



The battle of Algiers

by Alan O'Leary, Milan, Mimesis International, 2019, 127 pp., \$18, £14, €16 (paperback), ISBN 9788869770791

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BOOK REVIEW

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How might a researcher think creatively about one of the most analysed films in the history of political cinema? What more is there to say about a film that – in the words of Alan O'Leary – has been theorised by many generations of academics from around the world, leading to 'an imposing body of scholarship' (9) with which the researcher is forced to contend? Such are the questions posed – and challenges faced – by O'Leary in this stimulating book, itself dedicated to interrogating the power and resonance of *La battaglia di Algeri/The Battle of Algiers* (Pontecorvo et al. (1966)). Conceptually ambitious, lucidly written, sometimes controversial, yet always compelling, *The Battle of Algiers* is a publication rich in insights.

Composed of five chapters, including the Introduction and Conclusion, and usefully divided up into a variety of subsections, O'Leary's book is propelled by a clearly and forcefully articulated research question: how did *The Battle of Algiers* draw from Orientalist and colonial discourses to communicate an anti-colonial message to the colonising North? (66). In answer to this question, Chapter 2 turns to the spatial history of Algiers, leading firstly to a general discussion of location, architecture, and geography, before concluding with more specific analysis of the coda of the film, during which thousands of Algerians – proclaiming national independence in Algiers – are seen to descend from the Casbah into European settler zones, circa December 1960. I will return to the argumentative value of this coda towards the end of the review; for now, suffice it to say that this chapter is at once historically perceptive – raising compelling questions regarding the Climat de France, an architectural edifice located to the south of the Casbah yet often mistaken by scholars for the Casbah (34–35) – and conceptually illuminating, with the final few paragraphs pivoting away from histories of urbanism to a more theoretical emphasis on the concept of 'third space', as elaborated by Edward Soja and Homi Bhabha. As a side note to this discussion, O'Leary could have added details regarding the Boulevard de l'Impératrice, a bay-side promenade often glimpsed in the film, and conceived as a site from which French settlers could see and be seen.

Even more concerned with the theme of the address, Chapter 3 interrogates 'the manner in which *The Battle of Algiers* orientates itself to a potentially indifferent, antagonistic or Eurocentric audience' (51). As part of this enquiry, O'Leary thus begins with two discussions – one related to images of Algerian female identity (woman-as-allegory, the colonial harem, the female voice); one related to images of Eurocentric masculine identity (paratrooper rationality, the White-Man-as-expert); both devoted to the politics of gendered representation. Out of these two discussions, the former is clearly more indebted to previous scholarship on the film than the latter, with the work of Ranjana Khanna (1998) forming a clear influence on O'Leary's contention that *The Battle of Algiers* 'denies speech' to the female nationalists depicted therein (62). More illuminating is the range of startling conclusions drawn towards the end of Chapter 3, when O'Leary muses upon the 'realism' of the film, suggesting that Pontecorvo's use of 'documentary aesthetics' can persuasively be linked to the 'visual realism' of French colonial cinema from the 1930s and Italian fascist cinema from the 1940s (75). Written in a lexicon at once laconic and poetic, it is during moments such as these that the thrilling originality and ambition of O'Leary's publication really shines through.

Equally original and ambitious is the final thematic chapter, entitled ‘Time and Again’. As the title suggests, this is a chapter about configurations of time, chronology, and simultaneity, leading to two especially trenchant pieces of analysis, both of which edge away from the historical methodology adopted in Chapter 2, ‘Into Algiers’, drifting into discussions of a more abstract, elusive, even mystical, nature. One of these concerns the use of ‘rhetorical time’ in the film (84–89), with O’Leary suggesting that the images of clocks and strikes that crop up throughout the narrative operate allegorically: to generate the impression that the Algerian people are marching inextricably – simultaneously – towards national independence, or what Benedict Anderson has called ‘the time of the nation’ (cited in O’Leary 87). The other notable piece of analysis included in this chapter is about how the film unfolds in ‘a subjunctive mood’, characterised by an ‘as if’ mentality (97). Drawing from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, O’Leary ingeniously links this conditional temporality to the notion of the carnivalesque: a state of being in which ‘unruly behaviour, cross-dressing and other transgressions of social norms are practised’ (97).

This is not to say that the book is entirely devoid of limitations. As mentioned above, much of the textual analysis included in the book turns around a somewhat myopic emphasis on the coda of *The Battle of Algiers*, leading to a nagging question: is it possible to extrapolate a general conclusion about the film from the messages conveyed by one specific scene alone? Likewise, parts of this book could have benefited from an equally less myopic focus on *The Battle of Algiers* as an exemplary film in its representation of de-colonisation. *The Olive Trees of Justice* (Pélégri and Blue (1962)), *The Unvanquished* (Cavalier 1964), and *Lost Command* (Robson (1966)): such are just some of the other late-colonial films that depicted Algiers in a state of colonial crisis, even if they do not feature in O’Leary’s publication. Nonetheless, these are minor flaws in what is an undeniably major contribution to the field.

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