
Historical Context of the Battle of Algiers and the Story Behind the Screen

Pontecorvos Battle of Algiers

Gillo Pontecorvos Battle of Algiers, though filmed in the late 1950s, remains one of the most powerful and emotionally stimulating films of the modern age. The realism captured by the director of photography, Marcello Gatti, laid the blueprint for directors and photographers to mold and shape equally great works in years to come. Gattis revolutionary use of the hand-held camera was instrumental in creating the simulated eyewitness account. So much so, that the statement not one foot of newsreel footage was used in its manufacture was needed so audiences were not confused or misled.

The films most intriguing scene is undoubtedly the bombing of the downtown coffeehouse found near the casbah. Approaching the eve of our own countrys tragedy, emotion and confusion continue to run high, and Pontecorvo and Gattis ability to capture such a catastrophic event in such an apocalyptic manner, cant help but fuel the emotional fire of modern audiences. As one New York firefighter said as Americas famous towers burned, Its almost a beautiful thing. One cant help but feel angered or confused by this statement, but it hold true for all modern tragedies. The power of Pontecorvos coffeehouse scene is finding beauty in the hideous, capturing a heinous crime against humanity so realistically that in all of its horrific forms it still remains awe-inspiring. It also strikes a nerve on a personal level, as the world arms itself for all-too-familiar religious warfare. The sequence in which the female Algerians shed their religious clothing and arm themselves with explosives is yet another example of the magnificence of modern tragedy. When you live a life of war, its the enemy that you dont see coming that always delivers the fatal blow. This story can be seen in modern times just as it was reenacted in The Battle of Algiers. All it takes is one nightly look at CNN or MSNBC to find out about an individual boarding a bus, only to have it explode at the next stop, or a woman, just as those in the film, exploding in a crowded marketplace. In my opinion, based not on the eve of the anniversary of one of the most documented disasters in history, The Battle of Algiers remains one of the most emotionally powerful films I have ever scene. As stated earlier, finding the beauty in an event so shocking it is only seen by a chosen few once in a lifetime is an incredible cinematic, as well as, human feat. The bottom line is that Pontecorvo exposes us to the radiance of human tragedy, no matter how hard we try to look away.

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