

Gillo Pontecorvo, Italian director of *The Battle of Algiers*, dead at 86

A 2004 interview with the WSWS

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*Gillo Pontecorvo, the Italian filmmaker best known for directing *Battle of Algiers* (1966), died October 12 at a hospital in Rome at the age of 86. The cause of death was not immediately revealed, but the director had suffered a heart attack in recent months.*

Pontecorvo was one of 10 children born in Pisa in 1919 to a wealthy Jewish industrialist. His older brother, Bruno Pontecorvo, became a renowned atomic physicist and early assistant to Enrico Fermi. (He later made headlines by defecting to the USSR in 1950, where he continued his research until his death in 1993.)

Gillo Pontecorvo, after receiving a degree in chemistry, turned to journalism and worked for various left-wing publications in Paris, where he had moved to escape Mussolini's anti-Semitic laws. He joined the Communist Party in 1941 and returned clandestinely to Italy, helping organize anti-fascist partisans. According to biographers, he was one of the leaders of the Milan resistance from 1943 until Italy's surrender.

*Following World War II, Pontecorvo worked as an assistant to filmmakers Yves Allégret, Mario Monicelli and others, before directing his first feature, *The Wide Blue Road* (1957), about a struggling fisherman, with Yves Montand. His next feature film, *Kapò* (1959), with Susan Strasberg and Laurent Terzieff, told the story of a Jewish girl leading an escape from a concentration camp.*

*Pontecorvo won international recognition for his *Battle of Algiers*, a riveting account of the struggle between Algerian nationalist forces and French colonialists in the 1950s. The film continues to haunt audiences, as well as the powers that be. As the WSWS noted in that May 2004 comment, a year earlier the Pentagon had begun using the film as training material for its colonial-style occupation of Iraq.*

*In October 2003, Zbigniew Brzezinski told a conference in Washington, DC: "If you want to understand what is happening right now in Iraq, I suggest a movie that was quite well-known to a number of people some years ago.... It's called *The Battle of Algiers*. It is a movie that deals with...[a] resistance which used urban violence, bombs, assassinations, and turned Algiers into a continuing battle that eventually wore down the French."*

*After *Battle of Algiers*, Pontecorvo's next project was *Burn!* (Queimada) (1969), a flawed but fascinating look at imperialism in the Caribbean. Marlon Brando plays the leading role, a professional mercenary and provocateur who stirs up a slave revolt, when it serves British interests, and helps suppress the rebels years later when they threaten those same interests.*

*Pontecorvo, as he notes in the interview, left the Communist Party in 1956, but remained a "person of the left," contributing to various films over the years, including *Another World is Possible* (2001), about the protests at the G-8 Summit in Genoa.*

*In 2004, Maria Esposito of the WSWS spoke by phone to Pontecorvo. They discussed the production of *Battle of Algiers*, his cinematic*

influences, the US-led occupation of Iraq and other issues.

Maria Esposito: Before talking about the *Battle of Algiers*, can you tell me why you became a filmmaker and who were your major influences in cinema and literature?

Gillo Pontecorvo: First of all, it was [Italian filmmaker Roberto] Rossellini. I believe he is the most important talent in the history of cinema because he brought forward a completely new approach to reality—a love for reality that was not there before. So for me, Rossellini is the person that I love the most and with whom I was a good friend and admired very much.

The writers that have had a strong hold over me were people like [Isaac Bashevis] Singer, for example. I was not familiar with the Jewish world in Europe, outside Italy, and so I developed a passion for a whole series of novels, not only by Singer, but similar writers. It is not that I think he is the most important, but he is one that I remember the most.

Above all, my main creative influence was Rossellini. I was also a friend of [filmmaker Federico] Fellini, who was an extremely intelligent, witty and creative person, but the cinema that I loved and wanted to make was very far from the world of Fellini. Rossellini, I repeat, was my model. He had the love and affection for reality which I have.

About three years ago the BBC defined my work as "the dictatorship of truth." In my cinema, when faced with the choice of distancing oneself from reality or using an effect that might be used to win the popularity with the public, I always renounce these possibilities and stay close to reality.

ME: Is this why you decided to make *The Battle of Algiers* in documentary style?

GP: Yes.

Let me explain how much this love for reality, the reality that surrounds us, weighed on me. I only spent four days doing the screen tests for the actors in *The Battle of Algiers*, but a month looking for the right kind of photography that would best convey this sense of truth.

The difficulty was to find the right sort of look that would imitate grainy photography with strong contrasts, like those of the newsreels, and yet, because it had to be shown in the cinemas where people paid to see it, it had to retain a certain formal dignity, a formal beauty. It therefore took us a month to discover the technique required. The method that finally guided us was to take the original negative and make a copy of it and then re-photograph the copy.

ME: How long did it take to prepare the production and was it difficult to get funding?

GP: Although the time spent writing the script was very brief—only two months—the research phase was extremely long. Scriptwriter Franco Solinas and I spent weeks and weeks inside the Casbah in order to get an idea of the reality of the horror that had taken place. Then we went to France and had long discussions with high officials who had been

paratroopers. So we spent a long time obtaining this information and a rather brief time writing the script.

It was extremely difficult to raise funds for the film. Although I had a good relationship with producers because my previous film *Kapó* had been nominated for an Oscar, they wanted me to make films that I did not want to do. When I proposed making *The Battle of Algiers*, they would tell me, “No, you’re crazy. Do you think Italians care about a story about blacks?” I replied that they were not “blacks” and “it wasn’t true that Italians were not interested in this—it’s very close to us.” In the end no one wanted to produce it. The producers would all say, “I’ll let you do what you want, but this film, really no.”

One producer even asked whether I thought he had “fool” written on his forehead for me to propose a film that “no one will ever see.” I asked this producer for the minimum—a very small amount of money—and something that the film collected in less than 20 days after its release. In the end we decided to form a sort of cooperative, with each of us putting money into it—the director, scriptwriter, etc.—and eventually raised the money ourselves.

To give you an idea of how little money this was, we left for Algeria without the script girl, even though such a job is essential for continuity or retakes. We told ourselves that we’d find a person and teach him or her how to do it there. But after 15 days, there was such chaos and turmoil that we were forced to get a real script girl from Italy even though we didn’t have a penny for it.

We also had very strong support from the Algerians. For example, it was very easy to get permits to go around the streets and other costs were less than the usual rates.

ME: Apart from Jean Martin, who plays Colonel Mathieu, there were no other professional actors in the film. Could you explain how you selected the Algerians for the movie and the qualities you were looking for?

GP: Even Jean Martin was a minor provincial actor in France. I chose him because I very much liked his appearance, his face. This is what I always do in films.

For me the physical resemblance of the person that we choose is more important, than their ability or cleverness. Of course, if I find an actor that is very good and resembles what we want, I am happy. However, I prefer losing hour after hour, because with a non-professional you do lose a lot of time, if he has the right face. For me it is like a painter who has to have the right imagined colours. This is decisive.

So in preparing for *The Battle of Algiers* we went around Italy and France until we found the faces that corresponded to those we were after.

ME: How long did it take to shoot the film?

GP: Four months minus three days, because we were all in a cooperative we knew exactly how much the hours were costing us.

ME: Could you explain how the music soundtrack was developed?

GP: This is a lengthy story but very amusing. I want to tell you that I love music even more than the cinema. In fact, it’s a sadness in my life that the economic circumstances of my family prevented me from studying at the conservatory of classic music, which I wanted to do.

Having said that I love music, which is a decisive component in making of a film, [renowned film music composer] Ennio Morricone was a young man; week after week he brought me themes that I didn’t like and I would take him themes that I composed, or better said, whistled or created on the piano, and he didn’t like them either.

Finally, after weeks and weeks of not being able to agree on the music, three basic themes came to me one night. I recorded them on a small tape recorder and happily, the next morning at half past seven, I woke Ennio and told him that I’d found something that “even you would like.” He told me to come over. In the meantime I whistled the themes in order to remember them and was whistling them as I climbed the five flights of stairs to get to Ennio.

When I entered, Ennio said: “Before you play what you’ve taped, I am

going to let you listen to three basic themes that came to me this morning.” He sat down at the piano and started to play exactly what I’d taped.

There was not a muscle on his face betraying that he was making a fool of me, and he said, “It’s normal after a month of exchanging ideas that we are on the same wavelength.” I asked “Wavelength? This is the same note, not a wavelength.” He said nothing.

Then, on the day when we won the Gold Lion for the film in Venice, Morricone was asked why the music was also credited to the director. He then explained: “That morning Gillo was whistling his motif, his themes, while climbing the stairs. When he arrived I said to him, look, listen, and then played his themes. Gillo was astonished and didn’t really understand how this could be. But I didn’t tell him anything. I called his wife and told her what had happened and said that I would tell him only if we win an award in Venice.”

Ennio explained this at the press conference for the Golden Lion. It had a great impact and everyone laughed.

ME: You were in the anti-fascist resistance. Did your experiences help in making the film?

GP: Yes, of course. In certain details every clandestine struggle is very much the same. The resistance against fascism, whether in Paris or Rome, and the struggle against the French colonial occupation in Algeria confronted common problems and used similar techniques. So my experiences helped a lot and it was very natural and easy for me to imagine what I would have done in these conditions.

I also had great help from the people of the Casbah in Algiers, an extremely poor section of the city, which was built around small alleys, because they could relate the details of what actually happened to them.

ME: As we speak the US military and their allies are doing the same things in Iraq—mass roundups, torture, and assassination—that you dramatise in the film. Could you tell me what you think about the occupation?

GP: I am terribly hostile to any form of foreign presence in another country. Iraq should have total autonomy.

There is a scene in *The Battle of Algiers* that is very appropriate to the Iraqi situation. At a certain moment some journalists ask Ben M’Hidi, one of the resistance leaders: “Do you think the FLN, the Algerian organisation, will be able to defeat the mighty French army?” and he replies, “No, but I think that it will be more difficult for France to hold back the course of history.”

Although there are differences between Algeria and Iraq, these comments are valid to the situation in Iraq. In the end, Iraq and all other countries where there is pain, sacrifices and battles against occupation, will succeed in defending their own independence. In the long run, therefore, I think Iraq will, soon or later, be a free country. I hope this happens because it is not automatically assured.

The recent information about US torture of Iraqi prisoners provides a stronger argument to those all who regard the occupation as unjust and illegal. And remember we are only discussing the tortures that have been exposed.

ME: And your attitude to Italian military involvement in Iraq?

GP: I am extremely opposed to it.

ME: After *The Battle of Algiers* you made *Burn*. What was it like working with Marlon Brando?

GP: I consider Brando a true genius of cinema and probably one of the most extraordinary actors in film, but he is also a person who is moody and difficult. He’s like a racehorse of extreme sensitivity. Although difficult to work with, he is also very professional and in the end does what he is asked to do.

It was very difficult during the production of *Burn*. There was a continuous struggle and it was so tense in the last month of filming that Marlon and I did not speak to each other. I gave him instructions about

what I wanted him to do through my assistant director. We did not even shake hands at the end of the film or even say goodbye, such was the tension.

We re-established relations later, however. In fact, a year and half after *Burn* he wanted to make a film about the rights of American Indians and asked if I could do it.

When I saw him I said: “So you’re crazier than I thought. It’s clear to me that your character hasn’t changed and neither has mine, so if we try to make a film we’ll be fighting again within three days.”

And he said, “No, no, no, I really care about this for political and moral reasons. I think that you’re very suitable to make this film and I beg you to do it.” So I said let’s see what happens but then requested that I be able to live for at least 20 days, or a month, on an Indian reservation, to find out how they spoke and lived, etc.

He agreed and I spent nearly a month on the reservation, which was desperately poor. It was a very interesting experience. Unfortunately the film was never made for reasons outside my and Marlon’s control. I am very pleased, however, to have experienced the month that I spent with the Sioux Indians in South Dakota.

ME: When you made *The Battle of Algiers* and *Burn* there were a number of left-wing filmmakers making movies with an anti-imperialist message. Why do you think there are so few directors dealing with these themes today?

GP: Unfortunately there has been an ugly lowering of filmmaking standards compared to 15, 20 or 30 years ago. There is less interest in politics by filmmakers; in other words, there is less interest shown in the problems of other people. This is expressed by the fact that producers who in an earlier time would have accepted certain themes are no longer interested because they think the public would not like them.

For directors, it’s a bit different because their interests are not entirely economic but political and moral. There are people that want to make serious films, but they have problems finding producers. The level of political interest in the media and in the European public, unfortunately, has lessened.

ME: You were a member of the PCI [Italian Communist Party] until 1956. Why did you leave?

GP: I did not leave the party just because of Hungary, but because I didn’t agree with democratic centralism—at least the forms of organization that they had was very rigid. Besides that I have remained a person of the left and not an enemy of it.

ME: Do you regard yourself as a socialist?

GP: Certainly. I have a strong attachment for socialism and progressive ideas.

ME: What advice would you give young directors today?

GP: I would say maintain your courage, even if it is hard because it’s worth all the trouble in the long run. When you achieve what you set out for, it’s always repaid 10 times over and more satisfying than doing a film which you’re not passionate about. I would say hold fast and you will be rewarded.



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