David Shipp (dg.shipp@gmail.com)

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# Depictions in Film of the Algerian War of Independence

*The Algerian War* is a documentary film written and directed by Peter Batty, produced in 1984 for TV broadcast transmission by Channel 4 in the UK. It is probably fair to say that the length of the film, in five parts of roughly fifty minutes each (an hour with commercial breaks), is a fair compromise between the mission to inform, budgetary constraints, and the commercial need to appeal to a broad general audience.[1] This balance is probably about right for an Anglophone audience thirty years after events.[2] The contemporary audience would have immediately drawn parallels with the 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland[3], but the film sticks to its brief: the parallel is drawn unprompted by one interviewee, briefly. If we must label it, let's call this an example of *popular history*. It can be taken as read that what we see is a simplification: but do the form, medium and execution unavoidably mislead? Or: can they bring original insights and perspectives? Regardless of medium, popular history spotlights some aspects of a subject at the expense of others. This is as it should be: an exhaustively broad but superficial coverage would serve no-one. There are pitfalls, but equally opportunities. Popular history needs to *engage* as well as *educate*: the viewer should 'lean forward' and be motivated to learn more. I feel this is a useful 'litmus test' for good popular history - to which I will return… The point has important consequences: the selective treatment can be turned to advantage if it provokes questions in the mind of the viewer. This film is hard-hitting when it needs to be, deploying grim imagery of atrocities to underline the human cost, to catch the viewer's attention, and to engage their emotions. These generals and colonels nearly overthrew the French state, they are openly admitting to crimes against humanity, they seem to be very cocksure – why are they still at liberty! What happened to them, and what were the repercussions in France and in Algeria after independence and the mass exodus of the Europeans? Stay tuned, viewer: but be aware the film must leave these and much else of significance as homework for you…

This principle of *engagement* also applies to the *internal* structuring of a multi-part film such as this. It's important to keep the viewer coming back for more, and techniques familiar from other genres such as detective fiction are evident: an arresting pre-credits sequence, a strong and clear chronological structure with a vigorous narrative flow, and the use of teaser and cliff-hanger elements at the end of each part of the film. A good example is the adulation accompanying the departure of Jaques Soustelle, the final Governor General of Algeria, at the end of the first part of the film: the narrator hints that he will return to play a further part. The bulk of the film follows a template judiciously deploying a 'show don't tell' principle, comprising extracts from a variety of film sources including cinema newsreels and broadcast TV to carry the narrative, interspersed with original interview segments giving context and

[1] Channel 4 is a publicly-owned, but commercially-funded broadcaster, with a statutory public service remit (https://www.channel4.com/corporate/about-4/who-we-are/what-is-channel-4).

[2] By contrast the acclaimed Ken Burns documentary on the Vietnam war, and the TV series *The World at War* were much larger projects.

[3] One of the most audacious IRA operations, the bombing of the Brighton hotel used as a base for the Conservative Party Conference, took place in October 1984

assessment of events. The voice-over commentary is a subordinate element linking these and so segueing from one 'episode' in the conflict to the next, and is delivered by a professional actor. The interviews and commentary serve as an important counterweight to the primacy of the moving image, which tends to exaggerate the importance of events recorded on film compared with those which were not – and, of course, with significant factors which are not *events* at all! The opening thirty minutes of the film allows some space for these factors, departing from the narrative template to sketch – albeit briefly - some background to the history of France in Algeria; the constitutional novelty of Algeria's position as a province, not a colony; and the salient racial, social, economic, and cultural features at play in what one contributor calls an "apartheid of fact"[4]. There follows a bold and striking passage lasting several minutes in which the camera roams over the vast expanses of the outback – the *bled* – accompanied only by mysterious, evocative music, to capture the exhilarating effect: "Algeria went to the head"[5] Here sound and imagery are deployed imaginatively to capture not events, but atmosphere and mood. Another striking departure is the wordless passage closing the final part of the film with a montage of deserted homes and graves in the aftermath of the mass exodus of Europeans, set to the anthem of the recalcitrant French military – Edith Piaf's 'Non, je ne regrette rien'.[6] In sequences such as these, the film is anything but a plodding and bloodless summary: it is art in the service of history – a transcendence I will argue below is also to be found in Gillo Pontecorvo's film *The Battle of Algiers*.

As for attribution and sources, these are not listed comprehensively. The main secondary source is evidently Alistair Horne's *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962*, a thorough English scholarly account of the war[7]. The main film sources are listed in the end credits of each part: "sources of historic film and stills include UPITN, BBC TV, VISNEWS…" but the origin of individual extracts is only commented on exceptionally in the film. This is not generally problematic: cinema newsreel footage and de Gaulle's TV broadcasts are easy to identify. The source of some important extracts is not so obvious but is supplied by the narration. For example, the disastrous French bombing of the Tunisian border town of Sakiet[8] is illustrated with newsreel footage, but also with harrowing colour pictures of dead schoolchildren, which the narrator attributes to the French film director René Vautier, who was in the area making a documentary with the FLN.[9] The same applies to footage of the FLN shot by the American journalist Herb Greer, who is also interviewed in the film. A surprising omission in this respect is

[4] Peter Batty, 1984, *The Algerian War, 1954-1962,* Part 1:10m – i.e., part one, ten minutes. All references to the film will follow this format.

[5] Batty, 1984, Part 1:12m. This sequence directly quotes from and 'brings to life' the relevant passage from Alistair Horne, 1977, *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria 1954-1962,* p.49. See Figure 5.

[6] Batty, 1984, Part 5:49m. See Figure 9. The judgement of the film, delivered in images as much as words, that the ordinary Europeans were in the final analysis more the victims of the OAS and their own leadership than of the FLN, while harsh, is hardly controversial. Charles-Robert Ageron, 1991, *Modern Algeria: A History from 1830 to the Present,* p.126, describes the "scorched earth" campaign of the OAS: the Europeans were "recklessly compromised…through the ineptitude of their own leaders."

[7] The final three parts of the film have the same titles as chapters in Horne, 1977: *"Je Vous Ai Compris"*, *"Aux Barricades!"*, and *The Suitcase or the Coffin.* Machiavelli's axiom "An enemy should be destroyed or bought – and never made a martyr" as applied to the counter-productive results of French tactics is quoted by Horne, 1977, p.129, and at the conclusion of part two of Batty, 1984. The passage on the intoxicating effect of the *bled* has already been noted above.

[8] Batty, 1984, Part 3:03m

[9] A useful filmography of the war including Vautier's film can be found here: https://gwonline.unc.edu/node/11727. It also references several films on the role of women, a notable omission from *The Algerian War*.

apparent footage of soldiers carrying out cold-blooded extra-judicial killings of Algerian villagers in retaliation for the FLN massacre of French civilians in the Constantine district in August 1955. Perhaps the provenance of this material is unclear: if so, should this have been noted? Or the material not used?[10]

Interviews make up a large part of the film and are its major original component[11]. They are the source of many of the film's strengths – but also its weaknesses. The roster of interviewees is impressive and includes many key figures, such as General Jacques Massu, the architect of French tactics in the Battle of Algiers, Jacques Soustelle himself, and Yacef Saadi, the FLN organiser and prize capture in the Battle of Algiers. But these are overwhelmingly professionals and 'leaders': politicians, diplomats, senior army officers, journalists.[12] They give polished accounts of events - in most cases not for the first time, we may suppose. Important as such testimony is, its prevalence is something of a historiographical strait jacket, leaving an impression of the agency of important men - almost exclusively men - orchestrating important events. This 'top-down' distortion is more serious in the presentation of the Algerian rather than the French side: although we are told of disputes within the nationalist camp, we do not get a full sense of the internecine strife which often broke out into violence and atrocities at least as bloody as those inflicted on the Europeans. The interviewer is an unseen presence throughout: we do not see the questions posed, and there is no direct challenge or follow-up. It is arguable that this 'talking heads' approach confers an unearned authority and finality on these accounts. Sometimes, however, unfiltered emotion breaks through, as for example when a tearful Colonel Antoine Argoud rationalises the OAS tactics and his part in them.[13] Again, the preening smugness of General Marcel Bigeard speaks for itself.[14]

At times, the viewer may feel they are seeing and hearing far too much of the colonels and, by extension of the intransigent *colon* 'ultra' viewpoint which arguably betrayed the interests of the bulk of the ordinary *pieds noirs*. It can seem as if the film-maker, like the makers of *The Battle of Algiers* as we shall see, has been seduced a little bit by their charisma, articulacy, and confidence. No ordinary soldier and few ordinary civilians are interviewed. The huge French military presence – as the film does point out - was very diverse: paratroop veterans of World War II and Indo China, Foreign Legion, reservists, rookie conscripts, local Algerian *harkis* (some of them also veterans), supplemented by the gendarmerie. But we see little directly *from* these groups, except once on newsreel a *harki* soldier speaking shortly before he and his comrades were abandoned to their grisly fate. We see survivors of French torture but no relatives or representatives of the 'disappeared': it is the Algiers police chief Paul Teitgen, recounting the fate of 4000 'Bigeard shrimps' dropped into the sea from helicopters who stands for reservations

[10] There is ample other evidence of summary executions in the field. A French soldier is interviewed in the Al Jazeera 2010 documentary *Veterans: The French in Algeria*. See Figure 10. This short film is an excellent summary of the legacy in France of the conflict, and includes interviews with some surviving *harkis* veterans living, effectively in exile, in France. See Figure 11.

[11] This is a reasonable conjecture, absent other evidence, based on the apparent age of the interviewees and the uniform stylistic presentation.

[12] Horne, 1977, p.17, contends that the revolution was a more collective effort than historians sometimes suppose

[13] Batty, 1984, Part 5:29m. He repeats, perhaps unconsciously, a phrase used by the Russian revolutionaries: "But you cannot make an omelette without breaking eggs". See Figure 6.

[14] Batty, 1984, Part 2:09. See Figure 7.

within the French establishment.[15] These gaps must be filled from other sources.[16] But just as the attentive viewer is entertaining doubts about these lacunae and the 'free ride' the colonels are getting, the film has a sting in the tail… In the film's treatment of the torture of suspects during the Battle of Algiers, the juxtaposition and editing of the interviews positively challenges the viewer to make a judgement and to own it: about the accuracy and trustworthiness of the testimony presented; and about the legitimacy of torture here and in general.[17] Interviews with the apologists are intercut with – and undermined by – the testimony of victims, most notably the journalist Henri Alleg[18], who describes with quiet emotion his own treatment, and asserts that torture was standard practice, not an aberration. There is a yawning chasm between the accounts of the colonels and the victims, with police chief Teitgen in the role of Greek chorus. Paradoxically the very 'talkiness' of the film provides a compelling spectacle. The way in which the conflicting accounts are edited and intercut has considerable dramatic power, building to a climax in the French pyrrhic victory in the Battle of Algiers. The narrator concludes this segment, and part two of the film by underlining this irony: the intelligence and efficiency with which the colonels had executed their mission had plucked for the FLN victory from the jaws of defeat.[19] Their *hybris* is unstated but made evident to the viewer.[20]

We turn now to Gillo Pontecorvo's celebrated feature film *The Battle of Algiers.* Released in 1966, a mere four years after the end of the war, it was filmed on many of the locations of actual events, using mainly non-professional locals as actors. A work of fiction but depicting actual events and people in a realist quasi-documentary style, the film has had a complex relationship with history from the time of its making to the present day.[21] Its influence on history has been so extensive that it is the subject of a 2017 documentary tracing this inspiration over a running time as long as that of the film itself. We see for example evidence of the influence of the film and its mediation of the conflict on the American Black Panther movement.[22] The lessons imperfectly learnt by the US military in Iraq are spelled out by a leading US Army counter-insurgency expert.[23] It continues to fascinate cultural commentators even now.[24] Evans detects the explicit influence of Fanon's theory of revolutionary violence on the film and asserts that the film in effect *packaged* that theory for export to Angola and elsewhere.[25] This degree of

[15] Batty, 1984, Part 2:27m. Teitgen had been tortured by the Gestapo and interned in Dachau. Other veterans interviewed speak of similar experiences.
[16] For example, the Al Jazeera 2010 documentary previously noted. The BBC 2019 World Service radio programme *Assignment: France, Algeria and the Battle for Truth* supplies testimony from survivors of the 'disappeared' and ordinary French soldiers traumatized by the behaviour of their own side.
[17] Batty, 1984, Part 2:36m - 48m
[18] Alleg's book, *La Question,* made a huge impact when published and then banned in France in 1958. See Figure 8.
[19] Martin Evans, 2012, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War*, p.236, cites hard evidence in support of this view, concluding that "The methods of victory had definitively alienated Muslim hearts and minds."
[20] On this point also the film conforms to the scholarly consensus. Ageron, 1991, p.127, comments: "Obsessed by the tally of its defeats since 1940, and by the myths it had made for itself in Indo-China, the army preferred to see a conspiracy of world Communism in what was simply a deficiency of French government." See also Figure 12.
[21] It began very early, when people confused the making of the film on the streets of Algiers with the actual coup of Boumédiène against Ben Bella in 1965!
[22] Malek Bensmaïl, 2017, *The Battle of Algiers: A Film Within History,* 1h:34m – 1h:40m. See Figure 13. See also Stephen J. Whitfield, 2012, "Cine Qua Non: The Political Import and Impact of The Battle of Algiers", *Revue LISA/LISA e-journal,* Vol. X no.1, pp.249-270 for a detailed discussion of the film's history and influence
[23] Bensmaïl, 2017, 1h:45m – 1h:52m. See Figure 14
[24] Adam Curtis, 2021, *Can't Get You Out of My Head: Shooting and F**king are the Same Thing,* 1h:00m
[25] Evans, 2012, p.350

influence could be attributed to few other works of historical fiction. How much it influenced Batty and *The Algerian War* is a matter for conjecture, but the segment where Saadi's actual hiding place is shown seems almost designed to complement the tense scenes of discovery which bookend *The Battle of Algiers*. Horne footnotes his account of the bombing expedition initiated by Saadi and carried out by Zohra Drif and her two accomplices that "The whole episode is re-enacted with remarkable fidelity in the Pontecorvo film".[26] Given that the film was based in part upon the experiences of Yacef Saadi, the FLN commander whom we see interviewed in *The Algerian War,* and paraded as a prize captive in newsreel extracts, the film is strikingly even-handed in its depiction of the conflict. Horne expresses surprise that the Algerians "could – within two or three years of the close of an eight-year war that cost the lives of almost one in ten of the population – make a film, *La Battaglia di Algeri*, where a colonel of the dreaded French paras appears almost as its hero"[27], further commenting that the film "comes reluctantly close to vesting its French para colonel 'Mathieu' with heroic qualities".[28] Certainly, the depiction of the confident, charismatic, cultured Mathieu is consistent with the real colonels and generals interviewed in *The Algerian War*. But apart from plaudits for the film's verisimilitude, and its undoubted importance as a unique cultural product in its own right, what is its status as a historical artefact?

Let's consider some scenes in the film. I remarked above on the tense scenes which bookend the film. The film opens to show the 'results' of torture in both senses: a detainee has given up the location of the key target Ali La Pointe; but he is visibly broken physically and mentally.[29] He is taken by the soldiers to show them the hiding place behind a wall in a house in the casbah. We see the faces of Ali and his companions behind the wall as they are told that the game is up: everyone else is dead or arrested. At this moment of crisis, the film flashes back to 1954 with a long tracking shot beginning from 'la cité européenne' and panning to 'la casbah' behind it on rising ground, to begin the narrative proper. The denouement of the opening will not be seen until near the end of the film when the four in hiding refuse to surrender and are blown up.[30] Scenes of torture are repeated at various points in the film, including a montage of the same techniques described by Henri Alleg, silent apart from a soundtrack of stately classical music - as if to close one's ears to the horror, or to lend some dignity to the suffering.[31] In other scenes, the film depicts the setting up of checkpoints between European and Algerian quarters to stop the bombers and improve security[32], but subsequently – at near the mid-point of the film's running time - Mathieu shows his men film of a checkpoint in operation to illustrate its ineffectiveness, and why a reset of policy and tactics is needed, resulting in the controversial action to decapitate the FLN organisation in the casbah.[33]

[26] Horne, 1977, p.185
[27] Horne, 1977, p.17 – technically the film is an Italian-Algerian co-production, and Pontecorvo is Italian
[28] Horne, 1977, p.167. In fact, the film evolved from an original script focused on the soldiers when Saadi came on board, as we learn from interviews with the film-makers in Bensmaïl, 2017. They also stuffed padding into the clothing of Jean Martin, the actor playing Mathieu, to force him to march with the correct military bearing! See Figure 2.
[29] See Figure 1.
[30] Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966, *The Battle of Algiers*, 1h:50m
[31] Pontecorvo, 1966, beginning 1h:35m. See Figure 4.
[32] Pontecorvo, 1966, beginning 0h:29m
[33] Pontecorvo, 1966, 0h:56m. See Figure 3.

Scenes such as these have an established factual basis - but they go beyond what is found in the conventional sources. Dramatic reconstructions of historical events in factual films are often a bad idea - but isn't the entire running length of *The Battle of Algiers* just that? It is - but the point isn't that it shouldn't be done, but that it should be done well and with good reason. The torture scenes supplement the record of a secret activity for which we do have other reliable sources. Although these accounts – such as Alleg's - can be very compelling, and thorough as far as they go, we may feel there is something missing. Similarly, conventional accounts, together with film resources such as those used in *The Algerian War,* can help to paint a picture of the nature and challenges of living in a divided society. But the portrayal of that society in *The Battle of Algiers,* from its sweeping shots of the city, to the chaos of the checkpoints, is *immersive* as well as accurate, drawing the viewer into its world: successful feature films have always had this appeal. Do these depictions add new information? No. Do they aid understanding? Yes. This impact would not be achievable without considerable dramatic and cinematic technique and artifice, of course, and it explains why the film has had a cultural impact far exceeding that of other war films. I would go further and say not only that it works as history because it works *as* drama, but that it works because it *is* drama. Freed from some of the constraints of documentary, the film makers can exploit their freedom to tell a bigger truth. More could be said on this point if space permitted. Simply put, *The Battle of Algiers* is the apogee of cinematic art as popular history.

It is hard to write a conclusion which draws together two such different treatments of the same subject without getting into deep water, even when – as here – the two are closely compatible where they are most easily compared. *The Algerian War* is a documentary which uses some of the tools of fiction: *The Battle of Algiers* is fiction rooted in fact. Each presents a version of truth which is necessarily incomplete and partial in scope, but is none the worse for that. They are not aiming at exhaustive finality: that is what conventional scholarship is for. *The Algerian War* sticks closer to the literal truth; *The Battle of Algiers* uses invention to achieve a metaphorical truth. Each engages as much as it educates; each meets the 'litmus test' for popular history to which I said I would return. As for the status of popular history itself, I hope that the examples presented dispel any thought that it can only be at best a repackaging of traditional scholarship or a "Dummy's Guide to…". At its best, it can furnish the open-minded historian with materials which augment conventional scholarship and can deepen the understanding of their audience.

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## Appendix: Film Screenshots

### The Battle of Algiers (1966)


*Figure 1.The film opens with a torture victim having given up Ali La Pointe's hiding place. Ali was the final target; the rest having been captured or killed. The denouement is near the end of the film, when Ali and his companions refuse to surrender and are blown up.*


*Figure 2. Colonel Mathieu – a fictional composite of Jacques Massu, Roger Trinquier & Marcel Bigeard. Many of the paras were veterans of World War II and Indo China, and had endured capture and torture by the Nazis*


*Figure 3. Problems of enforcing the divided society: the checkpoints between the casbah and the European quarter*


*Figure 4. Torture montage - set to soundtrack of stately classical music: an ironic counterpoint*

## The Algerian War (1984)


*Figure 5. "Algeria went to the head": the bled*


*Figure 6. Argoud on the OAS and de Gaulle's "betrayal": tearful but defiant*


*Figure 7. General Marcel Bigeard: his glamorous paratroop uniforms have been copied the world over*

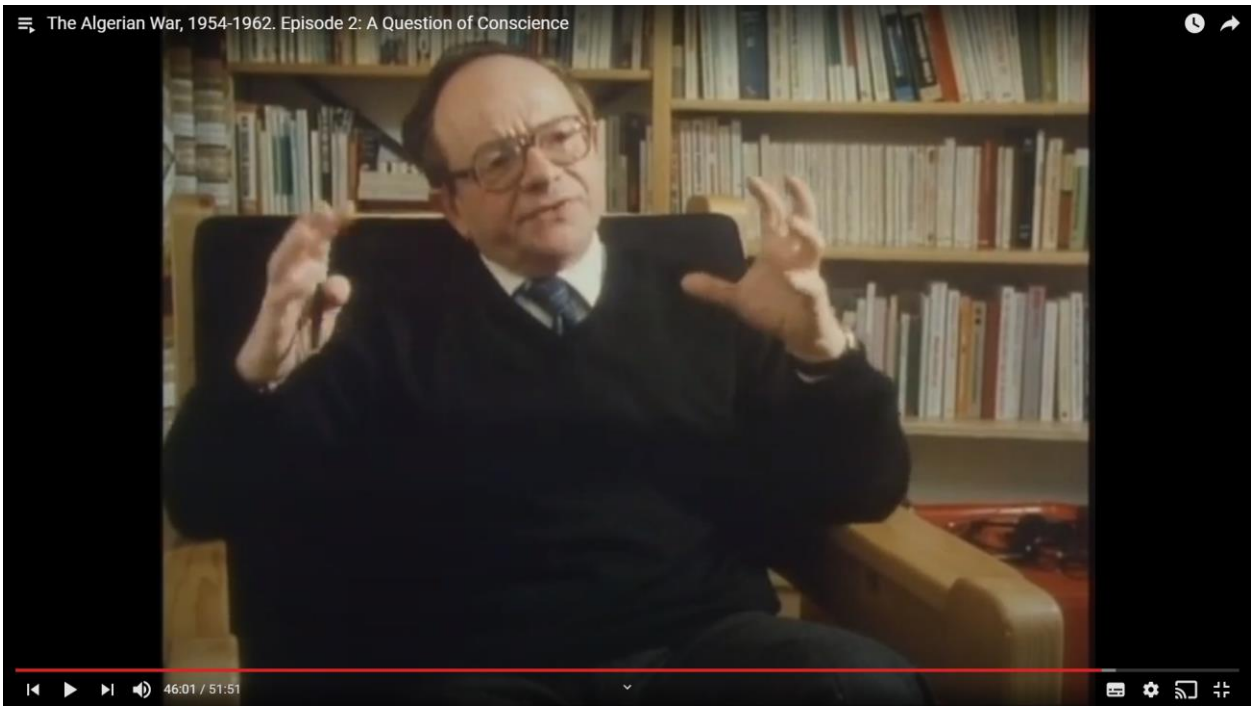


*Figure 8. Henri Alleg relives the experience of torture*


*Figure 9. Aftermath of European exodus & OAS 'scorched earth' policy: abandoned & ruined buildings. "Non, je ne regrette rien"*

## Veterans: The French in Algeria (2010)


*Figure 10. Account of summary execution of Algerian prisoners in the field*


*Figure 11. Harkis veterans who escaped to exile in France after independence, still afraid to return to Algeria*


*Figure 12. General Paul Aussaresses. In 2000 he admitted and defended the use of torture, and asserted that it was fully sanctioned by the French government.*


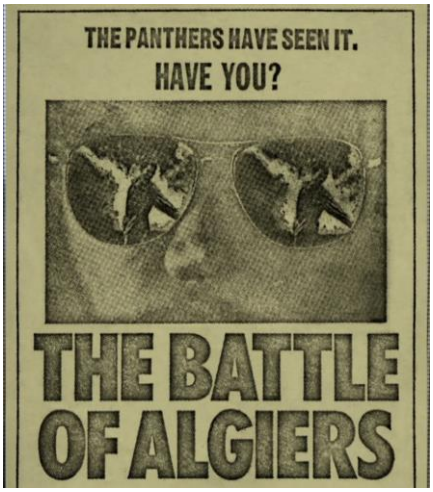


*Figure 13. Black Panthers in exile: villa in diplomatic quarter of Algiers, 1969. At the trial of 13 Black Panthers in 1970 in New York, the film was introduced in evidence and played in court on the basis that it had been used as a training film.*

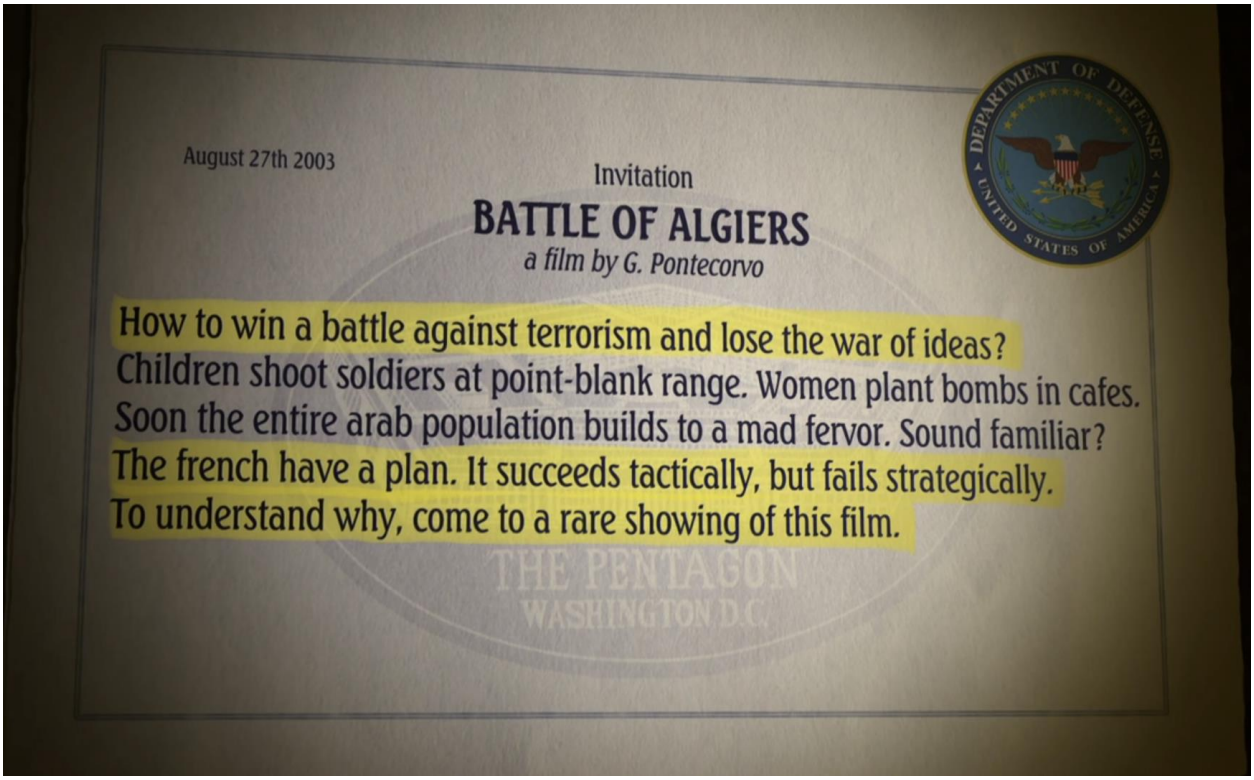


*Figure 14. Poster for 2003 Pentagon screening during first Gulf War and subsequent occupation of Iraq*