

Toronto International Film Festival 2006—Part 2

The past is present

David Walsh
26 September 2006

This is the second of a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto film festival (September 7-16).

Even the most sinister and authoritarian regimes in the modern era have sought to portray their actions as the defense of civilization and find those elements in the population susceptible to such justifications.

The subject of *The Colonel* (*Mon Colonel*), directed by Laurent Herbiet and co-scripted by Costa-Gavras and Jean-Claude Grumberg, is the ruthless effort by French colonialism to suppress the Algerian independence struggle in the late 1950s.

The film opens with the murder of an elderly man some time in the 1980s or early 1990s. He turns out to be a former officer in the French army, Colonel Raoul Duplan (Olivier Gourmet), closely identified with the conflict in Algeria. Envelopes containing portions of a diary, evidently kept by an officer during the Algerian war, begin arriving at army headquarters. A young female officer is assigned to read them. The film alternates between scenes of the army-police murder investigation and far longer sequences treating the events in Algeria that help explain the killing decades later.

Its moral pivot is the relationship between a young officer, Guy Rossi (Robinson Stévenin), who arrives in the town of St. Arnaud (a “French city,” claim the signs) in Algeria in 1957 and comes under Duplan’s command. A lawyer, a nominal leftist, Rossi has nonetheless volunteered as a legal adviser in the military. He is quickly pressed into service.

Duplan (who inevitably brings to mind Col. Mathieu in Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers* [1966]) hands him the emergency laws passed by the French National Assembly and tells him to translate them into military language. After an examination of the measures, Rossi tells the colonel that the army “can do anything, nothing is excluded.” The film unfolds from this moment as Duplan obliges Rossi, little by little, to draw and act on the logical conclusions of such a directive.

Essentially, Duplan argues, against the feeble protests of the civilian administrators in Algeria and France, that the political goals of the French authorities—their “civilizing mission” in Algeria, the attempted “pacification” of the rebellious population—can only be achieved by the most resolute means, including raids, destruction of property, arrests, beatings, torture and summary executions, and that everything else is mere hypocrisy. He makes no bones about this, even embarrassing visiting French politicians with a frank written and photographic account of the savage means by which information is being gathered. The forceful colonel attempts, with some success at first, to seduce the weaker Rossi into taking part in this project. He makes Rossi his intelligence chief, which eventually obliges the young lieutenant to supervise sessions of torture and humiliation.

While in St. Arnaud, Rossi also encounters René Ascencio (Eric Caravaca), a leftist teacher with obvious sympathies for the Arab cause. Rossi argues with his new acquaintance, asserting sincerely that “We’ll stamp out terrorism,” then “rebuild the country.” The military turns up evidence that Ascencio is supplying the Algerian nationalist forces with

information, and Rossi is asked to ensnare him. The colonel offers him an ultimatum....

The Colonel, based on a 1999 novel by Francis Zamponi, is obviously sincere and concerned with compelling moral and political issues. This is not a trivial or unserious work. Costa-Gavras and Herbiet deserve commendation for continuing to examine the historical record of French colonialism and dramatize its realities. At a time when a wide spectrum of liberal and “left” voices are providing justifications for new colonial adventures, with untold consequences, the film could hardly be more timely.

Recognizing its merits, of course, doesn’t mean closing one’s eyes to the film’s inadequacies. Setting *The Colonel* in two different decades doesn’t seem to serve any particular function other than to justify our witnessing Duplan meet his fate. In an interview, Costa-Gavras suggested that the relationship between Rossi and the female officer reading his diary years later was a kind of “love story.” If so, it’s seriously underdeveloped. In general, the scenes laid in the later period are far less intriguing.

The Algerian sequences, involving Gourmet (best known for his association with the Dardenne brothers from Belgium, who co-produced the film), Stévenin, Caravaca and Georges Siatidis, as the cynical local police chief who facilitates the French military’s reign of terror, are much more effective. The film is at its best demonstrating Duplan’s utter devotion to the French colonial cause. The problem is not the man, as such, but the cause. Duplan, like many other French officers in Algeria, had fought with the Resistance against German occupation; he even witnessed the liberation of the concentration camps. Little over a decade later, he finds himself employing Nazi-like methods against a resisting populace.

Rossi, for his part, is an interesting figure. Sensitive, cultured, he nonetheless proceeds from the assumption shared by a good portion of the French middle class that Algeria is part of France and that the Arab population ought to be grateful to partake of France’s “Republican values.” (The film obliquely makes the point that much of the official French “left” in the 1950s, including future “socialist” president François Mitterrand, explicitly or tacitly accepted colonial rule over Algeria.) Rossi’s willingness to accommodate himself to and even preside over the torture of prisoners flows from his assumptions. Civilization, according to this logic, must take every step necessary in the struggle against “terrorism.”

The participation in the production of Costa Gavras, who has been a significant figure in international cinema since the mid-1960s, is noteworthy. Born in 1933 in Greece to a Russian father who fought with the Greek resistance, the filmmaker came to prominence with *Z* in 1969 (which went on to win an Academy Award), a political thriller based on events surrounding the assassination of Greek politician Grigoris Lambrakis in 1963.

He followed that work with *The Confession* (1970), one of his best and

most conscientious films, about the Stalinist frame-up trials in Czechoslovakia in 1952, and *State of Siege* (1972), which fictionally treats the kidnapping and eventual murder of an American intelligence operative by leftist guerillas in Uruguay. A decade later, in *Missing* (1982), the filmmaker turned his attention, movingly, to Washington's role in the coup against the "Popular Unity" government of Salvador Allende in Chile in 1973.

It was fashionable on the "artistic left" in the 1970s to deride Costa Gavras. Most famously, Swiss-French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard declaimed: "The problem is not to make *political* films but to make films *politically*"—i.e., to reinvent film in a manner that would supposedly deconstruct bourgeois image- and sound-making and politically "activate" the spectator. In 1970, during his relatively brief but noisome "leftist" phase, Godard stupidly told a journalist, "Gavras is objectively an ally of the Greek government [the military junta then in power].... After all, who financed the coup d'état? The CIA. And who gave the prize [the Academy Award] to a Greek film? Hollywood. Z got an Oscar from the same people who silenced the Greek people."

After years of quasi-paralysis, Godard today is entirely despairing. He told the British *Guardian* in 2005, " 'It's over,' he sighs. 'There was a time maybe when cinema could have improved society, but that time was missed.' "

Costa-Gavras continues to struggle to represent social life. So was he entirely "right" in the long run and Godard "wrong"? It's not nearly as simple as that. In the first place, an inspired and poetic element existed in Godard's work, at least until recently, even in some of his most misguided projects, while an undeniably conventional tendency recurs in Costa Gavras's efforts.

Beyond that, however, the more critical issue is to understand the evolution of both artistic careers in relation to larger problems of artistic and political perspective in the last decades of the twentieth century.

This much can be said definitively "for" Costa-Gavras and "against" Godard: the evolution of cinema has conclusively demonstrated that the various "leftist" campaigns in opposition to efforts to reflect and make sense of life on screen in the form of drama, in favor of supposedly revolutionary methods of going "back to zero" and "dissolving images and sound," have proven false and produced little, if anything, of lasting value.

We spoke to director Laurent Herbiet and Costa Gavras, who remains vigorous at 73, during the Toronto film festival—in fact, on the fifth anniversary of the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington.

In response to a question, Herbiet (born 1961—*Mon Colonel* is his first feature film) indicated that the impulse for the film came from both the past and the present. The Algerian war continues to reverberate within French society. After years of neglect, French filmmakers have begun once again considering the Algerian conflict, in films such as Alain Tasma's *October 17, 1961*, Herbiet noted.

Clearly, the war in Iraq and the American effort to legitimize torture were also factors. Herbiet pointed to George W. Bush's recent speech defending secret CIA prisons.

Costa-Gavras spoke of the terrible price paid in the Algerian war, which cost the lives of tens of thousands. And for what? "These wars have always ended in peace negotiations. The 'terrorist' of yesterday becomes the head of state, as in Algeria." The present situation is also clearly on his mind: "Iraq, but also Chechnya, Lebanon and we must not forget the Palestinian situation."

He commented, "The young officer is a perfect metaphor for that section of the French people convinced that Algeria was part of France. For more than a century, they accepted killings, torture, repression. The Algerians finally convinced them that they wanted to be Algerian, not French."

Herbiet spoke of Colonel Duplan and his social type. "These were not

fascist officers, they thought of themselves as loyal republicans, true to France. A massive number of French soldiers served in Algeria, hundreds of thousands. The soldiers were told they were the 'children of the Republic,' and there was also the mythologizing of the French Resistance.

"The civilian authorities were happy to cede responsibility to the military, they didn't investigate the crimes committed in Algeria. They provided the legal framework for torture. The army applied the methods learned in Indochina in an effort to control the population, but the prime responsibility lies with the political leaders."

I asked Herbiet and Costa-Gavras what accounted for Rossi's vulnerability in the film. The director replied, "There are personal factors involved. But, more importantly, Rossi is not a soldier like the others. Most came from the working class or the countryside. They had relatively little education. Rossi is a law student, a 'leftist.' He has a superiority complex in relation to the colonel. He thinks, 'I'll be able to stop him.' This arrogance is his weakness. In fact, Colonel Duplan is far better prepared."

Costa-Gavras put in, "We are all vulnerable, in a situation where the authorities tell the people what to do. This was France, but we also have the Iraq war now. People are told, 'this has to be done.' We speak today of 'fighting terrorism,' and terrorism must be opposed, but no one asks why it exists. 'Terrorism is evil.' This is accepted uncritically by many people. But we have to investigate the conditions that produced terrorism. Rossi has this weakness. Also, he looks at the colonel like his father, another authority figure."

On the specific question of torture, a horror of which animates *The Colonel*, Costa-Gavras commented that "torture is nothing new. Vietnam, Algeria, now Iraq, Guantánamo. People have been imprisoned in Guantánamo for three and a half years, with no rights! Torturing in the name of fighting terrorism. The situation will get worse and worse. Now the Americans want to legalize torture, that *is* new; they will only produce more terrorists."

He spoke of a recent trip to Israel. "Twenty years ago, I made *Hanna K.* about the Israeli-Palestinian situation. Israel has changed completely. There are more and more killings, the situation is deteriorating badly. They are attempting to solve their problems through military means. To give the power to the military, like in Greece, is the very worst thing."

Herbiet added, "There is no example of a society dominated by the military that remains democratic."

He explained about the present situation in France. "There is a naiveté and ignorance about history. 'Yesterday's problems are yesterday's problems.' There is no knowledge of the Algerian war within the younger generation. Our younger actors expressed this. If this film serves a purpose, then it's that. There is a kind of relay, things are handed on to the next generation."

Costa-Gavras spoke about the role of cinema in helping to change social life. "Art is not a leaflet or a tract, a political speech. The process is not direct. You have to bring emotion to this process. With emotion and life, we can bring the viewer into the historian's study. In this way, perhaps we can open something up."

We assured him that he should not underestimate what he had accomplished. He said, with modesty, "It is better to underestimate one's role."

The Bubble from Israel, directed by Eytan Fox, is a film with its heart deeply in the right place. At its center is the relationship between a gay Israeli, Noam (Ohad Knoller), and a gay Palestinian, Ashraf (Yousef "Joe" Sweid). They meet at an Israeli military checkpoint in the film's opening sequence; Noam is on reserve duty and Ashraf tries to help a Palestinian woman forced to give birth in the middle of the road (her child is still-born).

Noam and Ashraf develop a relationship in Tel Aviv, where the former lives with two roommates, Yali (Alon Friedmann) and Lulu (played by the

captivating Daniela Wircer). The trio are politically active in a somewhat haphazard and, in the director's words, "childish" fashion. They organize a "rave against the occupation," for instance.

The love affair between Noam and Ashraf is doomed by circumstances and ends very tragically. Fox and his co-screenwriter Gal Uchovsky criticize the occupation and the treatment of the Palestinians, as well as Islamic fundamentalism, with some understanding and depth of feeling. They do so without ever challenging the essential premises of Zionism; the film does not wander that far from the conventional in its politics. Nonetheless, *The Bubble* provides a glimpse at the complexity and contradictoriness of Israeli society, and its humanity is unquestionable.

Over the past 15 years or so, some of the world's most interesting cinema has emerged from Iran. *Iran: A Cinematographic Revolution*, directed by French-born Nader Takmil Homayoun, screened at the festival, is a useful introduction to the subject. Homayoun's feature-length documentary contains some fascinating archival material, clips from Iranian films of the 1950s, as well as interviews with a number of prominent figures, including directors Jafar Panahi, Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Bahman Ghobadi.

"Why are ninety per cent of cinemas in the grip of Hollywood?" Makhmalbaf asks, "Do other countries not have thinkers or images, dreams or sorrows?"

The present state of Iranian cinema is a matter of international concern. Harsh censorship and increased government pressure have created very arduous conditions. Panahi's new film, *Offside* (reviewed in an upcoming article), has been banned, along with others.

On the Makhmalbaf Film House web site, one of the "Frequently Asked Questions" is "If you were to reside in a country more permanently where would you prefer to live?" Makhmalbaf's answer: "Iran in the first place, but not at any cost. I am a filmmaker. If living in Iran equals not making films, between Iran and filmmaking I will choose the latter."

The most recent film by Bahman Ghobadi is *Half Moon*. A renowned Iranian-Kurdish musician, Mamo (Ismail Ghaffari), following the fall of Saddam Hussein, has been given permission, after seven months of efforts, to perform at a concert in Iraqi Kurdish territory. He assembles his many sons, all musicians, and sets off in a school bus driven by a faithful friend, Kako (Allah Morad Rashtiani).

Ghobadi has said that the film was inspired by Mozart's *Requiem* and that Mamo (who was originally to be named "Mamozart," which means "my Mozart" in Kurdish) represented the great composer, but that he made him a Kurdish musician in the end so as not to hurt the Kurdish people's feelings.

In any event, Mamo is convinced that the success of his project depends on the presence of a female singer. He has chosen Hesho (Hedye Tehrani), who lives in a mountain village along with 1,333 other exiled women singers. It is illegal for women to sing in public in Iran. Hesho, who is ailing, has to be hidden beneath the floorboards of the bus, like in a tomb. The Iranian police stop the group and search their vehicle. "What is her crime?" demands Mamo.

Other difficulties beset Mamo and his sons, a number of whom have now fallen by the wayside. The musician presses on, determined to appear at the concert, even if he has to be dragged on stage in a coffin. An old colleague drops dead when he learns of Mamo's visit. At the funeral, however, he seems to show signs of life. "If that woman sings, he'll come back to life!"

Most of the sons, along with Hesho, have vanished. Mamo's bus drives on with its remaining passengers, taking detours through western Azerbaijan and Turkey. A pretty young woman, Niwemang [Half Moon in Kurdish] (Golshifteh Farahani) appears mysteriously, having apparently landed on top of the vehicle. Perhaps an angel, she helps Mamo make the last stretch of his journey, over the mountains in the snow. He climbs into his coffin.

Ghobadi continues to be one of the most poetic, sensitive presences in world cinema. As our interview with him reveals, he is tormented by the present state of the world and his region in particular. He explains that the film was dedicated to the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, but he lives in a country where women are not allowed to sing in public and musical instruments cannot be shown on television!

The film has many painful and sad moments, but also comic ones. One of Mamo's sons, Shouan (Sadiq Bezhadpoor), no spring chicken himself, keeps trying to sneak off. During one of his attempted escapes, Mamo takes a shot at him and wounds him in the ear. When Shouan shows up with a bandage wrapped around his head, the old man searches his memory for the name of the appropriate French painter. He finally remembers, "You look like Van Gogh!" Kako, the bus driver and organizer of cockfights, is also a lively character.

Ghobadi shows a complicated reality, with its "combined and uneven development." On the one hand, unrelenting poverty and genuine backwardness, including the position of women, and, on the other, the potential offered by global technology—Mamo has his own e-mail address and one of his sons operates a laptop computer in the bus, even as it travels through some of the most desolate landscape imaginable!

Despite its beauty and fascinating detail, *Half Moon* is not entirely successful, and the reasons for this are complex. In the first place, as Ghobadi explains in our interview, he censored himself extensively. He wanted to make a film about the banning of women singers, and the conditions of female artists in general, but he couldn't show women singing or his own film would be proscribed.

In the end, the Iranian government banned the film anyway, on the spurious grounds that Ghobadi was a Kurdish "separatist." As the director explains, now he is angry at himself for cutting potentially offending material from his film. "Why did I bother?" he asks. He says he will restore the edited-out sequences.

In other words, Ghobadi's film, like other serious, artistic and socially minded Iranian films, was made in extremely unfavorable circumstances. One could sense the pressures at work in a number of Iranian films at the Toronto festival. In certain cases, the filmmakers have withdrawn slightly, reduced the scope of their films to the more personal or provided only details of social life. Others have retreated even further.

Ghobadi has continued along the same path, but social reality in the region is extremely complex. Artistic intuition, sensitivity, compassion are indispensable qualities. Nothing great can be accomplished without them. However, in the long run, one cannot do without some degree of political and historical clarity either.

The oppression of the Kurdish people has been ferocious. How is it to be opposed? Through deals with this or that great power against one or another of the historically oppressive governments in the area? Or through the unification of the peoples of the region in a common struggle against imperialism and every one of the national bourgeois regimes and for socialism?

Ghobadi is not a "separatist," nor even an ardent nationalist, in that sense, but the unresolved issues hang over him at present like a fate. Certainly Kurdish nationalism or semi-nationalism provides too narrow a basis for the most searching and penetrating artistic work, as Ghobadi's most recent film demonstrates. The last section of *Half Moon*, which flirts with the mystical, is unsatisfying and even tedious.

There are difficult questions that need to be faced up to: among them, the character of the Iranian revolution and the current regime; the threat to the entire region posed by American imperialism; and the Kurdish question. The artist is not obliged to come up with a comprehensive political diagnosis. But he or she needs to be oriented toward concrete human solutions for concrete human problems, not angels and other celestial beings. One can have immense sympathy for the artist who faces trying circumstances, but still contend that this amounts to taking the line

of least resistance.

Ghobadi promises to make a new film every year. We await his next with great interest.

To be continued



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact