

# The 52nd Berlin Film Festival

## Part 3

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*In this part we discuss three films dealing with Fascism: Amen by Constantin Costa-Gavros, Taking Sides by Istvan Szabó and Safe Conduct by Bertrand Tavernier.*

### *Amen*

Greek born Constantin Costa-Gavros (69) has been making films since the early sixties. As a result of his father's political affiliations (he was a government functionary and member of the Greek Communist Party) the young Constantin was prevented from following up his plan to study film in America. Based in Paris and radicalised by the political upheavals at the time, Costa-Gavros began filmmaking and has specialised in directing a series of films dealing with various forms of political repression.

His 1969 film *Z* was a devastating indictment of the military junta in Greece. *The Confession* (1970), based on the story of the 1951 trial of the loyal Communist Party member Arthur London, remains one of the finest films dealing with post-war Stalinist repression. *Missing* (1982) delved into the involvement of the American government and secret forces in backing the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile. His film *The Music Box* (1989) dealt with the devastating discovery by a daughter of her father's involvement in Nazi atrocities.

Costa-Gavros has returned to the issue of Nazism with his new film *Amen*, a reworking of the stage play *The Representative* written by the German dramatist Rolf Hochhuth, directed by Erwin Piscator and first performed in 1963. The play deals with the way in which the Catholic Church ignored the plight of the Jews in the Second World War and its performance has consistently provoked outraged reactions from the church and conservative establishment. Following the premiere of the play in Berlin in 1963, questions and criticism of the piece were raised in the German parliament. After the opening of the play in the Swiss city of Basle, a torchlight procession of 4,000 protested against the performance.

Costa-Gavros' film has met with similar condemnation. A campaign is currently underway in France to ban the posters for the film, which show an intertwined swastika and crucifix. At a press conference in Berlin, where the play is currently running at the *Berliner Ensemble* theatre, Costa-Gavros was confronted by a journalist from the Vatican radio station who assailed him for his depiction of the Catholic Church in *Amen*. At the same press conference, Hochhuth pointed out that the film rights to his script have been available for 38 years, but only now had a director, and a non-German at that, the courage to make the film. The recent announcement by Pope Johannes Paul II to make available in 2003 parts of the secret Papal archives dealing with the reaction of the Church to the Nazis must at least partly be credited to the influence of Hochhuth's play.

The story centres on the real-life figure of the doctor and engineer, Kurt Gerstein, appointed head of the Nazi Institute for Racial Hygiene and the man later responsible for the delivery of the deadly gas Zyklon-B to the Nazi concentration camps. The film begins in the year 1936 and Gerstein's horrified reaction to the Nazis first moves towards gassing and exterminating the mentally disabled. As knowledge spreads of the extermination policy and protest grows, the Nazis are forced to make a

retreat and temporarily halt the killings.

With the outbreak of war the committed Protestant Gerstein is appointed head of the Nazi "hygiene programme" convinced that his job is to ensure the hygiene and health of German troops fighting on the front. Drawn into the handful of SS (Schutzstaffel) leaders organising the mass extermination of the Jews, Gerstein is repulsed by what he sees. In line with his Christian beliefs, he appeals to the Church to protest against and publicise the systematic annihilation of the Jews. Gerstein and his only ally, the young papal emissary based in Berlin, Ricardo, meet a wall of obduracy and resistance as they attempt to convince the Catholic Church to speak out against the persecution of the Jews.

As the papacy prevaricates, we witness cattle trucks transporting Jews to the concentration camps of Eastern Europe. They are then shown empty as they thunder through the countryside returning to pick up new victims. In stark contrast to the bleakness of the camps, with a pall of thick smoke emerging from their chimneys, Costa-Gavros depicts the Vatican palaces, set in splendid gardens, in all their luxury. The Vatican, we are informed, has the best intelligence service in the world. The implication is that the Pope is fully aware of the plight of the Jews, even prior to the intervention of Ricardo and Gerstein. Pope Pious XII regards the figure of Hitler with contempt, but sees the Nazi drive to the East as the only way to forestall communism.

In the final scene of the film, the war has ended. We see the back of a refugee pleading with a papal emissary for assistance. He is the immediate boss of Gerstein, who readily and wittingly organised the mass extermination of the Jews. The emissary agrees to help him travel to South America. Having kept its mouth shut on the issue of the Holocaust, at the end of the war, the Vatican then organised the passage of many leading Nazis into exile.

Hochhuth acknowledges today that his 1963 script was too generous to Pope Pius XII. Further research, in particular the book by the English author John Cornwall (himself a Catholic) has confirmed that Pius XII was anti-Semitic. Hochhuth's play remains one of the most important pieces of post-war drama to deal with the subject of the relationship between the Church and fascism and Costa-Gavros has faithfully translated it into film.

One problem of the film, which has its roots in the original play, is the difficulty of identifying with the main protagonist. Gerstein (played by fine German actor Ulrich Tukur) is a committed Christian and member of the ruling elite. Under conditions where he must be careful what he says and to whom he says it, his protest at the behaviour of the Nazis is largely internalised. He does not even inform his wife of his conflicts with his bosses and his pangs of conscience are largely conveyed by the pained expression on his brow. At the same time we are taken on a somewhat rapid journey through the preparations and politics involved in the realisation of the Nazi death camps, which are contrasted with the deliberations and dalliances taking place in the Vatican. There is a great deal of information to assimilate. Nevertheless *Amen* should be widely

seen. As Costa-Gavras remarked at the Berlin press conference, he does not regard his film as disengaged history but as a vital contribution to social debate under conditions where neo-nazi parties are once again emerging.

### ***Taking Sides***

In his new film *Taking Sides* Hungarian-born director Istvan Szabó has returned to a theme he has handled before in his films—the conflict and fate of the artist who subordinates his art to fascist dictatorship. In *Mephisto* (1981), Szabó dealt with the German actor Gustav Gründgens, who prostituted his talents for the Nazi regime. In *Hanussen* (1987), he portrayed the magician and fortune teller who predicted the rise to power of Hitler and eventually met his end at the hands of the Nazis. *Mephisto*, based on the novel by Klaus Mann, offered penetrating insights into the opportunism of artists like Gründgens. In *Hanussen*, Szabó refrained from making clear that the main character in his film was a charlatan. Instead the film suggested parallels between the hypnotic powers of Hanussen on the one hand and Adolf Hitler on the other, inviting interpretations of fascism as a primarily psychological phenomenon.

In his latest film Szabó's subject is Wilhelm Furtwängler, Hitler's favourite conductor. *Taking Sides* is based on the play by South African author Ronald Harwood, who also wrote the film script.

The action takes place in Berlin at the end of the Second World War. The American army is commencing the interrogation of prominent figures active in Nazi Germany to prove their complicity with fascist atrocities. The officer in charge of interrogating Furtwängler (wonderfully played by Stellen Skarsgard) is a down-to-earth American major, Steve Arnold, (Harvey Keitel). Arnold was an insurance fraud investigator in civilian life and knows that everyone has a weak point when the pitch is right. His orders from above are to find Furtwängler guilty of collaboration and he is determined to get his man. Arnold was part of the force that liberated the Nazi death camps and, as he tells Furtwängler later in the film, he could smell the dead bodies from miles away. At the same time Arnold has no time for art and culture and continually refers to the director of Germany's most prominent orchestra, the Berlin Philharmonic, as a "bandsman."

At one point in the film we see shots of the training video made for American troops, like Arnold, occupying Germany after the war. The video warns against any sort of fraternisation, indicates that Nazi agents are lurking everywhere and implies that all Germans are equally responsible for the fascist dictatorship. Arnold's zeal to come to grips with the horrors of Nazi dictatorship is laudable, but the play always points to a large measure of pragmatism on his part. Upon discovering evidence that a member of Furtwängler's orchestra was an informant for the Nazi secret police, Arnold then bribes and intimidates the man in order to implicate Furtwängler. Arnold's personal double standards were played out on a larger scale by the American and other allied governments which, parallel to the trial of a number of prominent Nazis, selected leading members of the fascist elite to take up and continue their careers when they could be beneficial to the Western powers.

Most of the action in the film takes place in Arnold's office. The strength of both the play and the film is the juxtaposition of various arguments, in the course of Furtwängler's interrogation, which first prove and then disprove his culpability. Arnold is convinced that Furtwängler must have been a member of the Nazi Party, but in the course of his investigations is forced to concede that this is not the case. Evidence is also presented that Furtwängler actually helped a number of Jews to escape Nazi persecution. Although Furtwängler was Hitler's favourite conductor, Furtwängler claims he never gave the Nazi salute.

Furtwängler's most avid defender is Arnold's own personal secretary, Emmi Straube, a young woman who herself survived the Nazi death camps following the wartime prosecution of her father by the fascists for his involvement in a plot to kill Hitler. The music played by Furtwängler,

in particular his rendition of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, is what gave Emmi the spiritual strength to withstand the terrible hardship and emotional demands of war. In a further twist, Emmi then reveals that her father was in fact for a long period a supporter of Nazi policy. "My father only joined the plot when he realised we could not win the war." The film also introduces career considerations, and in particular, Furtwängler's rivalry with the younger, up-and-coming conductor Herbert von Karajan (who was a member of the Nazi party).

Harwood and Szabó have set out to demonstrate that the allocation of innocence and guilt in a dictatorship is not always easy and straightforward. Their own final word in the film seems to come down in favour of Furtwängler. In the closing scene we see original footage of a concert given by Furtwängler in front of an audience of Nazi leaders. As the concert finishes, Adolf Hitler personally strides to the conductor's podium to shake Furtwängler's hand.

As usual Furtwängler carries his baton in his right hand, which has enabled him up until now to avoid giving the Nazi salute, but now Hitler is offering him his hand. Furtwängler is forced to shake it, but in the next instant we see how Furtwängler transfers a handkerchief in his left hand to wipe away the sweat of the hand of the despised Führer.

In his exhaustive biography of Furtwängler, *The Devil's Music Master*, Sam Shirakawa presents ample evidence to demonstrate that Furtwängler did oppose aspects of the Nazi policy. For example in 1933 Furtwängler wrote an open letter to Goebbels protesting measures which had forced Jewish artists into exile—he names Bruno Walter, Otto Klemperer and Max Reinhardt. He also took risks to protect Jewish members of his orchestra.

The Nazi leadership was well aware that Furtwängler was an unreliable ally, but as Goebbels retorted in one discussion, "I don't care if Furtwängler is a National Socialist or not. As far as I am concerned, he can criticise us as much as he likes. Right now he is worth the trouble. He may not be a political official, but he must give us a facade."

An essential aspect to an understanding of the character and career of Furtwängler is the composer's own conception of his art. He was certainly in a different category to artists such as Gründgens, who shamelessly used fascism to advance his career and fortune. Furtwängler was uninterested in fascism as a vehicle for his own personal advancement and he turned down Hitler's personal offer of alternative luxury accommodation. But in one essential respect, he shared a kinship with Gründgens. Both men believed that their respective realms of art were self-contained worlds, which should be preserved and protected against social reality. Shirakawa writes of Furtwängler: "He became convinced that music at its best and highest was a world unto itself, a universe far richer and infinitely more satisfactory than anything mere reality with its enslavement to chance and vicissitude could make possible" (Page 10).

And in a discussion in 1937 with the Italian conductor Arturo Toscanini (initially a supporter of Mussolini and then later one of his most determined opponents), Furtwängler remarks: "Personally I believe that for musicians there are no enslaved and free countries. Human beings are free wherever Wagner and Beethoven are played, and if they are not free at first, they are freed while listening to these works. Music transports them to regions where the Gestapo can do them no harm" (Page 217).

If there is one lesson to be learned from the collaboration of prominent and talented artists with fascist dictatorship, then it is the disastrous consequences of such a "purist" concept of art. Not only does it leave the artist open to manipulation by the most reactionary political forces, it also thoroughly distorts and denies the role of social life and historical development in music itself. Performances of Beethoven's works undoubtedly gave heart to ordinary Germans during the course of the Second World War, but Beethoven's own music cannot be fully comprehended and appreciated without understanding the role that the revolutionary events of the late eighteenth century played in the gestation of his art. The denial of such a relationship is surely a key to

Furtwängler's accommodation to the Nazis, an issue that is largely ignored in *Taking Sides* to the detriment of the film and its argument.

### ***Safe Conduct***

Bertrand Tavernier has also turned to the conflict between the artists and dictatorship in his latest film, *Safe Conduct*. The scene is France and Tavernier's characters are workers in the film industry who continue to turn out movies under the Vichy fascist regime. Tavernier regards his film as a tribute to real persons, in particular the film-maker Jean Devaivre, with whom Tavernier has had a long working relationship and who features as the film's main protagonist. As in the case of *Taking Sides*, Tavernier is concerned to demonstrate that resistance as well as collaboration with the fascist dictatorship took many different forms. While many artists were driven abroad, most notably many Jewish artists, others stayed behind and sought their own ways and means of opposing French Vichy fascism.

*Safe Conduct* concentrates on three individuals: the gifted author and script-writer Jean Aurenche, who turns down all attempts by the fascists to integrate him into their film industry; director Jean Devaivre, who accepts work for the main German-run film company Continental, while at the same time conducting acts of sabotage against the German war in his free time; and assistant director Jean-Paul Le Chinois, who is a Jew and member of the Communist Party, working inside the film industry to further the aims of the resistance.

Tavernier is working with a broad canvas in *Safe Conduct*, with over a hundred speaking parts and basically covering the entire period of the war. At various points in the film, he includes scenes in which characters correctly criticise the bourgeois resistance to the Vichy regime being organised by De Gaulle in exile in Great Britain, as well as the policy of the Communist Party. Towards the end of the war, the latter risked the lives of its cadres (such as Jean-Paul Le Chinois) by calling on them to break their cover and undertake open, armed opposition to the regime. However, none of these issues are fully explored.

While featuring prominently at the start of the film, the character of Aurenche seems to fall from sight in favour of a concentration on the figure of Devaivre. Perhaps, in the end, Tavernier was not helped by the close relationship he enjoyed with Devaivre. The latter undertook legal action to stop the film, claiming it misrepresents him because he is not portrayed as the bourgeois person he is and he never kissed his wife when they met! Despite the overly ambitious nature of Tavernier's film, it constitutes a very worthy attempt to get to grips with complexities of life and art under fascism.

None of these films can be regarded as fully realised works of art. All three directors try to cram too much into their work, making at times for difficult viewing. Nevertheless the attempt by established directors to tackle some of the most important political and historical developments to arise in the twentieth century is entirely laudable and an essential element in efforts to revitalise contemporary film, and art in general.



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