

Dina Iordanova, *The Confession: Enthralling Absurdity*
Essay for *The Criterion Collection* DVD of Costa-Gavras' *The Confession*, 2015.
Available: <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/3578-the-confession-enthralling-absurdity>

The Confession: Enthralling Absurdity

By [Dina Iordanova](#)

May 29, 2015



It so happened that I met with Costa-Gavras right after the *Charlie hebdo* and related terrorist attacks in Paris in January 2015. Two days later, his picture was featured in all the major French newspapers, as one of the high-profile participants in the huge mass rally that asserted the will of European humanists against the terror.

The man, who is also president of the Cinémathèque française, is still strongly engaged. His political trajectory is representative of the evolution of many other Western European

intellectuals. Coming from a family of Greek leftists and having been an outspoken supporter of human rights causes in 1950s France, Costa-Gavras in the 1960s began to feel let down by various rigidly ideological approaches to political power. The three films that the young director made in the late sixties and early seventies—*Z* (1969), *The Confession* (1970), and *State of Siege* (1972)—marked the beginning of his parting of ways with dogmatic directives and taking a more liberal stance.

The films also adopted a popular—as opposed to aesthetically radical—mode of address, made for wide appeal and thus able to reach a larger audience than the highbrow oppositional cinema of the time. Still, each of them was an unblinking exposé of political brutality and corruption, and each caused a significant uproar and displeased authorities. Set in different countries—from North Africa to Latin America—they established Costa-Gavras’s enduring reputation as a transnationally committed political filmmaker. As he said during our interview, his interest has always been more in the systems that make injustice possible than in national or regional specifics.

The Confession, based on Artur and Lise London’s 1968 book, goes behind the scenes of the Prague show trial of November 1952, in which fourteen high-ranking Communist officials, including the party’s secretary-general, Rudolf Slánský, were prosecuted by Stalinists. Eleven were sentenced to death and executed; only three, Artur London among them, survived. An indirect consequence of Yugoslavia’s Josip Broz Tito’s splitting from the Soviets in 1949—an excruciating rupture within the Communist camp that triggered the most extreme manifestations of Stalin’s paranoia—such trials were held not only in Czechoslovakia but also across other countries of the Communist bloc at the time. The official accusatory lines evolved around Titoism and Trotskyism, but references were also made to Zionism and

participation in the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War of the 1930s; the majority of those who perished were of Jewish origin.

Costa-Gavras presents the story by focusing on the tortuous process of extracting a “confession”—or, rather, a series of confessions—from one of the accused, Gérard (London’s French Resistance name), in preparation for the trial. There are constant hints about and references to his alleged links to the “Titoist spy” László Rajk, a senior Hungarian Communist who had also been tried in a show trial and then executed three years earlier (in 1949), to his alleged role as an informant for the Western agent Noel Field, and so on—all accompanied by interminable torture and deprivation. In painstakingly revealing the depraved and nightmarish quality of this process of self-implication, and thus exposing the darkest aspects of Soviet bloc Communism, *The Confession* establishes itself as one of the toughest political films ever made.

* * *

From today’s point of view, it is important to keep in mind that the team behind *The Confession* had to navigate treacherous political waters. In the Cold War world, marked by black-and-white ideological divisions, and in a Western Europe that still had strong Communist parties, denouncing even the known absurdities of the Soviet system could be regarded as an act of treason. The Communist Party in France, in particular, was very critical of *The Confession*, on the grounds that one should not air dirty laundry or give ammunition to the opposition.

In this context, the film was an important step in the public expression of Western leftist intellectuals’ disillusionment with Soviet Communism. The estrangement that had already started in the interwar period was consolidated during the height of Stalin’s cult of

personality and the posthumous revelations of 1956, and became irreparable after the Warsaw Pact's invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 (which had been preceded by the similarly brutal suppression of an anti-Communist uprising in Hungary in 1956). For the sake of saving their values and preventing further disenchantment with leftist ideas, a faction of the left felt that they ought to set themselves apart. Yet in order to express their growing doubts, they had to carefully maneuver among associates with strong political allegiances. In a way, by shedding their affiliation with the Soviets, the filmmakers were trying to establish a new line of "political correctness," one that was more critical and open-minded.

The Londons' book had attracted significant attention when it was published in 1968. The couple, both Communist members of the French Resistance, lived in Paris at the time, and Costa-Gavras met with them. The team that came together for the project comprised more or less the same people who had just worked on *Z*, including writer Jorge Semprún (who also worked with Alain Resnais and who personally knew Josef Frank, one of the victims of the trial) and cinematographer Raoul Coutard (who also worked with Jean-Luc Godard, François Truffaut, and Nagisa Oshima). Chris Marker, an *incontournable* figure on the scene of French left-wing filmmaking, joined the crew as still photographer; reportedly, it was believed that seeing Marker's name on the production would smooth the way to getting a stamp of approval from the Communists. (Marker also made a thirty-one-minute making-of featurette, which was broadcast on French television in March 1970 and is included on this release.)

Actors Yves Montand and Simone Signoret, both major stars, were also outspoken leftists, and had traveled together across the Soviet bloc in 1956–57. Montand had joined the Communist Party as part of his family's tradition, and remained a member until 1968. The

couple had been taken aback by the Soviet reaction to the Prague Spring and wanted to make amends for their earlier support of the Soviets.

Montand's character here is narrowly drawn—a man of the nomenklatura, a righteous veteran cast out by political storms, who has to choose between surviving for his family and sticking to his higher principles—yet his presence is felt just as forcefully and tenaciously as in his more dramatic roles. Montand reportedly lost about twenty-five pounds for the role, and indeed shows the emaciation and physical deterioration that London experienced.

Blindfolded, in prison, with aviator goggles reminiscent of the ones worn by the protagonist of Marker's *La Jetée* (1963), Gérard becomes synonymous with a man faced with some of the most difficult choices one can be exposed to; symbolically, the blindfold directs his gaze inward, toward an examination of himself.

Signoret plays London's wife with steely determination, and while she is known not to have liked the role, she is particularly persuasive: her Lise is Communist to the bone, a resilient believer totally dedicated to the cause, who thrives on her Communist pedigree.

The most memorable performance, however, comes from Gabriele Ferzetti, an Italian actor who enjoyed a robust reputation for his work in a range of supporting roles. Here he is Kohoutek, an elegant intellectual and skilled interrogator who apparently worked for the Nazis at some earlier point. Amoral to the core, he knows how to extract, bit by bit, the confession he needs, and how to put it together so as to manipulate his victim for the next extraction.

Work on the production began in February 1969. The team's intention was to shoot in Prague, even though at that time Warsaw Pact forces had already installed themselves in the Czechoslovak capital. Their main contact, Alois Poledňák, formerly head of the

Czechoslovak State Film company and at the time the head of parliament, seemed optimistic that it would be possible to make it happen. Costa-Gavras sat in a planning meeting with him during that May's Cannes Film Festival, where *Z* was being screened in competition. Just a month later, however, the news came that it was all falling apart: as with other intellectuals and politicians close to Alexander Dubček, Poledňák, who had been behind the extraordinarily bold political act of issuing a parliamentary statement condemning the occupation on the very day of the invasion, was forced to resign, and contact with him was lost. *The Confession* ended up being shot in the northern French city of Lille. The courtroom scenes were filmed on the outskirts of Paris, at the Boulogne-Billancourt studio.

* * *

The Confession unfolds around Gérard's arrest, imprisonment, mistreatment, trial, and eventual release. In the epilogue, we're taken to the present day, and his return to post-1968 Prague to face the demons of the past. The most substantial part of the film, however, is the one dedicated to depicting the continual rounds of interrogation, the aim of which is to extract a self-incriminating confession.

Costa-Gavras portrays the interrogators who are preparing the trials as a bunch of faceless, utterly forgettable individuals—bullies who enjoy torture, eat at their desks with greasy fingers off oily paper, and sleep there as well. In contrast, Kohoutek is polite and professional, and does not engage in futile attempts to make the prisoners spit out fantastic admissions about conspiracies that never took place. He applies division of labor—he does not dirty his hands with torture; the others are there for that part of the job. And he is methodical. All he wants is confirmation of specific short statements. It is only after these individual testimonials are signed, on a one-by-one basis, that he does his real job, compiling a monstrous narrative, one that consists of incontestable little facts, and one that is ultimately

supported by the signature of the accused, many times over. By the time the charges are made public, it is too late to protest. And any attempts to seek public attention, to appeal, or to undermine the credibility of the trial are foreseen and dealt with by the organizers.

The elements of torture— isolation, physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation, blindfolding— had been touched on in earlier films: Godard's *Le petit soldat* and Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers*, as well as Costa-Gavras's own *Z*. However, *The Confession* was the first film that zeroed in on torture as a seemingly endless ordeal, a systematic and relentless process aimed at delivering a specific outcome. Looking back, and in view of recent revelations about torture, one can see that the methods have remained more or less the same across the board. In this instance, it is the political affiliation of the torturers that supposedly sets them apart. Yet torture is present across cultures and contexts, and it is not endemic to Stalinists.

What is specific to the Stalinist approach to these matters is the perverted method of fabricating evidence, where the accused must engage in self-implication, “confess” to things they have never done or thought. The film adaptation eliminates many events in the Londons' book, opting to foreground instead the disorienting loss of stability brought about by this process (as chronicled in Arthur Koestler's 1940 novel *Darkness at Noon*). The detainees must not only be broken down; they are also challenged to engage in endlessly debasing self-doubt and, ultimately, made to despise themselves. While Communism denied the existence of the subconscious, the twisted logic of these self-implications actually built on the premise that there are layers to a personality, and that what one manifests in social life is different from one's innermost thoughts and feelings. It is all shrouded in enthralling absurdity.

One of the specific features of Soviet Communism that is raised to the level of farce and exposed in *The Confession* is the requirement of unswerving faith in the party. Denying all

individualism and self-interest, Communists were supposed to always put the party's will and wisdom above their own. The cracks in such an untenable position become tangibly obvious in this film. Who is "the party"? Why is it that one must put one's trust in this supra-infallible abstract leader, when it becomes more than obvious, as things evolve, that the will of the party is nothing but a line perpetrated by a clique. Thus the irrationality of the setup is exposed. Interestingly, Gérard's wife has no illusions on this matter—she does not hesitate to use personal connections to help free her husband, rather than blindly put her fate in the hands of some anonymous and abstract concept.

The fear that permeates this stuffy atmosphere is not directly named. On the surface, one talks about faith in the party, yet deep inside, it is all fear—fear of being ostracized, of the suffering that may come to the family. It is like belonging to a religious cult (and fearing the repercussions). Ironically, in his life as a high-end functionary, Gérard himself used to be one of the instigators of this fear. Now, as a victim, he is on the receiving end of approaches and policies that he helped put in place.

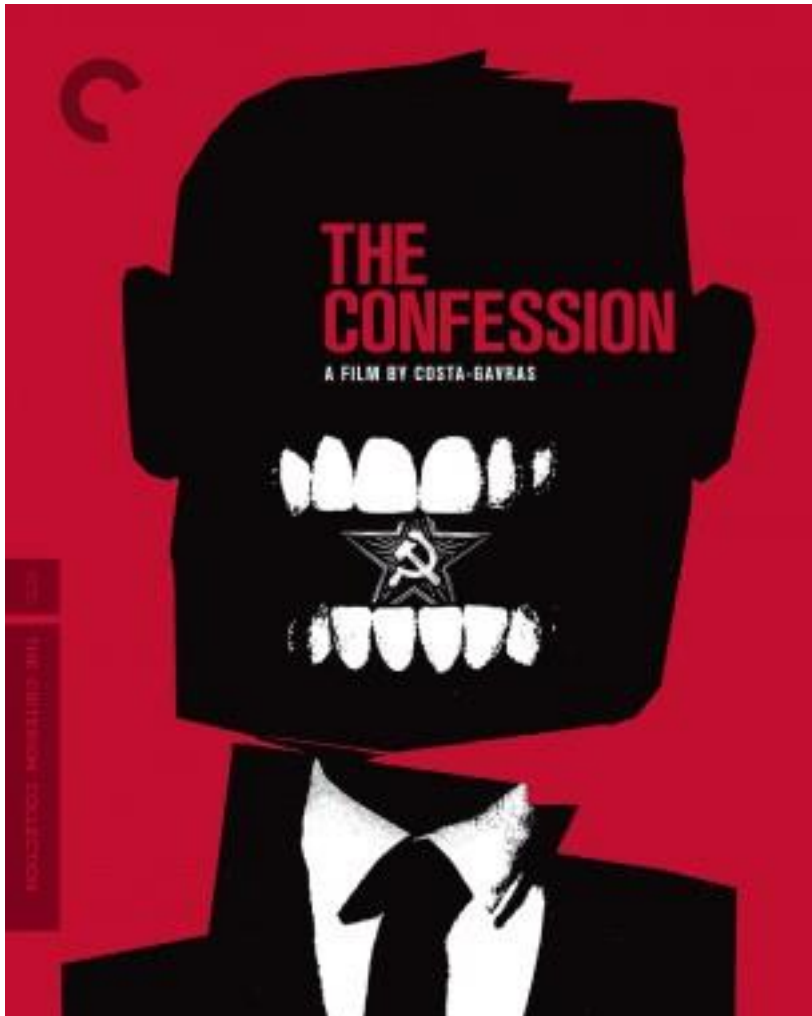
* * *

At the time of its release, *The Confession* was particularly controversial, especially on the left. And, of course, at the height of the Cold War, it was also an issue of cultural diplomacy with the Soviets. Georges Marchais, the leader of the French Communist Party, at first seemed to approve of the film, but then renounced it as anti-Communist. The French state did not put it forward for any festival competitions, so as to avoid further controversy (nonetheless, the film was nominated for a Golden Globe and a BAFTA Award). A number of countries did not import it. And, indeed, the reviews by influential critics like Vincent Canby, Pauline Kael, and Roger Ebert reflected this unease. In Czechoslovakia itself, the film premiered only after the end of Communism—on January 21, 1990, as part of Václav

Havel's election campaign; Yves Montand visited Prague for the occasion, to show support for the Czech dissident and first post-Communist leader of the country.

In retrospect, it is clear that *The Confession* is a landmark film. There have been others since that have taken on the immorality of extracting confessions under duress—notably, Ryszard Bugajski's 1989 *Interrogation*, from Poland—a practice that has proven more enduring than one would have imagined at the time. But *The Confession* is somehow more powerful and effective in boiling down good and bad to an existential simplicity that reaches out beyond systems and particular historical circumstances. It connects to the wider project of Costa-Gavras's films from the period. “The general feeling at the time seemed to be that the East was bad and the West was good,” he remarked. “Our idea, with the films of this trilogy, was to show that there was no real difference between the two systems.”

Related Films



[The Confession](#)

[Costa-Gavras](#)