

# THE HOWL



## Film Review: Battle of Algiers

By: Gursimran Hans

### 4/5 Stars

Gillo Pontecorvo's *Battle of Algiers* is a stunning example of a director at the height of his success. The Italian, who died in 2006, had his 1966 film screened at the Barbican over October.

The film tells the story of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) in their fight with the French Army in Algeria's war for independence, specifically focusing on the battle for the capital city, Algiers.

The film was for many years censored in France, due to both the government and the pressure from far-right groups. This was over concerns it was far too sympathetic to the Algerians. However, the film is far more objective than some would have you believe.

The French fighters do show compassion and respect to their Arab opponents at points, whilst the Algerians are not shown as angels either. There's a scene where a group of Arab street urchins beat a wino to death, showing European children are victims of the guerrilla insurgency too.

Produced just four years after Algeria finally declared independence, Pontecorvo only cast one professional actor in the entire film. Jean Martin, who played Colonel Mathieu, the leader of the French paratroopers, a character created as a composite of several different men.

Martin was mainly a stage actor so would have been unknown to most of the audience. However, he voiced opposition to the French intervention in Algiers and had been a paratrooper in Indochina as well as a WWII Resistance fighter, so his casting kept in with autobiographical feel.

FLN leader Saadi Yacef, who helped produce the film, also stars as Djafer, a character that strikes similarities to his real-life persona and represents the political thought behind the FLN. He plays alongside Mohamed Ben Kassen, who stars as Petit Omar, a child street urchin.

The rest of the cast were all chosen by Pontecorvo on their similar appearance to real-life characters and the emotional impact that their casting would create.

Indeed, whilst at times a relative lack of experience is self-evident, the cast performs exceptionally well in conveying the emotional and psychological impact of the way. Brahim Hadjadj, who would appear

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in four films after *Battle of Algiers*, perfectly represents the angry young man of Ali La Pointe, a leading FLN military commander politically radicalised in prison.

Also striking is the casting of an elderly Arab, who has to deal with abuse from European settlers following a spate of FLN bombings and is amongst the suspected FLN members who is tortured, he fully conveys the impact of the war on the civilians with Algiers.

The torture, the bombings, the shootings and the racism are all conveyed strongly by a cast with genuine experience of the issues at hand.

Pontecorvo's directing does the rest of the job. His musical scene composed with Ennio Morricone is perfect, helping to build the tension in a lot of the scenes. The music combines the use of mechanical war sounds during French manoeuvres and of undulation and drumming during FLN bombings and protests.

In addition, Pontecorvo, who also directed *Kapo* and *Burn!*, chose to film the movie in Rome and on location in Algiers. The Casbah, the historic quarter built around the city's historic citadel, is as much of a character in the film as Mathieu and Ali. With its narrow walkways, back alleys and stairs, the audience sees how the Casbah was the FLN's key weapon, providing shelter from the French and colonial government forces. You can't help but fall almost in love with the beautiful architecture, despite the film being produced in black and white.

Visually, the film plays out like a documentary, it is almost newsreel-like. The look of the film helps it present itself in the way Pontecorvo wishes, the audience is omniscient over the entire course of the film; they get an up-close perspective of the thoughts of the FLN and French paratroopers. This objective manner means the film passes no judgment but allows the audience to decide which side they hold sympathy for.

The Battle of Algiers may have been a tactical victory for the French Army, their first major one of the campaign, but they ultimately lost the war and would lose the hearts and minds of civilian Algerians. This film deals with the why and how and is excellent at it.

The only negatives are aspects of the characters themselves, we don't really see how any of the FLN members are recruited, only what they do once members. A lot of characters are introduced throughout the film, Hassiba Ben Bouali is involved in two of the most important sections of the film, but we learn little about the revolutionary fighter, Djamilia Bouhired and Zohra Driff, current vice-president of Algeria's Council of the Nation, also both suffer the same fate.

Mathieu, Djafer, Ali and Larbi Ben M'hidi, another revolutionary leader whose death remains controversial are the only characters explored in any real detail.

However, if you want to see what a director can do with a limited cast, as well as learn more about the Algerian people and their war for independence, then the *Battle of Algiers* is a true masterpiece and a fantastic starting point.

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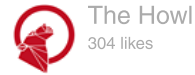
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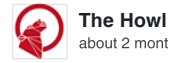


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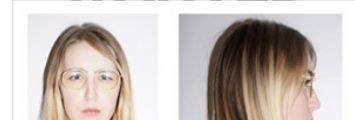
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