

The Battle of Algiers (La Battaglia di Algeri)

Dir: Gillo Pontecorvo, Italy/Algeria, 1966

A review by Philip Roberts, Northumbria University, UK

In the contemporary political climate, terrorism and insurgency are often exploited to an alarming degree by political figures keen to take advantage of a practice that has become ever increasingly equated with innate evil. If we are to believe this common depiction of terrorism, then terrorism is always wrong, and is committed for no other reason than to do harm for harm's sake. However, it is clear that this contemporary political use of terrorism is somewhat simplistic, ignoring any wider social causes and any aims of the ongoing campaigns. Instead, coverage focuses on the act itself, making heroes of the victims and the law enforcers working to catch terrorists, and demonising the terrorists themselves. Such simplistic representation tells us nothing about the phenomenon itself. Indeed, recent depictions of terrorism in popular cinema have tended to adhere to this simplistic understanding of terrorism. Recent blockbuster films such as *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006) give little mention to the wider social implications or causes of terrorism, presenting each attack in isolation, serving to simply condemn it. Whilst notable mention should be given to *Paradise Now*, (2005) a recent film dealing with Palestinian suicide bombers, it would appear as if the representation of terrorism seen in the first two (vastly more financially successful) films reflects the dominant trend. And in a media culture where the quality of a film seems so often to be measured by its realism, such a simplistic take on terrorism is inexcusable. With this in mind, I wish to direct the viewing public to Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), a film that breaks open the issue and presents a more realistic depiction of terrorist and counter-terrorist campaigns, whilst paying heed to the techniques, social causes and implications of such actions.

The Battle of Algiers teaches us much about terrorism, particularly about how an effective terrorist and anti-terrorist campaign may be mounted. Being a form of mass entertainment, the film of course fails to provide a balanced understanding of terrorism, as it is heavily dramatized, and audience responses are often manipulated by filmic technique. However, the film-going public would hardly want to watch a purely factual account of the battle itself, so if we are to remain within the confines of cinema then I would suggest that *The Battle of Algiers* is as detailed a representation of terrorism and counter-terrorism as we are likely to find. Since it is considered one of the most realistic portrayals of a terrorist campaign in cinema history, *The Battle of Algiers* has inspired and provided a technical basis for many would-be revolutionary movements (Solinas, 1973: 199).

The film teaches us about revolutionary techniques by presenting two stages of action; the progression of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) insurgent group's terrorist campaign, and then its end at the hands of French paratroopers. As such, we witness effective examples of both a terrorist and anti-terrorist operation, allowing the viewer to clearly identify how both sides operate, allowing the viewer to become involved with both sides of the events.

Much of the early part of the film is spent in showing the FLN setting up a 'safe area,' an important part of any terrorist campaign. By declaring that the FLN is to ban alcohol, drugs, pimping and prostitution, the organisation is able to cement its influence and authority over the Kasbah. The people are forced to choose; either they bow to these demands or are punished - as is one man when he is executed by Ali La Pointe. With the people of the Kasbah obedient to them, the FLN are able to move freely, the people providing their shelter and ultimately support. The wedding scene shows the FLN having set up a parallel revolutionary government in the Kasbah. In the scene, the people turn to them for authority rather than the French colonial government. From this, we are presented with the leap from the terrorist claiming to represent a constituent people, to actually representing them, with popular support and obedience.

As the film progresses, we are presented with several key scenes informing us about the intricacies of a terrorist campaign. These sequences show how the FLN drove the people of the Kasbah towards actively engaging with them; how they gained popular sympathy by coercing the French authorities into detonating a bomb in the Kasbah, thus proving to the people who the 'real' enemy is, and so transforming the FLN from an organisation representing just an ideology into an organisation representing a people. The bombing of the Kasbah shows that all Arabs are targeted regardless of their political affiliations, convincing the Kasbah population that the French are the enemy of their people, and that they must act accordingly. With this, the FLN are then free to act upon the anger of the Kasbah towards the French, declaring, "The FLN will avenge you!" Thus, it is demonstrated how an insurgency group may successfully turn the local population's anger into support.

With the appearance of the French Paratroopers and the intellectual voice of the French colonialist Colonel Mathieu, the film resists the temptation to empathise with the FLN absolutely. Instead, the film adopts a critical standpoint, allowing us to gain a better understanding of both the terrorist campaign itself and the approach to counteracting it. In his briefing, Mathieu informs us of the two main objectives of mounting an anti-terrorist operation in Algiers: how to identify the enemy and how to destroy him. In contrast to other popular representations of terrorism, *The Battle of Algiers* encourages us to take part in a debate on the issue of terrorism. From Mathieu's briefing, we are able to understand why it becomes so difficult to identify the enemy. For example, we are presented with the pyramid-like structure of the FLN, starting with the commander in chief and expanding outward from him, in which each member has a maximum of only three contacts. As Mathieu summarises, "We do not know who they are because they do not know each other." Such a refusal to pander to terrorism-sensitive audiences is refreshing.

In the most illuminating briefing given by Mathieu, we learn that the only way of positively identifying terrorists is through effective intelligence. As he explains, "The military angle is secondary; it is the police side that matters." It is of course the terrorist group's intention to overcome the military advantage of the colonial power. The terrorist must remain invisible, mount his attack then slip out of sight forcing the authorities into a constant state of defence, unable to mount any effective counter-operations. By observing the unfolding terrorist campaign the audience becomes aware of the difficulties faced by the counter-terrorist forces, and of the need for effective and rapidly collected military information. For example, by changes in its operations, the FLN can render useless any information obtained in under twenty four-hours.

We are then introduced to another important debate regarding contemporary terrorism, namely the justification of torture. As with other the issues raised in the film, this is in no way diluted for its audience. We are very much encouraged to consider the issues without prejudice; in a way other films may often wish to avoid. Bruce Hoffman discusses the real life justification for torture by the French:

The French army in Algeria found it easy to justify such extraordinary measures, given the extraordinary conditions. The prevailing exculpatory philosophy among the Paras can be summed up by Massu's [the real figure upon who Mathieu is based] terse response to complaints, that the innocent (that is, the victims of the next attack) deserve more protection than the guilty (Hoffman, 1998: 63).

We are therefore able to see how many attitudes and philosophies in the film are authentic to the real battle. The Paras' justification of torture forms part of an often complex dialogue present within the film, made between Mathieu and the French media, and later between Mathieu and Ben M'hidi, Mathieu's FLN counterpart, who is himself the dominant intellectual voice of the terrorists on the justification for atrocities committed during the battle.

In the face of the public outrage conveyed by the French reporters, Mathieu asserts that torture or "interrogation" is necessary to defeat the FLN, and if France wishes to remain in Algeria, then it should accept what that entails. This makes Mathieu, or even the film itself, appear somewhat cold and remorseless, but as the film's screenwriter Franco Solinas explains, this is to miss the point. "[Mathieu] embodies a realistic idea: the 'rationality' that supports a certain kind of society and should not be ignored" (Solinas, 1973: 63). Mathieu presents a rational method for the continuation of French rule in Algeria, and unlike most of today's powers, he accepts the use of torture. More importantly, he also asks France to accept the necessity for it.

The counter-discourse of the film, voiced by Ben M'hidi, defends the FLN's actions in a different way. Rather than simply stating that the attacks are necessary, he justifies them by reminding us that the FLN attacks caused far less casualties than colonial France did in Indochina, and that the FLN are in no way as advanced or prolific at killing as are the French. When being questioned about the morality of planting explosives in women's baskets, he asks of the reporters, "Give me the bombers and you can have the baskets." Here, he comes to the same conclusion as the real FLN leader Ramdane Abdane, declaring, "I see hardly any difference between a girl who places a bomb in a milk-bar and the French aviator who bombards a *mechta* [village] or who drops napalm on a *zone interdite*" (Horne, 1977: 186).

The Battle of Algiers gives us two important arguments on the nature and justification of terrorism. M'hidi presents the leftist standpoint; that state terrorism is the real problem, and that insurgency terrorism, by contrast, does little damage and causes little casualties. He also suggests that the terrorism is justified, as a means to fight against the massive state killing apparatus, and to free oppressed peoples. Mathieu argues from an alternative point of view, justifying his actions not by such comparative moral reasoning, but simply on the grounds of preventing further violence. The film recognises the contradictions inherent in all these arguments; that by committing attacks in order to prevent further ones or committing attacks in response to previous ones, will each only ever lead to an escalation of violence. This, as Mathieu admits, leads us into a viscous circle.

Despite the high volume of factual information contained in *The Battle of Algiers*, I must stress that it is a fiction film, and is never completely impartial. Indeed, at no point does it attempt to be so, as total indifference would deprive the audience from the emotional impact of the film. However, it does manage to disguise this entertainment function by presenting the action in newsreel-like, grainy black-and-white, somehow hiding its pro-FLN agenda by at least giving the impression of being a balanced, historical study of the conflict. Pontecorvo, the film's director, wanted the film to look as realistic or as 'true' as possible. He explains, "Since the people are used to coming in contact with the black and white reality of the mass media – telephotos, TV newsreels, etc. – an image seems most true to them when it is furnished by the media" (Solinas, 1973: 167). Presented as a newsreel, the film does present its story as 'true.' Just like these techniques, the production itself was designed to be manipulative. During filmmaking, the crew would "cover the areas that were to be shot with forty to fifty-yard sheets" (Solinas, 1973: 171). This served to block out the sun and give the film a dull, depressing feel - visually communicating the unease of the city. Despite giving the illusion of impartiality, the film is biased towards the FLN's struggle; Pontecorvo admits it to be "anti the French permanence in Algeria" (Solinas, 1973: 166). Early on, we are placed in the shoes of Ali La Pointe, trapped in prison by three walls and the guillotine – making for a powerful metaphor. Here, it's obvious the film is more than just a factual account. What use would it be to cut from empty wall to empty wall in a documentary film? As J Mellen has noted, "Pontecorvo's approach to the political and ideological realities of Algeria is lyrical rather than analytical" (Mellen, 1973: 24).

Throughout the early stages of the film, we continue to identify with Ali and the FLN, that is, up until we first see the practical application of the FLN's campaign. By representing graphic killings perpetrated by anonymous people, we are encouraged not to sympathise with the FLN's righteous actions, but to be shocked. By the next scene, we are ready to sympathise with the frustration of the police chief at his own inability to prevent the murders. However, this does not last long. We are ultimately encouraged to switch viewpoints when we see the eventual French response, whereby the authorities detonate a bomb in the Kasbah. This attack is clearly anything but impartial. Joan Mellen explains the techniques employed to manipulate the audience:

To dramatise the senseless cruelty of that first act against civilians, Pontecorvo must look to the potential of the camera [...] He views from above, surveying the entire scene as bodies are pulled from the rubble. The camera then descends, tilting deeper and deeper into the debris so that the devastation can be viewed from every angle (Mellen, 1973: 45).

As an audience, we are encouraged to react like the people of the Kasbah, to be affected by the attack, and to be convinced by the FLN's promises. Again, this empathy does let up when the FLN make another attack, and we are once again horrified by an emphasis on the destruction caused. However, throughout all the attacks, the only group we have absolute sympathy with is the victims of the attacks, and in this respect, *The Battle of Algiers* is similar to other representations of terrorism in film.

It is not until closer analysis that we are able to see the film does not show both sides of the battle impartially, but it does presents each side's attacks as equally horrific. Notably, Pontecorvo found it difficult to express sympathy for the FLN because his attempts to do so were "further complicated by his feelings that the inhumane means of warfare used by both sides were comparably reprehensible for the suffering they caused to the innocent" (Mellen,

1973: 45). The only difference between the portrayal of the two sides appears to be that Pontecorvo shows the FLN's actions as being at least partly justified, to end oppression at the hands of the colonial French.

The Battle of Algiers does not show impartial examples of actions and reaction as you would expect to find from a study of the Algerian terrorist campaign. It instead shows examples of mass murder, and outrages. There is a chance that some may become too preoccupied with moralising these events to learn from the film's deft handling of terrorist and counter-terrorist techniques. However, given its focus on social and political strategies, the film's unique presentation of terrorism and counter-terrorism means that, especially in the contemporary political climate, it deserves further viewing. It should also be noted, however, that due to the film's sympathy with the terrorists, it is left unclear whether the Algiers campaign was indeed "anti-terror" or just an act of colonialism.

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The Passenger (Professione: Reporter)

Dir: Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy/France/Spain, 1975

A review by Irini Stamatopoulou, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece

During a professional trip in the North African wilderness, investigating guerrilla freedom-fighters, reporter David Locke (Jack Nicholson), finds himself spontaneously exchanging identity documents with that of a dead man in his neighbor's hotel room. His wife is trying to "reinvent" him (to use the words from the film itself) through the producer's editing of his documentary footage taken in the desert – making a film which would be "a portrait of David." At the same time, Locke assumes the life of the dead man, he meets a girl whose name is never given (even in the credits Maria Schneider is mentioned as 'Girl') and to whom he never introduces himself. Locke makes a long, apocalyptic journey across disorientating, hallucinatory lands, on a playful, hopeless effort to move away from his existential malaise and trace his spiritual, moral and emotional inner fate.

This existentialism-influenced film raises many philosophical issues about the human condition, as Antonioni himself states in a 1980 interview with Aldo Tassone (Di Carlo, 1996). The reporter, according to the director, is leaving on a journey in order to forget himself. The desert landscape - where it's of no importance that Robertson be Robertson and Locke be Locke - represents his own redemption, and a place where his desire for death could be fulfilled. As R Barthes, would say, it is his wish to disappear without being killed. This philosophical sentiment is echoed by Locke, who says in the film, "People disappear every time they leave the room."

The film's preoccupation with existentialism is conveyed by its explicitly deceptive structure. Antonioni's utilizes the kind of aesthetic technique which P P Pasolini defines as "an interior monolog in images" (Pasolini, 1976: 551). In other words, the distinction between what the character sees subjectively and what the camera sees objectively vanishes, in favor of the camera adopting a kind of "simulation" (Deleuze, 2005: 143) or mimesis, which shows us just the character's way of seeing. In *The Passenger*, the notion of a subjective camera or point of view is abandoned, creating the impression that shots often represent only the psychological mood or moral status of the main character. The image often functions only as his personal projection to the world, as only a mental investment on the actual events of the plot. In the lead character, Locke's words, "Perception is unreliable."

This kind of disorientating filmmaking technique is very clear in the last seven minute single-take shot at the Spanish hotel, in which the camera "escapes" from the iron-barred window. At this time, the hero is found in a disorientated condition, unable to identify with anything or anyone. To him, the world exists on the other side of the window. As Antonioni explains, commenting on this particular shot in his interview with Aldo Tassone (Di Carlo 1996), the camera's impossible movement through the iron lattice visualizes Locke's spiritual flight out in the open, as well as Antonioni's disengagement from the norms and constraints of the traditional cinematic grammar.

Antonioni's filmmaking technique foregrounds style, fiction, and the characters' temporal perception, by making narrative speed fragmented - sometimes going from one moment to another, skipping the passage of whole periods. Thus, the characters are situated in very disconnected spaces. Throughout the film, Antonioni maintains an unsettling focus on details – shots such as those on bugs on wires or the ceiling fan with its constant, monotonous, almost annoying sound.

Even though we can gather from the plot where the action takes place, the story's spatial orientation seems almost irrelevant. Character identities are confused, literally at the level of the plot, and symbolically by the director's filmmaking. Very indicative of the film's theme of identity-muddling and disorientation is the fact that Locke's wife always uses the pronouns "he" or "him" when speaking, never making clear for the viewer whether she's referring to David Locke or the dead man, Robertson.

At its most unsettling, the incompatibility of the film's hodological spaces, mixed together by the director, transforms the scenes into a no-place notion. David Locke, for example, waiting in empty squares, never meets his appointments. This unreality is symbolically captured when the hero first meets the intermediary with his other, virtual self, known as "the girl," amidst the uninhabitable and "impossible" utopian Gaudi architecture. At this point, Locke himself - from who's perspective the film is made - starts to falsify his own story, committing what Deleuze calls "the flagrant offence of making up legends" (Deleuze, 2005: 145). Here, the characters' deceitful correspondences with each other eliminate their actual lives in favor of what is perceived – meaning any notion of "reality" is further de-constructed.

The main character's propensity for devising his self is more apparent in the scene where David Locke listens to his taped conversation with Robertson. While listening, he visualizes the recalled presence of his own, now assumed personality, "projected" through the hotel-room window. In this scene, Antonioni portrays not only Locke's invention of his own new fictional persona, but also provides us with an interesting allegory of the process of movie-watching.

Antonioni's *The Passenger* combines classical notions of realistic or naturalistic representation in film, with a more modern approach which offers the deconstruction of the human experience – revealing everything to be part of a cinematic illusion. The film's ambivalent flirtation with the notion of appearances, facts, documents and truth is given out through the reporter, being constantly opposed to his own careful falsification. This is very apparent in the scene where David Locke records an interview with the tribe's witchdoctor. In this sequence, he and the witchdoctor reverse their roles. The witchdoctor tells Locke that his "sincere" questions are much more revealing about who he really is, than his own answers are of him. After telling the reporter that they can have a conversation "only if it's not just what you think is sincere but also what I believe to be honest," the witchdoctor then grasps the camera, holds it against Locke, and puts him in the position of the interviewed. The witchdoctor's play with the meaning of the words "sincerity" and "honesty" together challenge the viewer to consider the reporter's own fraud.

Director Antonioni - characterized by Deleuze as one of the masters of obsessive framing - moves his hero between identity and non-being, always making his audience speculate about the film's all-consuming objectivity. The absence of a realistic truth about the characters is reproduced from the basic level of the plot, to the narrative discourses suggested by the story, and in the *mise en scène* itself. Antonioni's insistence on empty spaces foregrounds

differences between the mental and the physical, the real and the imaginary. The framing and storyline work together to evoke a new level of existence, a reality defined purely by superficial appearance – and by the filmmaking process. The direction is all part of Locke's characterization. As Deleuze has poignantly observed, "[T]he neurotic, or the man losing his identity, enters into a 'free indirect' relationship with the poetic vision of the director" (Deleuze, 1992: 75).

David Locke is central the viewer's engagement with this existential theme. He describes himself in the film as many things: "a waiter in Gibraltar, a novelist in Cairo or a gunrunner." Rather than being ground in reality, Locke's identity is shaped dependent on his own changing interpretation. The grand significance of Locke has been summed up by Deleuze, who notes, "He is simultaneously the man of pure descriptions and the maker of the crystal image, the indiscernibility of the real and the imaginary" (Deleuze, 2005: 128, 129). In the story as well as in the way he is portrayed by the director – David Lock is a true forger, a counterfeiter, who assumes the identity of an outlaw.

In *The Passenger* the 'true world' does not exist, and, if it did, would be inaccessible, impossible to describe, and, if it could be described, would be useless, superfluous. David Locke is unrecognizable by his own wife as a corpse. His lover-bodyguard couldn't identify him with a proper name while he was alive. To add to this objectiveness, the Nietzschean notion of eternal return (entropy) is symbolically reproduced - at an iconographic level - through the visual motif of the spirals: sand swirling in the wind, the spinning fan, and Antonioni's various pans. By its closure, the film leaves the viewer with a pleasurable feeling of inevitability and objectivity – a sentiment embodied most clearly in the character's mystic encounter with his own death. The film's ending combines destiny with the accidental, in an inescapable and desired combination.

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Tony Takitani

Dir: Jun Ichikawa, Japan, 2004

A review by Paul Roquet, University of California, Berkeley, USA

Jun Ichikawa's *Tony Takitani* (2004) comes as the first feature film adaptation of a short story by Haruki Murakami. Anyone familiar with Murakami's work (a translation of Takitani was originally published in the *New Yorker*) will quickly recognize the characters: a reclusive but ultimately good-hearted man who doesn't fit into society but doesn't mind his isolation, the beautiful woman with a strange quirk who appears out of nowhere to love him, and the strangely shimmering materials of everyday life. Ichikawa effectively recreates Murakami's story through the film's gorgeous minimalist aesthetic and its moving take on the role of the material world in the process of human grief.

Tony, the title character, works as a successful illustrator, specializing in detailed mechanical drawings. The film's calm narration relates how, while at art school in the politically charged 1960s, Tony could never understand his friends' emotion-oriented drawings. To Tony, they were simply 'immature.' Skeptical of social involvement, Tony takes refuge in the small details of his domestic isolation, searched out and encapsulated upon his canvas.

As the leftist politics of the 1960s subsided and Japan slid into material affluence, Tony's mechanical, matter-of-fact drawing style became in demand. Tony's rationality and efficiency were perfectly suited to the solitary and functional outlook of the new Japanese consumer class. Tony's own isolation, the film hints, is but one example of a larger social withdrawal into the quiet world of consumer comfort.

As I will explore, this soft material world is effectively conveyed through the austere aesthetics of the film. The pleasure of watching *Tony Takitani* is the supple stillness of Ichikawa's images and Ryuichi Sakamoto's piano score. Emotions are revealed economically through the quiet portrayal of individual moments, rather than dramatic back-and-forth splicing of characters confronting each other. There is no 'drama' here in the conventional sense. Rather, *Tony Takitani* quietly maps out the investments Tony makes in the people and objects around him.

The main characters in the film each rely on material objects in order to make them feel complete. Tony spends all his money on art supplies. One day he meets Eiko, a soft-spoken woman who relates to clothing the same way Tony relates to drawing. Designer clothing "fills up the emptiness inside her," Eiko says. She admits straight out that she is "selfish" in buying so many clothes. But they fill in the gap in her relation to the world, and they give her a reason to exist. Tony intuitively understands this, and asks her to marry him.

This leads to first cracks in Tony's carefully controlled material and emotional environment. For the first few months they are together, Tony is overjoyed, but plagued by a constant fear they will be separated again. Previously, he was content living by himself, but once joined by

a companion, Tony cannot bear to see her go. While solitude ensured a degree of calm in Tony's day-to-day existence, expanding his life to include Eiko involves a potential danger. She is an unstable element, and Tony worries that these new emotions may one day rupture his clockwork existence.

After a trip to Europe, Eiko's obsession with designer clothing begins to get out of hand. A whole room in their apartment fills up with her ever-expanding wardrobe. At long last, Tony registers a hesitant objection: "Do you really need so many clothes?" She tries to cut down, but can't shake the impulse to buy more. She sits alone in the wardrobe, chiding herself: "Why do I need all these clothes? I only have one body." Distraught after returning a favored outfit to the store, she dies, off-screen, in a car accident. In a sequence characteristic of the film's understatement, this is heard but not seen, and even the sound of skidding tires only implies the crash that must have followed. Eiko's death only becomes clear when Tony appears at home in the next scene clutching a box of ashes.

From this point on, Tony's own material needs take the viewer into more disturbing psychological territory. Eiko's clothing - once the very center of her being - begins to haunt him. Tony goes so far as to hire a woman who looks like his wife to wear her clothes around his office, apparently hoping to breathe life back into his wife by revitalizing the clothing that was so much a part of her. In a sumptuous sequence of panning shots across the hanging clothes, the film luxuriates in an almost overwhelming sensuousness of texture. But since these clothes now are also a remainder and a reminder of the body that once filled them, this sensuous beauty becomes almost grotesque. This is too much to bear for the girl Tony hires, who after trying on some of Eiko's outfits, begins to cry uncontrollably. Tony is taken aback, but all she can say by way of explanation is, "They are just so beautiful."

At this point the film becomes as much an exploration of grief as of solitude. Tony's desperation in hiring a girl to re-embody Eiko's love of clothing is both touching and tragic. But the girl too disappears, despite Tony's attempts to contact her.

Tony Takitani merges the isolation of the designer lifestyle with the solitude of grief in a way that is both touching and unsettling. When the story ends, Tony is left alone in his empty, muted apartment. He carries a lingering sadness, but for him, he has at the same time simply returned to the quiet center of his solitary world. Just as Eiko breezed into his life, her body and her clothes eventually vanish without a trace. Time continues to move along - made apparent by a series of camera wipes from right to left, scene pushing into scene, pushing into scene. There is a melancholy feeling to this transition, but also a sense that it is inevitable and therefore pointless to resist. Everyone leaves Tony's life just as they entered it: quietly and efficiently. The film ends, leaving us simultaneously enthralled and disenchanted with the beauty of Tony's material world.

Children of Men

Dir: Alfonso Cuarón, UK, 2006

A review by Emily E. Crawford, Wright State University, USA

Many films of the past have portrayed the ultimate decimation of mankind and desolation of the earth through battles against such epic monsters as giant insects, giant mammals, aliens, diseases, and the list goes on. It's been an entertaining genre for the thrill-seeking film enthusiast, to see how creatively film makers can bring about the destruction of the earth.

Time has brought us to an age where, though many of the same monstrous themes of films and novels remain popular, the agent of evil that is brought upon mankind is a little closer to our perception, and not nearly as outlandish. Concerns about the end of the earth are no longer being brought about by a sixty foot green monster from Mars, but by the actions of the human population itself – a concept which now manifests frequently in both the film industry and literature.

Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006) is an exciting and emotionally moving film about the bleak future of our world in which the infertility of women has turned the earth into a chaotic, desolate, and war-drenched reality. There have been no births in eighteen years. News of the tragic death of the current youngest human being on the planet opens the film, watched by a crowd of desperate and shocked faces glaring at the TV screen in a street-side coffee shop. As the movie progresses, we are given an insight into a world where information and technology has led to a mechanical society in which people follow the "experts," trusting them and acting according to their plan. The viewer is struck head-on by the chaos of the first scene, in which a million hustling and bustling minds stop dead in their tracks, united in horror. We can hardly accept the possibility of the massively diverse population of New York City suddenly stopping together, unified by one thought of terror. Here, the crowd has gathered around their only mode of information which connects the bubbles of their individual routines and obligations.

The passivity and isolation of the human race is portrayed discreetly and blatantly throughout the film, with interesting touches of symbolism and allegory. Theo Faron, (played by Clive Owen), is the disillusioned, less-than-heroic lead of the story, whose obvious vulnerability and simple humanity allows the viewer to not just sympathize, but empathize with his struggles - feeling isolated and afraid, almost to the breaking point, just as Theo does. The world has become the fiery playground of a war-hungry nation that has slipped into paranoid frenzy, intent on securing "their homeland" and "their way of life" by driving out every immigrant in England. The film is colored in a vast palate of black and grey. From the very beginning, we are drawn into the decrepit ruins of a world that is very likely to end.

Within the background of the score we hear a high-pitched ring, like the loud ringing in the ears after a concert, or after being in a dance club all night. This phenomenon is explained later by Theo's ex-lover Julian Taylor, (Julianne Moore). The ringing you hear is the sound of

ear cells dying, their "swan song" so to speak, she says. "After it disappears you'll never hear that frequency again." Julian advises him to "enjoy it while it lasts." The distracting ringing in the ear reflects the slow decay and inevitable death of the world in which we find Julian and Theo – all struggling for those last few gasps of breath before the end, and refusing to go down without a fight. Indeed, now the human race is struggling for survival, it has become an army, locked into a violent and hate-filled civil war.

Jasper Palmer (Michael Caine) is pretty much the last of Theo's friends in the world. He is a jaunting, outgoing and hippie-looking old individual with a taste for smoking in its many shades. All of them are crawling through their lives, trying to stay alive amidst the constant threat of violence from those of opposing opinions motivated by instinctual reactions and panicked states. On one hand, the government tries to clean out the cumbersome pests that have made their way into their land looking for safety and security. On the other, are those who stand up for those people, but who have fallen into the same trap and lust for violence and rage. All people are driven to act dramatically in order to save their lives. They follow their respective leaders, and fight with everything they have. It is this blind loyalty to the higher up - the "experts" - which leads, in my eyes, to the bitter civil wars that follow.

We soon find out exactly why Julian has contacted Theo when she explains that she needs to get a certain young woman to the coast. Theo reluctantly agrees and we enter the house of Nigel, (Danny Huston), where he tries to get help. Nigel has managed to partially save some historic pieces of work, but it seems that in this dying world, history plays no significant part. Where the end is drawing near, who has time to appreciate accomplishments of the past? When Theo finally meets Kee, (Claire-Hope Ashitey), we discover she is the young girl he must help to get to the coast, to meet the ship named "Tomorrow" that will take her to safety at the Human Project. She is pregnant. Now, Theo is armed with a precious and infinitely important task.

I was shocked to watch the passive and futile responses of the population whom the baby was to preserve. Again, there is a blind allegiance, a determination and resignation to despair which leaves the majority in a destructive panic. The world's civilians are caught up in a situation where the only information they receive is that shown on TV. We are given a clear example of media manipulation later, when our protagonists are pursued by the police. Two policemen are shot out of panic when Theo's car is stopped as they race to safety. But they are later portrayed as terrorists, wanted for murdering two cops - and are considered by the authorities to be armed and dangerous. From our perspective, they are innocent bystanders caught up in the madness.

Theo takes up new responsibility as he must guide Kee and her caretaker to safety. In a little shabby, cold room, we witness the birth of Kee's child, by far the most emotionally evocative and powerful scenes in the movie. Kee is alone, having never been exposed to childbirth or indeed having ever seen a pregnant woman. She struggles through it and in the end produces a beautiful baby girl. Another shocking display of disillusionment is played out by the firing soldiers amidst the rubble; fighting has become their last preoccupation with no other conviction and no will to act in any other way than to submit to orders.

Here, again, is the human reaction of panic: these people seem to be trapped within a cage of ignorance and one-way communication. Kee and Theo walk by these people, who stop for a moment to gawk at the child, and then immediately resume firing. This proves to be a very powerful illustration of what has happened to humanity; as their last and only hope passes by,

they are left powerless to feel or act in any way other than as instructed. What I love about this film is the richness in these portrayals, and its allegorical symbolism that so vividly defines one man's vision of the world, both as it is now, and what it may become in the future - should our reckless and massively destructive behavior never change.

Along with these dramatic devices, the film also uses more subtle metaphors, to aid in our engagement with the characters. For example, clad in a bulky, ugly grey pair of socks, Theo's feet appear front and center in a shot in which he relaxes in Jasper's home. Throughout the movie, the feet reflect the personal journey that Theo goes through in a visual, simple, and symbolic way. Theo floats through life at this point in Jasper's house, devoid of all hope for the future and disconnected from his life. The blatant appearance of his relaxed state, with his feet crossed and lounging on the table, suggests to me his own passive attitude and carelessness. He has lost hope, and sits as if he has consented to drown in the chaos that has become of the world. He will "put his feet up," watch, and sit back as it all goes to hell.

As the movie progresses, Theo's own peril and the important role he has been thrust into wakes him up. He is confronted with terrors all around him, and likewise, his bare feet endure numerous wounds and pains. At the same time as suffering this discomfort, Theo is forced to the harsh realization that this dying world around him cannot be ignored. Towards the end of the film, when he finally grasps a hint of hope, as plans are made to get him and Kee to the coast, Theo is presented with a pair of shoes. He finally finds steady ground, and a clear path he can now travel to the end. Now, instead of being a bystander, comfortable on the couch in his socks and drifting through existence, Theo is "dressed" with a purpose and a new vision of hope for the future embodied by the "Human Project."

The film is filled with imagery depicting the human race as distracted and controlled by the mass media. The dining room in Nigel's home, along with the high-tech futuristic video game that occupies his son at the dinner table, is just an example of the many creative touches that reveal Cuarón's vision. Perhaps most delightfully surprising was the inflated pig floating alongside two tall industrial towers, seen clearly outside his windows as Nigel and Theo are talking. "Algie" - the affectionate nickname given to him by his creators, Pink Floyd - floats majestically by, just as he can be seen on the cover of the Pink Floyd album *Animals*. This particular image correlates with the provocative themes regarding "humanity" evoked within the film. It's notable that in the album's lyrics to tracks such as "Pigs," "Dogs," and "Sheep," the words ominously reflect unique metaphors for human beings; perhaps we are living a controlled, blinkered life, just like animals themselves.

Children of Men provides a commentary on society today. Even now, technology in the modern age has certainly changed the face of communication, industry, media, and many other vital areas of societies all over the world. Ironically, there is a growing isolation of people through the advancement of communication forms. We no longer need to go out and meet with a friend or colleague when we can instant message them online, or send a quick text on the cell phone. There is much to be said about the impact of such modern technology on the human mind and human relationships. In Richard Stivers's book *Shades of Loneliness*, Stivers goes into a fascinating discussion about the effects that modern technology has had on the human population, focusing primarily from a mental perspective, in which he notes, "Technology makes human relationships abstract, and thus impersonal" (Stivers, 2004:17).

Not just making social interactions less common, the massive expanse of industry and technology has creating more and more ways for us to do less and less of the work; we let the

"experts" handle what we don't understand, and we consume more and more to fulfill our own personal and isolated pleasures. We discard at leisure what we don't need, ignoring the consequences.

What Cuarón's film visualizes so vividly is a picture of a world in which the human dependence on the mass media, and the worst in human instincts in a difficult situation are taken to the extreme. Both are presented throughout using brilliant devices of symbolism. *Children of Men* conveys the essence of human emotions and instincts that could potentially drive any of us to engage in a destructive and hateful course of action as a mode of survival. It also shows how the "depersonalization" produced by a technological world only deepens these human instincts.

Children of Men has displayed, for me, a brilliant insight into a raw reality that can only be seen after we step out from in front of the television. In the film, we are presented with the dangers of massively expanding technology and media globalization, which can together result in the isolation and fragmentation of people – as argued by anti-globalization activists such as Naomi Klein, amongst others. No matter what your personal beliefs and political views regarding these issues, I believe *Children of Men* is a fantastic and imaginative creation which showcases the director's ability take a passionate story, and thread it with symbolism and connotations that directly point to concerns which threaten our society in the present.

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Notes on Marie Menken

Dir: Martina Kudláček, USA, 2006

A review by Sarah Boslaugh, Washington University in St Louis, USA

The Lithuanian-American artist and filmmaker Marie Menken (1909-1970) is better known today by her reputation than by her work. She was an integral part of the underground art scene in New York City from the 1940s through to the 1960s. Starting out as a painter and collagist, she then switched to film after working on the *Geography of the Body* (1943), directed by her husband, Willard Maas. Andy Warhol, Stan Brakhage and Kenneth Anger were among her colleagues, and they and others testify that she was an important contributor to the aesthetic typical of their movement, as well as a notable personality within the avant-garde art scene of the day. However, Menken's work is rarely seen today, and she is more widely remembered for her appearance in several Andy Warhol films, including *Chelsea Girls* (1966), and as the inspiration for the character of Martha in Edward Albee's 1972 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* So here's an artistic and historical mystery: why did Menken's work fall out of favor, while that of Warhol, Brakhage and Anger, among others, found its place in the canon of twentieth-century art and film?

The possibilities are numerous. Maybe her work wasn't that good, and she was simply a hanger-on who is only interesting in the context of other, better artists. Maybe as a woman, she was excluded from positions of power and influence in an art scene dominated by gay men. Maybe she didn't care, and was simply happy to create her work - whether anyone else ever saw it or not. Maybe she had no talent for or interest in self-promotion, and her voice simply got drowned out by the louder voices around her.

Notes on Marie Menken (2006), a feature-length documentary by Martina Kudláček, is a welcome effort to bring long-overdue attention to Menken's work and life. It's not a traditional documentary, and is more interested in posing questions than answering them. In fact, it often seems more like a collage of undigested material than a finished product, leaving viewers to piece together some sense of a whole from the materials presented. While this can be an interesting approach, it can also be frustrating, particularly when the end result seems to be more a product of laziness and wishful thinking than artistic judgement.

Notes on Marie Menken is constructed from three types of material: segments from films by Menken and her contemporaries, interviews with Menken's peers, and abstract footage which appears to be Kudláček's attempt to create her own Menken-like abstract film. The value of *Notes on Marie Menken* rests primarily on the film clips, many of which are not available elsewhere. The interviews, conducted with several of Menken's peers including Peter Kubelka, Jonas Mekas, Gerard Malanga, Billy Name and Alfred Leslie, are more of a mixed bag. Some of them provide some real insight and help place Menken's life and work in context. Others are in severe need of editing or could have been left entirely on the cutting room floor. Almost all the abstract footage could have been eliminated: it's simply not that interesting and adds little to the film.

The most important function of *Notes on Marie Menken* is to make selections from Menken's work available for viewing. These samples reveal that she had an individual style, with an eye for beauty and an ability to see the profound in the mundane: water droplets on leaves, monks at their daily labors, flowers blooming in a garden. As a bonus, they are nicely complimented in this film by original music written by John Zorn. Some of the clips from other filmmakers are fascinating as well, including segments which show Menken working as an artist and appearing as an actress in films by Maas and others (the outtakes from his film *Naricissus* (1956), set in a gay bar, are alone almost worth the price of a ticket). Perhaps *Notes* will spark interest in Menken and lead to restoration of her films, many or all of which apparently were rotting in a storage locker until rediscovered by Kudláček; if not, at least we now have some opportunity to understand why Menken was held in such high regard by her peers at the time.

In the film, Menken's colleague Peter Kubelka describes her filmmaking process as one of continual discovery: "Her films are expeditions like Columbus, into country she had not seen before herself." The breadth of Menken's vision is shown in the contrast between two films she shot in Europe. *Gravediggers* (1958) portrays the daily life of an order of monks whose discipline is digging graves: it is astonishing in its beauty and simplicity, and conveys a sense of restfulness and calm. In contrast, *Arabesque for Kenneth Anger* (1958), which was shot in the Alhambra, is a symphony of color, texture and rhythm, in which the camera is almost constantly moving. *Arabesque* also incorporates an early example of a technique developed by Menken to exploit the creative capabilities of the Bolex (a hand-held, spring driven film camera with the ability to capture single frames): she shot brief segments of film with jump cuts between that, when projected, create a kaleidoscopic effect.

That's the good news about this film: lots of interesting footage by and about Marie Menken, much of it unavailable elsewhere. Here's the bad news: *Notes on Marie Menken* is a frequently exasperating and self-indulgent film which seems to include the entire length of every piece of film Kudláček shot, in order to reach the respectable length of ninety-seven minutes while only having only about an hour's of worthwhile material. Many of the interviews ramble on, most of the abstract segments are not that interesting visually, and there are frequent inclusions of footage which serve no function except to stretch out the length. It's one thing to show Gerard Malanga saying in an interview that Menken was like a mother to him. It's another to include a lengthy segment of him being driven to Queens to visit his father's crypt and Menken's grave, and getting lost twice in the process. The former illuminates the subject at hand, the latter belongs in a home movie.

Kudláček also makes odd creative choices throughout the film, and I don't mean odd as in "what an interesting idea" but odd as in "did something go wrong here?" Some of the interviews are conducted using a tripod, while some are handheld, and in one case the subject seems to be doing a piece to camera, for no apparent reason. Some of the interview subjects are conventionally lit, some are in shadow, and for a lengthy segment Alfred Leslie is shot entirely in silhouette. While this might make an interesting photograph, for an interview of any length it is an affectation which robs the audience of the opportunity to observe the subject's facial expression. Similarly, a shot of snowflakes swirling outside Leslie's window makes for a lovely short abstract visual interlude: pans up and down the surrounding buildings, and shots of workmen shoveling snow, do not. If the extraneous material were trimmed, *Notes on Marie Menken* could be a much shorter film.

It's too bad, because many interesting questions are raised by *Notes on Marie Menken*, and there would have been plenty of time to explore them if all the filler were cut. For instance: how and why did Mencken chose to marry a gay man (if indeed she realized that was what she was doing), and how did she fit into an art scene consisting largely of gay men? Did her gender limit her options or exclude her from creative or promotional relationships which ultimately limited her art? What were her early life and education like, and did her Lithuanian heritage influence her work? Jonas Mekas claims it did, but this question is not explored further. How did her heavy drinking and combative relationship with her husband affect her creative output? Why is Menken's work almost completely forgotten today, while Warhol is a household name and the works of Brakhage and Anger are screened regularly?

Notes on Marie Menken is a frustrating film because of opportunities passed over and care not taken. It fills an important niche because Menken is so little known today. Almost anything that brings attention to her work and life is valuable. There's a lot of interesting material in this film, and any opportunity to see even segments from Menken's films is very welcome. Libraries and universities will want a copy of the DVD, partially because there is nothing comparable available on the subject. On the other hand, individuals who don't have a particular interest in Menken or the mid-century art scene may find themselves exasperated by Kudláček's mannerisms and may just want to give a miss to this overlong, self-indulgent film.

Where is Sara Gomez? (¿Dónde está Sara Gomez?)

Dir: Alessandra Muller, Cuba, 2005

A review by Kwame Dixon, Syracuse University, USA

A powerful social and cultural renaissance is flowering in the Americas – Afro-Latin America is on the map. The cultural, historical and sociological relevance of Afro-Latin peoples and their histories is now the subject of vigorous examination. Across Latin America and the Caribbean, the black contribution to art, literature, film and cinema, as debated within an Afro-Latin context, is re-configuring the national identities of many Latin American and Caribbean societies. This cultural renaissance is organically linked to strong, positive, black-based social movements. A new set of cultural politics has unfolded across the black Americas. By cultural politics, I refer to a process enacted when sets of social actors shaped by, and embodying different cultural meanings and practices come into direct conflict with one another. Blacks in Latin America are renegotiating and redefining the cultural terrain as they attempt to reclaim their national histories.

The social erasure of black poets, filmmakers, actors, actresses and other artists in the cultural sphere was until recently such that Afro-Latin cultural productions were widely not recognized by the Latin American cultural and social institutions. Black cultural productions were seen as marginal, primitive and existing beneath cultural standards of Latin American societies. In fact, cultural productions and works that configure or address the image of Afro-Latin peoples within narrative texts or subtexts (literature and film) are often marginal, if not invisible, within the broad frame of the Latin American cultural lens. However, I would suggest that black social and cultural movements are now implementing new forms of cultural politics, and in doing so, are challenging old cultural notions while simultaneously calling for a new kind of progressive multicultural renaissance.

Black directors, actors and themes are more present than ever. Across the continent there are new artistic forms and cultural productions that portray the history, the struggles, and the lives of black Latin Americans from a fresh angle. Such recent films and documentaries include: *Good-Bye Momo / A Dios Momo* (2005), a beautiful tale focused on the exploits of an Afro-Uruguayan kid (dir. Leonardo Ricagni); *African Blood* (2004), a documentary on the black presence in Mexico (dir. Roberto Olivares); *Del Palenque de San Basilio* (2003), explores the largely forgotten Afro-Colombian community of Palenque de San Basilio, (dir. Edwin Goggel); *Afro-Argentines* (2002) refocuses attention on black Argentina (dir. Diego Caballos and Jorge Fortes); and *Roots of my Heart* (2001) deals with the 1912 massacre of over six-thousand members of Independents of Color (dir. Gloria Rolando). These are only a handful of some of the new films and documentary on the black Americas. Whereas blacks have long been structurally absent in Latin American cinema, or negatively portrayed, these new films on black Latin-America finally bring presence to absence.

Where is Sara Gomez? (2005) is an example of the newly emerging cultural landscape. This short but effective documentary focuses on the brief life of Sara Gomez, an Afro-Cuban, and Cuba's first female director. The title of the documentary could have easily been "Who is Sara Gomez?" given that only a few Cubans and hard core film buffs have ever heard of her. Sara Gomez was born in Cuba in 1943 into a middle class family. She studied literature, piano and Afro-Cuban ethnography before becoming a film maker. As a pioneering women and intellectual, she was a revolutionary film maker who focused on Afro-Cuban cultural and gender issues. The director relying heavily on interviews from Gomez's husband and children, as well as people, who worked with her, brings together scattered fragments of her life. Family and friends tell compassionate stories about Gomez the mother, wife, and director.

Shot in colour, with footage from Gomez's black and white films interspersed, the documentary flows naturally as the camera roves through the barrios of Havana. The director uses rare archival footage from two of Gomez's films to give the viewer a sense of her aesthetic depth and vision. The footage shot by Gomez in black and white has a soft grainy texture; the shots are well framed, the angles and lighting perfect: Gomez captures her human subject as beings fully cognizant of their difficult circumstances. Her subjects appear real and authentic – never dramatic; marginal but never marginalized.

We learn that Sara Gomez entered the Cuban Film Institute at an early age where she worked with the well known Cuban director, Tomás Gutiérrez Alea. Between 1962 and 1974, Gomez directed twelve documentaries and one critically acclaimed feature film. Gomez's best known work is *Cierta Manera / One Way or Another* (1974), in which she focuses on the life of the dispossessed, the marginal and the damned of Cuban of society as well as the social lives of blacks and other forgotten people in Cuba. Her camera captures the ways in which centuries of profound exploitation have affected the social conditions of everyday people. Her images are never harsh or uncomfortable – only disturbing. She speaks through the camera as her lens is able to frame the accumulated affects of slavery and colonial relations. Through Gomez's eyes, via the camera, we are engaging in soft voyeurism - anthropology with respect. In doing so, she creates a new landscapes and social images built on the simple idea of realism, i.e. that the lives of common people have intrinsic value.

For many, *Where is Sara Gomez?* will provide a valuable introduction to her works. In Gomez's first documentary, *I'll go to Santiago / Iré a Santiago* (1963), the camera pans from colonial monuments into urban spaces intimately inhabited by a local Afro-Cuban population. By emphasizing Santiago, as well as its economic, political and architectural legacy, Gomez makes a claim for Santiago as a vibrant point of origin where all Cubans (particularly Afro-Cuban) can reclaim there national heritage. *We've got Rhythm / Y Tenemos Sabor* (1967) is a compelling examination of Afro-Cuban instruments and musical forms: Gomez situates herself as a black woman participant-observer as she records Afro-Cuban cultural formations. Her physical presence as narrator helps convey a tone of informality, which elicit a casual, response on part of the film subjects (Benamou, 1994: 57).

Her critically acclaimed *One Way or Another / De Ceirta Manera* (1974) is a feature length film, the first to be directed by a women in Cuba. It examines the implications of being black and female in a developing country. The story focuses on the love affair between a 'mulatto' factory worker Mario, a 'dark-skinned' man from the urban ghetto, and Yolanda, a middle class 'mulata' woman. Mario being black and from the slums is seen as a 'marginal' subject and part of Cuba's underclass (Galiano, 1977: 4). Gomez posits 'marginality' as a part of the

colonial master-slave relationship, while simultaneously showing how pre-revolutionary forms of behavior, expectations, and oppression can co-exist with institutional opportunities for social transformation (Benamou, 1994: 58).

Gomez locates the ideological roots of machismo in Cuban colonial and patriarchal past. She does not focalize gender at the expense of race and cultural identity, but instead demonstrate their historical interconnections (Benamou, 1994: 58). Her work thus problematizes the complex drama of race, class, gender and colonial relations as the contradictions a new society like Cuba had to address. Embedded within Cuba's long colonial past were a series of sharply defined class and cultural prejudices where blacks were pushed to lowest level of a racialized hierarchical system, as well as being socially cleansed from Cuba's national identity. As a filmmaker and story-teller, Gomez is able to construct an airtight narrative and plot as she skillfully confronts Cubans patriarchal and racialized history.

Gomez's artistic methodology – captured by *Where is Sara Gomez?* – is best appreciated within the context of Cuban society attempt to struggle with and resolve razor sharp contradictions. The Cuban revolution of 1959 emerged, on the one hand, as a specific response to social injustice and economic inequality perpetuated over centuries, and as a complete reaffirmation of Cuban national history, on the other. In the aftermath of 1959, Cuba would build a new society to counter the effects of centuries of inequality as well as produce a new class of artists and intellectuals in order to reconstruct a new Cuban national identity. This new identity would be forged based on the old fragments of its horrific colonial experience and new ideas of the revolution. Gomez's work is representative of these new artists, and as a revolutionary film maker, she would capture the hangover of the past: slavery, colonialism – and the promise of the future – a new Cuban reality in her documentaries and films.

Where is Sara Gomez? is an extremely important documentary because it not only brings the story of Sara Gomez back to life, but we are reminded that film makers have crucial roles as organic intellectuals and story tellers in all societies. The documentary functions on several levels: first, it pays homage to and reconstructs the life of a pioneering young woman whose life ended way too early; second, as a documentary and story, it makes a small but important contribution to reconstructing Cuban national history, particularly Afro-Cuban history; third, given the absence of presence of blacks in Latin American film – particularly directors – this documentary helps to establish the presence of blacks – particularly women – by expanding the lens of Latin American cinematography. Given the relatively lack of films on black issues from Latin America, this documentary makes a significant contribution to the cinema and film studies. Sara Gomez died of severe asthma attack on June 2nd 1974.

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