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Maria Spindler / Gary Wagenheim
**Editors' Comments: How a Reflective
Hybrid Approach Can Change how We
Think about and Take Action in Our Work**
page 179

Tom Brown / Gary Wagenheim /
Alexander W. Crispo
**Creating Learning and Change through
Reflective Conversations**
page 184

Jacqueline McAdam
**A Case Study of Social Entrepreneurism:
A Model of Practice – Hakuna Matata
Imports and Accessories**
page 204

Silvia Ettl-Huber / Michael Roither
**Reflective Hybrids in University
Continuing Education**
page 221

Maria Spindler
**Hybrid and Reflective into an
Uncertain Future**
page 239

Helen Turnbull / Ralph de Chabert
**Forward, Reverse or Neutral:
Which Gear Are We Operating in
With Our 21st Century Approach
to Global Diversity and Inclusion?**
page 257

Ruth Lerchster / Larissa Krainer
**Out of the Ivory Tower,
and into Reality**
page 274

Peter Gester
**Film Review: The Axe (2005),
Directed by Costas-Gavras**
page 291

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PETER GESTER

Film Review: The Axe (2005), Directed by Costas-Gavras

A film about neoliberalism, and its impact on private life, organizations, and society.

The director of this 2005 French thriller is the Greek-French Academy Award winner Costas-Gavras (CG). CG was born in Arcadia. His father fought against the German occupying forces, losing his job after the start of the Greek civil war in 1946.

In accordance with his family history, CG has brought forward one of the most momentous filmic oeuvres in political terms, consisting of the 1968 political thriller *Z* about the Greek military dictatorship's deep structure (which received the Academy Award in 1969); the 1972 thriller *State of Siege* about the Tupamaros movement's struggle against the military dictatorship in Uruguay; the 1982 drama film *Missing* about the victims of the military dictatorship in Chile; the 1990 political thriller *Music Box* about the war criminal John Demanjuk who was sought after by Israel; and, finally, the 2002 screen adaptation of the stage play *The Deputy* by Rolf Hochhuth entitled *Amen*, which tells the story of SS-Lieutenant Kurt Gerstein who, acting from Christian motives, attempts to mobilize the Catholic Church to resist against the Holocaust (received the César Award).

The Axe (which was unjustly nominated solely for the César Award) constitutes CG's clever, malicious, and very witty reckoning with neoliberalism. In that film, he varies his constant theme – i.e. the regulation of the relationship of subordination between the individual, other human beings, and the respective state organization – using the example of unemployment in terms of being one of the major issues in crisis-ridden Europe.

The film's plot is based on the novel by D. E. Westlake and can be summarized as follows: The chemist Bruno Davert works as an executive manager in the paper industry. Due to the digital revolution (which is symbolized in the film through a digital dictating machine that is given to Bruno on occasion of his company anniversary), the paper industry too becomes subject to the force of rationalization and merger.

As a result, Bruno becomes unemployed (as did CG's father in 1945). Despite best-possible qualifications, he has been vainly seeking new employment for two years, which makes him fall into depression increasingly. Inspired by a TV commercial of the paper company "Arcadia" (i.e. CG's birthplace), Bruno suddenly becomes obsessed with the idea of wanting to obtain the position of chief engineer at Arcadia.

With the intention of reversing the roles of victim and culprit, Bruno places a newspaper advertisement under the name of a made-up paper company so as to get to know his potential competitors. Ultimately, there remain five competitors that have the same or better qualifications. Once Bruno has met one of his competitors in person, the respective opponent gets killed by him in order to clear his way for the job.

The murder weapon is a World War II firearm that was captured by Bruno's father – a Parabellum 08 (Luger pistol), the primary service pistol of the German forces. *Si vis pacem, para bellum* ("If you wish for peace, prepare for war") was the motto of that pistol's manufacturing company. True to that motto, Bruno prepares for his private war with the same meticulousness as he carried out his former professional activities.

Eventually, the only one that remains to be murdered is the head of Arcadia, who 'blows himself' up as a result of a gas tap that was insidiously opened by Bruno. Thus, Bruno finally reached the goal of his wishes. The end justifies the means, but only for those who rule, it says in a school essay written by Bruno's son.

On account of Bruno taking the law into his own hands, he might be referred to as the enraged citizen 3.0 (alluding to the German word *Wutbürger*). He has come to the conclusion that the neoliberal

society cannot be changed by one person alone, which is why he decides to terminate the social contract.

The fact that his decision involves the killing of his competitors is deemed by Bruno to be acceptable collateral damage. As a self-appointed private hitman operating in neoliberal competition, Bruno considers a competitor's killing to be at worst an act of self-defense in the struggle for employment and maintaining his standard of living. While the first killing is still done with shaky legs, the fifth one already presents a matter of routine. Through the self-reflexive comments of its characters, the film shows and analyzes the anxieties as well as the socio-economic erosion of the upper income group.

The film depicts the transportation of the primary process-like fantasies from the semantic space of the inner world to the space of action of the outer world. It acts out and satirizes without restraint what employment-related competitors could otherwise only fantasize furtively, which makes it a fabulous piece of criticism regarding societal and, especially, economic relationships of subordination. With *The Axe*, CG has returned to the epicenter of his oeuvre.

Right from the outset, CG's cinematic works examine the question raised by Thomas Hobbes (2009; Schmitt 1995) in his momentous work *Leviathan*: How does the relationship between individual freedom and state sovereignty succeed if man is a wolf to other men in terms of posing a constant threat of violence, war, and death?

However, CG not only addresses this key question relating to all constitutional deliberations; as a political anthropologist, he invariably chooses for his films the current cases in which the balance between the citizen's freedom and security and the power of the state has gone completely out of control in the sense that the respective states have established a totalitarian reign of terror, which is evidenced in CG's use of subjects such as the Greek Colonels' regime, the Tupamaros struggle for freedom, the Nazi myrmidons of the Third Reich, or the generals of the military junta in Chile. Among CG's targets have always been the most disgusting, most violent, and most murderous manifestations of such tyrannies, i.e. stratocracies

where the leviathan constitutes the agglomeration of the military-industrial complex and the state organization in one cluster. Today's targets of CG include the shock doctrines of neoliberalism (Klein 2007) as practiced in the Northern industrialized countries.

Hence, as for the film's surface structure, *The Axe* does not fit into CG's general thematic scheme. Since it deals with an individual person's loss of control, the impression might arise at first sight that the film actually gives an argument in favor of the state taking drastic and suppressive measures to prevent such acts of madness, especially given the current era of massacres and rampages.

The film's deep structure, however, clearly demonstrates that an individual's ostensibly absurd acts of madness are consistent acts of self-defense against the consequences of a state-organized economy and labor market. This is strengthened by the fact that the film allows the spectators to sympathize with the protagonist.

As the film progresses, Bruno and his wife undergo a change in relationship with the help of a resource-focused couple therapy. Folkloric myths and therapeutic limitations have rarely been satirized and exposed as clearly as in this film, i.e. in an event where the economic basis has been eliminated.

Meanwhile, Bruno's son, a petty criminal, earns his money by stealing video games. Thus, the film anticipates Schirmmacher's *Ego – The Game of Life* (2013).

Although Bruno makes efforts to oblige his son to live a decent bourgeois life, he acts as an accomplice to his son when helping him to get rid of the stolen goods.

Moreover, by contrasting the sexist commercials with the stock exchange news that are permanently broadcasted on the car radio as well as with the exclusive Arcadian residential areas of the protagonists, the film magnificently satirizes the economy of good and evil (Sedlazeck 2011), knowing that not just the bourgeoisie but rather all industrialized societies in north-west Europe are approaching interesting times (Zizek 2011).

Even though *The Axe* will be remade this year for the American market under the direction of Park Chan-Wook, you should never-

theless check out the French version of that film, because there is no better, more malicious, and more brilliant way to cinematically represent the magnitude of the small-scale economic competition taking place in everyday neoliberalism as well as the economic transformation of a once beautiful world (i.e. Arcadia) into an economic paper tiger that makes its inhabitants lives a living hell.

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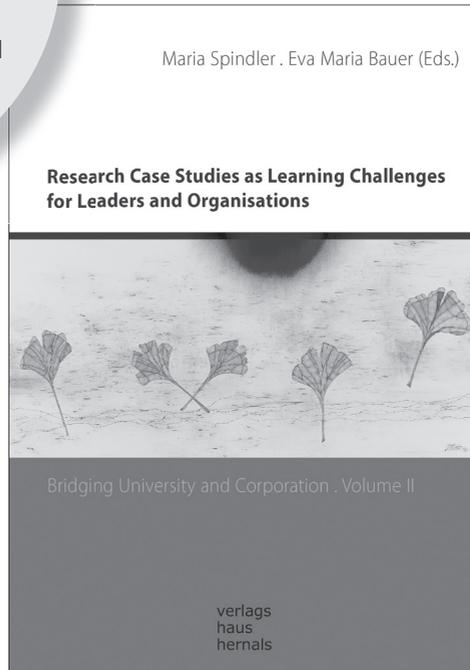
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