



**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
FALL CONVOCATION
OCTOBER 5 and 6, 2006**

Convocation Address
By Dr. Costa Gavras
Director, Screenwriter, Actor

An honorary doctor of fine arts was conferred on Dr. Costa Gavras during the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Ceremony on Thursday, October 5, 2006. The following is Dr. Gavras' convocation address.

I wish to thank Dr. Michael Stevenson, Dr. John Pierce and the Simon Fraser University administration for the honor bestowed on me today.

I'd also like to thank my Greek friends, starting with Andreas Gerolymatos for the warm welcome they gave me, which reminded me of the way my Greek family greets me each time I return to the old country.

What I do in life. What I like to do is to tell stories by means of images. In Greek we call them icons. In my youth, my imagination was fed by these icons in the churches where my parents took me every Sunday or feast days. There I was surrounded by a world full of amazing, fiery colors, and by extraordinary priestly characters most of whom looked sternly at me, **but** some with kindness. They all imposed their presence and authority beyond the church into everyday life, and all its manifestations.

This interaction of images with life, and of life with images, has always been, and still is, one of my constant concerns. Cinema moves society on the screen.

In a movie theater, confronted with a film, we become the spectator of our own passions, of our own powers over others. And of the powers of others over us. Meaning that what moves us on the screen is the life of the city. It's called "polis" in Greek. To me that's what politics is all about. That's why I agree with what the critic and semiologist Roland Barthes wrote : "All films are political" or "There is a political element to all films" or again "All films can be analyzed politically."

To live up to the honor that is being awarded to me by you today and to arouse your interest, I would like to entertain you with my vision *of what films are*. I soon realized what a vast subject it is, and that my expertise in scientific analysis was not up to it. But this reminded me of some preliminary research I had once done for a film. It's what I

usually do to check out the feasibility of an idea, and to define the themes of a film. It's an outline of an outline of an idea for a screenplay.

I thought I'd read you this outline done 15 years ago, based on texts and thoughts during my research on a period of the Byzantine Empire, that was one of the most imaginative in terms of violence perpetrated in the name of God. It's the period of the Iconoclasts and the Iconophiles.

He who has secret of images of the icons controls the world through his emotions. The icon replaces the verb, or becomes its foundation. The icon is the tool of the priest. He may be untutored, the icon will speak for him. That also goes for the whole priestly cast and the kings who have adapted and copied their own images from those of the icons, unless it was the other way round.

The icon is the framework of the pyramid of power. Thanks to it, power becomes sacred, especially as priests officiate in front of, or beside, icons. The icon completes the spectacle of a religious ceremony, the actor-priests perform their duties in a setting that ends up being identified with the house of God and his saints. The church.

They're all there, as icons, as if they were taking part in the ceremony and approved of it. The faithful end up feeling tiny in the presence of all this grandeur. To be received in the house of God, watched over by God and his saints! How happy a man is to be welcomed there with kindness, and be accepted as one of God's sons. From then on his whole worry is to be worthy of this honor.

Icons make things that are sacred more accessible, more popular, hence more "human". The sacred becomes accessible to all believers, even the most humble. It protects and watches over him. Religion no longer needs an army or a police force to impose its powers, its image is sufficient, even if sometimes its actions do not concur with its dogma. The icon is a weapon, and it will be used to the fullest.

A code of representation is born. It is adopted and imposed by the church, and by kings, who now become represented by the icons. This code has been handed down to us. Just look at the official portraits of heads of state or the anchorpersons of TV newscasts. You couldn't dream of seeing them sitting astride a chair, or on the floor, or slouched in an armchair in their slippers. Things visual or sacred are codified and rule over us.

Whoever has the secret of destroying the image in peoples' minds, of making an enemy of it, governs the world through the mind. God now becomes less accessible, more mysterious, more frightening. All you can do is submit to him. And blindly obey the rules he sends via his religious establishment. The battle between iconophiles and iconoclasts is like two alchemists who have both discovered how to rule the world, but can only do so by eliminating the other. Thereafter all means are used to reach this end. That's the whole history of God: his usefulness, and how we use him.

In both cases there are liberating aspects.

First: the icon is an idol. Man, ever since he became conscious has needed idols. To reassure himself, to demystify the unknown and cope with all its fears. And also to destroy the idols of others.

Second: the absence of an icon, means appealing to the mind, which is man's privilege. To think, to discover, to decide, without resorting to "magic" or to "metaphysics".

This film was never made. Because the right story was never found, which is essential to make these reflections palatable to audiences.