

**STATES OF DANGER AND DECEIT: EUROPEAN POLITICAL THRILLERS IN THE
1970S**

FILM NOTES: THE DAY OF THE JACKAL

In some respects, Fred Zinnemann's adaptation of Frederick Forsyth's novel *The Day of the Jackal* might look out of place in the States of Danger and Deceit season. Here is a film by a celebrated Hollywood director of the studio era towards the end of his career. Hollywood is not known for political intrigue per se outside the machinations of the US political system or the adventures of US policy overseas and it's true that Zinnemann himself saw the film as an 'entertainment' first. Yet, in many different ways the film does fit in with the debates that underpin most of the films in the season and Zinnemann is undoubtedly disguising his own interests in what might be described as 'political issues'.

The Day of the Jackal was Forsyth's first novel, written quickly and based on his experiences working for Reuters in the early 1960s. The context for the film's narrative is similar to several of the other films in the season. An organisation sets out to assassinate the Head of State for overt ideological reasons and the infrastructure of intelligence and all forms of military and police security forces are detailed to find the assassin(s) and prevent the attack. The differences are that the events unfold in 1962-3 and that the organisation planning the attack is the OAS – *Organisation armée secrète*, the military organisation which claimed to be betrayed by the French withdrawal from Algeria when the colony achieved independence. The timing is not really important since the film has relatively few visible markers of the actual date and many audiences no doubt assumed it was set just a few years earlier (Charles de Gaulle, the target for the assassination, died in 1970). The OAS is a different form of combatant in the sense that in most of the other films the conflict is between either a fascist state and left-wing guerrillas (e.g. in the Costa-Gavras films) or fascist groups attacking a centrist or at least potentially democratic state as in the Spanish films and variations thereon. The OAS is not necessarily fascist as such but it is attacking de Gaulle's right-wing government. There is no sign of the various European left groups as such.

The OAS is indirectly involved in two of the other films in the season. In Francesco Rosi's film *The Mattei Affair* about the mysterious death of the head of the Italian oil company ENI in 1962, the OAS is one of the possible suspects for the placing of a bomb on his plane – on the grounds that they didn't approve of the aid/support he gave to the newly independent state of Algeria. In the same vein, Costa-Gavras was concerned about possible attacks on cinemas by OAS members during screenings of *Z* which was made as a French co-production with Algeria and was shot mainly on location in that country.

The narrative of *The Day of the Jackal* corresponds to other films such as *Z* and *State of Siege* in the way it shows the police and paramilitary forces searching for the potential assassin and the networks that support him/her. Again, *The Day of the Jackal* is different in that when an assassin is contracted outside France, the authorities have no immediate purchase on who might be selected – they have no useful network of performers or police records that might help to pin down the assassin.

At this point it is important to note that though Zinnemann was a distinguished director in Hollywood, he was still European by birth and did not arrive in the US until he was 22. His films from the 1950s onwards were often made in Europe and *The Day of the Jackal* is a genuine British-French co-production. The cast features British actors well known from British and ‘international’ (i.e. Hollywood) productions, some of them playing French characters. But well-known French actors also feature, including Michel Lonsdale as the French policeman who becomes the main character trying to catch the ‘Jackal’. This character, ‘Lebel’, is familiar from the French crime thriller, known as the *polar* – a genre which you might have experienced in the recent Jean-Pierre Melville season at HOME. He also corresponds to Martin Beck in the Swedish ‘police procedural’ *Man on the Roof* in the States of Danger and Deceit season.

The film scholar Neil Sinyard, whose interesting presentation can be found on Arrow’s Blu-ray of *The Day of the Jackal*, also points out that, despite Zinnemann’s protests to the contrary, his films were often ‘political’ in the personal sense – that is, they feature one man or woman who decides, for whatever reason, to take on ‘the system’. Mostly these individuals (Montgomery Clift in *Here to Eternity*, Audrey Hepburn in *The Nun’s Story*, Gregory Peck in *Behold a Pale Horse* etc.) are generally likeable and easy to identify with. Zinnemann’s task with the Jackal is to present us with a paid killer but then to make us follow his actions with a kind of grim fascination.

- Roy Stafford, Freelance Film Educator

States of Danger and Deceit: European Political Thrillers in the 1970s is curated by Andy Willis, Professor of Film Studies at the University of Salford and Senior Visiting Curator: Film at HOME, produced by Rachel Hayward, HOME’s Film Programme Manager, and coordinated by Jessie Gibbs, HOME Film Team.

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