

***The Battle of Algiers* (15)**

18th February 2008

Director: **Gillo Pontecorvo**
Italy/France 1966

Running time : 121 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Jean Martin** (Colonel Mathieu), **Yacef Saadi** (Saari Kader), **Brahim Haggiag** (Ali La Pointe), **Tommaso Neri** (Captain Dubois), **Fawzia El Kader** (Hahmal).

SCRIPT: **Franco Solinas**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Marcello Gatti**. EDITING: **Mario Serandrei, Mario Morra**.
MUSIC: **Ennio Morricone, Gillo Pontecorvo**.

Battle of Algiers (*La Battaglia di Algeri*) made an immediate impact on its release and won the Golden Lion at Venice. Critical opinion was not unanimous, however, and some attacked the film for its sympathy with the 'terrorists' and mixing of filmic styles. (Imagine *United 93* being made less as pure docu-drama and with more attention on the motives of the hijackers.) Before addressing these criticisms, some account of the genesis of the film might be useful. The war itself ended in 1957 with the death of the FLN leader, Ali La Pointe. Then, in 1960, spontaneous pro-FLN demonstrations surprised the authorities and heralded a renewed struggle. The political mood inside France had changed; a return to war was unacceptable and Independence was negotiated in 1962. Two years later Pontecorvo and his assistants were in Algiers, collecting eye-witness accounts of the events to be depicted in their film. Yacef Saadi, organizer of the Casbah resistance and now president of the Casbah Film company, co-produced the film and played himself in it. Pontecorvo took a crew of only nine with him once shooting began, recruiting the rest locally. Marcello Gatti held night classes after shooting so that the fledgling film industry would have trained technicians by the time they left it.

It is not hard to see from the above how the director clearly felt about the struggle for independence: his stance was left-wing and anti-colonialist. However, the bias of the finished film is far less straightforward; indeed it is remarkable for its even-handedness.

The backbone of the screenplay is the career of Ali La Pointe and it follows a flashback structure, exploring his politicisation from petty criminal to FLN freedom fighter and how he rose up the organization's famous pyramid structure. In this way Pontecorvo provides a useful metaphor for the birth of the nation as a whole. La Pointe's adversary is paratrooper

Colonel Mathieu, an articulate and experienced soldier, humane but pragmatic, who knows that the only way to beat the organization is to follow the pyramid up to its head. In order to do so he must interrogate detainees quickly enough to extract the identities of their limited contacts before they are reassigned; in one memorable scene he argues, therefore, for the necessity of torture in this kind of war, while owning that it is only possible if the political will is in place to follow it through.

Outrages are perpetrated on both sides, needless to say: the police chief plants a bomb in the Casbah, and we survey the damage while plangent music plays on the soundtrack. In response FLN women take bombs into the French quarter disguised as westerners, and scan impassively the faces of their victims to be. The filmic tactics are thus not identical, and when Pontecorvo later overlays scenes of torture simply with Morricone's music, is he sparing us the screams, or is he editorializing?

The vocabulary of the film is similarly ambivalent: it is shot in what one might term 'documentary style'. In other words Pontecorvo uses wide lenses to favour depth of field and lend versatility, handheld shots for immediacy and mobility, and black and white because it is the clothing of the docu-genre. But leaving aside the spurious realism of these conventions, there is also a range of effects drawn from the political thriller: dramatic close-ups, suspense sequences, on-screen violence and musical underscoring. By using the Casbah and its inhabitants so soon after the events as its raw materials, *Battle of Algiers* acquires an immediacy and vitality that its cinematic qualities only make more effective, even as we are reminded we are watching an artefact. You must make up your own mind whether they are misplaced.