

The Battle of Algiers

Dennis Raymond

1968

a review of
"The Battle of Algiers"

How surprised we were three years ago by the success of "To Die in Madrid," Francisco Rosi's remarkable compilation of old news films from the Spanish Civil War. The distinction of that film was the poetic way in which it shaped and explained the ironic progress and outcome of the struggle. And now we have a new film, though in much the same vein, which is historically more immediate.

"Not one foot" of newsreel is used in "The Battle of Algiers." The film begins with that boast—quite properly, because one of the great achievements of its director, Gillo Pontecorvo, is his reconstruction of the revolution in the streets of Algiers between 1954 and 1962.

The combat photography is awesome, though the battles were staged. And the cast, mostly non-professionals, come across as real people. Bombings and killings are controlled with razor-sharp editing that stops just before you see what you think you see. It is the emotions of those milling French and Arab crowds that I kept wondering about. After Pontecorvo yelled "Cut!"—then what?

The illusion is perfect, yet this painstaking mimicry of reality would be nothing more than a trick, an exercise in neo-realist cinema, if it were not for the honesty that informs it. Instead of playing God, Pontecorvo has chosen the more difficult job of objective observer. His sympathy is plainly with the rebels, but his allegiance is to the truth.

The terror portrayed is the same for French and Arab alike. Paratroopers do not hesitate to use the most hideous means of torture in interrogating prisoners. A police commissioner blows up an entire Arab apartment dwelling in misplaced revenge for terrorist attacks. But the leaders of the rebel Front de Liberation Nationale also employ Draconian measures in purging its own people of public vice. Homemade bombs snuff out countless innocent French lives—youngsters dancing to a jukebox, a child licking an ice cream cone. As proof of his neutrality, Pontecorvo uses the same muted music when dead French are carried out of ruins that he uses when dead Arabs are hauled from other ruins.

The drama is powerful, often beautiful and endlessly fascinating in the analogies it offers to Vietnam and America's racial strife. It is also frightening in the responses it evokes. At the Studio One, where the film is now playing, many young blacks cheer or laugh knowingly during each bloody terrorist attack on the French, as if "The Battle of Algiers" were a textbook on urban guerrilla warfare to come. It is sad that a fine work of art like "The Battle of Algiers" should be viewed in this perspective when its obvious intent is the illumination of human dignity for all mankind. But the makers of matches cannot be blamed for forest fires.

fifth Estate

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Fifth Estate #66, November 14-27, 1968

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