

Disguising Subjective Narrative in *The Battle of Algiers*

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In an interview with Joan Mellen, Gillo Pontecorvo mentions that the painter is freed from the “tyranny of the lens” because the image passes only through his hand and his brush, whereas for the photographer it must pass through the camera, which records images as it sees them (Mellen & Pontecorvo 8). While there is some truth to what Pontecorvo says, one would be mistaken to believe that photographers simply create objective records of the world with the camera. Framing, processing, film stock, and other elements of photography add subjectivity to the photographer’s work. Using all of these formal qualities of film, Gillo Pontecorvo creates an image of truth that draws on viewers’ assumptions about what constitutes “objective truth” in media in his film, *The Battle of Algiers*, by utilizing a unique method of shooting and processing film stock that mimics documentary and newsreel footage. The film looks remarkably realistic in its representation of the Algerians’ battle for independence because it is shot in a way that reminds the spectator of the kinds of images they see in the news. Because these images are seen as “fact,” *The Battle of Algiers* recalls expectations and feelings usually associated with news footage. Three scenes in particular imitate this style: the epilogue that describes the events following the death of Ali La Pointe, the arrival of the French paratroopers, and the press conferences with both Ben M’hidi and Colonel Mathieu. By negotiating the space between subjective storytelling and objective filmmaking, Pontecorvo masks the fact that his film is Marxist propaganda. He makes the film appear objective rather than subjective, encouraging the viewer to absorb his message as fact rather than opinion. This also grounds the narrative in “reality” as it is constructed by the news and therefore gives the events more weight than a purely fictional work would.

Pontecorvo relies on the Myth of Photographic Truth to cover up the political message embedded within the film. Photography is often seen as an “unmediated copy of the real world,

a trace of reality skimmed off the very surface of life” (Sturken & Cartwright, 17). Because photographs are made by recording images that actually occur in the real world, photographs are seen as proof that certain events actually took place or that certain objects actually existed. This is the Myth of Photographic Truth: the basic assumption that what the spectator sees in a given image must be true because it was taken with a camera. Pontecorvo heightens this effect in a variety of ways, including the use of non-professional actors, and non-professional editing techniques, mise-en-scene, framing, and the grainy texture achieved by using telephoto lenses and adding vinegar to the developing process. Prior to the shooting of *The Battle of Algiers*, he performed many tests to create a particular “granular effect and to gain a feeling of truth” (Mellen & Pontecorvo, 7). The goal was “to find something which looks like reality as people know it through mass media, without being so sloppy and ugly” (7). Another way that Pontecorvo achieves this “feeling of truth” is to use telephoto lenses and shoot very far from the action the way photojournalists sometimes do. The grainy effect combined with using specific lenses mimics the way that documentary is shot, even though the subject matter is narrative cinema. By combining these two fields, Pontecorvo is able to add this “feeling of truth” to his film.

More than the other scenes, the epilogue describing the events following the death of Ali La Pointe looks like authentic newsreel footage. While all three use the same filmic conventions, this scene does not follow a narrow, character-centric timeline of events. The narrator dictates events that happen, and an amalgam of footage is shown to demonstrate what the narrator says. Rather than focusing on specific characters, this scene demonstrates the rippling effect that the conflict shown in the film produces. As a post-script to the narrative that

precedes this, the message is that cutting off the head of the beast will not stop the revolution in Algeria and by extension other revolutions around the world.

Pontecorvo's Marxist views are well known, and the film functions as part of a larger corpus of works that support his political affiliation: "Indeed, Pontecorvo was primarily characterized, implicitly at least, as a former communist journalist turned filmmaker—i.e., someone who used film as a vehicle to get ideas across" (Caillé, 375). When considering him in this context, it is impossible to believe that he made this film without any political convictions. That French critics in 1966 could not see through the cinematographic style to identify the film's message is a testament to the subtlety it adds to the film.

Pontecorvo's works are often compared to those of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein, but he is usually agreed to be less successful than either at making political film. While *The Battle of Algiers* is not as forceful with its message as either *Strike* or *Battleship Potemkin*, I would argue that this is not a weakness on the part of the director. Rather, his ability to be subtle in the representation of the struggles of minorities and working class peoples helps influence contemporary viewers more than either of the other two films. Pontecorvo's strength is in his ability to convince the viewer that he is coming to certain conclusions on his own without being influenced by subjective opinion.

The scene depicting the arrival of the paratroopers highlights the militaristic nature of France's response to the problem of civil unrest. The camera is positioned in the crowd, facing the street where rows upon rows of French paratroopers march into the city. These images are similar to newsreels from World War II of Nazis marching through the streets of Europe, matched by insert shots of cheering French colonials. Pontecorvo is calling our attention to the fact that France's response to the problem is disproportionate to the scope of the problem.

Bringing in the military to deal with a civilian threat is incorrect in his interpretation of the situation. Characterizing the French as overly militaristic in this sense, Pontecorvo shows that the government is willing to rule over its people with Martial Law and demonizes it in the process. One of the main objections people had with France's response during this time according to the film is that it was ruling Algeria in a fascist way. Colonel Mathieu denies these accusations, reminding the press that he was part of the French Resistance during World War II. However, Pontecorvo visually aligns the French military with Nazis upon their entrance into the city. In this case, the use of documentary style emphasizes his point while at the same time making the image appear true to life. Doing so makes Pontecorvo's message appear more of a natural assumption, more matter-of-fact than a constructed image of the film.

The press conferences function as a way for Pontecorvo to expose the outspoken motives of each side of the conflict. The leaders of each side field questions from the film's press and vocalize their opinions. Doing this allows Pontecorvo to give both sides a voice. It builds sympathy for each and calls attention to the absurdity of violence. Ben M'hidi and Colonel Mathieu are asked sensitive questions about their methods of operation, and each responds in kind. At one point during Ben M'hidi's interview the press asks him about the act of using women's baskets to plant bombs that kill innocent people. He responds by saying, "Isn't it even more cowardly to attack defenseless villages with napalm bombs that kill many thousands of times more?...Give us your bombs, sir, and you can have our baskets" (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1:28). Pontecorvo constructs an image of the FLN that is violent, but this violence is justified by the fact that it is not as violent as the French. Similar to this, Mathieu is asked about the use of torture to get information out of his prisoners. He responds by saying, "We are soldiers. Our duty is to win...Should France stay in Algeria? If your answer is still yes, then you must accept

all the consequences” (*The Battle of Algiers*, 1:34). Military force and torture are not accepted methods of dealing with civil unrest, but as Mathieu says, the duty of soldiers against a faceless enemy is to do what they must to succeed while minimizing threats to all civilians. But while the viewer can sympathize with the French in the film, and in particular Colonel Mathieu, ultimately Pontecorvo takes the side of the FLN, as is apparent by the juxtaposition of Mathieu’s press conference with the images of torture that follow it. The film seems to objectively report the motives of both sides, but then underhandedly influences viewers through its use of perceptual set and juxtaposition. When Ben M’hidi speaks of bombing public spaces full of innocents, the viewer does not see the negative effects of these demonstrations. When members of the FLN murder the French military or French constables, no clips are shown of the families that are left behind. However, when the paratroopers raid the Casbah, there are shots of children, crying and abandoned, as their parents are arrested. This uneven representation of the conflict gets muted by scenes like the dual press conferences and the “objective reporting” that go on in the film.

Ultimately both factions help to escalate the violence in the conflict, and neither is completely justified. Pontecorvo shows the spectator that while revolution is necessary, the absurd escalation of violence is a tragedy for both sides. His narrative is heavily informed by his Marxist political views and by the views of Saadi Yacef, who was involved in the conflict as a member of the FLN. Pontecorvo even says that it was necessary to tone down the treatment of the FLN in Yacef’s original proposal for the film: “Pontecorvo rejected [the treatment] in its original form, which he later claimed was a mere celebration of the FLN, but accepted the subject and wrote with Solinas a new treatment which drew in part on Yacef’s account of the events” (Forgacs, 352). The film is in some sense an indictment of France’s handling of the situation, and in another sense a lament of the sacrifices that must be made during a revolution.

To persuade viewers, Pontecorvo presents the narrative in a way that makes it seem objective. He makes the events in the film appear to unfold as they would naturally in the world, almost like Cinéma Verité. Those who see the film get reminded of documentary and newsreel footage, and because these two types of footage carry with them certain ideas and feelings, those are inevitably transferred onto Pontecorvo's film. People see the events that unfold as truth, as events that are happening in real life. *Practices of Looking* contains a convincing argument for how this influences the spectator: "The power of the image derives not only from its status as photographic evidence but from its powerful evocation of the emotions of life's struggles" (Sturken & Cartwright, 19). Through the natural progression of the narrative, viewers are encouraged to sympathize with the FLN, and because they see the events as unfolding naturally as they would in a documentary, they see the movie as being objective or neutral in its position on the situation. When the movie was released in 1960 critics criticized the film for not taking a stance: "The film was condemned for its refusal to provide the spectator with a clear message, for the undecidability of its meaning" (Caillé, 375). This conflicts with Joan Mellen's understanding of the film as expressed during her interview with the director: "It is clear that you have made the film on the side of Algerian independence" (Mellen & Pontecorvo, 3). Any misinterpretation about the meaning of the film comes not as much from his even treatment of both sides of the conflict, but from his style of cinematography. When viewers come to the conclusion that the FLN is right, they do not stop to think that it is a result of the way that Pontecorvo presents the situation because the subjectivity of the filmmaker is muted by the assumed objectivity of the image.

Film reality is constructed, never simply exposed; film has to be created by someone. Pontecorvo masks his subjective narrative in a veil of truth that he constructs by marrying it with

the documentary style. Viewers are inclined to think that they can come to their own conclusions about a situation because they have been shown an “objective” image, even though the director is pointing them to that conclusion through the use of narrative and other formal devices. The three scenes mentioned above: the epilogue following Ali La Pointe’s death, the arrival of the French paratroopers, and the dual press conferences with Ben M’hidi and Colonel Mathieu all present the opinions of the director while showing them with this objective style. In this way, Pontecorvo negotiates the space between subjective narrative and opinion and objective documentary filmmaking to make a contemporary political film that follows in the footsteps of earlier filmmakers such as Vertov and Eisenstein.

References

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