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**Alan O’Leary. *The Battle of Algiers*. Milan: Mimesis International. 2019. Paperback (\$18, £14, €16). ISBN 9788869770791.**

**By Claudia Radiven, University of Leeds**

In 2016 *The Battle of Algiers* marked its fiftieth anniversary with viewings of the film across the world. The Algerian conflict itself influenced many, from Franz Fanon to Malcom X to Martin Luther King, however the film showed a history less spoken of. The impact of the historical reenactment of the Algerian struggle for independence from its French colonizers, with the young Ali la Pointe seen as a parallel of many young activists, cannot be understated. Like many, Ali found his call to the movement in prison and later became a revolutionary. The film resonates with many contemporary issues such as the policing and containment of minority lives, structural inequality and cultural imperialism. It is still referred to as a means of educating military forces in counter-insurgency methods. The film also continues, as O’Leary makes clear, to be a source of inspiration to oppressed peoples showing it has not lost any of its potency.

The book’s analysis is weaved around three main themes, which are location, address and temporality. The first theme deals with location in the context of revolution, showing the ways architecture was used as a tool of oppression and insurgency tactics had to be employed for eventual emancipation from imperial power. The city of Algiers is spoken about throughout as if a living, breathing entity. The book homes in on the power of specific moments in the film and whether this power emanates from the use of these locations or other cinematic elements in conjunction with one another such as audiovisuals or camera angle. Much emphasis is put on the coda scene here and how it shows a culmination of a journey of regaining agency through revolution. Not just a space in the physical sense of location but a “third space,” one of possibility (46). This has particular resonance for me in terms of how we see this played out in modern times with increasing use of surveillance or defensive architecture to control certain populations in given areas. Not to mention the selective application of some counter-radicalization policies to specific communities and less so others.

The second theme is representation such as that of the press as the eyes of the international community and the collective protagonists common to most revolutionary scenarios. These sections of film are analyzed for who they are directed at, what they are trying to convey to that audience as well as what it is hoping to make people feel in that moment. For example, O’Leary uses classical orientalist images and compares them to the imagery of the three women preparing the bomb attacks, showing the orientalist inflections of the film. Particularly interesting is the observation that while the film is outwardly there to convey the joy at being

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free from the clutches of Empire it also addresses the “white North” in the ways it plays into Orientalist tropes. This is further emphasized by the role of women in the revolution and the ways their agency/voice is still removed. Also remarked upon is the common trope of the “irrational Arab” (64, 73). O’Leary observes that this is what gives *Battle* a shaky status in terms of political film as it smacks of trying to appeal to the skeptical European.

The final theme concentrates on time. Much focus is given to the Coda scene at the end of the film which shows so much joy and celebration. It represents change, a new era of potential, and freedom from the shackles of colonial power. The use of reenactment is discussed as well as the odd fact that the whole climatic purpose of this film (i.e. Algerian independence) isn’t featured except in the implied future. Among the analysis here of time frames is also the use of documentary style footage. It is noted throughout the book that this has a profound effect on the viewer but in particular scenes it is observed that it can cease to appear a film at all and more like a news report giving a sense of realism. The timing of particular scenes, such as the eight day strikes and United Nations meeting being synchronized, ties into the idea of what makes a nation and how it is unified. As with the other sections comparative examples are given of similar films where these techniques are used, such as the Battle of Orgreave. These comparisons and observations give each reader something to draw upon, whether you are in the business of cinema or politics.

Aside from the cinematic analysis of location and temporality, O’Leary identifies areas that have largely gone ignored in many analyses such as who the film speaks to, who does it represent, and agency within the film. He focuses less on whose film it is (Italian or Algerian?) than on how the people the film represents are given a voice, or not. For example, he speaks of those denied agency through lack of mention entirely such as the “Harkis” who supported the colonizers and the settlers who supported independence (42).

Perhaps most interesting is O’Leary’s acknowledgement of his own positionality while discussing the paradoxical place this film occupies. This doesn’t dismiss the valuable contributions to scholarship on the film, just that these positions must be acknowledged. When we consider that this film is simultaneously considered decolonial and orientalist, Birth of a nation and End of Empire, it is crucial that commentators acknowledge their own positions and the effect that may have on their analysis. O’Leary gives us a balanced perspective. He presents an in depth analysis of the Orientalist tropes, for example the allure and threat of the Algerian woman (57–65), that are used in a film which is in theory speaking against the injustices of such stereotypes. What is fascinating here is his acknowledgement that it was made at a time when it could only speak against these injustices from within the very same system of injustice; that is white racial supremacy that came from

European colonialism (67). He does not dismiss the film as having no decolonial value, but rather states that it has had to work from within an imperfect setting.

Crucially, it is stated that the film transcends many of the categorizations people initially make which usually lie on either side of a gulf that is between terrorist sympathizing, leftist propaganda or glorifying colonial methods of control and counterinsurgency. Contrastingly, by some on the left it is considered a failure in its anti-colonial message. In fact, one aspect of this book is to show that the critique of *Battle* through the years is anything but clear cut. A further example is the acknowledgement by many analysts that the director commissioned by the FLN is an Italian “white Christian.” Some argue that this decision is a form of agency, and therefore not problematic, whereas others see it as a “renunciation of agency” (81). Mixed views and contradictions show the complexity of a film that, as mentioned, still holds resonance more than fifty years after its release. While the film will undoubtedly always remain a key piece of postcolonial cinema, this book accurately observes how it has been forced to speak within Eurocentric white racial supremacy, using the “master’s tool’s,” as it were, to have the chance to convey the message.

O’Leary’s has written not only an engaging companion to the film, but also an exploration of complex tensions of Eurocentrism and Orientalism in a “postcolonial” film. It should be read by all those interested in *Battle of Algiers*, but also those interested in the postcolonial possibilities of cinema.