

Z — An Interview with Costa-Gavras

Dan Georgakas

1970

NOTE: Costa-Gavras, the director of “Z,” was born in Athens, Greece in 1933. In 1964 he made his first film, “The Sleeping Car Murders” and since has completed “One Man Too Many” and “The Avowal.” While in New York for the opening of “Z,” he was interviewed by Dan Georgakas, a writer who is active in the anti-junta movement, a past contributor to the *Fifth Estate* who was in Greece in 1963 during the Lambrakis affair, and Gary Crowdus, editor of *Cineaste* Magazine.

Dan Georgakas: What were your reasons for making Z?

Costa-Gavras: The main reason for making Z was my Greek origins, of course. I can’t see how anyone without those origins could possibly have made such a film. I had been concerned about the Lambrakis murder ever since it occurred in 1963, but after the military coup of 1967, I wanted to do something concrete against the dictatorship. I had also been troubled by the murder of Ben Barka in Paris during the fall of 1965. There were many parallels with Greek events, but the Lambrakis murder had all the classic elements of political conspiracy posed most clearly. It had police complicity, the disappearance of key witnesses, corruption in government—all those kinds of things. There was the additional question of the way some men make culprits of others. Most important for me was that the Lambrakis affair had a conclusion. There was a trial which produced concrete testimony and evidence. This was not so in the case of Ben Barka or some of the assassinations in the United States.

Dan Georgakas: You mention a parallel with the Ben Barka affair. Were you influenced by the John F. Kennedy assassination? The murder scene, for instance, is shown several times and one of the ‘replays’ is a slow motion, almost frame-by-frame analysis that bears striking similarities to the Zapruder films taken of the JFK assassination.

Costa-Gavras: People here have often mentioned Kennedy, but in Europe no one has really seen the Zapruder films. I hadn’t thought of them as having any influence on me. I was more interested in showing how an important event is perceived. First we see it as it actually took place, then as the general retells it, and finally, as a lawyer friend of Z remembers it. The last viewpoint is the most interesting for the man is trying to be factual. He does not say he saw this or that but that he thought he saw this or that. The lawyer strives to eliminate new information he has learned since the event and he excludes uncertain details.

Dan Georgakas: It’s interesting that Europeans don’t see this sequence in relation to the Zapruder film and that Americans would not be likely to see it in relation to the Ben Barka affair.

Costa-Gavras: Yes, none of the reviewers here has mentioned Ben Barka.

Dan Georgakas: The dramatic focus of the film is not Lambrakis but the investigating judge. Could you explain why you chose that dramatic framework?

Costa-Gavras: I thought that showing the story through the investigating judge would be the most effective way of revealing the political situation in Greece. My film hoped to probe the mechanics of political crime. If I had wanted to do justice to the achievements of Gregory Lambrakis, I would have had to make a far different film, a film of his life. I didn’t set out to do that. I wanted to study the mechanics. And the investigating judge was truly an incredible character. At any point he was free to halt his investigation. He was quite crucial to the expose of the police. He was a man of the Right, a man of the Establishment, but he was an honest man.

Dan Georgakas: Your first film, *Sleeping Car Murders*, was a detective thriller, which *Z* resembles in its dramatic construction. Do you have a penchant for this type of film or did you think more people could be reached if a political film were presented in this manner?

Costa-Gavras: It was neither of those. From the time Lambrakis was struck until the time he died three days later, there was intense suspense throughout Greece. The unraveling of the conspiracy was something that was followed daily in the press. It was nothing I interjected. That was how events took place.

Dan Georgakas: But there were many things that happened that you didn't show. There were public demonstrations, particularly the mammoth funeral in Athens.

Costa-Gavras: But I didn't have 500,000 extras.

Dan Georgakas: Wasn't it possible to use newsreel footage to depict the funeral? It's a popular device now.

Costa-Gavras: As I said before, from the beginning we had decided to do the film as a study of political crime. We did not want sentimental feeling to interfere with that. Had we shown the funeral, the film would have been more revolutionary, but also more sentimental. It was really after the events in the films that the Lambrakis Youth Movement developed into an important force in Greece. As for newsreel, we had also decided from the beginning that it would be a completely directed film with well-known actors playing the major roles. I do not like the use of documentary material in a film like this because I think it cheapens it. I have been working on a documentary, however, which deals with the funeral of George Papandreou. Most of the footage was shot by Greeks hidden in the crowd and then the film was brought out of Greece secretly. But that is something altogether different. That will be a documentary film.

Dan Georgakas: The musical credits state that the music for the film is original work by Mikis Theodorakis, but the songs are some of his best known and most popular—isn't this all music he had composed earlier?

Costa-Gavras: Exactly. The music is not original. I don't know about the presentation of it as original. All the Greeks will recognize the songs at once.

Dan Georgakas: There's an interesting placement of music early in the film. When a black tie crowd comes out of the Bolshoi Ballet you use music from a song that mocks the good Germans of the Nazi era. Obviously you are striking out at the upper class of Thessaloniki which is enjoying ballet at the moment Lambrakis is being killed elsewhere in the city. Are you also criticizing the Soviet Union?

Costa-Gavras: It's more complicated than that. Lambrakis was not in complete agreement with the Soviet Union on a number of issues, including certain positions on Greece. The proof of this is that he scheduled his meeting for the same night as the opening of the Bolshoi in Thessaloniki. I think this is an important point to make.

Dan Georgakas: You've also made a point out of the homosexuality and pederasty of one of the killers. Did you take some liberty in portraying him quite as obnoxiously as you do?

Costa-Gavras: Quite the opposite. We didn't want to stress the fact that he was a homosexual. Certainly we aren't saying that homosexuals are dangerous people or rightists. We had to tone down some of this individual's characteristics to make him more credible. His homosexuality was important because it was the factor which made him a lackey of the police. He was a victim himself. We might have stressed his victimization more, but after all, he was the man who murdered Lambrakis.

Dan Georgakas: Were there other things which you chose to omit or tone down?

Costa-Gavras: Many, but these were things which would have detracted from the film's effect and credibility. When the general was brought for questioning he had a pistol with him which he waved about shouting that he would commit suicide if there was an indictment. That was really too incredible to include...something you might expect in a poor Western. At another point, the investigating judge asked him what he had done a particular morning and he answered, "I was looking for my long underwear." Those things would have made him look too foolish. There were other omissions concerning Lambrakis himself. He ran a free clinic for the poor every week. Just before he was killed a little old woman asked him to look at her sick son and he had agreed to come first thing the next morning. That would have been far too sentimental for the film even though it actually happened. John F. Kennedy sent a telegram to the widow expressing sorrow at the tragedy. At one point we mentioned there had been a telegram from the President of the United States, but it would have been too incredible to mention Kennedy by name. He would be dead himself within a few months.

Dan Georgakas: You build Z to an exhilarating climax where the conspirators are all indicted. Then you more or less pull the rug from under our feet in an epilogue where we learn key witnesses have been killed under mysterious circumstances and that the conspirators have been freed and reinstated by a military coup. Americans will again be reminded of events in the Kennedy assassination. Was that your intent?

Costa-Gavras: No. In France, they thought of Ben Barka where so many witnesses died and disappeared. For instance, a reporter who shot pictures for PARIS MATCH in front of the police station committed suicide by shooting himself in the head. Later, it was revealed that the revolver was held in his right hand but that the photographer was left-handed. The Ben Barka affair was very much in mind while doing this film, but not the Kennedy events.

Dan Georgakas: Did the Ben Barka parallel influence your decision to make the film in Algeria?

Costa-Gavras: Not exactly. In Europe we make films by co-production. Two companies from different countries produce pictures jointly. We made this picture with Algeria because no one in Europe would co-operate. Not the Italians, not the Yugoslavians. I went to Yugoslavia personally—they said it was “too political.”

Dan Georgakas: Too specifically political or too generally political?

Costa-Gavras: Both I think. I showed the director of the Yugoslavian cinema the script and he said “No, we cannot do this.” The Italians and the French had the same attitude. The Algerians finally said “Come film the movie here.” Most of it was finally shot there except for a few interior scenes done in Paris. They didn’t give much money but they helped with extras and in giving us locations. It may seem strange that a semi-police state like Algeria would allow us to make such a film. Perhaps it was partly luck. They didn’t know the film would be so good or popular. They wanted to have good rapport with the French intellectuals. They want to show they are the most advanced Arab nation in the Mediterranean. I want to make it very clear, however, that if they had not taken part in the production, Z probably would not have been made.

Dan Georgakas: Had the film been less political, they might not have been so interested.

Costa-Gavras: Well, it was an excellent way for them to look more liberal than they are, by attacking a nation so badly governed as Greece. If I had to choose between the Greek government and the Algerian government, I have no doubt I would choose the Algerian because the Greek government is just impossible to live under.

Dan Georgakas: What effect do you think Z will have in America? The Black Panthers had a print months ago and had special screenings, but that was something unusual. How do you expect the average American to react?

Costa-Gavras: I think that it is extremely important that as many people as possible see this film to see how present conditions came about. It’s important for reference purposes. Someone speaking about Greece can be challenged on specific grounds.

Dan Georgakas: Would there be any specific things that would make you feel the film was a success? Perhaps the fall of the junta or success at the box-office?

Costa-Gavras: I have no financial interest in the film. I was paid a fixed salary so I’m not much interested in the financial success of the film. The most important thing is that it have a large audience because of the political possibilities. In Paris, people left notes at the door saying that they had been to Greece and loved the land and its people very much but that they would not return until the present regime fell. They transformed some of their outrage into a political act against the junta.

Dan Georgakas: If political results are so important to you, why have you placed so much emphasis on the mechanics of the crime and less on the motivations? You are also vague about the role of the palace and the CIA.

Costa-Gavras: Are you sure the palace ordered the murder? Is there any proof? Are you sure the CIA was involved? Is there any proof?

Dan Georgakas: We have proof about certain military men and their groups and the kinds of connections they have.

Costa-Gavras: Greece has always had these paramilitary groups and police cadres, especially since the war. Queen Fredericka has sponsored many of them. The story of Lambrakis offered many possible approaches. By sticking absolutely to what was proved at the trial, we have made it all but impossible for people to say, “How do you know? That isn’t true. That’s a rumor.” What we do say about the palace and the CIA is the kind of thing that came out at the trial. For instance, Theodorakis said that we should not attempt to find the murderers in two poor workers of Thessaloniki but to the palace, particularly to the Queen Mother.

Dan Georgakas: Your first film had no significant political content, but you obviously have very strong political feelings and are quite clear on how you want to develop political points. Are you a man of so many parts that we can expect more films of both types?

Costa-Gavras: I want to explain about that. *The Sleeping Car Murders* was my first film. A first film is extremely difficult. I had to have a subject that was not too easy. The New Wave directors did other kinds of things as their first films. My situation was different. I did not have a personal fortune. *The Sleeping Car Murders* was a solid film that could open doors to the future. In the past three or four years I have been working on *Z*. Since then there has been the uprising in France in 1968 and there's been the growing feeling about the war in Vietnam. The general public has become much more political. The world has become much more open-minded. I think cinema has to follow this trend. More and more of our films will be political. I will make more political films. There's no doubt I have a penchant for this kind of film—for films with real subjects.



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