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Note from Roger â?? The Battle of Algiers

Description

Before I get to Rogerâ??s note, I have seen the film and, while it was released in 1967, the issues portrayed in the film are pertinent today. With a feel of direct cinema and cinema veriteâ??, *The Battle of Algiers* is engaging and delivers a closeup view of terror, tactics and strategy. Highly recommended!

Dear Cinephiles,

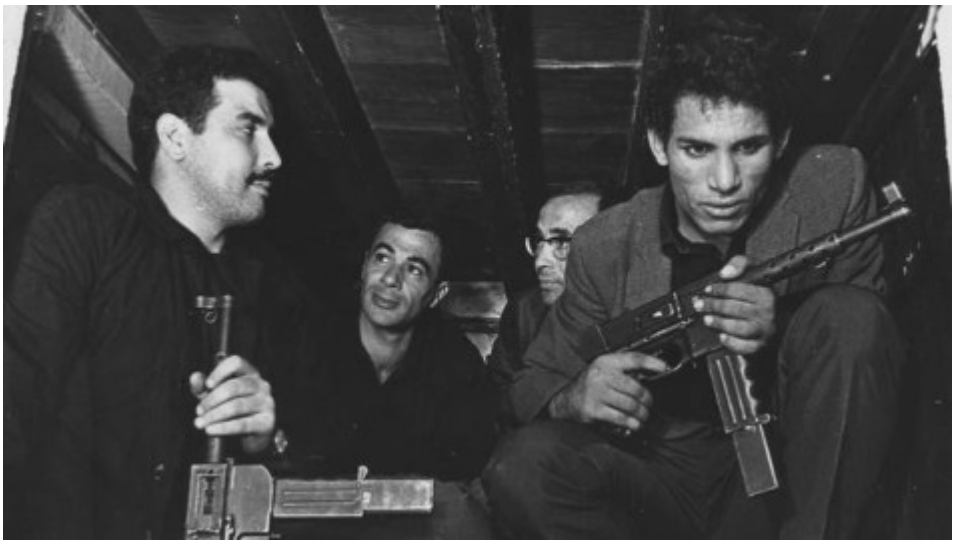
50 years ago, Italian filmmaker Gillo Pontecorvo released one of the greatest movies ever made â?? THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS. The film is a big-screen recreation of the bloody mid 1950s Algerian uprising against French rule. The film was shot on a low budget and used non-actors from Algiers. The fact that the point of view is from those colonized rattled the French government enough to ban the film. It went on to get three Oscar nominations including Best Director. The film is a masterpiece, and it has been restored in a gorgeous digital print. This film is so influential â?? and political thrillers filmed today borrow from Pontecorvoâ??s style.

THE BATTLE OF ALGIERS is as urgent and immediate as it was 50 years ago. Below find a wonderful essay by Justin Chang from the LA Times on the filmâ??s importance. It plays tonight at 5:00pm and tomorrow at 7:30pm at the Riviera Theatre. I will highly encourage you to see this landmark film.

See you at the movies!

Roger Durling

Get tickets here.



Once banned, â??Battle of Algiersâ?• smart, compassionate take on terror and rebellion resonates today
By Justin Chang â?? LA Times

For those who have seen â??The Battle of Algiers,â?• Gillo Pontecorvoâ??s masterful 1966 panorama of political insurrection and urban anxiety, the title alone can summon forth indelible images of Algerian resistance. Three women sneak through the crowded casbah to plant bombs in public places. A revolutionary leader named Ali La Pointe (Brahim Haggiag) waits quietly in the darkness as heâ??s surrounded by police. A triumphant throng of men and women shout and cheer amid a rising cloud of smoke as their hard-fought dream of independence has finally come to pass.

Buried amid all these defining moments is a calm, pivotal scene in which a French military chief named Col. Mathieu (Jean Martin) trains his soldiers to root out members of Algeriaâ??s National Liberation Front, cautioning them to be discriminating in their search. â??Are they all our enemies? We know theyâ??re not,â?• he says of the Algerian locals. â??But a small minority holds sway by means of terror and violence. We must deal with this minority in order to isolate and destroy it.â?•

It is difficult to read those words in isolation, divorced from their political and cinematic context, and not hear a shivery echo of recent headlines. You may have heard someone express a similar sentiment when parsing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or differentiating between Muslims and Islamists. However chilling Mathieuâ??s sentiments may be, they may strike you as a model of sensitivity compared with Donald Trumpâ??s infamous remarks about the Muslim world â?? or, for that matter, his son Donald Jr.â??s recent comparison of the Syrian refugee population to a bowl of selectively tainted Skittles.

Closer to home, the notion of a dangerous sub-minority feels painfully relevant to the ongoing clashes between police officers and unarmed black men in America. The latest fatalities in El Cajon, Calif.; Tulsa, Okla.; and Charlotte, N.C., suggest that when it comes to this cycle of senseless violence, too many cops â?? however vehemently they might deny it â?? still view great swaths of the African American population as a criminal menace by default. (Reviewing Pontecorvoâ??s film in 1967, then-New York Times critic Bosley Crowther wrote, â??One may sense a relation in what goes on in this picture to what has happened in the Negro ghettos of some of our American cities more recently.â?•)

All of which is a roundabout way of saying that there has perhaps never been a better time to experience or re-experience â??The Battle of Algiers,â?• which is commemorating its 50th anniversary with a digital 4K restoration that will appear in select theaters on Oct. 7 courtesy of Rialto Pictures. Then again, as history is always at pains to remind us, there has never been an inappropriate moment for a picture that so completely collapses the distance between now and then.

The movieâ??s tremendous dramatic urgency and sociopolitical currency can be attributed, in no small part, to its still-electrifying alchemy of form and content. Mimicking the jagged, caught-on-the-fly syntax of a â??50s black-and-white newsreel even as it moves with the propulsive sweep of a thriller, the movie seems to be everywhere at once, the camera capturing pockets of anxiety and unease even in broad daylight.

A dangerous armed movement rises from the shadows, yet with an insistently human face. Soldiers bound up the steps of the casbah, their footfalls echoed by the up-and-down rattlings of Ennio Morriconeâ??s score. The omniscience of the filmâ??s perspective and the fluidity of the editing ease us into the narrative yet slowly divest us of our moral bearings. The film is not just a relentlessly gripping entertainment but also a cinematic Rorschach blot, a moral miasma that tosses our sympathies this way and that.

Feared, loathed and loved over the last half-century, â??The Battle of Algiersâ?• won the Golden Lion at the 1966 Venice Film Festival and was later nominated for three Academy Awards (director, original screenplay and foreign-language film). It was deemed so incendiary in France that it was banned there for five years, and even afterward it has remained a magnet for controversy, often derided as an apologia or a blueprint for terrorism, rather than a call for common understanding.

Itâ??s worth recalling that the last time â??The Battle of Algiersâ?• showed theatrically here was in 2004, during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. A few months earlier, in 2003, the Pentagon hosted a private screening, advertised by a flier that touted the pictureâ??s relevance: â??How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. Children shoot soldiers at point-blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film.â?•

Whatever viewers at the time might have learned about how a Western imperialist power should or should not deal with a rapidly mounting, many-sided insurgency, those lessons seem positively quaint in light of the geopolitical crisis that looms before us at present, following the rise of Islamic State and the subsequent deadly attacks in Europe and the U.S. What might have once seemed a far-flung, local concern has spread far beyond Iraq to consume what feels like the world entire. Meanwhile, on a very different yet simultaneous front, the struggle for black justice at home continues, and for some Americans, its roots and motivations â?? and the cycles of brutality and unrest that emerge in its wake â?? are no less difficult to grasp.

Who is safe? Who is innocent? Why must they riot? Where will the next attack occur? Was that shooting or bombing the work of a terrorist, or just an unhinged mind? (And in the end, does it matter?) â??The Battle of Algiersâ?• offers no reassuring answers to these questions, but to watch the film, with its startlingly evenhanded treatment of both sides, is to experience the sort of mature intelligence and tough-minded compassion that makes you long to believe hope is still possible.

The filmâ??s greatness was hardly preordained. In his essay for the 2004 Criterion Collection DVD release, British film lecturer and critic Peter Matthews recalls how â??The Battle of Algiersâ?• was originally conceived along more Hollywood-friendly lines, complete with a journalist hero (set to be played by Paul Newman) who would serve as an entry point for Western audiences. Fortunately, heeding the influence of their countryâ??s neorealist masters, Pontecorvo and screenwriter Franco Solinas refused to make the Algerians a secondary presence in their own story. As Matthews writes, the filmmakers â??knew that every artistic decision is simultaneously an ethical one.â?•

If the perspective of â??The Battle of Algiersâ?• still feels radically diffuse, its aesthetic choices have been more readily absorbed into the mainstream. A war film shot with bristling handheld urgency â?? like, say, Paul Greengrassâ?? â??Bloody Sundayâ?• and â??Green Zone,â?• or Alfonso CuarÃ³nâ??s â??Children of Menâ?• â?? is no longer compared to documentaries or newsreels; hyperkinetic Steadicam is simply par for the course. The use of untrained performers (Martin was the sole professional actor cast in Pontecorvoâ??s film) is no longer a novelty, even if most American films still rely on big-name stars and strong, relatable protagonists to lure audiences toward difficult subject matter.

The spirit of Pontecorvoâ??s filmmaking can be felt even in pictures with markedly different stylistic DNA. Picking up where â??The Battle of Algiersâ?• left off, Kathryn Bigelowâ??s excellent post-9/11 thrillers address the ground-level pressures of dealing with an insurgency (â??The Hurt Lockerâ?•) and the morality of torture (â??Zero Dark Thirtyâ?•). Clint Eastwoodâ??s World War II drama â??Letters From Iwo Jima,â?• though done in a much more classical register, feels no less powerful in its willingness to penetrate the mind-set of a side that we typically perceive as the enemy.

Ken Loach, who has long cited Pontecorvoâ??s influence, made perhaps his most â??Algiersâ?•-like effort with 2006â??s â??The Wind That Shakes the Barley,â?• which also chronicled the tensions that flare between the occupiers (the British) and the occupied (the Irish). When Loach received the Palme dâ??Or at Cannes for the film, the words he spoke might as well have been a permanent epitaph for â??The Battle of Algiers.â?• if â??epitaphâ?• is the right word for a film that refuses to die: â??Maybe if

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