



Battle of Algiers

Director: Gillo Pontecorvo
Country: France
Date: 1966

A review by Glenn Heath of *Slant Magazine*:

Before revolutions were televised, political cinema enabled large populations to contemplate the machinations and consequences of violent unrest from a distance. Technical advancements helped the cause, allowing narrative storytelling to merge with documentary aesthetics and formulate a new kind of hybrid realism. Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* immersed itself in this aesthetic, and might be the greatest film on the subject of insurrection, profiling the Algerian fight for independence against the French colonial forces in such stirring detail that many intense fictional sequences feel as if they are ripped directly from actual newsreel footage.

Spanning the conflict's most deadly time period from 1954 to 1957, *The Battle of Algiers* plunges the viewer headfirst down the narrow corridors of the Casbah District, a predominantly Muslim area of Algiers and the urban haven of the rebelled National Liberation Front (FLN). Down the steep hill from the impoverished Casbah is the posh European sector where the French police force attempts to subvert the FLN's ideological stranglehold. Communiqués and propaganda speeches inform the ideologies behind each group, but it's just clean surface cover for the messy bombings, assassinations, and torture sessions committed by both sides. War may be hell, but it's also devastatingly cyclical.



Instead of sentimentalizing the Arab cause and villainizing French colonialism, Pontecorvo strips away the emotional aspects and embraces a gripping handheld aesthetic. Not only does this establish a kinetic documentary effect, it makes the impact of every shoot-out and explosion a deeply personal experience. This approach defines the introduction of Ali La Pointe (Brahim Haggiag), a low-level grifter who becomes a crucial leader for the FLN after watching a fellow prisoner get guillotined in a French prison.

Ali's ideological shift could represent any number of the other Arab characters in *The Battle of Algiers*, and Pontecorvo makes their point of view a priority immediately before and after sudden bursts of violence. A bomber scans the public room before placing the incendiary device, Pontecorvo's camera lingering on the unwitting smiling faces of the men, women, and children about to die. Later, a tortured informer starts tearing up when he realizes the consequences of his betrayal. These decisions couldn't be more organic.



As Ali and his fellow leader El-Hadi Jaffar (Saadi Yacef) recruit young Arab men and women to participate in a brutal barrage of political killings and bombings, the French government in Algiers grasps at whatever colonialist straws they have left. They call in an elite paratrooper battalion, led by Lt. Col. Mathieu (Jean Martin), who swoops down like a hammer from God occupying the Casbah with precision

and force after the FLN institutes a weeklong, citywide strike. The ensuing military chess match between the guerilla's and the French shock troops becomes a protracted standoff that erupts into chaos early and often.

Each side experiences "a duty of resistance," committing heinous war crimes to achieve their political goals. The French police aren't above secretly bombing the house of an innocent man in the Casbah, killing dozens of civilians, while the FLN carries out a devastating three-pronged attack on different hotspots in the European district. Pontecorvo always hovers on the aftermath of each attack, watching as French and Arab bodies are pulled from the rubble, faceless innocents masked by layers of dirt and blood.

The Battle of Algiers isn't just a political beast, but a cinematic one as well. A fitting complement to Pontecorvo's penetrating compositions and DP Marcello Gatti's nimble camera work, Ennio Morricone's score echoes through the cramped Casbah avenues like a call to arms. The pouncing musical notes crescendo during moments of mass tumult, and together all three artists perform a balancing act of epic proportions; a complex historical moment is recreated from the gritty ground up. Politicians are expectedly nonexistent in the constantly evolving social world of *The Battle of Algiers*, their voices only heard via radio or transmitter dictating orders that are as ignorant as they are abrasive. They are the true inglorious bastards.



Ultimately, Ali and Jaffar are overrun after Col. Mathieu locks down the city during a military surge ironically called Operation Champagne. But the final moments in the film prove that the French colonialist machine has very little to celebrate. Shots of tortured prisoners dissolve into massive protests by regular citizens demanding freedom, and these large groups clash with riot police only to be mowed down by machine-gun fire. The striking images overlap, the unrest growing more intense with each passing montage. This sequence is a potent precursor to the fact that Algeria attained independence a few years later in 1962.



More than any other, one line of dialogue sums up the film's unique balance of romantic lyricism and hard-nosed realism: "Violence itself does not win wars. The people themselves must act." This statement by a high-ranking FLN leader becomes a prologue of sorts to the countless civilian revolutions that have dominated the nightly news every decade since. *The Battle of Algiers* may have been released in 1966, but its powerful influence still holds violent sway in the volatile streets of Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. Great protest art like Pontecorvo's will always be necessary.

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