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Politics and Pontecorvo

David Wilson S&S SUM 71

'The natives' challenge to the colonial world is not a rational confrontation of points of view. It is not a treatise on the universal, but the untidy affirmation of an original idea propounded as an absolute.'—FRANTZ FANON, *The Wretched of the Earth.*

Algiers, 1957. The FLN has called an eight-day general strike in the Casbah to coincide with the United Nations debate on the Algerian question. The French paratroopers called in to crush the Algerian uprising use the opportunity of a paralysed Casbah to root out suspects and systematically break up the Front's hitherto impregnable pyramidal structure. The strike, and with it the morale of the masses, has been effectively broken when a French policeman harangues the Arab crowd through a Tannoy on the benefits of the French administration. Suddenly, unseen, an Arab boy steals the microphone and rallies the crowd: 'Courage! Algeria will be free!' Consternation among police and paras; the veiled women of the Casbah respond with an eerie high-pitched wail of assent.

Queimada, a Caribbean island, near the beginning of the last century. With British economic interests threatened by a native rebellion, the army is called in to flush out the rebels. A 'search and destroy' strategy, ruthlessly applied, eliminates all but a hard core of the insurgents. Searching the native villages for arms, a group of soldiers confront some women and a little boy. As the women are interrogated, the camera fastens on the boy's face.

Scenes from two films made by Gillo Pontecorvo, previously known only for the highflown kitsch of *Kapo*, in which Susan Strasberg was the Jewish girl who sold her soul in a concentration camp. Two scenes taken out of context, but isolated because they illustrate what I think is a central weakness in Pontecorvo's variety of political cinema. Unfair perhaps, but those close-ups of a little boy's face could be taken as the objective correlative of Pontecorvo's screen revolution: Third World dissent in the emotive terms of an Oxfam poster. *Battle of Algiers*, made in 1965, effectively banned in France, and only recently given a public airing in this country thanks to the enterprise of the Other Cinema, has garnered almost universal critical acclaim ('one of the greatest films ever made'; 'probably the finest political film ever made'). *Queimada!* (United Artists), made three years ago, looks like getting a somewhat less ecstatic, though still fairly enthusiastic, reception. Both films are about revolution in a colonial setting; both trace the history of a revolution to its ultimate triumph (Algeria) or its suppression (Queimada); and both raise the old question of how (whether?) a political film can be evaluated over and above its politics.

This is not perhaps, except in a literal sense, a valid distinction. But let's assume that it can be made. As a film, *Battle of Algiers* is indeed a remarkable piece of work. Pontecorvo has said that the main challenge he faced was 'that of coming as close as possible to the truth.' A condensed version of the truth maybe, but what we see is an astonishingly convincing reconstruction of the Algerian revolt which adroitly encompasses a wealth of close-up detail within its wide-angle view of a complex historical event. Pontecorvo's method is simulated documentary—dynamic cutting, dramatic juxtaposition, hand-held, mobile camera, over-exposure and shooting against the light to give the effect of on-the-spot reportage, a commentary briskly interpolating chronology, facts and figures, brief biographies. The images are marshalled with masterly economy and for maximum impact, ominous silences dramatically counterpointed by (often literally) explosive action, as when the paratroopers swoop down on the strike-becalmed Casbah.

The film has all the drive and urgency of *Z* without that film's glossy overlay; and a nerve-tingling percussive score (by Pontecorvo and Ennio Morricone) which drums up audience anticipation, invariably rewarded. There isn't a foot of newsreel in the film, but Pontecorvo's staging of headline events (filmed entirely in Algiers) has a newsreel authenticity. The murder of French policemen provokes a retaliatory spiral of violence which envelops the whole city; private houses and public buildings are blown up; tanks roll in the streets in warning answer to a spontaneous demonstration. The atmosphere is charged, but Pontecorvo can still find room for the human touch, like the first Arab wedding under the auspices of the FLN—or that little boy's face in close-up again as he bravely rejects the chance of life in a reformatory instead of death at the hands of French paratroopers about to dynamite the house in which he and Ali la Pointe, illiterate hero of the revolution, are trapped.

Pontecorvo is on the side of the angels (the film ends with a triumphant announcement of Algerian independence, which comes like a *deus ex machina* after the downbeat drama of that last explosion), but it is his sympathy for the devil that has won him the critical plaudits. *Battle of Algiers* is certainly propagandist, the argument goes, but as political cinema it's not crude like *Z* or caricatural like *Strike*, and what shines through is the impeccable honesty of Pontecorvo's objective stance. How Pontecorvo achieves this much praised objectivity can perhaps best be illustrated by his characterisation of Colonel Mathieu, the film's version of the paratroop leader General Massu. Mathieu enters Algiers like some faceless latter-day Caesar come to deliver the colonists from the troublesome natives; but dark glasses off, and he's human like the rest of us—parrying a journalist's untimely reference to Dien Bien Phu with an unanswerable gibe about the Sartres of the world always being on the wrong side, astonishing a press conference with a eulogy for the FLN leader who has just hanged himself in his cell, justifying his methods (torture) with an ends and means logic that Lenin might have approved. 'We are not sadists,' he tells a sensation-seeking press. 'Some of us survived Buchenwald. If you want Algeria to remain French you must accept the consequences'—and Pontecorvo illustrates with a montage of torture, intercut with a big close-up of an Algerian woman's tear-stained face.

The logic of this ostensibly commendable aspiration to play fair by both sides requires Pontecorvo to draw up a shaky balance sheet of emotive pros and cons. So the blowing up of a house in the Casbah is answered with FLN explosives in the French quarter, and *both* atrocities are accompanied on the soundtrack by the same bars of melancholy Bach; a pathetic old Arab street-cleaner is terrified out of his wits by hysterical cries of 'Assassin!', but it is a French policeman who rescues an Algerian boy set upon after an explosion at the racetrack. One might admit as a legitimate melodramatic device the way he has filmed the long pivotal sequence in which three Algerian women plant bombs in crowded public places: that old Hitchcockian clock ticking away, the anxious subjective pan around the faces of innocents about to be massacred, the lingering close-up of a child licking an ice-cream. One might even gloss over the historical simplifications, like the fantasy—necessary for the melodramatic peripeteia of the film's coda—that the paras wiped out the FLN in Algiers. But just what is Pontecorvo saying with all this objective display, other than that violence begets violence, that revolution also involves the innocent bystander, that oppression also has a human face? Is it possible to take an 'objective' view of history?

Of course not, and *Battle of Algiers* is in this sense a confidence trick. If, as a committed film-maker, Pontecorvo is for the Algerian revolution (as he is), and if his intention was to deliver that message to as wide an audience as he could reach (as presumably it was), then why equivocate? All that dramatic irony and moral ambival-

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ence is only a romantic humanist's sugaring of the pill for a liberal audience unwilling to stomach the hard facts of revolution. 'Colonialism,' wrote Fanon, 'is violence in its natural state, and it will only yield when confronted with greater violence.' *Battle of Algiers* accepts this lesson of history, but fogs the issue by dangling a carrot to the liberal conscience. A neat and comfortably retrospective piece of historical theatre; but the truth is a lot less tidy.

This is the essential paradox of political cinema. The more 'objective' the stance taken by a political film and the more sophisticated its method (*L'Aveu* as against *Z*, for instance), the less its effectiveness in propaganda terms and the greater the risk of ambiguous overtones. Significantly, militant blacks in America have responded to *Battle of Algiers* less as a message for the Third World than as a training manual for urban guerrilla tactics. It could be argued that *Battle of Algiers*, by fixing its focus on the collective dissent of a people (it wasn't, but no matter) and generally avoiding the ramifications of personality, is no more than a modern version of Eisenstein's agit-guignol; to the contemporary eye, saturated with television newsreels of urban protest, those tanks on the street are beginning to seem almost as formalist an image as the bayonets on the Odessa steps. Paradoxically, *Queimada!*, which subordinates collective revolutionary gestures to a conflict of personalities, emerges as both a more vigorous and a less ambivalent demonstration of Pontecorvo's political dialectic.

The film's fictional framework acts as a distancing device. Briefly, the story centres on the Machiavellian intrigues of Sir William Walker, an *agent provocateur* sent by the British Admiralty to an island in the Antilles to break the Portuguese monopoly on Caribbean sugar. He achieves this by instigating a revolt of the African-descended slaves against their Portuguese masters, only to persuade the insurrectionist leader José Dolores, whom he has personally instructed in the methods of revolution, to stand down in favour of a puppet colonial government. Ten years later he returns to the island, now as agent for a British sugar company, to suppress a revolt led by the same José Dolores, who has learned enough from his political master to prefer martyrdom to the impotent freedom which Sir William Walker offers him.

No question that as a film *Queimada!* is not in the same class as *Battle of Algiers*: slow off the mark, unevenly paced, in places (the brief London scenes, for instance) uncomfortably reminiscent of one of those pseudonymous Cinecittà costume quickies. It does have some of the same epic sweep and dramatic urgency of the earlier film—in isolated moments, like the startling cut from a lesson in rifle-loading to a grim array of colonial corpses; and in whole sequences, like the firing of the plantations as the British redcoats flush out and methodically eliminate the last of the rebels. But there are also similarities of structure (the execution of a rebel, portentously situated in both films near the beginning; overneat punctuation marks, in *Queimada!* the facile dramatic irony of Walker's murder by the porter who carries his bags, a service performed ten years previously by José Dolores) which only illuminate Pontecorvo's reliance on melodramatic device.

'Battle of Algiers'; Evaristo Marquez, Marlon Brando in 'Queimada!'

It is another link between the films—the way in which the leading players are cast as mere puppets on the larger stage of history—which illustrates why *Queimada!* is better political cinema than *Battle of Algiers*. The focus is fixed throughout on Sir William Walker, not as a character—since he is hardly defined as one—but as the agent of Pontecorvo's demonstration of the process of history. Though Pontecorvo occasionally falls back on emotive emphasis (the widow of the executed rebel wheeling his decapitated body through her village, incantatory music when the rebels are on the march), he has no need here to strike an 'objective' balance since he is not dealing in points of view. Walker is the immediate instigator of the action, but in a curious way he is detached from the consequences of his own machinations; in effect, his function is didactic, an illustrative cipher for a determinist theory of history.

Interestingly, Pontecorvo has cast Marlon Brando in this role (which in itself amounts to a theatrical distancing device), and he plays it with the kind of clipped aloofness which indicates an awareness of the character's place in the film's scheme. 'I'm not quite sure what I'm doing here,' Walker says at one point. And when he asks his revolutionary protégé whether he knows the latest market quotation for raw sugar, it is not his voice speaking so much as the voice of history, here illustrating the inevitability of the economics of capitalism—the historical consequences of which is the real villain of the piece, rather than perfidious Albion or Walker himself. As Walker says, 'Ten years may be enough to illuminate the contradictions of a whole century.' The message is clear enough without his not so cryptic remark about Indochina being his next port of call. ■

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