

# An interview with Alain Tasma, director of *October 17, 1961*

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*David Walsh and Joanne Laurier spoke with French director Alain Tasma in Toronto.*

WSWS: What is your particular interest in this incident?

Alain Tasma: I respond as a French citizen, someone who is aware, like everyone French, that there is an unease between the young generation of Algerian origin and the rest of the French population. This history, which has never been officially recognized, which absolutely never appears in school books, indeed the entire Algerian war is poorly treated, is certainly one of the reasons for the malaise. It is not the only one, but it contributes to the creation of this malaise. Thus if film artists can do their work as citizens, it is all to the good.

WSWS: Is this incident well known?

AT: If one interests oneself, yes. There are books that have come out every year for the last decade, newspapers like *Libération*, *Le Monde*, have done major articles. It's not that it is unknown, simply that such articles slide by, one piece of information among others. It has absolutely not entered into the consciousness of the French people. Absolutely not. In fact, people confuse this with the Charonne incident. I don't know if you know this. There was a Communist Party demonstration against the OAS [right-wing, pro-colonial movement] attacks at the Charonne Metro station in Paris. There were nine dead. That is enormously talked about, because there were nine Communists, French, white.

Yes, if someone is interested in the 1961 massacre, there is information, but this film is a supplementary blow of the hammer on the same nail.

WSWS: Is there new research, are there new books, open archives?

AT: The reference on this is a work by Jean-Luc Einaudi *La bataille de Paris*, who had access to the FLN archives, who himself conducted an extensive investigation, who obtained a great deal of testimony, and who wrote a book which is considered the central text. There is a historian, Jean-Paul Brunet, who had access to the police archives. His work consists of contesting the work done by Einaudi, relying simply on the police reports.

It is obvious that when a policeman kills someone, throws him in the Seine, he doesn't write it down. But Brunet discusses only the facts. He says, I don't see this [the police massacre] in the archives, therefore I don't believe it.

So there is an effort going on to deny what happened. But to film in Paris, we needed to have police authorization, in order to block certain streets, park trucks and so forth, and the Paris police read

the scenario, and didn't argue with any of it. Thus, they admit it more or less.

WSWS: What do the police say about this incident?

AT: The young policemen—I had police advisers, because I'm not a policeman and I needed advice on the police operations in the film—who saw the film surprised me, they had no critical attitude toward the police actions. They said, I understand quite well the police of that time. What we showed about the conditions of life, about the combination of cowardice and... There was a quite definite group of racists, of colonialists who agitated for the OAS, and the rest were just like is often the case, as it was during the Second World War, of people who were hesitant, who saw-sawed from one side to the other.

The cops saw principally the climate of fear, which seemed important to them, and which helped explain the unleashing of such violence.

WSWS: Were there openly fascist tendencies among the police?

AT: Yes. Remember, there was the fear of a [right-wing] coup d'état at the time. The DeGaulle government was afraid of being overthrown. [Paris police chief Maurice] Papon could not afford to detach himself too far from his police. That's why he says at one point, things are getting too restless in the police stations, we have to take measures. The rift between the authorities and the police was real.

WSWS: Was this operation directed from on high, by DeGaulle, or ...?

AT: It's just as the journalist says at the end, when he says, it was a police operation for DeGaulle, he didn't interest himself. What is certain is that DeGaulle could not accept that the FLN flag fly in the center of Paris while he was in negotiations. There was a relationship of forces to consider. That was unacceptable. DeGaulle never gave written orders to throw Arabs into the Seine, that's certain also.

The history between France and Algeria is extremely painful. Simply the fact that it was clear by this point that Algeria would become independent rendered the OAS hysterical. It was an extraordinarily conflicted, complex situation at that time in France. Even today, when we raise the question of Algeria it remains very painful.

The film opens October 19 in France. I think it will produce a polemic. Today nobody denies that there was a massacre. That's why at the end of the film we estimate the number of victims as between 50 and 200, we didn't want to polemicize about the

number, that doesn't seem to me that important. Whether there were 50 or 200, the horror of it is the same. The current argument about the number of deaths is a diversion, it's secondary. It conceals the real issues.

I think the reactions will be passionate, because it remains impossible to talk about the Algerian war. It is accepted that there was officially sponsored torture in Algeria, one can make a film in which one shows French soldiers torturing, no one will say it's not true. Ten years ago, that might not have been the case. Today nobody will deny that there was such an outburst of violence. Nobody.

There will be a polemic simply because the subject of the Algerian war produces strong reactions.

In the US, you have the ability to discuss contemporary history; in France, we don't have that. You have certain films about Algeria. There was a beautiful film, *Avoir 20 ans dans les Aurès* [*To Be Twenty in the Aurès*, 1972], there is *Battle of Algiers*, but that is not a French film—Pontecorvo is Italian. We have a difficult time in France treating current events.

WSWS: How do you explain, not the actions of individual policemen, but the level of brutality, of cruelty, on the part of the French state toward the Algerians?

AT: There is of course the relationship of a colonializing people in the face of a colonized people. There is the contempt of the colonialism: here is the indigenous population, there is the occupier. I show at the beginning of the film that a Moroccan is treated more or less in the same fashion as an Algerian. So that's the first thing, the contempt of the colonialist.

Aside from that, there was the climate of fear. There had been 21 French policemen killed.

And you had [police chief] Maurice Papon, who in 1944 had handed over Jews in Bordeaux to the Nazis, who had with extreme brutality delivered Jewish children to the Nazis when the Nazis demanded it, this man who demonstrated total indifference, total inhumanity. Cold, a technician, who never asked himself once what was a Jewish child or an Algerian worker. He was a police mathematician, if one asked him to do a certain thing, he did it. When he said for each one of us, we'll do ten of them, he let loose, he opened the door for the violence.

WSWS: What is the relevance of the film in the present situation?

AT: Unhappily, the scenes in the police stations that I show in the film are no doubt still taking place today. There are scenes of humiliation. Perhaps not in the same form, but other forms of humiliation.

What does the film say? It also says, be vigilant in regard to the people in power. It's above all that. We give our power to people who utilize it to do things that appall us. How to become adult, to become politically responsible? How to try, together, not to be under the sway of a supreme savior, DeGaulle at one moment, Mitterrand at another. It's rather that, think.

WSWS: The "shantytowns" shocked me, that they existed in the 1960s.

AT: The last shantytown disappeared in 1970, not very long ago. It's very exact in the film. We made them as they were at the time. It took a long time to do that set.

Dignity, that was very important for me. Someone harassed me about the French spoken by the Algerians in the film. 'I lived in Paris at the time, the Arabs didn't talk like that.' If I had made them speak as they did at the time, it would have been a caricature, they would have instantly lost their dignity.

My hope is that the reaction of young people of North African origins ... the actor who played Abde, for him it was the first time he could speak about this in his family. They lived in the shantytown in Nanterre at the time. French families didn't speak about it, but neither did the Algerian families. For the Algerian families, there was shame, a strange shame, about allowing themselves to have been massacred, humiliated. For him it was a positive development, to talk about these things in his family. I hope it will help people recover a certain dignity.

There have been very good documentaries, books, articles, on these events. But the strength of fiction is that people will see, will sympathize with each of the characters. I think that will have more weight.

WSWS: What role does cinema play in social life?

AT: The word that pleases me the most is vigilance. I think of films like *Family Life* by Ken Loach, which at a certain moment suddenly changed the view that we held toward psychiatry, anti-psychiatry, family relations. I think when cinema attains this degree of intelligence, of relevance, there is a social function. *The Battle of Algiers* played a social role. The incredible thing is that South American dictatorships used that film to train their forces in a guerrilla war.

I hope modestly to contribute to that. It is very important for me to do that. The film comes out at a good moment in a sense, when one can discuss, debate the events.

WSWS: What do you think of contemporary French cinema?

AT: I think it is in search of itself. I think it has become terribly "embourgeoisé," it does not respond to necessity. We are in the period of a French cinema which is bourgeois, made by people from a privileged background, who have come from the film academies.

There is currently the emergence of a generation of filmmakers of North African origins, Algerian and Moroccan, which is very interesting. The future of the French cinema clearly passes through these minorities.



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