

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Art politics cinema -- excerpt. Political terrorism in 'Ogro'</b>
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Source	<i>Pluto Press</i>
Date	1985
Type	interview
Language	English
Pagination	307-312
No. of Pages	3
Subjects	Pontecorvo, Gillo
Film Subjects	Ogro (Operation Ogre), Pontecorvo, Gillo, 1979

From: ART POLITICS CINEMA  
PP 307-312

## 28—GILLO PONTECORVO

### Political terrorism in “Ogro”

The rise of urban guerillas in Europe has posed artistic and political challenges to filmmakers on the left. Franco Solinas, Salvatore Samperi, Giuliano Montaldo, and Lina Wertmuller were forced to abandon projects on the subject. A number of German films (The Lost Honor of Katharina Blum, Germany in Autumn, Knife in the Head) relegated terrorism to a background element. Fassbinder's *The Third Generation*, which focused on a group of terrorists, had a narrative so fragmented that it was impossible to discern the characters' political motivations. In this context, Gillo Pontecorvo's *Ogro*, based on Operation Ogro, the 1973 assassination of Franco's first Prime Minister, Carrero Blanco, by the ETA, the Basque guerilla organization—was a significant cinematic event. The film took us inside the terrorist organization to provide an intimate understanding of the four protagonists responsible for the preparations for and execution of the political assassination. Corinne Luca's interview with Pontecorvo was translated from the French by Natasha Thomsen and Meg Hunnewell.

**Cineaste:** Did you encounter any particular problems in getting *Ogro* produced?

**Gillo Pontecorvo:** Yes. In 1976, shortly after we started working on the project, the Americans (United Artists) who were to have produced it got scared. Franco was dead, but the political regime was still half Francoist, and United Artists was afraid that the Spanish government would block the distribution of their other films in Spain. So we stopped for a year and a half. During that time there was a democratic movement in Spain, and the government changed. Since the danger of repercussions was lessened, we were able to renew the project. Following this, however, there was another interruption, apparently because the theme we had selected was too difficult and not very commercial. After four or five months of searching, we finally came up with two producers—an Italian, Franco Cristaldi, and his associate, Nicola Carraro; and a Spaniard, Jose Samano.

**Cineaste:** The Moro affair occurred during this period. Did it encourage you to make changes in your scenario?

**Pontecorvo:** Yes. It was during the kidnapping of Moro that we wrote the final version of the script, after hesitating between continuing or dropping the project altogether. The film probably shows the effects of many of these perplexities. We perhaps overstated the fundamental difference, as we see it, between armed struggle under a democratic regime and armed struggle under a dictatorial regime.

**Cineaste:** In the original screenplay, the entire film takes place at the time of Carrero Blanco's assassination. Why, in the final screenplay, did you set the film in the present, treating the attempt on Carrero Blanco's life as a flashback?

**Pontecorvo:** Because of the film's structure. I wanted to portray the present to show that deviation is possible in a form of struggle which was justifiable under fascism, but erroneous today. That is why, at a particular moment, the storyline of the assassination of the Spanish prime minister is interrupted to show Txabi today, killing two inoffensive policemen.

**Cineaste:** The Italian critics, on the whole, have stressed the firmness of your position against modern terrorism. After seeing the film I would find it difficult to make a judgment, either positive or negative, on terrorism.

**Pontecorvo:** Your impression may be a result of the way that, in general, I apprehend political problems. In *The Battle of Algiers*, one of the left parties accused me of being impartial, even though I was

firmly convinced I had taken a position in favor of Algerian independence. Instead of condemning the situation from the outside, however, by painting black all the action on one side, and white on the other, I tried to enter into these two logics and to see, from the inside, everything that was possible to see, all the while expressing a judgment which was historically in favor of one side and against the other. In *The Battle of Algiers*, it is the logic of colonialism which is condemned, and not the particular individuals who put it to work.

The same is true of *Ogro*. Txabi, who kills two clumsy and innocent policemen, is not a monster. I tried to see him as he is: someone who, on one hand, has a desire to remake man and society—a noble and generous desire—and, on the other hand, someone who has the capacity for a violence that can become savage. That is what I attempted to show when, for example, we first see him speak to his wife about mankind's future, of the need for things to change profoundly. Then he arms himself with a pistol, and goes out and shoots two policemen whom I wanted to portray as much as possible as non-military types.

Finally, my own opinion is given at the end, through the words of Ezarra, the other protagonist who refutes terrorism outside of fascism. While Txabi is dying, he asks his former friend, "But you are also a man. How can you ask a man to have so much patience?" Ezarra, tears in his eyes at the loss of a friend who fought with him against fascism, replies, "Nevertheless, this kind of courage is also necessary." Even if everything is incredibly barren, even if the prospects before us are discouraging, it is necessary to have the strength to go ahead and change things bit by bit, and not maintain the foolish illusion of being able to change the world through acts of this nature.

**Cineaste:** *The next to last scene in the film is very moving. We see Txabi, on his deathbed in the hospital, with his old friends in tears around him. Did you want to make the viewer cry?*

**Pontecorvo:** It is with this scene that the equilibrium of the film is balanced. Even if, emotionally, we are able to side with Txabi, who is about to die, we don't agree with him rationally and politically, and therefore the emotional participation would tend toward Ezarra, who, although he is crying for his friend, says "no" to him. If we hadn't had this scene, especially during the period of exacerbated tensions that followed the kidnapping of Moro, I would have given up my plan to make *Ogro*, because it seemed to me dishonest, quite frankly, to make a film on this subject if I couldn't offer a clear idea of

my own position. The important thing was to arrive, through an emotionally intense mood, at those words, "Nevertheless, this kind of courage is also necessary"—the courage of patience, of the everyday struggle of life—and it was necessary that those words be spoken honestly by someone we had seen in other political circumstances, leading a mission just as big as the assassination of Carrero Blanco. The emotion released in this scene serves as a sort of sounding board to underline these decisive words at a crucial point in the film.

**Cineaste:** *It's your novel use of pathos, actually, which allows the viewer to distinguish the emotional from the rational, two levels which the mass media have succeeded in confusing. In other scenes, however, your use of pathos reminds one of neo-realism. There is a very short scene where we see Txabi, as a child, being hit on the fingers with a ruler because he speaks in Basque to a friend. This scene—which shows us motivations, deeply rooted in childhood, which lead Txabi and his friends to resist oppression through violence—uses pathos in a very positive way. After the intensive use which neo-realism has made of pathos, however, wasn't it difficult to use it today?*

**Pontecorvo:** Firstly, regarding the scene to which you refer, disallowing the speaking of Basque in school is a determining element in the story. Of the four protagonists involved in the assassination, to whom I have spoken at length, two of them told me that the deepest, longest-lasting impression left upon their memories was of being punished with a ruler. One of them, in fact, spoke about it for over two hours. Consequently, this scene synthesizes the mode of fascist repression against all forms of expression of national identity. Also, this scene is very short; it lasts about three seconds. I don't dwell on it. Besides, emotion, pathos, exist in life. They pose a problem in the cinema, but it is only a question of measure, of dosage. Since it is a facile method, when dealing with material which is emotionally moving, one must make an effort to use all possible antidotes: brevity, dryness, and a lack of underlining. Pathos should be expressed in passing.

**Cineaste:** *There is a scene where Txabi disobeys the prudent orders of Ezarra, and takes the enormous risk of going out and walking through the streets of Madrid to follow the trade union members, even though the city is overrun with police because of the demonstrations. Did you want to show another form of struggle against power through a suspenseful scene?*

**Pontecorvo:** I included this scene, on one hand, to show the

different kinds of struggle one can use against fascism, and, on the other hand, I wanted to develop the slightly fantastic and strange character of Txabi. I wanted to show his deep sympathy for those capable of exposing themselves to danger, his admiration of self-sacrifice, which, incidentally, came out of his Catholic formation as an ex-priest. Which is to say that the actual perpetrators of the assassination attempt against Carrero Blanco were aided by a communist union bricklayer who, although he did not share their ideas, was aware of the importance of their mission, and agreed to lend them a hand, although obviously not in the way it was recounted in the film

**Cineaste:** *The tunnel scene, when the four men dig a long tunnel under the road where the car of Carrero Blanco will pass and explode, is magnificent. It is a very long scene, and seems disproportionate in terms of its function in the overall plot.*

**Pontecorvo:** I wanted the viewer to feel the difficulty, the inhuman fatigue, they felt.

**Cineaste:** *Do you feel that a successful scene must involve elements—such as the length of the episode or the presence of numerous details—which go beyond the strict needs of the plot?*

**Pontecorvo:** Yes, there is a necessity for a realistic approach to action, a necessity to represent it as a form of document. It must be accented, more or less, depending on the subject. I pushed this tendency to the limit in *The Battle of Algiers*. When the film was nominated for an Academy Award, my American friends advised me to print on the poster the inscription, “Not one foot of newsreel is used in this film.” They explained that “everyone here thinks this is a compilation of newsreel film.” In *Battle of Algiers*, not only the images, but also the dialogue seems to come from reportage. Everything was filmed with a telephoto lens which gave it a graininess, the look of real events captured spontaneously. The theme of *Ogro* does not lend itself to a systematic development. Certain composites of the protagonists limit this sense of direct truth. In fact, *Ogro* bears no relation to the kind of cinema I usually make.

**Cineaste:** *You have made only five films in a period of over twenty years. Why are there such long intervals between your films?*

**Pontecorvo:** You know, I did no movie for ten years, refusing every project proposed to me, and refusing even the things I was proposing to myself, because I was so disoriented. I hope that I’m not going to wait another ten years before I make my next film. I would like to make something in a year and a half or so. But I have to

struggle with myself. The choice of the theme is always tragic for me. I am a perfectionist, so each time I have the impression that I could do better, that I’m mistaken, that I would be better off to drop the whole thing. Then I look at it again, I change my mind, I modify it so much that, in the end, the result doesn’t please me any longer. I must struggle against this failing in myself.

**Cineaste:** *What is your view of the current crisis of the Italian cinema?*

**Pontecorvo:** In Italy today there are only six or seven major filmmakers who are able to make their own kinds of films.

**Cineaste:** *Don’t most of the major Italian filmmakers have in common a new interest in the problems of private life and sentimentality?*

**Pontecorvo:** I would say that, formerly, there was an easily identifiable common basis in neo-realism. This cinema was replaced later by Italian comedy. Today I would be unable to describe the current situation of Italian cinema, and it is precisely that which is the symptom of the crisis—the absence of a common denominator between different “auteurs,” the absence of a school. But I think this is a temporary crisis, even though it now affects most of Italian cinema. For the smaller group of “auteurs,” it is not difficult to make films. One cannot say that Fellini, Rosi, Ferreri, or even myself have problems.

Aside from the absence of a school, what is serious at this time is the effect of the economic crisis on the cinema. If the government does not apply new measures, a new law, make interventions within the industry, there is truly a risk that our cinema will collapse. There are no more producers, and the Italian distributors are no better. Returns on ticket prices and the government subsidies are only partial reimbursements of the high taxes imposed. But I believe that as a result of multiple pressures from the unions, writers, and producers, the government has realized that it must intervene quickly.