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Sex, Spies, and Semiotics

5 March 2003

Ideological Conflict, Villainy, and the Spy Movie

The spy films we've viewed this term have not so much discussed the looming ideological conflict of the Cold War era as they have sought to use its trappings to express narratives of broader impact. The Cold War provided what Barthes would call a "dictionary" (Barthes, 146) from which to draw parcels of broader thematic significance that would ring familiar to the audience. Some of these thematic parcels take the form of intimate enemies, combat by proxy, and impersonal aggregations of power and influence. These ideas aren't new to literature. Going all the way back to Greek myth, we can see examples of each of those thematic parcels in many narratives. The Cold War didn't create them, or even endow them with particularly new meaning, but it was a defining preoccupation of the '60s. By tapping the universality of that preoccupation, the spy movie genre created a shorthand specific to the era that couched ancient themes in familiar images and signposts. Consequently, though the generic spy movie is "reflective" of the Cold War ideological struggle, it isn't *about* that struggle.

1. The Familiar Enemy

Perhaps the first jarring political recognition of the Cold War came before World War II even ended, when U.S. Army General Patton advocated an invasion of the Soviet Union built on the momentum of the defeat of Germany. This was widely discounted as flamboyant war mongering from a volatile soldier, but it surely reflected the anxieties of the military establishment and political realists who understood that war had not reformed the nature of "Bolshevism," which they had been fighting for decades. Because of an underlying sense of

cordiality from home front propaganda efforts that simplified the war into a struggle of good vs. evil, though, the Soviet Union became a "familiar enemy," one with whom it was possible, unlike a Nazi or Japanese soldier, to speak and interact without seeking its immediate annihilation. Some "good" was present in the makeup of the new foe.

In *The Third Man*, a prototype of this understanding was presented in the ferris wheel scene, where Holly and Harry are able to converse in plain daylight without coming to blows, despite Holly's realization that Harry is, indeed, evil and megalomaniacal. That only makes sense: they were once friends. While Holly may hope for the containment of Harry's evil, he doesn't wish his destruction. In *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, the British intelligence service even seeks to preserve one enemy (Mundt) who's destroyed much of its own Berlin network. In *Funeral In Berlin*, Harry Palmer thinks nothing of rescuing a would-be defector, Colonel Stok, and their relations are cordial when they do interact, at least initially, and avarice, not ideology eventually defines Stok's villainy. In *From Russia With Love*, it's widely understood that agents of East and West are constantly pursuing or trailing each other. The death of a shadow is indicative, in fact, of a disruption of "normal" operations brought about by SPECTRE, not either of the principal "combatants." In *The Quiller Memorandum*, despite Quiller's romantic disengagement with Inge after his recognition that she's part of "the adversarial party," he doesn't seek to kill her. Even in the narrative hash that is *Modesty Blaise*, she's able to enjoy a cordial breakfast with Fothergill, who has no need to kill her out of hand. In *In Like Flint*, the "enemy" is women, and as surely as Flint is incredulous at the suggestion women should rule the world, the most retrograde male chauvinists in the audience would be incredulous at the idea that the evil-doing women are in need of anything more than being put in their proper places. Flint even presses them into service before the movie's over, and its final scene is one of inter-gender harmony (with men once again on top in the sexual economy of the newly restored status quo).

In all these examples, the World War II conflict paradigm would have called for the immediate annihilation of an enemy combatant on the grounds of his or her genetic evil. The Cold War understanding was more nuanced and perhaps reflective of a disrupted sense of good and evil, thanks to the excesses of Nazism, which remains, to this day, a defining extreme on the moral spectrum of most, and an example against which most examples of "evil" fade. Where hot war calls for annihilation, cold war suggests that containment and careful maneuver will eventually win the day, with plenty of opportunities to invite the enemy to Disneyland along the way.

2. Combat By Proxy

While World War II was waged not by opposing chess masters and their pawns, but by the opposed nations themselves, the Cold War was fought by proxy. The East had "satellites," while the West formulated a delineation between "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" governments and pumped money into the former to ensure their ongoing commitment to the fight against the latter. When the Cold War became "hot," it was in the form of "peoples war" as waged by the Viet Cong, the Nicaraguan Contras, or the Afghani *mujahedin.* If the opposing blocs ever committed soldiers to the field, it was done so with a straightforward awareness that one of the combatants in the immediate arena must be a proxy.

The Third Man provided a template for this theme in the form of Holly Martins' pursuit of Harry. While Holly may well have no malice toward Harry, Major Calloway does, and he uses Holly, who isn't interested in seeing Harry destroyed as much as contained, to locate and run Harry to ground. Holly and the audience feel some small amount of pity when Harry's hand comes up from the sewer grate, making one final, doomed grasp for freedom. Calloway, of course, is merely happy Holly proved useful, and we don't see him again: Holly is the character who has to endure the final indignity of Anna's rejection.

This theme reappears in *From Russia With Love* on several levels. SPECTRE has no ideological enemies, per se, but it does have an enemy in the form of the existing world order. Russia becomes its proxy combatant in the form of Tatiana's subversion at the hands of Rosa Klebb. Bond, similarly, does little fighting, but relies on the gypsies to handle matters for him during the pitched battle in the Turkish countryside. Bond himself is a proxy combatant for MI6/M (in which England is posed as the opposing force to SPECTRE, conferring it with a sort of non-ideological virtue and status as keeper of "The Organization Man's Burden.")

Harry Palmer is a somewhat unwilling proxy as he goes about his work in *Funeral in Berlin*, and he uses Samantha Steel at the climax of that film's action to dispense with an enemy. In *The Quiller Memorandum*, Quiller is Pol's proxy combatant, and Inge is Oktober's (along with a coterie of anonymous, modish Germans who chase Quiller around Berlin).

In *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, Leamas provides perhaps the most poignant example of a proxy combatant, as he ultimately learns that Control has subverted his actions to both save the life of his bitter enemy and end Nan's. The novel's version of Leamas has the metaphor of great, colliding trucks to describe the manipulations he's participated in, and his dying realization is that he, too, is as trapped between these crushing forces as any agent he ever lost to Mundt in Berlin.

3. Impersonal Aggregations of Power and Influence

While the United States and the USSR were completely committed to the concept of ideological hostility, Europe has never been that comfortable with either Stalinism or the sort of total anti-communism practiced in the US. France and Germany have socialists in office, and Italy periodically installs a "communist" government, though all are counted as "liberal democracies." What Europe thinks about the Cold War, though, was never the subject of much concern on either side of the ideological fence. The US was happy to move soldiers and nuclear weapons into Germany over popular objections, and Russia was happy to press

East Germany, Poland, and others into service as proxy combatants. From the ground in Europe, the cold war combatants probably seemed largely disinterested in the welfare of their "allies" as they probed for strategic advantage.

Leamas' conception of the Cold War as a collision of great, impersonal forces, and his sacrifice at their altar was core to the way the film was posed as a "realistic" depiction of espionage, but if that's the criteria on which the film is judged realistic, *From Russia With Love*, *The President's Analyst*, and *The Quiller Memorandum* are equally, if more figuratively, realistic, because each featured organizations, institutions, and forces that are defined by their power, scope, and the anonymity of their highest functionaries. *From Russia With Love* features both Blofeld, who isn't ever seen above the elbows, and M, who has a distinct personality but no name beyond that of his code designation. If he answers to anyone, we never meet them and can only assume they occupy the nebulous and undefined space between M and "her majesty," in whose secret service he and Bond work. Ultimately, though it requires consideration of Bond movies outside the course selection, even the film's most distinct personality, James Bond himself, is a replaceable cog who's changed faces six times (if we count David Niven in *Casino Royale*). He's probably less distinctive to audiences by name than designation, 007, which is distinctive in its own right more by the function it designates (a license to kill) than a specific person (who's just a number).

Imperfect as it is, *The Quiller Memorandum* still catches enough of this thematic drift to toss in the impersonal "old men in London," who exist perhaps to demonstrate the supreme detachment of those in the corridors of power when compared to foot soldiers they dispatch to suffer on their behalf. Their adversary in the context of the movie, Oktober, suggests less a unique villain with a distinctive name as he does a hastily rewritten Bolshevik with an utterly generic name, transformed into a Nazi, perhaps, to render him more universally despicable to all but the most undesirable market niches.

The President's Analyst, of course, takes the impersonal aggregation of power to its extreme in the form of The Phone Company, which is so impersonal that it can't even muster an actual human being to represent it on screen. Sidney and Kropotkin are left to struggle with a collection of androids that communicate most meaningfully not even in human language, but in cartoons. At the same time, this impersonal entity causes a healthy amount of death and destruction along the way, as dramatized in the "field of flowers" scene, where agents of assorted governments kill each other off, not even realizing their true motivator is the Oz-ian phone company.

4. Villainy

Considering the ideological derivations of the conflicts that defined the Cold War era, it seems odd that villainy would be characterized as anything other than ideological in origin. As has been discussed in class, market considerations might well have contributed to the way spy movies shied away from villains defined by their ideological bent. Another possible reason derives from the nature of the Cold War's status quo.

Leading up to the advent of nuclear weapons, "hot" war still served an active role in the preservation of "normal" international relations. The Cold War introduced nuclear weapons as a tool of statecraft that ended the use of war as an "everyday" way to get land or goods, because a war in the nuclear age wouldn't end with the "mere" sack of a capital or enslavement of a country, but promised instead that even a strategically compromised opponent could destroy its enemies even as its capital burned. In this context, the status quo became a question of ensuring extreme stasis. While both superpowers probed for advantage, they also had an eye on an overarching sense of balance that had to be maintained lest they risk mutual destruction. As much as "non-aligned" members of the global community might have wished otherwise, what the world didn't share in ideological unity, it shared in a mutual desire that the tenuous balance not be compromised.

In almost every film we watched, the villain is a non-ideological external threat to the status quo. In Proppian terms, villainy's function in a spy movie is almost always interdiction of the status quo . . . not its propagation (unlike, for instance, *Star Wars* or a Robin Hood narrative).

In *From Russia With Love*, Turkey exists in a fine balance between MI6 as proxied by Kerim Bey (who's more amused than threatened by his Soviet counterparts) and Russia. SPECTRE destabilizes that status quo for its own gain, and to restore that, Bond must literally embrace a Russian. In *The Spy Who Came In From the Cold*, the disruption of balance comes, ultimately, from Fiedler. Leamas' mission isn't to fight communists . . . it's to unwittingly neutralize the political influence of someone who'd disrupt the routine trade of lives in the name of "business as usual" in Berlin. In *Funeral in Berlin,* the failure of an ideologically charged mission (aid in a defection) loses meaning in the face of an avaricious attempt to manipulate east and west to get at Nazi money. In *The Quiller Memorandum*, there's no need for Quiller in ordinarily "quiet" Berlin until the Nazi underground breaks the stasis of the Cold War and begins killing operatives. In *Modesty Blaise,* Fothergill has no ideology (outside, perhaps, fashion), but he threatens an oil concession. In *In Like Flint*, the catalyst for action is a female plot to rule the world. Otherwise, Flint would be content, it seems, to write books, speak to dolphins, and periodically dance with the Bolshoi. In *The President's Analyst*, the Russian spy is named Kropotkin in likely homage to the pacifist and anarchist, and preaches an eventual melding of west and east. The *real* problem is The Phone Company . . . a pernicious outsider that watches with malice as Russian and American, spy and civilian embrace and celebrate Christmas, the bookend image of the status quo offered in the film's opening musical sequence and its closing scene.

Works Cited

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” Course packet, ENG 305, Ed. Tim Bower. Portland State University, 2003.