in which bombs are set and explode in locales frequented by "innocent civilians," a cafe, a milk bar catering to youth, and an Air France ticket office.

These are filmed in the spirit of Gorky's motto, "Truth is above compassion." You see the victims before the explosion, the people in the cafe, a mother and infant among them, the kids dancing to a juke box in the milk bar. And you see them afterward, the silent dead and the screaming wounded.

All this is portrayed with total objectivity — and yet there is no mistaking the profound sympathy of director Gillo Pontecorvo and the other makers of the film for the revolutionaries. This is a mark of their genius.

They do not gloss over anything. They do not gild or soften the cruelty of the conflict, and yet they never lapse into the old cliché — "Atrocities are committed by both sides" — as if this were a moral judgment or settled anything historically.

Implicit in the film is a pro-

found question of revolution that was phrased by Lenin in two short words — "Who whom?" Without resorting either to caricature or heroic glorification in portraying the contestants, the film manages, with rare skill, to identify with the revolutionaries as the who, as against the colonialists, the whom.

THE CENTRAL figure in the documentary is Ali La Pointe (Brahim Haggiag), a young unemployed laborer, one-time boxer, and petty hustler. The story line follows him from his recruitment into the FLN in 1954 and the ingenious test of his reliability until he meets his death at the hands of the French in 1957 as the last survivor of the leadership corps of the FLN urban guerrilla force in the casbah.

For the most part the camera focuses on the action, the actual conduct of the battle, the assassination of policemen, the lightning raids in the European quarter — and the military countermeasures by the French. As a consequence, the film has been referred to as a primer in urban

guerrilla warfare.

To see it as no more than that is to diminish the film. There is a memorable — if brief — dialogue between a revolutionary leader and Ali La Pointe that sets the guerrilla warfare in the larger, more profound context of revolution.

The more experienced leader says that "incidents" (as he refers to the guerrilla forays) are, in themselves, not revolution; revolution is the act of the mass.

The mass is portrayed in action. There is a general strike, and in an epilogue, which comes in 1960, some years after the principal action, after the underground organization had been destroyed, the people pour out of the casbah in an irresistible, irresistible tide, and resolve the conflict. Two years later independence is won.

The massive festive outpouring of the people is the climax, the triumph of the lonely cells of three who waged unequal combat and perished.

It is a great ending to one of the great films of our time.

—AL RICHMOND