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Résumé
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Stephen J. Whitfield earned his doctorate in American history in 1972 from Brandeis University, where he has subsequently taught, in the Department of American Studies. He is the author of eight books, including mostly recently The Culture of the Cold War (1991, expanded ed. 1996, hardcover and paperback) and In Search of American Jewish Culture (1999, paperback 2001). At Brandeis he has won two teaching awards. Whitfield has also served as Fulbright visiting professor at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the University of Leuven and Louvain-la-Neuve. In addition he has twice taught at the University of Paris-IV (Sorbonne) and at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich.

"This is the day of the guerrilla," Malcolm X confidently announced in 1964. "Algerians... took a rifle and sneaked off to the hills, and de Gaulle and all of his highfalutin’ war machinery couldn’t defeat those guerrillas. Nowhere on this earth does the white man win in a guerrilla warfare. It’s not his speed."¹

The generalization did not take into account the success of the British in defeating the insurrection in Malaya in the 1950s, or the evidence that even the French had won the military phase of their counter-insurgency in Algeria, only to lose politically in an era of decolonization. But “the day of the guerrilla” that Malcolm X perceived as having dawned was to inspire its most important cinematic realization the following year, with the release of La Battaglia di Algeri, an Italian-Algerian co-production (in French and Arabic). In portraying the struggle of urban insurgents (though not revolutionaries fighting in the mountains and hills), The Battle of Algiers has become in retrospect a work of exceptional prescience. In depicting the willingness of terrorists to murder civilians to pursue political goals, this film constituted a preview of a world of sudden, disruptive, and shocking violence, the world that we in the twenty-first century now inhabit.

But foresight is not the only claim that *The Battle of Algiers* can invoke. If an unscholarly but defensible opinion may be offered, this is quite simply the greatest political movie ever made. One criterion is the breadth of the impact that this film has exerted, the sheer range of an appeal that continues to be felt. From left to right, and from 1965 until the present, the scale of that attraction is the primary focus of this essay. It seeks both to describe that political influence and to account for it in cinematic terms. Briefly banned in France in 1965, and then infrequently shown in that country for the next few decades, screened by groups of political incendiaries ranging from the Irish Republican Army to the Tamil Tigers, praised by the Palestinian intellectual Edward W. Said for “extraordinary . . . clarity and . . . passion,” even as units of the Israel Defense Forces were required to watch it, revived in the late summer of 2003 through the official sponsorship of the Pentagon’s Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, *The Battle of Algiers* is peerless in the breadth of the fascination that it has continued to elicit.

Depicting the failed insurrection of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in the capital of Algeria from 1954 until 1957, *The Battle of Algiers* is unusual – and indeed may be unique – in galvanizing attention across the political spectrum, and in continuing to convey a gut-wrenching urgency and stinging relevance long after France abandoned its colonial empire. The director and co-scenarist, Gillo Pontecorvo (1919-2006), nevertheless hoped, in an interview conducted only two years before his death, that *The Battle of Algiers* might be appreciated as an technical exercise. He disclaimed any intention to show how to make war; instead his aim was to “teach how to make movies.” Pontecorvo wanted his film to be understood as an exercise in *verismo*, not as a veritable manual of terrorism (much less a guide to counter-terrorism either).

So stark an either/or deserves to be rejected, however. The choice need not be between technique and *politique*. What makes this movie so enduringly impressive is its explosive combination of form and content, its combustible blend of art and politics. To account for the power of *The Battle of Algiers*, style and subject cannot be separated. Like *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the greatest of American silent films, and like *Citizen Kane* (1941), the greatest of American sound films, *The Battle of Algiers* deploys innovative techniques to scrutinize and illumine an ambitious subject. D.

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W. Griffith wanted to reveal how race and slavery, sectional conflict and war call into question the viability of nationhood. Orson Welles explored how inordinate power and wealth induce a psychic emptiness that calls into question the value of individualism. Pontecorvo inquired whether the price for a colonial power or its subject people to pay is too high in determining who is to rule in an era of ascendant Third World nationalism. (The films of both Griffith and Welles also emitted a political charge.)

If Pontecorvo is to be believed on the self-reflexive intent of his movie, designed to demonstrate how it should be made, a brief summation of his technical achievements is necessary. Orson Welles had inserted a fake newsreel in the first reel of *Citizen Kane*. But the clever effects of “News on the March” are easily dwarfed by cinematographer Marcello Gatti’s jagged, grainy, pseudo-documentary style, which he sustained with extraordinary immediacy for the two-hour running time of *The Battle of Algiers*. The sinuously narrow streets of the Casbah made Gatti’s hand-held camera almost obligatory. So seductively credible was the mimetic effect that, with justifiable bravado, the credits instruct audiences that “not one foot of newsreel has been used in this re-enactment of the battle of Algiers.” After seeing this “incontestably superior” entry at the New York Film Festival in the fall of 1967, critic John Simon exulted in the impression of “watching at the very least a spectacular newsreel, if not indeed history itself in the making.” In *The Nation*, critic Harold Clurman concurred, calling the film “a masterpiece of epic realism.”

The score is also memorable. It is credited not only to Ennio Morricone, who is (to advance a final unscholarly opinion) the greatest composer of film scores ever. Sharing the credit is the *auteur*. Music had been Pontecorvo’s first aesthetic love, while growing up in Pisa, and “becomes a form of agitation” in *The Battle of Algiers*, the American film critic Pauline Kael noted. “At times, the strange percussive sound is like an engine that can’t quite start; pounding music gives the audience a sense of impending horror at each critical point; the shrill, rhythmic, birdlike cries from the Casbah tell us that all life is trilling and screaming for freedom.” In that same year French film critic Robert Benayoun

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wondered whether Pontecorvo had “invented a new way of writing history.”

The realism that *The Battle of Algiers* contrives to project is further heightened by our knowledge that, except for Jean Martin as Lieutenant Colonel Philippe Mathieu, we are not watching professional actors. Indeed a few of them – most importantly, Yacef Saâdi as El-Hadi Jaffar – were revolutionaries who had managed to survive the struggle for decolonization and were playing versions of themselves. Two years after Algeria achieved its independence, Yacef Saâdi, who had served as the FLN’s military chief in Algiers and then founded a movie production company called Casbah Films, visited Pontecorvo in Italy to propose a film about the victory over French imperialism. Half of the funding, Saâdi promised, would come from the new Algerian government, which at the dawn of independence had nationalized all 113 movie theatres and created a Centre National du Cinéma Algérien. Thus the second film industry in an Arab nation was created (after Egypt’s). But Egyptian Arabic was poorly understood in Algeria, and about 80 per cent of the movies shown in the immediate aftermath of decolonization were either French or American. Saâdi’s own Casbah Films, though autonomous, benefited from the highly-charged atmosphere of nationalism and from the direct support of the new Algerian republic.

Such financial backing was no minor consideration. How expensive movie-making could be would soon be revealed in the *New York Times*, when John Leonard reported that Twentieth Century Fox’s *Che!* (1969), starring Omar Sharif as Dr. Ernesto Guevara, tore through a bigger budget than Fidel Castro himself needed. “It costs more to make a movie about a revolution,” Leonard calculated, “than it does to make a revolution.” This does not mean that political upheavals do not impose other costs. One of Guevara’s speeches is paraphrased in *The Battle of Algiers*, when the intellectual Larbi ben M’Hidi confronts the street-fighting man Ali La Pointe (Brahim Haggiag), who has undergone the same sort of transformation as did Malcolm X (from petty criminality to self-disciplined insurgency). On a roof-top in the Casbah, Larbi ben M’Hidi reflects that “starting a revolution is hard, and it’s even harder to continue it. Winning is the hardest of all.” But only after victory “will the

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real hardships begin.”11 In fact, neither of these two FLN members lived to confront such challenges. Ben M’Hidi was arrested on 25 February 1957 and died in French custody on 5 March, officially a “suicide,” in fact an assassination. On 8 October 1957, French counter-insurgents killed Ali La Pointe; and that month France officially declared victory in the urban guerrilla warfare known as the Battle of Algiers, ten months after paratroopers had surrounded the Casbah.

For The Battle of Algiers, Pontecorvo later raised more than half the budget himself, and to complete the film managed to spend under $800,000, or what was then less than a half a billion lire. He also got full access to sites in Algiers by turning Saâdi into one of the stars of the film, which drew upon newspaper accounts, police reports and other material that Casbah Films had collected and provided to Pontecorvo and to Franco Solinas, who was credited with the scenario. Saâdi resembled, according to Pontecorvo, “a young Paul Muni.” Saâdi had wanted a film to be made that would do justice to the experience of decolonization and yet somehow not be perceived as anti-French, because he wanted French audiences to see such a film, uncensored, and to be receptive to its politics. He also invited a European film crew to Algeria because he wanted his own countrymen to learn the technical skills required to produce movies. Pontecorvo rejected Saâdi’s initial ideas for what an anti-colonialist film, set during the Algerian struggle for sovereignty, should emphasize. But the director also decided to abandon his own tentative project that would have centered on a French parachutist who realized the terrible consequences of empire. Pontecorvo wanted to cast Paul Newman as the para.12

Casbah Films, which co-produced the movie, made a shrewd choice in picking the director, who insisted upon – and got – full artistic control.13 Born three years before Mussolini took power, Gillo (short for Gilberto) Pontecorvo had studied chemistry after abandoning music. When the Fascist regime passed antisemitic legislation in 1938, he moved to Paris and became a political activist. After the German army invaded France two years later, Pontecorvo fled to southern France, where he joined the Communist Party in 1941. He served as a liaison in Toulon for underground groups in Italy as well as for Italians who shared his exile in France. As a tennis player who was good enough to compete in international matches, Pontecorvo could cross borders without arousing


too much suspicion. For much of the war, he led a partisan group in Milan, and afterwards served as a Communist *apparatchik*. After quitting the Party in 1956, Pontecorvo remained on the left, as an independent. Photojournalism in Paris (for Agence Havas, which later became Agence France-Presse) was his penultimate career; and then he became a film-maker.\(^{14}\)

In eighteen years, however, Pontecorvo would make only four feature films. But among them was *Kapò* (1960), which takes up the theme of collective resistance under the extreme circumstances of a death camp. Solinas wrote the script. Featuring a female Jewish protagonist, that film addressed the subject of the Holocaust well ahead of other artists in any medium. Pontecorvo later professed to have “more affection for *Kapò* than for my other films. I know there are more faults and weaknesses in it than by comparison with *The Battle of Algiers*. But emotionally . . . *Kapò* contains more.” Pontecorvo left behind so thin a body of work, he said, because he felt a compelling urge to make four films. He made them out of his own personal concerns rather than to satisfy a market or to earn a living. If at least one of those movies is indelible, the way that he worked might be contrasted with Hollywood, where, according to playwright David Mamet’s savage portrayal of how movies there are “green-lighted,” the aim is not to satisfy the director’s taste, but to “make films people like,” and to “make the thing everyone made last year.” Pontecorvo did it differently, however intermittently, and died in Rome at the age of 86.\(^{15}\)

In June 1965, as tanks rumbled through the streets of Algiers, many residents assumed that the filming of *The Battle of Algiers* had begun. In fact the show of force was much more than a show: Colonel Houari Boumedienne was in the process of leading a military coup to overthrow the regime of Ahmed Ben Bella. Filming did not begin until 25 July 1965, and was finished on 3 December 1965. Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas wrote the original story. Unlike Pontecorvo, Solinas could never bring himself to resign from the Italian Communist Party. They managed to remain friends, however. Improvisation was valued; camera set-ups were devised in the course of filming.\(^{16}\) An uncut version was shown first at the Cinéma Afrique in Algiers, with Colonel Boumedienne, the new President of the Algerian Republic, plus other officials, in the audience.


They watched the first feature to be produced and released in an independent Algeria. In the following decade and a half, however, while Ben Bella was subjected to house arrest, the film was rarely exhibited in Algeria, because the new regime feared that *The Battle of Algiers* might incite street demonstrations in support of the former president. Pontecorvo’s work is nevertheless so indelibly bound to its particular historical subject that other film-makers have undoubtedly been discouraged from making any competing versions of this pivotal postwar conflict.

Released in 1966, *The Battle of Algiers* won the top prize, the Golden Lion, at the 27th International Film Festival in Venice, where the response of the French delegation was to walk out of the screening room. The awards ceremony was boycotted as well. Among the delegates who objected to the awarding of the Golden Lion to Pontecorvo’s film were François Truffaut and Henri Cartier-Bresson. A film journal reported that “a panic seized the French press,” which included a headline referring to “Un Verdict de Salauds” (a bastards’ verdict), and expressed embarrassment at so “sinister” and “stupid” a protest against a movie that the delegates had refused to watch. *L’Aurore* called “quite questionable” “the merits” of *The Battle of Algiers* in evoking “a very painful moment of French history.” *Le Monde* sniffed that “the jurors’ political opinions” had been decisive. Later that year the Grandes Associations des Rapatriés, which represented returnees from Algeria, pressured the French government to block the screening of cinematic excerpts that were to be included on a television program, *Zoom*. The general secretary of the organization warned that the film “reflects revolting cynicism and risks inciting feelings of hatred that could be regrettable.” The government agreed, and for good measure prohibited release of the cinema version in France for three months.

For a previous instance of the official proscription of the work of an Italian Jewish artist in France, cultural historians had to go back to 1917. That was when the explicit nude paintings of Amadeo Modigliani so shocked the gendarmerie that they shut down the only solo exhibition of his lifetime. There is, by the way, another curious parallel: Modigliani’s

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socialist brother had been jailed for his political activism, and Pontecorvo’s older brother Bruno went even further to the left. A nuclear physicist who had belonged to Enrico Fermi’s team that worked on the atomic bomb in the United States and in England, Bruno Pontecorvo informed British security officials in 1949 that his brother the journalist was also a Communist. The following year Bruno Pontecorvo defected to the Soviet Union, which awarded him a Stalin Prize in 1954 for his services to that totalitarian regime.\textsuperscript{19}

In France the official censorship of films did not end until 1975. Before then authorities had banned or censored a dozen French films about the Algerian war while it was occurring, including \textit{Muriel} (1963) by Alain Resnais.\textsuperscript{20} Jean-Luc Godard confronted the question of torture during the Algerian War in \textit{Le Petit Soldat}, which he finished in 1960. Bleeding from numerous cuts, the film was not released until 1963,\textsuperscript{21} a year after the war formally ended. But the controversy that Pontecorvo’s film aroused was unmatched. During the tumultuous month of May, 1968, \textit{The Battle of Algiers} could be seen (unofficially) at the Studio Luxembourg in Paris. In that same year President de Gaulle freed the last imprisoned leaders of the OAS and in effect tried to bring closure to the Algerian conflict. In 1970, after the French government apparently gave its approval (\textit{visa de contrôle}) for the release of the film, outrage erupted from the Grandes Associations des Rapatriés. According to one of its officials, Marc Lauriol, the \textit{pieds-noirs} who had relocated themselves “resented [the film] as an insult to the memory of their ancestors,” precisely when the members of his organization were purported to need smooth integration into France. The situation was so grave, Lauriol warned, that public protests would be instigated.\textsuperscript{22}

When \textit{The Battle of Algiers} opened in Paris at three or four cinemas soon thereafter, the Organisation de l’Armée Secrète (OAS) warned that bombings would result. Pontecorvo claimed that he then arranged with various youth organizations to guard the theaters where the film was being screened, and also enlisted the public support of Louis Malle and other French directors. The OAS threats did not in fact materialize, Pontecorvo recalled. He added that no incidents occurred even when the


\textsuperscript{20} Renais’s earlier \textit{Nuit et Brouillard} [\textit{Night and Fog}] (1955) had had to be edited to eliminate any comparison of the Holocaust with the conflicts over decolonization.


film was released outside of Paris, except for ink that was once hurled at the screen in Lyon. But no major French television network showed *The Battle of Algiers* until 2004.\(^{23}\)

The public record directly collides with the director’s memory of domestic tranquillity, however. The legal permission to screen the film was granted in the summer of 1970. But protests, fears of violence and actual disruptions deterred and frightened exhibitors. In September 1970, the owner of a Saint-Etienne movie theater showing the film got several anonymous phone calls before a two-kilo bomb exploded nearby. Close to two dozen militants from Action Française disrupted screenings and hurled eggs and ink at the screen, before the police expelled the protesters. There were no further incidents. On the other hand, there were also no further screenings at Saint-Etienne.\(^{24}\) Benjamin Stora, a historian of the Algerian war, has noted that in October 1971, pitched battles erupted between leftist and rightist students in the Latin Quarter, where the film was shown at the Studio Saint-Sèverin. Eventually its owner gave up, after replacing smashed windows and after resorting to almost clandestine screenings that were not announced in the weekly cinematic programs. A decade later the same movie theater tried again. This time, in January 1981, it was the target of two Molotov cocktails, and about twenty young men in helmets battled police. Two of the protesters were lightly wounded. The Studio Saint-Sèverin got three phone calls warning of bombs, though there were no evacuations, and nothing exploded. A stink bomb, however, was thrown that month at a cinema at Place Clichy where *The Battle of Algiers* was being shown. For about three decades, until it was re-released in the spring of 2004, screenings were very rare. Not until 1989 did Professor Stora himself manage to see the film, on videocassette, which he borrowed from an Algerian friend.\(^{25}\)

The effort to present and view this movie thus reads like a missing chapter from Charles Tilly’s *The Contentious French* (1986). Elsewhere, however, the appeal of this film could be characterized as ecumenical. It was nominated in 1967 as Best Foreign Language Picture, but failed to win an Academy Award. Two years later Hollywood honored *The Battle of Algiers* again, with two additional Oscar nominations: Best Director,


and Best Original Story and Screenplay. *The Battle of Algiers* was named the best film of 1967 in Cuba, where the magazine *Cine* polled critics on that island after *The Battle of Algiers* was screened there. Whatever the political differences between Fidel Castro and the CIA, Havana and Hollywood shared admiration for this film, even as the currents of history seemed to be moving in a leftward direction. In October 1968, for example, the business monthly *Fortune* announced the results of a poll that identified two-fifths of American undergraduates as “forerunners” of change. A plurality of these privileged college students claimed to identify with the late “Che” Guevara, whom they ranked ahead of the Presidential candidates that the U.S. political system was presenting that fall: Richard Nixon, George Wallace, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey. The most popular titles that the campus bookstore at Columbia University reported were Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton’s *Black Power*, Régis Debray’s *Revolution in the Revolution?*, and *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*. In so radicalized a setting, a film like *The Battle of Algiers* could easily gain traction.

One “forerunner” might well have been Bill Ayers (1944- ), later a very minor political associate of Illinois state senator Barack Obama in promoting school reform. Ayers’ father was the president of Commonwealth Edison in Chicago. The son of privilege transformed himself into a Weatherman, and his memoir records the first time that he saw *The Battle of Algiers*, which excited him “with a brimming sense of our own specialness.” He and his comrades were “young and awake and eager to take on the waiting world,” which “was in such desperate need of repair.” As his own radicalism hardened, he expressed the yearning “to build a force of clandestine militants . . . . We meant to learn to fight through fighting . . . growing in strength and power through the practice of revolution.” This self-definition of a street-fighting man explains the allure of one film in particular: “We shrieked and screamed as we ran, ululating in imitation of the fighters of *The Battle of Algiers*. I saw us become what I thought was a real battalion in a guerrilla army.” That summer the Weathermen had hoped to disrupt the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, though they probably did only enough damage to help elect the Republican ticket in November.

Also arriving in Chicago, to generate mischief of their own, was the Youth International Party (YIP), or Yippies. They assembled near City

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Hall on 23 August 1968, and then met with David Stahl, an assistant to Mayor Richard J. Daley. Stahl asked two of the Yippies’ “leaders,” Paul Krassner and Abbie Hoffman, about their actual intentions. “Didn’t you see *Wild in the Streets*?” Krassner asked, a bit ominously. (The film was a satire, with a rock musical score, on what would later be called “ageism.”) Stahl countered with a reply that was even more ominous: “We’ve seen *The Battle of Algiers*.” These dueling moviegoers could not resolve their differences. “Where the Yippies threatened to dose reservoirs with LSD,” one historian commented, “Chicago officials anticipated a scenario in which urban guerrillas blew up ice cream parlors.” The following October, the Weathermen again showed up in Chicago to instigate “Four Days of Rage.” “War whoops” inspired by the ending of *The Battle of Algiers* helped stir up these militants, who openly professed their admiration for the terrorist tactics that the film presented.28

Bewitched by a certain theatricality, the white left in the U. S. might well have fantasized about the revolutionary prospects that the FLN had fulfilled. But among some young blacks, the empathy went further, in imagining the outlines of violent insurrection. Already by 1967, soon after riots had destroyed much of Newark and Detroit, *Newsweek* was noting the possible danger that one pseudo-documentary was posing to the social order in the long hot summers to come: “At the recent New York Film Festival at the Lincoln Center and later at a first-run theater on Manhattan’s East Side, many young Negroes cheered or laughed knowingly at each terrorist attack on the French, as if *The Battle of Algiers* were a textbook and a prophecy of urban guerilla warfare to come.” This was, after all, a film that showed how revolutionary cells might be organized, how bombs might be placed in public settings, and how policemen might be murdered to accelerate the turbulent cycle of terrorism and counter-terrorism. Such rage was barely contained within the vortex of American cities, according to film critic Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*.29 Journalist Garry Wills even published a book entitled *The Second Civil War* (1968). The excerpt in *Esquire* predicted that “it will be simpler this time” – instead of Blue versus Gray, just “black versus white.”

Or maybe not so simple. In the month that President Nixon took his first oath of office, Leonard Bernstein and his wife, Felicia Montealegre Cohn, gave a cocktail party in their Park Avenue apartment in support of twenty-one Black Panthers charged with a conspiracy to bomb five department stores in mid-Manhattan, and to murder


policemen as well. This plot was presumably an effort to actualize *The Battle of Algiers*, while the cocktail party instigated Tom Wolfe’s most famous satiric assault, “Radical Chic.” But did Pontecorvo’s film actually inspire the twenty-one defendants? The prosecution evidently thought so. During the trial the following year, the assistant district attorney introduced *The Battle of Algiers* as evidence and screened it for the jurors, one of whom, Edwin Kennebeck, later remarked: “The film did more to help me see things from the defense point of view than the D. A. suspected.”

(Reader-response theory had not yet been fully formulated in the academy.)

One of the defendants, Lumumba Shakur, had told an undercover detective, Ralph White, that the Black Panthers were required to see Pontecorvo’s movie. White testified that Shakur had told him: “The way a revolutionary is tested in *The Battle of Algiers* is, he’s given an act of violence to commit against the police.” White added that the film shows the bombing of stores. Yet journalist Murray Kempton, who covered the trial, drew a different moral from the screening from what the prosecution had intended. Watching the movie reminded Kempton, “on all points save rhetoric, not of the Panthers but of the Bureau of Special Services of New York’s police force. The Algerian Liberation Front was organized into closed cells; no member knew anyone outside his own cell, or anything about those above him or even about most of those beside him in the structure he served; he knew in fact only as much as he needed to know to function.” And that, Kempton noted, was the career pattern of another undercover cop, Eugene Roberts: “He had contact with no one in the department except the Bureau of Special Services’ staff member assigned to transmit his reports up from and his orders down to him. He did not even know which object of his investigation might be himself a brother agent.”

The summation of the prosecution warned the jury that the defendants, in Kempton’s account, were too credulous, and could easily be swayed by so powerful a film as *The Battle of Algiers*. It “explains that there is a philosophy, a theory of revolution, of terrorism, that is productive, that you should and can put bombs in public places, and that it is desirable.” The assistant district attorney deemed that philosophy “undesirable under any circumstances. But, to an uneducated mind, to people who really aren’t that terribly well educated,” the impact might be different. The D. A. acknowledged that watching this movie would not “make a terrorist out of anyone who is sophisticated. . . But you can appreciate the effect that this film is going to have on uneducated minds.”

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Kempton, who provided the fullest account of the trial of the Panther 21, was nevertheless very doubtful that the film could have registered as a battle-plan. He argued that what the defendants might have been imagining was simply too “incoherent” to be credible, much less a threat to life or limb.\textsuperscript{32} One month after the acquittal of the defendants, one of them, Afeni Shakur, gave birth to the future rapper Tupac Shakur (1971-1996).

The radicalism of \textit{The Battle of Algiers} cannot be denied. An avid reader of Frantz Fanon in the 1960s, Pontecorvo refused to be impartial. He shows Col. Mathieu to be fully aware of the ways by which revolutionaries can be crushed, at least for a while: “To know them means to eliminate them . . . [For this we need] information. The method is interrogation.” That means, of course, torture. It is among “the necessary consequences” of the political decision for France to remain in Algeria. The logic is impeccable, the lucidity famously French. But neither does the film shrink from the atrocities that the FLN is shown perpetrating, the brutalities that no audience is permitted to ignore, including what the chief editor of \textit{Cahiers du Cinéma} called the “extreme strait-jacket of revolutionary puritanism.”\textsuperscript{33} The leftist rival of that journal, \textit{Positif}, drew the lesson that “the ethic of assassination remains savage, unjust and murderous,” and that “the price of armed insurrection is unthinkable and atrocious.”\textsuperscript{34} \textit{The Battle of Algiers} is unsparing. Were it nothing more than a possible source of radical fantasy for groups like the Black Panthers, the power of the film would have been locked into a particular historical phase that was bound to pass. Indeed, as the axes of politics shifted to reaction and to the strengthening of conservative authority, and as revolutionary fervor inevitably dissipated, the allure even of a masterpiece might well have vanished. But \textit{The Battle of Algiers} has not sunk into oblivion, and need not be sought in the DVD bins where obscure cult films are stacked. That is primarily because of its director’s insistence upon the hard choices that politics mandates.

The discipline of economics began with claims about invisible hands, whereas political activity has usually been about dirty hands. In 1957 Senator John F. Kennedy, who had criticized the stubborn folly of French imperialism in trying to stifle the Algerian Muslims’ “eternal desire to be free and independent,”\textsuperscript{35} is famous for having declared that “to govern is to choose.” That makes a political film almost inherently

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 213, 271-272.


\textsuperscript{34} Benayoun, “La Bataille d’Alger,” \textit{Positif}.

dramatic, a study of conflict between two rights or two wrongs. Can torture (ever) be justified, for example? In the struggle against undemocratic colonial rule, is violence acceptable? These are the gnawing questions that Pontecorvo poses, without quite decisively answering them. Contrast such hesitancy with Z, another exciting film, which came out three years after the release of The Battle of Algiers. The Greek-born Costa-Gavras has been a consistently political director; and this anti-fascist film, also shot in Algeria, pits good against evil. Z makes Yves Montand the prey of thuggish police and military, and the only morally interesting question is whether Jean-Louis Trintignant will have the spine to indict and prosecute the uniformed killers and their accomplices. Z stirs audiences to cheer his display of courage, even in defeat; The Battle of Algiers offers a more complex emotional consolation.

Even more important, the device of Col. Mathieu enables this supremely political film to escape the embarrassments of mere propaganda. Jean Martin, who played Mathieu, would later get another chance to champion French Algeria, in assuming the role of an OAS agent who helps to arrange an attempted assassination of de Gaulle in The Day of the Jackal (1973). According to Barbet Schroeder’s L’Avocat de la terreur (2007), the actual Jackal, the Venezuelan-born terrorist Ilich Ramírez Sánchez, or Carlos, has seen The Battle of Algiers. His reaction to the film has not been disclosed, however. But a biographer of the West German terrorist Andreas Baader (1943-1977), reports that The Battle of Algiers was his favorite film. In its second half, terrorism is seen from the perspective of a highly intelligent paratrooper and counter-insurgency strategist (which makes Pontecorvo a peculiar kind of Marxist). Mathieu is neither a fanatic nor a sadist. Indeed so assured is he in performing his duties that he comes close to being “heroic,” according to one historian of the Algerian struggle for independence, which does not stop Mathieu, a martinet who adopts the logic of cruelty, being rather creepy. After all, according to Pauline Kael, he incarnates “the cool, inhuman manipulative power of imperialism versus the animal heat of the multitudes rushing toward us as they rise against their oppressors.”

The device works, however. What if the FLN militants made a point of justifying their actions? Audiences might well have resisted such truculent anti-colonialist exhortation. “The revolutionaries forming their pyramid of cells don’t need to express revolutionary consciousness,” Kael


added, “because the French colonel is given such a full counter-revolutionary consciousness that he says it all for them. He even expresses the knowledge that history is on the side of the oppressed colonial peoples, who will win; he himself is merely part of a holding action, preserving imperialism a little longer but bound to fail.”

Because both sides earn a distribution of sympathies, the playwright Tony Kushner “really loved The Battle of Algiers. It has a clear, anti-colonial political message,” but he asserted that the film plays fair. Indeed both sides are cruel; and the film presents violence “in an extremely painful way,” Pontecorvo asserted. “Its consequences are the same even when used by those who are historically right; using it is a tragic necessity.” Unlike colonialist France, however, the FLN seems to have in its favor the historical justice that belongs to movements of national independence, as well as the moral advantage of ultimate victory over the torturers. Perhaps that is why Saâdi could express some magnanimity and could adopt a stance of detachment. He insisted that The Battle of Algiers is not “a hateful film,” nor were its makers “animated by any spirit of revenge.” The movie was intended, he asserted, to tear off “a page of our history and that of France.” The making of The Battle of Algiers, Pontecorvo recalled, was therefore “like filming the birth of a nation.”

The moral equilibrium of the movie was not appreciated by General Jacques Massu, upon whom the character of Mathieu is partly based. As commander of the 10th airborne division, General Massu was given full police powers over Greater Algiers on 7 January 1957, and created the system that enclosed the Muslim population within certain neighborhoods of the city. Interviewed in 1971, he banged his fist on a table as he complained of cinematic duplicity and a lack of objectivity. “The fundamental vice of this film,” he insisted, is to have assigned military victory in the battle of Algiers to the revolutionaries rather than to the parachutists. But so wild a misinterpretation of the movie could be advanced only by concentrating on the final frames, when the unarmed masses pour into the streets, three years after the siege and the killing of Ali La Pointe and his comrades. The urban leadership of the FLN is shown getting crushed; the head of the “tapeworm” is cut off. Nor did the general care for the portrait of Mathieu, who “has a doctrinaire tone,

38 Kael, Reeling, 210, 211.
describing the counter-revolutionary fight as though it were a course in a war college.” The supremely confident Mathieu is enough of a savant to know who Jean-Paul Sartre is. When told that the philosopher had just published an article, presumably denouncing the war waged on behalf of French Algeria, Mathieu wonders “why all the Sartres are always . . . on the other side?”

The question that Mathieu raises about the playwright who had written *Les mains sales* (*Dirty Hands*) in 1948 deserves some unpacking. Mathieu’s memorable line is not literally true; and on 5 September 1960 Jean Martin himself had signed, along with Sartre, the manifesto of the “121” artists and intellectuals demanding an end to the “dirty war” and to French control of Algeria. Among the 121 signatories was Truffaut, whose endorsement of the right of refusal to take up arms against the people of Algeria did not prevent him from protesting the screening of *The Battle of Algiers* in Venice six years later. This curious inconsistency seems not to have puzzled any of his biographers; and Truffaut’s correspondence, published in 1988, makes no reference to his boycott of Pontecorvo’s film. Officers like Mathieu had been on the same side as leftist intellectuals during the Second World War, which rendered conservative patriotism quite compatible with radicalism (and even, after 22 June 1941, with Communism as well). Massu himself had joined General de Gaulle in resistance headquarters in London in 1940.

By having Mathieu remind journalists that French soldiers had fought against fascism barely a decade earlier, *The Battle of Algiers* does not cheat. It gives loyal soldiers like Mathieu their due. Pontecorvo was not entirely one-sided himself. His film certainly shows the terrifying experience of torture. But in exposing some of the violent methods of the FLN, *The Battle of Algiers* is hardly free of the ambiguity that constitutes the antithesis of propaganda. Even Saâdi eventually shrank from the murderous means of achieving independence from France, and explicitly repudiated the bombing that maims and cripples. Such methods not only end lives but also ruin them.

Sartre could be on the other side during the Algerian torment because he was not caught in the middle, as the political theorist Michael Walzer has emphasized. That differentiated Sartre from another leftist intellectual, Albert Camus. Proclaiming that “the period of colonialism is over,” Camus nevertheless condemned “the terrorism applied by the FLN to French civilians and indeed, to an even greater degree, to Arab civilians.” Such nuances led Simone de Beauvoir to utter the harsh

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judgment that “the humanist in him had given way to the pied-noir.”43 A radical critic (and of course a Nobel laureate), Camus experienced the anguish, doomed quest for a politics that eliminated both the roles of victim and executioner. A member in good standing of the French intelligentsia, he therefore reflected a more complicated and diverse position than Mathieu’s question implied. The reluctance of Sartre to denounce the totalitarianism of the Soviet Union, which entailed a personal and political rupture with Camus, suggests that even the vocation of estrangement has its limits. Inconsistencies in the exercise of conscience are what Mathieu’s pithy question does not encompass, and by 2001 even General Massu was willing to acknowledge publicly that “morally, torture is something ugly.”44

The end of the Cold War hardly brought an end to lethal conflict, and indeed may have simply shifted the fault lines elsewhere, to the collision between a militant Islam and its enemies. One battleground was post-colonial Algeria itself, which has been subjected to military rule since independence was won in 1962. In the 1990s the regime of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika smashed the fundamentalist party, the Front Islamique du Salut or Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), after cancelling a second round of elections. The moral price was exorbitant. Some of the same appalling techniques that the French paras had used against the FLN were adopted against the FIS, including torture, summary execution, and incarceration in secret detention camps in the Sahara. Although Human Rights Watch condemned such ruthless counterinsurgency methods in an important report that was issued in February 2003, those who perpetrated such atrocities were not identified – much less punished. When Jacques Chirac visited Algiers four decades after the defeat of French colonialism there, the crowds that greeted him did not see the French President as a legatee of imperialist oppression or colonialist cruelty. Instead they were pleading for “Visas! Visas!”45

By then President Bouteflika had named Yacef Saâdi to the Senate; and in 2002 he published the first two volumes of his own history, in French, of the conflict of almost half a century earlier. The book was entitled La Bataille d’Alger. When he published a sequel two years later, entitled La Guérilla Urbaine, its cover used a still from the film. In


September 2002 two American diplomats visited Saâdi in his villa to talk about *The Battle of Algiers*. Senator Saâdi declined the offer to come to the United States to talk about his political and cinematic experiences. Nor did he wish to enter into any arguments by analogy. Saâdi recalled telling the diplomats, half a year before Operation Iraqi Freedom began, that he “had no comparison to make between a war of decolonization and an operation to change regimes.” But when *The Battle of Algiers* was re-released in the U. S. early in 2004, he came to promote the film, and expressed his suspicion that the American military would stay too long in Iraq, and thus trigger the sort of insurgency that “will spread like an oil spill spreads, further and further.” Conveying remorse for the carnage against civilians in the FLN’s campaign for independence, Saâdi showed no sympathy whatsoever for the FIS: “These people are really destroyers,” who live “in a country that’s free.”

The ascendance of fundamentalist Islam in the twenty-first century has ensured a continuing interest in *The Battle of Algiers*. It counts as one of the favorite films of journalist Lawrence Wright, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (2006), especially because of “great moral quandary” that French counter-terrorism confronts. Another journalist, David Halberstam (1934-2007), was too young to have covered the doomed French effort to keep Indochina within the empire, but he insisted that the roots of the failure of the U. S. intervention in Vietnam could be traced to the injustices of colonialism. In 2002-3, when the administration of George W. Bush signaled every intention of invading Iraq, Halberstam claimed that his experience in Vietnam obliged him to issue warnings of a catastrophic repetition. Before Operation Iraqi Freedom began, he predicted that “we were going to punch our fist into the largest hornet’s nest in the world and end up doing the recruiting for Al-Qaeda.” The technical sophistication of the U. S. military would ensure a successful march to Baghdad. But, as though echoing Malcolm X, Halberstam warned that “the urban battle would change; we would be involved in urban guerrilla warfare, and things would turn against us.” Taking a crash course on the colonial experience in Algeria, President Bush was even inspired to read Camus’ first published novel, *L’Etranger* (1942), as well as Alistair Horne’s classic history, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962* (upon the recommendation of Dr. Henry A. Kissinger). But the Presidential


47 Quoted in Hofler, *Variety’s Movies*, 62.

He recalled saying that “the movie that they were all watching in the White House and the Pentagon was \textit{Patton}, and the movie they should have been watching was \textit{The Battle of Algiers}.” He added: “There is a moment in a war – as there was in Vietnam and as there will be in this war – where your military superiority is undermined by your political limitations . . . And I felt the specter of colonialism would be a problem again in a more complicated way with Islam.” He was then asked: “I heard they were watching \textit{The Battle of Algiers} in the White House. What do you think we can learn from it?” Halberstam replied: “Well, they finally did. About a month later they sent out a memo saying people should watch it. But whether it will have the same impact on someone who has never worked in the postcolonial world . . . and has a fervent belief, post-Cold War, in American triumphalism, is another question.” He concluded: “It’s scary.”\footnote{Tebaldi, “Refreshing Our Historical Memory”.}

Halberstam’s worries were hardly unique. Richard A. Clarke, the chief of the U. S. anti-terrorism unit for the National Security Agency, has argued that \textit{The Battle of Algiers} “raises the right issues. Can you go after terrorism by just killing terrorists? When the movie ends, the French have captured and killed all known terrorists, but in the process they bred another batch.” He added: “After 9/11, the President asked for a chart of al-Qaeda managers so that, as we captured them, he could cross out their names. I had a flashback to the movie where the French colonel, Mathieu, crosses out the names of terrorists, thinking he is winning. I thought, oh, my God, the President wants to do the same thing – probably with the same degree of success.” Clarke suggested to President George W. Bush’s national security advisor, Condoleezza Rice, that the White House screen the movie.\footnote{Quoted in Maureen Dowd, “Scaring Up Votes,” \textit{New York Times}, 23 November 2003; “History Lesson: How a ’60s Film About Algeria Resonates Today,” \textit{Time}, 25 October 2004.} If indeed that happened, the lesson that Clarke believed could be learned from this classic political film was ignored.

By the summer of 2003, an insurgency intended to subvert the American military in Iraq was already active. In response the Pentagon distributed e-mail fliers entitled: “How to Win a Battle Against Terrorism and Lose the War of Ideas.” Those involved in the war on terrorism were invited to a special screening of \textit{The Battle of Algiers}. The come-on was the following: “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 three dozen officers and counter-insurgency experts at the screening could see, in Ali La Pointe, the elusive, nothing-left-to-lose street-fighting man who was then being tracked down through the labyrinthine back alleys of Baghdad, at the cross-section of where the First World meets the Third World. There the only end in sight was one that the Pentagon was not looking forward to. The film constituted “a pitch-perfect case,” a reporter from the Washington Post noted after the screening, “of winning the battle, losing the war.” Pontecorvo himself claimed in a 2004 interview that he found the interest of the Pentagon in the film “a little strange.” One of Rice’s predecessors, Zbigniew Brzezinski, who served under President Jimmy Carter, offered this endorsement, however: “If you want to understand what’s happening right now in Iraq, I recommend The Battle of Algiers.” No movie blurb could have been more salient.

Writing at the very end of 2003, journalist Philip Gourevitch acknowledged the value of watching The Battle of Algiers, which he called “surely the most harrowing, and realistic, political epic ever filmed.” He saw parallels, and conceded the grim effectiveness of terrorism. The “tactical political instruments” of the Iraqi insurgents “have steadily and systematically succeeded in isolating American forces in Iraq. They have effectively driven the United Nations, the international staff of the Red Cross, and other aid groups from the country, and – more disastrously – they have fostered a mutual sense of alienation between the American forces and the Iraqi people they are supposed to be liberating.”

What might be done to stem the losses? Gourevitch quoted an American lieutenant colonel who sounded eerily like a para in Algiers in the mid-1950s: “With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them.” Whatever might be said for the military effectiveness of the American “surge,” the temptation to quote George Santayana on the value of historical recollection is almost irresistible.

But let the last word be less melancholy or portentous. In a recent American film, Starting Out in the Evening (2007), an on-again, off-again relationship is depicted between the protagonist’s daughter, and a wanna-be editor of a leftist magazine. A chasm in film taste hints at the fragility of their relationship. One evening she wants to see Jacques

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54 Ibid.
Demy’s musical, _Les Demoiselles de Rochefort_ (1967). He prefers instead to see _The Battle of Algiers_. So does posterity – and that includes the residents of Algiers, where this movie is reported to have remained quite popular.\(^5\)

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\(^5\) Reid, “Re-viewing _The Battle of Algiers._”