

The Battle of Algiers

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

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BOOK REVIEW

The Battle of Algiers, by Alan O'Leary, Mimesis International, 2019, 127 pp., \$18/£14/€16 (softcover), ISBN: 9788869770791

Alan O'Leary opens his remarkable study of the film *The Battle of Algiers* (Italy/Algeria, 1966) by pointing out that it is one of the most discussed and written about works of political cinema. He backs that up by immediately including a note listing highlights of the extensive existing scholarship. Despite the impressive quantity, if sometimes polemical quality, of that critical literature, there is no question that O'Leary's short book makes an original and fascinating contribution. Combining a deep knowledge of pre- and post-war Italian film, including overlooked Italian fascist colonial cinema, with awareness of the political and architectural nuances of Algiers' mid-century urban spaces, O'Leary is able to focus in on the significance of under-appreciated scenes and shots. Anyone interested in Italian cinema, political cinema, or the contradictions of post-war urban planning and architecture, especially in the global South, will find something new and striking in this work.

The book is organized into three substantive chapters, each addressing one of three main themes, plus a briefer introduction and conclusion. 'Into Algiers' moves into the spaces of the city, including close attention to the relation, in the film and in historical urban experience, between the Casbah (commonly figured as 'the authentic space of resistance and indigeneity', and the site of thirty-five of the fifty-six sequences of the film) and the European city (the space of colonial presence, and habitually overlooked by viewers as also a space of popular presence as well as alienation). O'Leary's knowledge of the history of Algiers' modern architectural spaces, and postwar colonial projects to build modern social housing, is invaluable. In particular, he focuses in on several of the buildings in the European city that provide backdrops for scenes of popular political uprising outside the Casbah. These mixed spaces, intended as housing for both local Algerians and European colonials (sometimes with separate, differently designed sections for the different communities of residents), were in fact the historical sites of several major anti-colonial protests. Algerian film audiences at the time would have recognized this, but the lack of critical attention to these scenes and spaces has meant the film, and the history it appears to represent, has been assumed to privilege the autonomy of indigenous authenticities at the expense of more hybrid developments.

'Out of Algeria' addresses voice, forms of address, and perspective. O'Leary emphasizes that the film, like the FLN (the Front de Libération Nationale, the revolutionary organization and then political party that has governed Algeria almost exclusively since independence) was intentionally oriented towards both the Algerian national population and international audiences caught up in the political solidarity of post-colonial euphoria. O'Leary points out that this helps

explain the conundrum of an Algerian popular liberation party (the FLN) commissioning European filmmakers (Italians Gillo Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas) to make what was clearly intended to be a definitive tribute to national independence and agency. The film is sometimes claimed as Algerian cinema (given the subject, the neo-documentary format, and having been commissioned and co-produced by the revolutionary hero Saadi Yacef), sometimes as Italian cinema (given the prominent identities of most of the Italian film crew, including composer Ennio Morricone, and the film's apparent position in the legacy of Italian post-war neo-realist cinema). O'Leary carefully considers questions of Orientalist representation, especially of feminine subjects, and the problem of 'realism' (whose reality?). But he is able to sidestep what might otherwise be a review of predictably familiar terrain by connecting *Battle of Algiers'* particular style of 'fictional documentary (*documentario romanizzato*)' with the emergence of the genre in Italian fascist colonial cinema. O'Leary compares the vividly constructed urban realism of *Battle of Algiers* with the 1942 Italian film *Bengasi*, a sympathetic depiction of the plight of Italian colonists in the city of Bengazi, in Italian colonial Libya, while under occupation by British troops. The formal similarities are striking: a dispersed 'choral' perspective across multiple local lead characters; intensive preliminary research into local lives and locations; a final scene of flag waving national celebration. The irony of this cinematic lineage and the scene comparisons is not lost on O'Leary: the scene of celebratory national(ist) triumph in *Bengasi* depicts Italians; the still-colonized Libyans are mere background. O'Leary's location of the origins of a classic of modern revolutionary political cinema, and the Italian neo-realist cinema with which it is usually associated, in a fascist colonial genre is both stunning and convincing.

O'Leary is right to let this problem of origins complicate, rather than determine, a contemporary reading of the film. In 'Time and Again' he considers the film's temporal structure and its significance. This chapter clarifies his attention throughout the book to the film's six minute coda, which he already emphasized in the earlier chapter on urban space. The coda, set in 1960 and including dynamic scenes of popular street protest and the famous closing scene of a woman's dancing jubilation, is matched by a six minute opening section, set in 1957, of the final, near breathless moments of a small group of revolutionaries: two men, a woman, a boy. The spatial exuberance of the coda, when the residents of the Casbah move into the streets of the European city (and among the modern buildings of the previously discussed social housing neighborhoods), is matched by the intense, immobile claustrophobia of the opening. But temporally, the initial scene is closer to the final coda; most of the film is a flashback to events occurring between 1954–1956. O'Leary emphasizes the unpredictability and carnivalesque aspects of the final triumph, both of the national events and of *Battle of Algiers'* cinematic achievement. Origins matter, politically and aesthetically, but the wonder of the film may be precisely its continuing ability to embody and transcend the contingency of its origins, and to remain resonant with its contemporary as well as historical contexts.

This is a brilliant, beautifully produced little book. It is surprisingly affordable, given the heft of the paper stock and the quantity of the images. The notes, which usefully clarify both the historical and interpretive contexts, are helpfully

positioned as footnotes throughout the text rather than buried in endnotes at the end of the volume. Alan O'Leary's *The Battle of Algiers* is a significant contribution to multiple fields of scholarship, and will be a great aid for teaching. It is a book that will change thinking about a film many thought we already knew, and others will discover and rediscover through its pages.

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