

COSTA GAVRAS – BETWEEN Z AND AMEN

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Abstract:

As a renowned and controversial personality, director Costa Gavras is the promoter of French political thriller. His movies are variations on the theme of totalitarian abuses, with disputing topics and a heavy social-economic impact upon the thriller and suspense films of hollywoodian origin. Through the heavy impact a film has upon its audience, through the releasing of various human reactions (moral, educational and emotional), between detachment and involvement, between resolution and indecision, between learning the truth or not – Costa Gavras's filmmaking is a political endeavour.

Keywords: *film, director, Costa Gavras, political thriller.*

Costa Gavras. French film director (Athens, Greece, 1933). Promoter of the political *thriller*. His films are variations on the theme of totalitarian abuse. He wraps controversial political issues in the suspense of Hollywood origin (Corciovescu-Ripeanu 1997: 103).

Even though extremely summary and schematic, these few descriptive words delineate the features of an uncomfortable personality, a cosmopolitan spirit, very much aware of contemporary events and trends; they also represent a "dedicated aria", in which all these qualities are cinematographically expressed: a film on a political subject.

The more controversies he aroused the more famous within the film world he became, along many other personalities who, through their films and especially through the messages they rendered, chose to make an audience ask themselves questions instead of amusing them with mere *consuming entertainment*. In one of his interviews, Costa (Konstantinos) Gavras offers us the necessary conceptual code for understanding his entire work, and implicitly of his films which are to be further analyzed: "Every film is a political one." (in The Guardian, April 4, 2009). We could understand those words as a statement of faith coming from a dedicated cultural activist, yet a few lines further Gavras assumes a more cynical position:

"I never forget that we (the ones involved in the film world – a. n.) are producing a form of entertainment or, on the contrary, when speaking from a bergmanian philosophical point of view, "cinematograph means seducing audiences to such an extent that they will leave the movie-theatre deep in thoughts. In Greece there is no other phrase to express it than "to guide one's soul" (almost similar to the philosophical

practice of maieutics, a.n.). I think the role of entertainment is exactly that." (interview in *The Guardian*, April 4, 2009)

The dose of rebelliousness and at the same time of "dogma confirmation" this "ars poetica" reveals might imply a pretty sophist attitude, so dear to the French director of Greek origin: film, as any cultural and social act, addresses to the citizens, to the *polis*. Film is a political act exactly because its multiple shock - informational, intellectual, social, political, esthetical, psychological - (de)forms the group of direct watchers and, consequently, through those, all people who would be "influenced" by the film message, thence because of the strong impact a film has over watching audiences (because any movie would remain in one way or another in the watcher's memory).

The "demonstration" is weak, though platonically possible, since it advocates the pre-existence in any film watcher of a conscious reaction to the film message, provided that a film does contain/intends to render a message, and puts the stakes on the fact that the "moral duty", the civility, the education, or the culture of the people who enter a movie theater will improve after having "assimilated" the ideas and the artistry a film contains.

Most likely that is what really happens, but only when the ideatic or ideological contents of the movie is wrapped in an exceptional esthetic quality of making - it is now common knowledge that *Amadeus* (d. Milos Forman, 1984) has done more (informatively, intellectually, culturally) for the composer's memory and his popularization than any of his biographies. A sine-qua-non condition for this logical implication is, as suggested before, the artistic exceptionality of the "final product" which is delivered to the world.

It seems here we can detect a first issue Gavras's films raise, based of course on a personal question/ dilemma the film director might have had, since his films aim at a paideic effect, i.e at triggering moral, human, or artistic reactions in those people who "make contact" with his visual messages: in other words, how people who have seen his films would leave the film theater: with "i pugni in tasca" (tight fists), or - as it so often happens nowadays - with mere dialogue, visual, or montage snippets, with nothing more than some suggestions that will lose their way into the great mass of consuming culture with which contemporary people are more or less stuffed?

Because access to culture in our contemporary world is truly unlimited - and cinema is undoubtedly the most democratic and accessible form of art.

Still, maybe because of that above-mentioned paideic obsession Gavras probably also has as a real-life person, his films are suspended between modernity and post-modernity, between purpose and play, between distance and implication, narrative and anti-narrative, between decisiveness and indecisiveness (see Ihab Hassan), yet they always display a relatively strong parti-pris in favor of value and against "democracy". In other words, he may be aware of the fact that film is a consuming art ("equivalent" to the *entertainment* in the above-mentioned quotation), but he cannot abdicate from the idea of using symbols in order to render his visual messages (=his movies); as any intellectual with left-wing tendencies, he seems to be aware of Foucault's writings, nevertheless he is not able to abandon that kind of "aristocratic" touch of the art he

creates. His "oscillating" - emotional and of course personal-philosophical or public-political – can be entailed in any of the following quotation, even if they seem partially antagonist, in the same way art could be seen as antagonist to politics, when one do not or refuse to see the "unlawful marriage" between the two.

Harvey (2002:53) writes about Foucault's "instigation" to scrutinizing the deep resources of power: Foucault (...) urges us "to perform an ascendant analysis of power, i.e. beginning with its intrinsic mechanisms, each having their own history, trajectory, techniques and tactical schemes, and to determine how these mechanisms were – and still are – invested, colonized, used, complicated, transformed, delocalized, extended etc. by other, more general, mechanisms and by specific forms of local domination". A thorough consideration of micro-political relations of power in various locations, contexts and social frames made him conclude that an intimate relationship exists between various systems of knowledge ("discourses") through their specific codifying techniques and methods they employ in order to exercise social control and domination within specific contexts and locations. Jail, asylum, hospital, university, school, psychiatric praxis are few examples of social frames within which power hierarchy is constructed upon scattered elements, independent of any systematical strategy of class domination. What happens within each of those frames cannot be truly understood by means of a global, general theory.

This quotation seems to be especially written for the movie *Z*, providing that a global, general theory may seem theoretically impossible, but has been practically "long exercised" by those totalitarian regimes which Gavras (de)mystifies – *Z*, for example, "coagulates" around the symbol of hitting baton and by the threat of personal perish, which is in fact the absolute threat coming from a discretionary power.

On the other hand, by choosing the structure of a thriller to speak about the absurdities derived from power, Gavras does nor for one moment abandon the linearity of the story and the idea of symbol, in other words, he does not abandon his "dance around substance" that seduces/captivates his viewers in a profoundly humane way, in which the Art of filmmaking paradoxically is its own and unique alternative. Because the progressive and "captivating" spirit of this art "conveys" its singularity as a "monopole" of dynamic and seducing esthetics, which no other form of art could ever achieve.

Realizing "the play with created temporalities", Panofsky "enacted" already in 1947:

... film is the only form of art which is totally alive. The cinema has established a dynamic relationship between art production and art consuming, (...) whereas in many other artistic fields that relationship is lamentably weakened, or even disrupted. (...) If all lyrical poets, composers, painters and sculptors would be forced by law to stop their activity, a very small part of the public would notice it and even a smaller part would seriously regret it. If the same would happen to film-makers, social consequences would be catastrophic. (Panofsky, cited in Oroveanu, 2004:259)

The dynamic tension between value and commercial is deeper analyzed by one of the greatest sociologist of the past century, A. Toffler, whose words we consider to be completely illustrative for understanding the opposition in concepts between art and leisure (entertainment):

Art quenches the thirst of stimuli. Art differs from other forms of experimenting because it implies the use of symbols. Even the most literal and figurative pictures or poems, the less abstract melodies or dances are as well imitations and aspects of reality. They are symbols. And the nature, the power of symbols is to engage human psychic on multiple levels simultaneously. An efficiently used symbol within a work of art triggers a storm of emotional, intellectual and sensitive stimuli.
(Toffler, 1997:48)

The expected effect of a political film signed Costa Gavras (the recovery of the individual, the “transformation” of his substance in order to make him alive and responsible) seems to rely on the answer to a(n apparently) simple question: when does a movie play with its character for the sake of the play and when does it for the sake of “learning”?