

Critics have rightly compared these scenes to the cinema of Ingmar Bergman, who adopted Chekhov as a theater director, and made his own Chekhovian masterpiece, *Cries and Whispers*. These dialogues between men and women are spiritual battles with each antagonist tearing strips off the other's soul with bitter eloquence. Yes, Bergman is a touchstone for Ceylan—but the content of these confrontations is taken verbatim from Chekhov; his narrator speaks of “all the dynamite that had accumulated in our souls.” The episodes involving Aydin's sister Necla, the one-time admirer of his columns for a local newspaper who suddenly and harshly turns against their pontificating naïveté and arrogance, is an (equally faithful) adaptation of Chekhov's “Excellent People” (1886). In fact, these confrontations are so brutal that after hers, Necla disappears from the film, as if Aydin has murdered her.

Despite some sobering qualifications by Dr. Sobel, Chekhov is content to stack the moral weight of his story in favor of the wife. Ceylan is too much of a misanthrope (or misogynist—a worrying aspect of films like *Climates* and *Three Monkeys*). It is hard not to agree with Necla's assessment of her sister-in-law as holier than thou, glaring contemptuously, an expert in criticizing by staying silent. While her grievances against her husband are fully justified, Ceylan makes damning comparisons between them, and follows Aydin's cruel criticism of her naïveté with a devastating demonstration of it. He places the climactic set piece of her humiliating moral downfall right in the middle of Aydin's so-called “redemption” sequence. This set piece—which begins with a silhouette of Nihal shot from behind as in previous shots of Aydin—is inspired by the famous scene of Nastassya Filippovna throwing ten thousand rubles into the fire in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*. The fire in this scene and the one in the previous confrontation between Nihal and Aydin has the terrible crackling of spiritual torment that is reminiscent of the gravel being continually raked in Bresson's *The Diary of a Country Priest* (Bresson also adapted Dostoevsky, and used the same Schubert theme in *Au Hasard Balthazar*).

Aydin has made an “anonymous” donation to Nihal's charity as a final ironical attack on her; she plans to give it to the family whose lives have been ruined by Aydin's heavy hand. Virtually every move Nihal makes and every word she utters in this sequence echoes Aydin in its insensitivity, arrogance, condescension, and expression of social power. It is as if this strong, emotionally proactive woman had to be crushed by the film as well as her husband before Aydin can be “redeemed.” The staging, lighting, pacing, and acting in this extraordinary thirty-minute sequence—a virtuoso piece of theater in a film packed with them—justify the length and storytelling techniques that have led up to it.—Darragh O'Donoghue

The Confession

Produced by Robert Dorfmann and Bertrand Javal; directed by Costa-Gavras; screenplay by Jorge Semprún, based on the book by Artur and Lise London; cinematography by Raoul Coutard; edited by Françoise Bonnot; music by Giovanni Fusco; production design by Bernard Evein; starring Yves Montand, Simone Signoret, Gabriele Ferzetti, Michel Vitold, and Jean Bouise. Blu-ray and DVD, color, French dialogue with English subtitles, 138 min., 1970. A Criterion Collection Release, www.criterion.com.

In January 1951, Artur London, the Czechoslovakian vice-minister for Foreign Affairs, vanished. There was no record of his arrest; his well-connected family and friends, with direct access to high government officials, were told nothing of his fate and could not contact him. In November 1952, London resurfaced, to confess in open court that he was a traitor and a spy.

He was neither—in fact, London remained a committed communist until the time of his death in 1986. The war hero had fought with the International Brigades in the Spanish Civil War and then for the French resistance; eventually captured by the Nazis, he survived the Mauthausen concentration camp and returned home to serve in the new communist government. But he had the misfortune to be ensnared, along with fourteen other high officials (including Party Secretary General Rudolf Slánský) in one of the paranoid, nightmarish Stalinist purges that swept across the Soviet satellite states of Eastern Europe during the early, freezer-burn phase of the Cold War. After endless months of interrogation, isolation, disorientation, deprivation, and dire threats combined with promises of leniency, London and all of the others confessed to their imaginary crimes.

Eleven of his fellow defendants were executed, their ashes scattered across a desolate, icy roadway; London and three others received life sentences.

In 1956, after Khrushchev's de-Stalinization campaign, London was released from prison. Eventually, he settled in France and in 1968, with his wife Lise, published *L'Aveu* (*The Confession*), a memoir of his interrogations and imprisonment, which included twenty-seven months spent in a small concrete cell.

Paris-based filmmaker Costa-Gavras read the book and was eager to take it on for his third feature. Gavras was also something of a political refugee—his father's band of leftist resisters to the Nazi occupation of Greece went on to fight on the losing side in the Greek Civil War, making a university education or a professional career for his son a practical impossibility in his home country.

Gavras had just completed *Z*, which had not yet been released. Based on the assassination of a liberal Greek politician in 1963 (and the subsequent cover-up and investigation), the film, banned by the military dictatorship in Greece, would become an international sensation and go on to win the Jury Prize at Cannes and the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. For the screenplay of *The Confession*, Gavras again turned to Jorge Semprún, who had written the adaptation of *Z*. The Spaniard was an ideal choice: a survivor of Buchenwald, Semprún worked with the French-based communist opposition to the Franco dictatorship, often traveling covertly to Spain. After a falling out with his comrades, he turned to writing, winning literary prizes for his concentration-camp memoirs; Semprún also wrote the screenplay for Alain Resnais's 1966 masterpiece *La guerre est finie*, about a disillusioned Spanish communist agent, a script that was surely informed by his own experiences and mixed feelings.



Czech government official Artur London (Yves Montand) is kidnapped and victimized in a Stalinist show trial of party members in Costa-Gavras's *The Confession* (photo courtesy of The Criterion Collection).

Approached by Gavras and informed that Sempurín was on board, Yves Montand (who had starred in both *Z* and *Guerre*), immediately agreed to portray London in the film; Montand's wife and fellow movie star, Simone Signoret, joined the cast as London's wife. (The couple was also known at that time for their outspoken left-wing politics.) A-list talent would be found on both sides of the camera: cinematographer Raul Coutard (best known for his work with Godard and Truffaut) signed on to rejoin his collaborators from *Z* (and can be seen in a brief cameo as a courtroom cameraman).

The Confession, newly released by the Criterion Collection in characteristically superb Blu-ray and DVD editions brimming with informative extras, opens with a dozen suspenseful minutes, during which London is followed from work, from home, and to urgent meetings with comrades from his days in the International Brigades, as everybody desperately tries to figure out who is stalking whom—and why. Subtle hints of London's beating heart and the very Melvilian representation of his pursuers as gangsters (all trench coats and fedoras) turns the screws on the tension, which comes to an abrupt end when London is dragged from his car and bundled off to a secret prison. Blindfolded, stripped of his possessions and his clothes, London is thrown into a filthy cobblestone cell and repeatedly hauled into harshly lit interrogation rooms over the course of a long and harrowing but riveting and masterly executed act two.

For much of the next hour, London is subjected to what its defenders now euphemistically call “enhanced interrogation techniques”—sleep deprivation, ceaseless mandatory walking, stress positions, the withholding of food and water. If you ever had any doubts about whether such tactics are torture, they will end here. Gavras shows these techniques unflinchingly, but also artfully and never exploitatively; many of the inevitable humiliations are shown solely on Montand's expressive face (though the actor did go the full DeNiro for the part, losing twenty-five pounds to make plain the physical consequences of the ordeal on his withered frame).

What do his tormentors want? London and Lise, whose fortunes tumble as she seeks her husband's vindication, have an unwavering support for the party, and can only assume that a mistake has been made. Initially defiant, the increasingly beaten and bewildered London simply does not understand that his interrogation is not designed to find the truth, but to ratify the accusation: “What am I accused of?” he asks. “You are here to confess your crimes,” is the only response. “Here everyone confesses.” “But confess to what?” This will become clear over time—and none of it, of course, will have any relationship to the truth.

Things come to a head with a terrifying



In *The Confession*, as part of the effort to get London to confess to his treasonous political “crimes,” he is subjected to a mock hanging.

mock execution, again detailed with the same combination of testimony, technique, and restraint—and soon after which Gavras makes an inspired choice, as *The Confession* leaps forward to 1965, and shows a revived London discussing his experiences with two friends in France. For the second half of the film, the audience knows that London will survive and that most of his co-defendants will not, and in so doing the film abandons conventional questions of suspense (will he survive?) in favor of the less heroic question (how do they break him?) Knowing the fates of the others also adds a layer of duplicitous chill to the sweet lies and reassurances of the court. They will do what they do and say what they say to get what they want—a good show—and then all bets are off, as *The Confession* shows, in advance, each man meeting his fate.

London is broken, inevitably, first with a trickle—an initial, innocuous signed letter—and then with a flood, as, with Orwellian precision, words are strung together and logic is inverted until a comprehensive case is built, brick by disingenuous brick. (If you can't sleep or eat until you sign the next letter, only a marginal change from the last one, you'll probably sign. What's the difference?)

Cleaned up and well fed, every one of the fourteen accused recites their memorized testimony for the cameras in the show trial that was broadcast by radio across the country; treated to coffee and cigarettes, they are also cajoled into renouncing their right to appeal. For these beaten men, the only anxious moment comes after the fact. “Where is my interrogator?” each asks, desperate for the reassuring presence of their tormentors. (Michel Vitold and Gabriele Ferzetti are each outstanding as London's overlords, Smola and Kohoutek.) But the show is over—they are no longer needed.

The Criterion discs feature an hour-long conversation with Costa-Gavras from 1998 and a half-hour on-set film about the production shot by legendary documentarian Chris Marker that originally aired on French television in 1970. (Marker, attached to the production as a still photographer, was yet another left-wing resistance veteran.) Additional extras include numerous vintage and newly shot interviews with participants and commentators, including excerpts from a TV program featuring the Londons from 1981, a talk show excerpt with Montand from 1970, and a newly shot interview with editor Françoise Bonnot. (Bonnot, who first worked exclusively for her husband Henri Verneuil, became Gavras's go-to editor after her marriage ended; she also cut Melville's *Army of Shadows* and Polanski's *The Tenant*.)

The Confession did not meet with the same level of success that *Z* enjoyed. Part of the reason was surely that this take-down of the totalitarian *left* was less exhilarating for those audiences who were eager to jeer at the right-wing, tin-pot Greek junta exposed in *Z*. Sensitive to this possibility, the enthusiastic reviews from Roger Ebert and Vincent Canby (a “harrowing film of intellectual and emotional anguish, dramatized by the breathless devices of melodrama”) each felt the need to emphasize (correctly) that the film was anti-Stalinist, not anticommunist.

But the parochialism that limited the film's initial audience missed the point. *The Confession* endures importantly today, as it was then, not as a period piece from the distant rubble of failed communism, but as an all-too-unfortunate document of perennial and universal themes: of power and its inevitable abuse, the instinctive, unquenchable search for enemies within, the dispiriting banality of evil, and the endless nightmare of the wrongly accused.—Jonathan Kirshner