

“It Would Happen This Way”

Revisiting *Three Days of the Condor*

by Jonathan Kirshner

Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* was generally well received upon release in the fall of 1975. Roger Ebert in *The Chicago Sun-Times* lauded a “well-made thriller, tense and involving”; Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* amiably praised a “good looking, entertaining suspense film” that was distinguished by the “verve” of director Sydney Pollack and “the presence of good actors,” which in addition to star Robert Redford, included Faye Dunaway, Cliff Robertson, Max von Sydow, and John Houseman. The picture also rewarded its producers by becoming the sixth highest grossing film of 1975 (not *Jaws*, but not bad).

In its moment, however, *Condor* was not taken very seriously. Few if any would then (or even likely now) classify Pollack, albeit with several quality films already under his belt, as an auteur; Redford's considerable but understated skills as an actor were too easily overshadowed by his irresistible charm, impossible beauty, and the blinding wattage of his movie-star persona. Moreover, as an “entertainment” the production was not a candidate to make the rounds of the European festival circuit, and although it garnered a few minor awards, *Condor* was simply not seen as a film worthy of a seat at the grown-up's table, rubbing shoulders with the standout films of the year, among them *Nashville* (Altman), *Dog Day Afternoon* (Lumet), *Barry Lyndon* (Kubrick), *The Passenger* (Antonioni), *The Man Who Would Be King* (Huston), *Shampoo* (Ashby), and the Academy-Award juggernaut *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Forman).

Yet, *Condor*'s reputation has grown over the years, and after decades of that slow burn it is now, appropriately, seen by many as one of the great achievements of the Seventies, that remarkable decade in American film history—the heyday of the “New Hollywood.” That status will likely be enhanced still further with the release of a well-appointed new 4K UHD + Blu-Ray edition, featuring a pristine new 4K scan of the original camera negative, from Kino Lorber. Long-time *Condor* aficionados will be quick to appreciate this upgrade. For first-time viewers, it will be a revelation that this would-be relic of a long-past era—littered with touch-tone telephones, hi-fi stereos, primitive computer monitors, and spiffy shots of and within the sparkling new World Trade Center—is as fresh and relevant today as it was fifty years ago.

Like *The Conversation* (Coppola, 1974), *Condor* was fortuitously timed, seamlessly in accord with the national disposition of the moment. As Faye Dunaway recalled in her memoir, *Looking for Gatsby*, “the story that unfolded as I read seemed to capture the mood of the country in the aftermath

What Pollack and (the more politically attuned) Redford could not have known was that the serial exposures of the CIA's so-called “family jewels” (a massive internal report of the agency's misdeeds) would transform their impossible cinematic yarn into something all too plausible. The intricate plot, with its multiple layers of betrayal, is not easily followed at first, but repeat viewings reveal it to be airtight. Protagonist Joe Turner (Redford) works for the CIA, but despite his titular, ominous bird-of-prey code name, *Condor*, he is not a spy; the thoughtful, bookish, affable fellow is

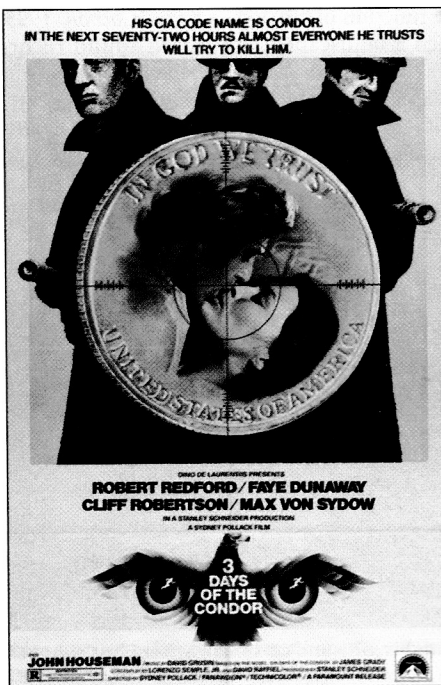
engaged as a “reader” for the Company, one of a small group housed at the “American Literary Historical Society” on New York City's Upper East Side. There they read, in a phrase, “everything” in search of new ideas, and, more important, the possibility of surreptitious conduits of communication by rival intelligence networks. And Turner, poring over an obscure novel translated into too many languages than its modest sales could possibly justify, thinks he may have found one.

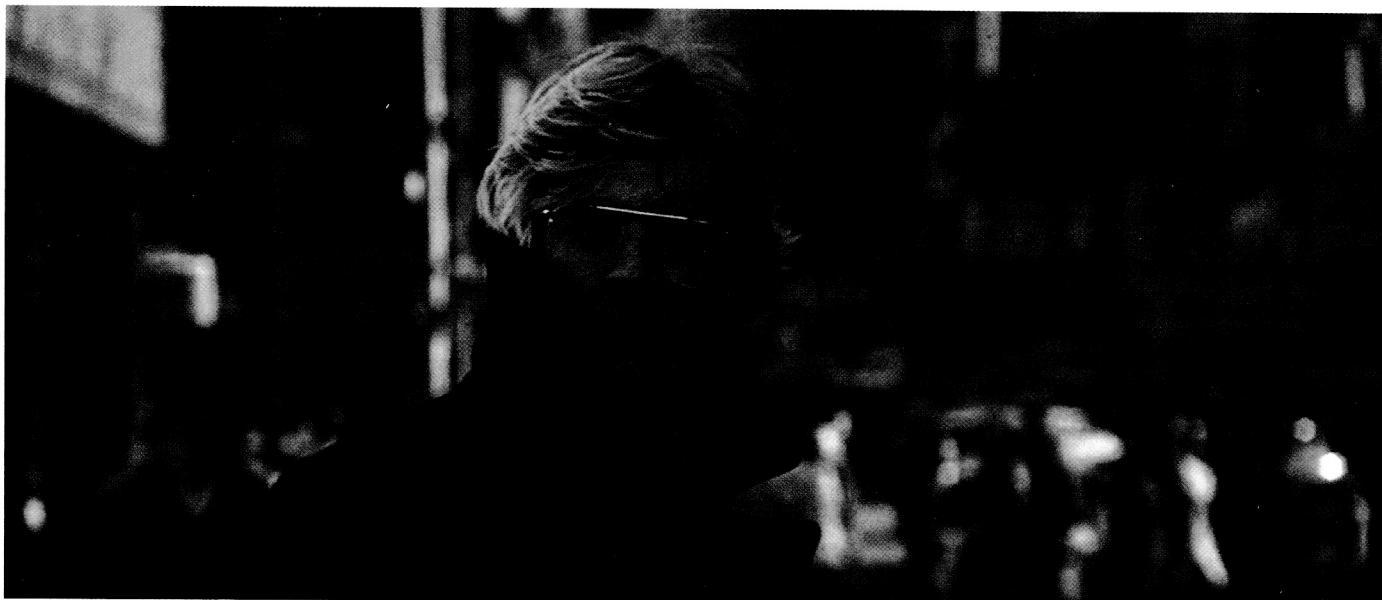
The sleepy routine of this modest shop is upended, to say the least, when a team of well-trained assassins show up one day and wipe out the entire unit—except for Turner, who was literally out to lunch (it was this premise that piqued the interest of Redford and Pollack). From there, *Condor* unfolds as a classic Hitchcockian “double chase”—Turner, pursued by killers, is an Everyman on the run, who ultimately must solve the mystery to save himself, outwitting the professionals on his tracks along the way. Hitchcock's *The 39 Steps* (1935) set this mold, and there are numerous well-executed Hitchcockian flourishes throughout the film, including Turner's extended elevator ride with an assassin that the Master would have been proud to call his own.

Since it's the Seventies out there, Turner does not quite save the day, but he does get to the bottom of it all, uncovering a multi-layered conspiracy hatched by highly placed rogue intelligence agents run amok, operating so secretively that even within the upper echelons of the intelligence community, the right hand was unaware (perhaps willfully) of what the far-right hand was doing.

Initially dismissed as lightweight entertainment, Sydney Pollack's thriller has attained greater stature since the Seventies, and a new 4K UHD + Blu-ray release shows how it exemplifies the paranoid aesthetic of “New Hollywood” films such as *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View*.

of Watergate.” And, indeed, as the production was shooting on the streets outside the headquarters of *The New York Times*, the paper of record was running blockbuster stories about nefarious episodes that would later be detailed in *The Church Committee Report*—the findings of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that exposed the staggering litany of extralegal activities by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), undertaken both at home and abroad. (Just weeks before *Condor*'s release, Senator Frank Church hinted at the stunning revelations to come on NBC's *Meet the Press*.)





In *Three Days of the Condor*, when CIA analyst Joe Turner (Robert Redford) returns to his office after lunch and finds all his fellow employees murdered, he spends the rest of the film on the run from the contract assassins in pursuit of him.

Three Days of the Condor boasts an exceptionally strong screenplay, both in story and dialogue, for which there is plenty of credit to go around. Based on the rather pedestrian potboiler *Six Days of the Condor* (from which only a few vestiges survive—the first hit, the initial kidnapping, and a murderous mailman), Redford saw within it a “seed” worth cultivating. Pollack loved the “marvelous premise” but thought the rest of it “silly”—an assessment shared by Lorenzo Semple Jr., who was assigned the initial adaptation. (I had the opportunity to interview Semple some years ago and he shared his thoughts about the production. Much of the paragraph that follows, and comments elsewhere on Semple’s contributions, derive from that conversation.)

Semple, who also wrote the first draft of *The Parallax View* (1974)—and whose New Hollywood résumé also included *Pretty Poison* (1968), *Papillon* (1973), *The Marriage of a Young Stockbroker* (1971), and *The Drowning Pool* (1975)—stayed fairly close to the initial story, but his serial revisions provided the basic structure for the final film and featured numerous innovations and improvements over the source material. It was Semple who moved the story to New York, added key characters, including Turner’s ill-fated friend Sam (Walter McGinn) and fleshed out the role of Kathy (Dunaway), while streamlining the story, tightening its focus, and tweaking crucial plot points.

The script was then passed on to Pollack’s go-to rewriter, David Rayfiel, who, working closely with the director (and to some extent Redford as well), introduced further major (and crucial) revisions. Rayfiel was responsible for dozens of the film’s razor-sharp lines and numerous high points including the closing, bravura “It would happen this way” prophecy by freelance assassin Joubert (Max von Sydow) to Turner.

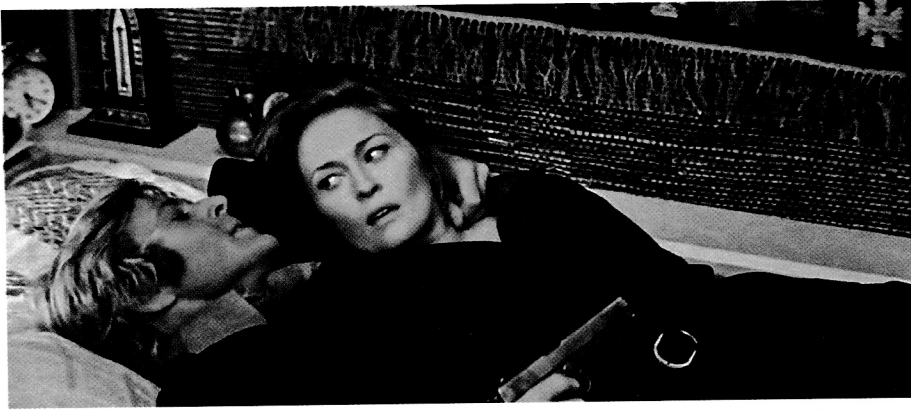
Together, Pollack and Rayfiel enhanced the complexity of the key characters, added the multiple layers of duplicity (a decision that also allowed space to respect the moral dilemmas faced by some of the movie’s nominal heavies), dropped the tired drug-smuggling trope in favor of a more sophisticated (and more prescient) angle, and, most importantly, completely reinvented Joubert. In the book, he is a one-dimensional villain, unrefined and unpleasant, and lacking a single appealing attribute. In the film, by contrast, he is wise, fascinating, philosophical, and even suggests hints of warmth, not common characteristics found in a mercenary killer—and is a testament to von Sydow’s brilliant, subtle, and nuanced performance. (Pollack and von Sydow jointly developed the small touches that further underscored these qualities, such as Joubert’s hobby of handcrafting figurines.) At the time, Semple disagreed with some of these changes; as was also reflected in his first draft of *The Parallax View*, he was averse to multilayered conspiracies. Similar to Robert Towne, however, who reassessed the ending of *Chinatown* (1974) he had initially fought against, Semple told me that he came around to the view that “maybe they were right.” They most certainly were.

Three Days of the Condor, in addition to its exceptional screenplay and impeccable performances, also benefited from the contributions of other participants in the production. Cinematographer Owen Roizman (in the first of several collaborations with Pollack) enhanced the picture with his signature style of gritty Big Apple location work, if with somewhat more polish in this instance (he also shot *The French Connection* [1971], *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* [1974], and *Network* [1976] on those city streets). Dave Grusin’s Grammy-nominated score works very well, and in his commentary track on

the new Kino edition (originally recorded in 2001), Pollack also justly lauds the contributions of production designer Stephen Grimes, with whom he worked on seven films. And not to be overlooked are the contributions of the director himself. Pollack was an actor’s director, and there is not a false note of performance in the picture; in addition, although it is markedly unflashy for what is nominally an action thriller, *Condor*, pensive and unhurried, especially by contemporary standards, is nevertheless briskly paced and tightly structured.

This somewhat hidden hand of the director also gestures at an enigmatic attribute of *Three Days of the Condor*. Although it is clearly a Seventies film, characterized by New Hollywood sensibilities—a thoughtful, morally ambiguous, downbeat story with something to say—it also has many of the qualities of a more traditional, studio-era production. This reflects the fact that both Pollack (a director who preferred to work with movie stars) and Redford (a major Hollywood movie star) were both to some extent hybrids. They were each eager to explore ambitious, challenging material, but neither would be well described as fitting the Altman-Scorsese mold of choosing projects with an utter disregard for their commercial viability.

Thus, on the one hand, *Condor* is unmistakably of the New Hollywood—as noted, both Pollack and Redford stressed the importance of reimagining Joubert, transforming him from a simplistic mustache-twirling villain into a complex and even charismatic character. As Pollack explained in a 1975 *Film Comment* interview, “We began to construct a man whose amorality was more solvent than the CIA morality.” The movie also takes the time—and, again, this was intentional, important, and an investment in moral ambiguity—for characters like CIA Deputy Director Higgins (Cliff



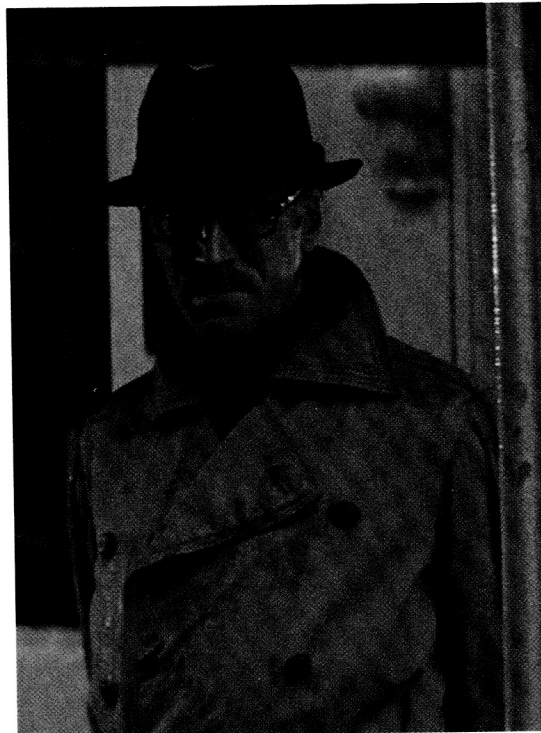
Looking for a place to hide, Turner kidnaps photographer Kathy Hale (Faye Dunaway) and holds her at gunpoint in her apartment. Initially terrified, she eventually becomes his ally.

Robertson) and the world-weary Director Mr. Wabash (John Houseman), whose values and behavior the film clearly abhors, to express, with conviction and even some persuasiveness, their own views. Moreover, it is a movie in which the real human costs are high, star-crossed lovers separate, and it concludes not in triumph but with an open ending that leaves its hero looking back over his shoulder, uncertain—all-too-aware that he can “take a walk,” but “how far can you go?”

At the same time, *Condor* retains elements of classical Hollywood storytelling. Although the period-perfect location work is outstanding, the camera is generally unobtrusive, and the frame compositions are measured and precise. Likewise, the filmmakers chose to shave down some of the initial narrative’s coarser elements in a very Old-School way. To take one example, in the movie, Turner lies low at the Guggenheim Museum; in the novel, he seeks refuge (as one likely would) on the margins of society—one such safe space was the dilapidated lair of a junkie prostitute. Most Old Hollywood of all is the credulity-risking only-at-the-movies romance that becomes an essential element of the film. (These latter choices sound more Pollack/Redford than, say, Lumet/Pacino, but in fact it was Semple who shed the grittier episodes, and, most surprisingly, who expanded Turner’s romance with Kathy.)

Some contemporary viewers will be quick to take offense at this edgy, transgressive narrative shortcut. But it is arguably sustainable—in a Hollywood movie—buttressed by Redford’s obvious humanity, what the audience knows about him, an attentiveness to the complexities of Kathy’s character (and her own problems), and the momentum of the increasingly thoughtful exchanges over several scenes that establish some emotional intimacy between them. Moreover, the movie is well aware of the stakes on the table. The specter of sexual coercion is explicitly evoked by Kathy early in the characters’ initial confrontation, punctuated by Dunaway’s best line in the film—“The night is young.”

Still, and despite the fact that the love scene is handled with sensitivity and tact, Pollack was well aware of the risks of taking this fraught (and far-fetched) step, which he saw as “one of the most difficult problems” in crafting the film. But the director saw the establishment of this intimate relationship (accelerated by pressures of having to develop characters within a two-hour movie that unfolds across three days), as essential to what he was trying to say. For Pollack, *Condor* was ultimately not about spies, but, as he explained in an 1976 *Jump Cut* interview with Patrick McGilligan, he wanted to make a picture about “trust, suspicion and paranoia,” and how destructive the erosion of interpersonal trust can be. Thus, the motivation for the romance—and its essential role in the movie’s subtext—has less to do with requisite lovemaking and much more about the way Kathy emerges as Turner’s essential ally.



In *Three Days of the Condor*, Max von Sydow portrays Joubert, the thinking man’s assassin.

This provides an essential payoff that would be hard to otherwise orchestrate. Very early in the narrative, in a pointed conversation with his superior, Turner describes himself as a man who “actually trusts a few people.” Yet, by the end of the film—even if only for one desperate moment—he is so overtaken by paranoia that, as Pollack put it, “he distrusts his lover” who had risked everything for him. From the director’s perspective, *Three Days of the Condor* was ultimately about “how destructive suspicion really is, because it’s the opposite of trust which is the basis of society and all relationships.” This was consequential, not only at the interpersonal level but more generally. The (understandable) paranoia of the Watergate Era—when, among other things, almost everybody in the Nixon administration was spying on one another—fostered an environment in which “every institution I grew up believing sacrosanct is now beginning to crumble.” Pollack and Roizman deftly underscore this theme by playing another Hitchcockian card—using iconic landmarks and national monuments as a backdrop for much of the action, such as the murder for hire negotiated in the shadow of the Lincoln Memorial.

Remarkably, for a spy thriller with a body count that hits double digits (and all the casualties are real characters we know, not cartoon cannon fodder), *Three Days of the Condor* hurtles inexorably, in its final twenty-plus minutes, to four climactic conversations. In a movie that opens with a massacre executed via silencer-equipped submachine guns, the “action” in the film’s concluding passages is limited to a single shot fired from a small handgun. But these riveting exchanges were, indeed, what the movie was all about, and their eloquence, savvy, and sophistication are what keeps *Condor* evergreen—these discussions and deliberations could be rehearsed today, without any loss of depth or pressing relevance.

Those four scenes are, individually and collectively, exemplars of everything that the New Hollywood aspired to be. Such things don’t just happen (and they were all conjured for the film). And they are, again, collaborative efforts, a synergy of superlative writing, performance, direction, and cinematography (the latter is not to be underestimated; the lighting choices, drawing on distinct palettes, enhance the dramatic ambiance of each of these encounters).

Three Days of the Condor signals the turn toward its conclusion with an expressionistic, quiet exchange in a smoke-filled Hoboken Train Station—a payoff that the film had been setting up from the start, as the culmination of disorienting paranoia. “Do you understand what I am saying?” Turner asks Kathy, somewhat obliquely, suggesting



Turner arranges to meet CIA Deputy Director Higgins (Cliff Robertson) in public, where both men exchange equally persuasive arguments, leaving Turner to a decidedly uncertain future.

that she might betray him, or was even part of a larger conspiracy. “Are you going straight to Vermont?” Her reaction of horror and incredulity, expressed mostly in Dunaway’s eyes and an astonished murmur, bring him back to reality. As Pollack explained, the trajectories of these two characters have crossed; the one who trusted has become suspicious; the other, who was inherently closed and wary, learned to trust.

Condor then cuts to a scene of actual treachery—another conversation, this time at CIA Headquarters, the depths of which are almost impossible to grasp on a first viewing. The crucial, cryptic line, “He’s being held at New York Center,” can slip by without notice. Who is being held at New York Center? Why is he being held there? That is the unspoken subtext of the somber, circuitous repartee between the Director (Houseman) and midlevel company man (Robertson). “Why aren’t you further along, Mr. Higgins?” Wabash asks, as, with casual precision, he guides Higgins toward career advancement (even though he knows of better, delivering the line, as only Houseman could, about missing “that kind of clarity” in comparing the compromised 1970s with the noble struggle against fascism in the 1940s). “There’s nothing in the way of your doing this, is there?” he asks deliberately, of the unstated assignment, which the company will not take responsibility for, and which involves an unthinkable betrayal (and a capital crime).

The location then shifts again, as the narrative pauses for a modest expository interregnum. The audience does want to know, after all, who did what, and why. This tidying up is also tight and smartly done, and again the contract killer Joubert soars—he virtually speaks in prose poetry: “I don’t interest myself in why, I think more often in terms of when, sometimes where, always how much,” are among his stellar lines here. But, ultimately, this plot-driven business is a way station on the road to the greatest passage in the movie: the final exchange between *Condor* and Joubert. In this extraordinary scene, Joubert, perhaps the film’s most complex and charismatic character, offers sage advice to the man he had spent

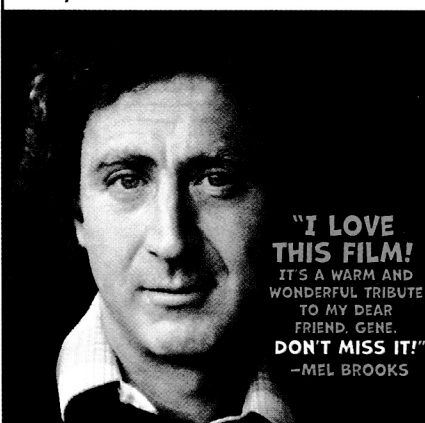
the past few days trying to kill—and who he had grown to admire. Of Turner’s plan to return to New York, Joubert explains, “You have not much future there,” and, again, with more poetry than prose (enhanced by von Sydow’s subtle shortness of breath reflecting the winter chill in the air), describes the fate that awaits him there, in that spellbinding “It would happen this way” soliloquy.

Back in New York, Joubert’s forewarning is proven correct, but *Condor*, armed with that knowledge, is, for the moment at least, a step ahead of the game. There is no easy victory on hand, however. In the movie’s final moments, Higgins is given space to express his views, and forcefully, not in caricature. Indeed, some viewers have found his speech too strong, and are unsettled by the fact that Turner’s response, which seizes the moral high ground, is not definitive. But befitting a Seventies sensibility, Redford thought it important to “always try to give the other side an argument that made sense.” Pollack similarly stressed the emphasis they placed on giving Higgins’s point of view “some teeth.” And so, *Three Days of the Condor* ends not in triumph, but with Turner slipping away into an uncertain future.

In addition to the director’s feature-length commentary, the Kino Lorber disc includes a twenty-five-minute featurette on the film from 2003, an hour-long documentary about Pollack from 2004, and a new commentary track by film historians Steve Mitchell and Nathaniel Thompson, which is agreeable and informative, but wall-to-wall, and stays close to the surface, most commonly calling out actors and locations and sharing enthusiasm over favorite moments. Their passion is more than understandable, however, as revisiting *Three Days of the Condor* confirms its reputation as one of the great films of the Seventies, and which, along with *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View*, comprise the holy trinity of the paranoid thrillers of that extraordinary decade. ■

The 4K UHD + Blu-ray of *Three Days of the Condor* is distributed by Kino Lorber, www.kinolorber.com.

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