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Melinda Camber Porter

Conversation with

Costa-Gavras

Paris 1985

“**S**ince *Z* and even before, I have been making films about the relationship between men and power. One could, I suppose, call it politics. But what fascinates me are the mechanisms invented and set into motion by men which escape their control and end up by controlling them,” said Costa-Gavras. In his film *Section Spéciale* (1975), he illustrates his central theme with a particularly provocative and uncomfortable epoch of French history: on August 23, 1941, at the instigation of the Minister of the Interior, Marshal Pétain’s government promulgated a law creating the “Sections Spéciales,” which had the authority to judge communists and anarchists. The law was not only retrospective; it also gave the judges the power to condemn to death any individual, without specifying the crime. Five days later, six men with minor criminal or communist records were judged and guillotined the next day.

Admittedly, the government was under pressure to pacify the Nazis after one of their men had been killed by some young members of the Resistance. But Costa-Gavras was fascinated by the fact that the most prominent and respected magistrates and judges were chosen and accepted to participate in this mockery of justice. For it revealed that, under pressure, even the exceptional human being could choose to follow the orders of superiors rather than the dictates of his own principles.

Although Costa-Gavras blames society and the hierarchy of power, he shows how the problem initially arises out of human nature: “One cannot separate politics and human nature. I was not making a film about justice and power, but rather about the men of justice and the men of power. And the type of power that was used in Vichy is still used today. At Bordeaux a magistrate who saw the film told me he was at a loss without orders from his superiors. And having spoken to magistrates all over France I began to get an insight into an extraordinary topsy-turvy world. But one can relate the particular problem of

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Vichy to a more common, familiar problem, that of personal responsibility. The fact that one accepts or refuses to do something that goes against one's principles. For example, you may eliminate or stress certain things I say for reasons that might not be your own."

Strangely enough, Costa-Gavras referred to this activity of selection and elimination to justify the methods of narration he employed in the film. For he and Jorge Semprun created a dramatic and exciting spectacle out of Hervé Villeré's thoroughly documented but undramatic book on the "Sections Spéciales."

And it is questionable whether Costa-Gavras should use the powerful rhetoric of fictional devices, humor, and hallucinatory images when he presents the film as an honest and accurate statement of fact. Costa-Gavras agreed that the particular subject merited a documentary treatment but continued, "it would have been impossible to make a more documentary film. Most of the participants are dead and those who are alive would talk rubbish. In any case, it is necessary to extract the essential and to reduce the material to human proportions. And the Ancients always used the power of the spectacle to communicate their philosophies and beliefs."

When I asked him why he had made liberal use of farce rather than irony when dealing with a subject he took seriously, he replied, "If there is humor and caricature in the film it is because it is there in the story, and it was not imposed. But the main reason the audience laughs during the film is more complex. Because we have participated in similar or comparable situations in our life, we reject the spectacle by means of laughter. It is a way of exorcizing oneself."

But when I persisted, Costa-Gavras admitted that his film could not give a totally accurate analysis of the subject. "It's impossible for a film to give a perfect analysis of a problem, at least for the moment. Films are closer to dreams. When we try to analyze the relationship between the images of a dream we find no logical link. Images do not have the same power of explanation as words." But Costa-Gavras's film version of the "Section Spéciale" has gained more attention and a larger audience than Villeré's treatment of the subject. Does the image,

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because it is closer to dreams and is less susceptible to reason and logic, have a more immediate and forceful effect than words?

“What is a film in society? It is less than a book because a book lasts longer in one’s memory and takes longer to digest. A film has a short life. And the reactions that it provokes must be strong enough to allow it to last longer than its life on the screen. Explosive reactions force one to reflect and consider afterwards. And that is why I chose to make a film about Vichy: it provokes violent reactions because there are many survivors and because the true story is just beginning to come out into the open; the attitude of the French is astounding. I have been to see the film all over France. People have walked out in a fury. The reaction has been violent in every way.”

But Costa-Gavras is perhaps optimistic in believing that violent, emotional reactions inevitably lead to reflective judgments. Or perhaps he was generalizing from his own experience: “When I came to France from Greece at the age of eighteen my first reactions to life were brutal, superficial, and unreflective. I had come from a badly educated country. Then I had studied in France, and I learned how to think and make films like the French. I began to reflect. But the two personalities are still there. One can’t get rid of eighteen formative years. It’s probably the Greek part of myself which causes me to make films that lie outside current trends in France. Because I am a stranger I see things from a distance.”

But the Greek part of Costa-Gavras was certainly not in evidence. Throughout our conversation he spoke in a calm, controlled voice, never became irritable when contradicted, yet rarely smiled or laughed. When he said, “For me Vichy was the Middle Ages, the most monstrous epoch we have known. In my view one must condemn it outright and at all costs,” he continued to speak in the same measured tone and his expression betrayed no emotion.

In 1985 Costa-Gavras was preparing his American-financed film, *War Days*, to be shot on location in the States. He has been the director of the national film institute, the Cinémathèque, for the last three years, and is therefore responsible for part of what the French call their “patrimoine,” or heritage. For the

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French, “le patrimoine” has a plethora of associations. But perhaps the most crucial aspect of a national heritage is that it should be preserved, and should retain its specifically French characteristics. Jack Lang, the Minister of Culture, asked Costa-Gavras if he would be willing to oversee the Cinémathèque. Costa-Gavras, who is Greek and came to France at the age of eighteen, is a shining example of a foreigner who was welcomed and accepted by the French.

He describes his early days in Paris: “When I arrived in France, I discovered culture. For I’d come from Greece, and the culture there was medieval, and very backward, because of the political system and Civil war. My first reactions were very impulsive, very Greek, and very primary. I plunged into Parisian daily life, with its immense possibilities, in all domains. . . . I spent the first years here like someone who was drunk. I became an alcoholic of French culture. And it’s here that I learnt everything I know. There was an empty space in me, when I came from Greece, for I lived in very tough conditions, in a poor village during the Occupation, and I’ll never forget those days. It’s true, that like many foreigners who take on French citizenship and who live here, one can become nationalistic and chauvinistic very easily. One has to be careful.”

Costa-Gavras studied literature at the Sorbonne, but he interrupted his studies to enroll in L’Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques (The Institute for Film Studies), or L’IDHEC. He made friends easily, and soon became part of a circle of filmmakers and writers. Yves Montand and Simone Signoret were part of this clique, and they helped him to get his first film made: “In a city like Paris, which is so large, one finds oneself living in clans. Or in microsocieties. I found myself in one of these groups, and it’s true that I was very influenced—even in the kind of films I make—by these friends of mine. Simone and Yves were wonderful to me. I happened to be René Clément’s assistant at the time. I came across a book called *Sleeping Car Murders*, and just for fun, without having the right to the book, I wrote a scenario of the book. I gave it to Simone to read, and she said, ‘If you like, I’ll play the role of that actress—if it’d amuse you.’ . . . I was very surprised. And Montand said, ‘You’ve written a very good scenario. So, tell me,

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which role shall I take?' I told him he could choose. So that's how it happened. The film went into production just like that. And so thanks to them, I made my first film, thanks to their friendship and their acceptance of me."

But before he directed *Sleeping Car Murders*, Costa-Gavras had served his apprenticeship as an assistant director. He had worked for Marcel Ophuls on *Banana Split*. "I enjoyed working with Marcel. It went very well, and we have remained friends. At least, I hope we have. Because I like him a great deal, and I admire him. I think it's mutual. He's made the most extraordinary films, and he's a man with deep passions . . . but it's hard for him being the son of such a famous man, like Max Ophuls. It's terrible to be the child of someone famous. I can see it happening with my own children. They'll have problems . . . and yet I think Marcel has freed himself from these complexes, because he has made films that bear the stamp of his own personality. But, you know, I think he should not try to make the kind of films he makes in France. I don't think it's the right place for him."

I did not quite understand why Ophuls' films were harder to produce in France than elsewhere. Admittedly, he had made films about the collaboration, but the topic was now in the open. And Ophuls was more interested in making features than documentaries. "Well, in Paris, you have to sell yourself. You have to be your own public relations person. And you have to have a loud voice, and make your worth known. Marcel, like many other people, doesn't have that mentality. He does wonderful work, and he doesn't shout about it. And because of that many people have tried to appropriate his work. Do you know that with *The Sorrow and The Pity*, there were people who played a minor role in the film who told everyone that they had actually directed the film! And they didn't even mention Marcel. . . . And he is a modest man, and so he didn't do anything about it. But, you know, Parisian life can be very difficult."

I wondered if Costa-Gavras was referring to the verbal cruelty and personalized debates that are fought out in the media. I often had the feeling in Paris that intellectual debates had taken the place of sports. For the intellectuals are usually interested in defeating the opponent, and winning the argument, rather

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than in discussing an issue. There is little sense of fair play. The debaters often use ammunition of a personal nature. And the fights continue in private as well as in the newspapers and on television.

“I think you’ve given the answer that I would give,” said Costa-Gavras. “I think that the duel with a sword or pistol has evolved into intellectual debates. In a sense, it’s a form of progress. For it’s better to attack people verbally than to kill them. But there are victims. And, I actually don’t participate in these media debates, because it’s rather sterile. But the problem is that there are some people who don’t have the capacity to reply to such attacks. And you can be destroyed when you don’t reply with the same dexterity as your opponent.”

Costa-Gavras is also aware of an evolution, and improvement, in French attitudes towards immigrants. I was rather surprised, for at the time of our conversation, there were increasing incidents of violence towards Algerians and the popularity of Le Pen (a politician whose views can only be described as racist) has grown. Costa-Gavras pointed to the younger generation as the source of hope.

“I believe that the problem is that the French have never mixed too well with strangers. And an example of this attitude was the awful anti-Semitism during the Occupation. Now they treat the Arabs and the Turks in the same way. But now it’s different because there are millions of people who are living in France who are not French, and they will not be leaving either. The French will have to get used to it. They haven’t yet. But I feel optimistic about the problem. For I think they will have to get used to it. And I’ve discovered a whole generation of people in their early twenties who don’t have a racist mentality. Young people understand that the Algerians are French. There are two to three hundred thousand Algerians who were born in France in the last twenty years, and they consider themselves to be French. It’s irrational to think they are not French. I really believe that assimilation won’t happen through the foreigners adapting to the French. I think it’ll happen the other way around. The French will be assimilated by the foreigners. Because if they don’t it’ll be the French who have to leave France.”

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Costa-Gavras and his wife produced a film for a young Arab writer, Mehdi Charef, of his novel *Le Thé au harem de Archi Ahmed*. The film, entitled *Le Thé au harem d'Archimède* (*Tea in the Harem* in English), won the 1985 Jean Vigo prize. "When I suggested that Mehdi direct the film, he didn't leap at the opportunity. He asked me to give him two weeks to reflect. I was so impressed by his reaction, and it gave me even more confidence in him. And so I produced the film with my wife. And it turned out beautifully. You should see it."

Costa-Gavras feels that cultural differences need not lead to hatred. For, in Costa-Gavras's mind, a "cultured" person is a tolerant person. By "culture" Costa-Gavras seems to mean an individual's understanding of himself and the world. But he fears that the modern world pays little attention to the evolution of individuals, and judges progress in terms of economic growth. He feels this problem is particularly acute in America, and this perception will be one of the themes of *War Days*, his American film project.

"The best part of man is his mind. That's to say, his 'culture.' It's his capacity to make himself more aware and happier—if happiness existed—and his capacity to cultivate his mind. That is progress. I think it's a catastrophe when people call progress material gain. And this attitude leads to a kind of fragility of the human spirit. One can't improve one's life by buying more fridges and houses in the country and by putting more money in the bank. You can only improve your life by reflecting on yourself and the world around you. And the more our societies devote themselves to some kind of materialistic perfectionism, the more fragile man becomes. In any case, the world is fragile. It'd take three terrorist attacks to stop the world. So, the need for understanding between people, and an understanding of oneself, is absolutely essential to the world right now. That's a little bit the meaning of *War Days*."

Costa-Gavras feels that the United States epitomizes this obsession with materialistic growth. France may share a similar attitude, yet he feels that political extremism is now the main obstacle to progress in France.

"If we take it a little closer to home, we can see that the real impediment to understanding is extremism. People catalogue

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you as being Left or Right Wing. Automatically. And that makes absolutely no sense. . . . When I look at what's going on in France at the moment, I feel I'm living in the most underdeveloped country in the world, because everyone is always arguing about politics. But none of it actually makes much sense. There are so many different parties and debates on television. I've always tried to distinguish myself from this kind of fanaticism. It's a dogmatic fanaticism.

"What does it mean to be Left Wing in France today? What is one? A communist? A socialist? For instance, I sometimes agree with the socialists, particularly with their attitudes toward culture, and the importance the government gives to culture. Fine. But I don't consider myself to be Left Wing. And I don't define myself through some of my political opinions. I think we need to have a spiritual attitude—and I don't mean a religious attitude. In any case, religion has often put a halt to cultural development. And my mother was a fanatic Catholic, so I've had experience of that. No, I'm talking about the inner world. Man's spirit, or his mind. If we don't nourish that, we're heading straight for a real catastrophe in the world."

Costa-Gavras believes that Mitterrand's government has recognized the crucial importance of culture to the nation's well-being, and not only because the government has spent more on the arts than any previous government. He feels that the socialists understand the value of culture in a way that Giscard's government did not. "I think the government's cultural project is important even if people put it down. The first gesture the socialists made was to increase spending. And they've had excellent results. But culture, or at least my definition of the word, implies the capacity to talk to the Caledonians, rather than bombarding them. It's the capacity to discuss a problem, rather than taking a violent solution."

So Costa-Gavras, finding himself in agreement with the government's cultural policy, decided to accept the position as director of the Cinémathèque. It is not a post with a salary, and Costa-Gavras goes into his office once or twice a week. "I decided to take the job because the Cinémathèque was dying. We know that in England you have the British Film Institute that does a superb job. So, I told the Minister, Jack Lang, "I'm

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going with you to London, to show you the BFI. You should see what the British have.' And I took him and said, 'You can't allow France to have less than that.' And he poured in lots of funds into the Cinémathèque, so, soon, we can be as proud as you British are of your BFI."

Costa-Gavras went into some detail as to the improvements he is in the process of making. "There wasn't any real library. We had about twenty thousand nitrate films, stored all over the place—in friend's houses, in castles—and now we've put them in safe conditions where they will survive, and we're doing the inventory of what we have and storing it in a computer. We manage to restore about one hundred and fifty nitrate films a year. Also, the library was opened at the Palais de Chaillot, and there are about six thousand visitors a year to the library. It's much easier to do research now. And we have the intention of opening a very large film center which would be ten times as big as what we have now. And I think the President had just given the go-ahead, so we will be able to start moving in a year from now."

Costa-Gavras has the ability to see the merits and the beauty of different cultures, while maintaining a critical perspective. He evidently feels strong emotional ties to France and wishes to help preserve her heritage. I sensed a deep excitement when Costa-Gavras spoke of his work at the Cinémathèque. And I also heard the same enthusiastic tone when he spoke of working in the U.S. Although he made the American-financed film *Missing*, and has experience working with American actors, the film was shot in Mexico. This is his first film to be shot in America.

But unlike Louis Malle, who left France in order to live in the United States and make films there, Costa-Gavras does not feel that he needs to make this move in order to make American-financed films.

Costa-Gavras is aware of his own limitations. He is not capable of making a film about contemporary American life although he has spent time in Hollywood and elsewhere. Rather, he will use the device that worked so well in *State of Siege*. The film is about a small group of individuals who could be living in almost any Latin American military dictatorship.

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“I wanted to spend a lot of time in America before shooting a film there. Because it’s so difficult to capture the American mentality. But, luckily, I chose *War Days*, because it’s a completely unusual situation and nothing to do with everyday life. It does, of course, contain some of my thoughts on the States, but I’ve taken a moment in time when ordinary life is destroyed.”

I told Costa-Gavras that I felt it was impossible to even try to talk about “an American mentality.” For the attitudes vary in each state and each district, and the country is too large to generalize easily. He did not agree: “Nevertheless, all Americans belong to the same nation and there is an American nationalism. I feel there’s a permanent search for security in the States. Security in terms of money, and a future, and a house. . . . I think there’s also a refusal to accept that death is part of life. They work as if they are going to live for two thousand years. And when I lived in Hollywood for eight months, the most curious thing happened to me. I realized that I was only aware of what was going on inside America. I felt that the world outside was this vague cloud, and I could only picture America. There were certain parts of the world, like Israel, that were in focus. But I felt, fundamentally, that America was the only place on earth.”

He feels that America is the perfect place for his story because it is a society obsessed by materialism. I felt that his comment could equally apply to any country in the world. The fact that the American economy appeared to be strong was no reason to suppose that American were more obsessed than other people with their economy.

Costa-Gavras explained that he was only using America as a symbolic place. And he agreed that materialism is a problem worldwide. His story shows what could happen if the material benefits of a Western country were suddenly eliminated.

“The book *War Days* is a sort of extrapolation on . . . the effects of a small-scale nuclear attack. It would be very limited. That’s to say in America there would be maximum of fifty million deaths. Two or three cities would be destroyed but the rest would remain intact. But the whole electromagnetic field would be destroyed. There would be no more television, or fridges, or kitchens. . . . And I’ve focused the script on a family.

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SYGMA/Christian Simonpietri



Costa-Gavras directing Sissy Spacek in *Missing* (1982). "Making a film is a sort of symbiosis with another person."

One doesn't know what's actually happening outside their own experience of this situation. They have to make a journey from New York to Los Angeles, because Los Angeles hasn't been hit. So it's not about America, but rather about some Americans. And it could actually happen in any society in the West. It couldn't happen in the Third World, because they are used to surviving without material goods."

Costa-Gavras added that he does enjoy the benefits that come with making films in America. "For us film directors it's paradise. When we arrive we're given hotels, cars, and all that. For a director, it's ideal on a materialistic level. But I'm not talking about the creative side, which is different. American companies seem to see directors as people who bring in a film on time on

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budget. They don't see him as a creator. But I've been lucky with my producer and the people at Universal. They are interested in creating a work of art, not just a product that sells. I've also asked if I can work as I do in France, without a huge crew. And they accepted. I will have an American crew, and a few people from France . . . I'm used to working with.

"Actually, American cinema had a very decisive influence on me, and my whole generation. . . . Hollywood, and the stars. . . . I'd say that for a film director going to Hollywood is rather like going to Mecca or Jerusalem for someone religious. And I am a little religious about the cinema. I am a believer. But, you know, I did something rather revealing when I was out in Hollywood for *Missing*. I asked my producer to get me a return ticket. And I kept it in my pocket all the time that I was there. In a way, it was a joke. But I still feel that I want a return ticket, even though I want the ticket to Hollywood."

Costa-Gavras did not find it very different working with the American actors, Sissy Spaceck, Jack Lemmon, John Shea, and Melanie Mayron, on *Missing*. They soon became friends. "When you're working with people who love what they do, things usually go well. And a film is a sort of symbiosis with another person. You always leave a film with new friendships, and a backlog of new experiences. I think one actually becomes a better person—not in a Christian sense—but perhaps in what I call a cultural sense. Of course, you have to like people to start off with. You have to focus on their good qualities. Because people always have characteristics you can criticize. But once you've made that move, then . . . you know, I think it's one of my weaknesses, my wish to like people. Because what does it really mean? . . . it probably means, deep down, that I want to be loved."

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