

Modes of resistance

Safe Conduct (Laissez-passer), directed by Bertrand Tavernier

David Walsh
22 March 2003

Safe Conduct (Laissez-passer), directed by Bertrand Tavernier, written by Jean Cosmos and Tavernier, based on the book by Jean Devaivre

French filmmaker Bertrand Tavernier belongs to a select group of intelligent and humane mainstream directors. One might add names like Mike Leigh in Britain and Robert Altman in the US, but not many more (perhaps Shohei Imamura in Japan, Volker Schlöndorff in Germany, the Taviani brothers in Italy and Youssef Chahine in Egypt, among others). Speaking most generally, these are individuals whose best work is characterized by a certain moral and emotional complexity, elements of social critique (and self-criticism) and a genuine aesthetic sensibility. History may not determine that they were great artists, but at a time when artistic integrity is in short supply, their more serious efforts ought to be recognized and valued.

Safe Conduct is a story of the French film industry during World War II, when Paris and northern and western France were directly occupied by German forces. Its two central figures are assistant director Jean Devaivre (Jacques Gamblin) and screenwriter Jean Aurenche (Denis Podalydès), both real figures. Indeed Tavernier based his film on conversations with Aurenche (who died in 1992 and who co-wrote four of Tavernier's early films) and Devaivre's memoirs.

Tavernier (*Deathwatch, Clean Slate, 'Round Midnight, Life and Nothing But, It All Starts Today*) has said that his most recent film "is about people in the film business, like me. I wanted to understand what I would have done" in such circumstances, i.e., the German occupation. The director cited the comment of Romain Rolland who once said that "a hero is someone who does what he can, when others don't." Tavernier has spoken of the "spirit of resistance, which we need now."

Both Aurenche and Devaivre, in their own ways, are resisting. The scenarist refuses to write for the German-controlled Continental film studio, despite considerable pressure, while Devaivre, who works for Continental and has daily contact with German officials, is a member of the French underground, seeing to the distribution of leaflets and occasional acts of sabotage.

The French film industry continues to operate in the face of German repression and censorship. A Dr. Greven supervises the film work, with a more sinister Nazi bureaucrat behind him. Greven encourages aesthetic seriousness and gives the directors a free hand, as long as no contemporary political issues are raised. (Ironically, Tavernier has noted that the Vichy censors were more severe than the Germans.) Aurenche observes at one point that he prefers to write costume dramas, because in them one "can say anything."

Meanwhile the film workers, like the entire population, are suffering

from the cold in wintertime and a desperate lack of food all year round. The studio is near suburban factories that are periodically bombed by the RAF. On those occasions film crew members go out and collect fish from the Seine, stunned or killed by the air raids.

Aurenche is a genial womanizer, shuttling between different lovers and lodgings; Devaivre, a dedicated family man. One of the film's tragedies involves the arrest of Devaivre's brother-in-law, found in possession of two anti-Nazi leaflets, who is sent to work as a prison laborer in Germany never to be seen again. Following the arrest Devaivre sends his wife and baby to the country. In one of the more lyrical passages he travels hundreds of kilometers by bicycle to pay them a visit. Tavernier shows considerable skill in this extended sequence, broken up into a number of shots of different length, in a variety of locales and times of day, revealing something about the man and his physical and mental endurance, as well as opening up his film for the first time to life outside Paris, to light and air. "What if I stayed?" he wonders out loud when he has reached his family, but he obviously feels the pull of his film work and the Resistance effort.

Devaivre, who dominates most of the second half of the film, accidentally stumbles on a trove of German secret documents and photographs them. The higher-ups in the underground are impressed, but his manner of obtaining them was so unlikely they are afraid the British military will doubt their authenticity unless he accompanies them personally. Sick with a miserable cold, Devaivre endures a remarkable trip by bicycle, train and plane, culminating in a middle of the night briefing by skeptical British officers, and somehow returns in time for work.

Tavernier succinctly brings wartime Paris to life, including its most bitter features. We see boarded up stores with signs indicating that they were once owned by Jews and a bus full of internees on their way to a camp, clothes adorned with the Star of David. A Jewish composer is no longer able to work in the cinema. Hunger, fear, humiliation—these are facts of daily life. The director impresses upon the spectator these harsh realities, without hammering at us. This is a filmmaker with some sense of proportion and perspective, and, moreover, someone with a belief in the importance of studying history.

Safe Conduct, and this is presumably bound up with Tavernier's current outlook, privileges small acts of resistance: the actor Michel Simon insulting the German cultural overseers on a film set, effectively driving them out the door; Aurenche writing a scene in which a character—of course in a period piece—counsels "impatience and revolt" (the scene is cut from the final version of the film); Devaivre stepping in when the wife of director Maurice Tourneur (father of Hollywood director Jacques Tourneur) is arrested by the Germans; cast and crew feeding the starved screenwriter Charles

Spaak when he is released from prison during the day to work on a film script; Aurenche berating his black marketer host (who has just fed him lavishly) for taking delight in beating an old man. And so forth.

The film suggests that opposition to tyranny occurs in many surprising and contradictory forms. (Even Greven, for reasons known only to himself, continues to employ for several years a screenwriter he knows to be both Jewish and a Communist Party member.) While *Safe Conduct* portrays its share of opportunists and collaborators, its primary concern is with those who demonstrated some integrity and courage under terribly difficult circumstances. Tavernier has said the film was done as “an act of friendship,” as a tribute to those in the film industry who remained true to themselves. And a spirit of warmth and generosity (as well as a surprisingly comic touch) is evident.

Safe Conduct is an attempt at the same time to recapture something of the structure and “feel” of French films of the time, the work of directors such as Marcel Carné (*Les Enfants du Paradis*), Jean Grémillon (*Le Ciel est à Vous*) and Henri-Georges Clouzot (*Le Corbeau*), as well as screenwriters such as Aurenche, Pierre Bost and others. Forced to abandon contemporary realism and social criticism, due to the presence of the Nazi occupiers, the filmmakers turned to historical subjects, a hothouse emotional atmosphere and Aesopian language (discourse with a hidden, second meaning).

It is worth noting in passing that Tavernier’s interest in Aurenche is something of an attack on the origins of the *Cahiers du Cinema* group of filmmakers with which he is associated (as part of its second generation). François Truffaut’s famous 1953 article, “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema,” one of the opening ideological shots of what was to become the New Wave, took aim in particular at Aurenche and his writing partner, Bost (who also makes an appearance in *Safe Conduct*). Truffaut denounced them as “literary men” who felt they needed to “elevate” the cinema, as closet anticlericalists and anti-militarists, as purveyors of “psychological realism” that was neither psychological nor real, as makers of an “anti-bourgeois cinema made by the bourgeois for the bourgeois” and other sins. The piece is confused and, as we have pointed out elsewhere, borrowed some of its language and style from the French Right. Tavernier apparently rejects these arguments and one suspects that he is largely correct.

In bestowing his general approval on the directors and screenwriters during the Occupation, is Tavernier painting too rosy a picture, as some have suggested? Perhaps. It is possible, after all, if one is determined to locate such a quality, to find resistance in the simplest acts. Is it entirely appropriate, for example, to claim that living honestly, refusing to participate in crimes and maintaining one’s integrity are forms of opposition? (Devairre did more than this, of course.) Would this not nearly empty the word “resistance” of any positive content?

If one were to take issue with the film, however, it might be along somewhat different lines. Tavernier sets a moral problem at the center of his film, how does one (an artist in particular) act properly under conditions of official violence and tyranny, how does he, in fact, demonstrate responsibility to his fellow human beings? This is an entirely legitimate issue and one that the filmmaker treats with some degree of sensitivity and insight.

However, one might reasonably ask whether that was the most profound problem facing artists in the twentieth century. The collaborator and the opportunist, the producers of “art made tongue-tied by authority” (Shakespeare), do not as a rule create substantial or

enduring work. They are something of a straw man in this regard. Almost by definition the serious modern artist is someone who concerns himself with more than his or her immediate selfish existence and who as well resists the commands of the powerful. Certainly in the first several decades of the twentieth century, however they may have approached it, the problem of the transition of existing society to a higher social form preoccupied great numbers of major artists.

The function of art was determined (and often seen to be determined), in Trotsky’s words, “by its relation to the revolution.” He noted, however, that “precisely in this path, history has set a formidable snare for the artist,” i.e., Stalinism and the Communist parties. In other words, the issue over which many artists stumbled in the middle of the last century was not the rather abstract, almost Existential “to act or not to act”—for most this was not even a question—but over the more complex problem: on the basis of which historical perspective to act?

It was not personal cowardice, moral inadequacy or a widespread desire to stick one’s head in the sand that primarily afflicted the artistic community, but the activities of political parties and tendencies that betrayed their highest aspirations and ideals. This is what demoralized, disillusioned or made cynical so many, and for which we continue to pay a price. One really has to turn to the concrete, *political-ideological* history of the past 75 years to gain more of an insight into some of the difficulties artists, including French artists, confronted. After all, it wasn’t simply a matter of responding to the consequences of German fascism, as well as the collaboration of large sections of the French ruling class, but of understanding how this tragedy had befallen Europe.

On this score, Tavernier has relatively little to say, aside from a few references to the Vichy regime and the social types who manned it and a brief swipe at the French Stalinists for their heavy-handed and bureaucratic role in the Resistance movement.

In any event, *Safe Conduct* is gripping and appealing—and honest—in regard to that part of modern life it does treat, and that is no small matter.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact