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THE POLITICS OF SPY FILMS

by Lenny Rubenstein

“Since every spy, even the amateur, must learn the tricks of the trade, and every aim, no matter how noble, may involve deception, the spy film can be both intensely dramatic *and* political. It is not only spies, counter-spies and their victims who meet in the political spy film, but also all the national loyalties and fears generated by public and official opinion. In its most sophisticated form, then, the film says something, not only about the protagonist, but the side for which he works.”
—Lenny Rubenstein

The spy film is almost as old as cinema itself. Even D.W. Griffith turned his hand to an espionage melodrama, THE GREAT LOVE, during the First World War, and since then over 500 spy films have been churned out by the studios in America and Europe. Most of these films are standardized productions with formulas in lieu of a story and stereotypes in place of characterization. Behind the hundreds of filmed clichés, however, lie a number of inspired and well-crafted films. Like the actual spies who prepare the way for invading armies, these better films paved the way for the hundreds of others that now lie in the storage rooms and vaults of television networks and film distributors.

There are elements which all spy films share—a degree of suspense or adventure, a touch of romance, and the relief of some humor. There are also topics which occur with some frequency—the problem of loyalty, the question of paranoia, the threat of war and the importance of politics. It is political ideals which often justify the shoot-outs, car chases and games of cat-and-mouse in the spy film.

The following article is excerpted from The Great Spy Films—A Pictorial History by Lenny Rubenstein, to be published this Spring by Citadel Press, which discusses the elements and themes of some fifty spy films, ranging from Fritz Lang's silent SPIONE (SPIES) through Alfred Hitchcock's most famous films, THE 39 STEPS and THE LADY VANISHES, to the recent French comedy THE TALL BLOND MAN WITH ONE BLACK SHOE.

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With their mixture of conscious adversaries and innocent amateurs, spy films have offered ample room for political nuance and sophisticated intrigue. Rather than merely depict the plight of a protagonist-victim amidst espionage's toughened professionals—the plot theme popularized by Eric Ambler in fiction and Alfred Hitchcock in film—a screenwriter or director could also show the political strategies and motives behind that unequal struggle. Since every spy, even the amateur, must learn the tricks of the trade, and every aim, no matter how noble, may involve deception, the spy film could be both intensely dramatic *and* political.

Whether or not the politics were made an explicit part of the action, the celluloid spy was the symbol of an audience's beliefs and sympathies. If Hitchcock had shown moviegoers that spies looked and acted like almost anyone else, later filmmakers showed

that their motives could be mixed and their ideologies murky. It was not only spies, counter-spies and their victims who met in the political spy film, but also all the national loyalties and fears generated by public and official opinion. An audience's suspicions, like those of the film's characters, could be stretched to the limit until the cinematic revelation of betrayal or fidelity. In its most sophisticated form, the film said something, not only about the protagonist, but the side for which he worked. When necessary, political spy films have dealt in the simplest imagery: the protagonist was not only an Everyman, but a specifically American variant; and the professionals could be neatly divided into evil foreigners and dedicated federal agents.

The 1940's and 50's, with a very hot World War II turning into a very Cold War, brought a full share of self-righteousness to their filmed myths, while changing ideological currents in the 60's and 70's undermined public confidence in the methods and aims of our own intelligence community. Four films, one from each decade—WATCH ON THE RHINE (1943), MY SON JOHN (1952), THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD (1963) and SCORPIO (1972)—reflect this shift in our views as conditioned by 30 years of film history and real events both in the U.S. and abroad.

WATCH ON THE RHINE appeared in 1943, two years after its original presentation as an award-winning stageplay for officially neutral New York City audiences. The film retained the play's peacetime setting, but its message, rewritten for the screen by Dashiell Hammett, had even more relevance for the larger wartime moviegoing public. Sara Muller (Bette Davis) has returned to America with her German husband, Kurt (Paul Lukas), and their three children. Kurt Muller, however, is no ordinary refugee; he has been active in the German opposition to Hitler and had fought with the International Brigade in Spain. Their luxurious life in the palatial estate of Sara's mother outside Washington, D.C., is a remarkable change for the Mullers after years of poverty-stricken political exile. The daughter of a Supreme Court judge, Sara has to explain to her mother that she once did seamstress work to earn money. It is the Muller children who, while attracting the attention of a doting grandmother, supply the hints about their life in Europe. Kurt finds himself attracting the attention of another house guest and relative by marriage, Teck de Brancovis (George Coulouris), a Romanian aristocrat with a shady past, and a frequent guest at the late night card parties hosted by the German Embassy's military attaché.

The film's action develops several points, some of which have



WATCH ON THE RHINE

been suggested to the audience in the opening sequences. Sara's mother and brother learn eventually what the audience has probably assumed, that Kurt has no intention of resuming his career as an aircraft designer, but has come instead to organize support for his anti-Nazi comrades in Germany. That is why his battered but carefully locked briefcase contains a Luger and \$50,000 in cash. Sara silences her mother's protest that, "We're all anti-fascists here" with the terse reply that she and Kurt *do* something about it. The second, more important theme is the confrontation between the two Europeans, Muller and Brancovis. From their first meeting, Brancovis has been curious about Kurt, a man with the traces of bullet wounds and torture who has lived in the countries bordering on Nazi Germany. Having guessed at Kurt's missions, Brancovis threatens to tell the German Embassy, especially since Kurt has decided to return to Germany illegally. One of his comrades, a man who had once saved his life, has been arrested by the Gestapo, and Kurt has resolved to rescue him. While the American relatives fetch their checkbooks and household cash to buy Brancovis' silence, Kurt goes for his gun. Kurt has guessed that the Germans would pay the Romanian, not with money, but with a sanctioned return to Bucharest, where with the money extorted from his American in-laws he could enjoy the life "of shabby palaces and cafes." Rather than rely on the day or two of silence that fear might generate, Kurt tells Brancovis that to guarantee his silence and the safety of his mission, he must kill him. This confrontation is the best sequence in the film, both in terms of sheer drama, intelligent dialogue and performance, and won Lukas an Academy Award.

From this encounter, Kurt's American relatives—and of course the audience—learn that different kinds of people helped the Nazis for varied reasons; homesickness and an open dislike of poverty in Brancovis' case. Moviegoers also learned, two years too late

perhaps, about the reasoned ruthlessness with which Kurt and Sara have pursued the anti-fascist crusade. The film ends with the implication that Kurt did not survive the trip to Germany, and that ending was indicative of the political temper during the time of the film's production. Adapted for the screen by Hammett, there were several references to the Spanish Civil War within the film's first five minutes. Sara's comments to her wealthy mother about the work many people do to earn a living leave no doubt about the film's leftist appeal. Indeed, the entire film is a belated tribute by Hollywood to those premature anti-fascists who were swallowed up by history between 1934 and 1939. Lukas, one of the legion of stage and screen performers who fled Hitler, refused to appear on the sound-stage when, in accordance with the Production Code that a cold-blooded murder had to be avenged, his death was to have been filmed. Muller is characterized as a complex personality; he explains his actions to the shocked American relatives, adding that he too may have become a murderous fanatic, "one of the sick of the earth." Hammett's craftsmanship is shown not only in the closing dialogue between the two Europeans, but also in a gallery of German Embassy officials, including the aristocratic Prussian and his debased Nazi equivalent, a Gestapo functionary. Because the politics of the war years were almost notoriously simple, that year's commercially successful Hollywood films also included *CASABLANCA* and *NORTH STAR*, the Lillian Hellman-scripted paean to the Soviet Union.

Within a few years, however, films like *NORTH STAR* were being branded by Congressional subcommittees as subversive, and the studios were gearing up for the production of films that would depict the threat to America posed by Communism. Hollywood mirrored the mixture of rational fear and irrational panic felt towards Soviet Russia. The facts were that the Red Army was the world's largest, that Soviet foreign policy was dictated as much by



MY SON JOHN

Stalin's will as by Marx's theories, that Communist tactics could be fatally complex, especially for idealistic supporters, and that the countries occupied by the Red Army, with the exception of Czechoslovakia, had been Nazi allies or notoriously undemocratic before the war. There was also much that was purely emotional: confusion about decisions made at Teheran, Yalta and Potsdam; the popular suspicion of anything novel or eccentric; the fear of critical opinion or thought; and the charge of "communist" hurled against anything with explicit social implications. One of the spy films that reflected this paranoia was Leo McCarey's 1952 feature, *MY SON JOHN*.

The film opens on a suburban, tree-lined street in which two young men in army uniforms are playing football. The two soldiers are the Jefferson brothers home for a send-off dinner party prior to their embarkation for the fighting in Korea. At the dinner table they join their mother, Lucille (Helen Hayes) and father, Dan (Dean Jagger)—only the oldest son, John (Robert Walker), is missing. When he calls to announce that he has been delayed, there is a fair amount of sniggering on the part of his father and two brothers about John's use of "two-dollar words" and his high government position. Lucille, though, sticks up for her obvious favorite. Afterwards, when John finally does arrive, the tension between father and son is readily apparent. The young man laughs off his school-teacher father's patriotism and avoids his direct question as to whether he is "one of those Commies" about whom the father has learned at American Legion meetings. John not only disparages his parents' devotion to religion, but also makes a point of subtly insulting the local priest. This intellectual arrogance is also linked to a genuine snobbery; he prefers visiting an old college instructor to being with his parents and, in one painful scene, tries to engage the family physician in a discussion by appealing to him as "a man of science." The implications of this characterization are bluntly ap-

parent: just as they belittle their parents, skeptical intellectuals have a tendency to treason. The link made in this film between love of parents and love for country overwhelms its espionage motif to such an extent that *MY SON JOHN* is as much an Oedipal as a Cold War morality tale.

Lucille Jefferson, who takes a phone message for John from a woman who refuses to leave her name, is the film's fulcrum. John has told her that he has no women friends in Washington, so his mother begins to have suspicions. Her fears are augmented by the arrival of FBI agent Stedman (Van Heflin) who tells Lucille that her son is being investigated in connection with a *known* Communist spy, a woman named Ruth Carlin (Irene Winston). Stedman senses that John's mother is the only person who can connect him with Carlin. He is right; not only has she received the phone call, but she soon discovers a key in a torn pair of trousers left behind by John as a donation to a Church rummage sale. Lucille, responding to John's frantic call, flies to Washington to return the pants and grimly notices how John searches for the missing key. Tormented by doubts, Lucille meets Stedman in a chance encounter staged by the FBI. Followed and filmed by other FBI agents, Lucille goes to the Carlin apartment where the key she has taken from John's pants opens the door. Lucille Jefferson now realizes that her favorite son is a spy, or at least implicated in espionage activities, and Stedman moves in to win the psychological spoils. As a result of this unwanted revelation, however, Lucille suffers a nervous breakdown. John, on the other hand, begins to waver in his earlier decision to evade arrest by flying to Lisbon.

While on his way to surrender to Stedman, John is machine-gunned in a cab near the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, but a tape-recorded confession he had made earlier is played to a graduating class as a warning to them about the dangers of Communism.

His warning goes so far as to mention "the eyes of Soviet agents that are even now upon you." The lighting, the uplifted faces and the inspirational music heightened the religious tone of the scene. John, after all, had redeemed his soul through confession and death, and the closing sequence of Lucille and Dan Jefferson going to church to pray for John reinforces this religiosity.

MY SON JOHN uses the theme of espionage to underline the dangers posed by Communist subversion of the family and domestic life. John lied to his mother about his politics, claiming to be a liberal, had got into a fight with his father about the Bible and had demonstrated his aversion to the family priest. As if this behavior were not suspect enough, he is contrasted with his two younger brothers going to face a Communist foe in Korea. John's own father has suspected that he is a Communist, and that most potent of paternal figures, the FBI, in the form of Stedman, had already compiled a dossier on him and was closing in for the arrest. Although espionage is talked about constantly, no secret formulae or missing documents are mentioned; there's no trace of coded messages or radio transmissions and John's actual job in the federal government is never stated (for that matter, the Rosenberg case was built on not much more evidence.) Sigmund Freud seemed more the inspiration for the film than Joe Stalin, since the caricatured attention lavished on John by his mother, his indifference to women, dislike of his father and general manner owed a great deal to the classically Freudian explanation for homosexuality. Seen at a distance of 25 years, Lucille's anguish over finding a woman's apartment key in her son's pants may have had nothing to do with Soviet subversion, the FBI or the Korean War.

Other anti-Communist spy films of the 50's included WALK

EAST ON BEACON and PICK-UP ON SOUTH STREET, productions which at least featured the mechanics of espionage intrigues, no matter how far-fetched. The "thaw" in the Cold War did not occur on theater screens until 1959 when Alfred Hitchcock's NORTH BY NORTHWEST used the Soviet-American espionage rivalry to experiment with his favorite theme of the innocent bystander caught in the crossfire between spies and counter-spies. One of the English director's most commercially successful films in America, NORTH BY NORTHWEST was a watershed; few films after it could treat domestic espionage with half the gravity it had formerly been accorded. The quiet struggle between spies still occurred with ferocity in Europe, however, and in 1963 a grim cinematic attack upon the basic foundation of Cold War spycraft did appear, THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD.

Like the best-selling novel, the film depicted "the disagreeable . . . occasionally very wicked things" that spies do to safeguard national defense. Directed by Martin Ritt, one of the filmmakers blacklisted during the 1950's, THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD displayed a carefully honed feeling for politics unseen in American spy films since WATCH ON THE RHINE. Paul Dehn's screenplay, like the Le Carre novel, had its strength in a scheme that was only partially revealed to protagonist and audience alike. That protagonist, Alec Leamas (Richard Burton), was a combination of professional and victim, since only at the end did he realize the Machiavellian quality of his assignment. A seasoned veteran of the spy war, Leamas had few illusions and scruples, yet was himself shocked by the ruthless cunning of his superiors in London. This film also had something unusual for any spy film—an enemy agent, Fiedler (Oskar Werner), whose appeal to both

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD



audience and Leamas was part of the film's artistry.

As the control for British agents in East Germany, Leamas has developed a hatred for a man he has never met or seen, the head of East German Counter-Intelligence, Hans Dieter Mundt (Peter Van Eyck). Leamas has agreed to pose as a defector to pass on just enough information to implicate Mundt as a traitor, a double-agent working for the British. Leamas need only act as a catalyst, since the other ingredients are to be added by Fiedler, Mundt's deputy who happens to be Jewish, while Mundt, Leamas is told, is "quite the other thing." Hating Mundt, Fiedler should jump at the suggestion that he is a traitor. The film's first half focuses on Leamas' pose as a discharged and disgruntled spy, taken to drink and fights with local shopkeepers. Contacted by a series of middlemen, "cut-outs" in the spy's jargon, Leamas finally arrives at a Dutch seacoast village where he is interrogated by a calm, detached, professional agent. Their conversations end, however, when news of Leamas' disappearance appears in a London newspaper—he must now head eastwards. Leamas protests, but learns only that neither the KGB nor their East German colleagues leaked the news to the press. This is the first hint of a more complex scheme than he has bargained for, but Leamas lets himself be taken for further interrogation to East Germany, where he meets Fiedler.

In a series of well-crafted scenes between Fiedler and Leamas, the political difference between the two professionals is highlighted. Although Fiedler berates Leamas as a defector, "the lowest currency of the Cold War," he is also mystified by Leamas' apparent indifference to ideological goals. The eventual triumph of socialism, notes the East German, is what justifies his actions and his life. Their conversations and Mundt's unexpected arrival lead to a fast-paced sequence of arrests, releases and re-arrests, with Fiedler levelling the charge of treason at Mundt before a secret tribunal of high-ranking Party officials. Fiedler's circumstantial evidence is trumped by Mundt's live witness, a young librarian and English Communist, Pam (Claire Bloom), who had been Leamas' lover during his pose as a disgruntled alcoholic. Pam supplies the needed evidence to indict Leamas as an agent planted on Fiedler to indict Mundt. At the hearing's close, it is Fiedler who is escorted out by uniformed guards, while Mundt stares icily at Leamas. Mundt, both Pam and the audience learn later from Leamas, is indeed London's man and the aim of "this dirty operation" was not to kill Mundt but to eliminate Fiedler who had begun to suspect the truth.

The truth was that cold-blooded expediency was the sole criterion used by espionage chiefs on both sides of the Berlin Wall which figures so prominently in Ritt's film. Besides the near betrayal of Leamas, a professional spy, the London spy masters had involved a complete innocent, Pam, in their complex game of cross and doublecross. That Pam was an idealistic Communist who had fallen in love with Leamas only "made it easy" for the fatal mechanism to work more smoothly. The final irony was that Fiedler, condemned as a traitor by his own comrades, could see through the events that Mundt *had* to be a double-agent, otherwise the lucky coincidence of Pam's arrival in East Germany could not have taken place. To complete the moral imagery, Mundt was depicted as the brutal secret police officer so familiar from wartime films and, indeed, the actor chosen for the part had played Nazi officers in several earlier Hollywood films. The audience's sympathy is divided between Werner and Burton, particularly since the only times the camera veers significantly away from Burton is when Oskar Werner appears.

THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD was a landmark in film history. Not only was it a seriously honest and grim portrayal of modern peacetime espionage, it also avoided many of the hallowed traditions of the spy films. There were no car chases, fist-fights, hidden bombs or extended shoot-outs, only the businesslike machine-gun bursts at the Berlin Wall. There were no excessive scenes of torture nor longwinded explanations of the strategic importance of Leamas' assignment. Perhaps due to these

thematic innovations, the film was not a commercial success and did not earn Burton the Academy Award for which he was nominated.

A later film that depicts espionage in terms of treacherous sacrifices and focuses specifically on the Central Intelligence Agency is Michael Winner's *SCORPIO*, a 1972 feature that seems to appear more frequently on late night television than it ever did in the theaters. Released at a time when disclosures about the CIA and the FBI were receiving wider acceptance, *SCORPIO* is a peculiarly grim and melodramatic encounter between an experienced CIA agent, Cross (Burt Lancaster), and a former French paratroop officer, Jean Laurier (Alain Delon), now a "CIA contract button man," a professional assassin assigned to kill him. Code-named "Scorpio," Laurier is blackmailed by the CIA into accepting the assignment to kill Cross. Told by CIA chief McLeod (John Colicos) that Cross is a double-agent working for the "opposition", Scorpio remains doubtful. In the meantime, by a series of clever tricks and tactics, Cross has managed not only to evade the CIA men following him, but also to arrive in Vienna, that favorite city for cinematic intrigue.

The bulk of the film's action and some of its best sequences take place in the former imperial capital where the mystery surrounding Cross deepens. In a nighttime rendezvous on a deserted street, Cross is met by a Viennese sanitation worker who is whistling, as a signal or perhaps out of habit, the "Internationale." The husky-voiced Cross says, "It's been a long time since Spain," to which the man responds, "The best died there," and gives Cross directions to meet two more "cut-outs." This kind of political reference occurs frequently in the film's dialogue as part of the sympathetic treatment of Cross as envisioned by scriptwriters David Rintels and Gerald Wilson. In one sequence which is easily the equal of any from the best spy films, Cross and his Soviet counterpart, Serge Zharkov (Paul Scofield), laughingly discuss their scorn for their bosses and the typical young men who staff both the KGB and CIA. While Cross good-naturedly accepts Zharkov's self-evaluation of themselves as a pair of premature anti-fascists, he cannot understand Zharkov's professed belief in Communism after years spent in a Stalinist labor camp and the recent invasion of Prague. In a later scene, when Zharkov tries to get help from his superior and is refused, he tells the younger man of his resemblance to another man "who didn't leave his name, but was trying to build socialism in one country out of the bones from a charnel house; there were a lot of them in 1939." This is as strong an indictment of Stalin's Russia as heard in any Cold War film, but much more intelligently and skillfully presented.

One of *SCORPIO*'s major virtues is the state of tension in which the audience is held; until the final quarter-hour, viewers cannot be certain if Cross is indeed a double-agent or a CIA maverick, an eccentric hated by the automations headed by McLeod. The CIA chief appears more ruthless than any other character, especially the charming Zharkov; he is willing to frame Scorpio on a false heroin charge, to needlessly endanger his own agents, and even to have Cross's wife murdered in a bungled burglary attempt. There is even a hint of Nazi hirelings, since one of Cross's wartime friends, Max Lang (Shmuel Rodensky), is killed during an interrogation conducted by a local Viennese thug who laughs slyly at the mention of Lang's imprisonment in a concentration camp. The problem of guilt or innocence centers on Scorpio who knows enough to distrust McLeod yet feels honor-bound to fulfill his assignment. In a nighttime scene set in an enclosed botanical garden, Scorpio meets Cross and their dialogue is a clever mixture of characterization and plot development. To the Frenchman's direct question whether or not he is a traitor, Cross tells Scorpio that he reminds him of a little girl in a white communion dress looking for God, but that since he has a torturer's soul his need is even greater. Cross denies being a double-agent and, just as a pair of CIA men come crashing into the garden, tells Scorpio that McLeod wants him killed as well. The sequence ends with automatic slugs resounding amidst the ferns and flowers.



SCORPIO

This sequence also displays one of the film's worst features, the awkward transition from sophisticated conversations to frenetic bullet-filled action scenes that owe more to James Bond than to Alfred Hitchcock. At times, the tricks by which one spy eludes the other are practical and clever indeed, just the thing one might want to keep in mind for a tight spot, while at other times they strain credulity—for example, Cross's impersonation of a Black clergyman.

Cross almost escapes the CIA and Scorpio until the murder of his wife draws him back to Washington to kill McLeod. That successful assassination results in a leadership change and the near resignation of Scorpio who is sickened by what he sees as the CIA's penchant for gratuitous murder and paranoid delusions. Both Scorpio and the audience then learn that Cross had truly been a double-agent, that his wife acted as a "cut-out" for a Czech courier who happens to be Scorpio's lover. He eventually guns down both her and Cross and, as the film ends, Scorpio himself is seen in the cross hairs of another professional assassin's gunsight.

Although criticized by *Variety* for its cultured dialogue, *SCORPIO*'s conversations give the film its uniquely complex political coloration—a deep pink. Burt Lancaster gives his role the air of a worldly-wise cynic whose ties to the Russians are as mercenary as they are emotional. With three separate bank accounts totalling more than a quarter of a million dollars, Cross's dismissal of Zharkov's Communist faith had a firm basis. Yet Cross has all the earmarks of the 1930's leftist. The whistled "Internationale," the references to Spain, the 20 year friendship with Zharkov, his ob-

vious affection for Max, and Cross's contacts among Washington, D.C.-area blacks are all hints of his political sympathies. His warning to Scorpio is justified, while his treason seems minor compared to the CIA's criminal actions. The CIA stands more condemned in the film than Cross, since all the traditional reference points are in Cross's favor. There is even a studied similarity between the names of the film's fictional CIA chief, McLeod, and the actual former Director, McCone. If it hadn't been for its irregular pacing—the juxtaposition of slow, talky sequences with far-too-gymnastic thriller sequences—*SCORPIO* might have been far more successful and reached the audience that later flocked to *STATE OF SIEGE* and *THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR*.

The spy film is ideally suited for politics, since it is one of the few popular formats in which an individual's life is legitimately seen by an audience as dependent upon international events and wills beyond that of the protagonist. It is only in an espionage film that an apparent romance can be interrupted by the entrance of the secret police—where the romance, in fact, may have been engineered by the secret police! The larger social or political issues that play such an important part in the spy film's plot mirror newspaper headlines and the concerns of politicians and professional intelligence operatives. Indeed, the mirror often glaringly reflects back on the real world. In a recent radio interview about the revolt in Iran and the CIA's apparent failure to predict it, a reporter commented that the events sounded like a bad spy film, to which the espionage expert replied, "The world is a bad spy film!" □