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# The Making of *The Battle of Algiers*

by Irene Bignardi

"It's 1960," Gillo tells us. "A young, upper-middle-class Frenchman, good looking, intelligent, refined, just as at ease on the ski slopes in Chamonix as in the night clubs in Saint-Tropez, a reporter for *Paris Match*, a photographer in his spare time and a former parachutist in Indochina, is getting ready to go to Algeria to do a story for his magazine. But he doesn't want his only piece to be about the countless cadavers that in those extremely tough times were so often strewn all over the streets. He wants to capture the situation at its most intense, to see the conflict as it is occurring. 'If there's an attack, I want to photograph the victim collapsing and his executioner with his pistol still in his fist.' With this in mind, the young Frenchman meets a member of the Secret Army Organization (*Organisation de l'Armée Secrète*) and tries to convince him to take him along on the military engagement the organization is getting ready to launch. But for all his being a mad right-wing extremist, the man has his own perverse sense of morality and he refuses. And the journalist-playboy in search of a scoop throws himself into scheming around the seediest right-wing haunts of Algiers just to find somebody else who might take him along during an engagement and allow him to scoop death, all captured during the work process..."

World geography at the beginning of the Sixties was in a state of unrest and confusion due to the anticolonial struggle—in Cuba and Algeria, in Congo and Vietnam. On July 1, 1962, after eight years of both declared and guerrilla warfare, Algeria would compel France to "surrender" and proclaim its independence. This was the victory of a people against a colonial power, the triumph of a nation born from victorious revolution against European domination. Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas, fascinated by the events and their ideological implications,

and convinced that the anticolonial struggle was an urgent and important theme, almost a stimulus and model for the political struggle against "an invincible capitalism at home," as Solinas was to say in an historical interview, toss aside the script based on a story by Franco for a film that was supposed to be called *Parà* and which was taken from the biography of the protagonist, who, as we've told you with help from Gillo's memories, is an ex-parachutist. The main character was supposed to be Paul Newman. The producer once again was to be Franco Cristaldi who was always very eager to work with the Pontecorvo-Solinas team. And the film, pursuing this narrative line, supposedly related the struggle for independence of the Algerian people.

**This article is an abridged version of a chapter from *Memorie Estorte a uno Smemorato (Memories Extorted from an Amnesiac)*, a biography of Italian director Gillo Pontecorvo by Irene Bignardi, published in Milan in 1999 by Feltrinelli, and translated for *Cineaste* by Joanna Dezio. Bignardi, film critic for *la Repubblica*, recounts how Pontecorvo, after many hurdles, threw himself into an exciting and complicated adventure that ended up becoming one of the great epic films of all time; how, to craft what would become *The Battle of Algiers*, he invested money he didn't have, worked with a skeleton crew, and led an exhausting life in the heady atmosphere of a liberated Algeria; and how he returned to Italy after four months of laborious efforts and was awarded, against all of his expectations, with the Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival in 1966.**

Franco and Gillo made a daring trip to an Algeria still in the throes of war in a spirit of total self-assurance and with bogus journalist identity cards. The two friends encountered an exquisitely beautiful, tormented, and still French Algiers. They checked into the Hotel Aletti, a big fin-de-siècle building, which in those days was home base for all the journalists who were following the Algerian situation.

These were the last months of the conflict, those pitting the National Liberation Front against the French Army, and the two sides were in the process of refining the

agreements which were supposed to lead to an early cease fire in March 1962 and the treaty of Evian on May 18 of the same year. Due to this relative tranquillity, the contacts that Gillo and Franco had with the NLF allowed them, with the necessary precautions, to approach people and even to explore the zones where the guerrilla war was raging. Documenting this initial adventurous and arduous trip is an historical photograph showing Gillo Pontecorvo on a hill, standing on the spur of a rock with two NLF partisans while below, at only a few hundred meters distance over the plain, a French military camp is visible with soldiers who, in a clearing surrounded by armored cars, are playing volleyball in front of their tents, unaware of the fact that they could have

been mown down by the machine guns of the two Algerians accompanying the Italian filmmakers.

The film, however, never got made—or at least *Parà* never got made. France was going through its harshest period of terrorism by the Secret Army Organization, which was doing everything it could by terrorist means to prevent or at least slow down the process of Algerian liberation. Franco Cristaldi, says Gillo today, was not particularly eager to become the privileged target of the madmen who were placing bombs anywhere it seemed propitious in their attempt to

preserve a domination that by then had already been relegated to history. After a while, Cristaldi politely came up with a series of excuses and hardships. But the real reason, unequivocally, was the terrorism. Everything was postponed until a more convenient time.

Then, one fine day in 1964, two years after the referendum that had decreed Algerian independence and the Evian accords that had ratified it, Salah Baazi arrived in Italy from Algeria. Baazi came on behalf of Yacef Saadi who had been military chief of the National Liberation Front in the



Gillo Pontecorvo prepares a crowd scene for *The Battle of Algiers* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

autonomous zone of Algiers and had come to Italy—considered a friendly country by reason, among others, of the support given to Algeria by Enrico Mattei, then head of the Italian oil industry—in search of a director willing to shoot a film on the Algerian struggle for independence.

He had three names in mind, all, obviously, ‘left wing’ directors: Rosi, Visconti, and Pontecorvo. But Rosi was in the midst of filming *The Moment of Truth* and would be tied up for some time. With Visconti he never managed to come to an agreement. Gillo tried proposing their own script of *Parà* to Baazi because, he recalls, the script written by the Algerian ex-combatants was “quite ugly from a cinematic point of view, or better, to tell the truth, it was awful and with a sickeningly propagandistic intention.” It seemed to Baazi instead that *Parà* treated colonialism from a European perspective and that finally it did not tell the story of the Algerian revolution with sufficient depth. Gillo turned him down without the slightest hesitation, but they left each other with an understanding: we’re in no rush, we’ll give each other carte blanche, we’ll rewrite everything, we’ll take whatever time we need, even if it’s six months or a year, but we’ll come up with another subject on the same theme and another script. Gillo and Franco were willing to take the risk of working for nothing—in case the script was unpopular with the Algerians. In compensa-

tion the NLF was supposed to help Pontecorvo and Solinas make contact with historical characters and was to allow them to make a new exploratory trip to Algeria.

It was during such a trip that Gillo and Franco recorded the accounts of many witnesses and leading figures of the war. Subsequently they went to Paris; interviewed many paratroopers, among them a few highly placed officials; collected tons of material; studied; worked. Months went by. But the two friends emerged from this complicated gestation period with an absolutely original approach. The heroic, hagiographic story that the Algerians had proposed was turned upside down and unexpectedly became the story of a defeat. The most fascinating, important, and decisive moment of the Algerian war, the very one that had moved and excited the imaginations of Gillo and Franco, was the birth, rise, and downfall of the NLF organization in Algiers between 1954 and 1957—a moment that had entered history and legend with the name “Battle of Algiers.” Because that downfall, and the victory which supplanted it when all was said and done, was for Solinas and Pontecorvo the paradoxical evidence of an inevitable process of liberation throughout the entire world. Indeed, after two years of silence, the flow of the underground river that was the Algerian revolution had once again picked up; the battle was resumed and continued until success was final. Gillo was particularly

fascinated by the opportunity to convey the events of the general strike led by the NLF in 1957 because it allowed him to re-create cinematically something that was part of his own precise experience during the Resistance and that continued to move him profoundly: namely, the choral nature of the struggle, the sentiments and emotions felt in unison by the masses, the enthusiasm of a collective battle. In his long interview with Piernico Solinas (no relation to Franco), which was published along with the script, Gillo relates that it was like filming the birth of a nation. And thus for a moment the film risked being called “You will give birth in pain,” in which the “You” would be the newborn Algerian nation giving birth to its own liberty. In the end it was given the same name by which the historical episode it represented was known in Europe: *The Battle of Algiers*.

But the film had trouble getting off the ground, and not only due to the length of time required to study and write the script. The money the Algerians had made available from Saadi’s Casbah Film—half private and half public funds—covered less than fifty percent of the estimated cost. And the project as it had evolved didn’t interest Italian producers, less because of political reasons, as it might be easy to imagine, as because “nobody is interested in Arabs,” and “nobody is interested in blacks” (Gillo offers the explanation that Arabs are not





**Gillo Pontecorvo, accompanied by an NLF partisan, views a French military camp on a research trip to Algeria during the guerrilla war in early 1962** (photo courtesy of Gillo Pontecorvo).

blacks...), because the film was insufficiently “fictional,” and because Gillo obstinately refused to use professional actors—an ensemble of arguments that really meant “box-office receipts: zero.”

He turned to Angelo Rizzoli whose counterproposal was for Gillo to choose from among the scripts on his desk or among the novels he had the rights to, whichever interested him the most. Rizzoli would do any film whatever with him, with the exception of *The Battle of Algiers*, for pity's sake. For *The Battle*, “and only because it's you,” he offered him as a minimum guarantee a little extra contribution of forty-five million lire at the time. Gillo opted to go it alone. He had saved a little of the money earned from *Kapò* and decided to risk it. He signed quite a few promissory notes (today he is appalled and amazed that the whole thing must have added up to something like two or three billion lire). Outside of the customary circuit of the same old producers, he found an audacious soul mate in the person of Antonio Musu, an enthusiastic character who up till then had been a director of production. Together, taking the risk all on their own, they set out to cover fifty-five percent of the cost of the film.

What Gillo and Franco wanted to convey wasn't simply a moment in the Algerian struggle for liberation. Nor did they wish to do a cinematic manual of the techniques of urban guerrilla warfare. Nonetheless, *The Battle of Algiers* was viewed this way by some, even to the point of being studied by the Black Panthers for educational orientation. Gillo, to be controversial, had once defined Algiers as “a film of fiction”—something which the film, written and shot through what Gillo would define as “the dictatorship of truth,” certainly was not, at least not in the traditional sense. This was, precisely, a controversial label, his reaction “to those few cretins” who reductively labeled

the film a documentary. Pontecorvo and Solinas, who had read the writings of Frantz Fanon with passion, were determined to relate, through this crucial episode, a war of independence that at the time seemed to embody for so many Third World nations a model for the course of liberation from colonialism.

But writing the film, as we have already mentioned, was long and tiring. Yacef Saadi, who had talked about his experience as a leader in the war of liberation in his book *Souvenir de la Bataille d'Alger* (*Memory of the Battle of Algiers*), and had set aside his machine gun in favor of his pen, enthusiastically accepted Gillo's proposal that he interpret the role of the commander of the autonomous zone of Algiers, in other words that he play himself; an identification that could prove risky, at least from the viewpoint of his relationship with the director. In fact, Gillo hesitated a great deal before making this choice, and in the end he made up his mind only because Yacef Saadi actually had a very interesting face and was “a kind of young Paul Muni,” and had managed to get through his screen tests quite well.

He concluded drafting the screenplay in the summer of 1965. Production of the film—which would last four months and three days—began immediately afterwards on those spots where the events had actually unfolded. Boumedienne's administration, in power since one month after the coup d'état that had marginalized Ben Bella, not only granted all the permits necessary to shoot in Algiers, but also made his soldiers available to them—although not completely gratis—for the crowd scenes. The city was offered to Gillo and his crew as though it were an immense set populated with interesting faces, some of whom came to be selected as extras and for small roles.

Gillo had patiently selected the one hun-

dred thirty eight faces which appear in the film. And for once he managed to get a cast that came entirely from the street. Or almost. Yacef Saadi, as we have said, had the role of Djafar, alias Kader in the film, the commander of the NLF, in other words he played himself; and as was expected, playing himself created some problems for him. It would happen to anyone. The main reason was that Yacef, who was truly a myth for the Algerians, was as though hemmed in by the understandable worry that he might in some way damage his own image. All the more since Gillo demanded of him, as he did of the others, a style of reciting with neither excess nor embellishments, understatement if necessary. Thus at times Yacef had the feeling that they were diminishing the glory, the polish, and the authority of the figure he had cut as a revolutionary leader. Yet on the other hand, he had no doubts about the final results.

Of the three women who, in one of the central episodes of the story, come out of the Casbah carrying the bombs for so many terrorist acts in ‘white’ Algiers, one had been noticed by Pontecorvo in a restaurant. But it took some delicate diplomatic work to speak to her, because in spite of the liberation and the revolution, Algerian women continued to live in a very rigid society and one couldn't approach them freely. Gillo had found the other two “on the streets,” not just in a manner of speaking because one was actually a prostitute; she was very young with a sweet, tender, clean face and ended up playing the role of the child bride of one of the NLF fighters. As for little Omar, the ten-year-old guerrilla who grabs the microphone during a scene of upheaval and emotion in order to harangue the crowd after the strike, he was Yacef Saadi's grandson. French journalists and tourists were played by tourists of various nationalities—in the case of the paratroopers in particular, a few Anglo-Saxon tourists roaming about the city had been roped in because of their height and physical appearance. Brahim Haggiag, who played the role of Ali La Pointe—the semidelinquent who becomes the hero and the victim of the struggle for liberation, one of the two souls of the battle of Algiers—had a splendid dramatic face, but he was a poor illiterate farmer and he didn't have the vaguest idea of what movies were (he would be coached step by step through his lines, just as Evaristo Marquez would be later on during the production of *Burn!*, through a series of agreed-to signals which reduced to a minimum the necessity of memorizing the part). The wretched creature in the first sequence who, while being tortured, reveals Ali's hiding place to the French, was also spotted and selected by Gillo in a market place. But on the first day of shooting, the police caught him in the act of an attempted robbery and he was arrested. In order to get him back, Gillo, who was particularly keen on having that face, had to go speak to the Vice Minister of the Interior who “lent” him

the pilferer for the duration of the shooting—subject to the agreement that at the end of the film this neo-actor would be returned to prison to serve out his sentence.

The only professional was Jean Martin whom Gillo discovered in a tiny theater in Paris. He was tall, imposing, and very diligent. Even more important, in spite of the fact that he had been practicing his profession for a number of years, his face was not very recognizable outside of theater circles. The choice of Martin ended up being an unintentionally ironic one: the actor had been one of the 121 signatories of a manifesto opposing the war in Algeria and because he had taken this position, he encountered no mean difficulty in the cinema and theater milieu.

Everything seemed perfect to Gillo. But for an instant, when it was time to shoot the scene of the paratroopers entering Algiers in a geometrical descent, an impressive formation along Rue Michelet between two rows of a throng, while facing his Mathieu—the name of the character of the colonel in the film who commanded the paratroopers in Algiers, inspired by the real Colonel

Massu—Gillo was seized with dismay. No longer in the little theater in Paris, here in the midst of his paratroopers, Jean Martin, despite all the well-placed insignias on his costume and the black goggles that he was supposed to remove with a certain good-natured air, looked decidedly bourgeois, not military. Even worse, he lacked grit.

A solution had to be found and quickly, because that scene, which was blocking off all of Algiers and for which masses of extras had been called, couldn't be repeated. Gillo had already begun to say that Mathieu's look was of the utmost importance, that it was better to postpone the scene, that the extras and Rue Michelet were of absolutely no importance to him... At that moment, good old Musu came up to him whispering a phrase that must have sounded somewhat mysterious to those within earshot: "Don't forget, don't split too much."

Mysterious, but contrary to appearances, not science fictional. The year before, when Gillo had offered to Antonio Musu to produce *The Battle of Algiers* with him, dividing both costs and risks, he happened as well to declare that when he was on the set, the pro-

ducer and the director in him often split in two, that he would gladly return to just being the film's director and that, to put it simply, he would many times have liked to completely forget that he was simultaneously its coproducer. "I also predict," he specified with a suave threat, "that this is what will happen every time the demands of direction collide with those of production." And that's why, whenever this occurred, Musu unfailingly implored him, "Don't split too much..."

So as neither to split too much nor to postpone the scene, therefore, the first idea that came to Gillo, confronted with a sun that was going down and his insufficiently military Mathieu, was to pad the latter's shoulders with handkerchiefs hurriedly gathered from around the set; among them was that of the always gentlemanly Musu. "But it's dirty," he protested, embarrassed. "Who gives a damn," barked Gillo rudely; for he was at that moment following the advice of his friend: having ceased to split, he was coming back as the producer. The idea worked. Those little improvised shoulders changed Martin's body proportions



Saari Kader (Yacef Saadi, center), Ali la Pointe (Brahim Haggiag, right) and other NLF guerrillas go into hiding during a French military raid in *The Battle of Algiers* (photo courtesy Photofest).



and made all the difference: Mathieu was once more a military figure.

The Italian crew was small: only nine people, among whom were the cinematographer Marcello Gatti, the ever-present right-hand man Giuliano Montaldo, and the set designer Sergio Canevari, who reconstructed Ali La Pointe's home on the exact spot where it first stood before French bombs exploded it into the air together with Ali. He reconstructed it in polystyrene, as he did all of the constructions of the Casbah he built, because they are easy to destroy without putting at risk all of the extras and actors inevitably in the scenes. The other technicians—who were in fact still technicians in the making—came from Algiers. Gillo, in agreement with the Algerian government, figured that they could learn to be filmmakers on the job. Some succeeded: as an example, Ali Maroc, thanks to *The Battle of Algiers* and the school of Marcello Gatti, became a skilled cinematographer. Others were hopeless cases; after a month of utter confusion at the very least a continuity secretary who knew how to do her job had to be summoned from Rome: a dear old friend, Anna Maria Montanari. But every effort was made to limit the budget to eight hundred thousand dollars (at that time less than a half-billion lire): not much for a film with big crowds, even if when all is said and done, the final cost today would be around four or five billion lire.

The screenplay had been written during five months of arguments, second thoughts, and tough doses of criticism, all typical of the Pontecorvo-Solinas team and all added to the problem of taking into account as well, whenever possible, the desires, personal experiences and more or less insistent "messages" of their Algerian friends. But once it had been completed, not a single change was brought into it. And, if any change were made, it was due to reality intervening—or, sometimes, to a sudden musical inspiration.

On one scene in particular Gillo and Franco were in total disagreement and threatened to have one of their famous disputes. It was the scene alluded to earlier in which the three Algerian women who work for the FLN have to dress up as Europeans to get past the blockade of soldiers who are closing the Casbah, and to go to the center of town to place three bombs.

Gillo felt that the dialog, or to be more precise the climate that the dialog created, was not convincing: while the three

women were combing their hair and dressing, they joked among themselves in a very, even too feminine way. Mainly, it seemed to Gillo that even though that dialog was witty and amusing, it ruined a moment of the highest dramatic tension. Right when they were about to shoot, the drama, to use Gillo's words, exploded. A drama he summarizes thus: when I can't feel a scene—and I already couldn't feel this one during the construction phase of the script—I don't even know where to put the camera, I don't know what to do.

Time was flying (and with it money), and nerves were getting frayed. Franco had run up against Gillo's doubts about the scene, rewriting the dialog several times before beginning the film, but now he himself was no longer so certain of the final result. Above all, the dialog was filled with nuances difficult for nonprofessional actresses.

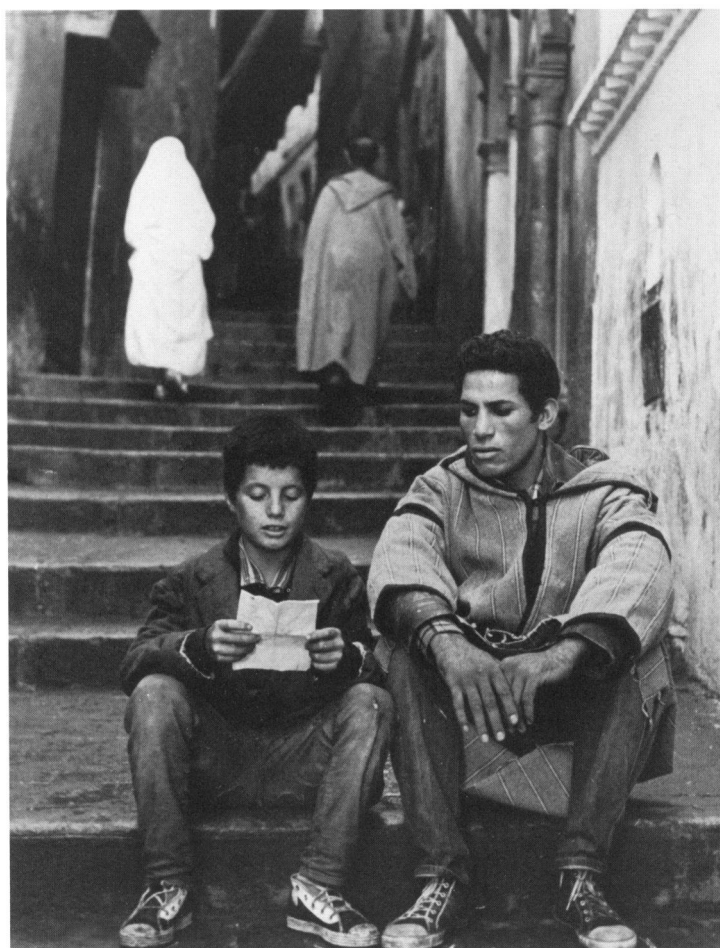
"By this time it was one o'clock," recalled Gillo. On the set reigned that embarrassing absolute silence created when the crew feels that the director is at a total loss (never suspecting how that terrible silence weighs on the poor director). "The minutes were passing. Then suddenly a piece of music I had heard and recorded popped into my mind: a 'baba saleem,' which is a typical tune that Arab beggars execute with drums and cas-

tanets, a piece that closely resembles a heartbeat." The solution to the scene's problems, to its psychological difficulty, to its tension—Gillo had intuited—was the heartbeat in that strange music.

He rushed his assistant at top speed from the set to the hotel to retrieve the cassette. In front of everyone, he listened to it again. His mind was made up: the dialog would disappear entirely. Just as would occur at a later date during the production of *Burn!*, that time because of a Bach cantata, the music of "baba saleem" and its rhythm resounded on the set during the entire take of the scene, reducing to bare bones and dramatizing to the hilt the gestures and attitudes of the women, who, as they cut their hair, as they dressed, as they lowered themselves into their new identities as European women, communicated only by exchanged glances laden with tension. Then they leave, a young worker on duty directs towards them an imperceptible nod as a greeting and good luck wish—a nod which Gillo was exceptionally fond of because, in his opinion, in an instant, and above all because accentuated by the "heartbeat," it communicated the idea and the fervor of the solidarity within the struggle, while in the background the city, which they are about to go towards to accomplish their mission of urban guerrilla warfare, is glimpsed.

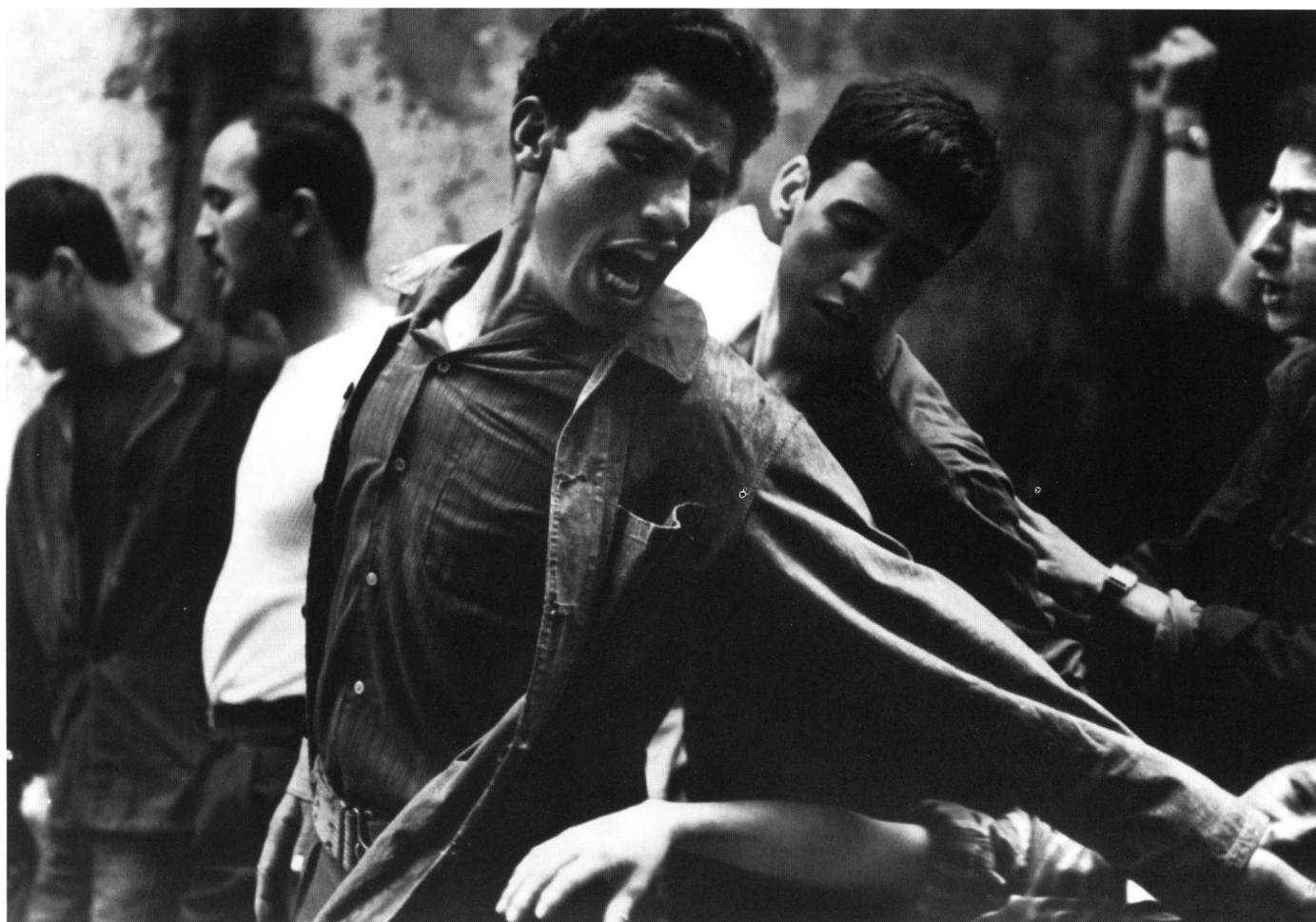
The scene, Gillo recalls with satisfaction, was resolved and revolutionized by that choice. But music has a determining importance throughout the film. Even though at the beginning a few notes of Bach's "Passion According to St. Matthew" are heard and although the torture scene is accompanied by a Gregorian-inspired choral composed by Ennio Morricone, the best known passage in the film, in spite of being "very elementary musically," says Gillo today, is the leitmotif of Ali La Pointe: an evocative and suggestive theme which, quite the opposite of the "baba saleem" of the three women, was composed only a few weeks before the film—whose music also bears Gillo's name as composer—was presented in Venice.

As it happens, once he returned to Rome, Pontecorvo began to work with Morricone on the musical passages that still needed to be composed. But Gillo didn't like what Ennio was suggesting and Ennio didn't like what Gillo was whistling to him. But by this time, the clock was running out: to finish the editing, they needed a theme that would be convincing" both of



Ten-year-old Omar (Mohamed Ben Kassen) reads a message from the NLF leadership to the illiterate Ali la Pointe (Brahim Haggiag) in *The Battle of Algiers* (photo courtesy of Photofest).





Omar tries to stop Ali, who is leading an angry mob protesting a terrorist bombing of the Casbah, in this scene from *The Battle of Algiers* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

them. One night, finally, Gillo had an inspiration. He immediately tape recorded the musical theme that, after all, he liked. Very early the next morning he phoned Morricone, announcing to him in advance that he thought he had found the right theme, and that he was on his way over to let him listen to it.

Gillo arrived at Ennio's home in a flash and climbed the stairs utterly joyful, all the while whistling his theme. Ennio greeted him saying that it was really odd, but he too believed that he had finally found the theme that "does it for us." He sat down at the piano and began to play Gillo's very melody; Gillo, astounded, couldn't believe his ears and even called in Maria, Ennio's wife, for support. "Listen," he said, "they are absolutely identical, pick up the tape recorder and I'll let you listen." "As a matter of fact," said Ennio after listening to the tape, "they really are similar." Even Maria agreed, whereas Ennio, with Olympian calm and without a single muscle of his face betraying him, maintained that fundamentally this was normal, that after a month spent talking about what the theme ought to be and what it ought to mean, obviously he and Gillo were by this time on the same wave length. "Wave lengths be damned, those are the same notes," protested Gillo who remained unconvinced. He even came to believe in the

transmission of thoughts—but the only rational explanation never occurred to him, that is, that he had climbed the stairs whistling his theme and that this was more than enough for a musical prodigy like Morricone. Ennio stuck to his guns. But when our hero left, shaking his head and perplexed before the unsolvable mystery, Ennio phoned Picci [*Pontecorvo's wife—ed.*] to tell her that he would tell Gillo the truth, as a gift, in case they won something in Venice. In fact, during the press conference following the awarding of the Golden Lion to *The Battle of Algiers*, Ennio kept his promise and, in the midst of the general festivities, told the journalists the story of the whistling and the motif that had become the theme of Ali La Pointe.

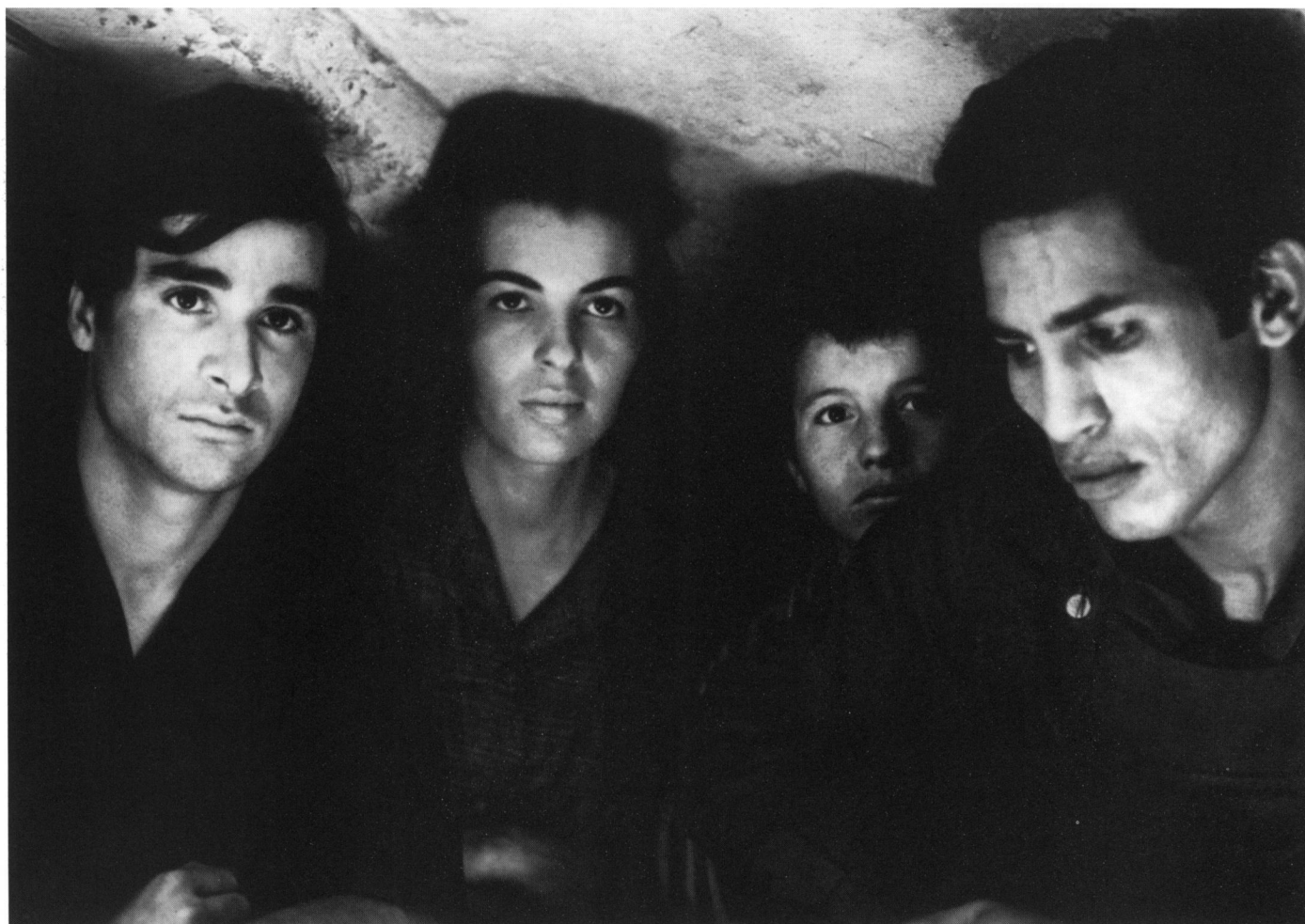
But back to Algiers. As a young man, Gillo had also been a photographer. And already at the time of *Kapò*, with all of his contrivances and experimentation conducted thanks to the collaboration of Gatti and Di Palma, and behind the unsuspecting Yugoslavian cinematographer, he had managed to obtain something he became very attached to: a completely unusual quality of cinematography, a grainy newsreel effect, a visual blend as in reportage, which he used to intensify the feeling of *verismo* in his film.

In his heart, the most important thing was to find the exact visual tone for *The Bat-*

*tle of Algiers*, a film he wished to contain all the flavor and atmosphere of a "documentary surreptitiously recorded with a telephoto lens as the events unfolded." It was not by chance that the BBC, picking up a Pontecorvo-esque definition, entitled a special on Pontecorvo's work *The Dictatorship of Truth*. A few members of the crew, on the other hand, used to say jokingly that it would have been more exact to call it *The Dictatorship of Truth and Cinematography*, and they would tease Gillo affectionately over it because he took a full month and more to find the kind of cinematography he was looking for, meanwhile devoting to his actors, who for the most part came from the streets and needed a great deal of care, a mere seven days for screen tests.

One month before the filming began in Algeria, therefore, Gillo had been experimenting with his 16mm camera in order to clarify his ideas—which meant as well finding the precise balance between the documentary tone he was seeking and the necessity of a cinematography which might also have formal beauty. Then Marcello Gatti intervened with a series of tests. The problem was that during the time of *Kapò* and the semiunderground experiments, the result they obtained often showed too strong a contrast because the lights they had planned to use on the set weren't those they





Left to right, Mahmoud, Hassiba, Omar and Ali wait silently in their hiding place as French troops, led by Col. Mathieu, surround the building (photo courtesy of Photofest).

had imagined for the unusual treatment of dupe negatives done on the film afterwards.

Today, in the age of digital cinema, the acrobatics and magic tricks of cinematography seem easy and everything, or almost, is possible. Thirty years ago, every time was the first time. And through this laborious procedure, Gillo wanted to achieve certain grainy textures and a contrasted black and white which might approach the powerful tone of newsreels treating current events; and he was convinced that using dupe negatives was the ideal system. Because people, he maintained, are used to experiencing accounts of great events precisely through newsreels—and therefore that “code” needed to be reproduced if one wanted to achieve the tone of truth. But if the dupe negative in effect gives the granular texture sought, it often creates as well excessive contrast, so that at times the shadowy areas, under the eyes for example, become unreadable, black, something acceptable perhaps for newsreels, but that for a maniac of cinematography like Gillo, would be utterly intolerable.

It was Gatti who came up with the solution. He suggested that Gillo start off with Dupont 4, at that time the softest of all film, really “disgustingly soft,” Gillo used to say, but which would be able to withstand even

two or three dupe negatives without producing too hard an image. The problem seemed completely resolved. But not even the malleable Dupont 4 could hold out against the contrasts produced by the often blinding North African sun. And so a paradoxical and very inconvenient decision was made: all the exteriors in the film were shot with the sun covered by huge screens to insure a soft, diffuse light. Even so, Gillo, never happy, was always trying to get “something that breaks through” into the frames, a blade of light, a dot of white, “because this gives guts to the cinematography and heightens the sense of truth.” Afterwards work would continue patiently on that negative, obtained at a cost of so much labor and sweat.

The result was so convincing that one year after the 1966 Venice prize, when *The Battle of Algiers* was presented in Los Angeles as an Oscar nominee, a few American directors suggested that Gillo add the caption that opens the film in the version subsequently distributed in the U.S. announcing that not one foot of the film made use of any newsreel or documentary film. The Americans were having trouble believing this. The French military, on the other hand, had no doubts: they knew very well that the rifles used in the film were different from

those with which the French Army in Algeria were equipped. Above all, they knew that the tanks were the Czechoslovakian ones acquired by the Algerian government after the liberation—and they said so publicly, perhaps congratulating themselves for hurting the film, but in fact involuntarily praising the director.

After four months and a week of production and ninety-one-thousand meters of film shot, the time had come to go back home and begin what Gillo has always considered the most fascinating part of a production: the editing and, *dulcis in fundo*, the mixing. They arrived in Rome on Via Masiacuccioli on December 24, 1965: before these veterans of Algeria, Italy opened its arms wide in all its sweetness and with a thousand lights for the holidays. But right after Christmas, Gillo shut himself up in an editing room and disappeared from circulation along with his ninety-one-thousand meters of film. The editing lasted “centuries”—in other words from January to the end of June. But this wasn’t so important because Gillo, Musu, and the Algerians didn’t really know what to do with the film. They contemplated going to a festival because they imagined that without the thrust of festival hype, nobody would want to see a film devoid of stars, demanding of



its audience, and in black and white; and they were thinking, really without much hope, about the Karlovy Vary Festival, which alternated every year in the month of July with the Moscow Film Festival.

The editing was done in an editing room on Via dei Villini, in a little old turn-of-the-century townhouse full of winding passages and staircases. The editor—one of the greats of the profession—was Mario Serandrei. While Gillo was still in Algiers, Mario had suggested to him that he edit the first two reels. Gillo's desire was to have even the editing preserve the film's flavor of a surreptitious documentary and he had attempted to explain his idea to him during the course of long and very costly telephone calls. What Serandrei turned over to him was instead a perfectly edited, but much more traditional, product that almost smacked of Hollywood. Gillo suddenly announced that those two reels were to be put back into their original condition—an idea that Serandrei, the prince of editors, digested poorly. Who knows whether they wouldn't have ended up in a fight, as often happens in great cinema families. Instead it happened that Serandrei died unexpectedly, leaving everything in a mess. His place was taken by Mario Morra, a young man for whom this was practically his first film and whom Gillo knew because while he was working with Serandrei, Morra was editing on the moviola next to his. They had chatted a bit and it seemed to Gillo that he had found an interlocutor who understood his ideas.

Certainly, it might have been very useful for the film to be invited by some festival. Gillo was not even thinking of a long shot like Venice, which seemed to him to be an unattainable goal. Furthermore, the Karlovy Vary Festival had seen the film and had invited it into the competition. Franco Solinas, ever the hard-headed Sardinian, obstinately repeated, "Don't do something idiotic; wait." But Gillo was ready to give in, convinced that nobody in Venice would ever dream of accepting the film. So much so that one day, haunted by Franco who was begging him to refuse the Karlovy Vary invitation, Gillo told him, after a public argument in Piazza del Popolo, that, OK, the next day he would call the Czechoslovakians and turn down the invitation, but that if *The Battle of Algiers* was then not accepted in Venice, "I swear I'll spit in your eye."

During the wait, he continued maniacally to fine tune the film, which still had the problem of a temporary musical finale. Gillo had begun to work on the idea, defined today as "*balzana*," (i.e., mad or eccentric), of concluding

*The Battle of Algiers* by blending, in an unusual sonorous medley, a harpsichord, the rhythms of "*baba saleem*," the ululating of the Algerian women, and a recitative voice reading the final captions: "Two more years of fighting...and of mourning. July 2, 1962. Independence. The Algerian Nation is born." But Morricone was not won over by this "mishmash"—and Gillo would not give in. The day for the recording arrived and the dispute grew heated. Morricone, who was also the voice of the announcer—in a word the sound clapper—jokingly goaded Gillo by beginning to announce: "Scene 133, finale, don't believe it, first take." They would record, then argue again. Ennio, with his exuberant capacity for inventing solutions, suggested changes, here an instrument, there a voice. Time was flying and nervousness was increasing on both sides. Until they got to the sixteenth take (which according to Gillo wasn't so different from the first), and Morricone announced: "Scene 133, finale, sixteenth take, I'm beginning to believe it..." And that take was the music used for one of the most moving finales in the history of cinema.

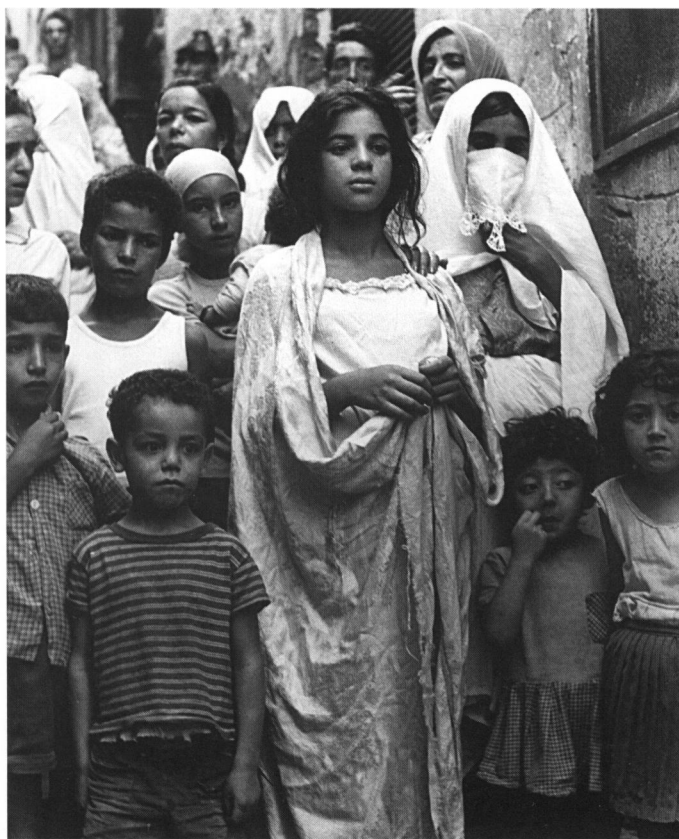
Luigi Chiarini, at the time director of the Venice Film Festival, saw the film for the first time alone, without the selection committee—which consisted that year of Tullio Kezich, Giulio Cesare Castello, Giovambattista Cavallaro, and Leo Pestelli. The editing was not yet completed and Chiarini found himself in opposition to Gillo who, always intolerant of even one frame too many in his

own as well as others' films, kept repeating that forty minutes needed to be cut from *The Battle of Algiers*. It fell then to Chiarini to comfort him and tell him that it was excellent just as it was and that, quite the contrary, the film "at some points was too rushed." Meanwhile he was telling the selection committee that the things that worried him and caused him to hesitate had nothing to do with the quality of the film but belonged in the diplomatic-political sphere. Because certainly the French wouldn't take this well, notwithstanding Pontecorvo's care to create a balance. Chiarini, somewhat worried, suggested that it might be better to send the film off to Karlovy Vary, if they could still meet the deadline. But his committee of experts, who in the meantime had seen *The Battle of Algiers* and concluded that it was a work of the utmost importance, told him that surely "this was like having a dead cat under the table" (the expression is from Tullio Kezich): it would indeed create diplomatic problems, but it was unthinkable to do anything but accept it. They ended up threatening to resign if the film were not entered in the competition. Chiarini, however, held back on his official decision. In part also because there was nobody and nothing, besides the film's quality and the combative Antonio Musu, to support it. Furthermore, *The Battle of Algiers* was not a film well liked by all Algerians. Even among them, some expressed doubts of a political nature. Indeed, Kezich recalls the arrival from Algiers of a "strange little guy," proba-

bly belonging to an anti Yacef Saadi faction, who proposed for the Festival a Lakhdar-Hamina film, *The Wind of Aurès*, cautioning Chiarini against accepting *The Battle of Algiers* because, he maintained, the latter was in reality an Italian film, not an Algerian one.

Chiarini, careful and slow in his decision making, went to Paris with his committee, saw *The Wind of Aurès* in a movie house threateningly crowded with Algerians, and came out determined to accept *The Battle of Algiers*—yet not entirely. Quite a bit of time went by and Gillo had almost settled down and made peace with himself. Then, one evening, after coming back from a Sunday spent in Fregene and while having supper in the *trattoria* of Castello di Maccaresse with a gang of friends, he made a telephone call (he no longer remembers to whom) and was told the big news: that in spite of the uncertainty and fears of Chiarini, *The Battle of Algiers* had been selected for the Venice Film Festival.

The shame of it was that due to all these second thoughts the



A crowd of Casbah residents await the impending explosion of the NLF combatants in *The Battle of Algiers* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

film wasn't completely ready, and Gillo insisted on its being perfect. Getting to the Venetian rendezvous on schedule was a race against time. The print intended for the film festival was picked up from the laboratory at the last minute, without any time to see it again at the home of Verzini, who left on the last plane that evening, together with Gillo and Picci, in the direction of the Lido. Towards the end of the festival evening, whose screenings at the time concluded at midnight, the little trio slipped with an air of secrecy into the projection room of Palazzo del Cinema to see once and for all whether they had hit the mark and achieved that dearly sought warm black-and-white tone that Gillo had so desired. But by the first frame, all three were already on the verge of tears: the film had a strong, bluish tint. How could this have happened? After the first instant of panic, it was clear that this was not the fault of the skillful Verzini, but rather of the bulbs in the projector, which were then replaced after complicated bureaucratic-diplomatic maneuvers, and even that took until the first light of dawn appeared.

But back to *The Battle of Algiers*. The day after the Venice première, the French were really not very happy and were planning to boycott the film in their country. Pietro Bianchi's headline referred to "A chronicle devoid of poetry in a half-successful film." Casiraghi in *Unità* wrote essentially that Gillo had been too nice with the French paratroopers (just as later members of small left-wing groups accused him of making Colonel Mathieu into a positive figure). But Giovanni Grazzini, in five columns in the pages of *Corriere della Sera*, was instead announcing: "*The Battle of Algiers*: Italy is within sniffing distance of the Golden Lion." But Gillo wasn't counting on it. It was a year of great films and great directors: among the competitors were Robert Bresson with *Au hasard*, *Balthazar*, Alexander Kluge with *Yesterday Girl*, and François Truffaut with *Fahrenheit 451*. In Gillo's opinion there was no hope. But on the morning of September 10, the eve of the awarding of the Lions, still more than satisfied with how things were going, Gillo was enjoying this vacation with Picci, who was soaking in the water of the Lido, clean at the time, under the jet of the Excelsior. He was floating lazily, unmindful of the film, when a host of photographers suddenly arrived from the beach. *The Battle of Algiers* had won the FIPRESCI prize, awarded by international critics, and always the first to be announced around midday on the last day of the festival.

This seemed to Gillo to be a marvelous and absolutely un hoped-for result. A few hours later, he was seated at a table under the veranda of the Excelsior when he was called to the telephone. It was Giorgio Bassani, chairman of the jury. He announced to him that *The Battle of Algiers* had won the Lion—even if he personally, he told him with brutal frankness, along with the French



Pontecorvo accepts the Golden Lion award for Best Film at the 1966 Venice Film Festival (photo courtesy of Gillo Pontecorvo).

juror, Michel Butor, had voted for Bresson. Gillo turned towards the table, took a few steps, leaned over with a conspiratorial air and said to his wife, "We won, but it has to remain a secret."

The day after the Lion, the reviews appeared in the press all over the world, with the exception, *ça va sans dire*, of the French newspapers. All the talk was of a masterpiece. The French delegation had not attended the screening and had abandoned the festival at the announcement of Pontecorvo's prize. But that wasn't all: the French government was obliged to assure the associations of *pieds noirs* [French nationals born in Algeria—ed.] from Algeria, who had been repatriated in those years, that the film would not be distributed. *The Battle of Algiers* was banned in France for one year. When it was finally scheduled, the OAS threatened to place bombs in the movie theaters where the film was on the program—and it was known that the threats were serious. For four years nobody felt up to trying to release it. Until 1971, when Louis Malle and a group of French filmmakers decided that it was time to try again.

The first attempt took place in Paris in a movie house in that hot neighborhood known as the Latin Quarter, picketed by students from young democratic associations contacted personally by Malle. The experiment worked. After this *The Battle of Algiers* was released without incident all over France, with the exception of Lyons where a disturbed person in the house threw a pot of ink at the screen—obviously leaving an indelible mark. What finally also happened after the release of the film is that the French press realized the fact that *The Battle of Algiers* was not a film offensive to France, but rather one that observed the Algerian revolution with such balance and respect towards the French—witness the portrait of

the controlled and lucid character of Colonel Mathieu—to justify, as in the most extreme left-wing criticism, a few extravagant claims of moral ambiguity.

The American reaction was different. In the United States the film received three Oscar nominations—first as Best Foreign Film, and the next year, after the film's release in the U.S., for Best Director and Best Screenplay—capturing for itself as well an understandable popularity among left-wing minorities and those of color; the latter's extreme fringes, such as the Black Panthers, studied it. According to what emerged from a case prepared against thirteen activists accused of acts of terrorism, it was alleged to be practically a manual for urban guerrilla warfare. If the famous critic John Simon, who at first innocently mistook *The Battle of Algiers* for a montage of current-events material, became a great supporter of the film, Robert Sitton of *The Washington Post* was to write enthusiastically that the film, "One of the most beautiful I have ever seen...is just as important for our times as the works of Griffith, Leni Riefenstahl, Carl Dreyer and Luchino Visconti were for theirs," and Joseph Morgenstern in *Newsweek* did justice to what another had seen as an ambiguous, equivocal treatment of the French: "Rather than playing God and judging where right and wrong lie, Pontecorvo and his team have chosen the scarcely less difficult role of witnessing angels. Their hearts are clearly with the rebels, but their loyalty lies with truth." But the most passionate review came out some time later, signed Pauline Kael, in *The New Yorker*: "The burning passion of Pontecorvo acts directly on your emotions. He is the most dangerous kind of Marxist: a Marxist poet," capable of convincing the bourgeois cinema public that revolution, in certain circumstances, is a necessary thing. ■