

Authorship, Location and Casting in Transnational European Films During the Cold War

Research Program

Scientific Background

The present research project will focus on two European filmmakers; Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa Gavras; who created and produced political cinematic works intended for broad audiences, focusing on and set in developing countries during the Cold War era. Most academic studies tend to connect Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' political films to the post-Second World War decolonization process and struggles in Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Martin, 2009; O'Leary, 2009; Michalzyk, 1983; Welsh, 1977). However, until recently most of the research on those filmmakers tended to overlook the connection between the filmmakers' aesthetic, narrative and thematic choices and the economy and politics of the film industry during that particular historical moment. Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) and *Queimada/Burn!* (1968) and Costa Gavras' *Z* (1968), *State of Siege* (1972) and *Missing* (1982) represent a singular moment in film industry and world politics, where left-wing politics, critical acclaim and box office success were not perceived as antonymic to each other.

Although Gillo Pontecorvo directed only five feature films during his lifetime, his name remains widely regarded as that of a significant film auteur of the Cold War period. His 1966 film, *The Battle of Algiers*, achieved monumental success with both critics and audiences, becoming not only a cinematic milestone but also a key text of the era. Radical left-wing groups absorbed its portrayal of anticolonial guerrilla tactics and military antiterrorist groups and paramilitary organizations studied the film to learn how to combat such strategies (Robin, 2005; Riegler, 2018). After *The Battle of Algiers*, Pontecorvo directed two additional films, *Burn!/Queimada* (1968) and *Ogro* (1979) both of which received mixed reviews (Scott, 2004; O'Leary and Srivastava, 2009). From the unexpected critical and box-office success of *Z* (1969), to the multi-award-winning yet no less controversial *Missing* (1982), Costa-Gavras' films were global top box office hits. Despite his global impact during the 1970s and early 1980s, Costa-Gavras and his crew were attacked by

critics from both the left and right. Among their reasons were the alleged application of a superficial, ready-made formula to different cultures and political realities (Comolli and Narboni 1971; Biskind 1973; Monaco 1976). Gillo Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' status as a "European" and as an "outsider" filmmaker working within the commercial cinema circuit obscured the involvement of a complex, thick transnational network of political activists, filmmakers, cultural producers, and film viewers engaged in the production and consumption of their "political" genre films.

The filmmakers' biographical experiences and familiar backgrounds marked by the struggle against Fascism and foreign oppression are frequently mentioned as primary sources of inspiration for their narrative and stylistic cinematic choices (Bignardi, 1999; Wayne, 2001; Costa-Gavras, 2018). However, the fact that those films were European or American-European productions made by European filmmakers but produced in Third World countries was excluded from scholarly debate. Based on archival research of audio-visual sources and printed press articles from Italy, France, Spain, the United States, Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico, along with historical research, biographies and testimonies published during the last four decades, the present research project aims to assemble a transnational political, economic, and cultural history of Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' films in the Cold War period. To this end, I have decided to focus on questions regarding the films' authorship, location, and casting, as they are revealing of the reproduction of hidden ideological presumptions and asymmetries between developed and underdeveloped (Third World) countries.

Despite their global impact and critical and box office success, European Transnational films have often been analyzed narrowly: either as the output of individual politically engaged filmmakers, such as Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras, or as intermittent filmmaking experiences stemming from directors' cultural interests and aesthetic sensibilities, exemplified by Marcel Camus' *Black Orpheus* (1959) and Werner Herzog's "South American" films *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972) and *Fitzcarraldo* (1982). However, scholarly debate has largely overlooked a crucial aspect: these were European or American-European commercial productions made by European filmmakers but produced in and about third world/ developing countries. The research project outlined below, proposes to dovetail a comprehensive transnational political, economic, and cultural

history of European films and filmmakers during the Cold War period. By examining questions of authorship, location, and casting, it uncovers hidden ideological assumptions, economic and technical considerations, and deep-rooted historical asymmetries between industrialized and developing nations.

The majority of academic debate around the figure of the filmmaker as an “auteur” focuses on the stylistic and thematic choices of certain filmmakers (Sarris, 2008; Lev, 1993), or for instance on the performative aspects of film authorship (Sayad, 2013; Rugg, 2014; Ribke, 2023). Still, the political and economic aspects related to the construction of filmmakers as auteurs is a largely under-researched topic. Without neglecting the political sensibilities and ideological commitment of Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras, their evolving careers as political film auteurs could be explained as the outcome of three nearly overlapping and apparently contradictory processes: the internationalization of Hollywood production in the post-Second World War Europe (Steinhart, 2019), the emergence of what Lev (1993) defined as “Euro-American” film art, and the active involvement of a vast network of left-wing cultural producers, social activist and politicians in Third World countries (Lacruz Frachia, 2020; Celli, 2005, Ribke, Forthcoming). According to Steinhart (2019) and Rosendorf (2007), after the end of the Second World War, multiple geopolitical, financial and technological factors encouraged the shooting and production of American films in Western Europe. The decision of a number of Western European governments to restrict the capital flows, the higher availability of skilled workers with lower wages vis-a-vis Hollywood workers, the development of new technologies which improved shooting on location, and the cinematic appeal of authentic locales contributed to the phenomenon of Hollywood post-Second World War runaway productions (Steinhart, 2019, pp. 6-7).

Film scholars tend to emphasize the “realism” in political cinema of the 1960s and 1970s, linking it to the ethical stance of the filmmakers associated with that trend (Nagib, 2011). However, political filmmakers’ stylistic choices were the result of their ideological leanings, “Bazinean” aesthetical sensibilities, and budgetary strategies and constraints. A key factor for the filmmakers to secure financial support for later projects was their ability to produce low budget films in “authentic” locations in Third World countries that would attract wider audiences across the world. In several interviews and testimonies given throughout the years, both Pontecorvo and

Costa-Gavras explained the large number of offers received from producers to finance their projects in terms of the extremely profitable budget and box office relation of *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and *Z* (1968) (Bignardi, 1999; Michalczyk, 1983).

The underlying connection between Cold War international politics and the economy of political filmmaking emerges as a decisive factor in Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' films of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Pontecorvo was contacted by Algerian producers to make a film about the Algerian independence struggle not only because of his previous record as a filmmaker and his political-ideological stance, but also because he was Italian and not French. Since Algerian film industry was not developed enough back then, Algerian producers sought to establish partnership with foreign filmmakers and production companies. However, they did not want to cooperate with their former colonial ruler (Forgacs, 2007). A partnership with American producers was probably not even considered given the political alignments of the post-independence Algerian State. Nevertheless, Italy was regarded as a friendly state due to the support shown to the Algerians by the Italian state-owned oil industry under the chairmanship of Enrico Mattei (Bini, 2017; Bignardi, 1999, p. 120). Algiers' benign weather and the lower cost for hiring a high number of extras were also important factors considered by Italian producers and financiers. However, the Algerian government cooperation in allowing access to locations in the city of Algiers and its casbah, together with granting the security of the film's crew, was also a decisive factor in the production of the film (Celli, 2005, p. 52; Forgacs, 2007, p. 353).

Although the present research project focuses only on the works of Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras, it should be stressed that economic calculations were also a central factor in the decision of other European "auteurs" to produce films in and about Latin America during the 1960s and the 1970s. When interviewed by the Brazilian press in 1980, the German filmmaker Werner Herzog referred to the economic calculations behind the films he shot in the Amazonas region in the following terms: "*Aguirre's* budget, according to the American production costs should have been 5 million dollars, however the production cost was 320 thousand dollars. I don't know the final figures of *Fitzcarraldo*, but I guarantee you that it will look like a 20 – 25-million-dollar film" (Schild, 1980).

Research objectives and expected significance

Despite their global impact and critical and box office success, Gillo Pontecorvo's and Costa Gavras' works have often been analyzed narrowly: either as the output of individual politically engaged filmmakers, or as intermittent filmmaking experiences stemming from directors' cultural interests and aesthetic sensibilities. However, scholarly debate has largely overlooked a crucial aspect: these were European or American-European commercial productions made by European filmmakers but produced in and about third world/ developing countries. This research project attempts to construct a comprehensive global political, economic, and cultural history of Gillo Pontecorvo's and Costa Gavras' work during the Cold War period. By examining questions of authorship, location, and casting, it uncovers hidden ideological assumptions, economic and technical considerations, and deep-rooted historical asymmetries between industrialized and developing nations.

The filmmakers' works analyzed in this research project were selected based on four main criteria. First, the research project focuses on transnational European fiction film projects during the Cold War period. Second, the films discussed are relatively high-budget productions aimed at reaching large audiences within the commercial circuit while also reflecting the filmmakers' artistic and ideological sensibilities. Third, the films examined in this research project reflect, in various and often subtle ways, the political, economic, and cultural dynamics of the Cold War era. The core hypothesis of this study is that these hybrid film projects, which blended committed, authorial, and commercial aesthetic and narrative styles, are essential to understanding the deeper connections between international politics and the politics and economics of transnational filmmaking during the Cold War.

Fourth, and finally, the case studies analyzed in the research proposal focus on European filmmaking projects set in regions defined during the Cold War as the Third World, which we now refer to as the Global South. While these case studies highlight the specific impact of Cold War dynamics on transnational European filmmaking, they also point to deep-rooted structural patterns between the world's centers and peripheries that extend beyond the specific period this research examines.

Detailed description of the proposed research

1. Working hypothesis

While previous studies have examined Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras's films from a textual-ideological perspective or, for instance, focused on the intersection between the filmmakers' public discourse and personal biography, this research project seeks to investigate the transnational financial, political, logistic, and creative operations involved in the production, distribution, and consumption of their works during the Cold War period. The underlying assumption of this research is that by intertwining an history of the cultural, political, and economic processes behind these films, we can gain insights into both the multiple forces shaping European political filmmakers' works, the dynamics of the global film industry and international politics during the Cold War.

Three main hypotheses underlie this research. Firstly, The analysis of Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' thematic choices and production patterns reveals a complex framework of transnational networks and connections between social and political activists and film producers. While their biographical experiences and familiar backgrounds marked by the struggle against Fascism and foreign oppression inspired their narrative and stylistic cinematic choices, we should see their interest in third world politics and culture during that time in the context of a wider interaction and cooperation framework that occurred during the Cold War period between European (mostly from the South) and Latin American and African political and social activists and cultural producers (Burton 1990; Lacruz Frachia 2020).

The second hypothesis assumes a connection between Cold War international politics and the national and political identity of the filmmakers as a decisive factor in Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' films of the 1960s and 1970s. For example, Pontecorvo was contacted by Algerian producers to make a film about the Algerian independence struggle not only because of his previous record as a filmmaker and his political-ideological stance, but also because he was Italian and not French. Since Algerian film industry was not developed enough back then, Algerian producers sought to establish partnership with foreign filmmakers and production companies.

However, they did not want to cooperate with their former colonial ruler (Forgacs, 2007). A partnership with American producers was probably not even considered given the political alignments of the post-independence Algerian State. Nevertheless, Italy was regarded as a friendly state due to the support shown to the Algerians by the Italian state-owned oil industry under the chairmanship of Enrico Mattei (Bini, 2017; Bignardi, 1999, p. 120).

A third hypothesis suggests that Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' success in the commercial film circuit is connected to the genre identity of their films and at the same time, to their connection with ongoing and or recent past events that inspired the histories they told in their films. Paradoxically, their box office success and their ability to produce relatively low budget films shot on location, attracted the attention of American studios and independent producers who were willing to finance political film out of mostly pure economic interests. The *Battle of Algiers's* unexpected critical and commercial success opened the door to other radical political film projects and filmmakers, which aimed to reach wider audiences through the commercial film circuit. After the *Battle of Algiers*, Pontecorvo embarked on the production of *Queimada/Burnt!* a high-budget Italian/American co-production depicting a 19th century slave revolt in a Caribbean island (Celli, 2005; Bignardi, 1999).

Research Design

This research project will analyze the films of Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras produced during the Cold War by focusing on three interconnected levels: (1) *The Politics of Authorship, Transnational Networks and Cold War Imaginaries*, (2) *Location and Casting and The Politics, Economy, and Culture of Cold War Political Films*, and (3) *An Historical Reconstruction of the films' reception across various geo-cultural landscapes*.

(1) The Politics of Authorship, Transnational Networks and Cold War Imaginaries

The filmmakers' biographical experiences and familial backgrounds, shaped by the struggle against Fascism and foreign oppression, are often cited as key sources of inspiration for their narrative and stylistic cinematic choices (Bignardi, 1999; Wayne, 2001; Costa-Gavras, 2018). Their rise to prominence as political filmmakers was the result of multiple factors, including

personal decisions, individual talents, and chance. However, based on the historical research conducted thus far, this section views Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' careers as the product of their active participation in a complex and evolving transnational network of politicians, activists, and cultural agents who shared a common "Cold War" imaginary at various levels.

For instance, after Algerian independence was declared in July 1962, Yacef Saadi, an Algerian independence fighter and prominent leader of the National Liberation Front (FLN), traveled to Italy to find a director for a film about the Algerian national liberation struggle. Why Italy? The Italian film industry was in its golden age during the 1950s and 1960s, and Italian films, known for their social and political sensitivity, were highly popular in post-independence Algeria (L.G, 1965; L.G, 1966). According to Yacef Saadi, who also played the role of an FLN commander in the film, he went to Italy with a list of three Italian filmmakers considered for the project: Francesco Rosi, Luchino Visconti, and Gillo Pontecorvo. Beyond their cinematic accomplishments, their political and ideological credentials as left-wingers were a crucial factor in their selection. With both Rosi and Visconti committed to other projects, Pontecorvo was ultimately chosen to direct the film (Blair, 2004).

(2) The Politics, Economy, and Culture of Cold War Political Film Production

The present research project aims to dissect political, economic and cultural factors which shaped the creation and production of Pontecorvo's and Costa Gavra's political films by focusing on to key aspects, but frequently neglected aspects of film production, location and casting.

Film scholars often emphasize the "realism" of political cinema in the 1960s and 1970s, linking it to the ethical stance of the filmmakers involved in the movement. However, the narrative and stylistic choices of European political filmmakers during this period were influenced by a combination of political considerations and practical budgetary constraints. For example, Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) and Costa-Gavras' *Z* (1969) both achieved international success despite being low-budget productions, and both were shot in Algiers. These projects faced significant difficulties in securing funding but were greenlit once Italian and French producers recognized the economic advantages of shooting in Algiers. The city's favorable

weather, the lower cost of hiring numerous extras, and the Algerian government's cooperation in providing access to key locations, including the Casbah, while ensuring the safety of the crew, were crucial factors in the production process (Celli, 2005, p. 52; Forgacs, 2007, p. 353). In the case of *Z*, a political thriller about the assassination of a Greek politician turned anti-war activist, filming in Greece was impossible due to the right-wing military coup that ruled the country from 1967 to 1974. However, Algiers' Mediterranean architecture, which could easily be cinematically "disguised" as Greek, provided a solution to both the political and economic challenges faced by the producers.

Despite they were both political filmmakers who aimed to attract wider audiences, they adopted diverging casting strategies. The critical and audience acclaim earned by Pontecorvo after *The Battle of Algiers* (1966), along with his political prestige, sparked the interest in major film studios to finance his films. At the same time, Pontecorvo's positive artistic and political reputation enticed some major American film stars, who were willing to forgo a higher pay in order to work with the Italian filmmaker. While Pontecorvo's ability to attract big names for his projects facilitated the funding of subsequent works, those high-budget, expensive projects required (or were conditioned by) the casting of major stars. However, Pontecorvo was reluctant to work with film stars, and to a lesser extent with professional actors, as it called into question the aesthetic and narrative stylistic choices that defined him as a political cinema auteur. Many of the crew members involved in *Z* also collaborated with Costa-Gavras on *The Confession* and *State of Siege*. The casting of Yves Montand as the lead in all three films reinforced the widespread perception that these works were part of a continuous narrative (Gonzalez Bermejo 1974, 16-7). Montand's repeated casting is often attributed to his ideological alignment with Costa-Gavras. However, the research data analyzed thus far suggests that other, more significant factors may explain Costa-Gavras' decision to continue working with certain crew members. Producing political films within a commercial capitalist system, amid unusually turbulent political and social environments, required highly coordinated and disciplined teamwork. American film critic Pauline Kael (1983, 136) described Costa-Gavras' recurring casting choices as being motivated not only by the actors' political commitment but also because they "could confer their

own movie backgrounds on the shorthand storytelling methods of these fast, complicated, information-packed thrillers."

(3) *An Historical Reconstruction of the films' reception across various geo-cultural landscapes.*

While most film and television studies analyzing reception processes from a historical perspective tend to focus on a single film within a specific national context (Staiger 1992; Klinger 1997), scholars examining transnational audiences often emphasize production and consumption patterns driven by recent technological, political, and economic shifts (Athique 2014). However, the analysis of Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras's works underscores the importance of broadening the temporal scope and extending the geo-cultural and geopolitical horizons when studying the reception of their films. By examining the multiple and overlapping temporalities that shaped the reception of transnational European political films during the Cold War, Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras's films emerge as cultural artifacts—political barometers—through which audiences reflected on their recent past and assessed the possibilities and limitations of their (political) present.

For example, during Brazil's military regime (1964–1985), Costa-Gavras' banned films were frequently referenced in the local press and magazines, sometimes even in gossip columns, as a way to both evade and criticize censorship. In February 1973, an article published in *Jornal do Brasil* reported on the release of *State of Siege* in France with the headline "Paris will see *State of Siege* right now," subtly suggesting that what French audiences were allowed to see was denied to "us, the Brazilian people" (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1973). Similarly, a 1977 article in a Brazilian cultural section reviewing Costa-Gavras' anti-Stalinist film *The Confession* was titled, "Those who can't have *Z* need to content themselves watching *The Confession*." The piece concluded by noting that "Brazilian cinephiles are so obsessed with Costa-Gavras that they have traveled abroad to watch *Z*" (Ferreira 1977, 35).

Additionally, in July 1979, the book *State of Siege*, written by Franco Solinas and Costa-Gavras and published six years earlier, was listed ninth on a list of Brazil's ten bestselling fiction books (Pompeu 1979). Just two months later, in September 1979, *Jornal do Brasil* reported that copies of *Z* and *State of Siege* were making their way to Brasília and would once again be submitted to the Censorship Division for reevaluation. The article concluded with the statement

that “the screening of those films in Brazilian movie theaters is a matter of time” (*Jornal do Brasil*, 1979, B3).

Methods

This research project ambitiously aims to dovetail a history of European political films during the Cold War period through the works of Gillo Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras, utilizing four main interdisciplinary research methodologies based on the principles of Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network-Theory (2005): (1) Archival Research, (2) Formal and Aesthetic Analysis, (3) Micro Historical Research (4) Transnational Approach. Although each methodology requires different procedures and skill sets, the proposed approach seeks to assemble a network of transnational European political films from the 1960s and 1970s by capturing the multiple connections “where the global, the structural and the total were being assembled and where they expand outward thanks to the laying down of specific cables and conduits” (Latour, 2005, 191).

(1) Archival Research: This research project aims to uncover critical data on the filmmakers’ professional and biographical trajectories, as well as key insights into the filmmaking production process, by examining three main archives: a) Museo Nazionale del Cinema in Torino, where I expect to find primary sources on Gillo Pontecorvo’s films; b) Filmoteca Española and Archivo General de la Administración in Madrid, where I anticipate discovering crucial information on Pontecorvo’s last film, *Ogro* (1979), produced during Spain’s transition to democracy. I also expect to find valuable primary sources on Pontecorvo’s *Burn!/Queimada* (1969), particularly regarding the international disputes over the film’s title; and c) the Cinémathèque Française in Paris, where I aim to locate primary sources related to Costa-Gavras’ films.

(2) Formal and Aesthetic Analysis: Throughout this study, I will examine the organizing principles, or what David Bordwell (2007) refers to as the “Poetics of Cinema,” within the filmographies of Pontecorvo and Costa-Gavras, focusing on the narrative and stylistic elements that defined their filmmaking style during the research period.

(3) Micro Historical Research: Drawing on data obtained from film archives, printed media sources, biographies, and oral histories gathered through video and audio-recorded interviews, this research project proposes an intensive historical investigation of individual films as “relatively smaller objects” (Magnusson and Szijarto, 2013). This approach aims to provide a

different perspective on both the history of cinema and the history of the Cold War, challenging the broader narratives presented in previous studies.

(4) Transnational Historical Research: This research project requires the integration of multiple political, historical, and economic dynamics unfolding within different geographic and cultural landscapes during a single time frame. By adopting a transnational historical approach, this study seeks to make sense of the intrinsic contradictions, ambivalences, and complex trajectories of the filmmakers and films under consideration.

Expected Results and Pitfalls

This research project builds on the PI's studies and research on transnational film and television. In 2024, an article by the PI, as first author, on Costa-Gavras' *State of Siege* (1972) and *Missing* (1982) was accepted for publication by the *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*. The case studies in this project expand on the works of Steinhardt (2019), Nagib (2011), Wayne (2001), and Lev (1993). However, this research limits its analysis to the study of two major European political filmmakers operating within the commercial film circuit during the 1960s and 1970s.

One criticism that could be made regarding the present project is that focusing on just two filmmakers might provide a very partial and incomplete picture of European transnational cinema during this period. Two complementary responses could be offered to counter this argument. First, focusing on these two filmmakers allows for a deeper analysis of their life paths, historical contexts, and filmographies. Second, the impact and significance of Gillo Pontecorvo's and Costa-Gavras' films during the studied period certainly merit an in-depth analysis.

This project is intended to culminate in a book. A book proposal, based on the article accepted for publication and preliminary research findings, has been sent to leading academic university presses in the field of film studies and is currently under evaluation.

Films Examined:

Director	Year	Name	Producers	Runtime	Country of Origin
Gillo Pontecorvo	1966	The Battle of Algiers	Antonio Musu and Yacef Saadi	121 min	Italy and Argelia
Costa-Gavras	1969	Z	Jacques Perrin, Phillipe d`Arguila and Ahmed Rachedi	127 min	France and Argelia
Gillo Pontecorvo	1969	Burn!/Queimada	Alberto Grimaldi	112/132 min	Italy and France
Costa-Gavras	1972	State of Siege	Jaques Perrin, Jacques Henri Barratier and Leon Sanz	115/130 min	France, Italy, West Germany and Chile
Gillo Pontecorvo	1979	Ogro	Nicola Carraro and Franco Cristaldi	115 min	Italy and Spain
Costa-Gavras	1982	Missing	Edward Lewis and Mildred Lewis	122 min	United States and Mexico
Costa-Gavras	1983	Hanna K.	Robert Cortez and Edward Lewis	111 min	Israel and France

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