

Video-interview with COSTA-GAVRAS

By Madeleine Allegrini

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Message from translator Eamon Costello: This interview has been edited for clarity. The ellipses were put in the transcript by the original transcriptionist and vary in length to denote the length of a given pause in conversation. Ellipses with a question mark denote places where the original transcriptionist could not make out what Costa-Gavras or Allegrini said.

Costa-Gavras speaks on the telephone.

Madeleine: About your latest film...

Costa-Gavras: Have you seen it?

M: Yes, I went to the screening. Why'd you make this film?

CG: Hm, I have no idea!

A: There must be some reason...you must know more than I do!

CG: No, 2 years ago...but there's not just one...there's a whole series of reasons that led me to this film. It's a film about *raison d'état*, a problem that's always preoccupied me...I've looked for ways to talk about it. It's also a film about justice, the justice of a certain era, the occupation. This is, in my opinion, a subject that allows us to go beyond that era and reach the modern day...

M: We should see these realities...

CG: Today, absolutely. I'm certain of it.

M: Could you give some examples?

CG: Are you talking about examples of today? It would be difficult to give precise examples...there isn't one...as big...as violent as the one in the film, but you could say that justice manifests itself in a form that I would call class justice, a justice that is put in place by a certain power who's had it for 100 years. That's what I tried to show in the film. When there are people from a certain class...the poorest, the simplest,

there is no indulgence. And there are people from another class like these journalists who, despite being communist journalists, don't dare condemn the powerful class to death precisely because [the powerful class] has a more formidable character. That's the closest [example] we have, if you like, but there are plenty of other things, notably the whole apparatus, the whole parade of justice...

M: But that's just it...

CG: This relationship with power...

M: Why did you choose this subject if.....?

CG: Firstly, the men have remained more or less the same, and secondly, in the various state courts there are "maximal" and "minimal" moments...I think it's comparable to athletes.....?.....French justice is based on history, and it's on the basis of a great history that athletes are judged.

M: When you took that...

CG: If they could do this, it seems to me that they could do a lot of other things.

M: But then there were...laws made during [the era of] a certain power.

CG: There were other laws of exception, of course, but the powers that made these laws of exception—notably the power that followed the occupation—became a power that French people voted for, a President of the Republic elected by universal suffrage. It was a legal power.

M: And so do you think that there's a justice that is legal and a justice that is illegal?

CG: The term is rather baroque. I think there should be a justice, period. I think there must be a justice system that has nothing to do with power or with the various fluctuations in history or issues that confront power...in its injustice.

M: Do you think it's possible?

CG: Oh yes! I think it's possible...at least it should be.

M: But do you think in a society that were to finally become...an ideal society...is there an ideal society where there can also be an ideal justice?

CG: I'm not a great believer in the story of the ideal society...you know that's utopian!

M: But ideal justice isn't...

CG: Yes, I believe that justice at the very least is...if one can't believe in justice, if one can't let our future rest on justice, then we're living in a jungle, you know?! So if justice can't be ideal, it should be closer to ideality than power, than parties, than everything else in our society. Because justice is, to me, and I repeat, the only thing a citizen must be able to rely on with confidence.

M: But in any case, the people who dole out justice will always be from a particular class. Do you think there's—if only by the very fact that it's dispensed by the people—a justice.....

CG: I think the mechanisms of our Western, capitalist, bourgeoisie society are such that the justice that controls society imposes itself everywhere.

M: What about the communists?

CG: They make it their own...yes, and I don't think it's any better, but that's another problem: we in the West automatically reject the communists'.....?.....everyone rejects them, we take more precautions...but talking about socialist countries takes us off the subject, doesn't it? They're countries that claim to be more honest, more human, and more free.

M: But haven't you already dealt with justice in Communist countries?...

CG: Yes, anyhow...

M: And in general, it's a problem that interests you very much throughout your films, especially in your recent films...it's the man...

CG: Yes, it's about power, let's say power. I think that justice is a part of power and my films are much more about power than anything else that's been said.

M: You chose this subject. Do you continue to make films about power because you're personally affected by it, or for other reasons?

CG: No it's because...it's the subject that interests me. At least at the moment.

M: But you're considered an artist...

CG: What I don't like is this word artist!!!

M: A committed director...

CG: All directors are committed, even those who don't want to be. I don't see things that way, as commitment. I see myself as a scenographer who can do what he wants to do, and what I want to do ends up being the films that I make. It's a great opportunity to be able to do what you want to do in this business because the financial difficulties, the market problems are such that...it's just very difficult.

M: You do these films because they interest you, but also to keep people informed. Do you feel like you're informing the people? Like you're showing them realities they can't see?

CG: Yes, yes, but I don't want to be given the "moralist" label either. I thought that these films had to be made because until now it hadn't been done, this type of cinema hadn't been made. When I was young, I noticed that it was missing. I was very interested in subjects like that because I had seen some American films and so on. I wanted to make some of my own.

M: And you're always taking the subject from books, or rather novels.

CG: Not always. State of Siege is an original subject.

M: Because you had ready-made documentation for that?

CG: Yes, one reason is because a ready-made documentation is historically irrefutable, this is very important. And then it's also a bit lazy, it's easier...

M: Because ultimately, your films that are most successful are about the CIA, no?

CG: For State of Siege no, it's not about the CIA. I think adjacent to the CIA there are other organizations that are dangerous as well. [The film] is about the advisors. [The US] is the largest country that we see across the world to "advise" small countries. Specifically, it's the story of an American advisor in a small Latin American country.

M: And it's the first film of this series where there's no Yves Montand...

CG: Yves Marchand is in the film.

M: But not State of Siege, this one...

CG: He's in State of Siege as an extra. There is no central hero and there was no character that Yves Montand could play in that case. I prefer to choose from very good television or theater actors who are not, let's say, stars.

M: And your choice of actors, is it a choice that you make because they want to do a

particular film, or because they share political ideas with you?

CG: Yves Montand, for example, has some ideas, some opinions...It's obvious that my relationship with Montand is very different. It's true that we tried to make a film with Yves Montand in mind. We discussed the political continuum a lot with him and the other actors. There were 70 of them in this film. It's evident that we can't do the same work with everyone, but it should also be required that the actors adhere, that they accept the subject. If they don't accept it, they don't do the film. I prefer that they're in agreement with my project beforehand, that we're speaking the same language. And most of the time, we are.

M: But for example the Montand phenomenon, especially in this film, there was a kind of symbolism...a character.....?.....

CG: Yes, in *State of Siege* he plays a bad guy...well, a villain—I say the word “villain” in the way that it's used in cinema, the good and the bad. We say that he plays a character that is not likable from the beginning to the end. He accepted it precisely because he wanted to add to the project that we were trying to achieve. We believe that the actors serve the film, not the other way around. And Montand, the star, accepts that!

Message from Fandangos editors: A very confusing and metaphysical conversation follows, which we have left out for the sake of brevity.

CG: I think the problem of terrorism today is completely different from the terrorism of 1940-45. I tried to make a film about contemporary terrorism with *State of Siege*, but I don't think we've said everything about today's terrorism. If we were to analyze terrorism, we would have to take it country by country, situation by situation. We cannot talk about terrorism globally because in Chile it is one situation, in France another, in Holland a third, etc.

M: And you believe that there is a justice to judge these people by? Or that we can't judge them outright?

CG: Oh! Oh my! We are entering into a very complicated discussion but I'll delve into it. I don't believe that any justice system can judge these people because [of] the current justice system?.....as long as these people, these “terrorists”,—I put the word terrorist in quotation marks—remain far from power (that is to say they have no power), all justice systems would condemn them. But from the moment they take any kind of power, all justice systems and bourgeois states would accept them. I'll give you an example: Boumédiène. Fifteen years ago, Boumédiène was a terrorist who had to be killed, and all French courts would probably have sentenced him to death—even the French government. Fifteen years later, Boumédiène takes power and re-

-ceives the [support of the] president of the French Republic!! So what is terrorism? Where is the terrorism in all this?? Boumédiène was right at the time to commit terrorism; they were right to bring down the French police, even in Paris—obviously it's good when it succeeds; when it doesn't, it's very different! The Red Army of Japan, if you will, as long as it is a terrorism of their kind, they are wrong. But if tomorrow they become the leaders of Japan they will be right. So I don't think we can talk about a justice system to judge these people. Any justice system would probably condemn them to death, but nothing says that if ten years later they are political leaders they won't be at the UN. Look at Arafat, a "terrorist" for Palestine. He goes to the UN, he is a head of state! So I don't think that we can talk about terrorism with the typical criteria of justice.

END.