Directed by Costa-Gavras
Based on the novel by Vasilis Vasilikos
Written by Jorge Semprún and Costa-Gavras
Produced by Jacques Perrin, Ahmed Rachedi
Original Music by Mikis Theodorakis
Cinematography by Raoul Coutard
Film Editing by Françoise Bonnot

Yves Montand...The Deputy
Irene Papas...Helene, the Deputy's wife
Jean-Louis Triintignant...The Examining Magistrate
Jacques Perrin...Photojournalist
Charles Denner...Manuel
François Périer...Public Prosecutor
Pierre Dux...The General
Georges Géret...Nick
Bernard Fresson...Matt
Marcel Bozzufi...Vago (as Marcel Bozzufi)
Julien Guiomar...The Colonel


westerns and Errol Flynn,” plus a few Russian films shown as anti-Soviet propaganda. The films he discovered at the Cinématèque Française were a revelation to him, “especially American films of the 1930s like The Grapes of Wrath and Capra’s movies.” The Italians Francesco Rosi and Federico Fellini also interested him, as did Jean Renoir, Alain Resnais, and Jean-Luc Godard among the French.

After two years at the Sorbonne, Costa-Gavras switched to IDHEC, the French film school, where he studied production and directing. In 1956 he became a French citizen. On completing his studies in 1958 he began to write scripts for American and Canadian television; the following year he entered the French film industry as a second assistant director, working with Yves Allégret, Jacques Nahum, Jean Giono, and René Clair, among others. In 1962 he went to Greenland to shoot footage for a film that was eventually abandoned and on his return he was assigned as first assistant director to Henri Verneuil on Un singe en hiver. In 1963 he met Michèle Ray, a Chanel model who later became a war correspondent and spent a well-publicized three weeks in Vietcong captivity during the Vietnam War; the two were married in Algeria in 1967.

During the first half of the 1960s Costa-Gavras worked as first assistant to René Clément (Le Lour et l’heure and Les Félins), Jacques Demy (Le Baie des anges), Marcel Ophuls (Peau de banane), and Jean Becker (Échappement libre). Of these directors, Clément is thought to have influenced him most, both in his interest in political subjects and in his fondness for self-conscious stylistic effects. There was, however, no sign of the former (though plenty of the latter) in Costa-Gavras’ first film of his own, Compartiment tuers (The Sleeping Car Murders, 1965), described by one critic as “a nerve-tingling, nonpolitical, highly commercial film.” In fact, Costa-Gavras himself felt that he was too inexperienced to undertake a political project and so gathered together a group of friends—Yves Montand and his wife, Simone Signoret, her daughter Catherine Allegret, Jean-Louis Trintignant, Michel Piccoli, and Jacques Perrin—for the adaptation of a novel by Sebastien Jarisot.

Montant, who starred in four of Costa-Gavras’ other movies, plays a police detective trying to track down the murderer of a sleeping-car passenger before more victims are claimed, while Signoret gave what was described as a “delicious performance” as an aging actress with a weakness for young men. Penelope Gilliat found the film “jumpy and gratuitous” in style and sickeningly violent, but most reviewers enjoyed it as a stylish thriller “with a lot of character and wit,” and something of a tribute to American movies.

The success of The Sleeping Car Murders brought Costa-Gavras an offer to direct a World War II story, Un homme de trop (One Man Too Many, 1967), in which a band of Resistance fighters break into a Nazi jail to free a dozen political prisoners and find themselves addled with an unknown thirteenth man (Michel Piccoli) who may endanger them all. The film, which Costa-Gavras adapted himself from a novel by Jean-Claude Chabrol, was selected to open the Moscow Film Festival in 1967; two years later it was released under the title Shock Troops by United Artists, who had re-edited it and supplied a happy ending. The director says that after that experience he never again left the final cut to others.

It was while preparing to shoot his next film, Le Fils (The Son), starring Yves Montand, that Costa-Gavras discovered the obviously a lightly fictionalized account of the assassination by fascist thugs of the idolized Greek deputy Grigoris Lambrakis, a hero of the Left. As the film goes on to show, the investigation uncovered such a network of corruption in the police and the government that the right-wing Karamanlis regime fell. It was replaced by the reformist government of George Papandreou, ousted in 1967 in a coup d’état that installed a totalitarian military junta.

The score was provided by Mikos Theodorakis, then under house arrest in Greece, and as Guy Flatley wrote, his “seething, swelling, raging music...lends an almost unbearable tension to Z.” The film was shot by Raoul Coutard in Eastmancolor, and it seemed to Pauline Kael that “although the photography is perhaps a little too self-consciously dynamic...the searching, active style doesn’t let you get away.” Kael thought that the film derived “not from the traditions of French film but from American gangster movies and prison pictures and ‘anti-Fascist’ melodramas of the forties...and, like those pictures, it has a basically simple point of view.”

For some critics, indeed, the film was altogether too simple: its tidy arrangement of characters into the impeccably heroic and the unreliably villainous and its ringing denunciation of tyranny years after the events related seemed designed to send audiences home in “the warm, safe glow of communal outrage.” Less sophisticated viewers were both moved and entertained, and Z enjoyed phenomenal success all over the world (though not in Greece, where it was banned). Among the many honors it received were the New York Film Critics’ awards for best film and best director.

“I’m neither a Communist nor a Socialist,” Costa-Gavras has said, “and I find leftist a rather vague expression. Let’s just say that I’ve learned to distrust any rigid ideology or party proposal that offers no alternative, that allows no criticism, and that too often tries to make people live according to borrowed ideas or in imitation of others....Therefore since it seems impossible to criticize from within I prefer to stay on the outside, though not with a hostile attitude.” And having lacerated right-wing totalitarianism
in *Z*, he turned his blade against Stalinism in *L'Avèu* (*The Confession*, 1970), whose script by Jorge Semprun was based on the autobiography of Artur London, a former deputy minister of foreign affairs in the Czech government. London has been a victim of the 1952 Prague show trials—a faithful party functionary who suddenly found himself ostracized and watched, then arrested and brainwashed into a false confession. Imprisoned, London was released without explanation after Stalin’s death. He went abroad but returned to Czechoslovakia in the hope of rehabilitation in 1968—just in time to see Russian tanks rolling into Prague.

*L'Avèu* follows London’s book very closely, with Montand conveying a weary integrity in the lead, Simone Signoret playing his wife Lise, and Gabriele Ferretti the genial, merciless interrogator. Penelope Houston wrote that the film’s “buttonholing tricks of style and artificially significant camera angles...pile synthetic urgency on real urgency,” but found it all the same a “more disciplined, compelling and complex” picture than *Z*—we identify with Montand, but do not forget that the man he plays had helped to create the system that crucified him. This complexity and sobriety may have limited the film’s financial success but established it, in the eyes of a number of critics, as its director’s best picture.

Costa-Gavras said of *L'Avèu* that “the Russians did not like the film. Many French Communists hated it. The Maoists were divided, Stalinists enraged and Godard’s friends not at all enthusiastic. Only the Italian party... [came] out unequivocally for the film.”

Having thus alienated most of the socialists who had so admired *Z*, Costa-Gavras went on to raise a great squall of controversy in the United States with his next movie, *État de siège* (*State of Siege*, 1973). Scheduled for screening in the American Film Institute’s festival for the inauguration of the Kennedy Center in Washington, it was abruptly withdrawn on the ground that it “rationalizes an act of political assassination.”

*State of Siege* was written by Costa-Gavras in collaboration with Franco Solinas, scenarist of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *The Battle of Algiers*. Like *Z*, it is a somewhat fictionalized version of an actual event—the kidnapping by Tupamaros guerrillas in Uruguay in 1970 of Dan Mitrione, an American from the Agency for International Development whose real job was to train the Uruguayan police in counter-insurgency techniques. The ransom demanded by the Tupamaros was the release of all political prisoners, and when this was refused and police death squads made a series of raids showing how much they had learned from Mitrione’s tuition, he was murdered.

Mitrione (called Santore in the film) is played by Montand as a brave, serious, well-intentioned man who is simply incapable of recognizing that the capitalist ethic is not universally desired. At the end of the movie, another AID man is flown in to replace him, but the camera singles out one defiant face from the crowd at the airport as a prophetic hint of what is to come. In *State of Siege*, Costa-Gavras abandoned the subtleties of *L'Avèu*. Jay Cocks found the new film “stylistically jazzy past the point of stridency,” employment “a sort of arhythmic, staccato editing and prominent, even aggressive music (by Mikos Theodorakis) to punch the movie along, giving it a kind of spurious suspense.” It did well at the box office.

In a 1974 interview with Pier Nico Solinas, Costa-Gavras explained his conception of political film: “To me it’s a film which brings to the surface a problem that people are ignoring or not thinking about, which makes them reflect upon, discuss, evaluate this problem and makes them aware of it in political terms. It should be a film that shows the political mechanisms with which we live, the mechanisms which cause things to be the way they are. Thus a political film is one which provokes political reactions, political discussions, and political controversies. Starting from this premise I might also add that a political film must be popular, as popular as possible so that these reactions, discussions, and controversies will automatically be far-reaching.” Costa-Gavras next turned his attention to his adopted country in *Section Spéciale* (*Special Section*, 1975), another highly profitable exercise in “righteousness after the event,” condemned for its “loading of the moral dice” but enjoyed all the same for the director’s “special brand of all-star, gold-plated suspense.” In fact, there are no major stars (though many excellent performances) in this reconstruction of a squalid episode in the history of the Vichy government of world War II. An officer of the occupying German forces is killed by the Resistance, and to avert massive reprisals, the Vichy authorities offer up six scapegoats, setting up a special court to “try” and condemn selected “troublemakers” already in custody. Jorge Semprun drew on the researches of the historian Hervé Villéré to who how eminent judges, magistrates, lawyers, and politicians were drawn, more of less reluctantly, into this shameful victory of ends over means.

*Clair de femme* (1979), with Montand and Romy Schneider as middle-aged lovers, was Costa-Gavras’ first attempt at a conventional romance and is likely to be his last. It was a total failure, excoriated as “a monumentally trivial picturization” of Romain Gary’s novel, “a glassy glossy.” The director returned to more familiar territory in *Missing* (1982)—literally familiar since he had visited Allende’s Chile in 1971, defending the President against right-wing charges that he had attempted to suppress *L’Avèu* during that year’s crucial municipal elections.

*Missing*, another political thriller with a basis in fact, proved to be even more controversial than *L’Avèu*. Charles Horman was a young American freelance writer who went to Chile to observe and support Allende’s socialist government, working there for a liberal newspaper. In the 1973 coup that brought the right-wing Pinochet regime to illegal power, Charles Horman disappeared. His father, Edmund G. Horman, went to Santiago in search of him and was informed by Charles’ widow that he had been murdered with American connivance because he knew too much about United States involvement in the coup.

Ed Horman, a pro-Nixon Christian Scientist businessman at first ridiculed this theory as “Commie paranoia.” But the American officials in Santiago were strangely unhelpful, Charles did not reappear, and Horman gradually became convinced that his daughter-in-law was right. In 1977, after four years of investigation, Ed Horman sued eleven American government officials for $4
millon for negligence and wrongful death, but the case was
eventually dismissed on procedural grounds and for lack of
evidence. Meanwhile a lawyer named Thomas Hauser had been
drawn into the crusade, and it was his book, The Execution of
Charles Horman (1979), that Costa-Gavras and Donald Stewart
used as the basis for their script.

Missing was filmed in Mexico, with Jack Lemmon playing
Ed Horman and sissy Spacek as his daughter-in-law Beth. Vincent
Canby thought it Costa-Gavras’ “most striking cinematic
achievement to date,” its script “a carefully interlocking work in
which present events and flashbacks are so seamlessly
joined that the film’s forward momentum increases
progressively, right up to the smashing finale that surprises
even though it has never been in
doubt.” Philip French similarly
applauded “Costa-Gavras’ ability
to grab you unawares by the
lapels and drag you through the
labyrinth of intrigue and paranoia
that lies beyond the more
acceptable corridors of power,”
though he thought that “as honest
Ed and his daughter-in-law are
reconciled, conflicting
generations united against the
smug establishment, the picture’s
radical thrust is turned into (or concealed behind) domestic drama.”

The intense and high-powered debate provoked by Missing
centered on its specific claim that it was “based on a true story. The
incidents and facts are documented.” In fact, as Flora Lewis pointed
out in an article in the New York Times (February 7, 1982), “the film
gives only one point of view,” and Costa-Gavras “made no
effort to speak with the government officials he portrays nor to
consult the records.” The State Department took the movie
seriously enough to issue a long rebuttal of its charges, and in
January 1983 the former American ambassador to Chile and two of
his aides filed a $150 million libel suit against Costa-Gavras,
Universal, and others involved in the making of the film. At about
the same time it won the Golden Palm at Cannes (shared with
Yilmaz Güney’s Yol), subsequently collecting an Oscar for best
adapted screenplay.

Hanna K. (1983) was Costa-Gavras’ first political thriller
based on a fictional situation rather than a historical event, and it,
like Missing, was released by Universal Studios. An ambitious
attempt to explore the thorny issue of Israel and the Palestinians,
Hanna K. was actually the synthesis of several projects the director
had been considering for a decade or more—an invitation to make
O Jerusalem in the early 1970s, a film on the Paris Commune that
he’d begun in 1970 and which raised the issue of the
excommunards expelled to Algeria and the evolution of their
colonial mentality, and finally a longstanding desire to make a film
about a woman’s life. Explaining how he and Franco Solinas wrote
the screenplay, he recalled, “Every year, events, a book, a
screenplay, or a visitor questioned us with the constancy of bad
But also pessimistic, discouraged about our being able to write a
screenplay. So little by little our desire to write a film about a
woman, like those around us, took form….And it was only after we
had been with her to Jerusalem in 1979 that we no longer left her.”

The film’s central character, Hannah Kaufman (Jill
Clayburgh) is a Jewish-American woman who, in her
professional/political life, emigrates to Israel, becomes a lawyer,
and gets involved with the case of a Palestinian man, Selim Bakri
(Mohammed Bakri) who is attempting to reclaim his family home
in the village of Kafir Rimona, now part of the Russian-Jewish
settlement of Kafir Rimon. In her personal life, meanwhile, her
“search for identity” (Costa-Gavras’ words) take her from a devoted
French husband Victor Bonnet (Jean Yanne) to a brief affair with
the Israeli chief prosecutor Joshua Herzog (Gabriel Byrne), whose
child she bears, and then to a romantic involvement with her
Palestinian client. As in his earlier films, it is through the
single mediating character of Hanna that Costa-Gavras
attempts to engage his viewers in the larger political issues; here,
her intimate conversations with Selim provide the rare
opportunity for a Palestinian point of view to be
sympathetically expressed, while her courtroom confrontations
with Joshua allow her changing perspective to emerge. But for
lack of a concrete historical situation, the story trails off into
melodrama, ending with a highly
improbable dinner gathering of Hanna and her three lovers, past and
present. A news bulletin announces a bombing in Kafir Rimon;
Joshua accuses Selim of the attack and summons the police; Selim
flees; Hanna orders the other two men out and then, as she retreats
into the shower, finds her house surrounded by the army of police
that Joshua had summoned.

Hanna K. opened to lukewarm reviews at the Venice Film
Festival and more of the same in its commercial runs in Paris and
New York. Besides the universal conclusion that Jill Clayburgh was
miscast in the role of Hanna (“An Unmarried Woman Moves to
Jerusalem” is how one critic retitled the film), reviewers were fairly
consistent in suggesting that Costa-Gavras’ departure from a good-
guys/bad-guys situation had left him with a muddled story—in
the words of Raphael Bassin, “an undigested proposition that tries
to make us understand a complex situation but doesn’t succeed.”
The New York critics, perhaps less disposed toward Costa-Gavras,
much less the Palestinians, to begin with, were even harsher about
what Stanley Kauffmann called “patent cheapness” and
“marketplace ambiguity.” Cost-Gavras himself told interviewers
after the New York premiere, “This film is my most important
political statement (to date) and is perhaps the most radical of all
my movies. The public perception is something else again, and
perhaps the style of the film—the way I approach the subject—will
turn out to be the film’s worst enemy. Some (people), however, will
find any reason to object to a film like this.”

While the film’s political thrust was undoubtedly a cause
of some unwarranted criticism—in the extreme, David Denby wrote
of “unconscious anti-Semitism”—even those who were favorably
disposed towards Gosta-Gavras’ intentions questioned the extent to
which he was successful, citing the rampant implausibilities of the
plot (at one point Selim is offered South African citizenship as a
means of resettling in Israel if he will drop the claim to his family
home), the stereotypical characters, the inconclusive resort to
melodrama at the end. Yet, as the Palestinian literary critic Edward Said pointed out in one of the more charitable reviews, the film’s singular achievement was the presentation of the human dimensions of the Palestinian experience, and for this reason, he argued, the strength of its political message might override its aesthetic problems.

In the wake of Hanna K., Costa-Gavras himself seems to have undertaken a reevaluation of his work while pursuing other projects. Since 1982 he has served as president of the Cinématéque Française; he subsequently became involved in the production of a first film by Mehdi Charef, an Algerian immigrant whose autobiographical novel, Le Thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed (1983) was a best-seller in France. Michèle Ray-Gavras had purchased the film rights, originally as a vehicle for her husband, but Costa-Gavras turned the direction over to Charef—who had been aspiring to filmmaking during years of factory work—and the resulting Thé au harem d’Archimède (Tea in the Harem, 1985), “presented by Costa-Gavras” (who appears as the stills photographer in the credits), was an immediate success, winning the Jean Vigo Prize, an Apple Foundation award for film distribution, and a second prize at the Chicago film festival.

After this collaboration with Charef (whose next film was to be produced by Michèle Ray-Gavras as well), Costa-Gavras resumed his own filmmaking but with a different orientation. As Variety put it after the release of Conseil de famille (Family Council, 1986), “Humor has never been an element in the socio-political film world of Costa-Gavras, so it’s a surprise to see the director now taking a stab at this ironic comedy about a family of burglars done in by its own double standard of morality.” Based on a novel by the well-known author of thrillers Francis Ryck, Family Council shows the transformation of a family crime ring into the local affiliate of an international syndicate based in the United States. When the father (French rock star Johnny Halliday) returns home to his wife (Fanny Ardant) after a long stint in jail, his son, François breathes new life into the operation, and over the years, the family enjoys the same upward mobility aspired to throughout the working classes. Just at the point when the father makes his American connection, though, the grown-up François (Remy Martin, the co-star of Charef’s Tea in the Harem) opts out for another “profession,” cabinetmaking. His outraged father responds by calling a family counsel and locking the son away until he consents to come back to the fold. Following the rules of the game in which he has been raised, François turns his father and their partner over to the police so that the rest of the family can pursue their dream of a “normal” life.

Departing from Costa-Gavras’ established style in form as well as subject, Family Council is structured as a kind of film within a film, with the family history presented through the first-person recollections of François. “It’s a lot of fun to change, to do something else,” Costa-Gavras told Monique Martineau during the shooting: “In making a comedy I’m discovering the traps I didn’t know about. You have to find another tone, another way of telling the story.” While Variety reviewer Len Borger found the result “stolidly lacking in visual imagination and narrative brist,” others were more impressed. French critics Yves Alion and Jacqueline Lajeunesse, for example, wrote appreciatively of Costa-Gavras’ ironic inversion of French family values; for them, this seemingly light entertainment took on “unexpected substance” through its social implications: “more than a comedy, Conseil de famille seems like a bittersweet chronicle, a sentimental saga in halftones...” In any case, as Monique Martineau wrote at the end of a 1985 anthology devoted to “The Cinema of Costa-Gavras,” with Family Council, the director seems to have broken out of the “Z formula,” but one can only ask, with Martineau, “Will it last?”

It is no doubt true that, as Vincent Canby writes, “all of Mr. Costa-Gavras’ politically inspired movies are, at heart, chase thrillers.” There are many who maintain that his use of “rapid-fire cross-cutting” and other techniques for building suspense are “manipulative” and inappropriate to the intensely serious issues that provide his themes. His defenders point out that his methods are far or effective in promoting widespread awareness and discussion of these issues than, say, the more austere procedures of Jean-Luc Godard.

Sam Adams on A.V. Club, 13 November 2009:
Beginning with 1969’s Z, recently added to the Criterion Collection, Costa-Gavras established himself as a master of the political thriller, using the tools of suspense to attack repressive ideology. Born Constantinos Gavras—the name change was courtesy of a title-card typo—he was raised in Greece by politically active parents; his father fought in the anti-Nazi resistance during World War II. While there’s no mistaking his targets, Costa-Gavras prefers allegory to direct confrontation, although the distinction can be a fine one. Centered around the assassination of a popular left-wing leader, Z is set in an unspecified time and place, but contemporary audiences could not have missed the parallels to the director’s home country, where the murder of outspoken pacifist Gregorios Lambrakis was followed by the rise of a military dictatorship. The Concession, released the following year, takes aim at the fascist tactics of the Czechoslovakian secret police, and State Of Siege shadows the U.S.’ involvement in crushing South American revolutionary groups and propping up friendly dictators. The agit-entertainment Costa-Gavras embodied has been largely squeezed out of the marketplace—John Malkovich’s The Dancer Upstairs, which explicitly quotes State Of Siege, is one of the few worthy successors—and even he has shifted his emphasis. His latest film, Eden Is West, takes a turn toward comedy, starring Riccardo Scamarcio as an illegal immigrant who washes up on the shore of a luxury resort and is taken for one of its guests, managing to keep his cover by barely speaking a word. Although the film has yet to secure U.S. distribution, The A.V. Club caught up with Costa-Gavras during a visit to Philadelphia, where he received an artistic achievement award from the Philadelphia Cinema Alliance.

The A.V. Club: Did you initially see cinema as a tool for political change, or did you just love the art form?
Costa-Gavras: No, no. The idea at the beginning was to study literature and to try, originally, to write. That seemed like a childish dream. And then I discovered the cinema, when I was in France in the university. I decided to go to the cinema school because I thought it was a new sort of media. Today, it’s not anymore, but in
the ’50s, cinema had a half century of age. Today it’s more than one century. So I thought it was a new media, a new way of telling stories. The bottom line is that we’re telling stories.

AVC: It was also a time when it was becoming much more possible to make films outside of a studio context. If you were making a movie in the 1930s, you’d usually have to get a job at Gaumont or Pathé.

CG: Yes, exactly. And particularly in France. There was a new law where you could have grants from the state for the movies, and then the audience was open, and also the distributors. Making movies was something. It was the major entertainment just to go to the cinema, once, twice a week. At the time, something like 400 million people went to the movies.

AVC: Did you watch a lot of movies?

CG: Yes, a lot. A lot. Absolutely. French cinemas used to show, at that time, something like two or three movies every day from all over the world. They’d have movies coming from Finland, with Russian subtitles, or China—that kind of picture. But it was extraordinary to see these movies without understanding what it was about, to try to reconstruct the story.

AVC: This was at the Cinémathèque Française, in the Henri Langlois era? There are stories of him projecting films in the stairwell when he ran out of screens.

CG: It was a major experience. In particular for me, because I was coming from a country, Greece, where after the civil war, there was a very tough, very conservative government, and a lot of censorship. So movies with a kind of… what you consider action movies. I know all the Randolph Scott movies.

AVC: Your first movie, The Sleeping Car Murders, is essentially apolitical, but there’s a template there that you drew from in later films. The structure of the thriller seems to attract you. Obviously they’re exciting, and they draw the audience in, but in your case they often serve political purposes as well—that hunt for information, to find out who committed a crime. That works for you?

CG: I put something in the adaptation of the story. For example, he was doing these crimes to go to South Africa. South Africa at that time was very racist. The Sleeping Car Murders was done in a very curious way, because I was waiting to work with René Clément, and assist on another movie, so I bump into this book, and I say, “Okay, why don’t I do an adaptation?” Just as an exercise. I gave it to a lady to type it, she’s working with the studio, she said, “This is a good story,” and she gave it to the director of the studio. The director called me and said, “This is a good story, why are you not making the movie?” But it was at the end of the nouvelle vague, ’65. In the last two or three last years, the so-called nouvelle vague, they weren’t having big successes anymore. So immediately, we’re jumping to a new director with different stories. So the movie was done like this, like an exercise. It was also a way to get into the profession.

AVC: You’d been working as an assistant to René Clair, as well.

CG: René is nouvelle vague without being nouvelle vague. The real nouvelle vague, it starts with Chabrol. And then Truffaut, and Godard, and then that group of people. Because they are very close to Italian cinema, to Italian philosophy on the cinema.

AVC: What was your relationship to that movement, or those filmmakers?

CG: You know, I worked as an assistant. The assistants in France are not like they are here in the States. Assistants are much more close to the directors, and they have—still now, less now, at that time, they used to have a kind of very artistic task. They used to do the casting, scouting, and so forth. So I have worked with René Clair, who was coming from the silent period, and then with Jacques Demy, who was part of the nouvelle vague, so I have seen all the spectrum of the different ways of work in France. I was very close to them, especially since I worked with Agnès Varda as well.

AVC: Right. People like Demy and Varda and Chris Marker are interesting because they’re at the same time as the nouvelle vague, but their movies don’t really fit in.

CG: Jacques was nouvelle vague, a principal part of nouvelle vague. Agnès is not, because she started earlier. Chris either. Chris is like Alain Resnais, because he’s much older and so forth. But they are close. They are the same period. Chris did essentially documentary.

AVC: He’s very secretive. Not many people know what he looks like.

CG: I know him very well.

AVC: Was he that secretive even back then?

CG: I had met him a couple of times by then, and then I met him better and later when I started having a relationship with Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, because he was part of that group also.

AVC: Right. Apart from Godard, that group was more political than most of the nouvelle vague.

CG: In a certain way, they were. It depends what you mean by political. I think that group was not really connected to the politics. A big influence on them was the surrealists. Do something different from what’s going on. And they were right. To break that kind of monotonous way of repeating things, repeating movies, the same great movies doing very well in the box office and so forth. That was the idea, and one who did, he went very deep with that idea, was Godard. Up until the end. Truffaut and the others got very quickly into the system.

AVC: A lot of surrealism comes out of repressive political climates—Luis Buñuel’s earliest movies, or people like Jan Svankmajer. We can still have great arguments about what “Un Chien Andalou” or L’Âge D’Or actually mean, but they’re clearly an attack on the norm.

CG: Certainly, you’re right. It’s a kind of political way of making movies, absolutely. But this also was helped with the new techniques, the technical changes. The [high-speed film] Tri-X, the small cameras. The Tri-X was essential, because they could shoot anywhere, everywhere, outside of the studio. Always, when you have new techniques, the aesthetics are changing. The conception changes and so forth.

AVC: Cinéma vérité would not have been possible without that sort of equipment.

CG: It would be very difficult. Very difficult, yes.

AVC: You’re talking about being political but not involved with
the day-to-day.
CG: Yes, and it depends also... the idea of being political, what's politics? If you speak English, you vote for whom, Bush or Obama? Or your behavior in everyday life. You use the small or the big power you have over others.
AVC: What you spend your money on.
CG: The money, how you treat people, you respect them, you don’t respect them. Politics, it’s behavior among us. Whether you respect others or not.
AVC: At the beginning of Z, you invert the standard movie disclaimer: Rather than saying any resemblance to real people is a coincidence, you say it’s deliberate. But you don’t use the real names. Why not?
CG: We’re saying to the audience, “Try to find yourself with your knowledge and your information.” The idea is to make the audience participate a little bit. It’s not a conversation with the audience. But instead of making just a speech and have them listening, try to see what’s there, where’s the country, what happens, who’s the guy?
AVC: Missing is different, in that you do name names.
CG: Yes, Missing at the beginning named names completely. Saying the name of everybody in the first script. And then when we start shooting, I have a report from the company saying, “Probably we should do different names.” Because the script went through the lawyers, the lawyers said, “God, we’re going to have all kind of…” Which we had, by the way.
AVC: You got sued?
CG: Yes, and we had to change. First, we changed to a name that was very close, with the same Christian name. And they say no, so we changed this too. We have to completely change everything. We just kept the functions. It was the idea to respect the book, but the movie had all the names. And then they said, “No, the book is one thing, and then the movie is different,” so for all the names. And also because it was an American story.
AVC: You made movies in English, if not Hollywood movies, from 1982 to 1997. How do you look back on that period now?
CG: After Z was shown in the United States, they asked me to make a lot of American movies—you know, the system they have, to sign a contract with several, four or five projects. So I refused, because I didn’t know the country, and also I didn’t have a story which could interest me. The first time I had a story which was very interesting to me, it was Missing. I sent the book. And even then, I told them that I would like to make that movie, but not all the book, just the 65, 70 last pages of the book, when the father finally goes to look for the son. They said, “Okay, let’s sign.” I said, “No, we won’t sign, because I don’t want to get into the Hollywood system. I’ll do an outline of 50 pages, and then if you like it, then we sign.” And it’s what I did, so they liked the outline. Because Hollywood’s a very difficult town to me. It can eat you completely.
AVC: Did you continue working that way through Mad City?
CG: Yes. Because then I asked them, “Okay, the post-production, I would like to do it in France, and the editing,” and so forth, just to keep some kind of distance, to have them on your back burner. Every Saturday, for example, the executives come to the editing room to see, “Show us what you have done during the week.” And then they start discussing, saying “Change this, will you change this?” It becomes a kind of crazy thing. Today, Hollywood is drastically different, I’m sure.
AVC: How did it change, in your experience?
CG: It’s changed completely. I was talking with the executive from Universal for Missing, he said, “You cannot do anymore anything like Missing.” He’s producing movies, you know, those movies about Egypt...
AVC: The Mummy?
CG: The Mummy. I said, “What are you doing?” He said, “The only thing I can do here.” So Hollywood changed completely. I don’t believe it. But if there is a story, when it can interest me, if it returns me to Hollywood, and I have the freedom I need to have, then I will do it.
AVC: Not only does Hollywood rarely make political movies, but they rarely make films that seem even vaguely connected to the real world.
CG: Yeah, but Hollywood did those movies before. Even in the ’20s, silent films. The ’30s, ’50s. We are nourished with those movies. The people who like to make movies, the Hollywood movement was very extraordinary. I remember when I saw a movie like Marty. You remember Marty? In the movie there were accidents. There were really producers and directors who were willing to make the popular movies then.
AVC: Is it easier to make the movies you want to make in Europe?
CG: Yeah, much easier. Much easier. Of course, you don’t have all the money you need, and if you go over budget, then you have to find the money, or you sell your house or something. [Laughs.] But you have much more freedom.
AVC: Since we’re sort of up to the present, where did the idea for Eden Is West come from?
CG: The idea came from... all the movies about the immigrants they have done everywhere, even here in Europe, all are very, very tragic movies. Dramas. Immigrants, they don’t bring only dramas, they are people like everybody. They live a dramatic life, but they are not, how we can say, people who bring dramas to our society. Let’s make a movie about the lightness, if I can say, of immigrants. The idea starts like this. So we started working with Jean-Claude Grumberg, and we made the movie with that idea. In France, one-third of the population is foreigners. So all these guys, they have a good life, and they participate in the life of the country. So I would like to show that the immigrant, it’s also that. Or it’s essentially that.
AVC: There are scenes in the movie that, if they were played a different way, could be extremely dark, like the way the residents of this resort organize themselves into a lynch mob with very little provocation.
CG: Because the movie is about him, it’s also about us. Probably more about us than about him, the way we behave with immigrants.
AVC: He’s deliberately a very silent character, and things happen around him.
CG: He wants to go someplace, and he tries to adapt himself every time in all the situations, bad or good. That’s the fate of an immigrant.
AVC: In some of the reviews, there seems to be a little difficulty
accepting a movie like this coming from you, because people think of you making a certain kind of movie.
CG: That’s right. This is true. I never thought about that. I discovered that after it. Like for some comedians, you see them, you have to laugh. Before they start doing something, you start laughing. Just because they are there. So that’s a negative part of our relationship with the audience.

AVC: The positive part is just that it becomes easier to make movies? What do you like about that ongoing relationship?
CG: The idea is to create a kind of… people waiting for something. Especially now, the immigrant problem is very dramatic around the world. Because we don’t know what to do with them. They’re in economic crisis, and there are more and more. There will be more and more. We speak about globalization of economy, but it’s also globalization for immigration. Millions of people, they’re willing to have a better life. A better life, they cannot have it where they live, so they move.

Nobody speaks about the amount of French who are coming from outside. Of course, there are Jews from the period of the ’30s, and before, they have Polish people and Italians coming to work in the mines, and you have really a huge population which are not French.

AVC: You mentioned that group of filmmakers and actors in the early 1960s that you were involved with, and obviously your relationship with Yves Montand and Simone Signoret continued through the course of several films, and outside of them as well. What was important about that relationship to you?
CG: First, it was important because I was an immigrant, and someone coming from a small town to get into the most, I would say, the most hot group of people in Paris, was very important. Why? Because that was the place where they used to speak about cinema, about theater, about politics, about everything. And speaking does mean saying stupid things, speaking really seriously. Deepening the reflection in other people. That was important. And then the second part is because, in the same way, they helped to make my first movie. It was because Yves and Simone said, “Okay, we’ll play in your movies.” Just like this, like a joke. And they didn’t do it only with me, they did it with other young people also. It was kind of their way of being. That was very essential, yeah. And it was learning Paris, learning the life also.

AVC: You use them well. Yves Montand’s character is assassinated less than 15 minutes into Z, but his presence lingers, in part because he was such a big star at the time.
CG: Z, that’s right. Twelve minutes. The movie’s over two hours, and there’s 12 minutes with Yves in the picture. Yves accepted without knowing what the movie would be. Nobody knew what the movie would be. It was very important, because with his character’s qualities, he gave an extraordinary dimension to the character. And of course to the movie.

AVC: His performance in The Confession is very different from what he did in other films. There’s a real quality of weariness, as well as physical endurance.
CG: Because he, for years after the war, Yves and Simone were, without being in the Communist Party, they were close to that movement. They stayed to the left. And the Communist Party played also a kind of bizarre role. They said, everywhere, they were with us completely. But they cannot come out, both of them say, “No. We are with them for some purposes, but not for everything.” It was impossible at that time to speak that openly without it being a condemnation against the Communist Party. So they just accepted that, up until a certain moment.

At that period, it was something like one third of the French population. All the intellectuals were close to the Communist Party. Being inside or being outside, they were close. And of course, little by little, they started getting away. They started with Hungary, in Budapest, it became acceptable to go into towns, and to kill people.

AVC: And then the Prague Spring in 1968. Yes. So that movie was very controversial when it came out?
CG: It was extremely controversial. At that time, it was against all kinds of thinking in Europe, and in particular in France. They used to say, “Okay, there are problems, but it’s necessary to establish socialism or to try to save it.” And then out comes the movie, which was a kind of direct condemnation of the old system. Some people stopped talking to us anymore.

AVC: It’s reminiscent of Kafka in a certain way. Was that intentional?
CG: Yes. The idea was not to play the thriller. The idea is to, up until a certain moment, go with the thriller, “What’s going to happen to him?” and so forth, and then to break the thriller and say, “No. He’s alive.” And then we talk about the situation, why that happens. To have the audience caught by the story, and then be caught by the why. So they have to kill this thriller at the very beginning.

AVC: It’s a shame that neither The Confession nor State Of Siege is on DVD.
CG: Yes, it is hard to find, I know. The rights used to belong to the group of Cinema Five. And now they have them back, so the people who did Z, they’re preparing also the DVD of State Of Siege.

AVC: That makes sense.
CG: But there too, people say I’m using the thriller all the time, but at the very beginning, we start the movie with the American being killed, we see his burial, we see the ceremony. And then we tell the story. The idea was not to play with that idea, he will be killed or he won’t be killed. It was to follow the story a different way.

AVC: Start with the ending.
CG: Yes. He’s dead. But who is he, and what he is doing?

AVC: There is a tricky balance there, in the sense that the thriller as a genre, as a mechanism, is very powerful. But it’s also so powerful that it can overpower whatever else the movie might want to do.
CG: What you’re trying to say. Absolutely. That’s the problem with the thriller, because the audience is taken so much by the most superficial part of the story, and then you don’t remember what the story is about.

AVC: Z has a similar structure, in that he’s killed 20 minutes into the movie, and it’s really about the repercussions of that event, rather than how it happened or what led up to it.
CG: He’s killed, but the idea of Z is to show the system who tries to hide the truthfulness and the assassins. And how one man, with a lot of risks, decides to go all the way down. The idea of resisting.
AVC: One of the interesting things about the movie is that the assassins are strangely charismatic.
CG: Yes. Marcel Bozzuffi and Renato Salvatori, and two very good actors. I remember a movie about Fidel Castro. Who was playing Fidel Castro? Jack Palance. Can you imagine? Because we need to show that it’s a bad guy. No, the bad guy is not because of the bad face. It’s because he is doing something bad. Bad guy can be any one of us. To go a little bit against that system, which some people call Hollywood system, but it’s not only Hollywood’s system, it’s everybody’s system. You have a bad guy, everything’s bad. His son is bad, his wife is bad, his dog. Everything is bad.
AVC: And not only is that bad storytelling and just plain boring, but there’s something insidious about it as well, in that it encourages people to think, “Well, he doesn’t kick his dogs or beat his wife, so he must be a good guy.”
CG: Which is the contrary. How many times you hear people say, we learn that he raped a small girl and so forth, a small boy, and the neighbors say, “No, he was a good guy. Every day, he was saying ‘Good morning’ to us. We have good chats.” Of course, it’s not the face. It’s the brains.
AVC: What are you working on next?
CG: I’m trying to see if I can speak about our society today, but I cannot speak about the theme, because it’s a bit difficult. I’m just starting to work on that. Because we live in a kind of world which has drastically changed in the last years. We speak about globalization, and how it’s become the reason for everything. It has a kind of deep meaning. To be everywhere and to be nowhere at the same time. You think to globalize, you think, the Earth, it’s your country. No, it’s not your country. It’s not easy to catch it in a cinema. It’s too huge.

**COMING UP IN THE SPRING 2010 BUFFALO FILM SEMINARS XX:**

Mar 16 Peter Yates, *The Friends of Eddie Coyle* 1973
Apr 6 Wolfgang Petersen, *Das Boot* 1981
Apr 13 Federico Fellini, *Ginger & Fred*, 1985
Apr 20 Michael Mann, *Collateral* 2004

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