“To me he’s a figure at Algiers airport: a man who was thin then, wearing a Che Guevara beret.” Thus the controversial lawyer Jacques Vergès reminisces in Barbet Schroeder’s fine documentary, Terror’s Advocate (2007), speaking of Ilich Ramírez Sánchez—known as Carlos—the Venezuelan terrorist and revolutionary presently imprisoned in Poissy, France, for the 1975 rue Toullier murder of two French intelligence agents in Paris. Running nearly six hours in its full-length version, Olivier Assayas’s three-part biopic sets out “to dismantle events and reveal them from the inside out” (to quote an interview included in the Optimum DVD edition). Though it is meticulously researched and designed, with a cast whose members closely resemble their real-life counterparts, Carlos not only opens with a disclaimer (“the film must be viewed as a fiction”) but also takes the construction of its protagonist’s celebrity as a theme. “You have become a star for the media,” says Wadie Haddad, leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, in part 1. “The famous Carlos.” In part 2, after Carlos has flown kidnapped Arab oil ministers from Vienna to Algiers and ransomed them, there is a scene in which he is driven in a limousine toward a bank of photojournalists. The car slows down and he looks out over the rim of his sunglasses like a rock star.

As if to acknowledge the quip about weight gain made by Vergès, Assayas and his remarkable lead actor Edgar Ramírez relate Carlos’s fame to physical transformation. Near the start, he emerges from a bathroom naked, switches off TV news broadcasting a politician’s opinion that pro-Palestinian terrorism is “vicious and bestial,” and then stands in the silence in front of the mirror. But if his athletic physique represents a newfound ability to prompt outraged punditry, then his self-regard suggests a superficiality of motivation. And Carlos gets noticeably bulkier when he is inactive. In the latter part of the film he is mostly indolent and purposeless as he shuttles between refuges, from Yemen to Hungary to Sudan—a legend still, but a hollow one, reduced from the man of action to a small player in the Great Game of international espionage. “Your notoriety is very precious to those men you deal with in the Middle East,” says a bold left-wing journalist in part 3. “It’s been a while [since you] had a headline and without newspapers you don’t exist.”

For a short time, the Venezuelan sits near the top table. In part 2, he is present at a Baghdad meeting addressed by KGB head (and future Soviet leader) Yuri Andropov, who calls for the assassination of Egyptian ruler Anwar El Sadat. The last third of the film, however, creates a mood of lethargy and frustration as Carlos becomes increasingly marginalized. Called simply a “mercenary” by a Stasi official, his interactions take place at a lower level, until finally a Syrian functionary is heard to deliver a contemptuous assessment: “He’s all washed up now. No longer of any use. Neither to us, nor to anyone else.” This decline involves a new kind of visibility. Instead of being a celebrity of primetime news, Carlos becomes an object of bureaucratic surveillance by various intelligence agencies. Then finally, exiled in Khartoum, where he acquires the unillustrious new nickname of “the phantom,” his famous image is reduced to his appearance in a French investigator’s photographs. The Sudanese leader examines the pictures and then consents to Carlos’s capture. In subtly exploring terrorism’s iconography, Assayas brings Carlos out of the shadows again.

Carlos can usefully be related to several films of the past decade that dramatize the history of left-wing militancy in the 1960s and 70s, notably Good Morning, Night (Marco
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and His Brothers
the French Resistance drama that is also influenced by Rocco
and His Brothers [1960], while Of Gods and Men is like a
John Ford cavalry Western with added prayer and chanting.)
There is great upheaval in France at the moment. Millions of
people have been demonstrating against the austerity mea-
asures of President Nicolas Sarkozy, who attacked the “im-
oral” legacy of May ’68 in a 2007 speech. It is too soon to
tell whether he will be undone by a renewal of French radical-
ism, but certainly it is a time of profound debate about the
country’s future and these three films reflect that. When I
met Olivier Assayas on October 25, I wanted to ask about
both the political background to Carlos and the director’s
own opinions.

Rob White: You would have been twenty when Carlos was first becoming
famous. How did he seem then? What kind of figure was he?

Olivier Assayas: Well it was really hard to make sense of
him. I was a student at the time and the killings in rue
Toullier happened in an area that was very familiar to me—I
would walk it every day, it’s right off the boulevard St. Michel,
which was the center of the Latin Quarter at that time. He
was from Venezuela and was possibly involved in some sort of
Palestinian politics, but that was kind of unclear, and he had
killed those two French secret service guys. And he had van-
ished. It was very difficult to read through that. And even
when he staged the Vienna operation a few months later, it
was not like this was in the news as a Carlos operation. It was
all about the operation itself and there was one guy who
might have been the head of the commando itself who would
eventually turn out to be the same guy who killed the cops in
rue Toullier. But that was something that was only analyzed
much later. So he grew as some kind of poster boy for terror-
ism at that time—but some international, extremely mysteri-
ous form of terrorism. Carlos, for example, had absolutely no
connection whatsoever with French militants. He wasn’t con-
ected to French leftism so you couldn’t really put him on
the map. The events in which he was involved were very strik-
ing but he has always been perceived as a media fabrication.
He wasn’t considered at the time as an important, relevant
militant of his cause. He was always a creature of the media.

Were his actions in any way approved of by elements of French leftism?
Before he was Carlos, he was involved in the failed
bombings of El Al planes in Orly and the attack on the
French embassy in The Hague by the Japanese Red Army.
Within French leftism there was at that time a debate about
whether to get involved in armed struggle the way the
Germans and the Italians had done. Ultimately, even if there
were isolated actions, the core of French leftism was clearly
against terrorism, against moving to armed struggle. It’s what
differentiated French leftism from the German or Italian
counterparts. It also has to do with the fact that France was
much less than those countries the frontline in the Cold War.
Carlos was always perceived as being part of some other war
that was disconnected from the goals and ideals and world
view of the French left. He was never endorsed. Although
there has always been a lot of sympathy in France for the
Palestinian cause, no one knew the extent of his connection
or the coherence of his positions in regard to the Palestinian
movement, especially because all his visible operations were
anti-Arafat (and so perceived as some kind of infighting,
which gave the cause a bad name). I can’t think of Carlos
being a sympathetic figure for the French left.

I was recently reading a 1976 Cahiers du cinéma round-table discussion
of Chris Marker’s newly released A Grin Without a Cat. The opinion of the Ca-
hiers critics seems to be against Marker—that he’s a traditional communist,
let’s say, whereas they’re associated with a more radical tendency. As some-
one who wrote at a later date for Cahiers can you situate yourself politically in
regard to the magazine’s line?

The period of Cahiers that you’re referring to is the most
political period of the magazine and I can’t say that I sympa-
thized with their politics at that time. My brand of leftism was
much more more connected to the ideas of the Situationist
International and Guy Debord specifically, which consti-
tuted the framework of my politics. Also as a teenager, the
huge influence was George Orwell. So I was extremely op-
posed to anything that smelled of totalitarianism and I think
that the politics of Cahiers at that time were defined by the
relationship to totalitarianism. When I started writing for the
magazine it was at a moment when it was certainly more
open and had moved away from those politics. Otherwise I
don’t think I could have been involved.

Carlos joins a number of other films about the radical left in the 1960s
and 70s: The Baader Meinhof Complex, Che, Terror’s Advocate. What do you
think is at stake in general terms about the way in which filmmakers are
reflecting on radicalism and terror in this period?

I would add United Red Army by Koji Wakamatsu, which
is also important. It’s difficult to answer. Once you look more
precisely into it, the movies are defined by very different dynamics. I think it’s interesting that Wakamatsu and Edel would both do movies about terrorism in their own respective countries. It has been for a long time an extremely painful subject in those countries. Dealing with the story of the Baader–Meinhof group in Germany and making a mainstream film that deals in a frontal way with those characters in German culture is some kind of revolution. I’m not German and I’m not an expert, but I never really bought the collective suicide theory. For me it’s absolutely impossible to believe. So I don’t think The Baader Meinhof Complex fully addresses the issue. The supposed suicides in Stammheim prison are for me the elephant in the living room of German politics dealing with that subject. You have to take a position on the subject and face it. The Baader Meinhof Complex doesn’t exactly face it. Wakamatsu makes a movie about the Japanese Red Army which is a both movie about ultra-left politics in Japan at that time and a movie about the Manson Family. The so-called Mountain House Murders sealed the fate of the Japanese Red Army. They found all those people who had been tortured and killed after political trial. It created such a reaction of horror in the country that it killed the idea of leftism in Japan. In those two cases, you need the perspective of a generation in order to face it without burning your
fingers. I suppose for those movies, it really has to do with time passing.

In the case of Carlos, it’s slightly different. He’s an “evil” character. He’s always been perceived in France as suspect, compromised. Still he’s not feared. He’s not involved with these memories that are complicated to face in terms of the politics of the 1970s. The reasons it’s possible to tell the story now have to do with time, but for different reasons. Carlos is a creature of the Cold War and ultimately the files of the Cold War are available. And a lot of individuals connected to Carlos have published their memoirs. So thanks to time passing, a lot of the elements of the story of Carlos are accessible—and basically it’s a sort of secret-service story. We can tell this story now. Che is something else. I liked Che very much. It’s a very ambitious and fascinating film about strategy, a reflection on guerrilla strategy that analyzes in detail how you win or lose a guerrilla war. It was inspiring for me in terms of how you could make a movie about a specific historical figure, using a big canvas and somehow dealing not only with the character but also with issues that are bigger than that. Carlos is both about Carlos and about geopolitics and it was Che that gave me the key in terms of functioning on those different levels.

There’s the scene of Carlos looking at himself naked in the mirror. He refers often to things like “the anti-imperialist struggle” but it seems like empty sloganeering. Is the character just a narcissist?

The media image of Carlos includes the notion of him as some kind of theoretician of terrorism, involved in the higher echelons of politics. But the reality is that he was never involved there. He’s a militant and so he does repeat slogans that get thinner and thinner as the times change and the Cold War gets to its last moments. Carlos has mostly been a man of action, a militant of the PFLP who executed operations that had been designed by other people, chiefly Wadie Haddad. Carlos himself had only a partial notion of the geopolitical consequences of his acts or even of where they stood in terms of his ideals. He is a Third World militant and very similar to others of his generation. He comes from Latin America, which at that time is a world which is at war—a violent, bloody war. Then he studies in Moscow and he finds himself, nineteen years’ old, with a gun in his hand fighting in Jordan during the Black September days. So he is someone who’s involved in the physical part of the struggle, but not in the theoretical one. He never really gets there because he always enjoyed the celebrity, for not always very relevant reasons—and that’s the narcissism, the media-consciousness. The media picked up on him because he gave them something. But mostly if you’re involved with terrorist action, you don’t want to be in the limelight! I met Anis Naccache, who is “Khalid,” in Beirut when we were preparing the film. One extremely interesting thing he told me is that, whatever you think of his politics, he was extremely proud that the fact that he was second-in-command of the Vienna operation only surfaced something like twenty-five years after the operation. There’s not one biography of Carlos that mentions that Khalid is Anis Naccache. At some point he couldn’t hide it anymore, but he said to me: “I am a militant and of course I don’t want my name in the press. So I moved on, I trained militants in the south of Lebanon, who gradually became the military infrastructure of Hizbollah.” You may or may not agree with this politics but he has been extremely coherent and he has done his job. And he said: “Carlos has been in the spotlight and what did he do with that?”

You write in the IFC press notes that “we must tackle the way [Carlos] embodied the deformed, twisted version in the imaginations of the European Left; the generation that, in the wake of May ’68, believed that revolution was coming and it would be a violent struggle.” The legacy of ’68 has been denounced by Sarkozy and defended by writers like Alain Badiou. How does Carlos fit with this debate and what is your own position?

It would not be anywhere close to Badiou and it would certainly not be anywhere close to Sarkozy! I was defined by the politics of May ’68, but for me May ’68 was an antitotalitarian uprising. People seem to forget that at the occupied Odéon theater, you had the crossed flags—black and red, and I was on the side of the black element. And the red element was not that strong. People like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the Nanterre enragés—what was so striking, and so violent ultimately, about it was a way of regaining the idea of revolution from the bureaucrats of the Communist Party. The party was violently against ’68. They hated every minute of it and they killed it in the end. The reason why the uprising ended was because the unions, which were entirely controlled by the French Communist Party at the time, just decided that they didn’t want it to go on and they sent everybody back to work. But that wasn’t my side. I was defined by the idea that this insurrection could have worked, that it could have gone much further, and I was part of the leftists who never really forgave that betrayal. And for me the central element of May ’68 was the Situationist involvement, the committee of the occupation of the Sorbonne during the most radical and extremist days involved the Situationists. They were at the forefront.

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