

**THE ROLE OF THE VIEWER IN FRED ZINNEMANN'S
*THE DAY OF THE JACKAL***

**O PAPEL DO ESPECTADOR EM *O DIA DO CHACAL* DE
FRED ZINNEMANN**

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ABSTRACT

Contradicting the notion that *The Day of the Jackal* is nothing but a skillfully produced and ultimately conventional film, this article argues that it gains relevance by presenting formal and thematic features that make demands on the viewer in terms of narration which are not usually made by the classical Hollywood film, a category it can be inserted in. This unusual narrative structure favors an identification of the viewer with the ideology that it implicitly supports.

Key words: classical Hollywood film; role of the viewer; identification

Although Fred Zinnemann's feature films have been received with praise by critics and audience alike – *High Noon* (1952), *From Here to Eternity* (1953), and *A Man for All Seasons* (1966) have been very popu-

lar and deserved lots of prizes and favorable reviews – they have not always been highly regarded in the academic circles, if they have been regarded at all. The reason for this negative academic reception and indifference may stem, in Arthur Nolletti Jr's view, from the fact that during the heyday of auteurist criticism, Fred Zinnemann was “dismissed as an impersonal filmmaker” (136). Andrew Sarris, one of the most influential American critics and one of the first to deny Zinnemann the status of an auteur, would later reconsider his position and include Zinnemann in the group of directors whose films “seem to fit into an *objet d'art* category (...), directors who are more concerned with cultivating the unique qualities of each individual work rather than projecting their own personalities. (...) The *Politique des Auteurs* has traditionally underestimated the *objet d'art* directors because of the auteurist emphasis on the stylistic unconscious”.¹

The film that I am going to analyze in this article – *The Day of the Jackal* (1973) – has also received respectful but not always enthusiastic reviews, which have nevertheless emphasized its professional finish and its status as a compelling thriller in the classical Hollywood format. Halliwell saw it as “an incisive, observant and professional piece of work based on a rather clinical bestseller. Lack of a channel for sympathy, plus language confusion, are its main drawbacks” (199). Stanley Kauffmann said: “Before *Jackal* is five minutes old, you know it's just going to be told professionally, with no flavour and no zest” (Halliwell 199). To Michael Billington, from the *Illustrated London News*, the film was “all plot, with scarcely a character in sight” (Halliwell 199). Basil Wright considered it “a rare lesson in filmmaking in the good old grand manner” (Halliwell 199). David Shipman said, in *The Story of Cinema*:

The Day of the Jackal (1973) and *Julia* (1979) showed that Zinnemann had moved with the times. His former academic style had given way to one more elliptical but not otherwise influenced by current European fashions; with the exception of Huston, Zinnemann was the only one of his contemporaries to realise that modern audiences like to draw their own conclusions. (879)

The Day of the Jackal describes, with painstaking details, the

¹ Quoted by Nolletti (136) in Sarris, Andrew. “Johnny, We Finally Knew Ye.” *Reflections in the Male Eye: John Huston and the American Experience*. Ed. Gaylyn Studlar and David Desser. Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993. 273-76. p. 274.

preparation of the assassination of General Charles de Gaulle by a contract killer, and the equally painstakingly detailed investigation by the French authorities of the identity and plans of the killer. The purpose of my essay is to argue that, in spite of conforming to most of the tenets of classical Hollywood cinema, *The Day of the Jackal* presents a calculated form of narration that makes demands on the viewer, in terms of narrative construction, which are not usually made by this type of cinema, and which are related to formal and thematic aspects of the film, thus allowing for the reading I propose. I also argue that the apparent shallowness of its characterizations is also related to these same aspects in such a way that it is the very fact that the viewer does not have a “channel for sympathy”, as Halliwell puts it, that enables the sort of reading that I am proposing here.

It goes without saying that Zinnemann’s films do not intend to break new grounds in terms of narrative structure. All of them fit into the category defined by David Bordwell as “classical Hollywood cinema”, which “presents psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals” (*Narration* 157). That makes the character the main causal agency in the classic film, a sort of film which usually presents an initial state of affairs that is disrupted and must be brought back to order – in *The Day of the Jackal* order is disturbed when there is an attempt to assassinate de Gaulle, and is only restored when the authorities identify the Jackal and prevent a new attempt. The main characteristic of the canonical sort of narration is causality, which involves spatial configurations – the Jackal buys hairdye in a drugstore – and compositional necessities – the hairdye will prove to have a significant function, in terms of plot, in a later sequence. Deadlines are a very common device in canonical films – the Jackal must be identified before de Gaulle is murdered –, and there are usually two plot lines, one related to heterosexual romance and the other involving a mission, work, or quest (*Narration* 157). In the case of *The Jackal* there is only the second. In terms of the film’s manipulation of space, Bordwell states that “classical omnipresence makes the cognitive schema we call “the camera” into an *ideal* invisible observer, freed from the contingencies of space and time but discreetly confining itself to codified patterns for the sake of story intelligibility” (*Narration* 161). Thus a style that does not call attention to itself – nothing must interfere with the development of the fabula –

will consist of match editing (movement begun in a shot will continue in the next), eyeline match (a character looks down and the next shot shows a character looking up), and the 180° rule (when there is a change from one shot to another in the same scene, the camera should stay on the same side of the previous shot in order to guarantee left-right spatial relations) (*Film Art* 477-482). These features can be found in *The Day of the Jackal*.

Despite its overall conformity to classical narrative, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that *The Day of the Jackal* does not fully comply with the classical format, due mainly to its elliptical nature and to its manipulation of sound and image. For example, soon after the failure of de Gaulle's assassination by the members of the OAS (Organisation de l'Armée Secrète) – the right-wing organization that resented the success of the movement for the independence of Algeria –, we are shown a breathtaking view of the Alps as a narrator tells us that the plotters have been executed, and that the chief of operations of the OAS, Colonel Rodin, is hiding somewhere in Austria. A zoom-out reveals a cottage, and after a cut we have the shot of a radio, as the voice-over – now recognized as the voice of a news reporter – reports that the OAS is finished once and for all. Another zoom-out reveals Rodin, who is with three other members of the OAS listening to the radio that is broadcasting the news we mistakenly supposed was non-diegetic information. The men listening to the news are the men being talked about. The viewer has, thus, to reformulate his/her hypothesis – it is not voice-over after all – and reconstruct the narrative in a more elaborate way than in a typically Hollywood film, which would probably present the facts in chronological order – first the scenery, then the cottage, then the men listening to the news on the radio. The surprising element of the sound that does not match the image would not be there.

Likewise, at the end of the film, on August 24, the eve of de Gaulle's public appearance, the Minister calls Commissioner Lebel and tells him that the Jackal could not be found. And he begins a description of what the ceremony would be like the following day. As he describes the proceedings – the lighting of the sacred flame, the mass, the presentation of the liberation medals to veterans of the resistance, and all the security measures – the camera shows the sun rising behind the Basilique du Sacré Coeur, the houses with armed policemen on the rooftops, the streets where

the parade will take place, and suddenly the voice-off² stops, the action continues, and we know that what we see is no longer the Minister's words in flashforward, but the film's narrative of the events on the following day, August 25.

Contradicting the belief that, unlike Hitchcock, Hawks, and Ford, Zinnemann was not an *auteur*, it is possible to identify common traits in most of his films, not only thematically but also stylistically. The subdued colors, abundance of close-up shots, and slow tempo of *The Nun's Story*, *A Man For All Seasons*, *Julia*, and *The Day of the Jackal*, for example, seem to be appropriate choices for films that elegantly deal with dignified characters who are put to a strain, whether morally, psychologically, or physically.

In *The Nun's Story*, Sister Luke must either bend under the rigid demands of the Catholic order to which she is committed or follow her natural tendency to rational thinking and the use of her sense of initiative. The symmetrical disposition of the nuns, the doubt and anguish expressed in tiny facial movements of Sister Luke in close-up, and the semi-documentary look of the Congo scenes, make up a dignified canvas where the battle between obedience to the order and free will takes place.

Thomas More, in *A Man For All Seasons*, must not compromise, even under pain of losing his own life. Again, the stylistic choice of closed shots, soft colors, and symmetrical compositions, reinforce the seriousness and intensity of More's decision to remain true to himself.

In *Julia*, Hellmann's reminiscences of her friendship with the character the film is named after include the one event involving social commitment – this time real commitment, not the verbal diatribes of her plays of social concern – that is deserving of the admiration of the uncompromising Julia. The rigor here is in the dark attires of the characters, in the serene elegance of the buildings of Vienna and Oxford, and in the fragmented narrative, that Stephen Prince describes – in “‘Do You Understand?’ History and Memory in *Julia* (1977)” (Nolletti 193) – as a “pentimento³ structure”, due to the various layers of memory that the film displays, like the various layers that sometimes appear in a painting, showing that the artist “repented”, changed his/her mind, and painted a

² It is voice-off and not voice-over, because its source is diegetical – the events are being recounted by the Minister.

³ “Pentimento” is the title of Lillian Hellmann's autobiography.

new scene on top of the scene already painted.

The strain that the characters in *Day of the Jackal* have to undergo are related to physical work – in the sense of continuous stressing work – and intellectual effort. Although the film is often referred to as a political thriller – French politics is involved in its plot: the activities of the OAS, the liberation of Algeria, a plot to assassinate the president – in my opinion these issues, which are related to clearly political events, are secondary in the film. They are not what the film is about. That, however, does not mean that the film does not act upon the spectator on the political level. On the contrary, as I will try to show later, its very structure favors a reading in which politics plays an important part.

The film portrays some individuals' attempts to execute a task in the best possible way, an effort which demands extreme care and attention to detail⁴. And that concern does not only refer to the strategies developed by the Jackal to assassinate de Gaulle. It also refers to the job undertaken by the commissioner in charge of the investigation, Lebel, who has to find out the identity of the killer and when he intends to attack. The work of both characters is tiresome – they are often seen working by a lampshade, going to bed late, rubbing their eyes, obsessively dedicated to the details of their tasks – and their activities demand precise planning.

The film follows the Jackal's comings and goings closely, as in the following sequences: he reads all the information he can find about de Gaulle, goes to a cemetery and finds the grave of Paul Oliver Duggan, born in 1929 and deceased in 1931, looks for the birth certificate of the child, forges documents and addresses them to the passport office. The Jackal then goes to the airport where, with binoculars, he watches the passengers get off a plane. He follows a passenger wearing heavy glasses. The passenger is then seen in the middle of the crowd of the airport followed by the Jackal from a distance. When the stranger leaves his passport in the side pocket of his handbag, the Jackal approaches in the background, gets near and ultimately takes the passport. Close-up of the passport in his hands. He looks at himself in the mirror of his bathroom and then there is a cut to a store where he buys hairdye, which will be used much later when he pretends he is the Danish professor from whom

⁴ As Claudia Sternberg states in "Real-Life References in Four Fred Zinnemann's Films", the French version did not have the prologue explaining OAS's frustrated plan to assassinate de Gaulle (Nolletti 212), which attests to the fact that the focus of the film is elsewhere.

he stole the passport.

Likewise, all the proceedings conducted by Claude Lebel, the best detective of the French police force, are described with utmost care to detail. He dedicates all his time and energy to the task that was assigned to him – “I’ve been given a job, so I’ll just have to do it”, he says to his assistant Caron. He moves to his office and asks for a bed, sheets, shaving things, coffee, and immediately contacts the heads of the homicide divisions of Holland, Belgium, Italy, West Germany, South Africa, the FBI, and the Scotland Yard. In a telling shot he is shown against a wall full of clocks showing the time in lots of different countries. There is then a cut to his face as he looks at the clocks and yawns. Lebel manages to get the Prime Minister of England involved in the search. The British police finally arrive at the name of Charles Harold Calthrop, who had been involved in the death of Trujillo in Dominica. As he is probably travelling on a false passport, they look for applications for passports in the last three months and check the names with death certificates. They find 8,041 applications, but finally locate Paul Oliver Duggan. At this point, Lebel is shown sitting at his desk, with an exhausted expression on his face, having fruit salt, surrounded by documents, a lit lamp signaling that it is night time. When the Jackal disguises as a Danish teacher and goes to Paris, all the hotels in the city are checked, but he is not found. After the Danish consulate checks stolen passports, the man whose passport was stolen by the Jackal is found, but the killer seems to have vanished into thin air.

These detailed descriptions of the Jackal’s and Lebel’s precise work take most of the running time of the film and are followed with the utmost interest – no reviewer has complained of the pace of the film, which was never said to bog down. My argument is that it is the obsessive professionalism of the characters that captivates the viewer, for their dedication to their jobs makes the planning of the assassination and the investigation a true arm-wrestling. Both protagonists are skilled and resourceful. The elegance and constraint of Lebel’s attitude match the Jackal’s coolness and efficiency – his murders are silent, bloodless, and often offscreen. Before the Jackal kills the photographer in Genoa, who would provide his French papers, we see both men laughing at a joke. The Jackal then suddenly punches the photographer in the stomach, and as he bends down in pain and awe, he is murdered with a deadly blow, and we hear a muffled cry as he falls to the ground. At this moment, all

we see is the Jackal's face. Only in the next shot will we see the dead man on the floor. The murder of Colette de Montpellier takes place almost imperceptibly – the Jackal and Colette begin to make love and then he quietly kills her. The gay character he met in a sauna in Paris and in whose apartment he now lives is murdered offscreen, in the kitchen, as the camera in the living room frames the kitchen door and the television screen that is broadcasting news on the killer. When the Jackal, disguised as a crippled veteran, asks the concierge of the building he chose as the place where he will carry on the assassination plan to fetch him a glass of water, he kills her with a fatal blow when she turns her back to him. The only “murder” that we witness is the smashing by a bullet of the melon which the Jackal bought and on which he painted eyes, a nose, a mouth, and a mark on the ‘forehead’. It stands for de Gaulle's head as the killer tests his recently acquired weapon. It is one of the few moments of explicit violence in the film⁵, when the melon, in the foreground, is blown, its red inside projecting in all directions.

Both Lebel and the Jackal, therefore, show the determination of individuals who seriously stick to what they have to do, independently of moral values. The film does not apparently take a Manichaeistic position, for it shows both Lebel and the Jackal as ultimate professionals, who do their jobs to serve other people's beliefs. In this sense, they do not exist as real people: as soon as Lebel locates the man, he is politely but coldly sent away; the Jackal does not even have an identity of his own – he remains the characters he impersonates, his true identity being completely ignored. Neither character is doing his best in order to be faithful to a political position related to the president's attitude of supporting Algeria's independence. Lebel is doing his job because it is his duty and it is made clear that he cannot fail; the Jackal is doing his because of the large amount of money he is being paid. Their causes are their own selves. But, as I will later argue, the way they are portrayed in the film is related to an ideological position held by the implied author of the film, which will place one

⁵ Another moment of violence takes place when Wolenski is being tortured, but even then, when the voltage of the electric shocks is increased in order to make him reveal the name of the contract killer, we are spared his screams. There is a cut to a man using a headphone, and we hear Wolenski's screams on the tape that was recorded during the questioning session. We are not shown the gory scene, but only the government people coldly and professionally checking and double-checking the tape and the transcription.

character on the side of the “good” and the other on the side of “evil”.

The same attitude of professionalism displayed by Lebel and the Jackal can be detected in other minor – but relevant and well drawn – characters of the film. Gozzi, the gunsmith, for example, behaves like a doctor who uses a soft tone of voice and demands precise information from the patient: “Over what range will you fire?”, “Will the gentleman be moving?”, “Will you go for a head shot or a chest shot?”. These details are discussed by the two men as they drink Campari, the gunsmith wearing a black band around his arm as a sign of mourning for a loved one. He says that the mercury type of bullet is better, for it makes the job cleaner. Later in the film, when the Jackal begins to assemble the parts of the gun, the gunsmith acts as a scrub nurse in a surgery, handing him the parts as the Jackal names them.

Denise, who is an OAS agent, does not hesitate in meeting and dating an official of the Elysée Palace, acting as a Mata Hari, although she has recently lost her fiancé. The affection she felt for him is made clear in her refusal to burn his incriminating photograph in uniform – he must have been an OAS agent too – and the love letters he wrote her. It is touching to see the sorrow on her face when the letters and the photograph are destroyed by another agent and friend for the sake of safety. But as she manages to meet the official, she incorporates her role and is shown wearing a transparent negligee, waiting for him after work, eager to get information on the proceedings of the investigation.

Another minor character who displays determination is Victor Wolenski, a foreign legionnaire, also a collaborator of OAS. He is tortured and dies without giving precise information on the assassin’s plan – he only mumbles the assassin’s codename before dying. And there is Colonel Rolland, who checks the tape with the recording of Wolenski’s questioning. The colonel works night and day, listening to the tape and comparing it with the transcription. When he finally comes to a name – Jackal – it is 4:30 in the morning.

In a first viewing of *The Day of the Jackal* the spectator may wonder, before the film is over, why Zinnemann took the trouble to go into so many details as to the frustrated attempt of murdering de Gaulle. What may initially seem an exaggerated concern with etic information, that is, information related to the real events that took place, will later become meaningful when related to the characters of the film. What Zinnemann

does, when he gives information on the exact time that events happened – clocks abound in the film –, on names, dates, minute descriptions of the parts of a gun, and the many different places the characters find themselves in, can be related to what the two main characters of the film do. For Zinnemann carries on a perfectly organized, thought out narrative that, like the plans of the Jackal and the investigative procedures of the commissioner, works like a well-oiled mechanism, like the clocks that one cannot fail to notice in the film⁶. The meticulous care with which the characters go about their businesses matches the care with which the film is constructed, brick added to brick, information added to information so that, at the end, what one has is a patchwork that impresses, not for the originality of the story it tells, but for its sheer organizational beauty.

From this perspective, the character of the commissioner and the character of the contract killer are not shallow, as I argued in the beginning of this article. The two men are parts of a machine, they function the way they are programmed to function. They may have their personal goals, their own private lives, but what is relevant to the film is what is directly related to the work both characters perform. Lebel's wife appears in the film, but her function is to show how Lebel's family life becomes second place once the investigation has begun. Lebel is seen for the first time inside a cage, looking after his pigeons. He leaves that cage only to be caught in another, for he is restricted to small quarters where he works practically day and night.

We learn enough about the characters to understand the role they play in the plot. In spite of the Jackal's resourcefulness, however, he is a difficult character to identify with. We may get involved with his technique – which is first class – but not with his personality, which is elusive. He is cold, detached, and uses people to attain his own goals: in these moments he can look charming, thoughtful, persuasive. We know it is a role he is playing, which does not prevent us from getting shocked when he coldly murders – in a clean, silent, professional way – characters he seemed to care about: Colette; the gay man he meets in Paris. This shock comes because only in retrospect do we learn that the attachment with Colette is not sincere, and that he did not have any consideration for the gay man.

⁶ In the sequence of the ceremony celebrating the Liberation Day, the 25th of August, the constant insertion of clocks gives a chronological account of the events of the day.

I have stated that the film is not clearly Manichaeistic, for it does not dwell on the question of who is right and who is wrong, but apparently only shows the procedures of both the assassination plan and the investigation. There is, however, a formal aspect that must be taken into consideration in relation to this issue. What the film's probing camera does – record documents, dates, hours, minute gestures – parallels what Commissioner Lebel does, that is, the film has an investigative nature. The film structure, thus, can be identified with the characterization of Lebel, the common family man, responsible, dedicated to his work and fond of pigeons, rather than with the Jackal, who, in spite of his skills and charm, displays coldness and disrespect for human life. And at the end of the film, it is Lebel who kills the Jackal, in a sensational scene, in which the contract killer's body is thrown against a wall by the violence of the gunshots. It is the way the film is constructed, mirroring Lebel's procedures, that evinces the fact that it eventually takes a stand, that it is not a film void of ideological overtones.

Indeed, in a film that is apparently academic in style, an elliptical investigative approach stands for a progressive attitude. After all, our major identification is with Lebel, who is portrayed as a humane individual – it is worth remembering that he is first seen looking after his pigeons – who is part of a structure that wants to protect de Gaulle, a national and international symbol of the resistance to the advance of Nazism and a defender of a progressive cause, namely the liberation of Algeria. The spontaneity of this character, with whom we identify, is reflected in the way he is dressed – loose tie knots, white shirts with rolled up sleeves, disheveled hair. The Jackal, on the other hand, with his dandy clothes, silk scarves, perfectly tidy hair, and shiny sports cars, stands for the maintenance of the status quo, and is ultimately reactionary. The film, thus, clearly takes a political position when it mimicks, in its discourse, the procedures of Commissioner Lebel.

In short, it is possible to say that the characters of the film develop their tasks little by little, and that the film itself is constructed in the same way, mainly mimicking the inquiry developed by Lebel. What remains to be analyzed is the way the viewer reads the film. He/she does not simply follow a cause-effect chain of events. Most of the time the viewer is asked to keep an uncommon amount of information in store for later use, when enough elements are given, and this structure is maintained throughout

the film. The Jackal meets Colette in a hotel lobby, makes passes on her, seduces her, and ultimately sleeps with her. Later, when he is being chased by the police, he pays a visit to her in her mansion, sleeps with her again, and we are led to believe he is simply looking for a place to hide. The same night he murders her, dyes his hair – now the sequence in which he bought the bottle of hairdye makes sense – in order to look like the Danish professor whose passport he stole – now the airport sequence makes sense – and runs away in her car. In another section of the film, the Jackal looks at various buildings in downtown Paris. He then sits on a bench next to the doorway of one of the buildings, and overhears a conversation between a postman and the concierge of the building, who is saying that all the tenants are on holiday. The scene does not seem to be pertinent to the story. When the woman leaves the place, the Jackal enters the building, takes the key of one of the apartments and copies it. We then know that he has chosen the apartment from which he will commit the murder. His patient wait for the talkative concierge to leave so that he could sneak into the building now makes sense. There is a sequence in which we see the Jackal wandering in a bazaar in Paris. He tries on a cap, buys it, buys a loose overcoat and three medals tied to a ribbon. On the day of de Gaule's public appearance – the day the contract killer will carry out his plan – we see him sporting the cap, the coat, and the medals when he disguises as a crippled war veteran – his left leg is bent and he walks on crutches – in order to more easily enter the building and go to the apartment from which he will shoot the president. All these examples show scenes or sequences that can only be inserted in the storyline in retrospect. Most classical films show elements that only in retrospect will fit the storyline, but in *The Day of the Jackal*, this happens with such a frequency and is so tightly related to the structure of the film, that it acquires a much greater relevance in terms of the overall meaning of the film.

The painstaking construction of the story by the viewer, then, is a result of the formal construction of the film, which adds information to information in an elliptical way, and is also related to the behavior of the main characters, mainly Lebel, who has to accomplish his task by connecting pieces of apparently unrelated events. And as Lebel is ultimately successful, and is the character we have a stronger identification with, the motif of the conscientious individual who does not compromise is highlighted in the same way it is in the other Zinnemann films mentioned

above – *The Nun's Story*, *A Man For All Seasons*, and *Julia*. The identification of the viewer with Lebel is possible due to the fact that he is portrayed as a piece in a chess game, with a very definite role to play, a role that coincides with that of the viewer, who is thus invited to share the progressive position of the film. That is why I do not agree with the view that the spectator does not have a “channel for sympathy”. It may be so if we expect to find in the film fully rounded characters, with psychological nuances and contradictions that make them look like some people we know. Seductive as these characters might be, it is likely that they would, however, feel much more comfortable in another movie, where they would perhaps function marvelously. The apparently distant and superficially drawn characters Lebel and the Jackal, however, are perfectly inserted in the world portrayed in *The Day of the Jackal*. Their precise characterizations are in tune with this elegant, precise, and ultimately satisfying thriller.

Recebido para publicação em 26/09/2002.

Aceito para publicação em 20/10/2002.

RESUMO

Contrariando a noção de que *O Dia do Chacal* não passa de um filme bastante convencional e habilmente produzido, este artigo argumenta que ele ganha relevância ao apresentar aspectos formais e temáticos que exigem respostas do espectador em termos de narrativa que não são usualmente feitas pelo filme clássico hollywoodiano, categoria na qual ele pode ser inserido. Sua estrutura narrativa incomum possibilita uma identificação do espectador com a ideologia que ele implicitamente apresenta.

Palavras-chave: filme clássico hollywoodiano; papel do espectador; identificação

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