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The Dictatorship of Truth

An Interview with Gillo Pontecorvo

by Edward Said

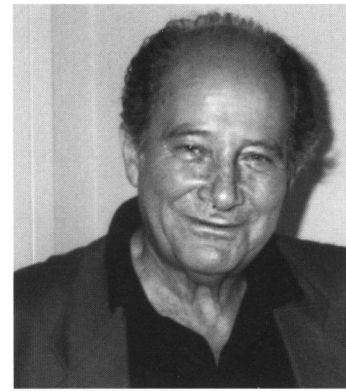


Photo by Vivian Traves

In March 1999, The Film Society of Lincoln Center presented “Documented Fictions,” a retrospective of the films of Gillo Pontecorvo, including *The Long Blue Road* (1957), *Kapò* (1959), *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), *Burn!* (1969), and *Operation Ogro* (1979). After the screening of *The Battle of Algiers*, author Edward Said (Orientalism, Culture and Imperialism, and *Covering Islam*, among many others) discussed the film with Gillo Pontecorvo on the stage of the Walter Reade Theater. Their comments have been supplemented by an interview with Pontecorvo conducted by Cineaste Editor Gary Crowder. Pontecorvo’s comments in both discussions were translated from the Italian by Antonio Monda.

Edward Said: First of all, I want to say what an extraordinary film this is. Seeing it now for the fifth or sixth time, the power of the film, its conception, and the logic and the clarity and the passion of it, stand out so powerfully. Thank you very much for the film [audience applause].

When you made the film, the Algerian revolution had already won. Did you want to tell both sides of the story or were you mainly interested in telling the Algerian side? What was your feeling about portraying this historical process?

Gillo Pontecorvo: I was mainly interested in showing this unstoppable process of liberation, not only in Algeria, but throughout the entire world. Naturally, in dealing with such a dramatic history, you must show how difficult the situation is for both sides.

The writings of Frantz Fanon were also very important for Franco Solinas, the screenwriter, and myself. We were there for a few months before the liberation and we saw everything, the hope and the joy, and we remember young people talking on the street all night. During the long months of preparation and of talking with the people, we saw that the struggle against colonialism diminished the mental state and the customs of the people. To fight colonialism they had to change themselves from what colonialism had made them.

Said: Yes, the film reveals that at some point, it’s no longer possible to simply endure colonialism quietly. One of the ex-

traordinary things about the film is how it shows that moment of awakening and organization. When Ali la Pointe, a pickpocket and a boxer and a thief, becomes political, that’s really one of the signs that the colonial process has reached an intolerable level and people are transformed. They then become part of an organization whose discipline is very harsh. That introduces a distortion in the lives of people and they cannot continue to live in a normal way.

The film shows how gradually everything becomes part of the political process. The organization enters into people’s lives at every level—even the wedding scene becomes politicized—and that, too, is a kind of distortion. There is no privacy and so harsh is the organization that there is a kind of stiff-necked quality that turns people into fighters.

Cineaste: During your research for the screenplay, to what extent did you find the NLF’s revolutionary political ideology informed or influenced by Islamic religious beliefs?

Pontecorvo: At that time, the presence of religious beliefs in their revolutionary political ideology was extremely positive because it gave a solid foundation to that struggle.

Cineaste: It provided a more indigenous character for it.

Pontecorvo: Yes, it contributed more of a nationalist identity.

Said: One of the innovations of the film is that it’s not only a story of individuals—Ali la Pointe, Colonel Mathieu, Saari Kader, and the women that we see—but also one that involves the collective, what you have referred to as a “choral personality.”

Pontecorvo: This was exactly what attracted Solinas and myself. It’s more difficult to incorporate a choral character in a narrative film,

but it’s not impossible to have the audience identify with it. In a political sense, the most important point is made in the film by Ben M’Hidi, who explains the difference between terrorism and collective action. “Wars aren’t won with terrorism, neither wars nor revolutions. Terrorism is a beginning but afterward all the people must act.”

This approach made it very difficult to find a producer for the film. Among those we approached was Angelo Rizzoli, who at the time was the most important Italian producer. When I proposed this, he asked me, “Why do you think



Pontecorvo and Franco Solinas’s script for *The Battle of Algiers* features a “choral personality, a collective protagonist composed of the Algerian people” (photo courtesy of Photofest).

Italians would care about Negroes!" First, I explained, "Algerians are white, like you and me." He said, "There is no star lead, you don't want to use actors at all, and you want to shoot it in black and white. What do you read on my forehead—"Stupid?" So, since no producer wanted to produce the film, we produced it ourselves, using what little money we had. We were so poor at the time that we had only nine people in the crew.

Said: *Was the script written beforehand or did you prepare it as you were shooting?*

Pontecorvo: Solinas and myself worked very hard on the script. Some things changed, of course, while we were shooting, but the structure was predetermined.

Said: *So it was very carefully planned.*

Pontecorvo: Except the end of the film. I discovered an extraordinary face among the extras—this is the woman at the end of the film—so I began to prepare a different ending.

Said: *What was the original ending?*

Pontecorvo: It was similar but it didn't have the same sense of freedom. When I'm asked if the film was difficult to make, I honestly explain that it wasn't as difficult as it looks, even though you see a lot of people, because, once you have chosen this theme, you decide you must smell the truth. Channel 4 in England did a program about *The Battle of Algiers* and it was called "The Dictatorship of Truth."* Once you pick the dictatorship of truth, it's like climbing a staircase in the darkness but having a banister to guide you. You always have to feel that this is fiction, and this is truth, and you throw away what is not truth.

Inspired by the face of this woman, I decided to end the film with a ballet to pay homage to all struggles for liberation. Now, when you choreograph a ballet at the end of a film that's under the dictatorship of truth, that is the only moment that is really difficult from a directing point of view. You need to find something that has the lightness of a ballet or of dancing but at the same time you don't want to break the unity or the continuity of the film. I think it's clear to everyone that an ending where the police push the crowd back, but these women keep coming back, is not necessarily realistic or the truth.

Said: *It's almost poetic in a way.*

Pontecorvo: What is important is that when the audience sees this, it doesn't feel that there is an interruption in the stylistic continuity of the film. That's why we filmed that scene three different times throughout the course of the production. Of course, I also did forty-one takes of Brando for one scene in *Burn!* We were looking at the footage coming from Rome in a screening room and we didn't feel comfortable, we felt the scene was fake, so we kept re-shooting it. In the end, I hope—and I've been told this many times—you don't notice the stylistic difference.

Cineaste: *Would you talk a bit about Franco Solinas?*

Pontecorvo: I wrote all my films, except for one, with Franco. We had the same political ideas. We both liked skin diving and I bought a little house on the beach near his. Sometimes we influenced each other in a terrible way. To write the screenplay for *Kapò*, we went away to a little village so as not to be distracted. When you're with someone all day, however, if you begin to fight, it can blow up.

At one point during the writing, Franco proposed that we introduce a small love story between a kapo and a guard. I thought it would break the unity of the film's style and I told Franco so. He insisted and I would say, "I'm amazed at you!" and he would say, "Why?" Then we began to insult one another. Eventually we both packed our suitcases and left and didn't speak to each other for two weeks. Franco had a mentality like a Sardinian and I'm almost the same, so we weren't speaking to each other.

After fifteen days we arranged a meeting through the producer and Franco said, "You were right, really, it was a great concession." I



French soldiers search for bombs hidden in women's baskets in *The Battle of Algiers* (photo courtesy of Photofest).

said, "No, you're right, because I realize that otherwise the story will be too hard and no one will go to see such a film." And he would say, "No, you are right," and so on, and that's how we finally put the story together. He was a great writer. I owe him a lot. We also had the same political formation.

Cineaste: *Italian Communist Party.*

Pontecorvo: Well, I left the party in 1956, but Solinas never left the party. He was angry with me, and I was angry with him for the opposite reason, but we always remained great friends.

Cineaste: *Your working relationship with Solinas was clearly very productive, and one assumes that each of you brought complementary qualities to it. Both of you are very political men, but one has the sense that you perhaps contributed more of an artistic sensibility—conceiving the film visually and even musically—whereas Franco was more ideologically oriented.*

Pontecorvo: No, I disagree. There was no such division of labor. We were very similar

in tastes. The only thing we really differed about was that Solinas didn't understand or know music and for me music is extremely important. The music for *The Battle of Algiers* was born during the writing of the script. At certain moments I changed the script because I said, "No, I'll put music here." When we were writing the script, Franco got angry at one point because I said, "We can cut everything in this scene because we're going to use music." Suppose you imagine a crowd scene, but if you find four faces and use a particular kind of music, maybe you don't need the crowd scene any more.

So I told Franco, "Please, do this for me as a favor. Listen ten times to Brahms's First Symphony, listen ten times to one Beethoven string quartet, and then listen to the first chorus of Bach's "Passion According to St. Matthew." After that, Franco started to love music, and one of the few areas of our disagreement was eliminated.

In my opinion, film involves a contrapuntal relationship between the image and the sound. It's a wedding of interests where the two parts, the bride and the groom, gain by being together. And the image doesn't always play the most important role. I think if you put Bach over a blank screen, it would still work!

Cineaste: *You trained as a musician early in your life and you clearly have very good musical taste. For the score for The Battle of Algiers, you were also working with one of the world's greatest film composers. Would you discuss your working relationship with Ennio Morricone?*

Pontecorvo: When I first worked with him, Morricone was not Morricone. He was a rising star. For my earlier films, including my documentaries, I generally hired composers in the last year of their conservatory studies because they were less expensive. Solinas recommended Morricone to me, saying, "Everybody says he's very good." The first time I met him I was a little embarrassed. I asked him to play little pieces of music and I immediately had the feeling that he was very good.

For *The Battle of Algiers* score, nevertheless, I didn't like very much what he was bringing to me. Only at the very end, when we had to rush because the film had been accepted for the Venice Film Festival, did we find the right themes. He accepted some of the themes I was proposing and I was enthusiastic about some of the themes he was proposing. For my following films, I totally relied on Morricone, who I consider a musical genius. For *Burn!*, Morricone wrote the entire score, except for one little piece of music, which I put in more out of superstition than anything else. ■

*Videocassettes of the Channel 4 program, *The Dictatorship of Truth*, are available from The Cinema Guild, 1697 Broadway, Suite 506, New York, NY 10019-5904, phone (212) 246-5522.