

EDEN IS WEST



As in «The Odyssey», the Aegean Sea is the setting when our hero, Elias, sets out on his adventures. On the same waters, under the same sun and the same sky as the dawn of civilization. After countless incidents and accidents, a stopover in paradise and a sojourn in hell, the magical conclusion of his journey takes place in Paris. Paris, the shining city in the deepest dreams, in the most uncertain sleep of wanderers. EDEN IS WEST attempts to echo the path, the journey of those (once our fathers and mothers) who cross through lands, braving oceans and seas of uniforms, looking for a home. Elias' story is not that of Ulysses, nor

is it Jean-Claude's or mine. But I see myself in Elias, a foreigner who is not foreign to me.



Costas Gavras

Continued from Wednesday's edition

Anny Duperey is fabulous in the film. She does only one scene, but that scene says it all! She meets Elias and gives him a jacket.

«With this you'll find work and you'll get to the Champs-Élysées,» she tells him. She's given him a key, a master key. That key is not just a piece of clothing to keep him warm. It facilitates human contact, makes the fear go away. This upper-class Parisian lady knows that.

She gives him her husband's jacket, a husband we imagine has passed away.

She doesn't go so far as to let him into her apartment!

No, she leaves him on the landing. She does what we all do, she helps a little.

Maybe you can't «take on all the whole world's misery,» but you can maintain your dignity, your humanity. This country is made up of millions of people like Elias or who used to be like Elias. Integration shouldn't be merely a personal victory over adversity. It should be the collective project of a society.

Among these millions of immigrants who make up France, there is one named Costa-Gavras. Born in Greece, there's a foreigner who has who has done more than well in his adopted country.

What about this film is drawn from your own story?

Everything. And yet it isn't an autobiographical film. Of course I, too, was a cultural and economic immigrant. I think I'm just like thousands of immigrants. Not all of them became filmmakers, naturally, not all have had the success which I still find so incredible. But I repeat, this is not an autobiography. Still, Elias was drawn from my life, my experiences. This is probably my most personal film.

Do you consider yourself French?

When it comes to this, I can only answer, «Do you, as a French person, consider me French? If you consider me French, then I'll go along with you.» I am a product of this country, of this culture, I'm from here. But the answer is in your eyes, not mine. And that is a need that never goes away. It's like a romance. You love a woman and you can see in her eyes that she loves you back. An immigrant doesn't start to feel French when he gets a roof over his head, a job, official status. That matters, but it's not enough. He's French when people look at him with respect and warmth, when they consider him one of their own.

Is «being French» something you learned?

I don't have the culture that my children have acquired since primary school. When I got here, I read schoolbooks to learn what schoolchildren learned, French songs for example. But naturally, I never lived them, I learned them later in life, and I know very well that they don't totally belong to me. That's what being French really is - it's having friends, little French playmates, and playing with them in French and never thinking twice about it.

Who are you, then? Where are you from?

I'm a citizen of France. I'm a Parisian, having lived in that city for over fifty years.

My culture is French and, as a French citizen, I am part of this country, and I try to be worthy of that honor. Sometimes I tell my children, «You're French by accident. I'm French out of choice and necessity.» That choice and that necessity made me who I am.

Do you feel that today's France is less generous towards immigrants than when you arrived?

I think it became less generous out of fear - a fear of unemployment, of different religions, of different skin colors. A fear fueled by certain politicians which ultimately made its mark, creating the myth of the invader, a danger to French identity and culture.

Riccardo Scamarcio, who plays Elias, must have about ten lines in the entire film. A main character who practically never speaks!

The great actors of silent movies never speak, but they communicate everything. Elias is an immigrant who couldn't learn French. But he tries to learn it from an old text book. When I hear people say immigrants should learn French before they get here, I'm outraged. Where are they supposed to learn it? In their countries devastated by misery, war or both?!

At the beginning of the film, Elias and his companion in misfortune speak in their native language.

We had to invent a language that wouldn't define the characters' identity. We reversed French words! A linguist friend listened to the result and said: «It sounds like a Semitic language, but the architecture is French.» He made a few changes so it would sound more like from elsewhere, a faroff elsewhere.

A nouveau riche Greek couple are having an argument in a car. I don't know if friends of yours inspired it, but they're incredible!

Like every scene in the film, this one has its meaning, its allegoric meaning, you might say. Elias is hitchhiking and the couple who give him a ride is Greek. They could as easily have been

Italian or Spanish. It's a scene about how fickle we are, how we want to be humane, considerate and charitable, as long as it doesn't disturb our comfort or our peace of mind. And that point, our humanism fades, then disappears. You used the term «nouveau riche» and it's not just a cliché. In my experience and from what I've observed, there is more indifference there than anywhere else.

In the foreground, despite a certain amount of humor, there is relentless ferocity. Like the scene where Elias has to unclog the toilet with his hands, literally plunging his hands into shit.

That scene, like the one of the Magician and the «toilet of death,» is a metaphor for the use we make of immigrants. There's this thing stuck in people's heads, in the immigrant's head as well; it's like he has to accept anything without a peep if he wants to be tolerated and accepted. Humiliation, degradation, even rape. Everything. Because he's weak. He's worse than weak, he's nothing. He can see that in people's eyes and finally submits to it.

Keeping one's dignity, resistance and refusal are not qualities or virtues for the immigrant. They are a source of trouble. And that kind of violence done to a human being is unspeakable. When I was a young man in Greece, we had to be submissive and stay that way. But, little by little, you find your place, you learn to stand up for yourself. That's in the film, too. When Elias rebels, he earns the respect of others and his freedom. That's how he gets out of a factory where he's being exploited through the promise of legal status. His gains his dignity, but he's forced to run away.

There is another kind of threat in your film as well, that of cops all over the place. A bit like in a Charlie Chaplin film. Even Elias turns into a policeman at one point, though it's only a costume. Does that express how you feel, or is it just a device?

But getting back to the police, it's true there are a lot of them around. Michèle and I spent our fortieth wedding anniversary in Iceland.

We were invited by the President and we got there, knocked on the door and the door opened. Not a policeman in sight. And it's not just Iceland. In many European countries the police aren't as omnipresent as in France. When you first get here from another country, it's striking. Then you get used to it. For immigrants, the police are danger itself.

So yes, we see them in the film. We see them through Elias' eyes and through his fears.

Throughout your work, you've tried to

show at what point a democracy deviates, or no longer behaves like a democracy. In today's France, those things are pretty much assumed. There's no need to be vigilant, it's taken for granted.

Never take it for granted. Always be vigilant.

Do you think that the way a democracy deals with immigration problems is a measure of its health?

Today, we no longer judge democracies by wondering if they might turn into dictatorships, or if this guy or that guy is a potential tyrant. Remaking «Z» and setting it in a modern European country would make no sense at all. The military no longer makes threats.

Sometimes they even work in communications or on humanitarian missions! Nonetheless, I think those questions remain. A few years ago, when Pierre Joxe was Minister of the Interior, he asked me, «Why don't you make a film about the blue banana? The blue banana is Europe seen from a satellite. At night, the brightest cities form a sort of blue banana. It is thought that in the next few years, between 20 and 25 million immigrants will try to settle in that blue banana.»

So there's nothing new about it.

But how did democracies behave with respect to that problem?

When you see a mother about to be deported because her son has just died and, without him, she loses her right to remain in France, that a cabinet member has to personally intervene on her behalf, it's natural to wonder what's happened to our democracy. To be subject to a cabinet member's whim! Where is the debate? Where is democratic process when it comes to the immigrant?

When policemen say, «Hey you, get over here!» it's humiliating.

Because I am not «hey you,» I am «sir.» When Elias is drawn irresistibly to an attractive store window and accidentally bangs his forehead against the glass, the store owner chases him with a gesture meaning, «Get the hell out of here! Don't you even look at my store window, you're not worthy!» That's a form of unacceptable violence as well and it grows more commonplace with every passing day. Any self-respecting democracy channels violence, protects its weaker members and maintains their dignity. I'm not speaking of absolute equality for everyone. That's another issue.

But democracy is a refusal to allow the loss of dignity. Immigrant, homeless, unemployed, outcast... nothing should take away their dignity. And that issue is far from settled.

Interviewed by Olivier Ravello